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How Did the Tripartite Relationship Among the United States, the Soviet Union and Cuba Lead to the Cuban Missile Crisis and Complicate Efforts to Resolve the Crisis?

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Abstract

The Washington and Moscow relations deteriorated culminated to the worst during 1962, on the issue of missiles which is commonly known as the Cuban Missile Crisis (CMC) in history. The crisis culminated to the brink of nuclear war between both superpowers. It can be said that it was the part of the Cold War Doctrine in which Cuba played a vital role. It was the head of the Cuba, Mr Fidel Castro who instigated this event which culminated to the brink of the war (nuclear) between the USA and the United Soviets Socialist Republic (USSR). The USSR aim in engaging in the CMC had multi-purposes. The US believed that it would be simple to remove Mr Castro from the political power through various means. However, all the US efforts to remove Castro from the Cuban government failed utterly. Fidel Castro's popularity became more apparent when he sided with the Soviets Union. His government challenged the US and brought the Soviet Union close to pressurise Washington to get a good political deal. This paper, therefore, is designed to understand the political situation of the three countries and their political leadership role in averting the nuclear disaster in the region. Further, it is investigated that to what extent the installation of the Nuclear Missiles in Cuba succumbed to the political disturbance in Washington.

Keywords: Cuba, Missile, Crisis, US, Soviet Union, Nuclear war.

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Introduction

The missile crisis of Cuba (commonly known as the Cuban Missile Crisis) (CMC) of 1962 remained the major event of history which brings Washington and Moscow to the brink of an Atomic war between the two nuclear power countries. It was the “the most dangerous crisis the world has ever seen” (Laffey & Weldes, 2008). The crisis marked the unique place in the history of superpower relations during the cold war period. The crisis brought both the USA and the USSR realises the possibility of nuclear holocaust (Burne, 1985).

The CMC was Cuban matter, Fidel Castro played a significant part at every moment (Laffey & Weldes, 2008). He was an anti-American politician. After assuming the power of Cuba, Fidel Castro adopted more aggressive policies towards the United States. In 1960, Castro nationalised United States property amounting to \$850 million and started establishing relations with China and the Soviet Union. He then became a thorn in the US flesh as they wanted to get rid of him. However, to demolish Castro, the US made a plan ‘Operation Mongoose’ (Rabe, 2000) costing more than \$13million to ‘train the people for guerrilla action’ (Domimiguez, 2000). The CIA offered Mafia \$150,000 to kill Castro (Allison, 1971; Stover, 2007). The more US attempted to push Castro the more he went closer to their rivals (Grathoff, 2002).

All efforts of the United States to remove Fidel Castro went to vain when the Soviets came to rescue him (Burne, 1985). The tension that arises between Havana and Washington since 1959, then got a U-turn and became the Moscow versus Washington when Nikita Khrushchev supported Cuba. Within thirty months Moscow-Havana relations converted Cuba into the Soviets another home ground which ultimately led to the missile crisis of October 1962 (Burne, 1985).

Kennedy’s Policies

The thirteen days crisis was not a product of the accident. Immediately after assuming the power as the president of America in 1960, John F. Kennedy, an Irish-American Catholic was staunch anti-communist from the very beginning (Boyle, 1993), had continued confrontational cold war methods. He also continued the policy of hard-line towards Castro as was maintained earlier (Grathoff, 2002). Not only in the Bay of Pigs Operation of 1961, but also in the Congo, Berlin, and Vietnam, Kennedy, adopted strong measures to strengthen the American influence by curbing the communist expansions (Burne, 1985).

