ARTICLES

Mirroring Risk: The Cuban Missile Estimation

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ABSTRACT The Cuban Missile Crisis is by this point well known to all scholars of international politics. Yet, although it has yielded countless lessons over the years, one critical aspect of the case has remained unexamined: the failure of estimation prior to the crisis that led US officials to discount the possibility of a missile deployment in Cuba. This article re-examines US intelligence estimates of the Soviet Union prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis in light of the concept of ‘mirroring risk’, introduced in this article. I present a framework for understanding a class of intelligence failures that are caused by the mis-assessment of how an adversary frames a decision and the risks that they are willing to take. I also present a new two-stage process for understanding how individuals assess the risk-propensity of adversaries in international politics.

Why do intelligence failures occur? This is a vitally important question with significant implications for national security. It is therefore not surprising that a significant amount of research has been devoted to suggesting possible answers. Perhaps because intelligence analysis is so clearly linked to the judgment and information processing of those who make them, it has been relatively open to approaches that draw upon psychology. However, with a few notable exceptions, most scholars have been content to simply list ways in which individuals have been demonstrated to make judgments in a non-rational or suboptimal manner and then conclude that these cognitive shortcomings have important implications for the analysis of intelligence. Of course, they do, but what is needed is a more detailed exposition on what kinds of psychological phenomena are relevant for the study of intelligence and intelligence failures, when they are likely to significantly affect analysis and judgments, and what (if anything) can be done to correct or compensate for these potential problems.

One key question that emerges in studies of intelligence failures concerns the assessments of others’ strategic motives, calculations and intentions. Quite obviously, misperception or a misunderstanding of any of these central factors is likely to make ‘strategic surprise’ more likely. Many factors – from bureaucratic impediments to time pressure – may contribute to such a misunderstanding. However, one critical factor in whether assessments of intentions (and likely behavior) are correct is how actors perceive and understand risk.

In this article, I examine the mis-assessment of Soviet intentions by the United States in the months before the deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba in 1962. This case is a striking example of what Raymond Garthoff termed a failure of ‘estimative empathy’. The critical problem in 1962 was not that the US hadn’t considered the possibility of a deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba. Rather, the cause of the estimative failure was the manner in which this possibility was considered. The US assessed Soviet intentions taking into account only the risks and costs – the ‘downside’ – of deploying strategic weapons into Cuba, and failed to consider the potential benefits that such a deployment would have for Khrushchev, as well as the reasons he might have for believing that such a move would be successful. As a result of this skewed assessment, the risks of such a deployment (as assessed by US officials) were judged to be too high for such a deployment to be at all likely.

This paper will examine the estimation process in the spring and summer of 1962 to illustrate the phenomenon of ‘mirroring risk’. Mirroring risk is the tendency to project one’s own framing of a situation onto another, and/or assume one’s own risk-profile (i.e., risk tolerance) to be shared by others. The case of the Cuban Missile estimation illustrates both aspects of mirroring risk. The first section of this article will present a framework for understanding how actors assess the risk-propensity of their adversaries in international politics. The second section will examine the process of estimation in the spring and summer of 1962, focusing on how US officials assessed the intentions, framing and risk-propensity of Soviet leaders. The third and final section will analyze the Cuban Missile estimation in light of the ‘mirroring risk’ concept, as well as suggesting steps that might be taken to avoid such problems in the future.

Risk Assessment and the Cuban Missile (Mis)Estimation

The Cuban Missile Crisis is by any standard a seminal event in twentieth-century history. For 13 days in October, two superpowers ‘paused at the nuclear precipice’. Speaking after the crisis, President Kennedy spoke for virtually the entire US policy-making and intelligence analysis population

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The Cuban Missile Estimation

when he stated: ‘I don’t think we expected that he [Khrushchev] would put the missiles in Cuba, because it would have seemed an imprudent action for him to take.’

In the years since the crisis, a virtual cottage industry of scholarship has examined the crisis from almost every conceivable vantage point. Notable topics of research have included the bureaucratic processes that impacted the implementation of political decisions, US and Soviet decision-making during the crisis, the role of international law, crisis decision-making, the impact of nuclear weapons on the crisis, and numerous memoirs devoted to the crisis. Additionally, there has been a great effort to determine what lessons should be drawn from the crisis.

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5 Allison and Zelikow, Essence of Decision.
11 For example, see Robert Kennedy, Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1999); Roger Hilsman, The Cuban Missile Crisis: The Struggle Over Policy (Westport, CT: Praeger 1996).
Yet, for all of the work devoted to the actual crisis, significantly less effort has been devoted to understanding both why the Soviet Union deployed missiles in Cuba, and why (and how) the US failed to anticipate the deployment. In fact, the majority of work devoted to answering these questions arose in the near-immediate aftermath of the crisis. The failure to follow through on analyzing these important questions is troubling for two reasons. First, the subsequent release of archived documents and transcripts, memoirs, interviews and conference materials (from the Havana, Cambridge and Moscow conferences attended by the principals of the crisis) gives us much better insight into the questions of both Soviet motivations and US assessments of those motivations than we have had in previous decades. This allows us the opportunity – not available to past generations – to determine the ways in which US assessments of the Soviet Union were incorrect. Second, there have been substantial advances in our understanding of the psychology of decision-making and how individuals react to risk, both of which are perennial problems of intelligence analysis. These advances allow us to finally place the erroneous US estimation of Soviet intent in the proper context.

As has been pointed out, the Cuban missile crisis itself should not be considered an intelligence failure: US intelligence services did identify the missiles before they became operational, and seem to have provided useful and relatively accurate updates during the actual crisis. Rather, it was a failure of estimation, and it took place well before the actual crisis. In fact, it was the failure of estimation that was partially responsible for the crisis. Had US leaders believed the Soviets would deploy missiles to Cuba, or even taken the possibility of such a tactic seriously, there would have been several options available to them to prevent such a deployment.

Yet, US leaders did not believe that Khrushchev would order the deployment. The critical failure was not in detecting what the Soviet Union was actually doing, but in the biased and incorrect assessments of what they were likely to do. The failure was in the incorrect assessment that the Soviets would not deploy strategic weapons in Cuba because they would not accept the ‘high risk’ of such a deployment. This raises the important, but little explored question of what the basis of the US assessment was, and in what ways was it incorrect? To attempt to answer these questions, we must first examine how individuals typically assess the ‘risk’ associated with a given decision.

