

Intelligence Uncertainties and Policy

In 1987 U.S.–Soviet negotiations were drawing to a close on the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The U.S. intelligence community had three methods for estimating the number of Soviet INF missiles that had been produced—all of which had to be accounted for and destroyed. Meanwhile, any final number given by the Soviets would be suspect.

Each of the three major intelligence agencies advocated its methodology and its number as the one that should go forward. But the senior intelligence officer responsible for the issue decided, correctly, that all three numbers had to go to President Reagan. Some agency representatives argued that this was simply pusillanimous hedging. But the intelligence officer argued that the president had to be aware of the intelligence uncertainties and the possible range of missile numbers before he signed the treaty. That was the right answer, instead of choosing, perhaps arbitrarily, among the methodologies.