

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS OF 1962

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Introduction

The Cuban Missile Crisis is probably the event in the Cold War that has received the most popular and scholarly attention and this presentation is an attempt to give an overview of what happened during these two weeks in October 1962 and how the US intelligence community handled what the Soviets called the Caribbean crisis and the Cubans, the Crisis of October.

Brief overview of the crisis

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war. The United States armed forces were at their highest state of readiness ever and Soviet field commanders in Cuba were prepared to use battlefield nuclear weapons to defend the island if it was invaded. Luckily, as we know now, war was averted.

In 1962, the Soviet Union was desperately behind the United States in the arms race. Soviet missiles were only powerful enough to be launched against Europe but US missiles were capable of striking the entire Soviet Union. In May 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev conceived the idea of placing intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) in Cuba. A deployment in Cuba would double the Soviet strategic arsenal and provide a real deterrent to a potential US attack against the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Fidel Castro was looking for a way to defend his island nation from an attack by the US. Ever since the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Castro felt a second attack was inevitable. Consequently, he approved Khrushchev's plan to place missiles on the island. In the summer of 1962 the Soviet Union worked quickly and secretly to build its missile installations in Cuba.

In the early morning of 14 October 1962, an American U-2 aircraft flew over western Cuba from south to north. The photographs obtained by the reconnaissance mission, piloted by Major Richard Heyser, produced the first hard evidence of medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) sites in Cuba. The National Photographic Interpretation Centre (NPIC) analyzed the photos the day after and identified a network of surface-to-air anti-aircraft missile (SAM) sites in Cuba.

For the United States, the crisis began on that day but it is early the next day that President John Kennedy was informed of the missile installations. Kennedy immediately organized the Executive Committee (ExComm) of the National Security Council (NSC), a group of his twelve most important advisors to handle the crisis. After seven days of guarded and intense debate within the upper echelons of government, Kennedy concluded to impose a naval quarantine around Cuba. He wished to prevent the arrival of more Soviet offensive weapons on the island. On 22 October, Kennedy announced the discovery of the missile installations to the public and his decision to quarantine the island. He also proclaimed that any nuclear missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack on the United States by the Soviet Union and demanded that the Soviets remove all of their offensive weapons from Cuba.

During the public phase of the crisis, tensions began to build on both sides. Kennedy eventually ordered low-level reconnaissance missions once every two hours. On the 25 October Kennedy pulled the quarantine line back and raised military readiness to DEFCON 2 for the first time in history. On 26 October, the ExComm received a letter from Khrushchev in which he was proposing to remove Soviet missiles and personnel if the US would guarantee not to invade Cuba. The next day, 27 October 1962, was the worst day of the crisis. An American U-2 plane was shot down over Cuba and ExComm received a second letter from Khrushchev demanding the removal of US missiles in Turkey in exchange for Soviet missiles in Cuba. Attorney General Robert Kennedy suggested ignoring the second letter and contacted Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to tell him of the US agreement with the first letter.

Tensions finally began to ease on 28 October when Khrushchev announced that he would dismantle the installations and return the missiles to the Soviet Union, expressing his trust that the United States would not invade Cuba. Further negotiations were held to implement the 28 October agreement, including a demand from the United States that Soviet light bombers be removed from Cuba, and specifying the exact form and conditions of United States assurances not to invade Cuba.

Behind the scenes and motivations

The causes of the crisis have been and are still a subject for debate among historians but with the documentation available today, some light has been put on the motivations of the parties as well as on some “behind the scenes” actions. For example on 15 October 1962, at the very beginning of the crisis, the high-level inter-agency group, the Special Group Augmented (SGA), ordered the acceleration of covert activities against Cuba. In particular, the group agreed that “considerably more sabotage should be undertaken” and that “all efforts should be made to develop new and imaginative approaches with the possibility of getting rid of the Castro regime.” Ten days later, a CIA sabotage team, dispatched to Cuba to destroy facilities at the Matahambre copper mine in Cuba, was prevented from executing the sabotage attack by Cuban authorities.

