



REFLECTIONS ON THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS IN THE CONTEXT OF STRATEGIC STABILITY

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DISCUSSION PAPER · SEPTEMBER 2012

TRENCH

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Working Draft



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Discussion Paper #2012 – 12

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Cover image: This is an aerial reconnaissance photo of the San Cristobal medium range ballistic missile site No. 3 in Cuba taken during the Cuban missile crisis. The shows the site at its maximum readiness on October 27, 1962, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. (AP Photo/U.S. Defense Department)

Layout by Courtney Anderson

ABSTRACT

In this discussion paper Andrei Kokoshin, member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and sixth secretary of the Russian Security Council, offers a concise discussion of the essence of the most dangerous nuclear crisis in the history of humankind.

Unlike other Russian publications on this topic, this paper explores the Cuban missile crisis in the context of the evolution of strategic stability in relations between Russia and the United States from the 1960s to the present. Among other things, the author pays attention to lessons that can be drawn from the Cuban crisis for the effective management of international crises. The author discloses a number of little-known but important details about the behavior of the Soviet Union and the United States, including specific details that he learned through personal communication with a number of individuals who were actively involved in resolving the crisis.

This paper is intended for use by institutions of higher education, as well as for anyone interested in the political-military and military-strategic aspects of international politics, and in effective crisis management.

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THE SETTING

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Caribbean crisis, which is known in the United States as the Cuban missile crisis.

This topic has been the subject of many historical and political-science studies, both in Russia and other countries, but especially in the United States.

It was the most dangerous nuclear crisis in world history. In October 1962, the two superpowers came to the brink of a large-scale nuclear war. Harvard professor Graham Allison estimates that casualties from such a war would have totaled a hundred million Americans and more than a hundred million Russians.

The Soviet and American people learned about the October 1962 crisis in different ways. Soviet authorities kept silent about it for much of that month. Given the nature of the American political system, information about the crisis became quickly available to the mass media. Evidence suggests that the news caused some Americans to panic over the real possibility that a nuclear war would erupt. According to a book by the former deputy head of the KGB's First Main Directorate, Nikolai Leonov, who was working in Mexico at the time, "An avalanche of refugees streamed across the Mexican border towards the south. . . . Cars with residential trailers formed endless lines along mountainous roads," and "difficulties arose with accommodation, medical and food supplies."¹

I have personal impressions about the events of this moment in history. At the time, my father was an Air Force engineer serving in the central staff of the Soviet Ministry of Defense with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He came home late on one of those days in October 1962, took his field uniform with the shoulder strap and holster for the pistol, and went back to his unit to work a night shift. Before leaving, he told my mother that if he did not come home or call the following day, she should urgently buy train tickets and take me and my younger sister to his parents in a village located in the Arkhangelsk region.² My mother was born into the family of a Soviet army officer and worked as an English language teacher at military organizations. Therefore she asked no questions, knowing that my father had no right to answer them.

The armed forces of both parties achieved a high state of combat readiness in the course of the crisis. It should be noted that such a measure was justified from a military point of view and served to apply political pressure on the opponent. However, this measure could also increase the probability of either accidental or unauthorized use of weapons, including nuclear weapons. As a

¹ Nikolai S. Leonov, *Likholetie* [Troubled years] (Moscow: Russky Dom, 2003), 53.

² Translator's note: The Arkhangelsk region is located in northwestern Russia.

rule, measures designed to prevent the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons are more effective when the level of political-military tension is not high.

It is worth noting that the Soviet and American sides had yet to work out a common understanding of what constituted strategic stability. Moreover, this important concept did not yet exist, emerging considerably later. The military doctrines of both sides emphasized the requirement for victory in a war featuring all our armaments, including nuclear weapons. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were actively conducting research and development to create strategic missile defenses. There were great hopes on both sides that an antimissile shield could be created to defend the entire country from a massive nuclear missile attack.

That optimism diminished considerably in the late 1960s. Such a change was largely associated with the development of multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) for ballistic missiles, and of special means of overcoming anti-ballistic missile defenses (ABM). (According to Yevgeny Velikhov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Lev Artsimovich and other Russian physicists drew a number of important conclusions in the late 1960s and early 1970s about the limited capabilities of directed-energy weapons, including laser and particle-beam weapons. These conclusions, which were based on the fundamental laws of physics and ballistics, remain largely valid today.)

