National Security Strategy:
The Cuban/Caribbean Missile Crisis, October 1962

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Overview We study the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, arguably the most dangerous confrontation of the nuclear powers during the Cold War. We then discuss some common interpretations of the crisis and its aftermath.

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1 Chronology of Events

1952	Batista overthrows elected government in Cuba
7/26/53	Castro leads an armed assault against Batista, jailed, escapes
1956	Castro tries again, defeated again
1/1/59	Castro seizes power
2/60	USSR signs economic agreement with Cuba
1/61	US severs diplomatic relations with Cuba
3/13/61	JFK announces “Alliance for Progress”
4/17/61	Bay of Pigs fiasco
8/13/61	Berlin Wall goes up
8/62	U-2 planes reveal Soviet bombers in Cuba
9/62	US intelligence concludes there are no missiles in Cuba
10/14/62	US officials state there are no ground missiles in Cuba
10/16/62	Kennedy receives first U-2 photographs showing missile sites
10/22/62	JFK announces the Soviets are building bases in Cuba
10/25/62	Soviet ships turn around without running the blockade
10/26/62	first letter from Khrushchev arrives
10/27/62	Soviet officer shoots down U-2 plane; second letter arrives
10/28/62	Khrushchev accepts US letter
11/20/62	US forces stand down from full alert status
12/14/62	US rescinds no-invasion pledge

2 Cuba: The Communist Thorn

Cuba was a thorn in the US’s own backyard. The small island nation under Fidel Castro had defied the Monroe Doctrine not only by successfully resisting repeated American attempts to get rid of its leader but also had begun to turn to the Soviets.

The whole Cuban thing began on July 26, 1953 when a young nationalist lawyer by the name of Castro led an armed assault on the corrupt regime of Fulgencio Batista. He got jailed but managed to escape, went to Mexico and came back with a small revolutionary force in 1956. Batista had no difficulty neutralizing him again and Castro barely escaped with his life and 10 survivors.

Now Batista was not what you’d call a constitutionally elected leader beloved by the people-having overthrown the elected government in 1952 and all that. Despite its colonial influence (Americans owned 80% of Cuba’s utilities, 40% of its sugar—the major commodity, and 90% of the island’s mining wealth), the US did not foresee Castro’s return. Neither did the Cuban communists who nearly missed joining his movement as he seized power on New Year’s Day in 1959.

Because of Cuba’s export dependence and near exclusive reliance on sales to the U.S., the U.S. could control Cuba by manipulating the amount of Cuban sugar al-

lowed into the American market. Castro wanted to end this dependence. Another major goal of his was wealth redistribution, a maneuver that was certain to cause serious opposition by those whose wealth would be distributed away. Castro's trip to Washington did not produce anything—the US was unwilling to cooperate and was, in fact, secretly working to "force the revolutionaries to their sense" or at least hoping that "moderates" would replace Castro. However, by the summer of 1959, Castro's power was unquestioned, his agrarian reforms had alienated the Americans, and by the end of the year anticommunists began leaving Cuba.

In February 1960, the Russians moved in to fill the power vacuum by signing a trade agreement to exchange Cuban sugar for Soviet oil and machinery. Trade with the Soviet bloc shot up from 2% in 1960 to 80% by the end of 1961. In July 1960, Washington cut the Cuban sugar quota for the US market, mobilized hemispheric opposition to the island, landed marines in Central America to quell rumored Cuban invasions, and began training an anti-Castro army of Cuban exiles. In January 1961, relations were formally severed.

On March 3, 1961, President Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress, which improved on policies initiated by Eisenhower and meant to provide assistance for the economic development of Latin America. The AFP provided for a 10-year commitment of $20 billion of US money in return for which Latin America pledged $80 billion of investment over that period plus various land and tax reforms. Kennedy hoped that the Alliance would produce a 5.5% increase in Latin America's growth rate. This was an attempt to reduce the "demand" for Castro-style revolutions throughout Latin America. If working conditions improved and inequalities were made more tolerable, fewer people would support populist or communist challenges to the regime, reducing the likelihood of revolutions. (The program was not very successful because of bureaucratic infighting in Washington and reluctance of Latin American governments to implement reforms. In fact, between 1961 and 1966 military forces overthrew nine Latin American governments, providing another way to stem the tide of revolution.)

If the Alliance for Progress was an attempt to reduce the "demand" for Castroite revolutions in Latin America, the U.S. soon got involved with attempts to reduce the "supply" as well: trying to get rid of Castro or destabilize his regime. The Cuban leader had become so intolerable by refusing to go away that the US decided to help him disappear, which it did on April 17, 1961.

