

# In the Eye of the Beholder

Keren Yarhi-Milo

## How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries

**H**ow do policymakers infer the long-term political intentions of their states' adversaries? This question has important theoretical, historical, and political significance. If British decisionmakers had understood the scope of Nazi Germany's intentions for Europe during the 1930s, the twentieth century might have looked very different. More recently, a Brookings report observes that "[t]he issue of mutual distrust of long-term intentions . . . has become a central concern in U.S.-China relations."<sup>1</sup> Statements by U.S. and Chinese officials confirm this suspicion. U.S. Ambassador to China Gary Locke noted "a concern, a question mark, by people all around the world and governments all around the world as to what China's intentions are."<sup>2</sup> Chinese officials, similarly, have indicated that Beijing regards recent U.S. policies as a "sophisticated ploy to frustrate China's growth."<sup>3</sup>

Current assessments of the threat posed by a rising China—or for that matter, a possibly nuclear-armed Iran, or a resurgent Russia—depend on which indicators observers use to derive predictions about a potential adversary's intentions. Surprisingly, however, little scholarship exists to identify which indicators leaders and the state's intelligence apparatus tasked with estimating threats use to assess intentions. For example, disputes among American analysts over the military capabilities of the Soviet Union dominated debates on the Soviet threat throughout the Cold War, yet there has been little examination of the extent to which such calculations shaped or reflected U.S. political decision-

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1. Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, "Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust" (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012), p. vi.

2. Gary Locke, "China Is a Country of Great Contrasts," National Public Radio, January 18, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/18/145384412/ambassador-locke-shares-his-impressions-of-china>.

3. Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012). See also Calum McLeod, "Some Cast Obama Trip as Effort to Contain China's Influence," *USA Today*, November 20, 2011, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-11-21/China-US-relations-Obama/51321096/1>.

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makers' assessments of Soviet intentions. Analyzing how signals are filtered and interpreted by the state's decisionmakers and its intelligence apparatus can lead to better understanding of the types of signals that tend to prompt changes in relations with adversaries, as well as help to develop useful advice for policymakers on how to deter or reassure an adversary more effectively.

In this article, I compare two prominent rationalist approaches in international relations theory about how observers can be expected to infer adversaries' political intentions, with a third approach that I develop and term the "selective attention thesis." First, the behavior thesis asserts that observers refer to certain noncapability-based actions—such as the adversary's decision to withdraw from a foreign military intervention or join binding international organizations—to draw conclusions regarding that adversary's intentions. This approach focuses on the role of costly information in influencing state behavior. Actions are considered costly if they require the state to expend significant, unrecoverable resources or if they severely constrain its future decisionmaking. The basic intuition behind this approach is that an action that costs nothing could equally be taken by actors with benign or with malign intentions, and thus it provides no credible information about the actor's likely plans.<sup>4</sup> Observers should therefore ignore "cheap talk."<sup>5</sup> Second, the capabilities thesis, drawing on insights from realism as well as costly signaling, asserts that states should consider an adversary's military capabilities in assessing its intentions. Of particular importance would be significant changes in armament policies, such as a unilateral reduction in military capabilities. Such changes reveal credible information about an adversary's ability to engage in warfare and thus its intention to do so.<sup>6</sup>

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4. In the context of foreign policy intentions, see James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (February 1997), pp. 68–90; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Robert F. Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy: How Communication Matters," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (May 2010), pp. 347–368. I exclude from the analysis public statements that can generate "audience costs," because they are typically seen as relevant in crisis situations. James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577–592. For an empirical analysis of audience costs, see Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (November 2011), pp. 437–456; and Marc Trachtenberg, "Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2012), pp. 3–42.

5. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); and Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests." On when and how "cheap talk" could matter, see Trager, "Diplomatic Calculus in Anarchy"; Vincent P. Crawford and Joel Sobel, "Strategic Information Transmission," *Econometrica*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (November 1982), pp. 1431–1451; Joseph Farrell and Robert Gibbons, "Cheap Talk Can Matter in Bargaining," *Journal of Economic Theory*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (June 1989), pp. 221–237; and Anne E. Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

6. Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Drawing on insights from psychology, neuroscience, and organizational theory, I develop a third approach, the selective attention thesis. This thesis posits that individual perceptual biases and organizational interests and practices influence which types of indicators observers regard as credible signals of the adversary's intentions. Thus, the thesis predicts differences between a state's political leaders and its intelligence community in their selection of which signals to focus on and how to interpret those signals. In particular, decision-makers often base their interpretations on their own theories, expectations, and needs, sometimes ignoring costly signals and paying more attention to information that, though less costly, is more vivid (i.e., personalized and emotionally involving). The thesis also posits that organizational affiliations and roles matter: intelligence organizations predictably rely on different indicators than civilian decisionmakers do to determine an adversary's intentions. In intelligence organizations, the collection and analysis of data on the adversary's military inventory typically receive priority. Over time, intelligence organizations develop substantial knowledge of these material indicators that they then use to make predictions about an adversary's intentions.

To test the competing theses, I examined three cases: U.S. assessments of Soviet intentions under the administration of President Jimmy Carter (a period when détente collapsed); U.S. assessments of Soviet intentions in the years leading to the end of the Cold War during the second administration of President Ronald Reagan; and British assessments of the intentions of Nazi Germany in the period leading up to World War II. My findings are based on review of more than 30,000 archival documents and intelligence reports, as well as interviews with former decisionmakers and intelligence officials. The cases yield findings more consistent with the selective attention thesis than with either the behavior or capabilities thesis, as I explain in the conclusion.

Before proceeding, it is important to note what lies outside the scope of this study. First, I am concerned primarily with the perceptions of an adversary's long-term political intentions because these are most likely to affect a state's foreign policy and strategic choices. Second, I do not address whether observers correctly identified the intentions of their adversaries. Addressing this question would require that we first establish what the leaders of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the periods examined here genuinely believed their own intentions to be at the time. Third, elsewhere I address the effects of perceived intentions on the collective policies of the states.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the focus of this

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7. For the effects of perceived intentions on policies, see Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing Thy Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessments of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

article is on the indicators that leaders and intelligence organizations tend to privilege or ignore in their assessments of an adversary's political intentions.

The next section of this article describes the dependent variable—perceived political intentions—and lays out the three theses. The following section outlines the research design. Then, three cases offer empirical tests of the theoretical explanations. The last section discusses the implications of my findings for international relations theory and practice.

### *Theories of Intentions and the Problem of Attention*

The three theses I outline below provide different explanations as to how observers reach their assessments about the adversary's political intentions. The term "political intentions" refers to beliefs about the foreign policy plans of the adversary with regard to the status quo.<sup>8</sup> I divide assessments of political intentions into three simple categories: expansionist, opportunistic, or status quo.<sup>9</sup> Expansionist adversaries exhibit strong determination to expand their power and influence beyond their territorial boundaries. Opportunistic states desire a favorable change in the distribution of power with either a limited or an unlimited geographical scope, but do not actively seek change. They may have contingent plans to seize opportunities to achieve this objective, but they will not pursue their revisionist goals when the cost of doing so appears high.<sup>10</sup> Status quo powers want only to maintain their relative power position.

#### THE SELECTIVE ATTENTION THESIS

Information about intentions can be complex, ambiguous, and potentially deceptive, and thus requires much interpretive work. Cognitive, affective, and organizational practices impede individuals' ability to process this information. To distinguish between signals and noise, individuals use a variety of heuristic inference strategies.<sup>11</sup> These simplified models of reality, however,

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8. Intention should be distinguished from states' motives for keeping or changing the status quo. On motives, see Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, pp. 38–39.

9. The scope of the revisionist intentions in expansionist and opportunistic states can be limited or unlimited. For a similar typology, see Keith L. Shimko, *Images and Arms Control: Perceptions of the Soviet Union in the Reagan Administration* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

10. Douglas Seay, "What Are the Soviets' Objectives in Their Foreign, Military, and Arms Control Policies?" in Lynn Eden and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Nuclear Arguments: Understanding the Strategic Nuclear Arms and Arms Control Debates* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 47–108; and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976).

11. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability," *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (September 1973), pp. 207–232; and Thomas Gilovich, Dale Griffin, and Daniel Kahneman, eds., *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

can have the unintended effect of focusing excessive attention on certain pieces of information and away from others. The selective attention thesis recognizes that individual decisionmakers and bureaucratic organizations, such as an intelligence community, process information differently. The thesis yields two hypotheses: the subjective credibility hypothesis explains the inference process of decisionmakers, and the organizational expertise hypothesis describes that of intelligence organizations.

**THE SUBJECTIVE CREDIBILITY HYPOTHESIS.** The subjective credibility hypothesis predicts that decisionmakers will not necessarily detect or interpret costly actions as informative signals.<sup>12</sup> This psychology-based theory posits that both the degree of credence given to evidence and the interpretation of evidence deemed credible will depend on a decisionmaker's expectations about the links between the adversary's behavior and its underlying characteristics; his or her own theories about which signals are indicative of the adversary's type; and the vividness of the information.<sup>13</sup>

First, the attention paid to costly actions hinges on observers' expectations about the adversary.<sup>14</sup> Observers are likely to vary in their prior degree of distrust toward an adversary and the extent to which they believe its intentions are hostile. This variation in decisionmakers' beliefs and expectations affects their selection and reading of signals in predictable ways. Given cognitive assimilation mechanisms and the human tendency to try to maintain cognitive consistency, decisionmakers who already hold relatively more hawkish views about the adversary's intentions when they assume power are less likely to perceive and categorize even costly reassuring actions as credible signals of benign intent. They are likely to reason, for example, that the adversary's actions are intended to deceive observers into believing that it harbors no malign intentions. Or they may believe that the adversary's reassuring signals merely reflect its economic or domestic political interests, and thus should not be seen as signaling more benign foreign policy goals. In contrast, those with relatively less hawkish views of an adversary's intentions are more likely to interpret reassuring signals as conforming with their current beliefs and, therefore, are

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12. Robert Jervis, "Signaling and Perception: Drawing Inferences and Projecting Images," in Kristen Monroe, ed., *Political Psychology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002); and Jonathan Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (January 2010), pp. 1–31.

13. The literature on such biases is vast. For important works and good summaries, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Ole Holsti, "The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (September 1962), pp. 244–252; and Philip E. Tetlock, "Social Psychology and World Politics," in Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Gardner Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp. 868–914.

14. Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (October 2006), pp. 641–663.

more likely to see such signals as benign. Hawks are likely to focus on costly actions that indicate malign intentions, because such actions are consistent with their existing beliefs about the adversary's intentions.<sup>15</sup>

Second, decisionmakers' interpretations are also guided by their theories about the relationship between an adversary's behavior and its underlying characteristics. As Robert Jervis points out, different observers will interpret even costly behavior differently, "because some of them saw a certain correlation while others either saw none or believed that the correlation was quite different."<sup>16</sup> If, for instance, a decisionmaker believes in the logic of diversionary war, he or she is likely to pay attention to indicators of an adversary state's domestic social unrest and see them as evidence that its leadership is about to embark on a revisionist foreign policy. Thus, social unrest serves as an index of intention, one that the adversary is unlikely to manipulate to project a false image. Those within the administration who do not share this theory of diversionary war will view social unrest as an unreliable indicator of future intentions.

Third, the subjective credibility hypothesis expects decisionmakers to focus on information that, even if perhaps costless, is vivid. Vividness refers to the "emotional interest of information, the concreteness and imaginability of information, and the sensory, spatial, and temporal proximity of information."<sup>17</sup> One "vivid" indicator that is particularly salient to the issues studied in this article consists of a decisionmaker's impressions from personal interactions with members of the adversary's leadership.<sup>18</sup> Recent work in psychology and political science has shown that our emotional responses in face-to-face meetings shape the certainty of our beliefs and preferences for certain choices.<sup>19</sup> As

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15. This hypothesis cannot indicate a priori when observers will change their assessments about intentions, but it can predict the possibility of change in perceived intentions relative to those of other observers on the basis of their initial beliefs about the intentions of the adversary.

16. Peer Schouten, "Theory Talk #12: Robert Jervis on Nuclear Weapons, Explaining the Non-Realist Politics of the Bush Administration and U.S. Military Presence in Europe," *Theory Talks*, January 24, 2008, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2008/07/theory-talk-12.html>.

17. Richard E. Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), p. 62. See also Eugene Borgida and Richard E. Nisbett, "The Differential Impact of Abstract vs. Concrete Information on Decisions," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 1977), pp. 258–271; Chaim D. Kaufmann, "Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method for Testing Psychological Explanations of Political Decision Making," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (December 1994), pp. 557–586; and Tversky and Kahneman, "Availability."

18. On the importance of personal meetings in inferring leaders' sincerity, see Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Personal Touch: Leaders' Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September 2012), pp. 560–573.

19. See, for example, Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs"; and Rose McDermott, "The Feeling of Rationality: The Meaning of Neuroscientific Advances for Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December 2004), pp. 691–706.

