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TO THE ATOMIC PRECIPICE AND BACK: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS AND LESSONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The events that occurred leading to the crisis and during the crisis were critically analyzed and the role of the chief players looked at closely. The article concludes that the Cuban missile crisis, its resolution, and lessons learnt from it, are the only pointers that the world has as to how to deal with tension and conflicts among nations with nuclear capability and between nuclear powers in the Twenty-First Century.

Keywords: Cuba; Missile Crisis; USA; USSR

INTRODUCTION

The Twentieth Century ended with few nations of the world possessing enough nuclear weapons in their arsenals to destroy all human life several times over. Although atomic bombs have been dropped so far only once by the US on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when it alone had the capability to deliver the horrendous force of destruction, the former USSR also developed its atomic capability shortly afterwards. Rivalry, suspicion, and direct and indirect confrontation characterized the postwar relation between the US and the USSR that culminated in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, a critical development in what came to known as the Cold War. This paper sets out to examine the crisis in the face of new information that has become available taking into account earlier analyses and their interpretations of the crisis. The events that occurred leading to the crisis and during the crisis are to be critically analyzed and the role of the chief players looked at closely. The new information available will be analyzed in the context of the lessons that had been learnt.

United States-Cuban relations and Castro's rise to power were in part the root of the missile crisis, just as America's inability to promote a successful evolution and development of a democratic system in Cuba was. US policy in Cuba from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Dwight D. Eisenhower emphasized order instead of freedom or independence. The indirect control America had over Batista's dictatorial military regime characterized by corruption, internal dissent, and repression brought disfavor among Cubans against America (Brune 1983). Fidel Castro, after four years of guerrilla warfare, from 1955 to 1959 and unassisted by the Eisenhower administration, came to power in Cuba. Unlike many previous Latin American dictators who relied on American assistance, Castro gradually turned to the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev welcomed Castro with open arms and, in December 1961, Castro announced his communist beliefs. Between 1959 and 1961, Castro became closely associated with the Soviet Union who sent him military and economic aid. Khrushchev, on July 11, 1960, threatened America with a nuclear attack if it militarily intervened in Cuba (Brune, 1983). J. F. Kennedy's presidency began in 1960 under this threat and with the assumption in America that a "missile gap" existed between the US and USSR that weighed heavily against the US, and that the Soviets would be able to launch a surprise nuclear attack with its new rocket technology as shown by the *Sputnik* (Brune 1983). The USSR had launched the first earth satellite, *Sputnik* that in its orbit regularly passed over the US. The anxiety in America was best expressed by President John F. Kennedy when he said, "The periphery of the free world will slowly be nibbled away. The balance of power will gradually shift against us." (Kennedy 1964).

CASTRO AND SOVIET MISSILES

The political rhetoric of the 1960 election as well as the ninety-five percent cut in Cuban sugar quota by the US escalated tensions between the two nations. Castro retaliated by nationalizing private firms, banks and sugar mills, all which had heavy American investment. The US answered the loss by placing a total embargo on Cuba just as rumors were circulating that the US was going to invade it. Castro got several tons of military hardware and advisors from the Soviets and a promise from Khrushchev to use Soviet rockets to protect Cuban sovereignty. The rumors of an invasion of Cuba became a reality in April 1961 when a group of American trained Cuban exiles landed in the Bay of Pigs. Castro's forces killed and captured the rest of the exiles and the expected revolt within Cuba, according to the CIA, never materialized. The tension and division between the US and Cuba became irreversible and irreparable, while the "friendship" between Khrushchev and Castro was strengthened and Soviet military and economic aid to Cuba increased tremendously (Brune 1985, Nathan 1992). Castro urged Moscow not only to augment Cuba's conventional weaponry but also to make explicit Khrushchev's statement that he would use ICBMs, intercontinental ballistic missiles, if necessary, to deter or defeat any American attack. Kennedy's reaction to this development is contained in his speech at a meeting he had with news editors on April 20, 1961. "I want it clearly understood that this government will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations to ensure the nation's security" (Brune 1985, 28).

Although there was no US complaint throughout 1961 as the Soviets supplied Cuba with conventional weapons, when in 1962 the Soviet Presidium decided to place medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM) and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) in Cuba, a challenge was thrown to America's position in the Western Hemisphere. Through September 1962, Senator Kenneth Keating of New York and other Republicans from the opposition party in Congress urged Kennedy to act vigorously and lambasted him for failure to counteract the Soviet military build-up in Cuba (Medland 1988). On September 2, Senator Strom Thurmond urged that the US invade Cuba and destroy Castro's regime after Cuban exiles shelled Miramar, a Havana suburb. As the tension escalated in October, a Joint Congressional Resolution was signed on October 4 sanctioning the use of US forces, if necessary, to defend the Western Hemisphere from aggression or subversion by Cuba. The resolution also pledged American collaboration with the Organization of American States, OAS, and "freedom-loving Cubans" to obtain self-determination (Brune 1985). While through September Kennedy assured the American public and also warned the USSR, he used, on the other hand contacts with the Soviets in attempts to lessen tensions with the Kremlin and asked congressional authority to call 15,000 reserves.

