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THE TRANSITION FROM THREAT SITUATIONS
TO INTERNATIONAL CRISES
TR&A Technical Report #34
Threat Recognition and Analysis Project

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THE TRANSITION FROM THREAT SITUATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL CRISES

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September 1976

In recounting how the Kennedy Administration formulated its policy toward the Cuban missile crisis, Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett (1962) ranked Secretary of State Dean Rusk's off-hand comment that "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked" as a classic in American diplomatic history. According to Alsop and Bartlett, the Secretary's observation captured the essence of the most explosive moment in the cold war. The momentum of Soviet-American interaction had so activated the "engines of war" that the superpowers were carried perilously close to the brink of nuclear disaster before one of the nuclear Titans stepped back. For their parts, both President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev seemed to recognize that if they acted hastily or without measured restraint an awful doom threatened the entire world,--indeed history itself.

The October crisis of 1962 was propelled by a pervasive force in human affairs,--namely a threat dynamic. The driving concern for prominent political leaders was the threat of an adverse future given present conditions or trends. Cues from the environment are interpreted to suggest that the situation anticipates a future condition of severe deprivation, more than likely involving some form of physical harm. The prevalence of negative signals heralding the advent of an unpropitious future stimulates systems to take action to avert the anticipated state of undesirability. The impending event precipitates the formation and implementation of tactics designed to steer the course of events away from the projected danger. President Kennedy read the presence of Soviet medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles on Cuba as portending an adverse future that should, if at all possible, be avoided. He interpreted the situation as demanding strategies to neutralize, dissipate, or avert the prospects of such an unwanted condition.

In announcing his intention to impose a naval quarantine and demanding the removal of the missiles, Kennedy (1969) noted: "Should these offensive military preparations continue, thus increasing the threat to the hemisphere, further action will be justified. I have

directed the Armed Forces to prepare for all eventualities; and I trust that, in the interest of both the Cuban people and the Soviet technicians at the sites, the hazards to all concerned of continuing this threat will be recognized." It is obvious the President linked the presence of ballistic missiles in Cuba with a future situation at odds with the national security of the United States. The missiles augured a future danger the United States Government deemed unacceptable. On the basis of its appraisal of the situation, the Administration took steps to eliminate such a future. The overt action taken by the United States entailed (1) seizing the political-diplomatic initiative by announcing the discovery of the missiles, labelling them as offensive and threatening to U.S. interests, and demanding their removal, (2) imposing the naval quarantine, (3) intimating a willingness to escalate the incident if Soviet compliance was not forthcoming, (4) employing a veiled threat of a surgical air strike against the launching sites, (5) utilizing non-routinized channels of communication, e.g. via the private exchange of letters between the heads of state and special envoys such as Robert Kennedy, John Scali and U Thant, and (6) issuing an ultimatum to insure removal of the missiles. These maneuvers were actions taken to dampen the prospects of an adverse future. They constitute the overt behavior of national systems taken under the stress of an anticipated danger.

The Cuban missile crisis illustrates, in the most dramatic terms, the threat dynamic frequently at work in international affairs, and most assuredly operative prior to and during most international crises. This inquiry is designed to monitor international political behavior to determine if the system of action between nation-states changes markedly from benign states of interaction to malignant ones prior to an international crisis. The intent is to explore whether international crises are preceded by "threat situations." For present purposes, threat situations are assumed to precede most international crises. The research objective is to elicit a clearer understanding of how international conflicts pass from the threat stage to the crisis stage.

To meet this research objective, an investigation strategy is employed which draws heavily upon the theoretical advances in international system analysis made during the last two decades, the empirical research on international crises, and insights from cybernetics about monitoring change in a system--in this case a threat system. The strategy is guided by an interaction model of international behavior elaborated on slightly to capture

changes in the states of the system of inter-state action. The basic model is McClelland's event analysis model which has already proven to be a robust strategy for monitoring and analyzing high politics generally (McClelland, Tomlinson, Sherwin, Hill, Calhoun, Fenn & Martin, 1971) and crises specifically (McClelland, 1961; 1962; Tanter, 1967; 1974; McCormick, 1973; 1975).

