

*Soviet weaponry—
overestimated or underestimated?*

WOHLSTETTER, SOVIET STRATEGIC FORCES, AND NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES



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The summer 1974 issue of *Foreign Policy* carried an article by Professor Albert Wohlstetter titled "Is There a Strategic Arms Race?" In the article Wohlstetter took up the question of myths and realities in the "arms race." He sought to demonstrate that much of the public debate over the arms race has been driven by myths, among others the myth of overestimation—that is, the widespread belief that the Pentagon systematically *overestimates* the strength of Soviet strategic forces. Using the Defense posture statements as his basis, Wohlstetter showed that in fact during the mid-1960s the tendency was to *underestimate* in such things as ICBMs, SLBMs, and bombers (although earlier, in the "missile gap" era, the tendency had of course been quite the contrary).

Since the article was published, I have examined National Intelligence Estimates going back to 1960 to see whether or not the same charge could be directed at the official judgments of the corporate body whose task it is to communicate the views of the U.S. intelligence community, the U.S. Intelligence Board, as set forth in the NIEs. I also checked estimative history as regards anticipated qualitative improvements in weapon systems and their predicted operational dates.

I am satisfied on the basis of my research that Dr. Wohlstetter is essentially correct in the case of ICBMs during the 1960s. There are some minor differences between what the intelligence community said and the data Wohlstetter used, but not enough to make a case against Wohlstetter's findings.

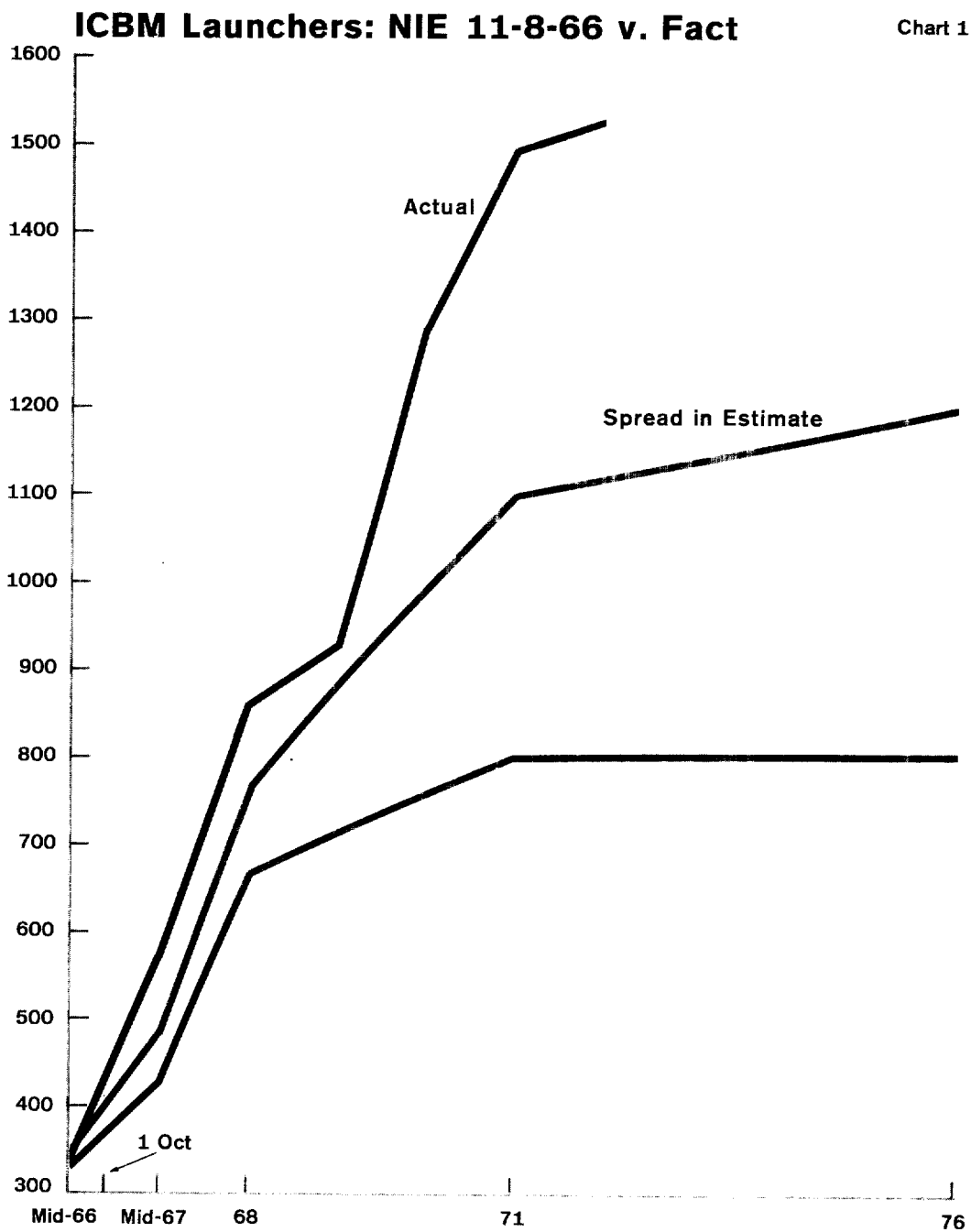
Take some examples of how the USIB tended to underestimate:

NIE 11-8-63 forecast a spread of 370 to 670 launchers for mid-1969. The actual count in mid-'69 was 858.

NIE 11-8-64 was even more extreme. It forecast 410 to 700 launchers for mid-'70. The actual count was 1,292.

The worst of the lot was the NIE issued in 1966. It forecast a spread of 800 to 1,120 for mid-'72. The actual count was 1,527. With the exception of the initial year, the actual count exceeded the projected annual spreads over the entire period covered by the estimate. (See Chart 1.)

In reading the past NIEs, I hoped to find some clear rationale for the repeated underestimation. In many years the community expressed views essentially along the lines that the Soviets would not deploy as many ICBMs as the U.S. for fear of touching off a new round of deployment in the U.S., or that they would be content with a retaliatory force somewhat smaller than the U.S. force. In 1967, the rationale given for estimates such as 11-8-66 was that the



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Chart 1. NIE 11-8-66 v. Fact.

Soviets saw political and psychological advantages in having an ICBM force roughly the same size as that of the U.S., and that was said to be the goal of their deployment program. In other years, however, no clear rationale was presented for the projected numbers.

In 1968, the text of the NIE established a lower side of the range for the future at 1,360 launchers (the number operational and under construction at that time). Because of several factors that could influence the size of the force, however, it did not estimate the maximum size it might reach.*

I thought, when embarking on this venture, that it would be found that we had credited the Soviets with the ability to make rapid strides in weapons technology (leading to MIRVs, high accuracies, etc.,) and that consequent improvements in quality would permit Moscow to limit the quantity of weapons deployed. But this was not the case. Our judgments on when the Soviets were likely to introduce certain qualitative improvements into their systems fitted pretty well with what has actually happened.

The "Missile Gap"

I suspect, but obviously cannot document the fact, that part of the reason for the repeated underestimation of the growth of Soviet ICBM forces was a subconscious (or maybe even conscious) overreaction by the intelligence community to the gross *overestimation* of Soviet ICBM growth during the days of the "missile gap." The intelligence community took quite a public flailing for that error of judgment.

The "missile gap" era began in August 1957 when the Soviets carried out the first test firing of an ICBM. That firing and subsequent ones served to convince a large segment of the U.S. intelligence community, as well as sizable elements of Congress and the Department of Defense, that the Soviets were preparing to embark on an ICBM deployment program involving large numbers of missiles. From the late 1950s until September 1961, the tocsin was repeatedly sounded that the Soviets were outpacing the United States in ICBM production and deployment. Several statements made by Khrushchev during those years, both public and private, seemed to be encouraging such thoughts. The "missile gap" was much discussed during the Presidential campaign of 1960, and the NIE for that year serves in part to tell why. (See Chart 2.)

NIE 11-8-60, dated 1 August 1960, contained three numerical estimates of Soviet ICBM strength for mid-1963. The Air Force estimated 700, the CIA 400, and the Army and Navy 200. State and the J-2 of the Joint Staff stated that they thought the number would be somewhere between the CIA number and the Air Force number. *By mid-1963 the actual number deployed was less than 100.*

In NIE 11-8-61, dated 7 June 1961, opinion was again well divided. CIA estimated that by 1964 there would be 200 to 400 ICBMs deployed; State INR's spread was 300 to 500; Army and Navy liked 150 to 300; and the Air Force projected 850. *By mid-1964 the number actually deployed was 191.* The Air

*State, DIA, and the military services all took footnote to this omission. They considered 1,800 launchers to be the upper limit.