In October more surveillance photographs showed an escalated Soviet build-up in Cuba indicating that Khrushchev had expanded his challenge to the US in the Western Hemisphere (C.I.A. 1994). The urgency of the situation was magnified by the capability of the IRBMs and MRBMs from the sites under construction. They were capable of striking targets in the US and Latin America within ten minutes and were, therefore, considered by the US as offensive (Brune 1985, Nathan 1992, C.I.A. 1994). The Soviet missiles in Cuba constituted both a national and personal test to Kennedy. He told Americans that the "secret, swift, and extraordinary decision" to base strategic missiles for the first time outside Soviet soil "is a deliberately provocation and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country if our courage and our commitments are to be trusted again by friend or foe." (Nathan 1992, 12-13) The missiles were offensive in that in the "bean counting" of the number of missiles capable of reaching the US or the USSR within 12 to 16 minutes, the USSR had made a "psychologically" offensive move (Nathan 1992). The Cuban missiles severely eroded the possibility of an unanswered US first strike against the Soviets, thus giving the Soviets back some of the leverage they had lost when the missile gap had been revealed as a myth (Nathan 1992). On the Soviet side, there was pressure on Khrushchev to act in the face of Castro's appeal for help after the Bay of Big invasion and US posturing in the form military maneuvers and economic boycott of Cuba.

AMERICAN RESPONSE

Kennedy began to search for an appropriate response and put together a "Think Tank" that later became the ExCom, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (Medland 1988). The ExCOM initially favored a US air strike to destroy the Soviet missile bases in Cuba. Members of the ExCom felt Khrushchev had two likely motives: first to enhance Soviet strategic strength and second to trade Cuban missile bases for Soviet advantages in Berlin or for US missile bases in Turkey or elsewhere. Secretary of State McNamara contended that a missile launch from Cuba or from the USSR had the same strength when it strikes a target in America.

The final decision reached by JFK after considering all the options, of which there were very few, on October 18, was to enforce a naval blockade with the principal advantage that it was an initial response that could be followed by stronger military action if Khrushchev did not remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba.¹ On October 22, final plans were set up for the blockade and response if it failed: 200,00 troops were moved to Florida in case of a Cuban invasion; B-52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command were dispersed to airfields in Florida and the Southern States; 14,00 Air Force reserve pilots were called to be prepared to fly transport planes; the First Armored Division moved to Georgia from Texas and the navy deployed 180 ships to the Caribbeans and to the US defense base in Guantanamo (Brune1985).

After this escalation, each side had reached the flash point. In his speech on October 22, Kennedy stated that the US could not surrender if “peace and freedom in the hemisphere and around the world was to be achieved.” (Medland 1988, 61) On October 23, the OAS, Organization of American States, voted to support the US quarantine because they were against the introduction of nuclear weapons in Latin America. Kennedy also sent a personal note to Khrushchev asking him to act prudently and not to “allow events to make the situation more difficult to control than it is.” (Medland 1988) By October 24, two Soviet ships reached the blockade and a Soviet submarine came to stand between them and the blockade, thus heightening the anxiety. The Defense Condition (DEFCON) 3 issued by the Commander-in-Chief, JFK, on 22 October was escalated to DEFCON 2 for the first time ever on October 24.² Fourteen other ships were on their way to Cuba stopped-dead at high seas. Khrushchev decided not to challenge the quarantine but continued the construction of the missile sites in Cuba as revealed by surveillance photographs. The US navy boarded selected Soviet ships to check for weapons without any resistance from the Soviets. The presence of Soviet submarines, however, tightens the knot of the tension. While letters were exchanged by the heads of state, Khrushchev made accusations and issued threats. In the UN, verbal battles were fought by both sides. On October 25, during the UN Security Council session, the Soviets refused to deny or confirm the presence of their missiles in Cuba. The Soviet ambassador, Valerian Zorin’s answer to the question by the American ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, as to the presence of the missiles was “I am not in an American court of law.”³ Stevenson then showed the surveillance photographs to confirm the presence. Zorin vetoed the United Nations resolution against USSR’s actions in Cuba.

THE NUCLEAR PRECIPICE

As both sides did not backdown, on October 26, the US military response became imminent, and time was running out for Cuba and the rest of the world. The tension that had been building for years as seen in Berlin in 1961 (Nathan 2001), through months of anxiety, had turned into weeks of international and national taunt nerves, and then came down to days, hours and minutes before doomsday. At 6 p.m., a ten-page letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy stalled the first nuclear explosion and the beginning of a nuclear war. Khrushchev's letter emotionally described the death, destruction and anarchy which nuclear war would bring and that if war began “it would not be in our power to stop it, for such is the logic of war.” (Brune 1985, 65, World Affairs 144 1981, 110-125, Foreign Relations of the United States 1996, Doc.84).

He added:

If the assurance were given by the President and the Government of the United States that the U. S. A. itself would not participate in an attack on Cuba and would restrain others from actions of this sort, if you would recall your fleet, this would immediately change everything . . . (World Affairs 144 1981, 110-125, Foreign Relations of the United States 1996, Doc.84).