On this date, a group of Cuban exiles, trained and supported by the US, landed at the Bay of Pigs to mount an invasion of Cuba. JFK had promised air cover for the landing, but when the 1,500-strong force arrived, it discovered that no such support was forthcoming—a key air-strike was canceled because of clouds, and other naval and air units were immobilized by Castro's small air force. The beachhead was indefensible and the would-be counter-revolutionaries surrendered. It was a major embarrassment for the US, whose involvement was widely known. In fact, US Ambassador to the U.N. Adlai Stevenson was caught lying about the US involvement.

Kennedy and his brother became somewhat obsessed with Castro. A series of bizarre and even comical plots to assassinate him followed, some of them as exotic as setting his beard on fire or as humdrum as giving him a diving suit lined with deadly bacteria as a gift (Castro was apparently an avid diver). In February 1962, the U.S. embargoed Cuba as well. Congress passed a joint resolution authorizing the use of force in Cuba if American interests were threatened.

These American activities in Cuba and around Latin America convinced Castro that the U.S. would not rest until he was gone. And since the limited attempts were not succeeding, he began to fear that the U.S. might be tempted to take more drastic measures, perhaps even a ground invasion to topple his regime. Consequently, Havana pleaded with Moscow for help defend the island.

3 The Soviet Buildup in Cuba

The Soviets were somewhat less paranoid about the immediacy of an American invasion than Castro. They probably estimated that an invasion is a serious possibility, and perhaps a probability in the future. Kennedy had been humiliated after the Bay of Pigs, and we saw how the Soviets immediately attempted to capitalize on that in Vienna and then in Berlin, where the wall had gone up on August 13, 1961. On the other hand, Khrushchev had not solved the Berlin problem completely. In fact, he had issued yet another of his Berlin ultimata and was facing a major diplomatic defeat because he had withdrawn it after being promised negotiations, and the negotiations were stalled and on the verge of collapse. This was precisely what had happened the two times he had tried this before, and he was convinced that the American intransigence was coming from their position of military superiority.

In October 1961, the U.S. let the Soviets (and whoever else cared to listen) know that the U.S. was aware that the Soviets did not have the nuclear capabilities they had been claiming to have. The Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric claimed that the U.S. was "now confident that the Soviets will not provoke a major nuclear conflict" because "we have a second-strike capability which is at least as extensive as what the Soviets can deliver by striking first." This revealed that the Soviet ICBM threat was a sham, and this now became common knowledge. It also drastically reduced the expectation of a favorable outcome in Berlin for the Russians who realized that the Americans would be even tougher bargainers than before.

The reasons for the Soviets placing missiles in Cuba are so many that their decision to do so seems overdetermined after the fact. The astounding thing is that it was unanticipated by the U.S. administration. The Americans had been monitoring the buildup in Cuba and were worried about the possibility of the Russians doing more than securing the defense of the island against an invasion that the U.S. was not even planning. After Castro's initial request for help, the Soviets agreed to send weapons and build up Cuban air defenses. There was no agreement for any nuclear

weapons. Once shipments began, the Americans got jittery about what was happening and asked that the Soviets promise not to install any nuclear weapons in Cuba. The Soviets promptly obliged, on more than one occasion.

After ascertaining that the Russians did not intend to put nukes in Cuba, in September Kennedy publicly stated that the U.S. would not permit any nuclear weapons to be installed there. This was not an attempt to deter the Russians—they had assured Kennedy that they were not going to do it—it was an attempt to assuage fears in the U.S. by essentially ratifying what the Russians had told him they were willing to do. Unfortunately, the Russians were lying and this public statement committed Kennedy to a confrontational response once it became known that they had lied. During the crisis, Kennedy was to regret that statement: "Last month I said we weren't going to [allow the Soviets to put missiles in Cuba]. Last month I should have said that we don't care. But when we said we're not going to, and then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I would think that our risks increase." Of course, it was not Kennedy's fault that the Russians had misled him.

But why did they risk so much with the missiles? One answer is that they did not know they were taking huge risks. Perhaps they did not understand that when the president publicly draws the line, it would be very difficult to back down. Secure in his office (for now), Khrushchev had done so on numerous occasions and perhaps did not understand that Kennedy's position was very fragile and that the president might be tempted to stand firm for political as much as strategic reasons.