No comprehensive studies were conducted at the time to discern what catastrophic medical, biological, and ecological consequences a nuclear war would entail. (The findings of such studies only became accessible to the wider military-political communities in the USSR, the United States, and a number of other countries in the 1980s. In the Soviet Union, the scholars Yevgeny Velikhov, Yevgeny Chazov, and Georgy Golitsyn contributed most to making the results of this research accessible to the public.) However, even in the absence of such studies, both Soviet and American political leaders, as well as some members of the professional military establishment, were still gradually edging toward a realization of the consequences of a nuclear war. It goes without saying that Soviet and American scientists who had sufficient knowledge of these issues understood these consequences.

THE CRISIS PEAKS

The crisis peaked during thirteen days in October 1962, beginning on October 14, when U.S. air reconnaissance detected the launch sites of nuclear-capable Soviet missiles under construction in Cuba.

The Soviet Union's leadership decided to deploy missiles in Cuba after the failed U.S. attempt to overthrow the revolutionary government of Fidel Castro, who had established friendly relations with the USSR. A brigade of Cuban exiles who had been trained and armed by the United States landed at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961.³ The failure of this CIA operation dealt a major blow to the reputation of the young American president, John F. Kennedy, damaging his political credibility at home and U.S. relations with many Latin American countries abroad. (Kennedy was forty-five years old at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, while Nikita Khrushchev was sixty-eight, and had more political and military experience. However, it should be noted that Kennedy was born into a family of a prominent businessman-turned-diplomat, earned a degree from Harvard, and had a strong team of advisors.)

Tensions around Cuba continued to run high even after the botched CIA operation of April 1961. Both Havana and Moscow knew that Cuba was the intended target of U.S. naval, air, and marine forces. American forces conducted various large-scale exercises that were explicitly anti-Cuban.

The Soviet leadership had ample reason to worry about the future of the Cuban revolution, the fate of the friendly regime, and of the government that was dedicated to Soviet-style socialism. The fact that such a government existed and that the USSR had acquired a new ally in the Western hemisphere, which had been fully within the zone of U.S. influence for almost a hundred years, constituted a bold challenge to Washington. Despite its small size, Cuba emerged as one of the most important elements in the two superpowers' global standoff, which had ideological, political, socioeconomic, and military-strategic dimensions.⁴

Although the Cuban issue was a very important factor in Soviet-American relations, many Russian experts believe that it was the Berlin issue that played a central role at the time.

³ This operation was prepared by the CIA during the Republican administration of Dwight Eisenhower and created great difficulty for Kennedy, who became president in 1961.

⁴ As General Leonov wrote: "The Soviet Union decided to do what Khrushchev described as 'planting a hedgehog,' that is to deploy nuclear missiles capable of deterring any aggressors." Leonov, *Likholetie* [Troubled years], 54. There is also a more colorful version of this expression by Khrushchev, who was not shy when it came to expressing his thoughts: "We will let hedgehog loose in their pants."

It should also be noted that the United States built a number of air-force bases around the USSR in the late 1940s and early 1950s that housed aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons to the Soviet homeland. In the later 1950s and early 1960s, the United States reinforced these deployments with the construction of missile bases, some of which were located in Turkey. In addition to these deployments, U.S. ballistic missile submarines armed with Polaris nuclear missiles were patrolling the ocean in close proximity to the USSR. Therefore, the Soviet Union had every right to take reciprocal actions vis-à-vis the United States.⁵ Given that the USSR was only beginning to station ICBMs on its territory, the deployment of medium- and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba was quite justifiable as long as these missiles were deployed in large quantities. One should note that at the time, the Soviet Union lagged behind the United States in developing technology for the naval deployment of strategic nuclear forces. Bridging that gap took a long time.

It was the manner in which the Soviet Union addressed this imbalance that raised questions. Almost no political-diplomatic preparations were made for the deployment of the Soviet missiles to Cuba, with the exception of communications within the framework of Soviet-Cuban relations. Both political and military elements of the deployment were implemented in total secrecy. Moscow and Havana concluded a secret treaty on the stationing of Soviet armed forces on Cuban territory. The General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces as a whole, and its Main Operational Directorate in particular, played a major role in preparing this treaty. There is evidence that suggests that Khrushchev planned to announce the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba during his visit to the island in November 1962. Khrushchev had also planned to notify the American side by visiting the United States during that trip.