Khrushchev's letter indicated that he wanted to backdown but only if JFK's actions were in the same direction (World Affairs 144 1981). But on Saturday, October 27, the situation returned to a near disaster when Khrushchev sent a second letter to Kennedy demanding the remove of Juniper missiles from Turkey if the missiles in Cuba were to be removed by the Soviets. The game of nuclear nerves had reached the brinks. Kennedy did not unleash an air attack on Cuba. John Scherer in his analysis of the US position argued that America was not prepared to remove its intermediate range Jupiter missiles from Turkey in addition to pledging not to invade Cuba. The JFK and ExCom were not ready to remove the missiles from Turkey under duress. Barton J. Bernstein also argued that the missiles were part of the US’s strategic deterrence program. Khrushchev and the Soviet Presidium, however, considered the Juniper missiles as offensive. Earlier protests against their placement in Turkey were virtually ignored. By early 1962, it had become clear to the Soviets that they were at great disadvantage in deliverable strategic weapons. The 15 Juniper missiles worsened their already terrible situation because the balance of strategic weaponry was probably about 9 to 1 in the favor of America. The US had over 100 ICBMs and the Soviet probably about twelve (Nathan 1992).

This was the nature of the missile "bean count" when the near disaster situation was made worse on that day when an American U-2 surveillance plane flying over Cuba was shot down (Nathan 1992). The countdown to the apocalyptic disaster of nuclear war had by then come down to minutes as the world hanged on the edge of an atomic precipice. JFK and the ExCom expected the worst and were ready to immediately retaliate by knocking out a Russian SAM base in Cuba. JFK asked for the air strike to be delayed till the next day instead of the automatic retaliation order of the Air Force, thus stopping the first shots of a nuclear war by minutes. In fact, in the afternoon of October 27 airplanes out of Florida had taken off for the island.⁴ Robert Smith Thompson (1992) examined the situation and argued that if JFK had ordered the air strikes Khrushchev could have ordered missiles launched since he was in the commanding position. JFK had stopped the first shots of a nuclear war by seconds. He sent a message to Khrushchev demanding that the USSR remove its offensive weapons from Cuba and that the crisis must be settled or war would result. Robert Kennedy, who delivered the brother's letter to the Soviet ambassador, orally pledged that the US would not invade Cuba, that the Turkish missiles would be removed but not under duress. He delivered an ultimatum warning that Khrushchev's response letter must be made the next day or hostilities would take place.

The next day, October 28, Khrushchev blinked. He replied accepting Kennedy's deal to remove Russian missiles in exchange for a promise from the US not to invade Cuba. The removal of the missiles would be under UN supervision. He added:

I regard with respect and trust the statement you made in your message of 27 October 1962 that there would be no attack, no invasion of Cuba, and not only on the part of the United States, but also on the part of other nations of the Western Hemisphere, as you said in your message. Then the motives which induced us to render assistance of such kind to Cuba would disappear." (US Department Bulletin 69 1973, 649)

Kennedy responded that "the solution of the Cuban crisis permitted the governments of the world to give attention to ending the arms race and reducing tensions." (US Department Bulletin 69 1973, 652) Fidel Castro was angry at Khrushchev's decision to remove the Russian missile bases from Cuba and refused to allow the UN Secretary General, U Thant and the UN technicians to enter Cuba to supervise the removal. He also refused to accept the Red Cross as the inspector of the removal. US continuous U-2 surveillance, however, confirmed the removal. Another point of disagreement was the IL-28 bombers that Castro claimed were a gift from the USSR to the Cuban people. The "November crisis" which occurred in Cuba was very tough on the Soviets and Cubans (Blight 1990). Kennedy pressured for their removal because they were offensive weapons. Khrushchev's special envoy to Cuba, Anastas Mikoyan, convinced Castro to allow them to be dismantled. The US quarantine ended on November 20, 1962, and the Soviets finished removing the forty-two IL-28 bombers by December 6, 1962. The Cuban missile crisis had ended with both Kennedy and Khrushchev claiming "victory."⁵ Khrushchev wrote in his memoir, *Khrushchev Remembers* (1970): We achieve, I would say, a spectacular success without having to fire a single shot.

LESSONS LEARNT

Analysis of the crisis with the new information available after the fall of the USSR presents new insights into it and points to lessons learnt by both sides. The new information allows for analysis from both sides of the issues as they affected the US and the USSR as well as Cuba. Perhaps the most basic realization was that the crisis should not have occurred in the first place if there were open discussions and communication between the US and the USSR. At the heads of state level, the immediate result was the establishment of a telephone hot-line between Washington and Moscow, between the President of the United States of America and the Premier of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, since communication during the crisis had to be conducted through embassies (Garthoff 1989). Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a Special Assistant to President Kennedy, in his account in *A Thousand Days* (1965) that gave detail descriptions of the crises during Kennedy's administration, indicated that by the end of the Berlin crisis the national contest of nerves between the US and the USSR became personal between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Kennedy's words describing Khrushchev's modus operandi express the intensity of this development: "[That] son of a bitch doesn't pay attention to words, he has to see you move." (Schlesinger, 1965, 370) An earlier meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna, Austria, in June 1960 exemplifies the lack of communication, the hardened stance of each leader and the personal character of the confrontations. Khrushchev said, "I want peace but if you want war, that is your problem." Kennedy retorted. "It is you, not I, who wants to force a change." (Schoenbaun 1988, 335) This is the backdrop of the conflicting personalities of the American and Russian leaders when the Cuban missile crisis, originally called the Caribbean crisis, occurred.