But perhaps the Soviets misunderstood how their action would appear to the Americans because they failed to realize that the Americans might misperceive the reasons for that action. For instance, if the Soviets wanted to defend Cuba under their assumption that the American invasion was inevitable, then the *Soviet* reasoning would be that the missiles were a natural *defensive* step to deter that invasion. This should not be too alarming to the U.S., and the response could be expected to be measured, especially if the USSR confronted the Americans with a *fait accompli*. But since the Americans did not intend to invade Cuba, they seriously underestimated how much this fear played in Soviet thinking. The Americans thought that because they were not about to invade (had made no threats or preparations to do so), thus much would be obvious to the Russians, so when the Russians acted, fear of such a hypothetical invasion could not have been their motive. The *American* reasoning would be that because there was no reason to defend Cuba against an invasion that was not coming, the Soviet emplacement of missiles there could only be a provocative *offensive* step designed to extract future bargaining leverage, possibly over Berlin. Therefore, a step that the Soviets thought would work without much risks in produced an unexpected response that greatly increased the risk of war.

Another reasons the Soviets might have underestimated the risks was that they placed great faith in their ability to pull this off before the U.S. became aware of the missiles. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that had the Soviets succeeded in

their *fait accompli,* the U.S. might have acquiesced to missiles in Cuba. Kennedy's remark about his wishes not have drawn the line make this clear but he was also supported by McNamara who argued that even with the missiles in Cuba, the U.S. military superiority was secure (the U.S. had overwhelming conventional weapons presence in the Western hemisphere) and the Russians would be unlikely to capitalize on the missiles for that reason. So maybe the Soviets hoped to extract political dividends from the missiles but, ironically, the U.S. might have acquiesced to their installation because the Americans believed it gave no advantage to the Soviets. At any rate, the risks would be serious only if the U.S. detected the missiles before they became operational and was tempted to intervene militarily to ensure that they never become so.[1]

This is not to say that there were no good reasons to run a serious risk:

- Defend Cuba from U.S. invasion. After the Bay of Pigs and Castro's request, the Soviets had to help. They had begun the supply of defensive weapons and maybe Khrushchev thought tactical nukes could prove useful against overwhelming U.S. conventional superiority. In particular, if the Soviets could not hope to defend the island, the possession of nukes could bolster their deterrent posture.

- Trump possible Chinese involvement. Castro was talking about going to the PRC for support, which threw the Russians into panic. Such a move would dilute their influence in Cuba and would undermine their prestige as leaders of the communist world. The Soviets considered their options and decided to increase their commitment to Cuba.

- Increase American's perception of threat. The U.S. had numerous installations in Europe, some of them very close to the Russian border (e.g., Turkey). The Soviets lived in perpetual anxiety, and Khrushchev thought that perhaps the Americans did not understand how stressful this was and were maybe unaware how unpleasant it was to give up under duress. With missiles in Cuba,

[1] At this point it might be useful to ask why the Soviets failed in their *fait accompli* tactic. They had taken great pains to conceal the *shipment* of the missiles, and they had been 100% successful—the missiles and parts had gone undetected by the Americans. There was also decent security on the ground in Cuba. But the Soviets also did not conceal the *installation* of the missiles. Perhaps they did not realize that their typical installation sites would be familiar to intelligence operatives in the U.S., making U-2 photos much more meaningful and informative. Or perhaps the organization charged with building the sites had no operating procedures for camouflage designed to prevent aerial surveillance (the Soviets had never installed missiles outside of the USSR and they did not conceal the installations within the country), and nobody thought of ordering them to develop such until it was too late. (After the discovery was made public, the Soviets did belatedly camouflage the sites. The jerry-rigged attempts were quite good and had they done this earlier, the sites might well have escaped detection.) This just goes to show how the best-laid plans can come to nought because leaders cannot exercise complete control over their subordinates.

they would have a little of their own medicine, and might be more accommodating.

- Rectify the strategic imbalance. The missile gap, which had been publicly revealed, was an embarrassment to the Soviets and it probably caused additional fears that the Americans might be tempted to capitalize on it. Given the inferiority of their ICBMs, the only way to reach the U.S. with nuclear weapons would be from Cuba with short and medium-range missiles. In fact, the Soviets had plans to develop Cuba into a major base, complete with SLBMs and megaton-range nukes.

- Score a diplomatic victory. If the Soviets could defy the U.S. in its backyard, it would go a long way from demonstrating that the Russians were not afraid of the Americans, and that they would protect their friends.

- Use Cuba as a bargaining chip for Berlin. When all is said and done, Berlin was the more important cause for concern for the Russians. It was a perpetual sore that threatened to destabilize whatever relations they developed with the West. It was a visible and powerful symbol of Western defiance and commitment. With a base in Cuba, the Americans could be expected to be more forthcoming with a compromise over Berlin, and maybe the Russians would be able to use more assertive tactics for dealing with Berlin. Maybe even they could trade Cuba for Berlin, with the Americans leaving Berlin in exchange for the Russians leaving Cuba.