We can only wonder why neither the political leaders nor the military commanders of the USSR had foreseen the possibility that the fairly elementary capabilities of U.S. air reconnaissance could expose the secret missile launch sites once under construction. The answer to this question remains one of the unsolved puzzles of the crisis. Later, American experts expressed surprise over the fact that launch sites were built in a configuration identical to one used earlier on Soviet territory and that was familiar to U.S. intelligence, which identified the pattern when reviewing

⁵ In the course of conversations that took place in the middle of the 1980s, former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told the author that Americans estimated the ratio of U.S. and Soviet nuclear warheads that could have been delivered in single launch to the other side's territory to be 17 to 1 at the time of the Cuban crisis. However, calculations done by (mostly civilian) military experts and given to McNamara showed that this supremacy did not guarantee that a preemptive U.S. nuclear strike would destroy all of the Soviet nuclear weapons capable of reaching U.S. territory. One should also factor in that the Soviet Union had a formidable array of nuclear missiles and aircraft capable of striking the territory of U.S. allies, as well as U.S. troops located in countries outside the American homeland.

imagery from reconnaissance satellites.⁶ As American experts acknowledged after the crisis, all other measures of camouflage (and disinformation) used during the deployment of Soviet troops and hardware were quite effective.⁷

In accordance with the aforementioned treaty, a forty-thousand-strong assembly of Soviet forces in Cuba was formed under the command of Colonel General Issa Pliyev. A division of the Strategic Missile Forces (RVSN) armed with forty nuclear-armed variants of medium- and intermediate-range R-12 missiles (NATO designation SS-4 Sandal) and R-14 missiles (NATO designation SS-5 Slean) formed the nucleus of the Soviet presence in Cuba.⁸ The range of the R-12 missiles was 2,200 km while the range of the R-14 missiles was 4,500 km. R-14s could carry either a lightweight warhead with a yield of 1 megaton or a heavy warhead with a yield of 2.3 megatons.⁹

Cuba, the “Island of Freedom,” also planned to host IL-28 bombers (NATO designation Beagle) that were capable of carrying nuclear weapons, Luna tactical missiles with nuclear warheads (NATO designation FROG-7), and Sopka coastal-defense missile systems that were also nuclear armed. Four separate motorized infantry regiments were also deployed. These units could provide cover for RVSN missile regiments and technical units. They would also assist the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba against enemy forces and counterrevolutionary groups in case of an air or sea invasion. Batteries of Luna missiles were to be used in conjunction with motorized infantry regiments. These missiles were operationally subordinated to the commanders of the infantry regiments. Their mission was to help destroy enemy forces and strike the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay in the event the Americans attempted an air or sea landing in Cuba. Soviet forces also comprised naval units that had their own missions. Two divisions of the Air Defense Forces were very important. “Radiotechnical” troops were also part of the force, providing combat support for fighter aviation and surface-to-air missile units using radar assets.¹⁰

⁶ Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Kvintessentsiya resheniya: na primere Karibskogo krizisa 1962 goda* [Essence of decision: explaining the Cuban missile crisis in 1962], translation edited by Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev (Moscow: Book House “Librokom”, 2012), 265–74.

⁷ Allison and Zelikow, *Kvintessentsiya resheniya* [Essence of decision], 260–61, 267, 271.

⁸ Various modifications of R-12s and R-14s remained in the RVSN’s arsenal until 1989, when they were dismantled and eliminated in accordance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987. M. Pervov, “Raketnye komplekсы RVSN” [Missile systems of RVSN], *Tekhnika i Vooruzhenie* (May-June 2001), <http://lib.rus.ec/b/225087/read#t22>, accessed July 20, 2012.

⁹ “Raketnaya tekhnika” [Missile hardware] (online information and news portal), <http://rbase.new-factoria.ru>, accessed July 20, 2012.

¹⁰ Anatoly I. Gribkov, “Karibsky krizis” [Cuban missile crisis], *Voyenno-istorichesky Zhurnal* 10 (Oct. 1992–Jan. 1993): 43–44.