The lack of communication between the two leaders and its consequences was vividly expressed, as in the exchange between JFK and Khrushchev, and by Khrushchev's speech writer, Fyodor Burlatsky, who in an article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in 1987 arguing that he was almost hundred percent certain that if JFK had sent notification to Moscow, further escalation of the conflict would have been prevented and the conflict would have been resolved by diplomatic means. On the US domestic level, declassified CIA documents indicate that the government was not provided with early warning of hostile intentions and that the intelligence community failed to get across to the government officials the most accurate picture of Soviet capability in Cuba, thus depriving the policy makers of time to plan their strategy. In the end the intelligence indicators present in Cuba were not communicated to the President who had the final say (Lebow 1987). It was also realized that the manner in which intelligence indicators were handled in the Cuban crisis was the most serious flaw in American intelligence system and if left uncorrected could lead to the gravest consequences (C.I.A. 1994). In the age of supersonic intercontinental ballistic missiles, an internal national and/or international communication gap or delayed message could have catastrophic repercussions.

The Cuban missile crisis looked at in the context of the above-mentioned realization influenced subsequent American thinking about its national security. It confirmed and crystallized the ideas and lessons about crisis management. One of the important tenets of crisis management that became evident was that "resolve discourages aggression and accommodation invites it." (Lebow and Stein 1994) An earlier crisis situation in Berlin pointed to a future and a more serious confrontation that might occur. When a year earlier, on October 21, 1961, American tanks faced Soviet tanks on the Friedrichstraße in Berlin, nearly muzzle to muzzle, Kennedy estimated the chances of a nuclear war at twenty percent (Schlesinger 1965). Kennedy's resolve was tested at the Vienna summit and by the construction of the Berlin Wall. It is alleged that he failed to demonstrate resolve in both cases, which was also exemplified by his self-imposed restraint at the Bay of Pigs (Lebow and Stein 1994). Even during the crisis Khrushchev tested his resolve by asking for the removal of US missiles in Turkey. If there were tests of JFK's resolve it may then be argued that Khrushchev saw Kennedy's accommodation as a weakness and went into Cuba, but when he showed unquestioned resolve Khrushchev withdrew the missiles from Cuba.

Historical interpretations of the crisis have been expressed in two diametrically opposed points of view. The writings of Theodore C. Sorensen (1965), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1965), and Elie Abel (1964) represent the traditional interpretation that view the crisis as an intolerable provocation, while those of I. F. Stone (1966), Ronald Steel (1969), Gary Wil (1982) and Baron J. Bernstein (Bulletin of Atomic Scientist 32 2,1976:12-21), the revisionist interpretation, condemn the marine blockade as irresponsible viewing the resolution of the crisis as the result of Soviet moderation and American luck. Traditionalist interpretation is in works written in the 1960s while the revisionist interpretation is in works mostly written in the 1970s and the 1980s. Traditionalists contend that Kennedy showed resolve while revisionists insist that Kennedy was neurotic with concern for his resolve, thus showing minimal cognizance of objective foreign policy need (Nathan 1992).

Soviet testimony from new information points to Kennedy's lack of understanding of Soviet foreign policy because Khrushchev's provocations were not driven by opportunity or because he disrespected Kennedy for his lack of resolve but rather because the Soviets feared the consequences of their strategic weakness. Kennedy's performance in Vienna, the Berlin Wall, and the Bay of Pigs was, therefore, not responsible for the USSR's placement of missiles in Cuba, but rather his deployment of missiles in Turkey, the strategic superiority he proclaimed and the political-military pressures he placed on Castro (Wil 1982). The explanation given for Kennedy's disposition to the Soviets was that the conceptual biases derived from the experience of the 1930s were applied in the post-WW II period with the assumption that Communist Russia like Nazi Germany was ideologically motivated and hell-bent on global domination. Soviet leaders, like Hitler, were thought of as being aggressive and alert to weak spots of their adversaries and ready to exploit all opportunities to extend influence and territorial control (Wil 1982). What has become clearer is that while revisionists wrongly dismissed the serious international implications of the missile deployment, the traditionalists also erred in disregarding their domestic political consequences because public outrage and the need to improve political prospects were consequential in Kennedy's actions (Wil 1982).

Some historians such as James G. Hersberg (Nathan 1992, Allyn, Blight and Welch 1989) argued that Kennedy under political pressure, even before mid-October when Soviet nuclear capable missiles were brought to Cuba, considered seriously conventional military action and if necessary a full-scale invasion. If the Soviets argued that their missiles in Cuba were to protect it from American invasion and intervention, was there factually a US plan to invade Cuba?

