



THE PITFALLS OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS IN THE CONTEXT OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

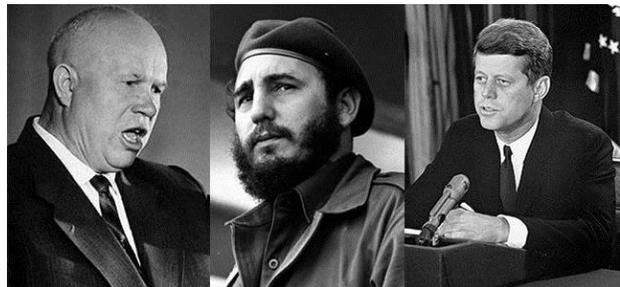
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Editor's Note: *Since Donald Trump assumed the Presidency of the United States on Jan 20, 2017; many believe the prestige of the office of the presidency and the position and the influence of the United States around the world has diminished. Case in point, President Trump alienated NATO member states by calling them obsolete; he supported Brexit (Britain's exit from the EU) and at the present time he is at odds with North Korea's dictator. President Trump's unpredictability and inflammatory rhetoric to pressure Pyongyang has instead risked the world peace, given that North Korea is not Iraq or Afghanistan but a nuclear power. However, if we look back at history, this is not the first time the world almost came to a standstill. To draw some experience, Adan Makina takes us back to the era of Cuban missile crisis and how it was handled by President John F. Kennedy.*

Introduction

From its inception in 1776 when courageous and heroic American men and women proclaimed their inalienable rights to self determination from the forces of colonial England, the government and people of the United States never imagined weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) would be hauled 7,000 miles all the way from the shores of communist adversary U.S.S.R and assembled a distance spanning ninety nautical miles from Florida on the shores of modern-day Cuba.



Since the beginning of the 19th century, the United States has been the undisputed dominant power in terms of science and technology, military, politics, and economy with the exception of a time in history known as “the Cuban Missile Crisis” when John F. Kennedy’s faulty and hesitant foreign policy promoted and irritated Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to grasp his surreptitious intention in America’s backyard. Since that fateful day of October 14, 1962 when an American U-2 photoreconnaissance plane captured photographic proof of Soviet missile bases under construction in Cuba, differing views and ideas have been deciphered and written by

historians, political scientists, and students of international relations as to what went wrong and why secretive Nikita Khrushchev's ill-fated operation happened in the first place in America's backyard without prior knowledge of the U.S. president, the U.S. intelligence services, and American public.

Just as early seventh century C.E. Chinese rulers of the postclassical era thought the expansive Taklimakan Desert to be a natural barrier against foreign infiltrations and that also the pharaohs of Egypt saw the Sahara Desert as an obstacle for alien invaders, likewise, there was a perception in the United States that the massive Pacific and Atlantic Oceans would safeguard America from foreign aggression. The objective of this research is to uncover the pitfalls of the Kennedy administration for failing to uncover Soviet military buildup in Cuba, nondescript Nikita Khrushchev's fantasy of ensuring Soviet longevity through justification and emulation, and Moscow's morbid suspicion of foreigners-especially America and Americans.

Soviet Belligerence in Words and in Deeds

Right after the end of the Second World War, in words and deeds, Soviet leaders and Soviet intelligence worked exhaustively without stop ultimately aiming at inflicting significant harm to the United States, to her allies, and to her democratic values. When McCone, in his capacity as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, presented a memorandum on the Donovan Project regarding the Soviet Cuban-Missiles to JFK on October 11, 1962, "The President requested that such information be withheld at least until after elections as if the information got into the press, a new and more violent Cuban issue would be injected into the campaign and this would seriously affect his independence of action." In his memoir, Robert F. Kennedy indicated that the president knew nothing about the Soviet missiles in Cuba, "yet several times before the missile crisis erupted, Kenneth B. Keating, a White-manned Republican senator from Rochester, New York, charged that the Soviets were putting missiles on Cuba." [1] For example, U.S. intelligence experts failed to analyze and pre-empt the strongly-worded message from the Soviet government carried by the daily Pravda on the morning of February 19, 1962, that read in part:

"Does the U.S. government organize and direct aggression against another country accusing it of having established a social system and a state different from what the United States wanted? If the U.S. government arrogates this right to itself, it is standing on very shaky ground, because it does not...possess the military might that would permit it to dictate conditions to other countries. The U.S. political leaders should take into account that there are other countries possessing no less terrible weapons, standing guard over peace, and prepared to prevent the unloosing of a new war." [2]

The phrase "direct aggression against another country" is in reference to the United States' policies toward Cuba while "social system" denotes the communist system established by Fidel Castro in Cuba with help from the Soviet politburo. Khrushchev issued this echoing message as a stern warning to the United States while the administration in Washington remained oblivious and unperturbed.

Soviet Missile Assembly in Cuba

According to U.S. intelligence information gathered on the Soviet build-up in Cuba, there were two types of missiles of distinct deterrence: medium-range and intermediate range. Designed to carry nuclear warheads and capable of travelling 1,100 miles; the medium-range missiles were capable of striking Washington, DC, Mexico City and other cities in the south-eastern parts of the United States, Central America and the Caribbean area. The intermediate-range missiles had the capability to strike major cities in the western hemisphere from Hudson Bay in Canada to Lima in Peru. On the other hand, President Kennedy noted that Soviet bombers capable of carrying nuclear warheads were being “uncrated” and assembled in Cuba while Cuban air bases capable of accommodating the bombers remained under construction. [3]

Soviet Global political Irredentism

The Soviet’s undaunted political irredentism and ideological obscurantism predate the Cuban missile crisis. During Josef Stalin’s reign, the Soviet Union embarked on forceful territorial expansion by craftily moving southwards towards Iran and Turkey and by stealthily injecting communist thought into Greek political arena. After World War II the Soviet leaders embarked on a precarious mission of occupying the northern regions of Iran until the prime minister of Iran conceded defeat by promising the Soviets offer of oil to which the Soviets categorically rejected until the United States and Britain got involved with a view to controlling Soviet irredentist tendencies. As for Turkey, Stalin made various demands that included giving up of Turkish regions straddling Soviet borders, joint Soviet-Turkish administration of the Dardanelles Strait, Turkey sever relations with Britain, and lastly but not least, Soviet demand that Turkey lease bases in the Dardanelles Strait exclusively for use by Soviet naval and land forces. In Greece, communism spread like wildfire leading to the formation of a right-wing government. [4]

American Demilitarization and Soviet Expansionism

The expansion of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe coupled with the spread of communism in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America created prolonged competition between the forces of capitalism and communism. Nonetheless, according to President Harry Truman, the United States was devising an absolute foreign policy of “detachment from foreign concerns”. [5] It was this detachment in the form of demilitarization that in the long run led to “the most rapid demobilization in the history of the world.” Despite the United States’ active-duty personnel drastically dropping from 12 million in 1945 to a mere 1.5 million in 1948, on the other hand, weighted against the dilapidated, disenfranchised, and demoralized Soviet military power, the United States, assisted by the largest and the deadliest nuclear arsenals, enjoyed leverage over the seas. [6]

This unprecedented sweeping reduction of active-duty personnel by the U.S. sent commotion across continental Europe especially among nations that relied on American defense against anticipated Soviet aggravations. Ironically, “the United States lacked the ground forces required to intervene in anything greater than a minor conflict”. [7] American global political estrangement boosted Soviet leaders’ ill-conceived and detrimental willpower which consequently tremendously accelerated their convoluted ideological foundations across the globe

undeterred. In addition, America's sublime alienation sped up the evolvement of unparalleled despotic and authoritarian leaders in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa in the runner-up to the Cold War. Compared to the enormous Soviet global sphere of control at the height of communism, apart from providing unreserved protection to its compacted NATO allies in the European continent and the cluster of territories under its trusteeship, the United States enjoyed little global dominance while the Soviet Union's malevolent communist ideology blanketed continental Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin and South America, and the Caribbean.