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14Garthoff, ‘US Intelligence in the Cuban Missile Crisis’, p.50.
Assessing Risk Reconsidered

In making assessments of how others understand risk and make decisions, there is a two-stage process. The first stage is assessing or estimating how a target ‘frames’, or understands, the situation. That is, how are the different choices understood? What factors are most salient? What risks does the target perceive in a given action? Consequential decisions may have far-reaching effects on any number of issues, but may have been initially framed as a response to only a single one of them. The second stage is assessing the most likely choice of the target, given the previous assessment of their decision-frame. This second stage must take into account the risk-tolerance of the target in order to allow the assessor to make a judgment as to the most likely behavior.

This two-stage process of risk assessment is often done so quickly and intuitively that the multiple stages meld into one, but they are conceptually distinct. And bias, misperception or error may enter at either or both stages of the assessment. Below, I introduce the concept of ‘mirroring risk’ to describe what occurs when individuals project their framing of a situation onto that of a target and/or assume the target to share their risk-profile.

Assessing the Decision-Frame

Framing involves the decision-maker’s conception of the ‘acts, outcomes and contingencies associated with a particular choice’, and is inherently tied to the concept of risk. Framing is integral to decision-making, and reflects the decision-maker’s conception of what type of problem they are dealing with, what the stakes of the situation are and the appropriate means to deal with the problem. It also affects their estimates of probabilities of outcomes associated with a given choice and the value attributed to each outcome.

Assessing how adversaries frame situations is a crucial first step in estimating their intentions and likely courses of action. However, in any given situation, there are generally several alternate decision-frames that would be equally valid. Two individuals with exactly the same information who are asked to make a decision might not only come to a different judgment, but also frame the problem in different ways. When Sherman Kent – author of the infamous National Intelligence Estimate prior to the Cuban missile crisis – speaks of the necessity for intelligence analysts
to ‘see the world through his [the adversary’s] eyes’, he is referring to how the adversary has framed a given problem or decision.\textsuperscript{19}

Mirroring risk occurs in this initial phase if individuals project their own understanding of a decision (and its attendant risks) onto that of a target. In essence, the error is to assume that the target of assessment perceives and understands a given risk in the same way that you do. Mirroring risk may also occur if an assumption is made that a target will not pursue a given action because it entails a high degree of risk. This error, discussed in more detail below, occurs in the second stage of assessing risk, when the target’s most likely choice is being predicted. The former is an assessment of how an adversary ‘frames’ a situation, while the latter engages one’s judgments of the risk-profile of the target.

Though the concept of mirroring risk is introduced in this article, there is an empirical basis for it in social psychology. In 1977, Ross et al. published an article developing the idea of the ‘false consensus’: the tendency ‘to see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common … while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant or inappropriate’.\textsuperscript{20} This effect is highly reliable, and has been replicated in many settings with diverse groups of participants.\textsuperscript{21} One way in which this effect is demonstrated is to give participants a story that culminates in a ‘decision point’; respondents indicate what they would choose as well as what percentage of a ‘target group’ they believe would make the same choice.

Some of the stories used in these experiments bear on the issue of assessing risk. For instance, one story describes a scenario in which the respondent gets a traffic ticket, but notices that the details of the ticket are ‘highly inaccurate’. He can pay a $20 fee by mail, or show up at court and contest the violation.\textsuperscript{22} In many ways this is a standard cost/benefit calculation. Yet it also incorporates risk and uncertainty. In essence, this is a choice between accepting a certain loss of $20, or choosing a gamble in which there is some possibility (the probability is unknown) of losing $20 and expending effort going to court and some possibility (again, the probability is unknown) that you will not have to pay any money at all.

The results indicated that subjects who chose either of the options tended to rate that option as relatively probable for ‘people in general’ and subjects who rejected that option rated it as ‘relatively improbable’ for others. In essence, what this demonstrated is mirroring risk: the tendency to either project one’s own framing of a situation on to another, and/or assume one’s own risk-profile to be shared by others.

\textsuperscript{19} Kent, ‘A Crucial Estimate Relived’, p.117.


The more general manifestation of this is known as ‘mirror imaging’, and its potential problems have been noted by many intelligence analysts and scholars. Frank Watanabe, an analyst in the Directorate of Intelligence (CIA), included a warning in his ‘Fifteen Axioms for Intelligence Analysts’:

Avoid mirror imaging at all costs. Mirror imaging – projecting your thought process or value system onto someone else – is one of the greatest threats to objective intelligence analysis. Not everyone is alike, and cultural, ethnic, religious and political differences do matter. Just because something seems like the logical conclusion or course of action to you does not meant that the person or group you are analyzing will see it that way, particularly when differences in values and thought processes come into play.23

Likewise, intelligence analyst Raymond Garthoff mentioned mirror imaging as a common ‘fallacy’ of intelligence analysis. The tendency, Garthoff claims, is to ‘project (usually implicitly and indeed unconsciously) onto the subject of the estimate one’s views, perceptions, values and behavior’.24

There is evidence that ‘mirror imaging’ has been a pervasive problem in international politics.25 For instance, Goodman traces some of the difficulty of Britain in assessing the Soviet nuclear program to this problem. In order to produce intelligence estimates (which were considered vital) in the relative absence of quality intelligence, British analysts utilized assumptions that centered on an interpretation of the Soviet atomic program as a ‘mirror image’ of the Anglo-American program.26 Doing so contributed to the notion that the Soviet program could not have been further advanced than the British one, leading to the stereotype of Soviet ‘backwardness’, and ultimately, to the shocking surprise of the USSR’s first atomic test in 1949.27

Mirroring risk is an important and distinct sub-category of the more general phenomenon of mirror imaging. Mirroring risk refers specifically to the tendency to project one’s own framing of a situation and its attendant risks on to an adversary and/or assuming that the adversary shares your risk profile (otherwise known as risk-tolerance). Mirror imaging refers to the more generalized tendency to assume that an adversary will act a certain way.

27 Ibid., p.134.
because ‘that is what I would do’. Mirror imaging can include the projection of one’s motivations, goals, fears, desires, risks, and even standard operating procedures on to a target. However, precisely because ‘mirror imaging’ can refer to so many distinct assumptions, it becomes relatively less useful as an analytical or conceptual device. The phenomenon encompasses so many potential problems that a realistic plan to ameliorate its deleterious effects is often reduced to prescriptions such as ‘being the other person, at least for a while’, or to avoid the ‘everybody-thinks-like-us mid-set’.  

