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Framing the Havana Syndrome Mystery: Imaginaries of the Second Cold War?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mil**Rubrick Biegon** 

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Abstract

This article explores the ‘mysterious’ phenomenon known as ‘Havana Syndrome’ in the context of IR’s growing interest in imagination and imaginaries. It argues that the social-psychological imaginary of Havana Syndrome is illustrative of the emerging geopolitical imaginary of the Second Cold War. To examine these imaginaries and the relationship between them, the study’s primary methodology is based on an interpretivist frame analysis of the Havana Syndrome discourse in US government and media texts. This is complemented by a content analysis of relevant scientific and medical research, the results of which show how and why Havana Syndrome presents itself as a mystery. Through frame analysis, the article identifies the specific diagnostic and epistemic frames that structure the discourse on Havana Syndrome and give the phenomenon its international political significance. The framing of Havana Syndrome suggests that the Second Cold War is both nostalgic and futuristic, and replete with tensions that only partially track the fissures of the first Cold War.

Keywords

Havana Syndrome, imaginaries, frames, Second Cold War, mystery

Introduction

In August 2016, reports surfaced of staff at the US embassy in Havana, Cuba suffering from a mysterious cognitive and neurological illness. For some, the unusual symptoms (dizziness, tinnitus, visual problems, vertigo) were preceded by a loud noise. The phenomenon was soon named ‘Havana Syndrome’ (abbreviated as HS in this article) by US officials and the media. As it spread beyond Cuba, doctors, researchers, and the US

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government came to refer to ‘anomalous health incidents’ (AHIs). According to one source, ‘AHIs have been reported in several countries, including Austria, China, Colombia, Georgia, Germany, India, Poland, Russia, and Vietnam. Multiple incidents have also been reported within the continental United States’.¹ The condition has evidently afflicted hundreds of individuals. From the outset, there was considerable speculation that victims had been targeted using a sonic weapon, though there was very little (if any) concrete evidence to support this.

In an era of heightened international tumult characterised by growing tensions between the ‘great powers’, the controversy around Havana Syndrome generated intense debate within the United States’ Department of State (DOS) and foreign policy bureaucracy.² In 2020, the DOS commissioned a study that found the ‘unusual presentation of acute, directional or location-specific early phase signs, symptoms and observations reported by DOS employees to be consistent with the effects of directed, pulsed radio frequency (RF) energy’.³ The study did much to further the narrative that a new weapon (if not sonic then pulsed radiofrequency/microwave-based) was being used to target Americans, as it found that RF was the ‘most plausible’ explanation for these cases. In 2021, President Biden signed into law the HAVANA Act to provide care to those affected and ‘to get to the bottom of these incidents, including to determine the cause and who is responsible’.⁴ The controversy damaged US–Cuba relations and contributed to the deterioration of US–Russia relations, as Russia was often posited as being behind the ‘attacks’. And yet, perhaps because of the lack of a scientific consensus, there has been minimal research on Havana Syndrome within international studies.⁵

1. United States Government Accountability Office, Report to Congressional Committees, ‘Havana Syndrome: Better Patient Communication and Monitoring of Key DOD Tasks Needed to Better Ensure Timely Treatment’, July 2024, p. 4.
2. National Security Archive, George Washington University, ‘U.S.-Cuba: Secrets of the “Havana Syndrome”’, 10 February 2021, available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/cuba/2021-02-10/secrets-havana-syndrome-how-trumps-state-department-cia-mis-handled-mysterious-maladies-cuba>.
3. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *An Assessment of Illness in U.S. Government Employees and Their Families at Overseas Embassies* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2020), 2.
4. White House, ‘Statement of President Joe Biden on Signing HAVANA Act into Law’, 8 October 2021, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/08/statement-of-president-joe-biden-on-signing-havana-act-into-law/>. This was officially the Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks Act of 2021. Congress also took action through defence authorisation and appropriations bills to provide assistance to AHI-affected individuals. Congressional Research Service, ‘FY2022 NDAA: Care for Anomalous Health Incident Victims’, 7 February 2022, available at: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IN/PDF/IN11850/IN11850.2.pdf.
5. For exceptions, see Jamey Essex, ‘Diagnosing American Decline: The Geopolitics of Havana Syndrome’, *Geopolitics* 30, no. 5 (2025): 2073–2094, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2468770>; John M. Kirk, ‘The Strange Case of the Havana “Sonic” Attacks’, *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 24–42, <https://doi.org/10.13169/intejcubastud.11.1.0024>. Essex focuses on anxieties of US decline and geopolitical vulnerability in the global balance of power. Kirk writes that the episode ‘has (at least partially) reintroduced a Cold War climate into international politics’, p. 38.

When the syndrome first emerged, embassy staff in Havana referred to it simply as ‘the Thing’.⁶ The reference was thick with Cold War overtones. Not only was ‘the Thing’ the nickname for an infamous covert listening device (discovered in 1952, known as the Moscow Signal) used by the Soviets to spy on the US embassy in Moscow, it was also the name of a nefarious alien character in science fiction films such as *The Thing from Another World* (1951), in which ‘the Thing’ was widely interpreted as a metaphor for Communism.⁷ This is apt because, as the early press profiles show, the discourse around Havana Syndrome conjured a (new) Cold War mood through its focus on spies, novel technologies, and shadowy threats, all centred on a bastion of Cold War-era mythmaking – the island of Cuba. Assuming Cuban agents were not acting alone (or at all) to carry out these ‘attacks’, attention ‘naturally’ turned to China and, above all, Russia.⁸

As argued in this paper, the Havana Syndrome controversy provides fruitful terrain to explore the fault lines, meanings, and uncertainties of the ‘Second Cold War’ (sometimes the ‘New Cold War’ or ‘Cold War II’), a term that is becoming increasingly prevalent in International Relations (IR). It does this by applying the concept of *imaginaries* to the politics of Havana Syndrome as the mystery has unfolded in the wider discourse(s) of US foreign and security policy. I maintain that the phenomenon not only reflects the anxieties of this new geopolitical reality,⁹ it illustrates the power of imagination in creating these new realities.

As noted by Barry Buzan, recent debates in international studies have shown considerable confusion over the term ‘cold war’, including in relation to its status as a general concept and/or a specific historical period. In arguing for the broader conceptualisation, Buzan contends that the world is already in a Second Cold War. Although it is still unfolding and exhibits certain differences from the First Cold War (Buzan highlights technological instabilities associated with drones, cyber, and artificial intelligence), the early 2020s revealed the crystallisation of international coalitions that are in sharp contestation with one another, with an authoritarian bloc led by China and Russia confronting a democratic Western bloc.¹⁰

The discipline of IR is in an exploratory period regarding the Second/New Cold War. Should China or Russia be listed first among US adversaries? Is the United States still the hegemonic leader of the Western bloc? Following Trump’s re-election in 2024, does it make sense to speak of the West as a bloc? For Brands and Gaddis (and for most others) it is the long-term contest with China that deserves Washington’s

6. Adam Entous and Jon Lee Anderson, ‘The Mystery of the Havana Syndrome’, *The New Yorker*, 9 November 2018, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/19/the-mystery-of-the-havana-syndrome>.

7. Jeff Smith, *Film Criticism, the Cold War, and the Blacklist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 9, 244–67.

8. Entous and Anderson, ‘The Mystery of the Havana Syndrome’.

9. Essex, ‘Diagnosing American Decline’.

10. Barry Buzan, ‘A New Cold War?: The Case for a General Concept’, *International Politics*, 61 (2024): 239–57, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00559-8>.

strategic attention.¹¹ However, it was Russia's actions that drove interest in the Second Cold War, primarily through the 2014 Crimea crisis and Moscow's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹² Meanwhile, some key thinkers have pushed back on this notion.¹³ Part of this article's contribution, then, is to stimulate reflection on the Second Cold War, and, more to the point, how it is being imagined into existence as a geopolitical reality.

The article begins by detailing the theoretical and methodological framework, which seeks to unpack the mysterious properties of the imaginary through frame analysis. The section also details my methodological approach, which utilises content analysis of scientific and medical research on HS/AHIs alongside a qualitative and interpretivist frame analysis of the US government and media discourse on Havana Syndrome. The following section examines the medical and scientific reporting on HS/AHIs around the question of whether the phenomenon is, in fact, 'real'. The next section details the specific diagnostic and epistemic frames that structure the public debate on HS. The final section features a discussion of the frame analysis along with some conclusions that connect the frames to the geopolitical imaginary of the Second Cold War.

Imaginaries in IR: From Mystery to Meaning

The concept of the imaginary has an eclectic and pluralistic bent in IR scholarship.¹⁴ Imaginaries can be difficult to distinguish from other key concepts in the interpretivist tradition, including constructs, myths, narratives, and discourses. What is unique about imaginaries? What analytical value do they add? How can the concept help illuminate the Havana Syndrome controversy and its significance to international politics?

11. Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, 'The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History', *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (2021): 10–21. See also, Stephanie Christine Winkler, 'New and Old Cold Wars: The Tech War and the Role of Technology in Great Power Politics', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5 no. 2 (2025): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf038>.
12. Gilbert Achcar, *The New Cold War: The United States, Russia and China: From Kosovo to Ukraine* (London: Saqi/ Westbourne Press, 2023); Richard Sakwa, *Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).
13. Stephen Walt, 'I Knew the Cold War. This is No Cold War', *Foreign Policy*, 12 March 2018, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180801122033/https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/i-knew-the-cold-war-this-is-no-cold-war/>; Odd Arne Westad, 'The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War?', *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 5 (2019): 86–95.
14. Rubrick Biegon, Daniel Møller Ølgaard and Tom F. A. Watts, 'Interrogating the Imaginary Turn: Technology, War, and World Politics in an Era of Great Power Competition', *Contemporary Security Policy* 47, no. 2 (2026): 20–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2026.2638846>; Aoileann Ní Mhurchú and Reiko Shindo, eds., *Critical Imaginations in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016); Caitlin Sparks, Shannon Brincat and Tim Aistrophe, 'The Imagination and International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 66 no. 3 (2022): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac024>.

The use of ‘imaginaries’ in IR is often preceded by an adjective – utopian,¹⁵ socio-technical, or geopolitical, among others. Perhaps the most influential variant has been Jutta Weldes’ *security imaginary*. Writing before the publication of Charles Taylor’s influential book on social imaginaries,¹⁶ Weldes defined the security imaginary as: ‘[A] structure of well-established meanings and social relations out of which representations of the world of international relations are created . . . [T]he security imaginary of a state provides what might be called the cultural raw materials out of which representations of states, of relations among states, and of the international system are constructed. National interests, in turn, emerge out of these representations’.¹⁷ The concept has been used to explore the role of security constructions in identities of various kinds.¹⁸ It has also been used to explain processes of technological diffusion and emulation in the military sphere.¹⁹ A similar dynamic is apparent in the concept of the *geopolitical imaginary*, which creates certain spatial logics around and within the global/international sphere. This idea has been central to Critical Geopolitics and is often traced to the work of Gearóid Ó Tuathail.²⁰ For Ó Tuathail, as for Weldes, the meanings (and power) that emanate from the relevant imaginaries are expressed through discourse.

In recent research, the imaginaries that shape contemporary international politics are often wrapped up in (representations of) new technologies. Increasingly influential in IR is the literature on socio-technical imaginaries (STIs) developed in the interdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). Canonical in this scholarship is the work of Jasanoff and Kim, who defined STIs as ‘collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects’.²¹ In this vein, imaginaries are ‘instrumental and futuristic’ and distinct from narratives and policy agendas. STIs operate ‘in the understudied regions between imagination and action, between discourse and decision, and between inchoate public opinion and state policy’.²² Central to the STS literature is the *performativity* of imaginaries. This speaks to the normativity that accompanies visions of technological

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15. Shannon Brincat, ‘Reclaiming the Utopian Imaginary in IR Theory’, *Review of International Studies* 35 no. 3 (2009): 581–609, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509008663>.
 16. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
 17. Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.
 18. Georg Löfflmann, ‘“Enemies of the People”: Donald Trump and the Security Imaginary of America First’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24, no. 3 (2022): 543–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211048499>; Maria Mälksöo, *The Politics of Becoming European: A Study of Polish and Baltic Post-Cold War Security Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
 19. Joeliën Pretorius, ‘The Security Imaginary: Explaining Military Isomorphism’, *Security Dialogue* 39 no. 1 (2008): 99–120, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010607086825>.
 20. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
 21. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, ‘Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Power in the United States and South Korea’, *Minerva* 47, no. 2 (2009): 120.
 22. *Ibid.*, 123.

innovation as they are enacted. A later definition of STIs refers to ‘collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures’.²³ Performance can take on different guises in different epistemic and political contexts.²⁴ In other strands of the literature the focus is on mechanisms of (re)articulation.²⁵ The concept of STIs has been applied directly to the study of US foreign policy, including in the work of Daniel McCarthy, who takes them to be similar to world-views. ‘Imaginaries are pre-theoretical’, he writes, echoing Taylor, ‘lacking the reflexivity of theory proper. As a result, they are informed by cultural tropes, myths and narratives’. Yet they are also world-making, as they inform ‘logics of practical action’ and materialise in ‘technological infrastructures’ and ‘the recreation of specific forms of political order’.²⁶

The imaginary can be a difficult and somewhat elusive concept. It is not insignificant that imaginaries are sometimes likened to ‘dreamscapes’.²⁷ Recent scholarship has linked imaginaries to fantasy and ‘the magical’.²⁸ In this sense, they are highly affective, helping to create and consolidate popular understandings of geopolitics that fuse elite and everyday conceptions while challenging ‘rational’ depictions of diplomacy and foreign policy.²⁹ Not only is the concept itself quite mysterious given its fecundity and elasticity, it would seem to be an optimal way of addressing specific mysteries that crop up in IR. A mystery can be seen as a puzzle to be solved,³⁰ whether through analysis, narrative, myth, or some other mechanism. But while fictional mysteries (often) have neat endings, a genuine ‘real-world’ mystery may not be solved for some time, and, indeed, might be

23. Sheila Jasanoff, ‘Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity’, in *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, eds. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 28.
24. Ibid. See also, Luiza Bialasiewicz et al., ‘Performing Security: The Imaginative Geographies of Current US Strategy’, *Political Geography* 26, no. 4 (2007): 405–422, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.12.002>.
25. Sean Lawson, ‘Articulation, Antagonism, and Intercalation in Western Military Imaginaries’, *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 1 (2011): 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010610393775>.
26. Daniel R. McCarthy ‘Imagining the Security of Innovation: Technological Innovation, National Security, and the American Way of Life’, *Critical Studies on Security* 9, no. 3 (2021): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2021.1934640>
27. Jasanoff and Kim, eds., *Dreamscapes of Modernity*.
28. Jeppe T. Jacobsen and Katrine Nørgaard, ‘Reading Security Imaginaries as Fantasies – Loss, Desire, and Enjoyment in the Military Quest for Explainable AI’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 52, no. 2 (2024): 408–433, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298231225753>; Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, ‘In Search of the Unicorn: The Magical, the Imaginary and the Spatio-Temporal Ordering of Knowledge’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 52, no. 3 (2024): 640–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298241277403>.
29. Jason Dittmer, *Diplomatic Material: Affect, Assemblage, and Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
30. Aggie Hirst et al., *Global Politics: Myths and Mysteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 5–8; Jamie M. Johnson, Victoria M. Basham and Owen D. Thomas, ‘Ordering Disorder: The Making of World Politics’, *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 4 (2022): 619.

impossible to fully understand or explain. For as long as it remains ‘unsolved’, a mystery (like that of Havana Syndrome) can produce untold effects; in this sense, mystery may function like (diplomatic) secrecy or conspiracy, both of which have received more attention in IR.³¹

There are definite patterns across the eclectic use of the term ‘imaginary’. Drawing on the various literatures noted above, I emphasise that, when compared with other features of a given discourse, imaginaries are more speculative and playful. I define imaginaries as *creative* and *temporally-fluid* visions that connect ‘everyday’ and elite understandings of emergent realities. Where they structure and drive policy discussions, however, these imaginaries need to be *framed* in a way that is intelligible to core audiences. Through specific frames, imaginaries bring meaning to the complexities and uncertainties of international politics – the mysteries are made intelligible. In other words, it is through the framing of elite actors that the (effect of the) imaginary becomes ‘real’. My focus on framing effectively replaces the emphasis on performativity in the STI literature as a means of capturing the manifestation of imaginaries through the deliberate actions of key actors(/framers).

Imaginaries are relatively open and free-form in their productivity. They are often cultivated and expressed through narrative, fiction, popular culture, and visual and news media outputs, alongside elements of analytical argumentation, such as the use of analogies and counterfactual reasoning. As highlighted in much of the STS/STI research, imaginaries also have a materiality that makes them ‘extra-discursive’. The HS mystery, based on conjecture regarding novel technology/weaponry, serves as an important reminder that imaginaries do not sit exclusively within discursive or affective spheres. Through specific frames, they are embedded in practices that make them more concrete and durable, in this case as shapers of the material realities of US foreign policy, diplomacy, and statecraft in the ‘Second Cold War’. If frames are one mechanism through which imaginaries manifest in a discursive sense, these imaginaries also materialise through the day-to-day practices of diplomats, bureaucrats, officials, and other decision-makers.³² In practice-based terms, imaginaries allow individuals to make sense of and navigate the unknown.³³ Through the frames analysed below, this has shaped US diplomacy and foreign policy in a number of ways.

As a concept, the imaginary is a uniquely productive way of linking the past, present, and future. Research on IR’s temporal turn, for instance, has made frequent use of the

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31. See for example, Allison Carnegie, ‘Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 24 (2021): 213–33, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102430>; Tim Aistrophe and Roland Bleiker, ‘Conspiracy and Foreign Policy’, *Security Dialogue* 49, no. 3 (2018): 165–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010617748305>.
 32. Biegon, Ølgaard and Watts, ‘Interrogating the Imaginary Turn’, 20–21.
 33. Daniel Møller Ølgaard and Elsa Hedling, ‘Navigating Technological Change: Future Imaginaries and Everyday Practices in World Politics’, *Cooperation and Conflict* (2026): 14–6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367251397780>

language of imagining, including through the concept of the ‘temporal imaginary’.³⁴ Multiple imaginaries can and often do co-exist in a given discursive context. In this article, for example, the social-psychological imaginary of the Havana Syndrome controversy is co-constitutive with the geopolitical imaginary of the Second Cold War. This is evident from the series of inter-locking frames examined below. It is through framing, I argue, that imaginaries become accessible. Alongside imaginaries, then, we need to unpack *frames* and *framing* as central components of this article’s theoretical and methodological scaffolding.