The Rise of John Fitzgerald Kennedy

The Cuban missile crisis happened at a time when the president of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, kept his brother Robert F. Kennedy who at that time was the United States Attorney General-as his closest confidant and advisor. [8] This task would have been left to someone with profound knowledge of national security issues-issues related to the containment of the Soviet Union's unabashed spherical predation and growing global communist antagonism. Perhaps the youthful forty-three old John Fitzgerald Kennedy-the youngest president by then-did not seriously heed the advice of the aging Eisenhower-an advice in the form of a warning that pinpointed the growing global communist offensive and the threat posed by Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev-leader of the egregious Soviet Union (Aleksandr and Naftali, p.79). [9] At that time Soviet leader Khrushchev and his foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and others considered the new president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, "a typical pragmatist" while Soviet Americanists saw Kennedy's position on USA-Soviet relations as being quite contradictory. [10] Under Khrushchev, Russian people always saw America as inferior technologically and militarily. After the first "beep beeps" of Soviet Sputnik 1 in space, NASA also blasted Explorer 1 into space as a countermeasure to Russian space race at which Khrushchev remarked: "but it is no larger than an apelsinichik" (tiny orange). [10] Paradoxically, the strongest man in the western hemisphere during the Cuban Missile Crisis, John F. Kennedy, was unwilling and unprepared to invade Cuba despite being pushed by Foster Dulles-the man who in the waning years of his life "maintained that the Democratic Party's policy of "containment" must be replaced by a policy of "liberation." What United States foreign policy needed, he said, was more "heart." [11]

Fidel Castro: Dedicated Communist

Fidel Castro climbed the ladder of success with the promise of transforming the Caribbean island into a conspicuous Shangri-La. In contrast, Cuba under Castro transformed into a dragon's lair. Despite preferring "godless communism" to the virtues of peace, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness enjoyed by his neighbor, America, Fidel Castro-the revolutionary zealot and doyen of socialism, hung crucifixes and pictures of Virgin Mary on the walls of his office. He reportedly admonished envoys and diplomats with the parting words: "all that needs to be done will be done, [for] it is the Madonna who is sending you." [12] Fidel Castro's meteoric rise to power culminated in his resentment of the U.S. such that his coining of the pejorative phrase "yanqui imperialism" resonated across central and south America where Spanish remained the established lingua franca.

For several decades, there have been conflicting political, social, and economic rifts between the leaders of the United States on one side and those of Cuba and the U.S.S.R on the other. To ensure enhanced national security measures, hawkish U.S. civilian and military leaders preferred the use of force against Cuban leadership before, during, and after the infamous Cuban missile crisis. Consequently, the defeat of the communist regime in Havana would have ushered in the overall annexation of the island after the dust settles. The thought by some American leaders that the imposition of tough economic sanctions would cause unprecedented economic strangulation and in the end herald abrupt change in the Cuban political hierarchy preposterously failed to materialize. For dovish JFK and his ardent supporters in government, dismantling Soviet-Cuban hostility toward the U.S. and her allies entailed the use of strategies that reconciled with democratic expectations and norms. Such constraints and others of like measure placed on presidential powers unquestionably created intrinsic predicament in JFK's pursuit of legitimate national security prerogatives.

Constrained U.S. Foreign Policy

For many decades American foreign policy remained a victim of tumult and political confusion. An aura of political malevolence and penumbra of mistrust ludicrously contaminated America's congressional, senatorial, and presidential operations. The placing of precipitous limitations on presidential powers and erosion of confidence intensified the defeat of *raison d'être* among members of the legislature. Since the formation of pluralism, political parties in the American landscape-Democratic, Republican, and moderates alike-have been at loggerheads regarding the direction the nation ought to be steered. Besides, JFK was surrounded by a staff that had conflicting ideas and mixed reactions about how to handle the Cuban missile crisis. Some called for the elimination of the Soviet missiles positioned against the U.S.; others like General Maxwell Taylor-the fine-looking Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) who got in to trouble during the Eisenhower era for advocating a "flexible response" for the military in place of the then-prevailing doctrine of "massive retaliation"-expressed that "the balance of terror might well tilt in favor of Russia." [13]