In contrast, mirroring risk is a discrete phenomenon, specialized enough that there are specific guidelines that can be applied to attenuate or guard against its pernicious effects. As the analysis in the later sections of this paper will illustrate, US analysts would not have had to possess any special talent for empathy in order to have produced a more accurate estimation of Soviet intentions in Cuba. There were several simple steps that could have been taken (and should be in the future), such as including both costs and benefits that an adversary might consider or including a possible alternative framing of the situation as a matter of standard procedure.

Assessing the ‘Risk Profile’ of an Adversary

Assessing a target’s decision-frame, though crucial, is only a first step. The process of estimation and intelligence analysis must necessarily follow that assessment with a prediction of likely behavior. That is, given what we know about how a target has framed a situation, what decision are they likely to make? In making this estimation, a number of important factors come into play, including an estimation of the target’s goals, beliefs and values. However, also crucial to assessing this second-stage of decision-making is the assessment of the target’s risk profile. That is, what amount of risk are they willing to tolerate? The most obvious example of an error in the second stage of risk assessment would be the judgment that an adversary is risk-averse when in fact they are risk-acceptant. There is an obvious relationship between the two steps. An erroneous assessment of an adversary’s framing might mislead the intelligence analyst about what risks the target is willing to accept.

Relevant to this issue is Prospect Theory, which has demonstrated very clearly the importance of framing and ‘domains’ in affecting the risk-profiles of individuals making decisions under conditions of risk and uncertainty.  

Of particular relevance for this article is the concept of aversion to certain

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losses, or ‘risk-seeking in the domain of losses’. It has been convincingly
demonstrated, both experimentally and in real-world circumstances, that
choices framed in terms of gains often lead to risk-averse choices, while
framing a problem in terms of losses leads to risk-seeking behavior.

However, while the concept of risk-seeking in the domain of losses has
been utilized post hoc to explain the behavior of leaders in world politics,
it has almost never (to this author’s knowledge) been used by intelligence
analysts and academic researchers as a framework for understanding
assessments of others’ likely behavior. For instance, the US failed to
anticipate Soviet intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli war of attrition
(1969–70), despite numerous overt signals, partly because US intelligence
analysts incorrectly assessed the Soviet framing of the situation and
inferred that the Soviets would be risk averse. It was only after the first
Soviet airlift of military supplies that US analysts revised their analysis,
stating that ‘in light of Egyptian vulnerability, the USSR might become
more risk-prone’ than previously believed. In essence, these intelligence
analysts had (before the notion had been formalized) noted that in that
particular context, the Soviet Union was facing a choice between a certain
loss (Egypt’s defeat) and a risky decision to aid Egypt, and therefore
increased their estimates of the risks the Soviet Union was willing to
tolerate in pursuit of their goals.

While it has been convincingly demonstrated that framing can push people
to be more or less risk-averse in a given decision, the ability to make use of
this knowledge requires knowledge of a ‘base-rate’ of risk-acceptance. That
is, intelligence analysis might know that a certain framing of a situation is
likely to make an adversary somewhat less risk-acceptant, but that has very
different implications depending on whether that adversary was very risk
acceptant to start with, or just moderately so. Yet, there is a danger to note

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31 There are two previously published articles that are relevant to a discussion of prospect theory and the Cuban Missile Crisis. However both articles focus exclusively on decision-making during the crisis, not on the relevance of prospect theory to estimating the behavior of others. While the Haas article may be correct in declaring that the ‘most important decisions’ made by both Kennedy and Khrushchev conform to the predictions of prospect theory, that is not the focus of this article. Rather, my interest is in examining why US estimations of Soviet behavior were incorrect. And, as will be discussed in greater depth later in this article, the reason that the US intelligence community was incorrect in their predictions was not that they failed to take into account ‘domains’ and ‘framing’. See Mark L. Haas, ‘Prospect Theory and the Cuban Missile Crisis’, International Studies Quarterly 45/2 (2001) pp.241–70; Glen Whyte and Ariel S. Levi, ‘The Origins and Function of the Reference Point in Risky Group Decision Making: The Case of the Cuban Missile Crisis’, Journal of Behavioral Decision Making 7/4 (1994) pp.243–60.

here, because we have evidence that suggests that individuals are poor judges of the risk profiles of those whom they interact with.\footnote{Michael W. Morris, Richard P. Larrick and Steven K. Su, ‘Misperceiving Negotiation Counterparts: When Situationally Determined Bargaining Behaviors are Attributed to Personality Traits’, \textit{Journal of Personality and Social Psychology} 77/1 (1999) p.57.}

**American Assessments of Soviet Intentions in Cuba**

We now turn to the events and assessments leading up to the deployment of the Soviet missiles in Cuba, seen from the perspective of US decision-makers. Progressing from the framework provided above, the primary question is whether US analysts fell prey to the potential mistakes noted earlier. That is, did they project their framing of the risks of a given situation on to their adversary? Did they also incorrectly assess the risk-profile (and thus, the likely behavior) of that adversary? The answer to these questions is surely yes.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this case is the unwillingness of virtually every US decision-maker and analyst before the crisis to question the fundamental assumptions that underlay the intelligence estimates. Those assumptions can be characterized as follows:

A1): Soviet leaders would perceive the deployment of missiles to Cuba as entailing a high degree of risk.

A2): The Soviet Union was not willing to take great risks to protect Cuba.

The inevitable conclusion that flowed from these faulty assumptions was that the Soviet Union would not deploy missiles to Cuba. In fact, these assumptions were so firmly ingrained in the minds of US policy-makers that Sherman Kent famously declared after the crisis had ended that the US intelligence services had been correct, it was Khrushchev that had been wrong to put the missiles in Cuba!\footnote{Kent, ‘A Crucial Estimate Relived’, p.118.} The crucial question of why these assumptions were made will be addressed in the next section of this article. Let us turn now to how the estimation process unfolded in the spring of 1962.