International event analysis takes the position that regular behavior between national systems delineates the character of the interaction system. Changes in the patterns of interaction reflect changes in the international situation. Consequently the analytic task is to monitor the flow of events between national systems to identify both the pattern of regularity in the event/interactions and its change dynamic. This information can then be used to index the various behavioral modes of the international action system. Here, international event analysis is used as a strategy to identify the patterns of pre-crisis behavior, of selected antagonistic states, to determine the regularities in the behavior, the propensity to change, and the threat content.

To increase the international event analysis model's sensitivity to international threat situations, a cognitive appraisal element is attached to the basic event analysis perspective. The logic follows rather routinely from the research on stress by Lazarus (1966), Withey (1962, 93-123; 1964) and others,--namely that threats arise by inferring, or in the case of an issued threat being told, that present conditions or trends are intimately linked with some impending disaster. In effect, threats and the behavior associated with them, relate directly to the expectation of harm, danger, adversity, and deprivation, sometime in the future. "The notion of threat specifically implies that the noxious stimuli are not actually present. Only the cues heralding their coming are involved" (Withey, 1962, 94). As indicated by Withey, before a threat dynamic is operative, the relationship between present conditions or trends and future dangers must be recognized. The expectation that danger is approaching must be present before it is reasonable to assume that the affected system is (1) actually threatened, meaning that the approaching confrontation is viewed with apprehension and preferably should not be experienced (2) acting to avert, neutralize or dissipate the possibility of an unwanted future. The cognitive appraisal dimension of this study serves as a means for determining the presence of this expectation among experienced observers of world affairs.

The union of international event analysis with the cognitive appraisal perspective combines the known advantages of each technique as a means of tracing and analyzing potentially dangerous sequences of inter-state behavior. Cognitive appraisal concepts give insights about which interaction sequences are perceived as alarming and foreboding by international political analysts within the national system. Meanwhile the international event analysis traces the behavior sequences that are generating that concern and apprehension. Furthermore, event analysis provides an impartial measure of the interaction behavior which is not viewed as threatening, but which results in unwanted consequences. In other words, it helps to recognize the cognitively unrecognized threat situation.

The end product sought using this strategy of investigation is a compilation of empirical findings describing how patterns of international conflict change and become international crises. The theoretical expectation is that the threat dynamic is a significant force propelling conflicts to their crisis levels. Guided by this expectation, the study attempts to delineate the behavioral characteristics most commonly associated with the transformation of a threat situation to a crisis situation. The result is an aggregation of empirical findings describing the "explosive mix" of factors most likely to lead to a crisis. Such information is indispensable to an understanding of how crises arise, how they can be detected at their earliest stage of development as well as how they can be managed.

The intellectual pre-occupation of this inquiry is to know more about the international interaction typically evoked when external events are either appraised as threatening, or are in fact stress-inducing and disruptive. The basic theoretical orientation posits that national systems, indeed almost all open systems, are constantly confronted with external threat situations with which they must cope. An international crisis arises from the presence of such stimuli (Hermann, 1969a; 1972b, 3-17; 1972c, 187-211; Robinson, 1972, 20-35). In keeping with this orientation the most critical research question is:

1. What patterns of event/interaction characterize the pre-crisis behavior of antagonistic national systems?

Obviously the empirical objective of this question is to ferret out the regularities in the interaction sequences during the period prior to a crisis. Since the context,

Issues, participants, location, duration, tempo, and role of intermediaries are highly variable items, the expected area of meaningful comparability across crises is the interaction patterns. As threatening events unfold, it is expected that national systems will adopt sequential strategies to nullify the approach of a negative future. The international event analysis model assumes that patterns of behavior can be identified for pre-crisis periods and distinguished from non-pre-crisis periods. Tanter (1972, 13) correctly asserts that McClelland's basic notion "is that events in conflicts might form a chain of interaction sequences, and the discovery of these sequences would permit comparisons across cases." But while this information is extremely important, the more demanding research task is embodied in the second research question which seeks to unearth the threat content of the pre-crisis interaction.