While the Soviets claim that their deployment of nuclear-tipped missiles to Cuba was intended to strengthen its defensive capability after the Bay of Pigs invasion with the understanding that another invasion was imminent; Americans explained that Kennedy did not support the use of US military force in the Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles and had absolutely no intention of invading Cuba. From these claims from both sides, one may draw the conclusion that there was a misperception on the part of the Cubans and the Soviets. Robert McNamara, the Secretary of State during Kennedy's Presidency and a member of the ExCom focused on that misperception in his explanation pointing to the fact that contingency plans to invade Cuba did not mean an action was imminent: All of our militaries - Soviet, Cuban and US - have contingency plans covering a wide range of contingencies. I'm afraid that in the US, our press has misunderstood the distinction between contingency and intent (Allyn, Blight and Welch 1989).

The Soviet leadership reacted to the press reports in the US of the contingency plans as intent, again pointing to the lack of communication on official levels between the two nations. The Soviet installation of missiles in Cuba was based on a misconception that was understandable and for which, according to McNamara, America was in part responsible. Recently declassified evidence pointed in the direction of intervention although they do not offer a definitive answer to the question of an imminent American invasion of Cuba. It has become clearer now that throughout the first ten months to the crisis American posturing suggested it, while on the administrative level, Kennedy had a secret program of covert operation against Cuba. The program coordinated with enhanced Pentagon contingency planning was to facilitate US military intervention to bring about Castro's downfall. (Nathan 1992).

Historians such as Raymond L. Garthoff in *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1987) and Graham T. Allison in *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1987) asserted that the US had no plans or intentions to invade Cuba. Both historians after seeing supporting documentation of such plans and intentions reversed the views expressed in the above-mentioned books (*Diplomatic History* 14 2, 1990:165). Both McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser and Robert S. McNamara, the then Secretary of Defense, were emphatic in their denial of any such plans or intentions which explains why historians, based on the information available before the declassification of the Pentagon documents, made such assertions. The most important of the documents is the one-hundred-and-seventy-six-page Pentagon postmortem of the crisis from the office of the commander in chief of U. S. Atlantic (CINCLANT) forces, Admiral Robert Lee Dennison, who was responsible for American military activities in the Caribbeans during the crisis. The CINCLANT Report recounted that there were two principal military options available during the weeks preceding the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba: air strike or invasion, or the first followed by the second. The report indicated that in September and early October 1962 military preparations were accelerated. The plans came into being after the disastrous failure of the Bay of Pigs landing. In July 1961 Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Joint Chief gave new directives to streamline contingency planning for Cuba. The new plan included an enlarged army and air force supporting CINCLANT Joint Task Force 122, which would carry out the Pentagon's two options. In late November Kennedy authorized the creation of Operation Mongoose, a top-secret covert action campaign to overthrow Castro's Communist regime (Wil 1982).

Evidence shows that there were plans and intentions to invade or intervene in Cuba, however, it cannot be argued that Khrushchev and the Soviet Presidium had knowledge of these top-secret plans and, therefore, reacted by deploying missiles to Cuba. One may, therefore, conclude that it was the Cuban and Soviet's reaction to the Kennedy administration's hostile rhetoric, its political and diplomatic efforts to isolate Cuba and especially the series of military maneuvers such as PHIBRIGLEX 62, Lantphibex 1-62, Quick Kick and Whip Lash that confirmed Cuban fears (Wil 1982). The Soviet intelligence analysts and the Presidium could not simply dismiss such maneuvers when Cuba asked for help in defending its sovereignty. General Igor D. Statsenko, who was in Cuba at the time of the crisis, explicitly stated that the US military exercises of Spring 1962 help trigger the Soviet missile deployment decision because it raised fears of an invasion (Wil 1982). He also claimed that "the Soviet strategic rockets stationed in Cuba did not give rise to, but on the contrary prevented the further dangerous development of the Caribbean crisis," thus deterring a conventional war and "saved revolutionary Cuba." (Wil 1982).

There are also questions arising concerning the role that the strategic nuclear balance played in the origin of the placement of missiles in Cuba and, therefore, the crisis. General Statsenko mentioned strategic rockets in his argument. If the missiles were strategic, what role did they play in the global arena of military competition and rivalry between the US and the USSR apart from protecting Cuba? The US had installed medium-range nuclear missiles across the Black Sea in Turkey, barely forty miles away from Soviet borders.