**Early Estimations**

From the beginning of 1962 until just days before the crisis began, the US intelligence community issued a number of National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on the subject of Soviet intentions with respect to Cuba. In January of 1962, an NIE was released (SNIE 80-62) that explicitly considered the possibility that Cuba (or other Caribbean states that ‘fell under communist control’) might be used by the USSR as areas in which to establish missile, submarine or air bases. The estimate posited that the rationale for such a move would be to ‘bring North America under attack’ or ‘add to the deterrent to any conceivable US military action’ in the Caribbean. However, the estimate concluded that such a scenario was ‘unlikely’ as the military and
psychological value of such bases ‘would probably not be great enough to override the risks involved’.  

This estimate illustrates the set of core assumptions mentioned above. It assumed that Soviet leaders believed 1) the deployment of missiles to Cuba would entail a high degree of risk and that 2) they would not be willing to take such risks. In fact, this estimate spends a paragraph discussing the potential risks involved for the Soviets. It notes that such a deployment would heighten the risk of general war, increase the probability that the US would attempt to overthrow the Castro regime before the missiles or bases became operational, and involve the USSR in a ‘politically difficult’ situation in which they would have to maintain control over the missiles without offending Cuban leaders. Nowhere, however, does the estimate compare the risks of deploying missiles to the risks of not deploying missiles, despite the clear relevance of this comparison (it was later mentioned as the most salient factor by Soviet General Gribkov). Even without a technical understanding of prospect theory, such a comparison would perhaps have highlighted to US officials the factors (e.g. the strategic balance between the two superpowers) that were relevant for Soviet leaders.

Additionally, the estimate proposed only two possible motivations for deploying the missiles – for offensive purposes (to attack the US) or to protect Cuba (by deterring a US attack). It did not consider that such a deployment might change the strategic balance between the two superpowers, give Khrushchev extra bargaining power with respect to negotiations over the status of Berlin, or simply embarrass President Kennedy.

Also notable for its absence is any discussion of either the potential gains from such a deployment, or consideration of whether Soviet leaders framed the situation in an alternate way. Though Kent mocks the suggestion to put oneself in the place of an adversary – to him this is as obvious as telling a baker the usefulness of flour – the fact remains that almost zero effort was expended in questioning a key assumption. This was an especially disastrous failure since a small change in either part of the assumption would have yielded drastically different predictions of Soviet behavior (this will be discussed in more detail later in the article).

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37 Gribkov and Smith, *Operation ANADYR*, p.3.
38 The ‘risk of not deploying the missiles’ is conceptually distinct from the potential gains of such a deployment. For example, one possible risk of not deploying the missiles was that the Soviets would continue to fall further behind in the strategic balance, while a potential benefit might be that Khrushchev would hold a large bargaining chip to coerce the US into removing its missiles from Turkey.
Of course, it is possible that such matters were discussed during the writing of the estimate, but did not make it into the final version. Yet if this were true, it is even more damning, since it would mean that the analysts considered and decided to ignore the possibility that the Soviet Union might see things differently. This raises the issue of whether an alternative framing should be incorporated formally into the assessment process, especially in cases such as this, in which the costs of mis-assessment are high and an alternate framing would suggest significantly different policy options. After all, complexity and diversity in the judgments of intelligence analysts can be of little help to decision-makers who are never made aware of them. It is not enough for only intelligence analysts and mid-level officials to consider alternate hypotheses and framings (though this is certainly necessary), leaders must do so as well.

Three months later, in March, another intelligence estimate was released (NIE 85-62) on the subject of Cuba. This estimate noted that Cuban military capabilities were being augmented by technology from the Soviet Bloc, but that it was ‘unlikely’ that the Bloc would provide Cuba with ‘strategic weapons systems’ or station combat units of any kind in Cuba. The rationale for this conclusion was that the ‘USSR would almost certainly never . . . hazard its own safety for the sake of Cuba’. Without belaboring the point, it is clear that the assumptions that underlay SNIE 80-62 also formed the basis of this new estimate. As the next section will demonstrate, increasing amounts of information that the Soviet Union had increased military assistance to Cuba – that ‘something different’ was taking place – were not sufficient to force analysts to confront and examine (let alone revise) their core assumptions.

August: The Beginning of the Soviet Buildup

Throughout the summer of 1962, evidence accumulated that indicated an increased flow of military supplies and even personnel from the Soviet Union to Cuba. To analyze these new developments, a new NIE (NIE 85-2-62) was released on 1 August. This estimate noted that the USSR is ‘becoming ever more deeply committed to preserve and strengthen the Castro regime’. However, as previous estimates had done, this NIE concluded that it would be ‘unlikely’ that the Soviet Bloc would provide Cuba with the capability to

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40Ernest May, for instance, has suggested as a possible hypothesis that some of the writers of the NIE might have been uncomfortable with the ‘action implications’ of including the possibility of a Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba in the estimate. By this logic, the writers would have been hesitant to include what they believed to be a very low-probability event in the NIE knowing that it might be used by others in the administration (such as McCone) who were known to be in favor of a US invasion of Cuba. Personal communication with Ernest May (3 June 2007).

undertake ‘major independent military operations’ or station combat troops of any kind in Cuba.\textsuperscript{42}

In fact, intelligence analysts were forced to continually adjust their estimates of Soviet assistance upwards as the extent of the military aid to Cuba became apparent. At no time, however, did this lead to a major revision of the underlying assumptions of the intelligence estimates. In fact, we have no evidence that the assumptions were even questioned, let alone revised. The premises of these assessments, once formalized in the NIEs, seem to have been surprisingly resistant to change or reconsideration. Between July and August, analysts estimated that between four and six thousand Soviet Bloc personnel had arrived in Cuba.\textsuperscript{43} Some of them were presumed to be technicians, but some of them were also troops, contrary to the prediction of the then-current NIE (85-2-62) that the Soviet Union would not station any combat units in Cuba that year.

On 21 August, McCone reported that new information (obtained since 10 August) indicated that the extent of the Soviet supply operation was ‘much greater’ than had previously been reported. There also seemed to be indications that Soviet personnel were involved in construction work on the island.\textsuperscript{44} Yet, those involved in the discussion concluded that the construction was probably related to either ELINT (electronic intelligence) and/or COMINT (communications intelligence), and possibly to surface to air missiles (SAM).