Eugene Borgida and Richard Nisbett argued, “[T]here may be a kind of ‘eye-witness’ principle of the weighing of evidence, such that firsthand, sense-impression data is assigned greater validity.”<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, information about intentions that is vivid, personalized, and emotionally involving is more likely to be remembered, and hence to be disproportionately available for influencing inferences. Conversely, decisionmakers will be reluctant to rely on evidence that is abstract, colorless, objective, or less tangible—such as measurements of the adversary’s weapon inventory or the contents of its doctrinal manuals—even if such evidence could be regarded as extremely reliable. This kind of information is not nearly as engaging as the vivid, salient, and often emotionally laden personal responses that leaders take away from meeting with their opponents.<sup>21</sup>

A few clarifications about the selective attention thesis are in order. First, the importance of prior beliefs in assimilating new information is central to both psychological and some rationalist approaches.<sup>22</sup> In Bayesian learning models, observers evaluating new evidence are not presumed to possess identical prior beliefs. The prediction that distinguishes Bayesian models from biased-learning models concerns whether observers with identical prior beliefs and levels of uncertainty will be similarly affected by new information revealed by costly signals.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the subjective credibility hypothesis claims that a process of updating might not occur even in the face of costly signals, and that vivid, noncostly actions can also be seen as informative. Further, the concept of Bayesian updating suggests that disconfirming data will always lead to some belief change, or at least to lowered confidence. The subjective credibility hypothesis, however, recognizes that some decisionmakers will not revise their beliefs even when confronted with valuable and costly information for reasons described above, such as a strong confirmation bias, the colorless nature of the information, or incongruity with the decisionmaker’s theories. This study also

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20. Borgida and Nisbett, “Differential Impact of Abstract vs. Concrete Information,” p. 269.

21. Nisbett and Ross, *Human Inference*, pp. 188–191; Fiske and Taylor, *Social Cognition*, pp. 278–279; Tversky and Kahneman, “Availability”; Kaufmann, “Out of the Lab and into the Archives”; and Rose McDermott, Jonathan Cowden, and Stephen Rosen, “The Role of Hostile Communications in a Simulated Crisis Game,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2008), p. 156.

22. For a debate on the role of “common prior beliefs” in bargaining models, see Alastair Smith and Allan Stam, “Bargaining and the Nature of War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (December 2004), pp. 783–813; and Mark Fey and Kristopher W. Ramsay, “The Common Priors Assumption: A Comment on ‘Bargaining and the Nature of War,’” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (2006), pp. 607–613.

23. Alan Gerber and Donald P. Green, “Rational Learning and Partisan Attitudes,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (July 1998), pp. 189–210; and Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (July 2006), pp. 755–769.

asks a set of questions about the importance of costly actions that Bayesian models tend to ignore: that is, do different observers select different kinds of external indicators to update their beliefs?

THE ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERTISE HYPOTHESIS. The bureaucratic-organizational context in which intelligence analysts operate has specific effects that do not apply to political decisionmakers. As a collective, intelligence organizations tend to analyze their adversary's intentions through the prism of their relative expertise. Intelligence organizations tend to devote most of their resources to the collection, production, and analysis of information about the military inventory of the adversary, which can be known and tracked over time. As Mark Lowenthal writes, "[T]he regularity and precision that govern each nation's military make it susceptible to intelligence collection."<sup>24</sup> Quantified inventories can also be presented in a quasi-scientific way to decisionmakers.

Over time, the extensive monitoring of the adversary's military inventory creates a kind of narrow-mindedness that influences the inference process. To use Isaiah Berlin's metaphor, extensive monitoring creates hedgehogs: "[T]he intellectually aggressive hedgehogs knew one big thing and sought, under the banner of parsimony, to expand the explanatory power of that big thing to 'cover' new cases."<sup>25</sup> This is not to argue that intelligence organizations know only how to count an adversary's missiles and military divisions. Rather, the organizational expertise hypothesis posits that, because analyzing intentions is one central issue with which intelligence organizations are explicitly tasked, and because there is no straightforward or easy way to predict the adversary's intentions, a state's intelligence apparatus has strong incentives to use the relative expertise that it has, which emphasizes careful empirical analysis of military capabilities. Unlike the capabilities thesis, the organizational expertise hypothesis sees the logic of relying on capabilities as arising from bureaucratic and practical reasons specific to intelligence organizations.<sup>26</sup>

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24. As Mark M. Lowenthal writes, "Deployed conventional and strategic forces . . . are difficult to conceal, as they tend to exist in identifiable garrisons and must exercise from time to time. They also tend to be garrisoned or deployed in large numbers, which makes hiding them or masking them impractical at best." Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2009), pp. 234–235.

25. Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 20–21.

26. For analyses of how organizations influence information processes, see Martha S. Feldman and James G. March, "Information in Organizations as Signal and Symbol," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (June 1981), pp. 171–186; Yaacov Y.I. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990); and Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953). The organizational expertise hypothesis does not predict the kinds of conclusions that individual intelligence agencies or analysts will reach about the adversary's intentions.



THE CAPABILITIES THESIS

The capabilities thesis posits that observers should infer an adversary's intentions based on indexes of its military power. This thesis draws on several realist theories that suggest that a state's intentions reveal, or are at least constrained by, its military capabilities. Two pathways link military power and perceived intentions.<sup>27</sup> First, according to John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, decisionmakers in an anarchic international system must "assume the worst" about adversaries' intentions.<sup>28</sup> How aggressive a state can (or will) be is essentially a function of its power. A second pathway relies on the logic of costly actions, according to which the size of an incremental increase or decrease in an adversary's military capabilities, in combination with how powerful the observing country sees it to be, can serve as a credible signal of aggressive or benign intentions.<sup>29</sup>

Drawing on these insights, the capabilities hypothesis predicts that observers in a state will infer an adversary's intentions from perceived trends in the level of the adversary's military capabilities compared with its own military capabilities. Under conditions of uncertainty about states' intentions, a perception that an adversary is devoting more resources to building up its military capabilities is likely to be seen as a costly signal of hostile intentions. As Charles Glaser puts it, "[A] state's military buildup can change the adversary's beliefs about the state's motives, convincing the adversary that the state is inherently more dangerous than it had previously believed. More specifically, the state's buildup could increase the adversary's assessment of the extent to which it is motivated by the desire to expand for reasons other than security."<sup>30</sup> Conversely, a perception of a freeze or a decrease in the adversary's military capabilities or its investment in them is likely to be seen as a costly and reassuring signal of more benign intentions. At the same time, realists have long emphasized that a state's perception of security or threat depends on how its military power compares with the power of the adversary, that is, on the balance of military power. Thus, in the process of discerning intentions, assessments of the balance of military capabilities are also likely to affect interpretations of benign or hostile intent. For example, if the adversary already enjoys military superiority

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27. A third pathway concerns the offensive or defensive nature of the military capabilities as a signal of intentions. On the little impact that such indicators had on the inference processes of decisionmakers during these periods, see Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing Thy Adversary*.

28. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 31.

29. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*; and Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*.

30. Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), p. 178.

over the observer, then observers will perceive an increase in the adversary's military capabilities as clear evidence of hostile intentions.

#### THE BEHAVIOR THESIS

The behavior thesis posits that certain kinds of noncapability-based actions are also useful in revealing information about political intentions, because undertaking them requires the adversary either to sink costs or to commit itself credibly by tying its own hands. I evaluate the potential causal role of three types of such "costly" actions. The first is a state's decision to join or withdraw from binding international institutions.<sup>31</sup> Some institutions can impose significant costs on states, and they are thus instrumental in allowing other states to discern whether a state has benign or malign intentions.<sup>32</sup> The structural version of the democratic peace, for instance, posits that the creation of democratic domestic institutions—because of their constraining effects, transparency, and ability to generate audience costs—should make it easier for others to recognize a democratic state's benign intentions.<sup>33</sup>

The second costly signal involves foreign interventions in the affairs of weaker states, or withdrawals from such interventions. A state's decision to spill blood and treasure in an effort to change the status quo, for example, is likely to be viewed as a costly, hence credible, signal of hostile intentions.

A third type of behavioral signal involves arms control agreements. Scholars have pointed out that, when offensive and defensive weapons are distinguishable, arms control agreements—especially those that limit offensive deployment and impose effective verification—provide an important and reassuring

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31. On the role of institutions in signaling intentions, see Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Seth Weinberger, "Institutional Signaling and the Origins of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 80–115; Songying Fang, "The Informational Role of International Institutions and Domestic Politics," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (April 2008), pp. 304–321; and Terence L. Chapman, "International Security Institutions, Domestic Politics, and Institutional Legitimacy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (February 2007), pp. 134–166. See also Stephen D. Krasner, *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 1997), pp. 114–155.

32. The usefulness of international institutions in revealing information about intentions depends on institutional characteristics such as the nature of enforcement, the effects of veto points on state decisionmaking, and the institution's effects on member states' domestic political institutions.

33. For a summary of how domestic institutions can be a signal of intentions, see Mark L. Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War: Reactions to Shifts in Soviet Power, Policies, or Domestic Politics?" *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 2007), p. 152; and James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577–592.

signal of benign intentions.<sup>34</sup> Cheating or renegeing on arms control agreements would lead others to question the intentions of that state. It is important to differentiate indicators such as the signing of arms control agreements as a behavioral signal of intentions from indicators associated with the capabilities thesis. Although both theses ultimately deal with the relationship between a state's military policy and others' assessments of its intentions, they have different predictions. If the capabilities thesis is correct, a change in perceived intentions should occur only when the implementation of the agreement results in an actual decrease in the adversary's capabilities. Policymakers should refer to the actual change in capabilities as the reason for a change in their perceptions of the adversary's intentions. If the behavior thesis is correct, perceptions of intentions should shift when the arms control agreement is signed, and policymakers should refer to the action of signing the agreement as a critical factor. Evidence indicating that changes in assessments of intentions occurring at the time of the signing of a treaty in response to expectations of future shifts in capabilities, or reasoning pointing to both the symbolic and the actual value of a treaty, confirms both theses.

#### SUMMARY OF PREDICTIONS

Table 1 highlights the most significant differences in the observable implications of the selective attention, capabilities, and behavior theses. Each of the four questions in the table addresses how to test the predictions of the three theories against the empirical evidence.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

To evaluate the selective attention, capabilities, and behavior theses, I examine, first, the perceptions of key decisionmakers and their closest senior advisers on the foreign policy of a particular adversary and, second, the coordinated assessments of the intelligence community.<sup>35</sup> In addition to variation on the dependent variable—perceptions of political intentions—the cases also provide useful variation on the explanatory variables.

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34. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited"; and Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

35. For the U.S. cases, I use the declassified National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on the Soviet Union. NIEs, which are produced by the National Intelligence Council, are the most authoritative product of the intelligence community. The community regularly assessed Soviet intentions in the 11-4 and 11-8 series of NIEs, supplemented by occasional Special NIEs (SNIEs). In all NIEs, I analyze only those sections that deal with the question of intentions. In the British case, the main focus of the analysis is the coordinated Chiefs of Staff reports and memoranda, because these represent the integrated analysis of all three military service intelligence agencies. As such, they provide a useful guide to the evolution of perceptions of the German threat at the level of the British intelligence community as a whole.

Table 1. Summary of Predictions

	Selective Attention Thesis	Capabilities Thesis	Behavior Thesis
Do observers vary in how they assess the adversary's political intentions?	Yes, decisionmakers and the intelligence community will rely on different indicators.	Not necessarily	Not necessarily
What is the key set of variables guiding observers' assessments of political intentions?	Decisionmakers will focus on vivid information that addresses what they subjectively judge as informative.	Influential variables are costly changes in the quantity of the adversary's military capabilities.	Influential variables are costly noncapabilities-based actions by the adversary.
When do assessments about political intentions change?	Decisionmakers will update in response to vivid information and subjective reading of credible indicators.	Assessments change in response to costly changes in the perceived quantity of the adversary's military capabilities.	Assessments change when the adversary undertakes particular costly actions.
How do observers explain their assessments of political intentions?	Decisionmakers reason with reference to information that they perceive as vivid or subjectively perceive as credible.	Observers reason with reference to the quantity of the adversary's military capabilities.	Observers reason with reference to the costly behavior of the adversary.

To test the propositions offered by the selective attention thesis, I examine how the primary decisionmakers—President Jimmy Carter, President Ronald Reagan, and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and their senior advisers—varied in their initial assessments of the enemy. Also, all three key decisionmakers were engaged in personal meetings with the adversary's leadership, albeit to various degrees.<sup>36</sup>

The cases also allow testing of the capabilities thesis, because both the initial balance of capabilities and the magnitude of change in the adversary's capabilities during the period of interaction vary across the cases. Both Cold War cases assume relative equality in military capabilities between the superpowers with a moderate increase (the collapse of détente case) or decrease (the end of the Cold War case) in Soviet capabilities during the interaction period. In contrast, the German military was vastly inferior to the British military, but an unprecedented increase in German military capabilities during the mid-to-late 1930s shifted the balance of power in Germany's favor. Thus, the interwar case should be an easy test case for the capabilities thesis, as the dramatic increase in German military capabilities and the shift in the balance of power during the period should have led observers to focus on this indicator as a signal of intentions.

The cases are also useful in testing the predictions of the behavior thesis. In particular, the end of the Cold War case is an easy test for the behavior thesis, given that the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, took a series of extremely costly actions. This should have had a significant reassuring influence on observers' perceptions.

In each case, I subject the evidence to two probes. First, I look for covariance between changes in the independent variables cited in each thesis and changes in the dependent variable of perceptions of intentions. A finding of no correlation between the predictions of a thesis and the time or direction in which perceptions of intentions change is evidence against that thesis. Second, through process tracing, I examine whether decisionmakers or collective intelligence reports explicitly cited the adversary's capabilities or its behavior, for example, as relevant evidence in their assessments of the adversary's intentions. This step provides a further check against mistaking correlation for causation.