We have to remember that in October 1962 the United States was waging a war against Cuba that involved several assassination attempts against the Cuban leader, terrorist acts against Cuban civilians, and sabotage of Cuban factories. Also, the Kennedy Administration had convinced the Soviet military that the United States was planning a first strike against its superpower adversary by rapidly building up US strategic forces. In 1962, the Soviet had fewer than fifty bombers and missiles that could hit the United States. The US had more than five hundred. The missile gap Kennedy exploited in his 1960 campaign was real, except that it was in the US favour, not the Soviets.

In such a context, and seeking to placate his generals, Khrushchev thought about installing intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. It was a cheaper way to provide some deterrent against a feared US attack than to build many new intercontinental ballistic missiles that could be launched from the Soviet Union. In fact, the Cubans – as well as the Soviets – really felt a growing threat of US invasion throughout 1961-62. The Russians had the desire to deter an American attack on Cuba and later to get US assurances against an invasion. Former Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara even acknowledged at an historic 1989 meeting with former Soviet and Cuban officials that “if I had been a Cuban leader, I think I might have expected a US invasion. Why? Because the US had carried out what I have referred to

publicly as a debacle – the Bay of Pigs invasion. Secondly, there were covert operations. The Cubans knew that. There were covert operations extending over a long period of time.”

So the Cuban Missile Crisis was only one piece of the puzzle and we must remember that the Americans were concerned by Cuban subversion and threats to US security. Therefore, strategic plans were developed by the United States, and one of the five approved strategic plans at the time, which were based on the US build-up, called for a nuclear first-strike against the Soviet Union. US actions made Soviet national security advisers very nervous the same way the Soviets made the Americans pretty nervous later, during the crisis.

And we learned many years after the end of the crisis that on the night of 26 to 27 October 1962 Khrushchev had received a message from Castro warning of imminent American attack and urging Khrushchev to respond to a full invasion of Cuba by initiating nuclear strikes on the United States – a message that, contrary to Castro’s intent, merely made Khrushchev more determined to settle immediately for the best terms available.

As of the motivations behind the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba, author Raymond Garthoff is of the opinion that Khrushchev had at least three considerations in view: “[1] a need to shore up the strategic balance with the United States, [2] a perceived need to deter an attack by the United States on Cuba, and [3] a belief that a successful missile deployment in Cuba analogous to US deployments around the Soviet Union would give the United States a dose of its own medicine, and would have a powerful positive impact on world politics reinforcing Soviet attempts to gain political parity with the United States.” However, for Kennedy and most of his advisers the central concern was a renewed Soviet push to eject the West from Berlin, and they believed this to be Khrushchev’s principal motivation.

Intelligence inaccuracies and failures

During the crisis, the US intelligence community played a very important role and was providing the ExComm with frequent estimates based on human, signals and imagery intelligence. But despite some great successes in their intelligence gathering and assessments, the CIA, the Defence Intelligence Agency, the NSA and the other members of the intelligence community did perform poorly in certain aspects.

The real shortcoming in the intelligence estimative process was not owing to flaws in intelligence collection, or analysis, but in assessments of Soviet intentions and motivations for placing missiles in Cuba. Believing that the main Soviet purpose was to bolster an offensive Soviet policy on Berlin and other issues, American decision-makers did not recognize the possible key role of an assurance against US invasion of Cuba. US intelligence failed to detect that Soviet motivation and bring it to the attention of American policy makers.

In addition, US intelligence failed to identify the presence of nuclear warheads in Cuba at any time during the crisis. Kennedy did not know that the Soviets had deployed tactical nuclear missiles to Cuba. Had a local Soviet commander fired one of these – like when on 27 October a local Soviet commander violated the Soviet leader’s orders not to shoot down any U-2 surveillance planes by downing Major Rudolph Anderson’s U-2 with a surface-to-air missile – it would have been the start of a general nuclear war. This was Khrushchev’s fear. But as of the nuclear warheads, it was taken as a deliberate assumption that they were there.