Khrushchev, felt if Americans have the right to put missiles on Soviet doorstep, they also have a comparable right. “Why not station Soviet medium-range missiles in Cuba?” (Nathan 1992) Raymond L. Garthoff, a Special Assistant of Political/Military Affairs in the State Department during the Kennedy administration, in his analysis of the situation asserts that Khrushchev had long rankled at what he regarded as American flaunting of its political and military superiority, and successful cultivation of a double standard. Khrushchev, therefore, felt that the Soviet Union should also be able to assert the prerogatives of a global power. After the Soviets had been riding an inflated world impression of Soviet missile strength during American self-flagellation over a “missile gap,” improved intelligence had persuaded the American leaders and the rest of the world that the *real* missile gap and a growing one, favored the United States (Nathan 1992). This realization had put pressure on Khrushchev, since he had personally overplayed the Soviet hand on missile superiority in other political contests. The Soviets, therefore, had find some way to overcome the growing superiority (Nathan 1992). Given these conditions Garthoff enumerated and explained, one may argue that when Castro asked Khrushchev for help after the Bay of Pigs invasion, he seized the opportunity supported by the Soviet military hierarchy, including the First Deputy Premier, Anastas Mikoyan and Marshall Sergei Birynzov. They all saw the stationing of medium-range missiles in Cuba as a step in redressing Soviet strategic inferiority in face of US superiority. Fyodor Burlatsky, one of Khrushchev’s speech writers and Sergo Mikoyan, the editor of *Latinskaya Amerika* and the son of First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, however, disagree on the importance of the Soviet need for strategic parity in the face of American military superiority (Diplomatic History 14 2, 1990:206). While Burlatsky stressed the strategic importance, Sergo Mikoyan put more emphasis on the protection of Cuba: I think that the first and most important reason to ship the missiles over was to defend Cuba. Other ideas certainly had a certain impact, but they were only secondary (Diplomatic History 14 2, 1990:206).

The question that arises from the disagreement is if Castro did not ask for missiles but for conventional arms, why then did the Soviets deploy strategic nuclear capable missiles? Aleksandr I. Alekseev, the Soviet ambassador to Cuba during the crisis, presenting the Soviet and Cuban sides as an eyewitness, explains Khrushchev’s actions as follows:

[Khrushchev] believed that we have every right to do it because Turkey had missiles, Italy had missiles. Why should the Soviet Union, which is a major power, not have them also? So it seemed that the Cuban comrades should accept it, although, I, for example, was not sure. I thought that Fidel Castro would not agree to such a proposition. But Fidel knew the circumstances with regard to the American better than we did. He (you know, to my surprise) agreed immediately. But he added that a sign of solidarity, that if it would really help world socialism, actually prevent the American threat not only to Cuba but also to other regions, other countries, then he was willing to accept the proposal . . . The American side experienced the shock. Khrushchev wanted very much to make them feel the same - to give them the same medicine which we were swallowing, having foreign missiles at our doorsteps.” (Allyn, Blight and Welch 1989)

Alekseev’s eyewitness account and explanation bring in another aspect of the crisis in respect to the global contest between the US and the USSR to influence politically and economically the then newly independent nations of Africa, the Latin American, and Asian countries, the so-called Third World.

Jorge Risquet, the Cuban Minister of Labor and Member of the Cuban Political Bureau, argues that the US had been using double standards in regards to the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine. When Argentina was attacked by a foreign power, the US helped Great Britain instead of Argentina during the Falkland crisis (Nathan 1992). The Senior Staff Member of the Central Committee of the Department of Liaison with Workers’ parties of Friendly Socialist Countries, Georgy Shakhnazarov’s claim that “to this day the Monroe Doctrine lies at the basis of this conception: not to allow any one at all to have access to America, never to allow weapons to be brought in” (Nathan 1992) seems to be confirmed by several analysts who argue that if Kennedy had fully supported the Bay of Pigs invasion and authorized full US air support, Castro would have been overthrown and the crisis would not have occurred.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing global development following the Cuban crisis, especially in Vietnam and Cambodia, one may argue that it was the outcome of the global competition between the US and the USSR, and that even if it did not occur in Cuba, it would have transpired somewhere else as was pointed to by the Berlin crisis. A nuclear missiles crisis was a crisis waiting to happen. In fact, the Cuban crisis forced the US and the USSR to develop a framework within which to deal with each other and gave, especially the US, the opportunity to also develop a crisis-management program (Etheredge 1991).

The Juniper missiles in Turkey were a very important aspect of the crisis in that their strategic importance to America and their offensive posture to the Soviets made them a bargaining issue in finding a resolution to the crisis. The question arises as to why Kennedy did not order their dismantling before they might become a public bargaining card in the crisis (Nathan 1992). Barton Bernstein's argument that Kennedy did not have time and that he was probably also tempted by the prospect of a future trade and unwilling to discard this extra card is plausible (Nathan 1992). This argument, however, strengthens the Soviet's stance in placing missiles in Cuba, a tit-for-tat situation, but also to protect a friendly nation just the US claimed it was protecting Turkey from Russian aggression. What has become clearer is that ExComm thought of a "defanging resolution" in which only nuclear powers should possess nuclear weapons, and that American and Russians would not place these systems in the territory of non-nuclear powers (Nathan 1992). Assistant Secretaries of State, Harlan Cleveland and W. Averell Harriman, endorsed this resolution arguing that it would compel the US to pull missiles out of Turkey and Italy, but not Britain, which was a nuclear power, and Russia would have to withdraw its missiles from Cuba, which was not a nuclear power (Nathan 1992). This resolution was given up. American alliance system, which rested on faith on its credibility, would be at risk if the Juniper missiles were involved in a trade-off as public as demanded by Khrushchev, or indirectly as suggested to the ExComm. The American credibility in the world as well as the strategic importance of the Juniper missiles, therefore, were the underlying factors in Kennedy's refusal to trade them off with Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Lester Brune in *The Missile Crisis of October 1962* (1985) explained that while most analysts have concluded that Khrushchev and Castro's contention that the missiles would protect Cuba from an American invasion or threat of invasion, they disagree on precise reasons for the Soviet Presidium's decision. Some agree on one general ideal that Khrushchev wanted to gain foreign policy access in one or all of the four areas in which he suffered setbacks between 1955 and 1962: Central Europe, China, Soviet nuclear weakness and Moscow's ability to lead revolutions in the Third World. Others agree that Khrushchev was testing Kennedy and America's will to respond to an aggressive Soviet move (Brune 1985).