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NIE Performance

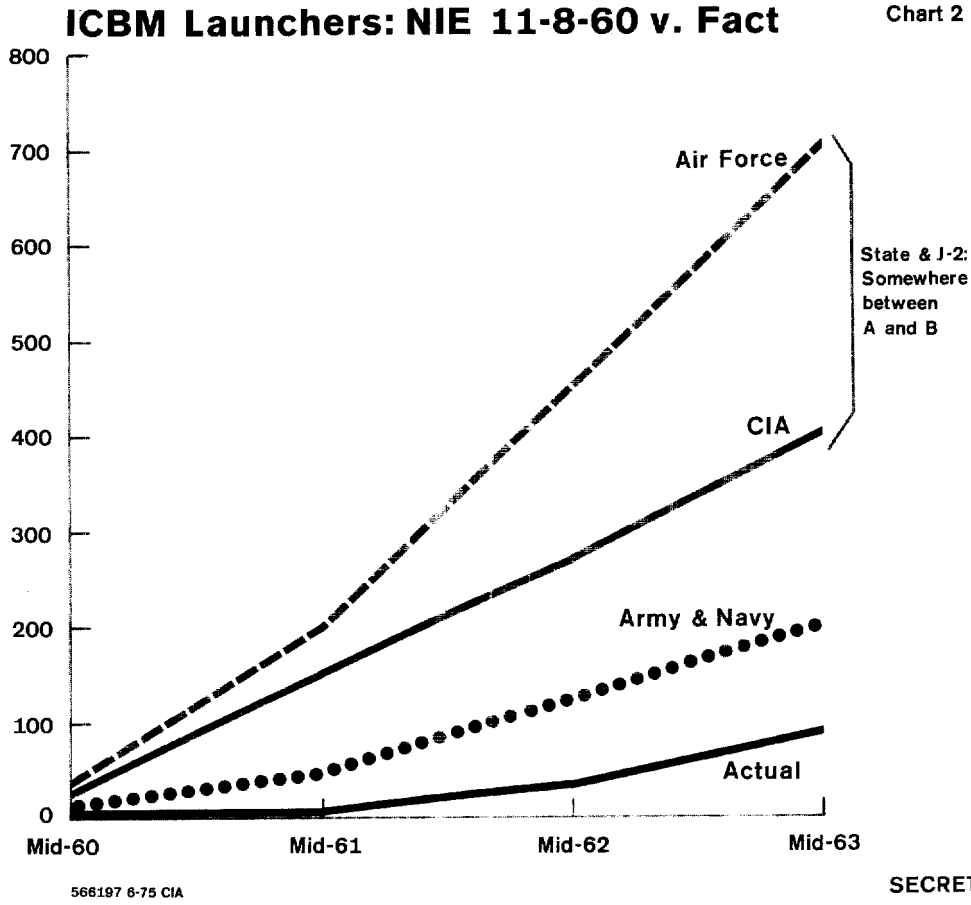


Chart 2. NIE 11-8-60 v. Fact.

Force, bolder than the rest of the community, also projected ahead to 1966, estimating that by that time the Soviets would have 1,450 in the field. By 1966 the actual number deployed was 250. (See Chart 3).

Data collected during the late summer of 1961 showed the community how wrong its estimates had been, and a Memorandum to Holders of NIE 11-8-61 was issued in September of that year. All agreed that there were probably 10 to 15 ICBMs deployed at that time (there were actually only 4) and that by mid-1963 the spread would be some 75 to 125; the number actually deployed by mid-1963 was 91, close to the center of the spread.

The Cuban Impact

I also feel that part of the reason for repeated *underestimating* was a lack of appreciation on the part of the intelligence community of how bitter Khrushchev, and probably others in the Soviet hierarchy at the time, felt about the "facing down" they experienced as a result of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. At that time the Soviets had less than 50 ICBM launchers operational, and we knew it. The Soviets knew they were dealing from a position of weakness and probably at least suspected that we were aware of their lack of ICBM strength. The chronology of the growth of their ICBM force fits very neatly with a decision that might have been taken shortly after the pullout from Cuba to expand their ICBM force at a rapid rate and probably to a size never originally intended. Deployment of the SS-9 and SS-11 really started to take off four years after the crisis.

Heavy Bombers

Wohlstetter is again correct in the case of heavy bombers. From 1960 through 1971, the NIEs always phased out the Bison and Bear bombers at a faster rate than actually occurred. There has, in fact, been no reduction in the heavy bomber force for the past six years. I still think that the estimative judgments were logical, albeit erroneous. Why the Soviets would go to the expense of retaining such a small fleet of obsolete heavy bombers defies well-reasoned explanation.

Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles

In the case of Soviet submarine-launched ballistic missiles, Wohlstetter is somewhat wrong in his assertion that the tendency was to underestimate. The NIE history on those systems is mixed. From 1961 through 1963, the NIEs overestimated. The spread of 160 to 250 projected for 1970 in the 1964 NIE was exceeded, but only in that one year. (See Chart 4.) (It is only fair to point out that the only NIE Wohlstetter used for these allegations about numbers of SLBMs was the 1964 projection, and that isn't cricket.)