The very next day the President’s Special Assistant Arthur Schlesinger drafted a memo that suggested ‘a striking change in [the USSR’s] policy toward Cuba’.\textsuperscript{45} The memo included an attachment that summarized the developments of the past month:

Intelligence on recent Soviet military assistance to Cuba indicates that an unusually large number of Soviet ships have delivered military cargoes to Cuba since late July and that some form of military construction is underway at several locations in Cuba by Soviet Bloc personnel . . . The speed and magnitude of this influx of bloc personnel and equipment is unprecedented in Soviet military aid activities; clearly something new and different is taking place.\textsuperscript{46}

The report went on to recount evidence that the material being transported from the port areas was done at night, and that the streetlights were turned off in the towns as the convoys passed through.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42]Ibid., p.893.
\item[45]Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant (Schlesinger) to the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), 22 August 1962’, in FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962, p.950.
\item[46]Ibid., pp.950–1. Emphasis mine.
\end{footnotes}
Yet, despite new information – that the magnitude of the supply operation was much larger than predicted, that special precautions seem to have been taken with the cargo, etc. – basic assumptions were still not questioned. Interestingly, the memo of 21 August noted that the principals (Rusk, Robert Kennedy, General Taylor, McNamara and Bundy) did discuss ‘courses of action’ open to the US should the Soviet deploy medium range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) to Cuba. However, that discussion was very clearly the act of responsible statesmen, willing to consider for a few moments what they might do should the unexpected and improbable happen. Though we cannot know for sure (transcripts of the meeting are not available), this seems to have been a discussion of a worst-case scenario, not a meaningful reconsideration of Soviet intentions or risk-tolerance, and certainly nowhere near a formal assessment of those factors by professional intelligence analysts. While this is certainly desirable, it is not enough. It is clear from the documented record that the underlying assumptions remained unchanged, even as evidence accumulated that should have forced their reconsideration.

In essence, American decision-makers focused only on the second stage of risk assessment: estimating and predicting likely behavior. However, without an accurate and full understanding of the adversary’s decision frame, this is useful only on a superficial level. As long as the basic assumptions underlying the assessment remain unquestioned (the first stage of assessment), it is no surprise that the prediction of likely behavior (no deployment of missiles to Cuba) did not change.

Evidence continued to accumulate through the end of August and the beginning of September that the Soviet deployment represented a departure from precedent. A memo written on 25 August by Roger Hilsman (Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research) noted the ‘unusually heavy Soviet shipments to Cuba’, but concluded that the ‘most likely explanation’ was to enhance the Cuban regime’s defensive capabilities. Hilsman concluded, in fact, that the Soviets had undertaken the military buildup with ‘reluctance’. The report did not mention the possibility that the buildup might include strategic weapons, or that the change in behavior (larger than expected military buildup) might necessitate a re-examination of the Soviet’s fundamental motivations and framing of the situation.

By the end of August, the military buildup in Cuba had caused sufficient concern to US leaders for them to consider issuing a public statement on the matter. Yet, there was a surprising amount of internal disagreement on whether to issue such a statement. A report on this issue declared that the disadvantages of such a statement outweighed its potential advantages. The worry of Carl Kaysen (Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs) was that issuing a warning against the deployment of nuclear

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47 Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to Acting Secretary of State (Ball), 25 August 1962', in FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962, p.963.

weapons in Cuba would implicitly sanction anything below that level. However, the bigger issue mentioned in the memo was clearly that warning the Soviets against deploying nuclear missiles close to US borders would give them ‘leverage’ to complain about US-controlled nuclear forces surrounding the Soviet bloc.\textsuperscript{49} President Kennedy did issue public warnings on 4 September and 13 September, though by that time the Soviet deployment had already been underway for over two months.

\textit{McCone and Kennedy: ‘Prophets’ of the Cuban Missile Crisis}

During the lead-up to the missiles crisis, there were two individuals who raised the possibility that the Soviets might deploy missiles in Cuba. The first was Robert Kennedy (hereafter RFK), attorney general and a close advisor to his brother, President John F. Kennedy. At a 22 March meeting, RFK asked the Special Group\textsuperscript{50} what an appropriate course of action would be in the event that the Soviets did establish a military base in Cuba.\textsuperscript{51} We have no evidence that anything came of Kennedy’s question until months later, during another meeting of the Special Group. At a meeting on 31 May, the group noted that

\begin{quote}
Establishment of a military base(s) in Cuba would cost the Soviets very little in terms of world public opinion. For example, they could explain that they were simply taking a page from our book, and would remove their base(s) from Cuba if we would remove ours from Berlin, Turkey or Formosa.
\end{quote}

The group concluded by agreeing to prepare written responses to RFK’s question (of 22 March) for the next meeting.\textsuperscript{52} Yet, at a meeting over a week later, Roswell Gilpatric (the Deputy Secretary of Defense) noted that RFK’s question had gone unanswered, and distributed a memo reminding participants of it, though there is no further mention of it in declassified sources.\textsuperscript{53}

Though he did not appear to follow up on the matter, RFK provides an illustration of how one might re-examine core assumptions. While others focused on the risk of general war that the Soviets might incur by deploying strategic weapons to Cuba, RFK focused on other aspects, such as the low costs of the deployment (in terms of the world public opinion) and the

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\item[\textsuperscript{49}] Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen) to the President’s Military Aide (Clifton), 1 September 1962’, in \textit{FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962}, pp.1007–10.
\item[\textsuperscript{50}] The ‘Special Group’ was the group responsible for planning Operation MONGOOSE, a plan to indirectly assist Cuban revolutionaries in the overthrow of the Castro regime.
\end{itemize}
potential use of the missiles as a bargaining chip. In doing this, he used a frame of analysis that more closely approximated how the Soviets might see the situation.

This is in marked contrast to most other US policy-makers, who focused on the risks as they understood them, and ignored other elements of the decision-frame, such as the potential benefits or possible motivations of the deployment. That is, US policy-makers knew that they would interpret a deployment of strategic weapons to Cuba as a major provocation, which would possibly precipitate a crisis and lead to increased chances of war, and they projected that knowledge onto Soviets leaders. While the Soviet leaders might have understood the risks in the same way, without also considering the advantages of such a deployment for the Soviets, US assessments of the Soviet decision-frame were incomplete.

This is a critical, though elementary, mistake. Happily, it is easily remedied. While it is often noted how difficult it is to put one’s self in the mindset of an adversary, the type of analysis recommended in this article requires no special talent for empathy. Decision-makers and intelligence analysts must simply remember that their adversaries are unlikely to frame situations with reference only to the costs/risks of a given action. In fact, a major component of their decision is likely to be what benefits they might derive from an action.