After examining the new information available and the new analysis it generated, one may argue that each school of analysts points to only a part of the precise reasons for President Kennedy and the Soviet Presidium's decisions. Viewed in the light of new information, as can be found in Alekseev's eyewitness account, all the reasons given by the analysts, one, protection of Cuba from invasion, two, testing American policy, and three, sending message to nations all over the world of Soviet support, were taken into consideration when the Presidium made the decision to deploy nuclear missiles to Cuba. The third reason was reflected in Soviet foreign policy through the next three decades till the end of what President Ronald Reagan called the "Evil Empire." Soviet support of socialist regimes in Angola, Africa, in Afghanistan, Asia, and in Nicaragua, Latin America, shows the importance of the Cuban precedent and the relation between the USSR and the emerging Third World nations. The support of world socialism by the USSR and Cuba posed a constant threat to US interest and the results were proxy wars between the USSR and the US in these countries, some of which continued to be fought although the Soviet Union has been dismantled, bring to mind Khrushchev's statement, "it would not be in our power to stop it, for such is the logic of war." (Nathan 1992)

Several eyewitnesses of the Cuban Crisis, such as McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Adviser, and Walt W. Rostow, chief of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, claim that the missile crisis succeeded in moderating Soviet foreign policy by demonstrating American resolve. The noted deterrence theorist, Thomas Schelling, concluded, "I don't think the Cuban missile crisis should be repeated, but I do think it was a good crisis." (Nathan 1992). While they may be right in seeing Cuban missile crisis as an important turning point in Soviet-American relations, the evidence disagrees with the underlying assertion that the missile crisis was worth whatever risk of war it entailed. Khrushchev was not motivated by the prospect of offensive gain or reacting to Kennedy's lack of resolve, but rather because he perceived the Soviet weakness and wanted to prevent loss. If there was only one Cuba crisis, it is because the origin of the crisis was in Khrushchev's desperation. He was ready to risk a challenge to the US because he believed the consequences of not acting would be more detrimental to Soviet strategic and foreign policy needs (Nathan 1992). It could be argued that Khrushchev's desperation and anger could have triggered a nuclear war. Perhaps as more information becomes available, especially from the former USSR, the picture of how close the world was to nuclear disaster would be further clearer. After reading the new information and their analyses, one is left with the impression that there are still more pieces of information missing. The Cuban side, especially Castro participation, is mostly reported through the Soviet perspective.

Information from Cuba and Cuban participants, official and unofficial, would make the full understanding of the crisis possible. From the former USSR the information has the tendency to be from the official Soviet perspective, thus blurring to a great extent the intensity of the personalities involved. Although eye-witness accounts may not be the most reliable sources, as exemplified in some cases in the US, they give insight into interpersonal relationships and the dynamics at work during the crisis which may help answer the question as to whether there could have been a nuclear war.

In final analysis, both the US and the former USSR realized, as evident in post-crisis studies, that they were not planning wars against each other and that the final responsibility for decisions on war or peace was left to the leaders, Premier Khrushchev, President Kennedy and, to a certain extent, President Castro. Khrushchev and Kennedy took cognizance of that and JFK's words, according to the brother, Robert Kennedy, also state that: It isn't the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth and the fifth step - and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so." (Brune 1985) The nuclear holocaust was averted only because both leaders understood that there would have been no turning back after the first bomb exploded.

The Twentieth Century ended with the proliferation of nuclear weapons in other nations after the death of the Soviet Union raising questions as to how to deal with them. China has a huge nuclear arsenal, not to mention those still in the hands of the fragmented republics of the former USSR. In the 1990s, the new republics born after the fall of the USSR promised to dismantle and destroy nuclear bombs in their possession but have not done so. In 1994, North Korea agreed to terminate its nuclear program, but there are worries that the nuclear program continues. In 1998, India and Pakistan each exploded nuclear devices increasing the number of countries capable of mutually destroying themselves and the world. The tension between these two neighboring countries over the Kashmir, a region that bestrides their borders, that had been simmering for decades flared up into open armed conflict. Each has the nuclear capability to reek horrendous nuclear destruction of the region. That mutual self-destructive force may be considered to be the greatest deterrent since there would be no victor if the conflict spirals down the nuclear abyss in that a nuclear explosion in the region would be like two antagonists locked up in a room throwing dynamites at each other. Other nations are projected to obtain nuclear weapons: It is only a matter of time before rogue nations such as Iraq and Libya obtain the means to threaten American cities with ballistic missiles armed with chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons. Once they do, the results could prove to be disastrous (USA Today May 1997: 14). The United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China are nuclear powers, the world's major arms suppliers, and therefore the source of technology and materials that are at the core of nuclear proliferation (Newsweek June 22, 1992: 46); a proliferation that can only lead to disaster for all humanity.