Methodology

Some consideration of framing does recur in the literature on imaginaries,³⁵ but the relationship between these things had not been adequately addressed. This is an important oversight because, outside of (often vague) notions of performance, it is not always clear how imaginaries are assumed to function. If imaginaries are dream-like and fuzzy, frames organise the creativity and temporal fluidity generated in the contingent imaginations of key actors, whether expressed in wider collectives (i.e. across [trans]national societies or larger imagined communities) or smaller groupings (diplomatic corps, reporters and commentators in the media, government officials). Frames are what allow individuals to examine and make sense of their social and natural worlds.³⁶ Given the collective nature of imaginaries, the frame metaphor is important because it suggests that sharp, clear borders can direct an audience’s ‘gaze’ in a deliberate or manufactured way. By circumscribing the wider image, framing stabilises unwieldy processes of collective imagination, allowing others to see the message and meaning created through the imaginary.

The study’s primary methodology is based on an interpretivist frame analysis of the Havana Syndrome discourse in US government and media texts. This is complemented by a content analysis of relevant scientific and medical research, the results of which show how and why Havana Syndrome presents itself as a mystery. Frames have various functions and logics within discourse, including as a means of structuring imaginaries. Whereas imaginaries are more open and less linear, framing is deliberate and

34. Christopher McIntosh, ‘Theorizing the Temporal Exception: The Importance of the Present for the Study of War’, *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (2020): 543–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz040>; Andrew R. Hom, ‘Silent Order: The Temporal Turn in Critical International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 3 (2018): 303–330, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818771349>.

35. Jasanoff and Kim refer to ‘framing risks’ in ‘Containing the Atom’, 139. See also, Winkler, ‘New and Old Cold Wars’.

36. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

purposeful.³⁷ The decision to frame an issue or problem in a certain way implies cutting relevant features ‘out of the frame’. There is some intentionality to this process, which results in the foregrounding of ideas, beliefs, and anxieties that might be more properly thought of as operating at the level of the collective subconscious. Thus, although framing has sometimes been seen as a ‘fractured paradigm’, there is consensus that frames are closely related to world-views, ideologies, and the communicative projects of those who do the framing.³⁸ This not to say that framing is always or even primarily strategic. Frames have different dimensions – interpretive, evaluative, prescriptive, and even epistemic. They help actors define problems, diagnose the causes of these problems, suggest remedies based on these diagnoses, and make moral judgments in accordance with the causal and diagnostic properties of the frame.³⁹

I define frames as interpretive and instrumental articulations of problems that verbalise processes of imagination. My analysis is not geared towards assessing the resonance of the frames per se, nor am I concerned with their ability to mobilise action amongst certain audiences. Taking ‘cold war’ as a *master frame* within the discourse of US foreign policy, I examine how the framing of HS keys off of this master frame to help constitute the Second Cold War imaginary. Master frames exhibit the same functionality as other frames but they are widely shared by diverse actors over specific periods of time.⁴⁰ They gain near-universal status as they can be evoked in simple terms, ‘meaning they can be deployed across a variety of political contexts and articulated with other frames as well as with deeper ideologies’.⁴¹ The cold war/Cold War frame has near-universal status but contains differential meanings about the nature of geopolitical tensions between great powers, which stem in part from competing interpretations of the period from the 1940s through 1989.⁴²

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37. According to van Hulst et al., ‘Framing analysis . . . involves studying processes of meaning construction. It explores what elements of reality are strategically or tacitly foregrounded or backgrounded in conversations and text, and how this includes and excludes voices, ideas and interests in policy and decision-making’. Merlijn van Hulst et al., ‘Discourse, Framing and Narrative: Three Ways of Doing Critical, Interpretive Policy Analysis’, *Critical Policy Studies* 19, no. 1 (2025): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2326936>.
 38. Robert M. Entman, ‘Framing: Toward a Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’, *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4, (1993): 51–8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>; David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, ‘Master Frames and Cycles of Protest’, in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 133–55.
 39. Entman, ‘Framing’, 52.
 40. Eric W. Schoon and Scott W. Duxbury, ‘Robust Discourse and the Politics of Legitimacy: Framing International Intervention in the Syrian Civil War, 2011–2016’, *Sociological Science* 6 (2019): 636, <https://doi.org/10.15195/v6.a24>; Snow and Benford, ‘Master Frames and Cycles of Protest’.
 41. Erin K. Jenne, ‘Populism, Nationalism and Revisionist Foreign Policy’, *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa230>.
 42. Buzan, ‘A New Cold War?’

I adopted an inductive approach to frame analysis in which frames emerge from the texts under investigation. Imaginaries connect elite perspectives with those visions circulating more widely in society. To probe official discourse, I consulted the online archives of the (first) Trump and Biden administrations (through the American Presidency Database)⁴³ as well as the US Congressional record (Congress.gov) using keyword searches for ‘Havana Syndrome’ and ‘Anomalous Health Incidents’. These keyword searches yielded approximately 250 government texts. These were skimmed initially to establish relevance, a process which reduced the number of government texts to approximately 80 for closer analysis. This was complemented by Lexis-Nexis searches using refined keyword terms over the same timeframe (January 2016–January 2025), which initially returned approximately 5000 documents. Triangulating with key events in the evolution of the HS mystery as gleaned from the detailed reading of government documents, I narrowed the scope to approximately 200 texts for closer inspection. This brought news media outlets and specialist and long-form publications into the analysis. The views and ‘visions’ of policymakers and affected diplomats (i.e. victims of HS) were captured in the government texts and media reporting. The shared imaginary, buttressed by the cold war master frame, fuses these visions into a meaningful if somewhat hazy picture.

In the interests of transparency and methodological reflexivity, it is important to acknowledge that the identification and classification of specific frames involve an element of subjectivity. The texts generated by the keyword searches were read primarily in relation to the foreign policy aspects of the HS controversy (versus the medical and health care provision aspects of the issue, though these are sometimes related). They were examined to expose the themes regarding the significance of the events, with a focus on the metaphors, tropes, and predicates used to explain HS and speculate on its origins and causes in relation to the larger international context. Via the thematic codes that emerged through the close reading of the most relevant texts (on the nature of the incidents, possible perpetrators and motivations, and the related knowledge-claims that established the veracity of these understandings, as detailed in the frame analysis section below), the specific frames were grouped into two main categories: *diagnostic frames* and *epistemic frames*. Diagnostic frames allow the actor to identify a problem and its causes, whereas epistemic frames pertain to the knowledge-claims and degree of (un)certainty with respect to claims advanced through the diagnostic frames.⁴⁴ In the context

43. A comprehensive database run by the American Presidency Project at the University of California-Santa Barbara, which collates speeches, remarks, memos, briefs, and interviews, including statements by senior administration officials: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

44. On diagnostic frames, see for example Entman, ‘Framing’; Jenne, ‘Populism, Nationalism and Revisionist Foreign Policy’. On the less-commonly used notion of epistemic frames, see for example, Gavin Rae, ‘Judith Butler and the Politics of Epistemic Frames’, *Critical Horizons* 23, no. 2 (2022): 172–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2022.2081410>; David Williamson Shaffer et al., ‘Epistemic Network Analysis: A Prototype for 21st Century Assessment of Learning’, *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1, no. 2 (2009): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1162/ijlm.2009.0013>. In Shaffer et al. epistemic frames link knowledge and epistemology to values, identities, and skills within certain communities of practice.

of the overlapping imaginaries of HS and the Second Cold War, the relationship(s) between the diagnostic and epistemic frames should be seen as fluid and multidirectional. Examined together, they provide insight into the imaginative processes underpinning the Second Cold War as an emergent geopolitical reality.

The Contours of the Havana Syndrome Mystery

This section examines medical and psychiatric studies pertaining to HS/AHIs. The phenomenon has elicited a significant response from actors and agencies across different levels of the US government. Victims and patients have been treated for their afflictions. However, the cause or causes of these afflictions remain unknown, and the condition continues to be the source of a great deal of speculation.⁴⁵ There is an ‘imaginary’ quality to the phenomenon regardless of the physiological experiences of the victims. Even if the condition was shown to be the possible product of a weapon of some kind, the identity of the attackers would remain unknown, as would their motives. Whatever the material reality of the technology used in these ‘attacks’, and whatever the physiological effects suffered by the victims, Havana Syndrome and the controversy swirling around it are at least partially the product of a social(-psychological) imaginary.

In 2018, the Journal of the American Medical Association (*JAMA*) published a study investigating whether there were neurological manifestations associated with the reports of audible and/or sensory phenomena among US government personnel in Havana. In an examination of 21 patients, it concluded that ‘persistent cognitive, vestibular, and oculomotor dysfunction, as well as sleep impairment and headaches, were observed . . . These individuals appeared to have sustained injury to widespread brain networks without an associated history of head trauma’.⁴⁶ Another study compared 40 US government personnel who had experienced symptoms of possible exposure to ‘directional phenomena’ with 48 healthy control subjects. It concluded there were ‘potential imaging-based differences between patients and controls with regard to (1) white matter and grey matter total and regional brain volumes, (2) cerebellar tissue microstructure metrics (eg, mean diffusivity), and (3) functional connectivity in the visuospatial, auditory, and executive control subnetworks’, but that ‘the clinical importance of these differences [was] uncertain’.⁴⁷ The *JAMA* studies were criticised by some experts, as the results were difficult to

45. As stated in a 2018 DOS report, unclassified in 2019: ‘We do know that [diplomats] were injured, but we do not know how. We do not know what happened, when it happened, who did it, or why’. US Department of State, ‘Havana, Cuba: Accountability Review Board, June 2018’, Doc No. C06768501, pp. 9–10.