Even some senior echelons of the U.S. government begrudged JFK most notably high-profile Dean Acheson who perceived young JFK as "...little more than a spoiled brat for whom the father had purchased a seat in Congress." [14] JFK had little trust even for John McCone-the man who succeeded John Dulles as the highest-ranking CIA operative. In early August 1962, McCone assigned Philippe L. Thiraud de Vosjoli who was Washington chief for French intelligence to go to Cuba and have a glimpse of the island. Upon returning to Washington, DC de Vosjoli presented compelling evidence regarding Soviet missiles directed at the U.S. An agitated McCone asked JFK to take action about the Cuban threats. Because McCone was a Republican, the Kennedy's gave little attention to his information. However, McCone's reports were leaked to the GOP who accused the president of appeasing Castro. [15] When General Lansdale included in his memo the expression "including the liquidation of leaders", he was persuaded by his immediate assistant William K. Harvey-"to delete those four words" [16]

"That Infernal Little Cuban Republic"

The United States' abhorrence of Cuba stretches back to the days of Theodore Roosevelt who is reported to have told a friend in 1906: "I am so angry with that infernal little Cuban republic that

I would like to wipe its people off the face of the earth. All we have wanted from them was that they would behave themselves and be prosperous and happy so that we would not have to interfere. And now, lo and behold, they have started an utterly unjustifiable and pointless revolution.”[17] Cuba under Castro had always been a no-win situation for every sitting U.S. president because the administration in Havana remained hard to pin down even in places as far as Africa where Cuba remained an adversary to U.S. political commitments in the underdeveloped continent crippled by mismanagement and pathetic corruption such that a Washington Post headline decried: “U.S. powerless to contain Cuba in Africa” while Zbigniew Brzezinski who was making a report to his immediate boss, the president, exclaimed: “we are stuck on Africa.” [18]

Even after Eisenhower and Kennedy had departed the world for the afterlife, Fidel Castro, continued to blow his own horn by bragging: “we will still be here in another 20 years.” [19] Decades later, during the 1980 campaign, flamboyant Ronald Reagan proposed a blockade of Cuba while his new secretary of State, Alexander M. Haig jr., had a more stringent measure: invasion. Almost all U.S. presidents shared similar mental images in their concerted attempts to restrain the tiny Cuban republic. Speaking to an audience of supporters at a campaign in 2004 at a time when ailing Ronald Reagan was battling Alzheimer and while Alexander Haig remained semiretired in Northern Virginia, George W. Bush, echoed the riveting point: “I’ve got a plan to spread freedom, not only in the greater Middle East but also in our own hemisphere, in places like Cuba.” Regardless of undertaking wide-ranging and profound foreign policy measures during his tenure of office, George W. Bush did little to effect change in Cuba consequently embarrassing wealthy Cuban-American campaign contributors and regular voters who populate the crucial state of Florida. In his final years of office, while responding to a question from the audience-a question in relation to U.S. foreign policy commitment in Cuba-George W. Bush had no other explanation other than stating: “One day the good Lord will take Fidel Castro away.” [20]

Soviet Dissemination of Propaganda

The Russians were adept at deceiving foreign leaders who felt inspired by communist principles with medallions of prestige and honor at grandiose ceremonies attended by a retinue of public figures with twenty-one gun salute, cocktail parties, and theatrical performances at the famous Bolshoi theatre in Moscow. From Latin America to Asia to Africa the number of foreign dignitaries lining up at the Kremlin to be showered on with praise must have been vast and boundless. “The payment of an honorarium was one of the traditional tools the Kremlin used to stroke foreign communists, leaders of national-liberation movements or “progressive cultural elites.” [21] While the Russians were deficient in military intelligence inside the U.S. at the time of the missile crisis, one thing is certain: U.S. national security services enjoyed superior and rigorous infiltration and information gathering structures inside the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the Soviets enjoyed superfluous and extraordinary array of intelligentsia where communism thrived such that Soviet military advisors and multifarious intelligence networks-despite espousing inferior intellectual paraphernalia in context and arrangement-flourished in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, South America, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

Working in concert with host nations besieged by European domination, colonialism, and imperialism-nations whose inexperienced lackadaisical leaders attached great value to Leninist-Marxist ideology- the Soviets, through reckless dissemination of propaganda and rigorous deception, conscientiously exploited every conceivable economic fiber of these retarded nations. Seeing that the United States was turning a blind eye to the rest of the world with the exception of Western Europe where the U.S. had vested interests, the Soviet Union promptly expanded its sphere of influence clandestinely through antiquated blueprints such that it did not even shy away from setting base in America's backyard.