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36. One potential criticism is that all cases involve Western democracies' assessments about the intentions of their nondemocratic adversaries. This is primarily because the data available from nondemocracies are not adequate to permit a reasonable understanding of what decisionmakers and intelligence analysts in these countries discussed and thought when they inferred the intentions of their adversaries. Moreover, although I show in the cases that the adversary's ideology did not play a direct role in the assessments of intentions, I do not systematically test the role of ideology in this project.

Third, in each case I test the predictions of the selective attention framework by comparing decisionmakers' assessments with those of the intelligence communities, as well as by tracing the process by which the selective attention criteria account for the variation among decisionmakers in how they categorized credible signals, and the timing of changes in their perceived intentions.

### *The Collapse of Détente, 1977–80*

Jimmy Carter began his presidency with great optimism about relations with the Soviet Union. But by his last year in office, the U.S.–Soviet détente had collapsed: Carter did not meet with Soviet leaders; he increased the defense budget; he withdrew the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) II Treaty from Senate consideration; and he announced the Carter Doctrine, which warned against interference with U.S. interests in the Middle East. In this case, I briefly outline trends in Soviet military capabilities and costly actions during that period that inform the capabilities and behavior theses, respectively. Then I show how the main decisionmakers in the Carter administration—President Jimmy Carter, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance<sup>37</sup>—assessed Soviet intentions in a manner that is most consistent with the subjective credibility hypothesis of the selective attention thesis. This is followed by a discussion of the U.S. intelligence community's assessments which, I argue, are in line with both the capabilities thesis and the selective attention thesis's organizational expertise hypothesis.

The U.S. consensus during this period was that the Soviet Union was building up and modernizing its military capabilities and that the correlation of military forces was shifting in its favor.<sup>38</sup> The Soviets were expanding their already large conventional ground and theater air forces and introducing modern systems that were equal or superior to those of NATO.<sup>39</sup> The deployment of Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Europe produced a growing concern over the potential threat of Soviet continental strategic superiority.<sup>40</sup> While the United States maintained what it called "asymmetric equivalence"

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37. On the relationship between the three decisionmakers, see Jerel A. Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and Their Impact on Behavior* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); and Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009).

38. Zbigniew Brzezinski, memo, "Comprehensive Net Assessment, 1978," p. 8; and Harold Brown, "Report of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to the Congress on the FY 1979 Budget, FY Authorization Request, and FY 1979–1983 Defense Programs," January 23, 1978, pp. 65–66.

39. Office of Strategic Research, "The Development of Soviet Military Power: Trends since 1965 and Prospects for the 1980s," SR 81-10035X (Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Research Center, April 1981), pp. xiii–xv.

40. NIE 11-6-78, pp. 2–3.

with the Soviet Union,<sup>41</sup> the U.S. defense establishment was especially worried about increases in Soviet nuclear counterforce capability. The Soviets were steadily improving the survivability and flexibility of their strategic forces, which had reached the potential to destroy about four-fifths of the U.S. Minuteman silos by 1980 or 1981.<sup>42</sup> In mid-1979, the National Security Council (NSC) cautioned that the strategic nuclear balance was deteriorating faster than the United States had expected two years earlier, and would get worse into the early 1980s.

The Soviets took two kinds of costly actions that fit the criteria of the behavior thesis. The first was signing the SALT II Treaty in June 1979, which called for reductions in U.S. and Soviet strategic forces to 2,250 in all categories of delivery vehicles.<sup>43</sup> The second was Soviet interventions in crises around the world. The Soviets intervened in twenty-six conflicts during 1975–80.<sup>44</sup> Unlike previous interventions during that period, however, the 1978 Soviet intervention in Ethiopia was direct, not simply through Cuban proxies, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 was a full-scale application of Soviet military power. The United States feared that the pattern of Soviet actions would expand beyond the “arc of crisis” to include additional regions and countries more important to U.S. interests. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in particular, significantly intensified this fear, because it was the first direct use of Soviet force beyond the Warsaw Pact nations to restore a pro-Soviet regime. In addition to these two interventions, reports in 1979 that the Soviets had placed a combat brigade in Cuba created a sense of panic in Washington that subsided only when American decisionmakers realized that the brigade had been in Cuba since 1962.<sup>45</sup>

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41. National Security Council (NSC) meeting, June 4, 1979, quoted in Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), pp. 334–336. The conventional military balance in Europe was perceived as favoring the Warsaw Pact forces. See National Foreign Assessment Center, “The Balance of Nuclear Forces in Central Europe,” SR 78-10004 (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, January 1978); and “Comprehensive Net Assessment, 1978.”

42. NIE 11-3/8-79, pp. 2, 4. Soviet damage-limitation capabilities were, however, still judged to be poor despite a large, ongoing Soviet investment. NIE 11-3/8-78, pp. 5–6, 11. See also Harold Brown, “Report of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, on the FY 1979 Budget,” pp. 65–66; and Harold Brown, “Department of Defense Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1980,” January 25, 1979, p. 70.

43. As a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter decided to table SALT II. NSC Weekly Report 123, December 28, 1979.

44. The Soviet Union had low-level involvement in eleven crises and conducted covert or semi-military activities in thirteen crises, in addition to using direct military force in Ethiopia and Afghanistan. See International Conflict Behavior Project dataset, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/>.

45. On the episode of the Soviet brigade in Cuba, see Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 360–361; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 347; and NSC Weekly Report 98, May 25, 1979; NSC Weekly Report 103, July 20, 1979; NSC Weekly Report 104, July 27, 1979; and NSC Weekly Report 109, September 13, 1979.

CARTER ADMINISTRATION ASSESSMENTS OF SOVIET INTENTIONS

In what follows I show that, consistent with the subjective credibility hypothesis derived from the selective attention thesis, Carter and his advisers did not agree on the informative value of Soviet costly actions. Rather, they debated the importance of various indicators in inferring intentions, and interpreted costly Soviet behavior markedly differently from one another. Specifically, their initial beliefs and theories about the Soviet Union affected the degree of credibility that each of the three decisionmakers attached to various Soviet actions.

Prior to becoming national security adviser, Brzezinski had held a more negative impression of the Soviet Union than either Carter or Vance.<sup>46</sup> During their first year in office, Carter and Vance perceived Soviet intentions as, at worst, opportunistic.<sup>47</sup> Brzezinski's private weekly memoranda to Carter reveal that, even though he was more skeptical than the president about Soviet intentions, he, too, was hopeful that the Soviets would remain relatively cooperative.<sup>48</sup> As conflicts in the third world grew in scope, intensity, and importance throughout 1978, however, Brzezinski concluded that the Soviet involvement in Africa was expansionist, not merely opportunistic. In January 1978, he maintained that "either by design or simply as a response to an apparent opportunity, the Soviets have stepped up their efforts to exploit African turbulence to their own advantage."<sup>49</sup> Soon after, he cautioned Carter that the "Soviet leaders may be acting merely in response to an apparent opportunity, or the Soviet actions may be part of a wider strategic design."<sup>50</sup> On February 17, Brzezinski provided Carter with a rare, explicit account of his impressions of Soviet intentions, including a table that divided Soviet behavior into three categories: benign, neutral, and malignant.<sup>51</sup> Brzezinski described Soviet objectives as seeking "selective détente,"<sup>52</sup> and explained that his revised assessments about Soviet intentions "emerge from Soviet behavior and statements since the election."<sup>53</sup> The table is particularly illuminating because it provides no mention of Soviet military capabilities, only of Soviet behavior, although the latter was not confined to Soviet interven-

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46. Rosati, *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community*; Melchiorre Laucella, "A Cognitive-Psychodynamic Perspective to Understanding Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's Worldview," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (June 2004), pp. 227-271; and Steven Jay Campbell, "Brzezinski's Image of the USSR: Inferring Foreign Policy Beliefs from Multiple Sources Over Time," Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 2003, pp. 74-75.

47. See, for example, *Public Papers of the President of the United States [hereafter PPP]* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 30, 1977), p. 1198; and PPP, December 15, 1977, p. 2119.

48. NSC Weekly Report 18, June 24, 1977.

49. NSC Weekly Report 42, January 13, 1978.

50. Quoted in Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 181.

51. NSC Weekly Report 47, February 17, 1978.

52. *Ibid.*

53. NSC Weekly Report 2, February 26, 1977.



tionism or costly actions alone. During February and March, Cuban and Soviet forces backed the government of Ethiopia in its effort to expel the defeated Somali army; Brzezinski believed that the Soviet Union was in Ethiopia "because it has a larger design in mind."<sup>54</sup> He reiterated these conclusions in subsequent reports to the president.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast, Secretary of State Vance believed that the Soviet Union's actions in Africa were not "part of a grand Soviet plan, but rather attempts to exploit targets of opportunity,"<sup>56</sup> and that they were "within the bounds of acceptable competition."<sup>57</sup> Alarmed by Carter's growing skepticism about Soviet motivations and objectives, Vance requested a formal review of U.S.-Soviet relations in May 1978. "Many are asking whether this Administration has decided to make a sharp shift in its foreign policy priorities," Vance noted, expressing alarm about the more hawkish Brzezinski's influence on the president's view of the Soviet Union.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Carter's growing distrust of Soviet intentions, ignited by the Soviet involvement in the Horn of Africa, had become apparent in a series of public statements depicting the Soviets as less trustworthy and calling for the adoption of a harsher U.S. stance.<sup>59</sup> Yet Carter continued to see the Soviet Union's actions in the Horn as opportunistic.<sup>60</sup>

By mid-1978, Brzezinski and Vance found themselves in opposing camps while Carter vacillated. Brzezinski summarized the differences:

One view . . . was that "the Soviets have stomped all over the code of détente." They continue to pursue a selective détente. Their action reflects growing assertiveness in Soviet foreign policy generally. Brezhnev's diminished control permits the natural, historical, dominating impulse of the regime to assert itself with less restraint.

Another view . . . was that the record of Soviet action is much more mixed and has to be considered case-by-case. The Soviets are acting on traditional lines and essentially reacting to U.S. steps.<sup>61</sup>

Convinced by early 1979 that the Soviets were pursuing an expansionist "grand design," Brzezinski continued to press Carter to act more assertively.

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54. Zbigniew Brzezinski, memo for the president, "The Soviet Union and Ethiopia: Implications for U.S. Soviet Relations," March 3, 1978.

55. NSC Weekly Report 55, April 21, 1978; and NSC Weekly Report 57, May 5, 1978.

56. Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 84.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

58. Vance, memo to President Jimmy Carter, May 29, 1978. Document released to author under the Freedom of Information Act, July 2007.

59. *PPP*, May 20, 1978, pp. 872, 940; and *PPP*, May 25, 1978, p. 977. See also Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 188–189; and Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), p. 185.

60. *PPP*, November 13, 1978, p. 2017.

61. NSC Weekly Report 65, June 30, 1978.

He wrote to Carter that the recent pattern in Soviet interventions revealed revisionist intentions.<sup>62</sup> Although alarmed, the president continued to reject Brzezinski's calls to "deliberately toughen both the tone and the substance of our foreign policy."<sup>63</sup> The issue of Soviet intentions resurfaced in the fall of 1979 during the uproar over the Soviet brigade in Cuba. Brzezinski saw this as another credible indicator of Soviet expansionist intentions, but Carter and Vance were unpersuaded.<sup>64</sup>

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 caused Carter to re-evaluate his perceptions of Soviet intentions. On January 20, 1980, he declared that it had made "a more dramatic change in my opinion of what the Soviets' ultimate goals are than anything they've done in the previous time that I've been in office."<sup>65</sup> Carter now viewed the Soviet Union as expansionist, not necessarily because of the financial or political costs incurred by the Soviets, but because the invasion represented a qualitative shift in Soviet behavior. Explaining this shift, Carter adopted Brzezinski's line of reasoning, saying, "[I]t is obvious that the Soviets' actual invasion of a previously nonaligned country, an independent, freedom-loving country, a deeply religious country, with their own massive troops is a radical departure from the policy or actions that the Soviets have pursued since the Second World War."<sup>66</sup> Consequently, he warned that the invasion of Afghanistan was "an extremely serious threat to peace because of the threat of further Soviet expansion into neighboring countries."<sup>67</sup>

The invasion was seen as an informative indicator of intention not solely because it was a "costly" action, but also because of the emotional response it invoked in Carter. Indeed, the reason he saw the invasion as indicative of Soviet intentions can also be explained, as Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein point out, by the "egocentric bias" that led Carter to exaggerate the extent to which he, personally, was the target of Soviet actions.<sup>68</sup> In particular, the invasion contradicted the frank rapport and the understanding that he felt he had achieved with Brezhnev during their meeting in June 1979 in Vienna.<sup>69</sup> Indeed,

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62. NSC Weekly Report 84, January 12, 1979.

63. NSC Weekly Report 109, September 13, 1979.

64. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 347–351.

65. Jimmy Carter, interview, *Meet the Press*, January 20, 1980. See also Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 480; "Message for Brezhnev from Carter Regarding Afghanistan," December 28, 1979; and Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 429.

66. *PPP*, January 20, 1980, p. 11. For a similar line of reasoning, see also pp. 308, 329.

67. *U.S. Department of State Bulletin (DSB)*, Vol. 80, No. 2034 (January 1980).

68. Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Afghanistan, Carter, and Foreign Policy Change: The Limits of Cognitive Models," in Dan Caldwell and Timothy J. McKeown, eds., *Diplomacy, Force, and Leadership: Essays in Honor of Alexander L. George* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993), p. 112.

69. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), p. 1059.

during that summit meeting, Carter spoke of “continuing cooperation and honesty in our discussions,” and upon his return he had proudly reported to Congress that “President Brezhnev and I developed a better sense of each other as leaders and as men.”<sup>70</sup> Brezhnev’s justification for the invasion—which asserted that the Soviet troops were sent in response to requests by the Afghan government—infuriated Carter, as he interpreted it as an “insult to his intelligence.”<sup>71</sup> Finally, Brezhnev’s betrayal also suggested that the Soviet leader could not be trusted to be a partner for détente. As Carter explained, “[T]his is a deliberate aggression that calls into question détente and the way we have been doing business with the Soviets for the past decade. It raises grave questions about Soviet intentions and destroys any chance of getting the SALT Treaty through the Senate. And that makes the prospects for nuclear war even greater.”<sup>72</sup> Carter wrote in his diary, “[T]he Soviet invasion sent a clear indication that they were not to be trusted.”<sup>73</sup>

Vance’s reactions to and interpretation of the Soviet invasion differed dramatically from Carter’s. He did not see the invasion as significant and costly, and thus informative of Soviet intentions. Rather, he considered it an “aberration” from past behavior, and “largely as an expedient reaction to opportunities rather than as a manifestation of a more sustained trend.”<sup>74</sup> Vance understood why others might view the invasion as a significant signal of expansionist intentions, but he believed that “the primary motive for the Soviet actions was defensive, [and] that the Soviets do not have long-term regional ambitions beyond Afghanistan.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Vance continued to view Soviet intentions as opportunistic long after the invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>76</sup>

In sum, the evidence presented provides strong support for the selective attention thesis. The support for the capabilities thesis is weak: the significant Soviet military buildup did not lead all U.S. observers to see Soviet intentions as becoming more hostile throughout this period. More important, none of the decisionmakers referred to the Soviet military buildup in explaining his assessment of Soviet political intentions. Brzezinski’s writings rarely discussed the recent Soviet military buildup, even though it would have bolstered the

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70. Quoted in *ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

72. Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1982), p. 99.

73. Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 383.

74. *Ibid.* For a similar logic, see Marshall Shulman, memorandum for Warren Christopher, “Notes on SU/Afghanistan,” January 22, 1980; and Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 388.

75. NSC Weekly Report 134, March 28, 1980.

76. See interviews with Vance and Shulman in Melchior Laucella, “Cyrus Vance’s Worldview: The Relevance of the Motivated Perspective,” Ph.D. dissertation, Union Institute, 1996.

hawkish case.<sup>77</sup> The evidence for the behavior thesis is moderate. Both Carter and Brzezinski used Soviet military interventions to infer political intentions. Yet the behavior thesis does not explain why, unlike Brzezinski, Carter and Vance did not infer hostile or expansionist motives from Soviet involvement in the Horn of Africa; it also does not explain why the invasion of Afghanistan triggered such a dramatic change in Carter's beliefs about Soviet intentions but had no such effect on Vance. Finally, the behavior thesis fails to account for the differences between the decisionmakers' inference processes—which largely relied on assessments of Soviet actions, albeit not necessarily “costly” ones—and the U.S. intelligence community's inference process, which, as described in the next section, largely relied on assessments of Soviet capabilities.

#### U.S. INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY ASSESSMENTS OF SOVIET INTENTIONS

The bulk of the integrated national intelligence estimates (NIEs) on the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War focused on aspects of the Soviet military arsenal. As Raymond Garthoff stated, “Estimates of Soviet capabilities were the predominant focus of attention and received virtually all of the intelligence collection, analysis, and estimative effort.”<sup>78</sup> Former Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet noted that “from the mid-1960s on to the Soviet collapse, we knew roughly how many combat aircraft or warheads the Soviets had, and where. But why did they need that many or that kind? What did they plan to do with them? To this day, Intelligence is always much better at counting heads than divining what is going on inside them. That is, we are very good at gauging the size and location of militaries and weaponry. But for obvious reasons, we can never be as good at figuring out what leaders will do with them.”<sup>79</sup>

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77. In only a few statements did the decisionmakers link Soviet intentions to the buildup. For example, in a report to Carter, Brzezinski wrote: “Soviet defense programs are going beyond the needs of legitimate deterrence and are increasingly pointing towards the acquisition of something which might approximate a war-fighting capability. While we do not know why the Soviets are doing this (intentions?), we do know that their increased capabilities have consequences for our national security.” This statement does not, however, lend support to the capabilities thesis, as Brzezinski explicitly says that he cannot infer Soviet intentions from these indicators. Brzezinski also addressed capabilities in other reports, but he did not link them—implicitly or explicitly—to an assessment of Soviet political intentions. NSC Weekly Report 33, October 21, 1977; and NSC Weekly Report 108, September 6, 1979.

78. In this section, I rely in part on interviews I conducted with William Odom, head of the National Security Agency at the time, and Fritz Ermarth, Raymond Garthoff, Melvin Goodman, and Douglas MacEachin, all former CIA analysts of the Soviet Union. Raymond L. Garthoff, “Estimating Soviet Intentions and Capabilities,” in Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Leggett, eds., *Watching the Bear: Essays on CIA's Analysis of the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence Publications, 2003), chap. 5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/watching-the-bear-essays-on-cias-analysis-of-the-soviet-union>.

79. “Speeches Delivered at the Conference,” in *ibid.*, chap. 8.

During the mid-to-late 1970s, various agencies within the U.S. intelligence community held differing views about Soviet intentions. For example, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) saw the Soviets as opportunistic. The military intelligence agencies and the Defense Intelligence Agency (part of the Department of Defense) viewed Soviet intentions as expansionist. The reasoning described in the integrated NIEs shows that all U.S. intelligence agencies viewed measures of Soviet current and projected strategic power as the most important indicator of Soviet political intentions. For example, NIE 11-4-78 estimated that "more assertive Soviet international behavior" was "likely to persist as long as the USSR perceives that Western strength is declining and its own strength is steadily increasing." It judged that "if the new [Soviet] leaders believe the 'correlation of forces' to be favorable, especially if they are less impressed than Brezhnev with U.S. military might and more impressed with their own, they might employ military power even more assertively in pursuit of their global ambitions."<sup>80</sup> The centrality of Soviet capabilities and the balance of capabilities as indicators of intentions also dominated NIE 11-3/8-79, in which Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner asserted that "as they [the Soviets] see this [military] superiority increase during the next three to five years, they will probably attempt to secure maximum political advantage from their military arsenal in anticipation of U.S. force modernization programs."<sup>81</sup> Competing and minority views were also routinely registered in the NIEs. One such view in this NIE claimed that Soviet perceptions of the global correlation of forces were "providing them with the latitude to safely confront the U.S." or its vital interests, and that in places where the Soviets enjoyed the "advantage of proximity" or "a preponderance of conventional forces," the regional correlation of forces made these areas more vulnerable to aggressive Soviet behavior.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, NIE 11-3/8-80 repeated the intelligence community's assessment that "the Soviet leadership is now confident that the strategic military balance is shifting in the Kremlin's favor and that the aggressiveness of its foreign policy will continue to increase as the Soviet advantage grows."<sup>83</sup>

Interagency disagreements about Soviet military strength and the evolving correlation of forces shaped readings of Soviet intentions. Agencies that perceived the Soviet Union as highly confident in its power also predicted that Soviet foreign policy would become more aggressive. Agencies that per-

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80. NIE 11-4-78, p. 6.

81. NIE 11-3/8-79, p. 4.

82. *Ibid.*

83. NIE 11-3/8-80, pp. B17–B18.

ceived Soviet capabilities as weaker also saw Soviet intentions as less aggressive and Soviet objectives as more moderate.<sup>84</sup> Bureaucratic interests did sometimes influence interpretations of Soviet capabilities and intentions, but whatever the parochial motives of analysts from different agencies and in spite of their disagreements about Soviet intentions, all of the intelligence agencies grounded their estimates of intentions in Soviet capabilities. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the Carter administration's decisionmakers, the intelligence community made almost no references to presumably costly noncapabilities-based actions to support the inferences they were drawing about their political intentions.<sup>85</sup>

In sum, the review of the NIEs on the Soviet Union reveals that unlike Carter, Brzezinski, and Vance, the U.S. intelligence community did not assess Soviet political intentions on the basis of behavioral or vivid indicators, but rather on their reading of Soviet military capabilities. This finding is consistent with both the capabilities thesis and the selective attention thesis's organizational expertise hypothesis. The marked differences between evaluations by the civilian decisionmakers and those of the intelligence community, as well as the substantial number of NIEs dedicated to assessing Soviet military capabilities, provide further support for the selective attention thesis.

### *The End of the Cold War, 1985–88*

During his first term, President Ronald Reagan perceived Soviet intentions as expansionist. His views changed dramatically, however, during his second administration. Following the Moscow summit in May 1988, Reagan asserted that his characterization of the Soviet Union five years earlier as an "evil empire" belonged to "another time, another era."<sup>86</sup> When asked if he could declare the Cold War over, the president responded, "I think right now, of course."<sup>87</sup> This section explores the indicators that President Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger used to assess Soviet political intentions during Reagan's second term, and how the U.S. intelligence community analyzed similar indicators to infer Gorbachev's intentions during the same period. The discussion that follows begins with some background information about trends in Soviet capabilities and costly action. This is followed by an analysis of how Reagan and his advisers per-

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84. See, for example, NIE 11-4-77; NIE 11-3/8-79; and NIE 11-3/8-80.

85. NIE 11-4-78 made some references to current Soviet actions with respect to SALT and détente. This line of reasoning, however, was rarely invoked. NIE 4-1-78, pp. ix, x, 17.

86. Quoted in Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), p. 352.

87. President's news conference, Spaso House, Moscow, DSB, June 1988, p. 32.

ceived Soviet intentions. The final section evaluates the inference process that the coordinated assessments of the U.S. intelligence community used to judge Soviet intentions during the same period.

Realist accounts of the end of the Cold War point to the decline in Soviet power relative to that of the United States during the late 1980s.<sup>88</sup> Yet archival documents show that at this time, the U.S. defense establishment estimated that the Soviet Union's military power was growing; that the Soviets were modernizing their strategic force comprehensively;<sup>89</sup> and that the Warsaw Pact had a strong advantage over NATO in almost all categories of forces as a result of its continuing weapons production.<sup>90</sup> In addition, prior to the signing of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the United States perceived the theater nuclear balance of power as extremely threatening, given the Soviet Union's vigorous modernization and initial deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Europe. Although the INF Treaty, which took effect in June 1988, substantially limited Soviet medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile forces, the U.S. intelligence community believed that it did not diminish the Soviets' ability to wage a nuclear war.<sup>91</sup> Then, in December 1988, Soviet Head of State Mikhail Gorbachev announced a unilateral and substantial reduction in Soviet conventional forces in Eastern Europe. Even so, U.S. perceptions of the balance of capabilities did not change until late 1989, following initial implementation of the Soviet force reductions. The announcement itself did not result in U.S. recognition of any significant diminution of Soviet capabilities in either size or quality.<sup>92</sup>

As for Soviet behavioral signals, Gorbachev's proposals during 1985 and 1986 were not sufficiently "costly."<sup>93</sup> During 1987 and 1988, however, the Soviet Union offered additional and significant reassurances to the United States. Especially costly were the Soviet acceptance of asymmetric reductions in the INF in 1987, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan

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88. William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 91–129.

89. See, for example, NIE 11-3/8-86; NIE 11-3/8-87; and NIE 11-3/8-88.

90. Frank Carlucci, "Annual Report to the President and Congress, 1989" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 18, 1988), p. 29.

91. NIE 11-3/8-88, p. 5. The Department of Defense reached a similar conclusion. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Soviet Military Power" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 1989), p. 7; and U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Soviet Military Power" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 54–55.

92. National Intelligence Council (NIC), "Status of Soviet Unilateral Withdrawal," M 89-10003 (Washington, D.C.: NIC, October 1989).

93. Jack F. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 275–276; and Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, p. 334. For an analysis of Gorbachev's costly actions and their effects on perceived intentions, see Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War"; and Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*.

announced publicly in February 1988,<sup>94</sup> and a series of other actions that Gorbachev undertook throughout 1988 aimed at restructuring the political system in the Soviet Union.<sup>95</sup>

#### SECOND REAGAN ADMINISTRATION'S ASSESSMENTS OF SOVIET INTENTIONS

A review of the historical record shows that Reagan, Shultz, and Weinberger disagreed on which Soviet actions they categorized as costly. Their interpretation of signals was shaped by their expectations, theories, and vivid, costless information.

To be sure, all three decisionmakers shared similar hawkish views of the Soviet Union, but they exhibited important differences in outlook. Weinberger held much more hawkish views than Reagan and Shultz at the start of Reagan's second administration.<sup>96</sup> Shultz was far less hawkish and did not believe, prior to 1985, that the Soviet Union desired global domination. Reagan's views were closer to those of Weinberger than Shultz. During his first term, Reagan had repeatedly referred to the Soviet Union as an ideologically motivated power bent on global hegemony.<sup>97</sup> Until mid-1987, Reagan continued to view Soviet intentions as expansionist. In December 1985, Reagan stated both in public and in private his belief that Gorbachev was still dedicated to traditional Soviet goals and that he had yet to see a break from past Soviet behavior.<sup>98</sup> In 1986, although Reagan had begun to view Gorbachev's policies as signaling a positive change in attitude, he still asserted that he "had no illusions about the Soviets or their ultimate intentions."<sup>99</sup>

Reagan and Shultz began to gradually reevaluate their perceptions of

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94. Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze informed Shultz of the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in September 1987. Gorbachev publicly confirmed this decision in February 1988.