46. Randel Swanson 2nd et al., ‘Neurological Manifestations Among US Government Personnel Reporting Directional Audible and Sensory Phenomena in Havana, Cuba’, *JAMA* 319, no. 11 (2018): 1125–33.

47. Ragini Verma et al., ‘Neuroimaging Findings in US Government Personnel With Possible Exposure to Directional Phenomena in Havana, Cuba’, *JAMA* 322, no. 4 (2019): 336–47, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2019.9269>.

interpret due to ‘extreme variability in the clinical cases and lack of access to specific health or personal information on the affected individuals’.⁴⁸

A National Academies of Sciences report published in 2020 found radiofrequency/microwave energy to be the ‘most plausible’ cause of the incidents. Around this time, another study was being conducted by JASON (an independent advisory group of scientific experts) with the backing of the DOS. This study found that the unusual sounds reported in conjunction with the AHIs were not sonic or microwave in origin, but were highly likely to be the product of the Indies short-tailed cricket, an insect common in Cuba.⁴⁹ A second JASON report published in 2021 was more comprehensive, as it was designed to examine not only medical records but also the potential underlying causes of AHIs. The study was inconclusive, meaning the researchers could not attribute the symptoms to any sort of ‘attack’.

The emergence of HS required the plausible existence of technologies capable of producing the reported health effects. Some research on HS noted that, beginning in the 1950s, Soviet agents had irradiated the US embassy in Moscow with microwaves, probably for the purposes of activating listening devices within the building, in what one scientific review referred to as a ‘classic Cold War affair’.⁵⁰ This incident fuelled interest in the possible development of microwaves as a weapon for behaviour modification. Through the 1970s, the US government’s Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) had its own programme to explore the weaponisation of microwaves, complete with plans to test technologies on unwitting human subjects.⁵¹ There were efforts to develop ‘secret’ and/or ‘invisible’ weapons, including various kinds of directed energy weapons (DEWs), such as lasers and other high-powered electromagnetics. Much of this is a matter of public record, and the open discussion of these types of non-kinetic weapons serves as an important dimension of the social and political environment that produced the HS mystery.

A US Department of Defense (DOD) report on electronic warfare published in 2012 defines directed energy as an ‘umbrella term covering technologies that relate to the production of a beam of concentrated electromagnetic energy or atomic or subatomic particles’. A DEW is a ‘weapon or system that uses directed energy to incapacitate,

48. Roxanne Nelson, ‘Havana syndrome might be the result of energy pulses’, *The Lancet*, 396 (2020): 1954, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)32711-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32711-2). See also, Robert D. Shura, Jason A. Kacmarski and Holly M. Miskey, ‘Neurological Symptoms in US Government Personnel in Cuba’, *JAMA* 320, no. 6 (2018): 603, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2018.8698>.

49. JASON, the Mitre Corporation, ‘Acoustic Signals and Physiological Effects on U.S. Diplomats in Cuba’, November 2018, available at: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21068770-jason-report-2018-havana-syndrome/>.

50. Jose A. Martínez, ‘The “Moscow Signal” Epidemiological Study, 40 Years on’, *Review on Environmental Health* 34 (2019): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/revh-2018-0061>. It was generally concluded that there were no adverse health effects due to the radiation in this case. See also, J. Mark Elwood, ‘Microwaves in the Cold War: The Moscow Embassy Study and Its Interpretation. Review of a Retrospective Cohort Study’, *Environmental Health* 11 (2012): 85.

51. Sharon Weinberger, *The Imagineers of War: The Untold Story of DARPA, the Pentagon Agency that Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2017).

damage, or destroy enemy equipment, facilities, and/or personnel'.⁵² Research and development on DEWs experienced a 'surge' in the early 2020s.⁵³ The DOD spends approximately \$1b annually on directed energy technology. Much of this research focuses on countering objects like missiles and drones and transitioning from prototypes to operational deployment, though there is also considerable focus on enhancing the portability of the technology.⁵⁴ Emails published by WikiLeaks in 2015 confirmed that several arms manufacturers were developing DEWs, including BAE Systems, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon, alongside the creation of non-lethal weapons used for domestic law enforcement (such as Long Range Acoustic Devices or 'sound cannons' used for crowd control). This is unfolding in a highly competitive international environment in which China and Russia (and others) have made technological strides in this area.⁵⁵ Whether or not a weapon of this kind is likely to be (or could be) the cause of the AHIs remains highly disputed. Experts disagree on the plausibility of an acoustic, pulsed radiofrequency and/or microwave weapon serving as the mechanism for HS. A hypothetical weapon of this kind would be so novel that it would be 'unknown' to scientists.⁵⁶

Some researchers maintain that Havana Syndrome is a mass psychogenic illness. Overlapping with disorders classified as psychosomatic, mass psychogenic illnesses involve the translation of psychological properties and processes into physical symptoms. As one textbook notes, 'no single viewpoint can adequately explain this phenomenon', meaning it is 'necessary to explore outbreaks from a variety of perspectives, including historical, cultural, social, psychological, and even medical'.⁵⁷ For Robert E. Bartholomew, a medical sociologist, and Robert W. Baloh, a neurologist, HS is a mass psychogenic illness similar to the 'shell shock' experienced by traumatised soldiers who served in World War I. 'Manifestations of mass psychogenic illness throughout history are notoriously protean', they write, 'changing with the times to reflect shifting fears and beliefs' and stemming from 'a complex interaction of biological, psychological and

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52. United States Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-13.1, 'Electronic Warfare', 8 February 2012, p. ix.
 53. United States Government Accountability Office, 'Directed Energy Weapons', May 2023, p. 2.
 54. United States Government Accountability Office, 'Directed Energy Weapons: DOD Should Focus on Transition Planning', April 2023.
 55. Alan MacLeod, 'Havana Syndrome, Directed Energy Weapons, and the New Cold War', *Mint Press News*, 20 September 2021, available at: <https://www.mintpressnews.com/havana-syndrome-directed-energy-weapon-new-cold-war/278501/>.
 56. Cheryl Rofer, 'Claims of Microwave Attacks are Scientifically Implausible', *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2021, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/10/microwave-attacks-havana-syndrome-scientifically-implausible/>.
 57. Michael J. Colligan and James W. Pennebaker, 'Preface', in *Mass Psychogenic Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis*, eds. Michael J. Colligan, James W. Pennebaker and Lawrence R. Murphy (New York: Routledge, 1982), xii.

social forces'.⁵⁸ They write that 'the "sonic attack" saga contains all of the elements of social contagion. New technologies have been fertile ground for the changing form of psychogenic outbreaks as episodes are driven by anxieties and prevailing fears'. Indeed, 'the Havana illness has direct parallels with [previous] psychogenic illness, even down to the role of insects in triggering cases'. As with other cases, the HS phenomenon entailed the 'rapid spread of illness symptoms within a cohesive group' but exhibited 'no organic basis'.⁵⁹ This perspective was supported by research carried out by the Cuban Academy of Sciences.⁶⁰ Further studies by US intelligence agencies largely corroborated the hypothesis that HS was (probably) not a novel clinical entity but rather a mass psychogenic illness.⁶¹ In this view, its appearance was akin to a social or moral panic, with echoes of similar panics (i.e. the Red Scare) during the Cold War.⁶²

The mere possibility that HS is not connected to espionage or a top-secret, hitherto unknown weapon simply adds to the confusion. The mystery is essential to the imaginative process, providing fertile ground for all sorts of conjecture on the nature, origins, and purpose of the 'attacks'. At the same time, the intense imaginative energies at play propel the mystery, disallowing the establishment of a consensus on the syndrome even amongst official sectors. In circular fashion, it seems likely that the Second Cold War imaginary both feeds off of, and contributes to, these kinds of mysteries and controversies. The specific frames identified in this case are bound up in this dynamic.

Framing Havana Syndrome

The discourse on Havana Syndrome countenances the possibility that AHIs may be the result of a psychogenic illness, but this is not the dominant framing. The content analysis is not wholly distinct from the imaginaries that constitute the primary subject of this article's investigation. Rather, the above discussion illustrates how and why the HS phenomenon is mysterious. This brings the imaginative properties of HS to the foreground.

58. Robert E. Bartholomew and Robert W. Baloh, 'Challenging the Diagnosis of "Havana Syndrome" as a Novel Clinical Entity', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 113, no. 1 (2020): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141076819877553>.

59. Robert W. Baloh and Robert E. Bartholomew, *Havana Syndrome: Mass Psychogenic Illness and the Real Story Behind the Embassy Mystery and Hysteria* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 5.

60. Cuban Academy of Sciences, 'An Assessment of the Health Complaints during Sojourns in Havana of Foreign Government Employees and Their Families', September 2021, p. 6, available at: https://www.academiaciencias.cu/sites/default/files/adjunto-noticias/cas-report_health_incidents.pdf.

61. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 'Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents', ICA 2023-02286-B, 1 March 2023, available at: https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Updated_Assessment_of_Anomalous_Health_Incidents.pdf; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 'Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community', 5 February 2024, available at: <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

62. Robert E. Bartholomew and Paul Weatherhead, *Social Panics & Phantom Attackers: A Study of Imaginary Assailants* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2024), 21–47.

By analysing the frames that help constitute and structure this imaginary (namely, the attack, attribution, motivation, reality, analogy, and conspiracy frames), we gain insight into the meaning of the mystery.

The Second Cold War is emerging as a speculative and temporally-fluid vision of global politics simultaneously future-oriented and almost nostalgic in its myths, narratives, and world-making logics. The baseline of this imaginary is set by the ‘cold war’ master frame (the use of the lowercase denotes a more generalised phenomenon), but its content needs detailed filler. As noted above, master frames span multiple contexts and are deployed by various actors in (international) political discourse in an almost generic or universal manner. Master frames have ‘variable features’ however and their potency depends in part on ‘extant beliefs, myths, folktales, and the like’, according to Snow and Benford.⁶³ The cold war frame is shared by academics, commentators, officials, and politicians, though deployed in different ways. It is central to the Cold War imaginary, which is nevertheless comprised of more than this single frame. Phenomena like HS become essential ‘evidence’ of a new Cold War, which remains mysterious and uncertain despite purported commonalities with the original.

The Attack Frame

The obvious point of entry into the HS imaginary is the *attack frame*. In both government and media texts, there are routine references to ‘attacks’. This serves to diagnose the conditions experienced by patients as the outcome of deliberate and hostile events perpetrated by coordinated assailants acting on behalf of a cause or purpose, whether political, criminal, or some other form of motivation. It thus negates the likelihood that the health issues suffered by diplomats are the result of some other cause unrelated to the deliberate actions of coordinated assailants. The attack frame may have first emerged from the experiences of the individuals in Havana who attributed their symptoms to sonic waves, but the wider use of the term ‘attack’ quickly took hold.⁶⁴ This is the most pronounced of the three diagnostic frames identified in my analysis. It serves as an *anchor point* that enables the diagnostic and epistemic frames that follow.⁶⁵ In other words, if these incidents or phenomena are not framed as attacks, the subsequent frames in the discourse lose purchase.

When the Trump administration first pulled staff from the US embassy in Havana in 2017, officials referred to ‘specific attacks’ as the reasoning behind the decision. This terminology was emphasised despite the fact that officials acknowledged they did not

63. Snow and Benford, ‘Master Frames and Cycles of Protest’, 138, 141.

64. Entous and Anderson, ‘The Mystery of the Havana Syndrome’. This is despite the fact that within US intelligence circles the episodes were initially attributed to ‘harassment’ by the Cubans; US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, ‘Attacks on U.S. Diplomats in Cuba: Response and Oversight’, 9 January 2018. The harassment explanation never gained traction as a prominent diagnostic frame in the discourse on HS.

65. On ‘anchor points’ as ‘entry points’ in frame analysis, see van Hulst et al., ‘Discourse, Framing and Narrative’, 88–92.

know ‘the means, the methods or how the attacks [were] being carried out’.⁶⁶ The attack frame was the dominant means of representing the incidents in government and media reporting on the issue, though it would eventually share the discursive space with ‘anomalous health incidents’. Even with the adoption of the AHI terminology, this more neutral framing was often used alongside or within the attack frame. For instance, although the policy debate on the HAVANA Act of 2021 included many references to AHIs, the legislation was officially known as the ‘Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks’ Act.

The mystery surrounding the incidents did not eclipse the use of the attack frame, but became a way of describing the attacks themselves. Reporting often mentioned ‘mysterious attacks’.⁶⁷ In the publication of the findings of the Interagency Coordinator on Anomalous Health Incidents in 2021, the Congressional record (House and Senate) makes multiple references to ‘suspected attacks’ as well as ‘hostile’, ‘brazen’, and ‘clandestine attacks’. The House record states for example: ‘The continuing and expanding scope of these suspected attacks is impacting the security and morale of United States personnel’. The record also makes multiple references to threat/threats, stating for example: ‘It is the sense of Congress that . . . the threat to United States Government personnel from suspected attacks presenting as anomalous health incidents is a matter of urgent concern and deserving of the full attention of government’.⁶⁸

The caveats implied by the occasional use of the qualifying verb ‘suspected’ were frequently negated by the use of other descriptors. Speaking in the Senate following the passage of the HAVANA Act, Susan Collins (R-Maine) stated: ‘As we investigate the source of previous attacks and seek to prevent future ones, the bill . . . would provide additional medical care and financial compensation to Americans who continue to experience debilitating symptoms as a result of these heinous attacks’.⁶⁹ Echoing Collins’ framing, Senator Warner (D-Virginia) added: ‘We have seen . . . attacks on U.S. personnel in Cuba, in China, and around the world. We have these reports here in this country, and rather than disappearing or going down in number, they actually appear to be increasing’.⁷⁰ Within the same texts or speeches, then, the incidents are referred to as ‘suspected attacks’ that are ‘heinous’ and increasing ‘around the world’.

Under the guise of the attack frame, the practices of US intelligence and diplomacy shifted in the late-2010s, in Cuba and elsewhere. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s decision in September 2017 to reduce by more than 60% the number of staff at the US embassy in Havana was later ruled to have violated normal operating practice, according

66. BBC, “US Pulls Staff from Cuba Over ‘Specific Attacks’”, 29 September 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41446697>.

67. See for example, Brad Dress, ‘Former Pentagon Investigator Says He Believes Russia Behind “Havana syndrome” Attacks’, *The Hill*, 4 January 2024, available at: <https://the-hill.com/policy/defense/4567312-former-pentagon-investigator-says-he-believes-russia-behind-havana-syndrome-attacks/>.

68. Congressional Record, House of Representatives, Vol. 167, No. 164, 22 September 2021, p. H5043.

69. Congressional Record, Senate, Vol. 167, No. 99, 8 June 2021, p. S3972.

70. Congressional Record, Senate, Vol. 167, No. 99, p. S3973.

to the State Department's internal Accountability Review Board. Moreover, that same month, according to materials that were later declassified, the CIA shut down its Havana station, pulling its operatives out of the country under the suspicion that they were being targeted.⁷¹

The Attribution Frame

For these to be 'attacks', there must be an actor responsible for carrying them out. The US government is not able to say *who* is behind these actions. However, the lack of a clear, known perpetrator does not negate the need to accord attribution; this leads to speculative and probabilistic framing of the would-be perpetrators. The oft-used phrase 'unknown attackers'⁷² is important in this context as a component of the attribution frame, which reinforces the anchoring attack frame. Although the United States may not know who/what is acting to cause the reported symptoms, that these forces are 'attackers' limits the scope of possibility (eliminating crickets, psychogenic social contagion, etc., as potential sources of the AHIs).

The term 'foreign adversary' (or 'foreign adversaries') also frequently appears in the discourse. In December 2024, Rep. Rick Crawford (R-Arkansas), Chairman of the CIA Subcommittee of the US House of Representatives' Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, released an interim report on the Subcommittee's investigation into Havana Syndrome. The Subcommittee challenged the findings of a 2023 report by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and alleged that the Intelligence Community had attempted to 'thwart' the Subcommittee's investigation. According to the Subcommittee, '[i]t appears increasingly likely and the Chairman is convinced that a foreign adversary is behind some AHIs'.⁷³ Evidently, the reasoning for this position could not be revealed in an unclassified document. The term 'foreign actor' is often used alongside 'foreign adversary' in government texts.⁷⁴

When a foreign adversary is specified, Russia is the most-named culprit. In a piece in *The Atlantic*, the author offered a typical representation of Russia's positioning within

71. National Security Archive, 'U.S.-Cuba: Secrets of the "Havana Syndrome"'.

72. See for example, Congressional Record, Senate, Vol. 167, No. 99, p. S3973.

73. U.S. House of Representatives, Interim Report by Chairman Rick Crawford of the Subcommittee on the Central Intelligence Agency of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 'Investigating the Intelligence Community's Conclusions on Anomalous Health Incidents: Is the Intelligence Community Hiding the Real Reason for This Phenomenon?' December 2024, p. 2, available at: https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/unclassified_ahi_report.pdf; See also, Nora Gámez Torres, "'Foreign adversary' Is Likely Behind Some Havana Syndrome Incidents, House Report Says", *Miami Herald*, 6 December 2024, available at: <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article296637594.html>.