Considerable empirical evidence exists to support the commonly held belief that the threat of harm is worse than the actual experience of it (Cook & Barnes, 1964; Janis, 1951; Mechanic, 1962). This research emphasizes the distinction between the threat of harm and the actual confrontation with it. Behavioral responses in anticipation of an unwanted event are different from those responses undertaken in the face of the actual event. For example, President Kennedy was initially threatened by the prospect that the Soviets might introduce offensive weapons into Cuba. On September 4th and again on the 13th, Kennedy warned the Soviet Union that his administration would not tolerate such a move. These warnings probably served multiple functions--domestic and foreign, but they were undoubtedly intended to deter the Soviets from taking any unwise action. The threat dynamic precipitating Kennedy's sequential attempts to deter the Soviet Union was substantially changed after intelligence analysts studied the films of a single U-2 surveillance plane taken during an overflight on October 14. Now the President was confronted with the reality of the adverse future he had sought to deter. At that point the threat dynamic changed. The anticipated, unwanted condition was no longer the introduction of such weapons, but the concern that they would become operational. Of necessity, the coping strategy changed from deterring the Soviets to persuading them to "undo" what they had already done (George, Hall & Simons, 1971, 24).

2. What is the "threat content" of the interaction sequences between the antagonists during the pre-crisis period?

The "threat content" question is subdivided to account

for two fundamental elements of a threat situation: the perceptual and the behavioral.

2.a What interaction behavior leads to the perception of threat by political leaders and opinion elites in affected national systems?

2.b Are interaction patterns prior to an international crisis significantly different from "steady state" system of action which normally describes the pattern of behavior between national systems?

These questions highlight a distinction that should be made in threat recognition and analysis models. The distinction is between threat as an act, sequence of acts or a statement (an issued threat), and threat as perception. In the latter instance, threat is a perceptual variable. It is customary in recent psychological, disaster and international relations literature to view threat perception as a function of an opponent's destructive capability and the "perception of intent." Singer's (1958, 94) quasi-mathematical model is an excellent example; accordingly, threat perception is equal to the "estimated capability x estimated intent." A similar position is taken by associates of the Stanford Studies in International Conflict and Integration Project. The conceptual framework for the 1914 case (Holsti, 1965) and the Cuban missile crisis (Holsti, 1972) is a rather standard stimulus-response model where the perceptions of decision makers serve to mediate between the external stimuli and the decision making unit's response.

In the decision making framework adopted in the Stanford Studies, perceptions serve the very vital role of defining the situation (Snyder, Bruck & Sapin, 1962; Pruitt, 1965, 391-432; March & Simon, 1958). In an overall sense a perceptual component of any threat recognition research is analytically unavoidable. "Threat as perception" provides a necessary conceptual apparatus to explain a system's sequential accommodations to a series of events that are not particularly disturbing by objective standards, but are responded to as if they were. When the perception of threat is a causally determining behavioral factor, systems are expected to behave as though they were threatened despite the existence of evidence to the contrary.

"Threat as behavior" focuses on the stimulus events that cue harm or are harm producing. Through learning certain events, sequences or configuration of events are

associated with danger and adversity. The inference from these events to the idea that injury, even ruin, approaches is both reasonable and direct. The content of the events and/or the sequence of events has an "endangering" quality to them. They threaten the target system. They thwart its objectives, stifle its motives, impose pressure on its capabilities and impair, even hurt, its functions and structures. In international affairs, warnings, denials, accusations, demands, demonstrations and acts of force are inherently more threatening than agreements, consultations, negotiations or grants-in-aid. It is an almost banal observation that past experience determines what is threatening. Diplomatic history is replete with accounts describing how these events irritated ongoing systems of action, challenging the steady state and frequently inducing change in the behavioral patterns. There is a tendency for these events to produce threat situations,--that is disturbed behavioral settings of a highly explosive and lethal character.

Threat as perception and threat as behavior are distinct yet indispensable components of any threat recognition model. Both are fruitful concepts in determining when a threat situation exists and what the prospects of an international crisis are.

In social-psychological research, disaster studies, and international relations investigations, threat perception is a well explored concept. For many scholars of the behavioral persuasion, it was only reasonable to expect that the individual's perception of threat given selected environmental cues or personality traits would play a significant intervening role in determining how individuals behave in stressful situations. This is exactly Richard Lazarus' point (1956) in his argument that threat appraisal is the "intervening variable" in how individuals cope with psychological stress. Recent research by Alexander George and Ole Holsti (1975) demonstrates the centrality and utility of this perspective in international relations research dealing with how policy makers make decisions under the stress of a crisis.