The subsequent 1965 estimate erred slightly on the high side in its projection for mid-1966, showing a spread of SLBMs for that year of 122 to 137. The actual count was 108. The projection for mid-1967 held at 122 to 137 and was pretty good but for the wrong reason; the unpredicted advent of the first Y-class in 1967 boosted the actual count to 124, within the NIE spread. In projecting beyond

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NIE Performance

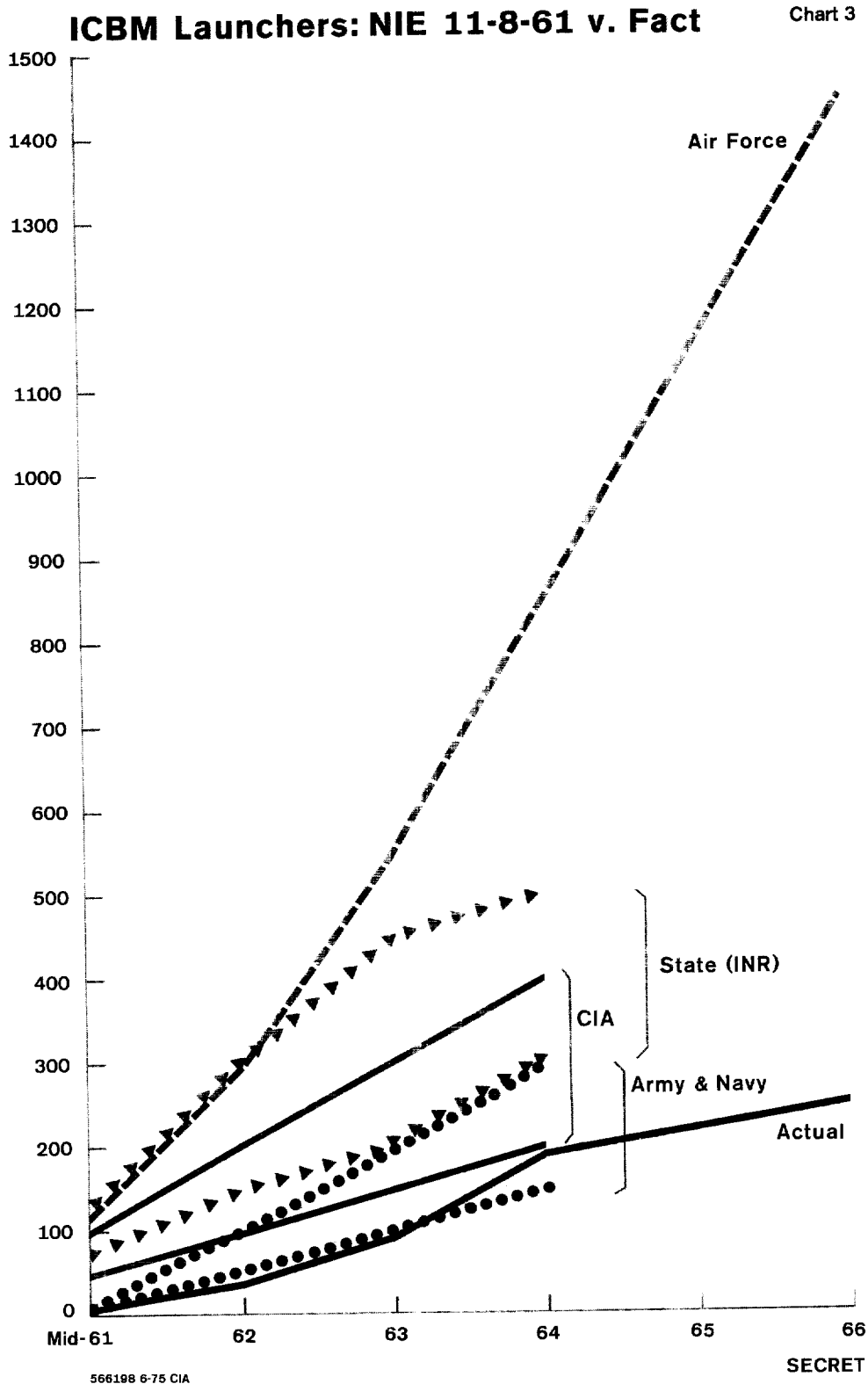


Chart 3. NIE 11-8-61 v. Fact.