74. See for example, Director of National Intelligence, 'Updated Assessment of Anomalous Health Incidents, as of December 2024', 10 January 2025, available at: <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2025/4043-updated-assessment-ahi-dec2024>.

this frame, referencing allegations of a ‘deliberate, clandestine campaign by a U.S. adversary, *probably Russia*, that left [victims] disabled, struggling with chronic pain, and drowning in medical bills’.⁷⁵ The 2024 House subcommittee meeting on AHIs pointed at Russia repeatedly, including references to a ‘Russian nexus’ and ‘Russian gray zone activities’.⁷⁶ A joint report by *The Insider*, *Der Spiegel* and the CBS television programme *60 Minutes* in 2024 asserted that HS was caused by the ‘use of directed energy weapons wielded by members of (Russian GRU) unit 29155’.⁷⁷ Russia denied the report. Prior to this there had been considerable speculation in the media (and, according to reports, within the Trump and Biden administrations) that a GRU (Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate) unit was behind the phenomenon.⁷⁸

The attribution frame extends to the Cuban government and/or Cuban intelligence operatives. When the controversy first broke, Trump said Cuba was ‘responsible’ for the incidents.⁷⁹ Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida, who became Secretary of State in 2025) frequently attributed blame to the Cuban government, as did other key Senators, such as Robert Menendez (D-New Jersey).⁸⁰ Additionally, mention of HS often featured in the discussion of the US government’s response to civil unrest in Cuba in 2021. In discussion of the HAVANA Act, Rep. McCaul (R-Texas) stated: ‘I am very concerned that the administration may be planning to send U.S. personnel back to our Havana Embassy. I just got off of a big rally across from the White House with a lot of Cubans [sic]. They are searching for freedom and democracy over tyranny, oppression, and communism . . . The same surveillance system that tracks dissidents and censors the internet has been unwilling to share the necessary information about these attacks against Americans. I have no doubt that Cuban intelligence is involved in this’.⁸¹

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75. Share Harris, ‘The Consensus on Havana Syndrome is Cracking’, *The Atlantic*, 10 January 2025, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/01/havana-syndrome-russia-intelligence/681282/>. Emphasis added.
 76. Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons: Examining Foreign Anomalous Health Incidents Targeting American in the Homeland and Abroad’, Serial No. 118-62, 8 May 2024, p. 7.
 77. Michael Weiss, Christo Grozev and Roman Dobrokhoto, ‘Unraveling Havana Syndrome: New Evidence Links the GRU’s Assassination Unit 29155 to Mysterious Attacks on U.S. Officials and Their Families’, *The Insider*, 1 April 2024, available at: <https://theins.ru/en/politics/270425>. The claims surrounding Unit 29155 in this reporting are rebutted in Robert E. Bartholomew, ‘Smoke and Mirrors: The 60 Minutes “Breakthrough” on Havana Syndrome Exposed’, *Skeptical Inquirer*, 3 April 2024, available at: <https://skepticalinquirer.org/exclusive/smoke-and-mirrors-the-60-minutes-breakthrough-on-havana-syndrome-exposed/>.
 78. See for example, Adam Entous, ‘Are U.S. Officials Under Silent Attack?’, *The New Yorker*, 31 May 2021, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/31/are-us-officials-under-silent-attack>.
 79. *The Guardian*, ‘Trump Says Cuba “Responsible” for Alleged Sonic Attacks, But Offers No Evidence’, 16 October 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/trump-says-cuba-responsible-for-alleged-sonic-attacks-but-offers-no-evidence>.
 80. Kirk, ‘The Strange Case of the Havana “Sonic” Attacks’; US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, ‘Attacks on U.S. Diplomats in Cuba’.
 81. Congressional Record, House of Representatives, Vol. 167, No. 130, 26 July 2021, p. H3857.

China has also been linked to the ‘attacks’ through the attribution frame. Early reporting in the *New Yorker* floated possible Chinese involvement.⁸² According to one expert witness speaking during a committee hearing in the House: ‘We have specific evidence of Russian operatives being in China at the time when American diplomats suffered incidents. This could not have happened without the knowledge and at least passive cooperation by Chinese intelligence. Which means Chinese intelligence would be exposed to the capability of such a weapon. Which probably means they have developed their own version or borrowed it from Russia’.⁸³ When discussing how HS spread beyond Cuba, government and media texts often mentioned China as one site of the attacks.

The attribution frame was complicated by the fact that some Canadian diplomats in Cuba reported similar symptoms to the afflicted Americans. A Canadian study suggested that insect fumigants may have triggered these symptoms.⁸⁴ This is often neglected or downplayed in US discourse, but it undercuts the notion that responsibility rests with foreign adversaries of the United States, and in a manner that also weakens the motivation frame. That Cuba/Russia/China would target Canadians appears geopolitically myopic and at odds with dominant attribution/motivation frames that adversarial actors are attacking diplomats to damage US interests.

The Motivation Frame

The language used to describe the potential or likely ‘attackers’ provides a segue into a distinct but inter-locking diagnostic frame: the motivation frame. This is the weakest of the three diagnostic frames. An attack by definition is designed to cause harm of some kind. Similarly, interlinking with the attribution frame, the term ‘foreign adversary’ conjures a highly generalised but plausible motivation: adversarial intent by an actor outside of the United States. These ‘attacks’ thus function as ‘threats’ to the United States, with the implication that they are motivated to change the behaviour, policy, and/or practices of US diplomats, officials, and/or policymakers. They are intended to undermine or threaten US interests in international politics in some unspecified way, including in relation to ‘national security’. For example, legislation enacted in the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act directed the DOD to create a ‘cross-functional team (CFT) to address the national security challenges posted by AHIs’.⁸⁵ There was speculation that the clandestine use of acoustic, ultrasonic, and/or microwave technology was deliberate to ‘create as a sense of vulnerability within the general public’ and that ‘it may be that using such devices is an act of terrorism, in which the effects produced in a few victims create rapidly expanding manifestations among many’.⁸⁶

82. Entous and Anderson, ‘The Mystery of the Havana Syndrome’.

83. Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’, 44.

84. Reuters in Havana, ‘Mosquito Fumigation May Have Caused Mystery “Havana Syndrome”, Study Says’, *The Guardian*, 19 September 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/19/havana-syndrome-mosquitos-cuba-diplomats>.

85. Congressional Research Service, ‘FY2022 NDAA’, 3.

86. James Giordana, ‘Nation Must Come Together to Tackle Havana Syndrome’, *National Defense*, 106:816, 2021, p. 19, available at: <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2021/10/15/nation-must-come-together-to-tackle-havana-syndrome>.

But the absence of a known or obvious political logic within this frame is jarring. It weakens its diagnostic properties. In a report examining HS alongside similar phenomena (such as cyberattacks, which are often hard to detect), analysts with RAND noted that the United States would struggle to deter threats from ‘uncertain origins’. The report stated: ‘The incidents may be occurring as an unintended consequence of an espionage effort, a deliberate attempt to harm U.S. officials, or both or for another reason altogether’. The threat, for RAND, was in the uncertainty itself. ‘Whether or not Havana Syndrome is a global phenomenon, whether it affected only two dozen people, or whether it affected no one at all is, in some ways, not the most important thing. An adversary needs only to create the perception that it has the ability to clandestinely use technology to harm U.S. personnel at U.S. embassies around the world for such a coercive attack to have its desired effect’.⁸⁷ This presumes there is a *desired effect* – including, for example, the creation of uncertainty. It also presumes the threat is attributable to an adversarial actor.

The fact that the motivation frame is so ‘open’ presents interpretive or logical problems for the previous two diagnostic frames. It raises questions for the wider imaginary. How confident can US officials be that AHIs are the result of attacks by a foreign adversary if they cannot pinpoint or identify a coherent reasoning or motivation? This conundrum is addressed partly through the next three frames discussed, which are epistemic in orientation, and which represent an attempt to stabilise the diagnostic frames expressed in the HS discourse.

The Reality Frame

Declarations about the ‘realness’ of HS are related to the framing of the clinical phenomena and symptoms as the result of ‘attacks’ with an undisclosed weapon. The ‘reality’ of the attacks is established in two ways: by establishing the truthfulness of the victims’ (accounts of their) suffering; and by acknowledging the materiality of weapons technology that could conceivably be deployed in such attacks. The logic of this frame suggests that, because diplomats and officials are suffering ‘real’ problems, and because certain kinds of RF and sonic weapons technologies have been, and are being, developed, the framers ‘know’ that AHIs are the result of foreign attacks. This frame is bolstered by the use of the adjective ‘credible’ in conjunction with nouns like ‘evidence’ and ‘links’ to foreign adversaries.⁸⁸

87. Daniel Egel et al., ‘Can the United States Deter Threats from Uncertain Origins? Examining the Cases of Havana Syndrome, SolarWinds, and the Chinese Mafia’, RAND, 11 May 2023, p. 5, available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1598-1.html. For a similar argument, see Giordana, ‘Nation Must Come Together’, 18–9. Broader anxieties around the role of technology in the shift toward ‘fifth-generation warfare’ (5GW) may underpin the attribution and motivations frames. The uncertainty around HS fuels concerns that the United States is ill-prepared for high-tech forms of ‘hybrid warfare’ that target societal actors and are relatively low-cost; Essex, ‘Diagnosing American Decline’, 2085–2086.

88. See for example, Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’.

The reality frame serves as the leading *epistemic frame* in my analysis. The term ‘epistemic frame’ is prevalent in educational psychology where it refers to beliefs about knowledge and knowing and ‘how one understands what it means to know’.⁸⁹ Epistemic frames pertain to what is knowable about the content of the diagnostic frames within a given discourse. They are particularly important in stabilising imaginaries, which, as discussed above, are characterised by considerable creativity, fluidity, and even dream-like properties. Epistemic framing is crucial to the meaning-making functionality of imaginaries across different audiences.