In contrast to the threat as a perceptual variable, threat as behavior is a relatively unexplored concept. While it is true that deterrence and game theorists (Kahn, 1960; Snyder, 1961; Wohlsteiter, 1959; Schelling, 1963) have elaborated extensively on the threat concept, their insights are restricted to a particularized sense of the term and are operative under rather special circumstances. There is little doubt that these insights have wider application in

international relations research, but to-date the task has not been performed. Similarly in the study of crises, both general and international, definitions of crisis frequently entail some threat element (Miller & Iscoe, 1963; Wiener & Kahn, 1962; 1972c), but this fact has not lead to a well developed notion of threat behavior.

The theoretical proposition adopted to expand the threat as behavior notion is that pre-crisis behavior will be characterized by marked changes from what is normal. Question 2.b seeks to determine whether significant differences exist between interaction sequences during the pre-crisis period and a known behavioral baseline. The baseline is an empirically generated measure of the "steady state" in the system of action between antagonists. A system is a set of entities "standing in interaction" (Von Bertalanffy, 1956, 3), and the state of the system refers to a particular pattern of interaction between the entities. A state is a "wholistic" notion and emerges as a significant unit of analysis in systems research. A steady state is one of many possible states of interaction for a system; for present purposes, it is the systemic condition of least disturbances and greatest constancy.

Theoretically the steady state is the system's stable region where the tendencies toward displacement and disturbance are countered by the forces of maintenance and stability (Berrien, 1968, 32). The steady state baseline serves as an unobtrusive, objective measure of the "normal operating" mode of the system. It is a state in an international system or subsystem where the volume of action is moderate, the conflictual forces are restrained and the cooperative elements balanced. The steady state represents the range of action least straining to the system. It persists so long as the variables, often called state variables, sustaining the stable condition are not forced out of the range of their stability. On this point, James G. Miller (1971, 294) argues:

All living systems tend to maintain steady states (or homeostasis) of many variables, keeping an orderly balance among subsystems which process matter-energy or information. Not only are subsystems usually kept in equilibrium, but systems also ordinarily maintain steady states with their environments and suprasystems, which have outputs to the system and inputs from them. This prevents variations in the environment from destroying systems. The variables of living systems are constantly fluctuating, however. A

moderate change in one variable may produce greater or lesser alterations in other related ones. These alterations may or may not be reversible.

This systems perspective endorses the definition of threat content in question 2.b as a disturbance in the steady state of behavior. Clearly, not all disturbances to a steady system of action are necessarily threatening. "Recognition of the meaning of the information of ... a threat must be based on previously stored (usually learned) information about such situations. A pattern of input information is a threat when--like the odor of the hunter on the wind; a change in the acidity of fluids around a cell; a whirling cloud approaching the city-- it is capable of eliciting processes which can counteract the stress or presages. Processes--actions or communications--occur in systems only when a stress or a threat has created a strain which pushes a variable beyond its range of stability" (Miller, 1971, 294)

Systems reasoning in international relations suggests that crises tend to be associated with states of systemic instability,--that is disturbances to the steady state. On this point Oran Young has written that political fluidity "frequently evoke(s) an air of political expectancy which creates in decision-makers a psychological receptivity to the possibility of sharp breaks with the past. In this context crises often appear as short but intense confrontations growing out of a merging in place and time of the disturbances just outlined" (1968,63) Crises are preceded and attended by disturbances in the system; they are products of, as well as catalysts for, international dislocations. Under extremely fluid, transitory political conditions crises tend to develop. Young extends his line of reasoning to the point of actually defining an international crisis as "a set of rapidly unfolding events which raises the impact of destabilizing forces in the general international system or any of its subsystem substantially above 'normal'... and increases the likelihood of violence occurring in the system" (1967,10) McClelland's position is similar. in the "Access to Berlin" study (1968), he bases the analysis of the Blockade Crisis of June, 1948-May, 1949, the Deadline Crisis of November 1958-May, 1959, and the Berlin Wall Crisis of August 1961 on the premise that a crisis can be distinguished from a non-crisis situation because the crisis is a "change of state in the flow of international political actions" (1968, 160) The change is significant enough to be readily detected and reveals a "sharp break" has occurred in the prevailing pattern of