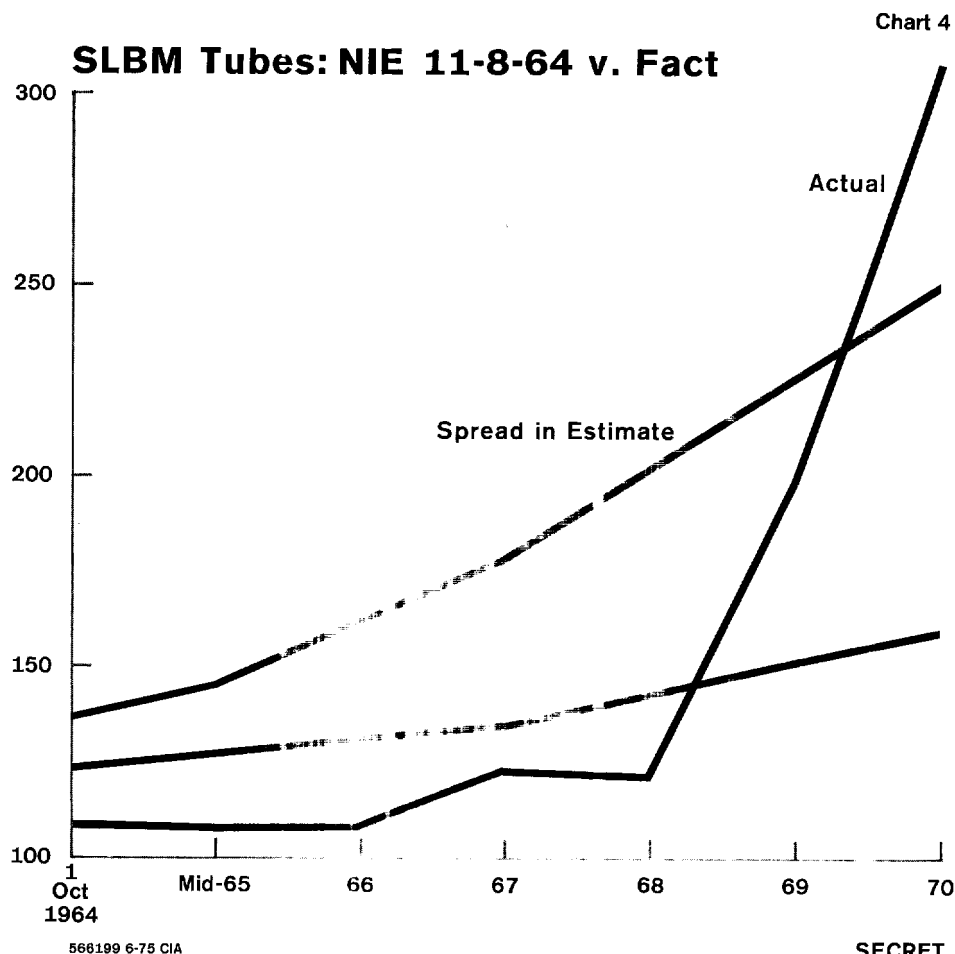


Chart 4. NIE 11-8-64 v. Fact.

1967, the NIE considered only the ballistic missile submarines, and did not specify the numbers of tubes per boat. In doing so, however, the estimate was not too bad. It projected some 50 such submarines, including perhaps 7 of a new class, for mid-1970. The actual number was 47, including 13 of the new Y-class.

Our projection in 1966 for mid-1971 fell well below the actual count for that year, principally because we had not yet established a production rate for the Y-class, and the Soviets had 21 of that class operational by 1971, as opposed to an estimate of 10. The NIE in 1967 also fell short in its projection for mid-69 and for mid-72 for the same reason. The 1968 estimate was quite accurate in its prediction, as was the one in 1969. The 1970 NIE's record for the years '71, '72, '73, and '74 was under, under, over, over—but the margin of error in each instance was 20% or less.

The main reason for the overestimates in SLBM strength in the early 1960s was the fact that the size of the ballistic missile submarine force remained static from 1962 through 1966. The natural tendency in estimating when a new weapon

system is seen coming in is to project a continuing growth in that system and to anticipate the development of new, improved models. In retrospect, it is now clear that the Soviets opted to hold their SLBM force at a modest level of three-tubed G- and H-class submarines, equipped with short range missiles, until something more nearly approaching the U.S. Polaris system could become available. And it did—the Y-class, fitted with 16 tubes.

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In sum, the USIB repeatedly erred after the mid-1960s in two out of three categories. No one can claim this as a triumph, and let us hope that the shortcomings prove instructive in the future. As Wohlstetter has observed, however: "Predicting the size and exact mixture of a potential adversary's weapon deployments several years hence is a hard line of work. It is intrinsically uncertain, reversible by the adversary himself between the time of prediction and the actual deployment."