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The Missile Crisis Fifty Years Later: What We Should Have Learned

Philip Brenner

The October 1962 trilateral confrontation over ballistic missiles in Cuba brought the world closer to a nuclear war than any other crisis. More may have been written about this engagement than any other, in part because of its horrific possibilities, but also because it seemed to end so well. The United States and the Soviet Union did not go to war; the Soviets removed the missiles—the apparent source of tension; the United States reportedly promised not to invade Cuba. Only one soldier died in combat—a U.S. airman piloting a U-2 surveillance plane which the Soviets downed with a surface-to-air missile (SAM) on October 27. Naturally we want to learn from our successes as well as from our mistakes, and by most accounts—of which Americans have produced the largest number—the missile crisis was a great success.

Three guidelines quickly became the enduring lessons of the crisis: (1) Crises can be managed; (2) Toughness, resolve, inflexibility—in short, a steel will—are essential to achieve one’s goals; (3) Superior strength must undergird any diplomacy. College professors, high school teachers, textbooks, films, news stories, and television programs have repeated the lessons so often that they have acquired law-like status, nearly impervious to contradictory evidence that scholars have uncovered in the last quarter century. Generations of so-called national security officials absorbed the lessons so thoroughly that they have often used them unwittingly as the basis of their reactions to new problems.¹

Yet the traditional lessons are based on major distortions about what actually happened in 1962, and when followed they have tended to lead policy makers to make decisions that resulted in extended wars. A far different picture of the crisis has emerged from declassified documents and critical oral histories accumulated largely in last 25 years in all three countries.² If officials want to derive appropriate guidelines from the crisis—that is, lessons that could enable them genuinely to reduce the likelihood of violent conflict—then they need to include the Cuban and Soviet perspectives.

1. “Eyeball to Eyeball”: The Traditional U.S. Perspective

Thirteen Days

The view Graham Allison articulated in 1971 summarizes nearly all early analyses of the crisis: “For thirteen days in October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union ‘eyeball to eyeball,’ each with the power of mutual annihilation in hand....During the crisis, the United States was firm but forbearing. The Soviet Union looked hard, blinked twice, and then withdrew...”³ From this perspective, the crisis involved only the two superpowers, and lasted less than two weeks: from October 16, when President John Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union was installing ballistic missiles in Cuba, until October 28, when Premier Nikita Khrushchev announced the withdrawal of missiles in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba.⁴

In fact, prior to October 16, 1962, U.S. officials had become concerned about the increasing Soviet military build-up in Cuba. While the Central Intelligence Agency judged that the Soviets were installing exclusively defensive equipment in Cuba,⁵ the President asked the Defense Department in late August to examine ways of removing the Soviet military presence in Cuba.⁶ Meanwhile, several senators repeatedly charged that the Soviet Union was sending troops and offensive weapons, perhaps even ballistic missiles. Kennedy responded to the charges on September 4 by asserting there was no evidence of "Aground-to-ground" missiles in Cuba. He then warned, "Were it otherwise the gravest issues would arise."⁷ Congress followed up with a joint resolution (Public Law 87-733) on October 3 approving the use of force against Cuba. The same day—nearly two weeks before the ballistic missiles were discovered—the Commander-in-Chief of Atlantic forces ordered that U.S. warships be in place by October 20 in preparation for a blockade of Cuba.⁸

By establishing a fixed marker—no offensive weapons in Cuba—Kennedy unknowingly created the potential for the dilemma in which he ultimately found himself engulfed. He drew the line at no offense weapons, Kennedy's special counsel Theodore Sorensen explained in 1987, "confident that the Soviet Union had no intention of going beyond it."⁹

At one level, Kennedy's problem was electoral and personal. He was concerned that Republicans might make gains in the November 1962 congressional elections, which would diminish the likelihood that the next Congress would pass legislation he intended to propose. That would further reduce his own possibility of re-election in 1964, which already was far from certain. Kennedy had been elected with a plurality of fewer than 200,000 votes in 1960, and in 1962 he was not the popular president that he would become as a legend.