Soviet Motives

The Soviet’s relations with the US were not cordial as both countries were in a state of cold war. Unlike Stalin Nikita Khrushchev the Soviet chairman in 1962 was a risk taker in foreign policy (McCauley, 1998) and during the sixties looking for a logical location in nearby America to place heavy weapons to achieve marvellous foreign policy victory over the United States. He knew the abilities of his country having the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, space technology and the rocket technology which was believed as the best in the world but nothing look likes what it seems? Indeed he wanted to play with the fire. He was also furious and formidable of US Jupiter missiles and military bases in Turkey. When informed of US secret war against Fidel Castro in July 1962, by Raul Castro’s delegation during their Moscow visit, waiting for opportunities to come, Nikita made no mistake when offered to help Cuba against the United States which he accepted and started pumping robust military supply to Castro’s government. Great Britain’s July 1960 ‘quality piece of intelligence’ report was also lurking in his mind which says that it would be dangerous and difficult for America if Soviets placed missiles in Cuba (Hass, 2001; Blight & Welch, 1989). “Cuba was a liberated Third World power which desired Moscow’s protection” Khrushchev has asserted (Burne, 1985). It was then the massive shipments of arms and ammunitions stared which later led to the 13 days crisis or Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. These shipments intended 24 IRBMs (Inter-Range Ballistic Missiles) and 36 MRBMs (Medium Range Ballistic Missiles), 40 aircrafts, 33 IL-28 light bombers. It is said more than

forty thousand Soviet soldiers shipped to Cuba to build-up the massive missiles with nuclear warheads (Allison, 1971; Hass, 2001).

Initially, *Omsk* brought first MRBMs on 8 September, and *Poltava* by 15th, including missile trailers, fuelling trucks, special radar vans, missile erectors, materials for building a nuclear warhead, storage bunkers and other material related in building the nuclear warheads (Allison, 1971). This was the first time Soviets deployed the massive deployment some several thousand miles away from her territory (Hass, 2001).

The Crisis Begins

Kennedy was much apprised when he came to know about the Soviet's move for building the missiles in Cuba about the surface-to-air-missiles (SAMs) on 29th August (Hass, 2001). He even can't believe that the Soviets could make such a movement. On the one hand, he was worried about the Soviet's missiles build-up internationally, on other he was also facing difficult situation domestically as Congress elections were due on November 6. He issued a policy statement and warned Khrushchev of creating trouble in the region which will result in a serious conflict. Further, he warned Soviets that "the United States would do whatever to protect its security and that of its allies". The situation worsened too much extent when the U-2 flight's surveillance confirmed the medium-range-ballistic-missiles (MRBMs) in Cuba on October 5.

Since the very beginning, Khrushchev and his foreign minister deny of the presence of missiles on Cuban soil (Boyle, 1993; Allison, 1971). The Soviet Union lacked in arms and equipment compared to the US. In contrasts to the US, Soviets were having only between 20 and 44 ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) and no SLBMs (Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles) while the United States were having 161 ICBMs and 144 Polaris SLBMs. About nuclear warheads, the United States was also having superiority of seventeen to one over the Soviet Union (Allison, 1971; Hass, 2001).

Khrushchev, therefore, wanted to counter the balance by placing 48 medium and intermediate-range-missiles only 90 miles away from the United States so that they can pose a more significant threat (Hass, 2001). Though the missiles were good at first attack, the Soviet was not capable of continuing the process of war for a long and US was far ahead regarding arms, equipment, technology and economic stability. Khrushchev miscalculated Kennedy as too young, weak and not intelligent enough to respond hastily (Ginglio, 1991).

It was only on 15 October by U-2 surveillance flights only 40 miles above the ground took photographs and showed that Soviets were preparing 1000 miles medium range and 2200 miles intermediate-range missiles near San Cristobal in Western Cuba (Figure 1 & 2).



Figure 1. MRBM Field Launch Site.

Source: The National Security Archive: The George Washington University. Available Online at https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//nsa/cuba_mis_cri/15.jpg



Figure 2. MRBM Field Launch Site.

Source: The National Security Archive: The George Washington University. Available Online at https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//nsa/cuba_mis_cri/21.jpg

Next day Kennedy called the high-level official gathering of the National Security Council (NSC) also called as the EXCOM (Executive Committee). Throughout the month, EXCOM had met secretly and very frequently (Dorn, & Pauk, 2009). In these meeting, 'Invasion of Cuba', 'air strikes', 'Third World War' or 'naval quarantine' became the centre of discussion by EXCOM. Most of the members preferred for the 'naval blockade' and 'air strikes' which later came to be called as 'Doves' and 'Hawks'. The naval blockade was the only option which Kennedy also preferred.