Speaking in the House of Representatives in 2021, Rep. Nunes (R-California) stated: ‘As the public now *knows*, our officers have been the victims of targeted attacks around the globe. I want to say upfront that these incidents are *real*, and the officers’ accounts are *credible*’.⁹⁰ A statement of Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Mississippi) in a 2024 Congressional hearing said: ‘A recent study by the National Institutes of Health, which analyzed MRI brain scans of the affected Government officials, confirmed the very real symptoms of the affected participants’.⁹¹ Reporting on the issue often conveyed admonitions of reality and credibility. As summarised in the *New Yorker* in 2021, John Bolton, national security advisor in the Trump administration, ‘believed that Havana Syndrome was real, and he initially thought that either Russia or China was responsible. By the summer of 2018, he’d landed on Russia’.⁹²

An article in the journal of the National Defense University was titled: ‘Directed Energy Weapons are Real . . . and Disruptive’. The article contrasted the development of lasers, RF and microwave technologies with films and lab experiments to state definitively that ‘directed energy weapons are no longer just science fiction. They are real and are maturing rapidly’.⁹³ A subcommittee hearing in Congress on AHIs discussed the ‘evolution’ of energy weapons technology evidenced through DOD documentation of relevant US weapons systems.⁹⁴ The headline of an editorial in the *Washington Post* read: ‘A *literal* secret weapon is hurting U.S. diplomats abroad’.⁹⁵ This element of the

89. P. Karen Murphy et al., ‘Examining Epistemic Frames in Conceptual Change Research: Implications for Learning and Instruction’, *Asia Pacific Education Review* 13 (2012): 475, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-011-9199-0>; Shaffer et al., ‘Epistemic Network Analysis’.

90. Congressional Record, House of Representatives, Vol. 167, No. 130, 26 July 2021, p. H3856. Italics added.

91. US House of Representatives, ‘Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence’, Serial No. 118-62, 8 May 2024, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/event/118th-congress/house-event/LC73614/text>.

92. Entous, ‘Are U.S. Officials Under Silent Attack?’

93. Henry ‘Trey’ Obering III, ‘Direct Energy Weapons are Real . . . And Disruptive’, *PRISM*, 8:3, 2019, p. 43.

94. Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’, 18–9.

95. *Washington Post*, ‘A Literal Secret Weapon Is Hurting U.S. Diplomats Abroad: What Is It?’, 7 September 2018, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-literal-secret-weapon-is-hurting-us-diplomats-abroad-what-is-it/2018/09/07/c2dec02e-b10b-11e8-aed9-001309990777_story.html. Italics added.

epistemic frame can be reinforced even through scepticism of the attack narrative. One headline in the *Wall Street Journal* read: ‘Microwave Weapons Are Real, but They Can’t Explain “Havana Syndrome”’.⁹⁶

Through the reality frame, considerable resources were allocated to AHIs, further illustrating how the socio-psychological imaginary of HS was made ‘real’ in a material sense. In 2018, Mike Pompeo, Trump’s second Secretary of State, established a Health Incidents Response Task Force and created a DOS liaison for injured personnel.⁹⁷ The aforementioned HAVANA Act of 2021 gave the Secretary of State and other agency heads the authority to provide payments to individuals who incurred qualifying injuries. In July 2024, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommended ‘that DOD develop written guidance, establish a mechanism for official communication with AHI patients, implement its AHI care cell, monitor initiatives, and create a plan to gather registry consent from patients’. The Pentagon concurred with these recommendations.⁹⁸

The Analogy Frame

The analogy frame provides the strongest links with the Cold War master frame and is central to the Second Cold War imaginary. Analogical reasoning is arguably fundamental to human cognition. The use of analogy has been the subject of much research in IR. In contrast to the ‘thicker’ treatment of analogies found in the literature, in my frame analysis, analogies are a kind of heuristic that suggests ‘we can simplify the complex by linking the difficult present to a reassuring past’.⁹⁹ The logic of this epistemic frame posits that the truth of the HS phenomenon can be grasped by looking at similar events during the Cold War.

The aforementioned Moscow Signal episode provides an important analogy to HS because the motivations behind the Signal remain unknown.¹⁰⁰ A headline in the *The Foreign Service Journal*, a publication of the American Foreign Service Association, read: ‘Before Havana Syndrome, There Was Moscow Signal’.¹⁰¹ In a separate article, one former intelligence officer drew a direct line between the Moscow Signal and HS: ‘The media has often reported that these attacks began in Cuba six years ago, often

96. Sharon Weinberger, ‘Microwave Weapons Are Real, But They Can’t Explain “Havana Syndrome”’, *Wall Street Journal*, 4 April 2024, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/microwave-weapons-are-real-but-they-cant-explain-havana-syndrome-171c6efa>.

97. National Security Archive, ‘U.S.-Cuba: Secrets of the “Havana Syndrome”’.

98. United States Government Accountability Office, ‘Havana Syndrome’.

99. Andrew Mumford, ‘Parallels, Prescience and the Past: Analogical Reasoning and Contemporary International Politics’, *International Politics* 52 (2015): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.40>.

100. Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’, 18–9.

101. James Schumaker, ‘Before Havana Syndrome, There Was Moscow Signal’, *The Foreign Service Journal*, January-February 2022, available at: <https://afsa.org/havana-syndrome-there-was-moscow-signal>.

contradicting their own reporting of previous years. As has been widely and accurately reported, the attacks began in Moscow some 70 years ago, in 1953, and was then known within the diplomatic and intelligence communities as “the Moscow Signal”.¹⁰² As noted in the HS coverage, medical experts have long disagreed about the potential health effects of the Signal’s radiation.

Although the analogy frame articulated in this way largely reinforces the diagnostic frames in the discourse (the attack, attribution, and motivation frames), it is noteworthy that even amongst outlets sceptical of the ‘attack’ narrative references to the Cold War are frequent.¹⁰³ This shows the continued purchase of the Cold War master frame and its reinforcement in the HS discourse. One critical journalist, citing the ‘Cold War undertones’ of HS, highlighted the relevance of the ‘Yellow Rain’ scare of the 1980s. This began when US forces in Southeast Asia noticed a yellow substance on leaves during their patrols. ‘Immediately fearing the worst, they suspected they had been attacked by chemical weapons . . . Paranoid officials from the State Department promoted the idea, formally accusing the Soviet Union of supplying weapons of mass destruction to Communist forces in the region. The story became a national scandal . . . only for the U.S. to admit, years later, that the yellow substance on the leaves was actually honey bee feces’.¹⁰⁴

As stated by one witness during a Congressional hearing on HS: ‘There are many examples of syndromes and ailments from Americans injured in the line of duty that the Government did not recognize for many years, which were eventually proven [sic] Agent Orange, used in Vietnam, the Gulf War Syndrome, burn pits during the forever wars of Iraq and Afghanistan. In all of these examples, America took too long to acknowledge these injuries . . . Havana Syndrome is no different’.¹⁰⁵ The Agent Orange comparison is telling because the parallels drawn point to the final epistemic frame in my analysis, the conspiracy frame. The historiography around Agent Orange indicates a complicated legacy that implicates US government secrecy in the (fallout from the) use of weaponised defoliants in the Southeast Asian theatre during the Cold War.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the Moscow Signal episode generated considerable distrust amongst State Department and Foreign Service personnel. According to reports, officials hid some information about the microwave radiation targeting the Moscow embassy.¹⁰⁷ Materially, then, there is

102. Lewis Regenstein, ‘The Mysteries – and Realities – of the Havana Syndrome: It’s the Russians’, *Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies* 28 no. 1 (2023): 15.

103. See for example, MacLeod, ‘Havana Syndrome’; Jack Hitt, ‘The Real Story Behind the Havana Embassy Mystery’, *Vanity Fair*, 6 January 2019, available at: <https://www.vanity-fair.com/news/2019/01/the-real-story-behind-the-havana-embassy-mystery>

104. MacLeod, ‘Havana Syndrome’.

105. Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’, 6. On the Agent Orange analogy, see also Barry Meier, ‘Havana Syndrome’s Newest Mystery: Who Gets Paid?’, *New York Magazine*, 29 April 2022, available at: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/04/havana-syndromes-newest-mystery-who-gets-paid.html>.

106. Edwin A. Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

107. Schumaker, ‘Before Havana Syndrome, There Was Moscow Signal’.

reason that analogies of this kind hold purchase within the US diplomatic and intelligence communities.

The Conspiracy Frame

The HS imaginary is full of allusions to hidden realities. This is partly because of the clandestine nature of the ‘attacks’. Beyond this, however, for some framers, there is another layer of purported secrecy or duplicity which is preventing the ‘whole truth’ from coming to light. This conspiracy frame suggests that there are coordinated efforts amongst certain officials within the US government and/or intelligence community to obfuscate events or withhold information from the public, media, and/or legislators or other officials. The frame is epistemic because it helps explain why the details and perpetrators of the ‘attacks’ remain unknown.

