

# 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 failed to see Castro's return. So did the Cuban communists who nearly missed joining his movement as he seized power on New Year's Day in 1959.

The US could control Cuba by simply manipulating the amount of Cuban sugar allowed into the American market. Castro wanted to end this dependence and redistribute wealth more equitably among society. His 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. JFK hoped that the Alliance would produce a 5.5% increase in Latin America’s growth rate. (The program largely failed due to bureaucratic infighting in Washington and reluctance of Latin American governments to implement reforms. In fact, between 1961-1966 military forces overthrew 9 Latin American governments. None of the promised growth and redistribution was in sight).

Well, the Alliance for Progress was an attempt to solve some of the problems that made Latin America a breeding ground for Castroite revolutions. 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.

### **3 The Bay of Pigs Fiasco**

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 (the guy was apparently an avid diver).

We already saw how Khrushchev interpreted the Bay of Pigs as sign of JFK’s inexperience, and moved to exploit it immediately in Vienna, and then in Berlin by building the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961. The Russian was not done—he was looking for ways to score another diplomatic victory. So, when Castro

asked for help in defending Cuba against possible US invasion, the Soviet leader seized the initiative. Here was an opportunity to:

- defend Cuba against U.S. invasion that, given the Bay of Pigs, seemed all but inevitable sooner or later; the Cubans had requested military help for such an eventuality, but of course they could not really do a whole lot with conventional weapons against a full-scale invasion;
- close the missile gap that the Russians knew existed except that they were on its losing side; although the Soviets would eventually make use of their ICBMs from their own territory, in 1962 they could not, and they knew it;
- score another diplomatic victory by showing the world that the USSR was not afraid of America and would protect its friends.

Khrushchev clearly did not believe that the Americans would react the way they did, after all, the Russians 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? The gamble was also 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. The scheme fell apart only because some Russians forgot to cover up the construction properly, and the CIA became aware of it.

#### **4 The Soviet Buildup in Cuba**

The Russians secretly began transporting medium bombers, troops, and various military installations to Cuba. 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 secretly moved to install not one, but two types of nuclear weapons in Cuba! In addition to the bombers capable of delivering nukes, both short and medium-range nuclear missiles were installed. 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 40,000 Soviet troops had arrived in Cuba and many of the missile sites were operational (although very few missiles had actually arrived).

## **5 The Crisis Begins**

On October 16, JFK 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.

Several alternatives were discussed: a ground invasion, a massive air strike, a surgical air strike, and a naval blockade. Finally, the options were narrowed to either the air strike or the blockade. Slowly, the EXCOM converged on the blockade, with the option of an air strike on the missile sites held in reserve should the blockade fail.

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.

## **6 On The Brink of Armageddon**

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 ships sent to intercept them. 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 marched to the brink of nuclear disaster. 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. Relieved, the US stopped and inspected a Russian ship that they knew carried no offensive weapons. The Russians offered no resistance.

## **7 Escalation and Resolution**

On October 26, a barely coherent letter arrived 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. It was not known at the time that the officer had acted on his own: he was authorized neither by Moscow nor by the Soviet commander in Cuba. However, the Americans could not imagine that such drastic action could be taken without the express consent and approval of Khrushchev. What was this escalation supposed to signal? The military asked to be allowed to attack immediately.

That same day, a new letter arrived from Khrushchev. It was firmer than the first and raised the stakes: the Soviets now demanded that the US dismantle its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Curiously, the letter made no reference to the U-2 incident, and so the Americans concluded that it was very likely that the Russian leadership did not know about it, meaning that this escalation was not a signal of anything.

Still, the ExCom, worn-down by the brutal physical and mental fatigue, began planning the surgical air strike that would destroy the missile sites before they became operational. The preparations for invasion were also accelerated. For a second time in less than a week the world was hurtling into a nuclear nightmare. American officials set October 30th as the date on which to strike the island.

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 resist, which would doubtless cause serious losses among the assaulting Americans, dragging the US fully into a possible nuclear war. Moreover, the US administration did not know whether Khrushchev was still in power.

The first letter was intensely personal and bore all the marks of his style. It also revealed the intense pressure under which the Soviets were working. In fact, it was so revealing that it was obvious that Khrushchev had written it without the formal approval of the members of the Presidium. The second letter was much more impersonal. It was formal, restrained, and firm, even demanding. There was a distinct possibility that a hawkish military group had ousted Khrushchev and assumed power—there was a group of people in the USSR that did not mind a nuclear war with the United States.

At this point, Attorney General Robert Kennedy suggested that the US ignore the second letter and reply favorably to the first. This they did. They sent an acceptance of the more moderate note by official channels. Unofficially, the administration told the Russians that the Jupiters had been scheduled for removal months earlier (this was true), and that although the US would not openly agree to this trade for fear of causing problems with NATO allies, the missiles would be gone in due time.

On the 28th, Khrushchev accepted Kennedy's offer. However, the crisis was not over. 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 entire US army to invade Cuba under the flimsiest pretext possible.

## **8 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. 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 new Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev favored large defense budgets and maintenance of equality, at least military, with 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 ICBMs were in place and

fully operational. These could obliterate US cities up to the Canadian border. These sites were guarded by 40,000 Soviet combat troops. Further, 9 SRBMs 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 US administration had forgotten to cancel nuclear tests, and a nuke was exploded on schedule (!), a group of anti-Castro Cubans engaged in sabotage (the CIA had forgotten to cancel their mission), a US ship almost caught up with and boarded a Russian vessel with nuclear weapons. Some of these events the administration did not even learn about until after the crisis was over.

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.

## **9 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 the logical 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."

Third, the Russians backed down because Khrushchev realized before the Americans that the crisis was spiraling out of control. The U-2 incident was one illustration of how actions could have unintended consequences, but this was only one instance in a series 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. It was the fear that an American attack would precipitate a general nuclear war that would hurt everyone that animated Khrushchev, not simple fear of U.S. missiles striking Moscow. 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. 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 confronta-

tion. 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. Unbeknownst to JFK, this pressure had become 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 tactical 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, the problem was that Khrushchev really had no way of revealing this knowledge in any credible way. 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 (a miracle?) 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.