The October crisis became Kennedy's most significant Cold War victory. There were many misperceptions and miscalculations from both sides during the crisis. The US came to know about the Soviets missiles seven months after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion which intended to overthrow Castro. By experiencing the Vienna Summit in 1961, Kennedy decided to order for the naval quarantine and went on national television to announce his decision on 22 October 1962 (Ginglio, 1991). Armed forces went from peacetime to wartime alert position for the blockade. Two days later Strategic Air Command (SAC) was placed with 550 nuclear bomb carrying B-52 for the first time ready for air fight.

Kennedy asserted on October 22 (broadcast to the nation) that any missile attack on the US from the Cuban soil by the Soviets will be considered as the declaration of war and will be responded with full force by the USA. He called for immediate withdrawal under the supervision of United Nations. As per orders by the

President, forces came out of barracks for the quarantine and blocked the Soviets ships before reaching Cuba on 24th. The terrible situation arose, Khrushchev sent an angry message to Kennedy calling the quarantine as the breach of international law and accused Kennedy of raising the crisis for getting the benefit of forthcoming elections of his party (Democratic).

High alert forces waited only for orders of the President, but the crisis deescalated when Kennedy received the letter of Khrushchev on October 26, 1962 in which he agreed to dismantle the missiles from Cuba, only one condition; Cuba will not be invaded, and Fidel Castro's government will not be dismantled. The Soviets miscalculated Americans as too liberal to attack but backed down when the United States started to use the force (Sorensen, 1965).

The massive tension of the Third World War was escalated but not removed as missiles were still in Cuba. As the world has a sigh of relief of the nuclear war, another letter from Khrushchev reached Kennedy on 27th October calls for the withdrawal of the US Jupiter missiles from Turkey. These were hard days for President Kennedy. While analysing Khrushchev's both letters during the EXCOM meeting, news came that the U-2 plan had been shot down by Soviets in Cuba. One officer reminds Kennedy of his orders that in the response of any aggressive move by the Soviets, US president will issue final orders for the invasion of Cuba, which Kennedy strongly rejected. However, he sent a letter to Khrushchev and assured of not invading Cuba. With regards to the Jupiter missiles of Turkey, he stated that those will also be removed but would be not made public (Blight & Welch, 1989; Burne, 1985; Boyle, 1993; McCauley, 1998).

For Americans, the 13 days crisis was the most turbulent period in their history as nuclear missiles were hanging over them from Cuban soil. From Kennedy's address to the nation on 22nd, there was a wave of despondency and desperation for Americans. United States forces went from "peace alert to Defcon 3 (war alert), and strategic air command Defcon 2" (full war footing), five divisions of armed strategic reserves were placed on alert. Aircrafts with nuclear warheads remained ready for only just 'command' from the president.

If the orders had been issued millions of thousands would have lost their lives, and millions had been displaced almost there would have been a catastrophe. It only dashed to the grounds when Khrushchev announced the dismissal of the missiles if promised that Cuba will not be attacked.

Though President was much compelled to issue the orders for final blow when the U-2 flight been shot, he utterly rejected and refused to issue orders instead accepted Khrushchev proposals. Kennedy's this act hailed in America and throughout the world as he saves the world for engaging in the world war III. His calmness, courage and sense entirely talking the crisis won for him the "plaudits of the American press" and hailed him as "the great diplomatic victory". Arthur Schlesinger wrote, "Kennedy's action in the crisis dazzled the world and displayed the ripening of an American leadership unsurpassed in the responsible management of power" (Schlesinger, 2002).