In drawing a kind of Maginot Line, Kennedy also created circumstances that led him and his advisers to escalate the significance of the missile emplacement. They viewed the Soviet action as a provocative test of the US determination to resist Soviet pressure, which made it a major national security threat, because the credibility of US resolve was central to the strategy of deterrence.¹⁰ Kennedy believed that the United States could avoid using nuclear weapons only if its enemies

expected that US leaders had the will to use them. The loss of US credibility, Kennedy believed, made it more likely that antagonists might be encouraged to risk pushing the United States to the point where he would be forced to use nuclear weapons in order to demonstrate his intestinal fortitude.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's decision to send ballistic missiles to Cuba seemed like such an adventurous risk. Kennedy surmised the Soviet leader had judged that Kennedy was unsure of himself, on the basis of their June 1961 summit meeting in Vienna and Kennedy's refusal to send in US forces during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.¹¹ The president's team of advisers, a group he dubbed as the "Executive Committee of the National Security Council" or "ExComm," assessed that Kennedy's seeming weakness had led Khrushchev to take the risk of sending missiles to Cuba, in order to give himself a "chip" he could later give up in negotiations with the United States over Berlin.¹²

Three Lessons

With this frame of mind, US policy makers—and scholars influenced by them—derived their three lessons from the crisis quite logically. First, the successful outcome indicated that future crises could be managed, if they were handled as well as Kennedy had orchestrated decisions during the missile crisis. That would require the utmost secrecy to be maintained, so that during the critical early days of a crisis, congressional demagogues, media pundits, or the public would not pressure the president and his advisers. In order to preserve secrecy, the president must limit the number of people who have knowledge of the crisis. If he informs Congress—by describing a problem as a "crisis" the U.S. executive gives himself latitude to ignore Congress—the president should consult with at most a handful of trusted legislators. In addition, social psychologist Alexander George explains, Kennedy followed the rules of successful crisis management by limiting "his objective and the means employed on its behalf."¹³

Second, Kennedy had remained steadfast in his position that the Soviets had to withdraw the ballistic missiles. "If we have learned anything from this experience," State Department intelligence analyst Raymond Garthoff wrote in a memo for the Under Secretary

of State on October 29, 1962, “it is that weakness, even only apparent weakness, invites Soviet transgression... firmness in the last analysis will force the Soviets to back away from rash initiatives.”¹⁴ At the same time, Kennedy seemed to have bargained away almost nothing—a promise not to invade Cuba—in order to end the confrontation.

Third, the US show of force seemed to have intimidated the Soviets. In response to Kennedy’s speech and the US move to Defense Condition-2 (DEFCON-2), they took only minimal steps to become ready for a military engagement. They did not increase any pressure on Berlin.¹⁵ The lesson is evident in a November 14, 1962 Defense Department review of the crisis which asserted that the Soviets withdrew the missiles because they saw they were going to face conflict in Cuba and lose.¹⁶ For this reason, James Nathan astutely observed, “force and toughness became enshrined as instruments of policy.”¹⁷ The approach commonly became known as Acoercive diplomacy,” a term coined by Alexander George to describe a strategy that “involves the threat of force or an exemplary limited use of force as a means of restoring peace in a diplomatic crisis.”¹⁸

2. “The smell of scorching hung in the air”: The Soviet Perspective¹⁹

Caribbean Crisis

Like U.S. officials, the Soviets viewed the crisis principally as a clash between the two superpowers. But they preferred to call it the *Caribbean Crisis*. While Cuba figured into their reasons for bringing the missiles there, the actual confrontation for them occurred on the high seas, in the Caribbean.²⁰

Unlike U.S. officials, the Soviet narrative of the missile crisis begins well before October 16, 1962. In his memoirs, Khrushchev suggests it dated from April 1961, when the United States failed to overthrow the Cuban government with the Bay of Pigs invasion. This is consistent with his claim that the primary reason for placing missiles in Cuba was to protect it from a U.S. invasion: “We knew that the Americans would not reconcile themselves and invariably would find

the opportunity and justification for a new aggression... Something had to be done to protect Cuba.”²¹