The conspiracy frame encompasses partisan disagreements and competing interpretations by different actors and agencies within the US government. Addressing the House in 2021, Rep. Nunes (R-California) said for example: ‘President Biden has refused to call these what they are, attacks on U.S. personnel. Secretary of State Tony Blinken publicly said perhaps no one is responsible for causing these injuries. I will tell you, from briefings and briefings in another annex, that is absolutely incorrect. We may not be able to fill in all the blanks yet, but know too much to dismiss these attacks as unexplained health incidents’.¹⁰⁸ The conspiracy frame plays off of the reality frame to go beyond mere intra-governmental disagreements to suggest that certain actors are hiding relevant information. As stated by one witness in a Congressional hearing: ‘[t]here are questions that need to be legitimately raised as to whether our own Government has utilized similar [RF/microwave] technology on the adversary for various objectives, and/or that we have actually caused self-inflicted wounds on our own personnel through the use of machinery and other devices that have been operated or stored in their vicinity for various purposes’.¹⁰⁹

One witness in Congressional hearings referred to the ‘gaslighting on AHI survivors’ while another said he realised ‘there is something possibly limiting the capabilities of the willingness of U.S. law enforcement or intelligence to do a thorough study’.¹¹⁰ Another witness stated unequivocally that ‘the Executive branch, particularly at the behest of and manipulation by officials within [sic] CIA, is not truthfully reporting what it knows’. The witness added: ‘numerous Federal agencies have failed to fully undertake substantive investigations, deliberately delayed collecting or ignored crucial credible evidence, and have intentionally withheld information, even from sister agencies so as to influence and manipulate their decision-making process’.¹¹¹ Havana Syndrome was mentioned in a 2023 Congressional hearing on ‘Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena’ (UAPs, i.e.

108. Congressional Record, House of Representatives, Vol. 167, No. 130, 26 July 2021, p. H3856.

109. Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’, 21.

110. *Ibid.*, 6, 12.

111. *Ibid.*, 15–6.

‘UFOs’) during a discussion that raised the possibility of ‘cover ups’.¹¹² Similarly, media reporting on the HS mystery, often featuring interviews with victims, uses terms like *bias*, *betrayal*, *cover up*, *gaslighting*, and *sham*.¹¹³ In 2024, Rep. Rick Crawford (R-Arkansas), Chair of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, published an op-ed in the *Washington Examiner* in which he claimed that Congress and the public had been ‘misled’ on HS and that legislators were being ‘stonewalled’ by the intelligence community.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

We can draw several insights from the framing of Havana Syndrome in US policy debate and media coverage, but this requires situating the HS mystery in the proper political context. Much of the discussion of Havana Syndrome has acknowledged that the phenomenon emerged just after the US’s push for normalisation with Havana under the Obama administration.¹¹⁵ While observers have highlighted the Cold War overtones surrounding HS, scholars have yet to adequately connect the bizarre phenomenon to the Second/New Cold War. What does Havana Syndrome reveal about mystery and imaginaries in international politics?

I have argued that the Second Cold War constitutes a shared (geopolitical) imaginary in the discourse of US foreign policy, buttressed by the cold war master frame. Havana Syndrome can also be conceptualised as an imaginary, one nested within this more expansive vision, fuelling notions of a new Cold War even as it reveals the tensions and contingent meanings of this larger imaginary. This is not the same as saying that HS and its AHIs ‘do not exist’ or are ‘not real’. Rather, by focusing on imaginaries as creative and temporally-fluid visions that connect everyday and elite understandings, we gain a sense of how emergent realities are imagined into existence. In the case of Havana Syndrome, it seems highly plausible (if not provable) that the Cold War affect played some role in the emergence of AHIs as a mass psychogenic illness. It was the experiences of diplomats based in Havana and elsewhere that gave rise to this ‘syndrome’, which, once established as a puzzle or problem, necessitated explication in US foreign and

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112. Committee on Oversight and Accountability, ‘Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Implications on National Security, Public safety and Government Transparency’, Serial No. 118-53, 26 July 2023, pp. 3, 4, 44. The term cover up is found elsewhere in documentary record: see for example, Committee on Homeland Security, ‘Silent Weapons’, 45.
 113. See for example, Julian E. Barnes, ‘Truth About Havana Syndrome Is Still Unknown, Biden Officials Say’, *The New York Times*, 12 January 2025, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/us/politics/havana-syndrome-causes.html>; Dress, ‘Former Pentagon Investigator’.
 114. Rick Crawford, ‘We Have Been Misled on Havana Syndrome’, *Washington Examiner*, 7 December 2024, available at: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/3252704/we-have-been-misled-on-havana-syndrome/>.
 115. Rubrick Biegon, ‘The Normalization of U.S. Policy Toward Cuba? Rapprochement and Regional Hegemony’, *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 1 (2020): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2019.45>.

security policy. The porous nature of these imaginaries means they bleed into one another. The various debates over HS reinforced the sense that the United States was now engaged in a renewed Cold War, full of clandestine actions, novel technological gadgets, and geopolitical intrigue.

The diagnostic frames of the HS discourse are anchored by the premise that AHIs are caused by ‘attacks’. This rules out other potential explanations. These ‘attacks’ have been carried out by foreign adversaries, in the dominant framing of HS. The most likely culprit is Russia, but Cuba and perhaps even China may share (some of) the blame. That there is so much uncertainty about the attacker(s) is itself telling. It suggests that the principal antagonists in this new Cold War are not clear. Is it Russia? Or could it be China? How do smaller ‘rogue’ states like Cuba factor into this situation? Could they be collaborating in some way? What would be the basis for this collaboration? This tracks with a Second Cold War imaginary in which, contrary to the first Cold War, the main international actors or forces are not established. At the same time, it is notable that, in general, HS has not been framed in relation to the threat of terrorism, suggesting that it is waning as master frame as the new Cold War takes root.

The relative weakness of the motivation frame is also significant. Not only are the antagonists blurry in this imaginary, so too are the sources of the apparent antagonism(s). Was HS the result of actions designed to damage the US–Cuba rapprochement? Why, then, would the Cubans be involved? Why would Russia (or China) risk damaging their relationship with Havana to carry out these bizarre attacks? What explains the spread of HS/AHIs to other countries? It is noteworthy that the locations of reported AHIs map onto hotspots from the Cold War: Cuba, China, Germany, Poland, Vietnam. Vienna, Austria, a nexus of Cold War espionage, became a hotspot for HS cases, leading to the removal of the CIA station chief over his handling of the issue in 2021. The episode, which led the CIA to triple the number of its medical staff dedicated to AHIs,¹¹⁶ is illustrative of how imaginaries become ‘real’ (in an extra-discursive sense) through their embedding in practice – in this case through reallocation of personnel and material resources. In effect, the spread of HS conformed to an older Cold War pattern even as the fault lines of the new Cold War were indeterminate.

The epistemic frames in the HS discourse are key to understanding how the shaky diagnostic frames are stabilised, as well as how they are connected to the cold war master frame that is central to the emerging Second Cold War imaginary. The reality frame, for example, solidifies the attack diagnosis in two ways: by establishing the truthfulness of the victims’ (accounts of) suffering; and by acknowledging the existence of weapons technologies that could conceivably be deployed in such attacks. Meanwhile, the analogy frame draws direct connections between the HS phenomenon and past events, including (in)famous episodes from the first Cold War: the Moscow Signal controversy; the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam; the Yellow Rain scare. The conspiracy frame

116. Greg Myre, ‘CIA Recalls Vienna Station Chief in Move Related to Handling of “Havana Syndrome”’, *NPR*, 24 September 2021, available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/24/1040422112/cia-recalls-vienna-station-chief-in-move-related-to-handling-of-havana-syndrome>.

acknowledges that the 'whole truth' of HS remains unknown. However, in the logic of this epistemic frame this is because of cover-ups and coordinated efforts to obfuscate events or withhold information. This, too, has echoes in the historical memory of the first Cold War. The lasting effects of Agent Orange, for example, were hidden from soldiers and the public by American officials.

The Havana Syndrome mystery shows that there are escalating anxieties about American decline and geopolitical vulnerability.¹¹⁷ It also suggests that policymakers and elites in the United States are attempting to navigate this situation through the lens of the Cold War, whether knowingly or unwittingly, through claims that can aptly be called 'imaginative'. The concept of the imaginary adds analytical value to interpretivist IR scholarship, particularly as the analysis moves from the everyday experiences of diplomats and other officials to the dominant perspectives of decision-makers and policy elites. Imaginaries are reservoirs of myths, narratives, images, and representations, full of creativity and temporal fluidity. There are perfectly legitimate intellectual reasons for claiming that international politics is entering a Second Cold War, just as there are sound reasons for hypothesising that AHIs may in some instances be the result of deliberate, hostile acts. However, IR should reflect on the processes that produce these kinds of assumptions. Mysteries such as Havana Syndrome are crucial in this regard, and the further theorisation of imaginaries (of different kinds) is a fruitful project for the discipline to pursue.

At the same time, the existing literature has not adequately addressed how imaginaries are made manifest in international politics. It has often been enough for scholars to discuss imaginaries alongside concepts of discourse or narrative. This paper makes a contribution to the literature on imaginaries through the practice of framing. By drawing clear boundaries around and within sprawling, often-fuzzy imaginaries, frames direct the gaze of both framer and audience, helping to construct and extract meaning from the dream-like imaginaries under question. The framing of Havana Syndrome shows an effort to diagnose, understand, and present the phenomenon through patterns that are consistent with a cold war master frame, to solve the uncertainties of the present through the certainties of a previous era – one that ended in a resounding victory for the United States. The Second Cold War imaginary is both nostalgic and futuristic, then, transposing the sharp and well-defined antagonisms of the latter half of the 20th century into the instability and confusion of the present moment. However, the 'newness' of the imaginary – represented by the imagined vision of a weapon that is yet to be identified or perhaps even invented – upsets the convenience and comfort that might otherwise come with a new Cold War, which may turn out to be unexpectedly different from the original.

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117. Essex, 'Diagnosing American Decline'.

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