General of the Army Anatoly Gribkov, who was deputy head of the Main Operational Directorate at the time, has written that the Soviet leadership first tasked the General Staff with preparing a plan for stationing forces in Cuba in May 1962.¹¹

All of the currently available evidence indicates that the Soviet leadership planned to use these forces as a *means of deterrence* to prevent the United States from staging a large-scale invasion that could overthrow the government of Fidel Castro and the Communist Party of Cuba. Such an invasion appeared quite probable at the time. From this perspective, Soviet nuclear warheads and associated delivery vehicles were considered “defensive weapons.” The Soviet leadership made continued attempts to convince the United States that the USSR was deploying only “defensive weapons” in Cuba (without disclosing what that wording actually meant) through various communication channels until the very last moment when Washington, using data collected in the course of air reconnaissance, could demonstrate that offensive nuclear-missile and aviation systems were being deployed in Cuba.¹² Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko asserted that there were only defensive Soviet weapons in Cuba during his visit to Washington on October 18, 1962.¹³ It should be noted here that as early as October 14, the United States had photographs of the launch sites of Soviet medium- and intermediate-range missiles being hastily constructed in Cuba.

The deployment of Soviet forces to Cuba required conducting a special operation that was code-named “Anadyr.” The operation was camouflaged as a strategic exercise that featured deployment of troops and military hardware by sea to various regions of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ For the operation to succeed, unprecedented secrecy measures were taken. Cuba-bound military personnel were issued civilian IDs and ordered to change from uniforms into civilian clothes. Even the commander of the Soviet forces in Cuba, General Issa Pliyev, had to give up his military uniform and leave his military ID at the General Staff. Instead, he was issued a civilian Soviet passport in the name of Ivan Aleksandrovich Pivnov. As Gribkov wrote of Pliyev, “it took a lot of effort to convince him to live and work under a pseudonym from that moment on.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² All available evidence suggests that counterintelligence was so effective in Cuba at the time that it minimized, if not nullified, the ability of U.S. intelligence agents to work in the country.

¹³ Anatoly F. Dobrynin, *Sugubo doveritelno: Posol v Washington pri shesti prezidentakh SShA (1962–1986, gg.)* [Strictly Confidential: The Ambassador in Washington under six U.S. presidents (1962–1986)] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenia, 1997), 63.

¹⁴ Gribkov, “Karibsky krizis” [Cuban missile crisis], 35.

Transportation in the narrow holds of ships proved to be a serious test of physical and mental strength for many Soviet military servicemen.¹⁵

General Gribkov, who published an important article on the preparation for and conduct of the “Anadyr” operation, wrote that an attack with medium- and intermediate-range missiles on targets in the United States could have been launched by the commander of the RVSND division based in Cuba, only with authorization from Khrushchev, who was commander in chief of the armed forces. As for the nuclear-armed Luna tactical missiles, Pliyev was authorized to use them without authorization by the Kremlin only if direly needed (i.e., if communications with Moscow were severed).¹⁶ This could have happened if the United States launched a full-scale invasion of Cuba and the invasion proved impossible to stop using conventional, non-nuclear weapons. There is evidence that suggests that the Soviet defense minister, Rodion Malinovsky, issued a follow-up order to Pliyev that said the Luna missiles could be used only with authorization from the Soviet leadership.¹⁷

Despite the total superiority of the U.S. armed forces in the sea and in the air around the Caribbean, and America’s formidable reconnaissance capabilities along transportation routes, the Soviet secrecy and disinformation measures succeeded in concealing the military deployments. This makes it all the more surprising that Soviet forces in Cuba did not take adequate, large-scale measures to conceal the construction of the medium- and intermediate-range missile launch positions. This may have been a direct consequence of the haste with which the missile sites were being built, on top of the difficulties involved with deploying and accommodating the many force types and military assets on the island as part of Operation “Anadyr.”¹⁸

However, we should keep in mind that these missiles did not have electronic locks that would have prevented a launch ordered from Cuba rather than by the commander in chief in Moscow, who would have to rely on a special unit within the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces to do so.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anatoly I. Gribkov, “Razrabotka zamysla i osushchestvlenie operatsii ‘Anadyr’” [Operation “Anadyr”: Development of the Plot and Execution], Rostov Military Institute of the Strategic Missile Forces, <http://rau-rostov.narod.ru/01/anadyr/anadyr01-01.htm>, accessed July 20, 2012.

¹⁷ Sergo A. Mikoyan, *Anatomia karibskogo krizisa* [Anatomy of the Cuban missile crisis] (Moscow: Academia, 2006), 209.