95. Some decisionmakers in the United States did recognize the significance of Gorbachev's efforts to institute glasnost (openness, or transparency) within the Soviet Union during 1987. It was only from mid-1988, however, that his actions seemed aimed at fundamental institutional change. Both Shultz and Matlock argue that Gorbachev's actions had not, as of the end of 1987, signified fundamental reforms. George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), p. 1081; and Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, pp. 295–296. By mid-1988, however, Reagan had begun to praise Gorbachev for initiating true "democratic reform." He said that Gorbachev's efforts were "cause for shaking the head in wonder," leading him to view Gorbachev as "a serious man seeking serious reform." *DSB*, Vol. 2137 (1988), pp. 37–38.

96. In his comprehensive study on perceptions of the Soviet Union during the Reagan administration, Keith Shimko noted that "Weinberger's views of the Soviet Union were about as hard-line as one could get." Shimko, *Images and Arms Control*, p. 233.

97. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–237. According to Shimko, however, Reagan exhibited a rather superficial understanding of the Soviet Union, and his beliefs about the Soviet Union may not have formed a coherent image.

98. See, for example, *DSB*, November 1985, p. 11; and *PPP*, 1985, p. 415.

99. *PPP*, 1986, p. 1369.



Gorbachev's intentions during 1987. The Soviet leader's acceptance of the U.S. proposal on INF was a major contributing factor. In 1987 Reagan reflected on his evolving characterization of the Soviet Union: "With regard to the evil empire. I meant it when I said it [in 1983], because under previous leaders they have made it evident that . . . their program was based on expansionism."<sup>100</sup> Still, neither Reagan nor Shultz expected Gorbachev to signal a genuine change in Soviet foreign policy objectives. Reagan wrote, "[I]n the spring of 1987 we were still facing a lot of uncertainty regarding the Soviets. . . . It was evident something was up in the Soviet Union, but we still didn't know what it was."<sup>101</sup>

Two events in the spring of 1988 persuaded Reagan and Shultz of a change in Soviet intentions. First, the initial Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in April symbolized to both that the Brezhnev Doctrine was dead.<sup>102</sup> Shultz explained that the dominant perception in the administration was that "if the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Brezhnev Doctrine would be breached, and the principle of 'never letting go' would be violated."<sup>103</sup> In a private conversation with Gorbachev, Reagan acknowledged that the withdrawal "was a tangible step in the right direction," and took note of Gorbachev's statement that "the settlement could serve as a model for ending other regional conflict."<sup>104</sup> The second event occurred during the 19th Communist Party Conference, at which Gorbachev proposed major domestic reforms such as the establishment of competitive elections with secret ballots; term limits for elected officials; separation of powers with an independent judiciary; and provisions for freedom of speech, assembly, conscience, and the press. The proposals signaled to many in the Reagan administration that Gorbachev's domestic reforms were meant to make revolutionary and irreversible changes. Ambassador Jack Matlock described these proposals as "nothing short of revolutionary in the Soviet context," adding that they "provided evidence that Gorbachev was finally prepared to cross the Rubicon and discard the Marxist ideology that had defined and justified the Communist Party dictatorship in the Soviet Union."<sup>105</sup>

Reagan also paid significant attention to some "costless" actions and viewed

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100. *PPP*, 1987, pp. 1508–1509.

101. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 683.

102. The Brezhnev Doctrine, announced in 1968, asserted the Soviet Union's right to use Warsaw Pact forces to intervene in any Eastern bloc nation that was seen as compromising communist rule and Soviet domination, either by trying to leave the Soviet sphere of influence or even by attempting to moderate Moscow's policies.

103. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1086.

104. Transcripts of the Washington Summit, June 1, 1988, 10:05 A.M.–11:20 A.M.; and *PPP*, 1988, pp. 632, 726.

105. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, pp. 295–296.

them as credible signals of changed intentions given their vividness. Reagan repeatedly cited his positive impressions of Gorbachev from their private interactions in four summit meetings as persuading him that Gorbachev was genuinely seeking to reduce U.S.-Soviet tensions.<sup>106</sup> Emphasizing his growing conviction of Gorbachev's trustworthiness,<sup>107</sup> Reagan began increasingly to refer to Gorbachev as a friend who was "very sincere about the progressive ideas that he is introducing there [in the Soviet Union] and the changes that he thinks should be made."<sup>108</sup> He had come to respect and admire the Soviet premier, and in private writings and public statements, Reagan was explicit in attributing his assessments of Soviet intentions to these feelings.<sup>109</sup> The president wrote, "It's clear that there was a chemistry between Gorbachev and me that produced something very close to a friendship. He was a tough, hard bargainer. . . . I liked Gorbachev even though he was a dedicated Communist."<sup>110</sup> Toward the end of his second term, Reagan was asked whether he considered Gorbachev a "real friend." The president responded, "Well, I can't help but say yes to that."<sup>111</sup>

Other members of Reagan's administration noticed the importance of vivid information in shaping his views. Matlock thus notes, "Once he [Reagan] and Shultz started meeting with Gorbachev they relied on their personal impressions and personal instincts." This should not come as a surprise, Matlock adds, "If a person reaches a top political system in a country they know how decisions are made even in a foreign country." Reagan's personality—specifically his openness to contradictory information, his belief in his power of persuasion, and his emotional intelligence<sup>112</sup>—allowed him to rely heavily on his personal impressions of Gorbachev. As Barbara Farnham puts it, for Reagan, "[p]ersonal experience counted for everything."<sup>113</sup> Reagan's confi-

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106. Reagan and Gorbachev interacted during four summit meetings: the Geneva Summit (November 1985), the Reykjavik Summit (October 1986), the Washington Summit (December 1987), and the Moscow Summit (May 1988). During these summits, the two held long, private meetings, as a result of which Reagan gained a positive impression of the Soviet leader. Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing Thy Adversary*.

107. *PPP*, June 1, 1987, pp. 594–595; *PPP*, June 11, 1987, p. 624; *PPP*, June 12, 1987, pp. 635–636; *PPP*, August 29, 1987, p. 988; and *PPP*, September 16, 1987, p. 1038.

108. *PPP*, May 24, 1988, p. 649.

109. For a fuller account of the role that vividness played in Reagan's case, see Hall and Yarhi-Milo, "The Personal Touch."

110. Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 707.

111. *PPP*, 1988, pp. 708–709.

112. For an excellent analysis of Reagan's personality traits that allowed him to revise his beliefs about the Soviet threat, see Barbara Farnham, "Reagan and the Gorbachev Revolution: Perceiving the End of Threat," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 116, No. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 225–252; and Fred I. Greenstein, "Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the End of the Cold War: What Difference Did They Make?" in William C. Wolforth, ed., *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

113. Farnham, "Reagan and the Gorbachev Revolution," p. 248.

dants have pointed to his tendency to reduce issues to personalities: "If he liked and trusted someone, he was more prone to give credence to the policies they espoused."<sup>114</sup>

Trust also came to characterize Shultz's relationship with the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze. For instance, Shultz trusted Shevardnadze's private advance assurances in September 1987 that the Soviets would withdraw from Afghanistan within a year.<sup>115</sup> Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci similarly observed that "the personal bonds that began to develop between the president and Gorbachev, between George [Shultz] and Shevardnadze," led to "the gradual building of trust."<sup>116</sup> Shultz said of Reagan and Gorbachev, "One reason they respected each other was that they both could see that the other guy was saying what he thought. Maybe you did not agree with him and maybe you did. But there it was. It wasn't maneuvering and manipulating and trying to make some obscure point. It was right there. It was real. What you saw was what you got."<sup>117</sup>

Another example of vivid and credible, though costless, signaling was Gorbachev's responsiveness to some of Reagan's requests, both public and private. Beginning in 1987, Reagan announced certain actions that he asked Gorbachev to take to signal a change in Soviet intentions. Interestingly, instead of demanding a reduction in Soviet military capabilities, Reagan called for changes in Soviet behavior, including a withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, changes in Soviet policies on immigration and freedom of religion, release of certain dissidents, and greater transparency in Soviet security policy.<sup>118</sup> Although some of these actions meet the definition of a costly signal, others do not. Regardless, Reagan interpreted Gorbachev's actions that appeared to be responsive to his personal requests as significant signals of reassurance.<sup>119</sup> For example, Reagan wrote that by late 1987, "[t]here were tentative indications that 'quiet diplomacy' was working with Gorbachev: Although neither he nor I discussed it publicly, some of the people whose names were on the lists I'd given him of people who we knew wanted to leave the Soviet Union began receiving exit permits." Impressed by this gesture, Reagan

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114. "Leadership and the End of the Cold War," in Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation, and the Study of International Relations* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 183.

115. Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 691.

116. Quoted in Wohlforth, *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, p. 46.

117. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 105.

118. See Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, pp. 295–296; and *PPP*, June 1, 1987, pp. 594–595; *PPP*, June 11, 1987, p. 624; *PPP*, June 12, 1987, pp. 635–636; *PPP*, August 29, 1987, p. 988; and *PPP*, September 16, 1987, p. 1038.

119. During the Washington Summit, Reagan was satisfied by Gorbachev's (private) promise that he would end the shipment of Soviet military weapons to Nicaragua. Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 701.

says, "Although Soviet troops were still fighting in Afghanistan and the Soviets were still supporting guerillas in Central America and elsewhere, we were at least seeing real deeds from Moscow."<sup>120</sup> As a result, Reagan concluded his second term with far warmer views about the Soviet Union and its intentions.

Unlike Reagan and Shultz, Secretary of Defense Weinberger did not regard any of Gorbachev's actions—costly or cheap—as credibly signaling reassurance.<sup>121</sup> As he put it in 1990, "Not only did Gorbachev give up all of the Soviet 'non-negotiable' demands [regarding the INF Treaty], but he gave us precisely the kind of treaty that the President had sought for seven years. That act of course does not mean—any more than does the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan—that the USSR has given up its long-term aggressive designs."<sup>122</sup> There are several potential explanations why Weinberger's beliefs about Soviet intentions did not change. My argument here, however, is that the actions that scholars would consider to be especially costly actions of reassurance were regarded by Weinberger as irrelevant to his assessment of Soviet intentions.<sup>123</sup>

As for the role of Soviet capabilities, both Reagan and Shultz saw a connection between the Soviet Union's capabilities, its actions, and its political intentions. In their eyes, Soviet expansionist conduct during the 1970s occurred at a time when the United States had lost its superiority over the Soviet Union in strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>124</sup> They made it clear, however, that it was Soviet behavior during that period, rather than the Soviet military buildup, that was the decisive evidence of Soviet aggressive intentions. In fact, one of Reagan's favorite quotations was that "nations do not mistrust each other because they are armed; they are armed because they mistrust each other."<sup>125</sup> Reagan simi-

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120. *Ibid.*, pp. 686–687.

121. Weinberger's collection of private papers is still classified, and most of his public statements do not contain explicit references to Soviet intentions. Thus, I rely on his memoirs and interviews during and after his tenure as secretary of defense.

122. Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner, 1990), pp. 348–349.

123. Still, the question remains: Why did Weinberger not change his views about Soviet intentions? One interpretation is that the principle of cognitive consistency prevented him from considering information that contradicted his beliefs about the Soviet Union to be at all informative. Others point to Weinberger's lack of vivid information, because the secretary of defense did not interact with Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, or Soviet Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov to the same extent as Reagan or Shultz. Finally, Weinberger's statements in the aftermath of the Cold War reveal that he considered Gorbachev's commitment to communism the most important indicator of the Soviet leader's intentions. Even as late as 2002, Weinberger asserted that "Gorbachev to this day is a committed Communist and still believes that what is necessary is to strengthen communism." Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, "Interview with Caspar Weinberger," November 19, 2002, pp. 28–29, [http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp\\_2002\\_1119\\_weinberger.pdf](http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2002_1119_weinberger.pdf).

124. *PPP*, 1985, pp. 650, 1287–1288.

125. See, for example, Ronald Reagan, speech given at Moscow State University, May 31, 1988; and *DSB*, August 1988.

larly acknowledged that the adversary's capabilities by themselves are not good indicators of its intentions; instead they are a by-product of how each state perceives the other's intentions.