U.S. Missiles in Turkey

Immediately after the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II and up until that momentous day when a U.S.-owned U2 Spy Plane relayed back what became known as the "historic images" that triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis, Soviet leaders perceived their country as inimitable, formidable, and invincible and far superior to the U.S. militarily and ideologically. Even with the proliferation of Soviet military build-up across the globe during the Cuban missile crisis, the administration in Washington, DC remained reluctant at deterring Soviet global threat. Thus, we could assume that the farewell reproach by statesman Eisenhower fell on John F. Kennedy's deaf ears. Although many contemporary historians may allude the Soviet missile build-up in Cuba to be a countermeasure to the U.S. U2 spy plane shot by the Soviets over Soviet Union airspace, in contrast, to Anatoly Dobrynin-the man who remained Soviet ambassador to the United States during the terms of six American presidents, from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan-"the Soviets had been perturbed by the presence of NATO missiles in Turkey. [22]

The Soviet Union may have been a dedicated ally of the U.S. during World War II, but the truth of the matter is, it transformed into a venomous serpent immediately after the war concluded, perhaps in direct retaliation for the 20 million Russian lives lost and the devastation wrought from 1939 to 1945. By championing communism-an ideology that vehemently denounced American system of free enterprise in the strongest terms-Soviet leaders fervently took a perilous road for the sake of, needless to say, empowering and disseminating their godless ideology of collectivism while feverishly denigrating the democratic system of governance enjoyed by the United States and her western European allies.

Ineffective United Nations

Because of the veto power enjoyed by the two superpowers-the U.S. and Russia, the United Nations, the highest organization having jurisdiction over matters pertaining to international disputes, remained equally ineffective in settling the Cuban missile crisis. The U.N. was either ineffective or at the sidelines during the siege of Berlin, in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and in Afghanistan. Historically, whenever a dispute arose with incumbent Soviet politburos, leaders of the United States oftentimes preferred settling matters of concern through diplomatic means even though the behaviors of key holders to the Kremlin may have appeared obstinate and inappropriate. [23] According to a very informative and important document available on George Washington University web site, "Fidel Castro recommended to the Kremlin a harder line against Washington, even suggesting the possibility of nuclear strikes. The pressure stopped after

Soviet officials gave Castro a briefing on the ecological impact on Cuba of nuclear strikes on the United States.”[24]

Analysis

Like past and current political analysts, political scientists, presidential historians, diplomatic observers, and the multitudes of international relations students who remain skeptical about how the Kennedy administration handled the Cuban Missile Crisis, arguably, the administration of the day did not apply the required skills nor did it institute the right measures to outmaneuver the Soviets before the deadly weapons reached America’s backyard. Lack of rigorous national security arrangements, the failure to infiltrate to the core Soviet-Cuban global conspiracy, and the absence of collective efforts to safeguard U.S. security from outside dangers by the National Security Council (NSC), enabled Khrushchev to clandestinely set base in communist Cuba. The absence of rigid national security establishment hindered the United States’ determination to restrain the spread of communism and to contain the Cuban missile crisis. Had there been close cooperation between the various sectors of the national security establishment and had there been profound monitoring of the spread of communism in the Caribbean peninsula, the spate of Soviet aggression would have been curtailed and kept at bay through preemption—a doctrine that came to fore during the reign of George W. Bush. However, after decades of baffling U.S. political misgivings toward the Soviet Union, it was the reflections and initiatives of George Keenan that gave the United States the strength of character to contain the Soviet Union—a long-term policy espousing fortitude and good judgment that proved productive during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. George Keenan, the U.S. Charge d’affaires in Moscow and author of the cable known to history as the “long telegram”, was a bright career Foreign Service diplomat and Soviet expert and a Princeton nonconformist who left significant footprints that benefited several U.S. presidents.

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Endnotes

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