¹⁸ Certain evidence indicated that half of the R-12 missiles deployed in Cuba had been ready for fueling and integration with the warhead by late October. As for R-14 missiles, they never reached Cuba because of the blockade. “Forum rossiiskoi armii ” [Forum of the Russian armed forces], <http://russianarmy.mybb.ru>, accessed July 21, 2012.

In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, Graham Allison notes that “NATO aircraft with Turkish pilots loaded active nuclear bombs and advanced to an alert status in which individual pilots could have chosen to take off, fly to Moscow, and drop a bomb.”¹⁹ Such locks were also absent from the four Soviet diesel submarines that were hastily dispatched from the Northern Fleet of the Soviet Navy to the Caribbean armed with nuclear torpedoes (part of Operation “Kama”). The deployment of these submarines was conducted under extremely difficult conditions (some of the compartments were as hot as 122 degrees Fahrenheit). The commanders and crew endured extreme workloads and great stress. We should all give them credit for their endurance, courage, and professionalism, which prevented a very dangerous situation from triggering World War III and catastrophic consequences for all. We should gratefully recall the names of the commanders of these submarines: Ryurik Ketov (B-4), Aleksei Dubavko (B-36), Valentin Savitsky (B-59), and Nikolai Kushnov (B-130).²⁰ There is a lot of evidence that suggests that dispatching these submarines to Cuba was a gross error of the Soviet Union’s political leadership and supreme military command.

¹⁹ Graham Allison, “The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy Today,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012), 14.

²⁰ Mikoyan, *Anatomia karibskogo krizisa* [Anatomy of the Cuban missile crisis], 206.

RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS

The resolution of the Cuban crisis required colossal efforts by the leadership of both countries. President Kennedy set up a special body, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExCom) that played an important role in resolving the crisis. In the Soviet Union, these issues were discussed intensively at sessions of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU)—subsequently named the Political Bureau, or Politburo, of the Central Committee—under the leadership of Khrushchev, first secretary of the CC CPSU and chairman of the Council of Ministers of Soviet Union.

The channels of communication between the top leaders of the USSR and United States played an enormously important role in the crisis. The main channel went through the Soviet embassy to the United States and Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, a diplomat of the highest quality who enjoyed a great degree of trust by Moscow and respect in Washington (and who I consider to be one of my teachers). Both sides were extremely fortunate that such a diplomat happened to work in Washington at the time.

Given the extreme importance of the problem, President Kennedy assigned someone to lead the ExCom and negotiate with Dobrynin who he especially trusted: his brother and attorney general of the United States Robert Kennedy. Diplomacy was beyond Robert Kennedy's official duties, but he proved to be a skilled negotiator during the Cuban crisis.

In addition to the official channels for Soviet-American communication, there were two informal channels. One went through Alexander Feklisov, chief of station at the KGB's political-intelligence branch (formally known as the First Main Directorate, or PGU) in Washington, D.C.²¹ The other went through Georgii Bolshakov, an officer at the Soviet defense ministry's strategic intelligence station (the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, or GRU). Feklisov worked under the cover of the Soviet's Washington embassy, maintaining communications with ABC's foreign-policy correspondent, John Scali, who had close ties to the Kennedy clan, including John F. Kennedy.

It was extremely important to ensure that the information was not distorted when passing through such channels and that messages were communicated completely and rapidly, without intermediaries offering speculations about information they were passing on.

²¹ V. P. Krikunov, "Neizvestnoye o razvyazke Karibskogo krizisa" [Unknown about the resolution of the Cuban crisis], *Voynno-istorichesky Zhurnal* 10 (1990): 37–38.

The Bolshakov–Robert Kennedy channel emerged even before Dobrynin arrived in Washington to serve as Soviet ambassador. Bolshakov would send messages to Moscow through the GRU station’s channels, but would also sometimes brief Ambassador Dobrynin.

The establishment of the Bolshakov–Robert Kennedy channel was designated by the Presidium as an “unofficial channel for exchange of information,” according to Andrei Fursenko.²² In the spring of 1961, Moscow gave Bolshakov detailed instructions on how to handle the channel. From May 1961 to December 1962, Bolshakov and Robert Kennedy met and called each other a total of thirty-one times.