Some scholars have pointed to ideological changes within the Soviet Union when explaining Reagan's changing perceptions. Reagan viewed Leninist-Marxist ideology as the root cause of Soviet expansionist behavior: "Marxist-Leninist regimes tend to wage wars readily against their neighbors as they routinely do against their own people."<sup>126</sup> It is difficult, if not impossible, however, to disentangle changes in Soviet ideology and identity from changes in Soviet domestic institutions during this period. These changes occurred simultaneously, and U.S. references to Soviet ideology were almost always accompanied by discussions of the observable implications of these ideological changes on Soviet domestic institutions. In a sense, ideology played an intermediate variable that linked changes in the Soviet Union's behavior with others' perceptions of its intentions. Mark Haas, who has examined how these two factors shifted Reagan's beliefs about Soviet intentions, reaches similar conclusions, stating, "Gorbachev needed to propose major democratic institutional changes before most U.S. leaders believed his commitment to liberalism was genuine. Greater tolerance and respect for basic human rights were insufficient to arrive at this conclusion."<sup>127</sup>

In conclusion, the series of Gorbachev's costly actions should make this an easy case for the behavior thesis, yet, the empirical evidence lends only moderate support. While Reagan and Shultz relied on costly behavior signals to infer intentions, they also focused significantly on behavioral actions such as their own personal impressions of Gorbachev. Further, the behavior thesis fails to explain Weinberger's inference process: the secretary of defense stated explicitly that he did not regard any of Gorbachev's costly actions as credible reassuring indicators of intentions. As a result, his assessments of Soviet intentions did not change at all, even after leaving office. These aspects in the inference processes underscore the subjective nature of credibility. The support for the capabilities thesis is weak. Given the perceived trends in Soviet capabilities described at the beginning of this section, one would have expected the perceived intentions of the Soviet Union to have remained hostile until mid-1988. This thesis, therefore, cannot explain the radical change in Reagan's and Shultz's perceptions, and why the president and his secretary of state rarely focused on the Soviet military arsenal as an indicator that shaped their assessments of Soviet political intentions during the period under examination.

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126. *PPP*, September 22, 1986, pp. 1230–1231; and *PPP*, October 4, 1986, p. 1323.

127. Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War," p. 175. See also *PPP*, February 7, 1986.

U.S. INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY'S ASSESSMENT OF SOVIET INTENTIONS

The U.S. intelligence community's National Intelligence Estimates focused on markedly different indicators of Soviet intentions from 1985 to 1988 than did Reagan, Shultz, and Weinberger.<sup>128</sup> It gave greatest weight to the Soviet Union's military capabilities in judging Soviet political intentions. The U.S. intelligence community, as is now known, overestimated Soviet strategic forces and defense spending during the 1980s; this overestimation was an important contributing factor to the community's tendency to overstate Soviet hostility.<sup>129</sup>

Intelligence estimates from 1985 to 1987 concluded that Gorbachev was seeking détente with the West to reduce U.S. challenges to Soviet interests and to decrease U.S. defense efforts. His long-term goal was said to be to "preserve and advance the USSR's international influence and its relative military power."<sup>130</sup> Recognition by the Soviet leadership that the correlation of forces would soon shift against the Soviet Union and a relative decline in Soviet economic power were offered as the leading explanations for Gorbachev's cooperative initiatives.<sup>131</sup> A 1985 NIE stated, "Moscow has long believed that arms control must first and foremost protect the capabilities of Soviet military forces relative to their opponents. The Soviets seek to limit U.S. force modernization through both the arms control process and any resulting agreements."<sup>132</sup> A Special NIE in 1986 pointed to Soviet concerns about the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative as the primary motive behind Gorbachev's pursuit of a détente-like policy vis-à-vis the West. The NIEs portrayed Gorbachev's arms control initiatives as propaganda aimed at bolstering his campaign of deception.<sup>133</sup> The intelligence community's working assumption was that, despite serious economic problems since the mid-1970s, Soviet objectives remained unchanged.<sup>134</sup>

By mid-1988, Reagan's and Shultz's assessments of Soviet intentions had undergone a fundamental change, but the available NIEs indicate that the U.S. intelligence community did not revise its estimates of Soviet objectives until mid-1989.<sup>135</sup> Throughout 1987 and 1988, the community continued to hold that Gorbachev's foreign policy initiatives were merely tactical, and that no sig-

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128. In addition to NIEs, I relied on the interviews that I conducted with Ermath, Garthoff, Goodman, MacEachin, and Odom.

129. The CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis had become increasingly concerned that estimates of projected Soviet strategic weapons systems were inflated. See, for example, MacEachin, memorandum to deputy director for intelligence, "Force Projections," NIE 11-3/8, April 22, 1986.

130. SNIE 11-9-86, p. 4; and NIE 11-18-87, pp. 3-4.

131. NIE 11-3/8-86; NIE 11-8-87; SNIE 11-16-88; and NIE 11-3/8-88.

132. NIE 11-3/8-85, p. 18. This line of reasoning is repeated in NIE 11-16-85, pp. 3-9.

133. See NIE 11-16-85, p. 13; and SNIE 11-8-86, pp. 15-17.

134. NIE 11-3/8-86, pp. 2, 18.

135. In an estimate published five days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the intelligence community

nificant discontinuity in Soviet traditional goals and expectations could be anticipated.<sup>136</sup> For instance, in describing Gorbachev's "ultimate goal[s]," a late-1987 NIE repeated earlier assertions that Gorbachev was pursuing a clever plan to pursue communism, not through the use of blunt force, but through a deceiving posture of accommodation with the West that was intended to win more friends in the underdeveloped world.<sup>137</sup> Soviet modernization efforts toward greater "war-fighting" capabilities, coupled with calculations as to how economic difficulties would affect the strategic balance of power, were said to provide the most reliable guides to Soviet objectives.<sup>138</sup>

In conclusion, consistent with the expectations of the selective attention thesis's organizational expertise hypothesis, as well as with those of the capabilities thesis, the intelligence community's NIEs inferred Soviet political intentions primarily from its military capabilities. Throughout this period, the community did not update its assessments in response to Gorbachev's costly actions of reassurance, and it rarely used costly Soviet behavior to draw inferences about Soviet foreign policy goals. It saw Gorbachev's policies on arms limitations, for example, as rooted in the need to increase Soviet relative economic capabilities, a task that could be accomplished only by reducing pressure to allocate more resources to defense. Engaging NATO in arms control agreements was merely a ploy to undercut support in the West for NATO's weapons modernization efforts.<sup>139</sup> Thus, the support for the behavior thesis is weak.

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still viewed Warsaw Pact intentions as hostile, and warned of the possibility of an unprovoked attack on Western Europe. NIE 11-14-89, p. iii.

136. "NIE 11-18-87; SNIE, "Soviet Policy during the Next Phase of Arms Control in Europe"; Robert Gates, memorandum, "Gorbachev's Gameplan: The Long View," November 24, 1987; and NIE 11-3-8-88.

137. These goals were thought to include, first, constraining the growth of defense spending in order to rebuild Soviet economic strength so that in the long run Gorbachev could fulfill Soviet military requirements; second, pursuing diplomatic efforts to restrict the U.S. military buildup, specifically the Strategic Defense Initiative; third, moving beyond former Soviet positions on arms control to achieve domestic and foreign goals; and, finally, exploiting the new "favorable image" of the Soviet Union to reduce others' threat perceptions and to advance Soviet influence abroad through political means. The Defense Intelligence Agency disagreed, claiming that Gorbachev would "not be in a position to make an overall reduction in defense spending during the period of the Estimate." See NIE 11-18-87, pp. 3-4.

138. NIE 11-3/8-88.

139. *Ibid.* On the INF Treaty, see *ibid.*, p. 6. The CIA did not foresee Gorbachev's announcements of unilateral cuts in conventional forces or the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 428-433; and "Nomination of Robert M. Gates," Hearings before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Vol. 2, September 24 and October 1, 2, 1991" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), pp. 520-521. Some NIEs did refer to recent Soviet behavior in analyzing specific issues—for example, Gorbachev's behavior in the ongoing arms control negotiations—but they did not use these indicators to reach conclusions about his larger foreign policy goals.

Interestingly, the intelligence community's reluctance to revise its estimates of Soviet intentions led to repeated clashes between Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates and Secretary of State Shultz, the latter saying later that he had little confidence in the community's intelligence reports on the Soviet Union.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, intelligence assessments had only limited impact on Reagan and Shultz, who drew conclusions about Soviet intentions largely from their personal impressions and insights from meetings with Gorbachev. As Matlock explains, "They are very experienced people and experienced politicians and it meant much more to them what they were experiencing."<sup>141</sup> Paul Pillar contends that Reagan and his advisers, apart from Shultz, "brushed aside as irrelevant any careful analysis of Soviet intentions, just as Carter and Brzezinski had brushed aside the question of the Soviets' reason for intervening in Afghanistan."<sup>142</sup>

### *The Interwar Period, 1934–39*

The inference process identified above is not unique to the nuclear era, the Cold War, or American observers. An analysis of how British decisionmakers and the British intelligence community assessed the political intentions of Germany in the years leading to World War II reveals similar patterns and strong support in favor of the selective attention thesis. In what follows, I describe the evolution in the assessments of Germany's intentions by several senior members of the British government. I then discuss the British intelligence's coordinated assessments during the same time period.

#### BRITISH DECISIONMAKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF NAZI GERMANY'S INTENTIONS

From 1933 until 1935, British observers generally viewed the military buildup in Germany as defensive in nature and moderate in pace, and the balance of power "was expected to show comfortable margins of superiority for the Allies in all three dimensions of all warfare—air, land, and sea."<sup>143</sup> Germany's

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140. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 864. See also "Nomination of Robert M. Gates," p. 481.

141. Author phone interview with Jack Matlock.

142. Paul Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 116.

143. See, for example, Joint Intelligence Subcommittee, "Foreign Armament," CAB 56/2, January 22, 1937; Chiefs of Staff Committee, "Comparison of the Strength of Great Britain with That of Certain Other Nations as of May 1937," CAB 24/41, February 9, 1937; Chiefs of Staff Committee, "Comparison of the Strength of Great Britain with That of Certain Other Nations as of January 1938," CAB 24/296, November 12, 1937; Ministerial Subcommittee, "Report of the Ministerial Subcommittee on German Rearmament," CAB 24/268, November 23, 1934; Minutes of the 283rd Meeting of the CID, CAB 2/6, October 29, 1936, p. 176; "Estimated Scale of Air Attacks on England in the Event of War with Germany," Committee of Imperial Defence memo; Chiefs of Staff Committee, "The German Army—Its Present Strength and Possible Rate of Expansion in Peace and



withdrawal from the League of Nations and from the Disarmament Committee in 1933, however, led many British decisionmakers to conclude that Germany intended to revise the status quo by seeking limited territorial adjustments in Central-Eastern Europe and the return of some of Germany's colonies. Most decisionmakers still believed that Germany's intentions were opportunistic and limited. They accepted Hitler's assurances that he had no territorial ambitions in the West apart from the Rhineland.

Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent undersecretary at the British Foreign Office, held a more hawkish view of Germany in 1933.<sup>144</sup> He was also among the first to see Germany's behavior as indicating expansionist intentions, although limited ones. Germany's past actions, Hitler's own writings and statements, "a continuous and daily stream of German oration, broadcast, literature, and teaching,"<sup>145</sup> and Hitler's efforts to militarize German society led Vansittart to conclude by mid-1934 that Hitler was determined to revise the status quo in Eastern Europe, and soon. In April 1934, therefore, Vansittart urged British decisionmakers to "listen to the Germans themselves—beginning with the official ones," who, according to Vansittart, were "giving us more specific warnings than ever we had before 1914."<sup>146</sup>

By the fall of 1936, British intelligence and military establishments had begun to revise their assessments about Germany's capabilities and to regard its military arsenal as superior to Britain's. They based these changes on the accumulation of new information, including the start of military conscription, announced in March 1935. Then, in March 1936, German troops remilitarized the Rhineland. Arguably a breach of the Treaty of Versailles, it represented Nazi Germany's first use of military force outside the boundaries of the Reich. Anthony Eden, Britain's foreign affairs secretary, along with Vansittart and other Foreign Office officials, saw the remilitarization of the Rhineland as a credible signal of a German determination to revise the status quo, and concluded that Germany could no longer be trusted to respect its international commitments. Eden commented, "Herr Hitler's action is alarming because of the fresh confirmation which it affords of the scant respect paid by German Governments to the sanctity of treaties."<sup>147</sup> In contrast, other members of

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War," CAB 24/276, April 28, 1938; and Chiefs of Staff Committee, "Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War against Germany in 1939 by the Joint Planning Subcommittee," CAB 53/29, October 26, 1936.

144. Michael Lawrence Roi, *Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934–1937* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997).

145. Vansittart, memo, "The Future of Germany," April 7, 1934, Documents on British Foreign Policy (DBFP) II, VI, app. 2.

146. *Ibid.*

147. Anthony Eden, memo, "Germany and the Locarno Treaty," CAB 24/261, March 8, 1936; and Minutes by Vansittart, DBFP II, XVI, No. 121, March 17, 1936.

the Cabinet, including Neville Chamberlain, did not view these arguably “costly” actions as reflecting German intentions. They continued to attribute to Germany opportunistic (and limited) intentions.

The March 1938 Anschluss with Austria did not lead Chamberlain, now prime minister, to change his views about Germany’s intentions. He stated that “the seizure of the whole of Czechoslovakia could not be in accordance with Herr Hitler’s policy, which was to include all Germans in the Reich but not to include other nationalities.”<sup>148</sup> Both Chamberlain and his foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, viewed the Anschluss as indicating only opportunistic and limited aims; they believed Hitler preferred not to use military force to reach his objectives, and desired to avoid antagonizing Britain.<sup>149</sup>

Britain’s newly appointed ambassador to Berlin, Nevile Henderson, held very dovish views of Germany. Henderson reassured Chamberlain throughout this period that Germany had benign intentions toward Britain.<sup>150</sup> In July, Henderson declared that he was “disinclined to believe in the reality of Germany’s aggressive intentions against Great Britain unless and until she goes back on the [1935] Naval Agreement,” which regulated the size of the German Navy in relation to the British Royal Navy. If it did, Henderson continued, this would make it “quite certain what her [Germany’s] ultimate intentions are. Otherwise, risk though there be, it has got to be faced, and we have got to trust her.”<sup>151</sup> Influenced by Henderson’s assessment, Chamberlain cautioned members of the Cabinet not to give “too much credence to unchecked reports from non-official sources. He himself had seen His Majesty’s ambassador to Berlin, who gave an account of the attitude of the Nazi government that was not discouraging.”<sup>152</sup>

The Sudetenland crisis in the summer and fall of 1938 was seen as an informative signal of German intentions by some decisionmakers, including Halifax. He “could not rid his mind of the fact that Herr Hitler had given us

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148. Minutes of the Committee on Foreign Policy (hereafter MCM), CAB 27/623, March 21, 1938, app. 1.