The first major incident involving two nuclear powers in the Twenty First century began in April 2001, when a Chinese fighter pilot went down into a watery grave with his plane after a collision with an American reconnaissance plane in the skies above international waters of the Pacific Ocean. Pilot and crew on the American plane were forced to land on the Chinese Hainan Island and were later released by authorities, while the reconnaissance plane remained in Chinese hands. How both nations deal with the incident would determine the direction of nuclear arms politics, since both superpowers have enough arms to destroy the world. Decades of America's support for Taiwan, an island off the coast of China that the Chinese claims, and the desire to arm the island despite China's protestations further heighten the tension. Taiwan could become China's "Cuba." The reconnaissance plane incident between the US and China recalls the American spy-plane incident in which an American reconnaissance plane was shot down from the Soviet sky in May 1960 (Gaddis 1987, Nathan 2001). While America has the "Cold War" experience from the superpower game it played with the former USSR, China had never endured and learnt from a hairspring nuclear nerve tester with the intensity of the Cuba missiles crisis. Henry Kissinger advises an approach in the reconnaissance plane incident between the US and China that moves "the issue to a level of human compassion and practical resolution" and adds "...the crisis may turn out to lay the basis for a new, mature and above all stable relation." (Newsweek, April 16, 2001: 37)

The huge stock pile of nuclear arms in unstable political, economic, and social conditions in the new republics of the former USSR, the nuclear sable rattling between India and Pakistan, the tension in Sino-American relations as a result of the reconnaissance plane incident as well as American arms for Taiwanese defense policy, and the ever-increasing nuclear capabilities of several other nations are indicative of the unpredictable nature of future developments and the reactions of nations with nuclear arms when internal pressures and aggressive military leaderships push them towards the flexing of their nuclear muscles.

Countries far away from the fray get drawn into it inevitably as exemplified in the decision of the African nations, Senegal and Guinea specifically, when they refused to allow Soviet planes to refuel in Dakar and Conakry respectively in 1962 (Kennedy 1971, May and Zelikow, 1997, Nathan 2001). It is all humanity that is at stake and Robert Kennedy most eloquently expressed it when he wrote:

But the great tragedy was that, if we erred, not only for ourselves, our futures, our hopes, and our country, but for the lives, futures, hopes, and countries of those who had never been given any opportunity to play a role, to vote aye or nay, to make themselves felt. (Kennedy 1971, 84)

It would be even more precarious when external pressures and tensions force these nations to fight against what they may perceive as encroachment on their sovereignty. In the present, expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Eastern Europe, as well as Finland's bid to join the organization, has remnant of the Soviet Union, now the Russian Republic, issuing bellicose pronouncements that could not be ignored because Russia, a nuclear power, invaded Ukraine, and it is at war in the region. In the waters surrounding Taiwan next to China, like Cuba not far from American shores, American and Chinese warships often pass by helm to helm and stare down at each other with their nuclear arsenal in silos in home countries. The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, its resolution, and lessons learnt from it, are the only pointers that the world has as to how to deal with tension and conflicts among nations with nuclear capabilities and between nuclear powers in the Twenty-First Century.

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¹The ExCom came up with four possible responses: 1) do nothing, 2) initiate diplomatic action, 3) bomb or invade Cuba, and 4) implement a blockade. JFK issued three directives which had the effect of: 1) an increase of low-level intelligence flights over Cuba, 2) an intensive survey of all possible courses of action, and 3) strict secrecy on the part of all until US response could be announced. (Medland 1988, 4)

²DEFCON 2 means further and unprecedented intensification of combat readiness measures: armed airborne B-52 bombers, ICBM launchers being checked out or being prepared for launching. (Garthoff 1989, 6)

³Stevenson continued: You are in the court of world opinion . . . I am prepared to wait until hell freezes over if that's your decision. And I am also prepared to present evidence in this room - now. Zorin replied that Stevenson should continue with his statement and that he would have his answer in due course. To this Stevenson retorted: I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over . . . (Stevenson 1979, 331)

⁴Four days earlier, on October 23 JFK and the ExCom agreed that in the event of a U-2 downing there should be an immediate retaliation destroying the missile site involved. Robert Kennedy's memoir states "[There] was almost unanimous agreement that we had to attack early the next morning . . . and destroy the sites." (Kennedy 1969,

⁵The negotiation to remove the missiles involved Mikoyan, Castro, and the Soviet Ambassador in Cuba, Aleksander Alekseev, and Vasily Kuznetsov, John McCloy and Adlai Stevenson in New York. Castro prevailed but in the end he could only stop the inspection of the missile sites and reconnaissance flight over Cuba. American inspection of Soviet ships for dismantled missiles and planes was done in international waters. (Blight 1990, 21-22)