

Khong argues that historical analogies serve as intellectual devices to perform a set of diagnostic tasks. First, they help define the nature of the situation in light of previous situations that may be more familiar. Then, analogies can also give a sense of the political stakes and possible solutions. The fourth, fifth, and sixth tasks pertain to evaluating the policy prescribed on the basis of the analogy: likelihood of success, moral rightness, dangers.

The framework makes the process comprehensible in its entirety, and when the different tasks all reinforce each other the power of the analogy can be overwhelming. Cognitive psychology too allows us to understand what analogies are capable of doing in terms of going beyond the available information and filling in for gaps in that information. On the other hand, analogies tend to fit incoming information into their mold: “Discrepant information tends to be slighted or ignored; ambiguous information tends to be interpreted as supporting the expectations of the analogy” (38). Foreign affairs being what they are, the abuse of historical analogies will be more difficult to correct and check.; “the consequences are also likely to be more serious” (44).