The second person who questioned the consensus judgment of Soviet intentions was Director of Intelligence John McCone. McCone, however, went further than Kennedy. Whereas Kennedy had merely asked other decision-makers to consider the possibility, it is readily apparent that McCone was utterly convinced that the Soviets would deploy strategic weapons to Cuba.

The possibility seems to have been first mentioned in a memo of 21 August in which McCone predicts that Cuba seems to be getting stronger, not weaker, and that in the future such a country would serve as ‘a possible location for MRBMs’ deployed by the Soviet Union.\footnote{Memorandum: Proposed Plan of Action for Cuba, 21 August 1962’, in The Secret Cuban Missiles Documents, p.31.}

Shortly thereafter, McCone left for Europe for his honeymoon. However, during his absence, he shared his concerns with the acting DCI, Lt. Gen. Marshal Carter in a series of transatlantic cables. For instance, following the 29 August discovery of the SAM sites under construction, McCone concluded that the ‘development of a costly surface to air defense system in Cuba could only be explained if it were designed to mask and protect the introduction of ballistic missiles’.\footnote{Editorial Note’, in FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962, p.1052.} And later, on 16 September, McCone sent a memo that warned:

believe we must carefully study the prospect of secret importation and placement of several Soviet MRBMs ... Do not wish to be overly
alarming this matter but believe CIA and community must keep
government informed of danger of a surprise.\textsuperscript{56}

In that same memo, McCone wrote:

Thrust of press reports reaching me is that there exists a clear
demarcation between defensive and offensive preparations \ldots{} I recog-
nize Cuban policy decisions most delicate and beyond agency or my
competence. \textit{However [I] believe we must give those making decision
our best estimate of possible developments and alternative situations
which might evolve and unexpectedly confront us.}\textsuperscript{57}

This memo offers a tantalizing glimpse into what could have been – what
should have been – the process of estimation in the case of the Cuban
missiles. The stakes of such a deployment were so high that alternate
conceptions of Soviet behavior should absolutely have been considered. This
was especially true in this case, where so much of the analysis rested upon
one key assumption that was never questioned.

Unfortunately, though McCone’s concerns were raised in Washington,
there was little that could be done to prove his hypothesis correct. In
McCone’s absence, Carter proposed extensive overflight photography
utilizing U-2 planes. However, because of the concern that one of the
planes might be shot down, few flights were undertaken. In fact, as McCone
noted on 4 October, there had been no coverage of the center of Cuba for
over a month, and all flights since 5 September had been either ‘peripheral’
or ‘limited’ as a result of restrictions put in place.\textsuperscript{58}

It is also interesting to compare the two Cassandras – RFK and McCone.
Though it is generally McCone that is mentioned in scholarly accounts of
the crisis, it was in fact RFK who suggested the more complete and accu-
rate assessment of Soviet intentions.\textsuperscript{59} McCone’s ‘prediction’ was, by his own
admission, merely a hunch.\textsuperscript{60} He did not have any more evidence than any
other US official at the time. And he hadn’t actually challenged or re-
formulated (at least, not out loud) the basic assumptions that underlay the
intelligence estimates; he simply \textit{believed} the Soviets were likely to deploy
missiles since that is what the scattered evidence indicated to him. It is

\textsuperscript{56}‘McCone to Carter, Cable, 16 September 1962’, in \textit{The Secret Cuban Missiles Documents},
pp.\textit{78–9}.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., p.\textit{79}. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{58}‘Memorandum: Soviet MRBMs in Cuba, 31 October 1962’, in \textit{The Secret Cuban Missiles
Documents}, p.\textit{116}.

\textsuperscript{59}For accounts of McCone as a ‘prophet’, see: James J. Wirtz, ‘Organizing for Crisis
Intelligence: Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis’, in \textit{Intelligence and the Cuban Missile
Crisis}, pp.\textit{134–7}; James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn and David A. Welch (eds), \textit{Cuba on the

\textsuperscript{60}Quoted in Blight, Allyn and Welch, \textit{Cuba on the Brink}, p.\textit{125}.
possible that his lack of influence in convincing others of his view was due to this shortcoming.\footnote{One other possible reason that has been suggested (by Abram Chayes, a legal advisor to President Kennedy) for McCone’s inability to influence other US officials was that he was considered a ‘hothead’ with respect to Cuba. See James G. Blight and David A. Welch (eds), \textit{On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis} (New York: Noonday Press 1990) pp.40–1.}

In many ways this parallels an earlier incident in US intelligence. During the purported ‘missile gap’ of 1957–1961, American intelligence services drastically over-estimated Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) stockpiles – at the height of the ‘gap’, the US estimated that the Soviet Union would have almost 1,000 ICBMS when they had only four.\footnote{Lawrence Freedman, \textit{US Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1986) p.73.} The lone figure in the US government that was not convinced by the intelligence estimates, and never believed in the existence of a missiles gap, was President Eisenhower.\footnote{Raymond L. Garthoff, \textit{Assessing the Adversary: Estimates by the Eisenhower Administration of Soviet Intentions and Capabilities} (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 1991) pp.41–2.} Yet, his position, like McCone’s, was based on intuition, not evidence. As a result, neither he nor McCone were able to convince their colleagues, and in both cases the estimation process continued farther down the wrong path.

\textit{Discovery}

The immediate lead-up to the missiles’ discovery on 14 October has been well documented by other scholars, and does not bear repetition here.\footnote{For excellent accounts, see Raymond L. Garthoff, \textit{Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis}, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 1989) pp.43–54 and Don Munton and David A. Welch, \textit{The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History} (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) pp.32–48.} In any case, this is a story of estimation, not intelligence. As intelligence reports piled up throughout the summer, analysts continually revised their estimates. However, they adjusted their assessments only incrementally, and failed to fully re-examine the assumptions underlying their assessments.

This dysfunctional pattern was evident throughout the summer, until 21 September, when the first reports arrived of sightings of Soviet MRBMs in Cuba.\footnote{‘Editorial Note’, in \textit{FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962}, p.1083.} Even as previous predictions of likely Soviet behavior were invalidated (such as the notion that the Soviets were unlikely to deploy combat troops to Cuba), analysts clung to their initial formulation that assumed that a deployment of missiles to Cuba was ‘high risk’ and that the Soviets were risk-averse with respect to Cuba.\footnote{See ‘Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to Secretary of State Rusk, 1 September 1962’, in \textit{FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962}, p.1014.}
Did US Decision-Makers Mirror Risk?