behavior in favor of a new pattern. Systems theory logic holds that the state-variables supporting the steady state system of action are significantly altered to the point that they dramatically rearrange the relationships between the interaction entities. Empirical evidence in international crisis research (McClelland, 1972, 90, 96; Zinnes, Zinnes & McClure, 1972, 140; Robinson, 1972, 25; Sigal, 1970, 133-149; Halperin and Tsou, 1966; Holsti, 1970; Lentner, 1972, 119; Jervis, 1970, 90-138; Janis, 1967;) is rich enough to sustain this basic argument and to warrant further research on more crises,--and especially the pre-crisis behavioral patterns.

The reason for tracking any sequence of events presumed to have some threat element associated with it is to know more about what combination of behavioral factors contributes to political explosions, and which do not. It is, therefore, not enough to describe the system of action, the perceived threat content or even how disturbed the system is from the normal range of behavior. Equally important is the task of defining what strategies national systems take to handle the stress generated by the advent of adversity. Consequently, the third area of focus for this inquiry is to determine the character of the adaptive behavior of national systems threatened with adversity.

Strategies of adaptation range from the simplest ways of dealing with minor problems to the most complex techniques for handling environmental change. Strategies vary from system to system. Lower forms of animal life rely heavily on instinctive, built-in mechanisms for handling stress, variety and change. Systems higher on the phylogenetic scale of development are increasingly dependent on learning as the source of inspiration in dealing with external stimuli. More advanced systems, human and human generated, frequently react more to the cues of danger rather than the danger itself. Through learning, advanced systems realize the disadvantages of attempting to deal with harm once it has actually occurred. Greater emphasis is placed on anticipating the harm, on reading environmental cues that project the likelihood of harm occurring. Cognition, interpretation, symbols and learning play critical roles in determining how complex systems adapt to adverse environmental events.

Exactly how systems strike compromises with their environments is an intriguing question and it might be added, a very serious business. Primate field studies have shown the importance of biosocial adaptation to threatening environments. Non-human primate studies reveal the primary

role of group in maximizing the chances for survival for individual animals. Studies of the Old World monkey and African apes suggest that at no time can individual animals, living alone, handle the problems of the environment. Complex social systems exist among non-human and humans to facilitate adapting. Hall (1965) provides one of many illustrations of the importance of the social system in adjusting to the environment. Pata monkeys, *Erythrocebus patas*, are physiologically built for speed which permits them to adapt to life in the grasslands of Uganda away from trees. When danger approaches a troop, the single, adult male, attracts attention to himself by his bright colors, jumping, screams and other techniques, and decoys the danger away from the troop. The young, lacking the speed to escape, and the females freeze in the tall grass and play "possum" until the danger passes. Young animals practice decoy and possum behavior in their play thereby learning the system that contributes to their survival. The point is that speed alone does not insure survival. The social structure of the group (one adult male with several female and their young), sleeping habits (troop members sleep separately), play behavior, speed, even the tall grass which permits possum behavior contribute to a successful adaptive behavior.

How national systems adapt to the international environment is as intriguing and as serious as how pata monkeys adjust to the Uganda grasslands. According to Rosenau (1970, 365) environments are constantly changing resulting in "a threat to the integrity and survival of the organism." If national systems are to persist and grow, the argument holds, foreign policies must be enacted to adapt to the external environment. Adaptation depends on the maintenance of essential structures (Rosenau, 1970; Kaplan, 1957; Ashby, 1952), on an internal and external homeostasis or steady state (Ashby, 1952, 58-70; Cannon, 1939; Seyle, 1956; Smelser, 1963; Grinker & Spiegel, 1945; Arnold, 1960), on vital information processing (Miller, 1965; Hamburg & Adams, 1967), and autonomy (Angyal, 1941, 49). Adaptive behavior by national systems involves a diverse repertoire of strategies to meet the variety of conditions in the environment.