The U.S. State Department treated this channel with jealousy and the FBI intensified its surveillance of Bolshakov. The GRU’s leadership also had a negative opinion of the channel since Bolshakov’s activities violated the entire military chain of command. For obvious reasons, the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, was jealous, not to mention Dobrynin, who described Bolshakov as a “mail box” in his memoirs.²³

In his study of the crisis, Alexander Fursenko, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, revealed that Gromyko and Dobrynin managed to sideline Bolshakov from the confidential channel of communication with the U.S. leadership. The Presidium of CC CPSU passed a resolution that instructed Dobrynin to directly communicate with Robert Kennedy, “bypassing any intermediaries.”²⁴ Nevertheless, on October 27, 1962, the so-called “Black Saturday” of the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy held a private meeting with Bolshakov to repeat the crucial message that he had passed on to Dobrynin earlier.²⁵

Later, Robert Kennedy again used the Bolshakov channel on November 9, 1962, after an agreement had been reached on both sides to end the crisis. At that meeting, Kennedy told Bolshakov that Soviet IL-28 bombers should also be removed from Cuba, arguing that a conflict over these aircraft could lead to nullifying of the agreements that had been reached earlier.²⁶

Today we possess plenty of evidence and various assessments from both sides that allow us to conclude that these channels worked in an optimal way without significant distortion of the information communicated (although such distortions did occur from time to time, as the

²² Andrei A. Fursenko, “Georgii Bolshakov – svyaznoi Khrushchev s prezidentom Kennedy” [Georgii Bolshakov – Khrushchev’s liaison to President Kennedy], *Znamya*, 161–83.

²³ Dobrynin, “Sugubo doveritelno” [Strictly Confidential], 38.

²⁴ Fursenko, “Georgii Bolshakov,” 178–79.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

contemporary analysis of data supplied by both sides indicates). It was, of course, the interaction between Dobrynin and Robert Kennedy that played the decisive role.

When discussing the activities of the ExCom, I cannot help noting the role played by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who was a prominent representative of the American technocrats in upper echelons of the U.S. government. He proposed a plan of action that helped buy time during the negotiations with Moscow that was needed in order to reach mutual understanding with the Soviets. His proposal was to introduce a naval blockade around Cuba, which the American leadership decided to call a “quarantine,” which would sound less provocative to the international community. According to Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, the operation was also called a quarantine because experts at the State Department and Department of Justice determined that the Western Hemisphere mutual defense treaty allowed Washington to declare a blockade of Cuba only if the Organization of American States passed a resolution authorizing the United States to do so.²⁷ That resolution would have had to be authorized by two-thirds of the organization’s members.

From the American point of view, the blockade didn’t eliminate the danger that the Soviet missiles already in Cuba would become combat ready. On the other hand, it also gave Washington an opportunity “to flex its muscles” (particularly the U.S. Navy, given its absolute superiority in and around the Caribbean).²⁸ The United States used the time generated by the blockade to assemble and reinforce U.S. divisions preparing for the contingency of an invasion of Cuba. Citing Soviet sources, among others, Allison and Zelikow write that the quarantine was enforced selectively, and that a number of Soviet civilian vessels crossed the line of blockade without any consequences.²⁹

The adoption of McNamara’s quarantine proposal also made it possible to delay consideration of the plan to launch air strikes against Soviet missile launch positions in Cuba, despite support for this plan among senior U.S. military officials, including General Curtis LeMay, the Air Force chief of staff. McNamara also controlled the actions that the U.S. military, and especially the Navy, was taking to enforce the blockade of Cuba. As a number of witnesses recall, McNamara played an important role in preventing very dangerous confrontations between Soviet cargo ships that entered the zone of blockade (or “quarantine”) and U.S. Navy ships enforcing the blockade.

McNamara even watched the actions of individual U.S. Navy ships to ensure that they acted appropriately and would not cause a further escalation of the conflict. That was certainly a vital

²⁷ Allison and Zelikow, *Kvintessentsiya resheniya* [Essence of decision], 165.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 437.

element of the interaction of the conflicting sides under such conditions. McNamara's controlling function was not to the Navy command's liking. The Navy has rich traditions and standard operating procedures for enforcing a naval blockade, but none of them were appropriate for use during an acute nuclear conflict.