Khrushchev had not anticipated that the Americans would react the way they did. The Russians had lived with U.S. missiles based all around them, even as close as Turkey. Why would the U.S. not tolerate something that it had been doing to the Soviets for years? It is important to stress, however, that the gamble was premised on the Americans not discovering the nukes until they were operational, which would make a forcible removal quite dangerous, possibly dangerous enough to deter them from attempting it.

In April 1962, Khrushchev responded to the Cuban pleas for assistance and authorized the transport and installation of SAM sites (to shoot down planes) and missiles for coastal defenses. In May, the Soviets launched Operation Anadyr—the secret deployment of medium bombers, an entire regiment of mechanized infantry (60,000 troops), and ballistic nuclear missiles (MRBMs, IRBMs), as well as tactical nuclear weapons. The first shipments arrived in Cuba in late July.

In late August 1962, U-2 planes revealed the presence of the bombers but in mid-September, intelligence reports indicated there was no sign of any nuclear-headed missiles arriving in Cuba. As late as October 14, 1962, US officials publicly stated that there were no ground-to-ground missiles in Cuba, and further expressed disbelief that the two communist leaders would be so rash as to emplace offensive

missiles barely 90 miles off the US coast, especially after JFK had publicly warned Moscow about this a month before. The Soviets had repeatedly, both publicly and privately through trusted channels, reassured the Americans that all military equipment going to Cuba was strictly for defensive purposes and that no nuclear weapons would be sent.

While the US administration was solemnly telling its citizens that the Soviets were true to their word, and even as the Soviets were making solemn pronouncements to that same effect, Khrushchev had secretly moved to install not one, but two types of nuclear weapons in Cuba. By the time of detection, the Soviets had managed to move 42 bombers (IL-28), 40 Mig-21 fighters, along with 24 launching pads, 42 IRBM rockets, and about 45 nuclear warheads. Unbeknownst to the US, and not publicly revealed until the early 1990s, by the time the US discovered the ploy and tried to deal with it, over 47,000 Soviet troops had arrived in Cuba and many of the missile sites were operational (although very few missiles had actually arrived).

4 How to React?

On October 16, Kennedy received the first U-2 photographs showing construction of the missile sites. The situation was precarious but instead of reacting publicly immediately, JFK created a small select group of high-ranking officials, the Executive Committee (EXCOM), that began around-the-clock meetings to discuss how to deal with the issue. The major alternatives were as follows:

- Do nothing. Although the military advisers were united in their estimate that Soviet missiles in Cuba drastically altered the nuclear balance, McNamara was more sanguine and did not believe that the Soviets would be able to use them. He saw no need to remove them by force. The problem was that whereas Kennedy agreed in principle, his public drawing of the line against nukes in Cuba made it impossible to allow it, certainly not after the Soviets had lied about it. This was abandoned almost immediately as an alternative.

- Ground invasion. The military advocated invading the island, removing the threat before the missiles became operational, and toppling Castro's regime in the process. While almost certain to succeed, this drastic escalation was dangerous because it could provoke Soviet retaliation, if not in Cuba, then perhaps in Berlin. Initiating such a large military action without an attempt to resolve the crisis would also be problematic with the allies in Europe. This option remained in reserve, a fall-back position if other alternatives failed. It would be crucial in forcing the Soviets to remove the bombers and missiles already in Cuba (which could not be done with passive means).

- Air strike. Some military advisers also advocated an air strike to remove the installations before the missiles became operational. The problem was that in order to guarantee the destruction of all targets, such a strike would have to be massive. Not only would the Air Force have to hit all sites numerous times, but they had to destroy the SAM sites to ensure the safety of the pilots, and all of this amounted to a rather impressive use of firepower. This seemed to have all the disadvantages of a ground invasion without the high probability of success, and without the additional benefits of Castro's fall. It would, however, be less costly to execute.

- Surgical air strike. Dissatisfied with this massive option, Kennedy asked and got a limited one. These air strikes would take out the sites with precision bombing and would avoid expanding the attack. The problem is that the probability of success drastically declined, the likelihood of American casualties climbed, and it was seen as impractical because the Air Force could not promise the destruction of all sites with sufficient confidence.

- Naval quarantine. (A blockade would be an act of war under international law.) The U.S. Navy would blockade the island, search all incoming ships it deems necessary to inspect, and seize any offensive weapons it finds. This would be a moderate escalatory step, better than doing nothing, and not as risky as an all-out strike. It would shift the onus of escalation back to the Soviets who would have to decide whether to challenge the blockade and risk further escalation. It would also give policy-makers some time to work out a diplomatic solution before resorting to violence. The drawback was that the Soviets could use this time to complete their installations (the U.S. did not know that some sites were already operational). This option also could not deal with the equipment already in Cuba: even if the Soviets did not challenge the blockade, they could still proceed with their activities with what was already in Cuba.