149. MCM, CAB 27/623, March 18, 1938; Halifax believed that if Germany were to take action beyond the Sudeten territories, it would be for defensive reasons, given Germany’s worries about Czechoslovakia’s relationships with the Soviet Union and France. Memo by Halifax, “Possibility of Modifying Czechoslovakia’s Treaties of Mutual Assistance with France and Russia,” CAB 27/627, June 14, 1938.

150. Henderson had been very critical of French attempts to contain Germany after World War I. He accepted the territorial claims the Nazis made in 1930s, partly because he believed that Britain should take the role of independent arbitrator in European affairs. His public speeches similarly have a pro-Nazi overtone. Aaron L. Goldman, “Two Views of Germany: Nevile Henderson vs. Vansittart and the Foreign Office, 1937–1939,” *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (October 1980), pp. 247–277.

151. Letter from Nevile Henderson to Anthony Eden, July 1, 1937, DBFP II, XIX, No. 10.

152. MCM, CAB 23/94, July 13, 1938.

nothing and that he was dictating terms, just as though he had won a war but without having to fight."<sup>153</sup> Halifax's reaction surprised Chamberlain, who remarked: "Your complete change of view since I saw you last night is a horrible blow to me."<sup>154</sup> Indeed, during that time, Chamberlain relied heavily on private assurances and personal impressions to interpret Hitler's intentions, especially from three personal interactions with the German leader. This information was far from "costly," yet Chamberlain gave it credence as an indicator of Hitler's political intentions during this critical moment. He genuinely believed that he had established a rapport with Hitler, and trusted Hitler's personal assurances that he had no intention of occupying the rest of Czechoslovakia if an agreement could be reached over the Sudeten territories. As he wrote in September 1938, "I had established a certain confidence which was my aim and on my side and in spite of the hardness & ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word."<sup>155</sup>

Chamberlain declared to the Cabinet that he had established "some degree of personal influence over Herr Hitler" and "was satisfied that Herr Hitler would not go back on his word once he had given it" to Chamberlain. The "crucial question was whether Herr Hitler was speaking the truth when he said that he regarded the Sudeten question as a racial question which must be satisfied and that the object of his policy was racial unity and not the domination of Europe."<sup>156</sup> Chamberlain's strong belief in his ability to read Hitler's intentions was received with skepticism by Cabinet members who saw Hitler's past record of breaking promises as more credible evidence of his intentions.<sup>157</sup> Chamberlain was not alone in relying on his personal impressions and private assurances during that period, nor was he the only one who gave credence to "cheap talk." Eden, Halifax, and Henderson, for example, drew important inferences from their interactions with German officials on numerous occasions.<sup>158</sup>

From November 1938 to March 1939, however, British decisionmakers' as-

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153. MCM, CAB 23/95, September 25, 1938.

154. Quoted in Adam Roberts, *The Holy Fox: A Biography of Lord Halifax* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), pp. 117–118.

155. Chamberlain's private letter to his sister, dated September 19, 1938, quoted in Robert Self, *The Neville Chamberlain Diary, Letters*, Vol. 4: *The Downing Street Years, 1934–1940* (London: Ashgate, 2005), p. 348.

156. "Meeting of Ministers on 'The Situation in Czechoslovakia,'" CAB 27/646, September 16, 1938.

157. Letter from Secretary of the Board of Trade to Chamberlain, PREM 1/266A, October 3, 1938.

158. After meeting with a number of top German officials in November 1937, Halifax said that his "impressions" of his three-hour meeting with Hitler led him to conclude that "[t]he Germans had no policy of immediate adventure." MCM, CAB 23/90, November 24, 1937; and Roberts, *The Holy Fox*, pp. 72–75.

assessments about Germany's intentions changed dramatically. The Foreign Office concluded that now "unmistakably . . . in the eyes of Herr Hitler and of the majority of the Nazi Party . . . Great Britain is Enemy No. 1."<sup>159</sup> This shift in perceptions occurred in two stages. First, intelligence reports indicated that Hitler was seriously contemplating an attack on the West and was no longer interested in maintaining good relations with Britain. This war scare led most Cabinet members to question their beliefs that Hitler's plans were limited. There was "one general tendency . . . running through all the reports," said Halifax, that made it "impossible to ignore them."<sup>160</sup> Chamberlain, however, questioned the validity of these reports, relying instead on Henderson's optimistic claims that "Herr Hitler does not contemplate any adventures at the moment and that all stories and rumors to the contrary are completely without real foundation."<sup>161</sup> His judgments were based on personal assurances from Hitler. As late as March 9, 1939, Henderson believed that, "as an individual," Hitler "would be as likely to keep it [his word] as any other foreign statesman."<sup>162</sup> Chamberlain shared this optimism right up to the eve of the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, relying largely on Henderson's reports. This contributed to a growing split with Halifax, who had come to the conclusion shortly after Munich that Hitler was able and willing to use force against Britain and its allies in the coming months.<sup>163</sup>

The German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 debunked the notion that Germany had limited intentions. A Foreign Office memo dated March 29 thus reasoned, "The absorption of Czecho-Slovakia has clearly revealed Germany's intentions." Halifax saw this as an indication that the Germans were "seeking to establish a position in which they could by force dominate Europe and if possible the world."<sup>164</sup> It was a "significant" signal because "this was the first occasion on which Germany had applied her shock tactics to the domination of non-Germans."<sup>165</sup> The newly appointed permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office, Alexander Cadogan conceded that the invasion had confirmed Vansittart's alarming views, saying, "[I]t is turning out—at present—as Van predicted and as I never believed it would." He said that Henderson had been "completely bewitched by his German friends."<sup>166</sup>

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159. "Germany: Factors, Aims, Methods, etc.," FO (Foreign Office) 1093/86, December 20, 1938.

160. Memo by Halifax to Mr. Mallet, DBFP III, IV, No. 5.

161. Memo by Henderson to Halifax, February 18, 1939, DBFP II, XV, No. 118.

162. Memo by Henderson to Halifax, March 9, 1939, DBFP III, IV, No. 195.

163. Roberts, *The Holy Fox*, p. 141.

164. DBFP III, VII, 270–272.

165. MCM, CAB 23/98, March 15, 1939.

166. David Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, O.M., 1938–1945* (London: Cassell, 1971), pp. 163, 151.

The informative value of the German invasion did not stem only from its being a “costly” signal. From the perspective of Chamberlain and Henderson, it was both vivid and emotionally significant because, by invading, Hitler had explicitly reneged on his personal assurances to each of them. He had humiliated the prime minister and cast doubt on his judgment. Chamberlain wrote to his sister, “as soon as I had time to think, I saw that it was impossible to deal with Hitler, after he had thrown all of his assurances to the wind.”<sup>167</sup> Fearing what Hitler’s next move would be, Chamberlain confessed, “[I]t all sounds fantastic and melodramatic . . . but I cannot feel safe with Hitler.”<sup>168</sup> Officially, Chamberlain voiced similar views:

The Prime Minister said [to the Cabinet] that up till a week ago we had proceeded on the assumption that we should be able to continue our policy of getting on to better terms with the Dictator Powers, and that although those powers had aims, those aims were limited. . . . On the previous Wednesday, German actions in Czechoslovakia had only just taken place. He [Chamberlain] had now come definitely to the conclusion that Herr Hitler’s attitude made it impossible to continue to negotiate on the old basis with the Nazi regime. . . . No reliance could be placed on any of the assurances given by the Nazi leaders.<sup>169</sup>

In Cabinet discussions, both Halifax and Chamberlain—who would become known to history as the architects of appeasement—now conceded that Germany’s actions demonstrated that its aims and methods were extremely hostile and would require England to “take steps to stop her by attacking on two fronts.”<sup>170</sup> Halifax likewise argued that “the real issue was Germany’s attempt to obtain world domination,” and that it was “in the interest of all countries to resist . . . [or] we might see one country after another absorbed by Germany.”<sup>171</sup>

To summarize, certain costly German actions were judged as much more credible signals about intentions than were German military capabilities. This support for the behavior thesis is manifested most clearly in the inferences that some British decisionmakers drew from Germany’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference in 1934 and its actions in a series of crises over the Rhineland, Austria, the Sudetenland, and Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the historical evidence is not entirely consistent

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167. Letter to Hilda, March 19, 1939, in Self, *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters*, p. 393.

168. Letter to Ida, March 26, 1939, in *ibid.*, p. 395.

169. MCM, CAB 23/98, March 18, 1939.

170. MCM, CAB 23/98, March 20, 1939.

171. MCM, CAB 23/98, March 18, 1939. On the impact perceptions of intentions had on British foreign policy at the time see Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing Thy Adversary*.

with the logic and mechanism of the behavior thesis. British decisionmakers significantly disagreed about how to categorize Hitler's supposedly costly actions and drew different inferences from the same behavior. Consistent with the expectations of the subjective credibility hypothesis of the selective attention thesis, Vansittart—who from the beginning of the period had held the most hawkish views of Germany's intentions—categorized many of Germany's actions from 1934 to 1939 as credibly indicating hostile intentions. Henderson, who had held mostly dovish views of Germany, discounted many of Germany's "costly" actions. Furthermore, the documentary evidence indicates that in several important instances British decisionmakers ignored the history of Germany's costly actions and relied more significantly on personal insights from their interactions with Hitler and his advisers, as well as Hitler's personal verbal assurances. Such inference highlights the importance of vivid information and also challenges the logic of the behavior thesis. Finally, the support for the capabilities thesis is weak. Germany's rearmament program played an important role in alerting British decisionmakers to the rising threat and in dictating the menu of policy options available. As in the Cold War cases, however, trends in Germany's military buildup were not used as the primary indicator from which British decisionmakers inferred Germany's political intentions.

#### BRITISH MILITARY INTELLIGENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF GERMAN INTENTIONS

The collective assessments of the Annual and Strategic Reviews of the British Chiefs of Staff (COS) rarely discussed the issue of German political intentions and concentrated on collecting and analyzing information about changes in German military production. In part, this was because the Foreign Office was responsible for providing political intelligence. Yet, throughout this period, whenever the COS did discuss Germany's intentions, it drew its conclusions repeatedly and explicitly from calculations about the rate of its military rearmament and from the estimates about the military balance in Europe.

During 1934, British intelligence community assessments ranked Germany as militarily weaker than Britain. While the moderate buildup of German capabilities indicated to the COS Germany's clear desire to eventually change the status quo in Eastern Europe—if possible by nonmilitary means—it estimated that Germany would not launch an attack that would risk British involvement as long as the balance of military power was not in its favor. Even following Germany's claims that it had achieved parity in the air, the COS did not spend much time trying to gauge Germany's intentions. Instead, it continued to see the likelihood of war through calculations of military capabilities, which, at the time, still indicated Allied superiority. The COS estimated that, given its slow progress in rearming, Germany would be unlikely to defeat

Britain militarily in 1939, and therefore the COS estimated that Germany was unlikely to risk war.<sup>172</sup>

During the fall of 1936, however, assessments of Germany's capabilities and intentions changed with the growing recognition that the German buildup was aimed at achieving not just parity but superiority. Consequently, British intelligence saw Germany's intentions as more hostile. The COS still believed, however, that a German decision to engage in armed conflict with Britain would be based on calculations of German military readiness. Accordingly, the report concluded, "As Germany's rearmament progresses and she becomes more ready for war, the danger of conflict increases."<sup>173</sup> By May 1937, the COS had become extremely alarmed about the rate of Germany's military buildup, yet it still did not consider war against Britain likely, because it believed Germany was not yet ready militarily. A late 1937 COS report concluded, "The German General Staff are unlikely to consider that the strength of the German Army is sufficient to justify the prosecution of a land offensive before 1939–40."<sup>174</sup>

During the Sudetenland crisis, the COS conceded that Britain was in no position to defend Czechoslovakia militarily. It still believed that Germany did not seek greater objectives such as the total occupation of Czechoslovakia. If war came about, however, the COS concluded that Germany would be planning eventually to win a quick offensive war, including an aerial knockout blow, against Britain. The timing of such a war was hard to predict, in part because of changing estimates about when the German military would have sufficient advantage over the Allies in terms of numbers and efficiency, as well as the domestic balance between Nazi moderates and extremists. In April 1938, the COS estimated that even given a steady rate of expansion, Germany would not be prepared for war before January 1942.<sup>175</sup> In November 1938, however, the British military attaché in Berlin reported that Germany was likely to go to war in the autumn of 1939, because by then it would reach "the peak of its efficiency."<sup>176</sup>

In early 1939, a British military intelligence report on the future strategic balance expressed more optimism about Britain's ability to fight Germany (despite the worsening of the balance of military power), based on qualita-

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172. CAB 53/25, COS 401 (JP), "Defence Plans for the Event of War against Germany."