IMPACT AND LESSONS

In his *Foreign Affairs* article mentioned earlier, Graham Allison justifiably draws attention to the relevance of the lessons the Cuban missile crisis for modern nuclear conflicts that the United States is involved in, particularly the standoffs over North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs. He recommends avoiding extreme solutions to these problems. He is not proposing inaction, but is recommending that decisions to carry out military strikes should not be rushed.³⁰

The Cuban missile crisis had a sobering impact on both Soviet and American leaders. From the political perspective, it was resolved in a mutually acceptable way, and the ultimate solution had both public and nonpublic elements. U.S. President John F. Kennedy gave assurances that the United States would not invade Cuba and the Soviet leadership pledged to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba (leaving the sides to negotiate a resolution to the issue of IL-28 bombers after having reached a principal decision on how to resolve the crisis as a whole). The nonpublic part of the resolution included Kennedy's promise to withdraw nuclear-armed Jupiter missiles from Turkey (a pledge that was fully implemented by the American side shortly afterward).

One of the consequences of the crisis was the creation of a hotline between Washington and Moscow, allowing leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union to communicate directly in a crisis if needed. First, this line makes it possible to minimize distortions in communications with each other; second, it allows the sides to conduct direct negotiations at the highest level; and third, it provides significant time savings for crisis communications. And time, as we know, is always a critical resource for senior leaders, particularly during crises. A line connecting the leaders of Russia and the United States exists to this day, and it is kept constantly open by the appropriate services in both countries.

We should remember that the Cuban crisis not only taught us to avoid getting involved in future nuclear standoffs; it also led both sides to reinforce and improve the quality of their strategic intercontinental nuclear weapons. It became especially important for the Soviet Union to acquire more of these weapons to achieve effective nuclear deterrence, because after withdrawing missiles from Cuba, Moscow was unable to forward-deploy missile systems capable of striking the U.S. mainland.

As General Gribkov has written, the Soviet military viewed U.S. military inspections of the ships that transported Soviet missiles back from Cuba as humiliating.³¹ This became ingrained in the

³⁰ Allison, "Cuban Missile Crisis at 50."

³¹ Gribkov, "Razrabotka zamysla i osushchestvlenie Operatsii 'Anadyr'" [Operation "Anadyr"].

memories and in the psychology of Soviet political leaders and supreme commanders. I have heard high-ranking Soviet military officials reminiscence about how a promise was made after the crisis to never let it happen again. I believe that the Soviet Union's decision to rapidly develop its strategic intercontinental nuclear forces was due to "the syndrome of the Cuban missile crisis." General Gribkov has argued that forty intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba did not have a radical impact on the Soviet-American strategic balance as a whole. One can debate this point with Gribkov. Soviet R-12s and R-14s were far less precise than America's Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and less able to destroy targets deep underground, but the flight time of these missiles was short and they were capable of delivering a decapitating strike on the U.S. government and disrupting military command and control. (As an aside, Pershing IIs were to have been deployed in Western Europe in the 1980s in response to the deployment of Soviet intermediate-range "Pioneer" missiles (NATO designation SS-20).)

The strategic imbalance favoring the United States reached its apogee during the Cuban crisis, but it ended by the time the Soviet Union and United States signed the first strategic arms limitation agreement in 1972.³² (I shall remind readers that it was also at this time that the Soviet-American ABM treaty was signed. McNamara initiated signing the treaty at a 1967 summit meeting in Glassboro, New Jersey. Initially, the Soviet side, represented by Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin, rejected the idea of concluding an agreement that would limit defensive rather than offensive weapons with indignation.) Later, the Soviets (and American proponents of the treaty) fought to preserve the ABM treaty as one of the cornerstones of strategic stability, in spite of the Reagan administration's decision to pursue the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Regretfully, the George W. Bush administration unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, complicating Soviet-American efforts to preserve reliable, unambiguous strategic stability. This continues to have malignant effects on the Soviet-American relationship to this day, particularly on achieving the political and psychological consensus necessary to achieve strategic stability. As noted by Graham Allison a few years ago, for a significant part of America's political class, the creation of a missile-defense system is not a subject of political-military, military-technical, or military-economic considerations, but instead is a matter of "religious faith."

"Strategic stability" has once again become relevant in discussions about Soviet-American relations since the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty. However the degree of uncertainty present at the time of the Cuban missile crisis has not returned. Much has changed since then in the relationship between our two countries and in the development of our strategic nuclear forces.

³² Translator's note: The official name of the agreement was Interim Agreement on Certain Measures with Respect to the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms.

However, the situation now seems less stable than it was in the 1990s when, for example, the United States abandoned Reagan's SDI program, the ABM Treaty in remained in force, and Moscow and Washington were negotiating elimination of their strategic and nonstrategic missile defense systems.



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