Assessing Khrushchev’s Framing

With our enhanced understanding of the estimation process, we can now turn to the critical question of why US officials were incorrect in their assessments. Recall that US intelligence analysts repeatedly predicted that a Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba was unlikely because of their beliefs that a) the risks of such a deployment were high and b) the Soviets would not be willing to take such risks. Sometimes – as in NIE 85-62 – US officials rephrased ‘b’ as ‘the Soviets would not be willing to take such risks for the sake of Cuba’. Clearly, the Soviet Union did deploy missiles in Cuba, so the US assessment must have been in error; but at which stage of assessment was the error made?

In fact, we can state definitively that US officials mirrored risk by projecting their own framing of the situation onto the Soviet Union, and with some degree of confidence that US officials also incorrectly assessed the risk profile of Khrushchev and his advisors.

In the first stage, US officials erred in their estimation of how Soviet leaders would frame a decision to deploy missiles to Cuba. They did so by focusing on the factors that were the most salient to the United States, not the Soviet Union. As a result, they based their prediction of likely behavior on an assumed framing of the decision that was both incomplete and misleading.

The factors that US officials focused their attention on in their assessment of the Soviet Union were: the high probability that such a deployment would be discovered (as a result of U-2 photography), the unprecedented nature of such a deployment and the potential costs (such as an increased risk of a general war) that might result from a deployment. US officials wrote policy memos focused only on the ‘disadvantages’ for the Soviets in having a military presence in Cuba, only once noted that if the missiles were deployed it would be extremely difficult to force their removal, and refused to consider any other motivation for deployment besides aiding in the defense of Cuba. It was not until the actual crisis, for example, that any officials questioned whether the deployment might be for the purpose of exerting pressure on the US over the Berlin issue, or addressing the strategic imbalance between the two superpowers. In fact, by the time that McCone

68 Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to Acting Secretary of State Ball, August 25 1962’, in FRUS: Volume X, Cuba, 1961–1962, p.963.
called attention to the fact that the deployment of offensive missiles in Cuba would have distinct and significant advantages for the Soviet Union – and that they therefore might be willing to take unexpected risks to establish such a position – it was already 19 September and the deployment had been underway for months.\textsuperscript{71}

What US officials did \textit{not} do was to empathize with Soviet decision-makers in any meaningful sense. Yes, it is true that they attempted to see the potential costs and risks as the Soviet Union likely would have. Yet, while they thoughtfully considered the \textit{risks} and \textit{costs} of deployment, glaringly absent from their assessments were the benefits or gains that might accrue, or the motivation that Khrushchev might have for the deployment. Because of this omission, they overlooked several factors that seem to have been influential in Khrushchev’s decision. Basing a prediction of behavior on such an assessment is akin to making a decision based on a list of ‘pros’ and ‘cons’, having only written down ‘cons’.

It is important to note that the failure in estimation was not simply a result of ‘asking the wrong questions’. One might concede that (in theory, at least), intelligence analysts should be concerned primarily with assessing and estimating behavior, leaving the political implications, or the ‘action implications’ of such analysis to political leaders. By this logic, the question of how a possible deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba would affect the overall strategic balance would be a question for the President, not Sherman Kent.

However, while the distinction between analysis and implications might be useful in the abstract, in practice it seems likely to produce less accurate analysis than would otherwise be the case. This is because questions that on the surface seem to bear exclusively on what the \textit{implications} of a given action might be are actually quite important for any intelligence estimate. That is, how an adversary perceives the consequences and implications of a decision are likely to directly affect what decision is made. Therefore, intelligence officials must consider all aspects relevant to the adversary’s decision-frame, without resorting to an artificial dividing line between objective analysis and political implications.

\textbf{Assessing Khrushchev’s Risk-Propensity}

The second problem in the estimation process was that US officials seem to have incorrectly assessed the risk-acceptance of the Soviet Union. There is little doubt that US officials believed the deployment of missiles to Cuban to entail a high degree of risk for the Soviet Union, and furthermore, that this was likely to constrain the behavior of Soviet leaders who would (in the US’s estimation) be unwilling to accept such a high degree of risk. That the Soviet Union \textit{did} deploy the missiles suggests that some part of this assessment was in error, but which part?

The possibilities are as follows: Khrushchev could have seen the deployment as high risk and ordered the missiles to Cuban nonetheless (indicating that he was very risk-acceptant); he could have ordered the

missiles deployed because he was a personality type that tends to ignore or be unaware of risks; he could have believed the deployment to be a low or moderate risk, in which case the issue of whether he was highly risk-acceptant or not would have been a moot point.

Therefore, our judgment of whether the US assessed Khrushchev’s risk-profile incorrectly depends to a large extent on how the Soviet leader characterized the risks of the deployment. We do know, for instance that Khrushchev and his associates believed the missile deployment would have to be accepted by President Kennedy if it could be presented as a fait accompli. Thus, in order for the plan to succeed, the missiles would have had to have been deployed in secret, without the US finding out. The risks of the plan – to the extent that they were considered by Khrushchev and his advisors – were thought to be in the initial deployment.

As Soviet policy-makers knew at the time, the US flew high-altitude U-2 flights regularly, which could possibly have turned up evidence of the missile sites while they were being constructed. The Soviet’s military representative in Cuba explained to Soviet Defense Minister Malinovsky, ‘It will be impossible to hide these missiles from American U-2s.’ Malinovksy’s response was to kick him under the table.

It seems highly likely that Khrushchev would have had some confidence that the plan would work, that it would be possible to move the forces undetected by the United States. Taking a risk only makes sense if one believes there is at least some chance that it will pay off. The explanation for why he believed this, despite abundant evidence to the contrary, might result from either motivated bias (the more we want something to be true, the more we believe it to be true) or simply bad advice. For instance, Burlatsky, an advisor to Khrushchev at the time, recalled:

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76 There is even evidence that at one point, Khrushchev himself commented to his military advisors: ‘So it is impossible to move these forces to Cuba secretly.’ However, there is no attribution for this quote, nor is it repeated in any other accounts of the Soviet decision-making process. Thus, there are a number of possibilities: it might have been said as it was quoted, it might not been said at all, or it might have been phrased as a question. See Fursenko and Naftali, ‘One Hell of a Gamble’, p.192.
77 There is evidence that people’s predictions of what will occur correspond closely to what they would like to happen, rather than what is objectively likely to occur. The strength of this effect increases in proportion to how important the outcome is. See Steven J. Sherman, ‘On the Self-Erasing Nature of Errors of Prediction’, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 39/2 (1980) p.211.
It seems to me that the advisers who surrounded Nikita Sergeevich [Khrushchev] did not inform him very accurately . . . that it would be impossible to preserve secrecy. That it was impossible – that the missiles would be discovered before they would be completely deployed.  