Role of United Nations

As Kennedy received the reports of installations of missiles on Cuban soil, he went on with enormous discussions and meeting with his Executive Council but never let the then UN secretary-Thant. It was only on 20th October that U-Thant came to know about the crisis and two days later on 22nd he was informed about the Kennedy's most important address to the nation about the debacle by his military adviser Maj. Gen. Indarjit Rikhye (Dorn, & Pauk, 2009).

The Kennedy's announcement for naval quarantine shocked the world. Khrushchev responded with full vigour saying "quarantine is a gross violation of the charter of the United Nations and is the necked interference in the domestic affairs of Cuba and demanded its withdrawal or will lead the catastrophic

consequences for peace throughout the world” (Dorn, & Pauk, 2009). There was a wave of tensions throughout the world about the start of the new world war. Thant played a significant role in de-escalating the gravest nuclear problem between two superpowers. His personality won over the Kennedy who later wholly relied on him. His recognition of Thant that “he has put the world deeply in his debt” is the clear manifestation of his recognition. From the time of quarantine to the withdrawal of missiles, he played a vital role.

Thant sent messages to both leaders urging for a moratorium of two to three weeks for suspension of weapon to Cuba and the quarantine methods. The objective was to delay the process to get time so that it should dismantle the debacle peacefully. Praising Thant’s initiatives, Khrushchev cabled on 25th October that “I appreciate your initiative and understand your concern over the situation which has arisen in the Caribbean, for the Soviet government to regards it as highly dangerous and as requiring immediate intervention by the United Nations. I agree with the proposal which is in the interest of peace” (Dorn, & Pauk, 2009). Later, when the Soviets turned their ships to their shore, Kennedy then relied on the Thant.

Soviets Gains

The Soviets Union at the end WW-II emerged as the new superpower along with the US. Rivalry with the US emerged due to many factors since then. Both raised quality as well as the quantity of the arms and ammunition. Each of them wanted their influence over the other. Although the Soviet Union was far behind the United States regarding weapons and wealth, Khrushchev’s decision of placing the missiles had two strategic objectives. First to get US’s Jupiter missile from Turkey, secondly to get a good deal for Cuba (Burne, 1985; Hass, 2001). At one place Khrushchev asserted: “We carried weapons there at the request of the Cuban government . . . Stationing a couple of Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Cuba. These weapons were in the hands of Soviets military men . . . Our aim was only to defend Cuba”. Moreover, the missiles are “. . . Warning to those who would like to solve international problems by force and not reason” (Burne, 1985).

Conclusion

The philosophy behind installing the nuclear missiles was to show to the US that Cuba is not alone in the political turmoil, the Soviet Union shall be there to protect her allies. Behind the curtain along with the objectives mentioned above of Khrushchev, there were many other objectives too (Schlesinger, 2002). As he wanted to get rid of the 15 American Jupiter missiles from Turkey in which he became successful but the US never made it publically till 1968 (Boyle, 1993; McCauley, 1998) and by that way showed the equal power of two states. It was only then finally the crisis averted when Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles from Cuba (Nicholas, 2003). The CMC had great historical importance from which the world leaders can get the experience of politically resolving the nuclear issue. Both countries played a vital role during the CMC. The decision of not going to engage in the nuclear war can be considered as the greatest which benefited both countries and to the world as well. The nuclear crisis averted, but it paved the way forward between both states. Later in next year, both countries signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the first disarmament agreement of the nuclear age.



Figure 3. Range of Missiles.

Source: Unimaps



John Kennedy
US President



Robert McNamara
US Secretary of
Defence



McGeorge Bundy
US Nat Security
Advisor



Maxwell Taylor
Head of SGA



Adlai Stevenson
US ambassador to
UN



Nikita Khrushchev
USSR Premier



Anatoly Dobrynin
USSR Ambassador
to the US



Fidel Castro
Leader of Cuba



Andrei Gromyko
USSR Foreign
Minister



Sithu U-Thant
Acting UN
Secretary-General

Figure 4. Prominent Personalities involved during the Cuban missile crisis

Source: <http://images.google.co.uk/images>

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