

A Harbor, A Bomb, A Wall—Geopolitical Context and the Emergence of America's National Reconnaissance Imaging Capability

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Abstract

The early days of the Cold War had vivid memories of World War II and a challenge to see into denied territories. From this emerged a new capability to image from space—a capability that was innovative, daring, and one of the nation's most closely guarded secrets.

This capability saw the development and operation in the 1960s of Corona—a series of photoreconnaissance satellites that orbited 115 miles above the earth and imaged Cold War targets, primarily in the Soviet Union and Peoples Republic of China. Out of this evolved a robust 20th-century US imaging space reconnaissance capability that has become the foundation for this kind of space reconnaissance and remote sensing for the 21st century and beyond.