Or consider the testimony of Alekseev (Soviet Ambassador to Cuba), who contended that ‘Khrushchev was firmly convinced that the operation could be carried out secretly, and that the Americans would not find out.’ And Sergo Mikoyan (the son of Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, and also involved in the Soviet decision-making during the crisis) recalled that Malinovsky was convinced that the missiles could be deployed without being discovered. Even Fursenko and Naftali – despite including the ‘impossible’ quote mentioned above – suggest that Khrushchev (and some of his inner circle) ‘clung to the thesis that US intelligence would not detect the missiles until it was too late to do anything about them.’  

Just as we may never have an exact and complete understanding of the Soviet motivation to deploy the missiles, we will probably never know exactly how Khrushchev perceived the risks associated with the mission. We can infer, however, that he at least had some belief that it would succeed (even if the probability was relatively small), and was certainly aware of the possibility that the US would discover the missiles before they were fully deployed. Therefore, we can with some degree of certainty rule out the hypothesis that Khrushchev was unaware of the risks of his plan, or ignored them.

The remaining possibilities are that he saw the deployment as high risk, or as a low to moderate risk. Unfortunately, until more documentation of the Soviet decision process is made available, we are unlikely to be able to answer this question definitively. Yet, because we know that Khrushchev was aware of the risks involved (even if he judged the probabilities as more in his favor than objective reality would suggest), and we know that he did decide to deploy the missiles, we can infer at least that he was certainly not as risk-averse as US officials believed him to be.

In a sense, the failure to predict the deployment of missiles to Cuba seems ‘over-determined’. US officials projected their own framing of the situation on to the Soviet Union. However, this framing was both incomplete, and biased heavily toward the risks and costs of such a deployment. Because of this assumed framing, US officials concluded that the risks of such a deployment were so high that such action was highly unlikely. In essence, the error in the first stage of assessing risk – the decision frame – led to, and was magnified in, the second stage when US intelligence analysts estimated Khrushchev’s likely decision. Because the framing that US officials had

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78 Allyn, Blight, and. Welch, Back to the Brink, p.46.
79 Blight, Allyn and Welch, Cuba on the Brink, p.79.
80 Blight and Welch, On the Brink, p.240.
81 Quoted in Fursenko and Naftali, One Hell of a Gamble, p.192.
estimated for Khrushchev was so skewed toward the negative aspects of a deployment, Khrushchev would have had to have been (in their minds) incredibly risk-acceptant to make the decision to deploy missiles. Thus, the magnitude of the error in assessing Khrushchev’s framing of a possible deployment seems to have been critical, and was only compounded further by the assumption (made in the second stage of assessing risk) of risk-aversion.

Conclusion
The estimation process in the months prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis was far from ideal. Though this might seem obvious, for many years government officials and scholars claimed intelligence before the crisis had worked as well as could be expected. Arnold Horelick, author of the first major study of the crisis (Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy, 1966), claimed as late as 1988 that the US had ‘simply misjudged Khrushchev’s capacity to make mistakes’.  

While Khrushchev did seem to misjudge the consequences of deploying nuclear missiles in Cuba, focusing solely on his mistakes prevents us from learning important lessons from the failure of the US to accurately assess Soviet intentions in Cuba. Of course, we cannot expect intelligence analysts to get everything right, all the time – such a standard would be unreasonable. International politics is a complicated business, and any number of unexpected or unanticipated factors might cause reality to deviate from the predictions of an intelligence estimate. The relevant question is then: was the Soviet decision to deploy missiles to Cuba a result of one of these unexpected factors, or was it foreseeable?

As this article has suggested, the failure of the US to anticipate the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba was largely a result of a faulty and incomplete assessment of the Soviet decision-frame. US officials projected their own framing of the situation onto the Soviet Union – ‘mirroring risk’ – which led them to focus on the factors salient to the US: the low probability of success, the unprecedented nature of such a deployment, and the high costs should the mission fail. While these factors were significant, this assumed decision-frame completely neglected the factors – the benefits of such a deployment, the motivation for deploying the missiles and the reasons that such a plan might succeed – that were most salient to Premier Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders. As a result of the incomplete decision-frame assessed by US intelligence officials – combined with the assumption that Khrushchev would be risk-averse – their estimates of likely Soviet behavior were incorrect as well. And because their fundamental assumptions were never updated or re-examined, estimations of Soviet intent with respect to Cuba did not change in the face of new and potentially disconfirming information.

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82 Blight and Welch, On the Brink, pp.35–6.
The prescription to ‘empathize’ with one’s adversary in order to avoid this type of error is not easy to put into practice, though it is critically important in avoiding unnecessary conflict. Ralph White, for instance, declares that empathy might be achieved by ‘being the other person, at least for a while’. However, a very rough, instrumental, version of empathy might be achieved with far less effort. In assessing a decision as it appears to an adversary, a complete framing must include four things: the costs (if it fails and if it succeeds), the benefits (if it succeeds), the possible and likely motivations, and the probability of success under different sets of circumstances. Though including these four factors is no guarantee that the analysis that follows from them will be correct, it will almost always be a significant improvement upon assessments based on incomplete framings.

Additionally, the case study presented above suggests that high-level decision-makers should have access to at least one ‘alternative framing’ of a situation. In the Cuban Missile estimation, virtually everybody assumed that the Soviet Union would frame the decision in a specific way. That framing (focused on the negatives of such an action) suggested that Khrushchev would not deploy missiles to Cuba. However, several alternative framings would have generated directly opposite predictions. For instance, what if Khrushchev thought that he could ‘get away with it’ (deploy the missile undetected by the US)? What if Khrushchev felt the Soviet Union to be in a desperate strategic situation?

The Cuban Missile Crisis has given scholars and policy-makers many lessons in crisis management and decision-making. Hopefully this lesson in ‘estimative empathy’ and the perils of mirroring risk will have similar impact and can now be added to that important list.

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