Adaptive behavior should be thought of as master concept. It covers all types of behavioral compromises and adjustments (French, Rodgers & Cobb, 1974, 316-333). The primary concern of this inquiry is restricted, however, to a type of adaptive behavior,--namely coping. Coping behavior is a class of adaptation exhibited by systems when faced with an acute disturbance or threatened with one. Coping behavior occurs prior to and during highly stressful

situations. Stressful situations are those instances where environmental changes are sufficiently drastic to force the system to operate in a radically new environment. Crippling sicknesses, death of close relative, floods, storms, marriage, starting or graduating from school, exams, or business failure are all instances that elicit coping behavior from individuals (Dohrenwend, 1974, 275-310). Collectives such as national political systems are similarly challenged by floods, storms, epidemics, mass migrations, panics, riots, revolutions, wars and international crises. Coping behavior refers to those strategies employed by systems threatened with or confronted by drastic changes in the environment that defy familiar response patterns. It is adaptation under severe, short term, abnormal conditions. Coping is a temporary adjustment to an inflamed, or potentially explosive situation.

The third and final research question of this study is concerned with the problem of identifying how national systems cope with threat situations.

3. What coping strategies do national systems adopt to meet undefined, unstructured situations that threaten adverse future confrontations?

It is reasonable to expect that national systems will engage in coping behavior only if the situation is disquieting and depreciating, or appraised that way. Coping strategies are employed when management of a given situation exceeds the normal operating range of the system. New measures in greater amounts are tried to arrest a trend that is foreboding, unbearable and potentially ruinous.

The collective purpose of these research questions is to explore more thoroughly the pre-crisis behavior of national systems and to uncover the relationship between threat situations and international crises. Comparatively little is known about what types of behavior precipitate international crises, what sorts of acts are assessed as threatening by relevant publics, what kinds of behavioral patterns cause disturbances in a system of action, or what classes of activity constitute coping behavior. Knowledge about what determines whether an international crisis develops from a sequence of behavior rather than a mild episode or flare-up is virtually non-existent. Current behavioral explanations of international crises are unsatisfactory, scientifically speaking, because as yet no unique combination of interaction sequences is known to be associated with an international crisis as a unique outcome. This problem is certainly not peculiar to crisis research

(Evans, 1969; Smelser, 1963); nevertheless, it remains an impediment to accumulating a thorough knowledge of how threat situations evolve into crises. To reduce the disadvantages of this fact is a major goal of this undertaking.

"The aim of the sciences is to diminish uncertainty about the world" (Katz, 1974, 394). The aim here is to reduce some of the uncertainty surrounding how international interactions pass from relatively benign states to "acute" crises. It is assumed that a partial reduction of uncertainty can be achieved by monitoring the pre-crisis interaction of national systems to track the transition from the non-crisis to the crisis state.*

The problems of monitoring the evolution of a non-crisis situation to a crisis one are severe. McClelland (1961) reminds us of the classical diplomatic historian's view that a crisis is idiosyncratic, and that the search for its pattern and regularity is a useless undertaking. No amount of nomothetic analysis can generate comprehensive generalizations when each case appears to be sui generis with respect to issue, actor, location, duration, tempo, role of third parties and superpower involvement. The general structure of pre-crisis and crisis situations is highly ambiguous; it never seems developed enough to evaluate, least of all manage. It is constantly changing and emerging. Crisis management and crisis preventive diplomacy must of necessity be context-dependent. They are contingent upon many unspecified variables which fluctuate over time (George & Smoke, 1974, 50, 54).

The problems of identifying similarities in particular cases are unquestionably sobering (Rosenau, 1968b; McGowan, 1975, 96). Verba (1967) acknowledges that generalizations tend to vanish in particular cases. Immensely complicated social processes frequently cloud the general dynamics at work in unique cases. The variety of crises selected for analysis do not constitute a sample of post-war crises, but they are sufficiently alike, meaning they are members of the same class of phenomena (Kalleberg, 1966), to warrant comparisons, to permit empirical probes (Eckstein, 1975), and to specify what similarities exist amidst the diversity (Robinson, 1972, 23).

* For his Ph.D. dissertation, Richard S. Beal is monitoring pre-crisis interaction activity among the nations involved in nine post-World War II international crises: the Berlin blockade crisis of 1948, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1955, the United States-Lebanese crisis in 1958, the Bay of Pigs crisis in 1961, the Berlin Aide-Memoire crisis in 1961, and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Included in this monitoring activity are the cognitive appraisals of national political leaders and/or prominent opinion elites. The coupling of these two enterprises follows the techniques described in this paper.

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