After six days of deliberations, the ExCom converged on a combination of an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of all offensive weapons from Cuba and the imposition of quarantine. In addition, plans for ground invasion continued on the assumption that if the threat failed, the U.S. would have to go in and remove the equipment already in Cuba. At 7p.m. on October 22, President Kennedy went on public T.V., and broadcast to the American people what the administration had known for a week: The Soviets were building bases in Cuba "to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western hemisphere." Kennedy listed all the lies of the Soviets and then announced that the US was imposing a strict quarantine (the word "blockade" was avoided as it would be an act of war) on "all offensive military equipment," which meant that the US would stop all incoming ships for inspection. The President also announced that the US forces were on full alert and that the

US would "regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union." He demanded that Khrushchev remove the offensive weapons under U.N. supervision. The worst nuclear crisis in history was on.

5 Escalation and Resolution

A terrified world watched as American and Soviet nuclear forces went on full alert. Soviet ships, some of which were known by CIA intelligence to be carrying nuclear missiles, were sailing full speed ahead toward Cuba and the American quarantine zone. The Soviets denounced Kennedy's blockade and vowed that if the Americans attempted to board any Soviet ship, the Russians would fight.

For three days tensions escalated as the world seemed to march toward the brink of nuclear disaster. The Americans boarded one ship that they were reasonably confident did not carry weapons, and it submitted to inspection. After not finding anything objectionable, the Americans allowed it to proceed. Another ship (a Swedish ship hired by the Russians), however, defied the blockade and the Americans let it go. To the Soviets the blockade appeared shaky: would the Americans actually stop the ships with the offending cargo? The Americans were also tense: would Khrushchev gamble to probe the blockade? The Soviets and the Americans stood face to face, bristling with nuclear weapons…

And then the Soviets blinked. Their ships began to turn around—there were not going to run the blockade. On October 26, the U.S. administration received a barely coherent letter from Khrushchev, in which the Soviet Premier offered to remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for a US pledge not to invade the island. Just when there appeared to be a break, the situation escalated again when the next day a Soviet officer in Cuba shot down a U-2 plane, killing its pilot. Shortly thereafter, a *public* message from Khrushchev arrived, It was stiffer than the letter, and it raised the stakes: in addition to the non-invasion pledge, the Soviets now demanded that the Americans dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. It made no reference to the U-2 incident.

Kennedy and his advisors were mystified: what did Turkey have to do with any of that? What were the Russians up to? Why were they transmitting in public formal demands in a tone so unlike the characteristically personal letter from Khrushchev? Was the Soviet Premier still in control in Moscow, or did some hardliners seize the power? If there was no coup, had the Premier gotten unhinged, could we trust him to behave rationally? Was the shooting down of the U-2 an act of escalation and a signal of Soviet resolve related to this new set of demands?

The military asked to be allowed to attack immediately. Kennedy refused, and after some deliberation the ExCom concluded that since the second message did

not mention the U-2 downing, it could have been unauthorized. (In fact, it was not authorized by Moscow and was entirely the local initiative by a Soviet commander.) Proceeding from that assumption and hoping that Khrushchev was still in power in Moscow, Kennedy accepted his brother's suggestion that they respond to the first letter with the non-invasion pledge and ignore the Jupiter proposal. It would signal that the U.S. is interested in resolving the crisis without violence but that it would not publicly agree to the concession.

The problem was that the second demand was made in public. Had the Russians privately asked for the removal of the Jupiters, Kennedy would have no doubt agreed. These missiles were obsolete, they were vulnerable to a Russian attack (making them tempting and therefore destabilizing), so they were being phased out in favor of SLBMs in the Mediterranean, and so this amounted to no concession whatsoever. On the other hand, withdrawing them under duress was another story altogether. It was costly politically, it would cause serious problems in NATO when the allies begin to doubt American resolve, and it might conceivably provoke the Turks to resist the removal. At any rate, the Turks could not be expected to agree without delicate and time-consuming negotiations, and time was running out. Kennedy was prepared to promise the removal of the Jupiters but under absolutely no circumstances would he allow the Russians to make the promise public. Thus much Robert Kennedy conveyed in his private meeting with the Soviet ambassador Dobrynin: if the Soviets publicized the promise, the White House would repudiate it, and the missiles would stay in Turkey. This eliminated the benefit for the Soviets—the only reason they had asked for the missiles to be removed from Turkey was to use such a promise in public to safe face now that the whole scheme had blown up in their faces.