173. Joint Planning Subcommittee of the COSC, "Strategic Review," CAB 53/28, July 3, 1936.

174. "Comparison of the Strength of Great Britain with That of Certain Other Nations as of January 1938," CAB 24/296, November 12, 1937. For similar reasoning, see J.R. Ferris, "Indulged in All Too Little? Vansittart, Intelligence, and Appeasement," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1995), pp. 122–175.

175. "The German Army: Its Present Strength and Possible Rate of Expansion in Peace and War," CAB 24/276, April 22, 1938.

176. Mason-Macfarlane, memo, November 30, 1938. DBFP, III, III, No. 389.

tive factors such as population attitudes, air defense, latent economic power, and weaknesses in German morale and economic vulnerability. Moreover, while Germany had achieved military superiority, the pace of its rearmament had exceeded the capacity of the German economy to sustain it.<sup>177</sup> Nevertheless, the 1939 Strategic Appreciation “still showed a strong tendency to count numbers.”<sup>178</sup>

In sum, the structure of the British intelligence community during the interwar period, which placed the Foreign Office as the principal provider of political intelligence, prevents any definite conclusions about sources of the inferences made by the COS about Hitler’s long-term intentions. The available evidence suggests, however, that throughout the 1930s, the coordinated intelligence estimates by the COS carefully tracked quantitative trends in Germany’s military arsenal, repeatedly using this indicator to draw inferences about Germany’s intentions. This practice is consistent with the predictions of the capabilities thesis and the selective attention’s organizational expertise hypothesis. British decisionmakers, however, did not adopt a similar inference process, a distinction that is consistent with the predictions of the organizational expertise hypothesis alone.

### *Conclusion*

The selective attention framework fills important gaps in scholars’ understanding of the effectiveness of signals. This approach sees the interaction of signals with perceptual and organizational filters as central. In particular, several patterns emerge from the analysis. First, the subjective credibility hypothesis of the selective attention thesis receives strong support in all three cases examined in this study. At the heart of this hypothesis lies the idea that “credibility depends on how observers assess evidence and on what evidence they decide to assess.”<sup>179</sup> Decisionmakers’ own explicit or implicit theories or beliefs about how the world operates and their expectations significantly affect this selection and interpretation of signals. Decisionmakers in the British Cabinet, the Carter administration, and the second Reagan administration debated what to make of different indicators of intentions. To a large extent,

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177. Paul Kennedy, “British ‘Net Assessment’ and the Coming of the Second World War,” in Williamson Murray and Allan Millett, eds., *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 19–59; Wesley Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 211–216; and F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, abridged ver. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

178. Kennedy, “British ‘Net Assessment’ and the Coming of the Second World War,” p. 30.

179. Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” p. 14.



their reading of signals was influenced by what they expected to see. Those decisionmakers with relatively hawkish views, such as Robert Vansittart and Zbigniew Brzezinski, were quicker to read early Nazi German and Soviet actions, respectively, as evidence of malign intentions. Some clung to their original beliefs and interpreted all incoming information through the prism of those beliefs. Thus, Caspar Weinberger did not revise his beliefs about the expansionist nature of Soviet intentions even when faced with costly reassuring actions. Similarly, Cyrus Vance interpreted Soviet actions in the Horn and in Afghanistan consistently with his existing belief that the Soviets were merely opportunistic.

Second, consistent with the selective attention thesis, British and American decisionmakers repeatedly and explicitly relied on their personal insights to derive conclusions about their adversary's intentions. They monitored and responded not only to what the adversary's leader promised or threatened behind closed doors, but also to how he delivered the message: tone of voice, mannerisms, and mood were critical pieces of intelligence in their eyes. Even though this method of inference is extremely risky, Anthony Eden, Lord Halifax, Neville Chamberlain, and Nevile Henderson relied on their personal impressions to derive their conclusions, and used these impressions to convince other members of the Cabinet of their perspectives, thereby explicitly risking their own reputations. Personal impressions gleaned from private meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev similarly played a critical role in transforming President Ronald Reagan's assessments of Soviet intentions. In sum, personal diplomatic communication may leave strong emotional impressions (positive or negative) on leaders, who then use these impressions as evidence of intentions. This inference process is, in some sense, rational, but it may cause leaders to act in ways that do not serve their best interests. Rather than debate the concept of rationality in a vacuum, scholars need to understand that vividness, or an affect heuristics, more generally, is essential for rationality.<sup>180</sup>

At times, vividness and costly signaling jointly produced a drastic change in decisionmakers' beliefs. The analysis has shown that vivid information provided the context for understanding Gorbachev's costly signals, leading to a transformation in Reagan's views. Similarly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, because of its magnitude, its salience, and the emotional toll it exerted on President Carter, induced a drastic change in his beliefs. One can debate what to make of Chamberlain's change in beliefs, but here too one notes

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180. Paul Slovic, Melissa Finucane, Ellen Peters, and Donald G. MacGregor, "The Affect Heuristic," in Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman, *Heuristics and Biases*, pp. 397–420; and A.R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1994).

that expectations, vividness, and certain costly actions were responsible for nuanced changes in his beliefs during the 1930s.

A third point has to do with the second hypothesis of the selective attention thesis pertaining to the filters that intelligence organizations use in estimating intentions. Collective intelligence assessments in the United States and Britain were consistent in their preference for military indicators over other types of indicators in their analysis of intentions. During the interwar period, British intelligence reports substantially focused on bean-counting practices regarding the military arsenal of Germany. Consequently, they derived conclusions about Germany's intentions in large part by referring to these military indicators. NIEs on the Soviet Union also carefully tracked changes in Soviet military inventories and future capabilities. They did not always recognize the tautological logic they were using: that is, in estimating capabilities, these coordinated intelligence reports used certain assumptions about Soviet intentions while the resulting estimates of Soviet capabilities were used to infer future political intentions.

These divergent uses of information point to a weakness in the relationship between decisionmakers and intelligence organizations.<sup>181</sup> For example, according to Brzezinski, intelligence assessments of the Soviet Union were "weak on the level of 'politology,' and thus "did not provide much help to the President . . . in determining what the Soviets, in general, were trying to do."<sup>182</sup> Intelligence analysts were painfully aware of this criticism, and saw the task of analyzing Soviet intentions as the "biggest single trap."<sup>183</sup> Director of Intelligence Stansfield Turner explained that, "sometimes they [decisionmakers] have better information than you do. I mean, whenever I briefed President Carter, I always had to keep in the back of my mind that 'he met with Brezhnev last week.' I'd never met with Brezhnev, so if he interpreted what Brezhnev was going to do tomorrow differently than we interpreted what Brezhnev might do tomorrow, I had to give him credit that maybe he understood Brezhnev better than we."<sup>184</sup> Similarly, commenting on

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181. The evidence I have presented suggests that in neither of the Cold War episodes did U.S. decisionmakers use the NIEs to derive conclusions about their adversary's intentions. During the interwar period, British decisionmakers appear to have relied on human intelligence reports of the Secret Intelligence Services, but much less on the COS strategic reports, to reach conclusions about Germany's political intentions. Future studies should disaggregate the intelligence community and look beyond the coordinated reports in order to examine which and when individual intelligence agencies (or officials) tend to have a stronger influence on decisionmakers' assessments of the intentions of their state's adversary.

182. Quoted in Haines and Leggett, *Watching the Bear*, chap. 8.

183. Robert Gates, "The CIA and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Winter 1987/88), pp. 225–226.

184. Interview with Turner, "Episode 21: Spies," *National Security Archive*, December 18, 1997, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-21/turner1.html>.

British intelligence reports on Germany, Vansittart once remarked: "Prophecy is largely a matter of insight. I do not think the Service Departments have enough. On the other hand they might say that I have too much. The answer is that I know the Germans better."<sup>185</sup>

Of the alternative theses, the capabilities thesis has its greatest support in describing the practice of a state's intelligence organization. The Soviet Union's nuclear buildup and modernization efforts served as the main indicator the U.S. intelligence community used to estimate Soviet intentions during the 1970s, as well as the 1980s. British intelligence monitored trends in the German military to infer Germany's plans of where and when it would seek to expand. The capabilities thesis does a poorer job, however, at explaining how civilian decisionmakers read and interpret intentions. To be sure, armament efforts also had important "framing effects," because they forced decisionmakers to raise questions about the adversary's long-term objectives. Nevertheless, in none of the three episodes were these indicators regarded by the state's civilian leadership as primary evidence of the adversary's long-term intentions. This inference process implies that decisionmakers do not always assume the worst about intentions, as offensive realists would say that they should. More consistent with defensive realism, decisionmakers see estimating intentions as a central task of statecraft, and they attempt to detect important signals, which may reduce or exacerbate the security dilemma. What the realist logic neglects, however, is that decisionmakers' beliefs about the adversary's intentions are not necessarily driven by changes in the adversary's military forces. Thus, the policy prescription of rationalist security-dilemma scholars who identify changes in armament policies as a way of signaling intentions may not be effective.

The behavior thesis performs better than the capabilities thesis in explaining how decisionmakers gauge intentions. Indeed, for some British and U.S. decisionmakers, contemporary costly actions such as the German invasion of Czechoslovakia and observed shifts in Soviet behavior induced changes in beliefs about the adversary's intentions. Still, the empirical analysis provides many examples that contradict the causal mechanisms and underlying logic of the behavior thesis. Significantly, decisionmakers rarely agreed on what constituted a truly "credible" signal even when it was "costly." For example, British decisionmakers debated the meaning of Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland, although the use of military force outside the Reich constituted a clear violation of

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185. Quoted in Donald C. Watt, "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe," in Ernest May, ed., *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 268.

the Treaty of Versailles. Members of the Carter administration disagreed on the significance of Soviet military involvement in the Horn of Africa. Some officials, such as Vance, did not treat the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a diagnostic indicator of Soviet expansionist intentions, despite its considerable scale and cost. Even at the end of the Cold War, a relatively easy test of the behavior thesis, one finds that some Reagan officials, including Weinberger, did not regard Gorbachev's costly actions as informative signals of reassurance. Indeed, neither Weinberger nor Vance updated his beliefs during his time in office, even when faced with hostile signals that would otherwise be categorized as "costly."<sup>186</sup>

Moreover, the assumption that the informational value of "costless" (and even private) communication will be discounted does not withstand empirical scrutiny.<sup>187</sup> Leaders explicitly drew on their personal insights about the sincerity and intentions of adversarial leaders. Chamberlain and other British decisionmakers repeatedly referred to Hitler's private verbal assurances, writings, and other types of costless action to infer his future policy goals. Finally, the behavior thesis does not explain why intelligence organizations ignored or dismissed those costly noncapabilities-based actions that civilian decisionmakers relied upon, a practice especially pronounced in the collective NIEs during the 1980s. These findings appear to challenge the empirical validity of the behavior thesis, but they do not negate the logic of costly signaling, as there is some evidence that certain "costly" behavioral signals were seen as informative in the eyes of some decisionmakers.

Taken together, the logic of the costly signaling approach deserves more scrutiny. Although certain costly actions do receive more attention than others, decisionmakers' inference processes diverge significantly from those predicted by that approach. Nonetheless, this study should not be seen as dismissing the costly signaling concept entirely. Rather, it reveals significant shortcomings

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186. I also do not find support for the proposition that these decisionmakers' assessments of intentions were epiphenomenal to the interests of the bureaucracies they headed at the time. Both Weinberger and Vance continued to defend their assessments of Soviet intentions long after leaving office. There is no indication in their memoirs or in later statements that their perceptions had changed after leaving their posts. Moreover, the Foreign Office was taking the lead in voicing more alarmist views of Germany's intentions, even relative to those of the COS. British foreign ministers did not always share the views of the Foreign Office on Germany's intentions. Further work is needed, however, to investigate the influence of bureaucratic roles on the perceptions of the individuals who run these bureaucracies. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971). For critiques, see Stephen D. Krasner, "Are Bureaucracies Important? (Or Allison Wonderland)," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 7 (1972), pp. 159–179; Robert J. Art, "Bureaucratic Politics and American Foreign Policy: A Critique," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1973), pp. 467–490; and Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (1992), pp. 301–322.

187. On the credibility of secret assurances, see Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Tying Hands behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance," *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2013).

and ambiguities in how one should translate this concept of a costly signal from economic theory, where it originated, into a testable proposition in international politics. The literature should be clearer about the inferences that observers are expected to draw from a costly action. Finally, decisionmakers often must interpret multiple signals, some of which may suggest that the adversary's intentions are becoming more benign, whereas others may suggest the opposite. Rationalist accounts are silent as to which costly signals perceivers are likely to notice and which they are likely to ignore.

In sum, the findings imply that any study on the efficacy of signals that fails to consider how signals are perceived and interpreted may be of little use to policymakers seeking to deter or reassure an adversary. They also suggest that policymakers should not assume that their costly signals will be understood clearly by their state's adversaries. They should not fear that others are necessarily making worst-case assumptions about their intentions on the basis of their military capabilities, but they should be aware that the adversary's intelligence apparatus is likely to view such an indicator as a credible signal of intentions. Decisionmakers' inclination to rely on their own judgments and subjective reading of signals to infer political intentions is pervasive and universal, but these individuals should be wary: getting inside the mind of the adversary is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks facing intelligence organizations, and perhaps most susceptible to bias and bureaucratic interests. As a result, it is hard to imagine how decisionmakers might become more attuned to intelligence assessments on these important issues of assessing the adversary's political intentions.