The other failures and inaccuracies include the following elements:

- The intelligence community had erroneously estimated on 19 September that the Soviet leaders probably would not station nuclear-armed medium- or intermediate-range missiles in Cuba.
- Intelligence had failed to break the very tight Soviet and Cuban security as to their plans to deploy the missiles.
- The estimate of overall Soviet military personnel in Cuba was raised from the 8,000 to 10,000 overall estimated on 22 October to some 12,000 to 16,000 by 19 November. Only some 25 years later did we learn that the actual size of the Soviet military force in Cuba in October 1962 was 41,902. Intelligence error on the number of Soviet military personnel was not significant in military terms, but it did reflect a more serious shortcoming. Even after the crisis and after the withdrawal of most Soviet personnel, until 1988 it was not realized that in addition to the missile deployment, the Soviet leaders had dispatched a large expeditionary force to Cuba, comprising Soviet air force, air defence, coastal defence, and ground force elements totalling some 42,000 men.
- The US intelligence failed to learn that the Soviet Union had not only sent 60 nuclear warheads to Cuba for the medium- and intermediate-range missile force, but also about 100 tactical nuclear weapons. US intelligence, unaware of the presence of tactical weapons in Cuba, was also of course not aware that from 20 to 23 November Castro pressed to keep the tactical weapons in Cuba under his own, or if necessary Soviet, control.
- US intelligence did not have information as to how much Soviet intelligence knew about US plans and intentions.
- No attention was given to how the Soviets would have regarded the extensive American political and economic isolation of Cuba, covert subversive activities, and active exercise of military contingency plans.
- A report prepared and issued in early February 1963 by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), then headed by James R. Killian Jr concluded that 'there were deficiencies in 'inadequate' clandestine agent coverage'.
- At the end of the crisis, Castro had asked that at least one 'brigade' (one of the four reinforced regiments) be left in Cuba as a token of Soviet support and tripwire deterrent, and the Soviets agreed. US intelligence was not aware of this Soviet agreement to leave one brigade in Cuba. When, 16 years later in the summer of 1979, a Soviet 'combat brigade' was suddenly discovered to be in Cuba, a diplomatic mini-crisis arose before US intelligence belatedly reviewed all available information and concluded that a Soviet brigade had indeed been in Cuba for many years, and probably ever since 1962.

Intelligence findings and successes

But US intelligence performed generally well during the crisis and its findings and successes exceeded in importance the shortcomings and failures. In fact, the intelligence community was already aware in September of an unusual Soviet military deployment in Cuba. A report from a refugee identifying SS-4 missiles near Havana on 12 September and a second report of the sighting by another source on 17 September of the same or another convoy with possible SS-4 missiles contributed to targeting the area around San Cristóbal in Pinar del Río province. On 3 October 1962 the San Cristóbal area was given top priority for attention. It is how the US Air Force reconnaissance missions came to discover the Soviet missiles launch sites on the island. This was therefore an indirect but still important success in human intelligence.

Other great contributions from the US intelligence community to the assessment of the Soviet threat include the following elements:

- The deployment of medium-range missiles in Cuba had been detected and identified in a timely way.
- The nature, location, scale and operational status of the missile deployment were accurately determined despite some Soviet camouflage and deception.
- The US intelligence knew that in addition to their standard non-nuclear torpedoes, each of the four F-class diesel attack submarines sent to Cuban waters also had been loaded with one nuclear-armed torpedo for possible use against US aircraft carriers or other major ships.
- Intelligence was able to verify the removal of the 42 SS-4 medium-range missiles, and later the 42 Il-28 light bombers, assisted by cooperative Soviet measures facilitating US aerial inspection of missiles stored above deck on Soviet ships.
- Throughout the crisis intelligence did a generally good job of monitoring and reporting the changing status of the missile sites in Cuba, other military activities on the island, and the status of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces worldwide.

Conclusion

If the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba had been known in the last week of October, although that fact would have made an invasion potentially more costly, it would not necessarily have deterred it. The danger posed by tactical nuclear weapons would have made more difficult a decision to invade, but countervailing pressure would have been strong to invade in order to ensure elimination of all nuclear weapons on the island.

As of the intelligence work, it can be said that the members of the intelligence community worked well together during the crisis and that there was good communication and cooperation between the intelligence community and the policy makers. Its performance was generally good, in some respects outstanding, despite a few shortcomings. According to the somewhat biased opinion of the NSA, 'the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the maturity of the U.S. intelligence community, especially in its ability to collect and analyze information.'

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Medium-range ballistic missile launch site