The U.S. transmitted its official counter-offer through official channels without mentioning the Jupiters, and Dobrynin was told about the deal with those. Amid all the uncertainty, and with the feeling that time was running out for action before installations in Cuba went online, the ExCom, worn-down by the brutal physical and mental fatigue, began planning for invasion. The mobilization was underway, and there were already 200,000 troops in Florida. The date for a strike was set for October 30th.

Both sides were well-aware that such an attack would kill many Soviet soldiers, obliging the USSR to respond. They also knew that the Soviet SAM sites were operational and had orders to resists, which would doubtless cause serious losses among the assaulting Americans, dragging the US fully into a possible, which might conceivably escalate into a nuclear exchange. The U.S. had not realized how much more dangerous this action would be. The Russians had tactical nukes for coastal defenses and local commanders were planning a nuclear strike on Guantanamo base in case of an American attack. They Americans had no idea about the actual number of Soviet combat troops they would be confront, and whose destruction would surely require a very drastic escalatory response by Moscow. They also did not

know that some of the ballistic missile sites were operational and that the local commanders could launch missiles on their own (although Khrushchev had explicitly forbidden them to do so).

Khrushchev, on the other hand, knew all of this very well. The Soviets were the ones who were bearing the full brunt of escalation because they were the only ones aware of the actual risks. On the 28th, Khrushchev accepted Kennedy's offer.

This did not quite end the crisis. The deal had been made without consulting the Cubans. Khrushchev knew that if Castro got wind of the deal, he could refuse to relinquish control of the equipment and delay proceedings so much that a military confrontation would be impossible to avoid. This judgment was correct. When Castro found out that the Soviets were going to withdraw the offensive weapons (destroying the missile launch sites, removing the missiles and the bombers), he was furious. He refused to allow U.N. inspectors to monitor the dismantling. (The Russians helpfully displayed everything as they were loading the ships so that U-2s could photograph them as they fulfilled their end of the bargain.) US forces remained on full alert until November 20th, when Castro finally returned the bombers. However, since he refused to allow inspection, the US did not formally pledge not to invade Cuba.

On December 14, Kennedy wrote Khrushchev that the no-invasion pledge required both the final removal of all offensive weapons from Cuba and the assurance from the Cubans that they would not commit any aggressive acts against any nation of the Western hemisphere. This second requirement was a major loophole—it was so elastic that its interpretation could stretch wide enough to allow an invasion of Cuba should that was deemed necessary.

6 Aftermath

Thus, the US ended up without a commitment not to invade Cuba (although the Russians did try to save face by announcing that such a pledge had been made). The Soviets had suffered a tremendous setback. They had challenged the US directly and had been compelled to withdraw. A bitter Soviet official warned the Americans that the Soviet Union would never permit the US to do that to it again. Indeed, soon thereafter, the USSR, convinced that the reason for its humiliation was the absolute military dominance of the Americans, embarked on a crash program of military buildup.

By 1964, Khrushchev was out of power, removed in part for his failure in October 1962, but mostly because of controversial and unsuccessful domestic economic policies and the losing political struggle with Leonid Brezhnev, who favored large defense budgets and maintenance of equality, at least military, with the US. By the end of the decade, the Soviets had reached parity with the US. In 1969, the balance was fundamentally altered: 1,200 ICBMs for the Soviets versus 1,054 for the

US, 230 SLBMs for USSR versus 656 for the US, and 150 bombers for the USSR versus 540 for the US. The dire predictions of NSC-68 and the warnings of the people scared by the "missile gap" had come to pass. The second era of US military superiority was over and the age of "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) had arrived.

As terrified as the world was in October 1962, not even the policy-makers had realized how close to disaster the situation really was. Kennedy thought that the likelihood of nuclear war was 1 in 3, but the administration did not know many things. For example, it believed that none of the missiles were in Cuba yet, and that 2-3,000 of Soviet service personnel was in place. Accordingly, they planned the air strike for the 30th, before any nuclear warheads could be installed. In 1991-92, Soviet officials revealed that 42 IRBMs were in place and fully operational. These could obliterate US cities up to the Canadian border. These sites were guarded by 47,000 Soviet combat troops. Further, 9 MRBMs were ready to be used against the Americans in case of an invasion. The Soviets had tactical nuclear weapons that the local commanders were authorized to use to repel an attack. After he learned of this in 1992, a shaken McNamara told reporters, "This is horrifying. It meant that had a US invasion been carried out… there was a 99 percent probability that nuclear war would have been initiated."

The aftershocks of the near-miss rippled on. Both sides suddenly became fully aware just how perilous nuclear brinkmanship (diplomacy that relies on nuclear threats) really was. During the crisis itself there were several events that could have triggered uncontrollable escalation:

- The U-2 plane that was shot down over Cuba. The Soviet leaders had not authorized the action, and it could have promoted an escalatory step by the U.S. in the mistaken belief that they had.

- Another U-2 strayed into Soviet air space and was detected by the Russians who dispatched fighter to escort it out. The Americans scrambled interceptors to protect it but because of the alert, these fighters were armed with nuclear weapons. In the event, the U-2 safely returned to Alaska. The Russians could have thought that this was a last overflight preliminary to an American attack, and might have escalated if the American fighters had shot down Soviet planes, especially if this was done with nuclear weapons. It is worth remembering that arming the fighters with nukes was standard procedure when going on alert and nobody thought of this when the fighters were scrambled. As Kennedy famously said when he was told of this incident after the crisis, "There's always some son-of-a-bitch who doesn't get the word."

- A group of anti-Castro Cubans engaged in sabotage because the CIA had neglected to cancel their mission. This could be interpreted as preparation for a ground attack, depending on the target of sabotage.

- All but one of the ICBM rockets at Vandenberg Air Force base were armed with nuclear warheads when DEFCON 3 was ordered. The remaining Titan rocket was fired in the midst of the crisis (26th) over the Pacific on a routinely scheduled test. The Soviets, who knew that the base was a test site, would have been monitoring it closely, and would also know that the missiles there might be carrying nuclear weapons. They might have been prompted to escalate when they detected the launch in the mistaken belief that it was authorized by Kennedy.

- On the 28th, North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) received a frantic warning from Moorestown radar warning site that a nuclear missile launch from Cuba was detected, and that it was apparently going for Tampa, Florida. When the explosion failed to materialize, an inquiry revealed that a radio operator had inadvertently put a simulation tape in the computer, and the control room observes who did not know about any of that mistook the simulated attack for the real deal. The Americans could have reacted without waiting to see if Tampa was going to be obliterated.

- NORAD received a second warning in the evening on the same day, this time about two possible missiles over Georgia. NORAD falsely believed the warning had come from the reliable Moorestown but in fact it came from Laredo where the radar warning site had just gone online and the operators had mistaken an orbiting satellite for missiles. Before NORAD could take action, the failure of expected detonations to materialize revealed that the warning was likely a false alarm.

- At Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana, after the DEFCON-2 orders on the 24th, Minuteman-1 missiles had to be prepared for operation. To speed up the process, many safety checks were neglected (or deliberately circumvented). There were no armed guards when one missile silo was ready on the 26th, and the launch equipment and codes were in the silo itself. It was possible for a single person to launch a missile without authorization. There are rumors that the officers in charge might have done this on purpose, to ensure that they could operate the missiles should communications with Washington break down.

As the threat that leaves something to chance logic would suggest, escalation really involves serious risks of random events that could be misinterpreted and cause the next escalatory step. Both sides now moved cautiously to prevent similar crises from occurring in the future. One long-lasting effect of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that the Soviets never rattled rockets over Berlin. In fact, their European policy never really flared up over that city again.

As Kennedy's prestige rose, that of Khrushchev declined. The Sino-Soviet spit widened. The Chinese thought the Russians were stupid for putting the missiles

into Cuba, and cowardly for removing them. Continuing to believe America to be a "paper tiger," they ridiculed the less militant Soviet policy. Characteristically, Khrushchev said this attitude was "dung."

In Europe, the crisis had somewhat unexpected effects. Just as the Soviets ignored the Cubans in their dealings with the US, so did the Americans ignore their NATO allies. The French in particular were first appalled when Kennedy offered to negotiate bilaterally with Khrushchev over Berlin in August 1961, and were now angered that the US had sent Acheson to Paris to "inform," not to "consult," as French President de Gaulle put it, the French on the crisis. Although France fully supported the US in this episode, de Gaulle became convinced that the US would involve his country in a nuclear war without even consulting them beforehand. Seeking to curb the power of the Atlantic bloc of the US and Britain, he vetoed Britain's entry into the European Common Market, sped up development of independent French nuclear program, and eventually withdrew France from NATO. De Gaulle feared unchecked American power, which he thought the US might use irresponsibly and unilaterally, causing the French to suffer annihilation without representation.

7 Comments

The conventional wisdom has it that it was a game of chicken, where the U.S. and the USSR went "eyeball to eyeball," and the Soviets "blinked first." In this version, the Americans compel the Russians to back down through a display of their strength, resolve, and determination. But the reality appears to be somewhat different.

First, the Russians had precipitated the crisis unknowingly in the sense that they had underestimated how the U.S. would react to their missiles in Cuba. Their secretive action was not a challenge but an attempt to correct the enormous disparity in power that the U.S. enjoyed in strategic nuclear capability. In an important way, this was the Russians' attempt to force Washington to take the USSR seriously as an equal, to force a departure from the consistent U.S. insistence on dealing with the Soviets from a position of strength. (You should recall that the May 1, 1958 U-2 incident incensed Khrushchev mostly because he interpreted it as a brazen reminder of such humiliating American attitude.)

Second, their (and Cubans') fears of possible invasion seem to have been quite justified given U.S. hostile behavior. Their attempt to place nuclear forces in Cuba was a possible solution to a problem that the conventional forces were unlikely to help solve. As the Soviets put it, "aggressive actions of the United States against Cuba led to a most serious crisis in international relations." It would have worked too, had the Soviets succeeded with their *fait accompli* tactic. They would have announced the presence of missiles in November, then concluded a defense treaty with Cuba that would allow them to create a full-fledged military base there (Castro

had previously refused to allow such a base fearing that it would provoke an American attack), and then perhaps blackmail Kennedy, whose political capital would be nearly depleted after such a humiliation, into concessions over Berlin.

Third, the Russians backed down because Khrushchev realized before the Americans that the crisis was spiraling out of control, and that a military confrontation was very likely. Government actions could have unintended consequences, and there were instances of events that were interpreted as signals when in fact the leadership was not aware of them. More importantly, Khrushchev knew (and Kennedy did not) that the Russians had tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba, and that local commanders were authorized to use them for defense. In the end, not knowing proved an advantage for the Americans who extracted bargaining leverage from their opponent who knew just how fragile the situation really was.

The crisis provides a good illustration of the various tactics we have discussed that rational players could use to credibly threaten use of force in the shadow of nuclear weapons.

To begin with, the Kennedy administration, while eschewing inaction, resolved on the least-provocative option that was available. They relinquished initiative to the Russians by setting up a naval blockade that the Soviets would have to deliberately choose to break. This shifted the onus of escalation to the Soviets: the next step in the escalation ladder was up to the Russians. They could, of course, decide to let the Americans board their ships, but that would reveal the nuclear warheads. This would have been an intolerable security risk, and there is little doubt that the Russian sailors would defended against it.

Although the Soviets decided against running the blockade, the crisis was not over. They still had their installations in Cuba that the Americans worried about. A wait-and-see tactic like the blockade would not work here. The U.S. needed a genuine escalation that was still short of a direct military confrontation. Most often, the rest of the crisis is depicted in terms of the threat that leaves something to chance: both sides testing each other's resolve.

But reality seems a bit different. Rather than coolly relying on a strategy that deliberately escalated risks of unintended and undesired consequences, both sides seemed genuinely frightened at the prospect of such events. They do not seem to have tried to use nuclear threats for political ends. They did implicitly threaten that things could get out of control into disaster, but they did the best they could to retain as much control as possible anyway.

Despite the urging of the General Staff, Kennedy resisted either air strikes or an outright invasion. At least, he resisted them for a while, enough to give diplomacy some chance to work. But of course, diplomacy could only work if enough pressure was brought to bear on the Soviets. As American preparations for invasion got underway in Florida, the pressure became unbearable for Khrushchev, who suddenly became aware that the Americans were preparing for an action that would really trigger a nuclear war without even knowing it.

At this point, he would have been served best by disclosing that Moscow really had almost no control of the nuclear weapons that had no fail-safe devices. This would have placed the ball back into American hands and, if the revelation were credible, would have probably prevented the invasion planned for the 30th. However, Khrushchev really had no way of revealing this knowledge in any credible way even if he wanted to, and he did not. He was looking for a way out. The likelihood that the U.S. would discount this as another tactic and a bluff was too great, and there was no time to even try it. In the end, the Russians backed down because they had a better idea of the risks involved in further escalation.

The Russians were not testing the American's resolve: it is stupid to test the resolve of someone who does not know what he is risking. Rather, they were hoping until the very last for some development that would help them get out of the situation and save some face. It is not surprising that they seized on the Jupiter trade and the no-invasion pledge. Khrushchev could pretend to the hardliners that he had compelled concessions from the U.S. (even if he could not make these public), and he could tell the world that the USSR, despite withdrawing, had managed to secure Cuba's independence.

Both of these face-saving tricks proved futile. Neither the world nor the Cubans were fooled by the outcome: the USSR had abandoned their defense. Nor were the Soviet hardliners. But they had learned a lesson: the U.S. could only be dealt with from a position of strength. When Khrushchev was removed from power, the Soviets began a rapid build up designed to propel the USSR toward military parity with the United States.