Khrushchev’s second motivation for deploying missiles to Cuba was to redress the significant imbalance in nuclear forces that favored the United States. In 1962, the United States had 5,000 strategic nuclear warheads, and the Soviet Union had 300. The Soviet Union may have had as few as ten Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs); the United States had more than 150 ICBMs, in addition to intermediate range missiles in Europe that could reach the Soviet Union. With 36 missiles based in Cuba that had a 1,400 mile (2,200 km) range, and another 24 missiles each with a 2,800 mile (4,500 km) range, the Soviet Union would be able to defend Cuba and “also put the United States under the same threat that the U.S. and NATO missiles in Turkey and Italy posed to the USSR.”²²

The Soviet premier may have been less concerned about the US-USSR nuclear disparity than the Soviet generals. But Khrushchev was compelled to respond to their demands for a faster ICBM build-up than he wanted when they pointed to initial Kennedy Administration decisions to increase the Defense Department budget, especially for strategic forces, to statements by U.S. officials about the desirability of the “first use” of nuclear weapons, and to the resumption of nuclear weapons tests early in 1961.²³ Their concern mounted further on October 21, 1961, when Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric pointedly announced that the missile gap—which Kennedy charged during the 1960 campaign had placed the Soviet Union ahead of the United States—in fact was in the U.S. favor. Moreover, despite this lead he said, the United States would continue to build up its forces at a rapid pace.²⁴ In response to Gilpatric’s speech Khrushchev ordered the detonation of a 50 megaton hydrogen bomb—the largest any country ever exploded.²⁵

From the Soviet perspective, the denouement of the crisis on October 27 and 28 was a consequence of their fear that the two super powers were moving close to the brink of a nuclear war which could obliterate humankind, not of their fear that they would lose a battle on Cuban soil or suffer conventional defeat in a war.²⁶ The incident that most provoked Khrushchev’s anxiety was the destruction of a U-2 reconnaissance plane over the eastern part of Cuba by a Soviet SAM.

The United States had been sending two to four U-2s daily to take photos of the missile sites since October 16, and there had been no Soviet attempt to fire on the planes.²⁷ But in the face of an expected U.S. attack, Lt. Gen. Stepan Grechko, commander of the Soviet air defense in Cuba, requested permission from the Kremlin on October 26 to use “all available antiaircraft means” against U.S. forces. He had not received approval on the morning of October 27 when Cuban leader Fidel Castro gave a rousing speech and ordered Cuban antiaircraft to open fire on any U.S. planes, though Cuban guns could not reach the U-2s which flew at more than 20,000 meters. Soviet soldiers sensed the anticipated battle was commencing, and in the exhilaration of the moment Grechko ordered three SAMs to be launched at a U-2.²⁸

At that point Soviet leaders sensed they could no longer control events with verbal orders from Moscow. This worried them because Soviet ballistic missiles were not configured with permissive action links, essentially two “keys.” A local commander could disobey or misinterpret an order—as one did in shooting at the U-2—launching ballistic missiles in the heat of a battle. The Soviets also had shipped more than 100 tactical nuclear missiles to Cuba, each with warheads that had one-third the destructive capability of the Hiroshima bomb, to be used against invading U.S. forces.

Khrushchev also was concerned about what Castro might do to increase the likelihood of a nuclear conflagration. Early on October 27, 1962 the Cuban leader sent a cable to Khrushchev warning that a U.S. air strike or an invasion was likely in the next 24 to 72 hours. Castro estimated that an invasion was “less probable although possible.” He then advised ominously that if the United States did invade Cuba

the danger that that aggressive policy poses for humanity is so great that following that event the Soviet Union must... eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.²⁹

Khrushchev believed that the Cuban leader had “lost his bearings.”³⁰ He advised Castro on October 28 not to be carried away by sentiment...by

provocations, because the Pentagon's unbridled militarists...are trying to frustrate the agreement and provoke you into actions that could be used against you. ” In a message two days later he told the Cuban leader that “you proposed that we be the first to launch a nuclear strike against the territory of the enemy... Rather than a simple strike, it would have been the start of a thermonuclear war.”³¹

Soviet Lessons

Soviet officials came away from the confrontation believing that crises could not be managed and instead must be prevented. They moved away from pressuring the West on a Berlin settlement, and in 1963 the Soviet Union and the United States successfully negotiated the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.³² Soviet concerns about losing control over their nuclear weapons also led them to resolve never again to place nuclear missiles in a country so far away from their home territory.³³

As a step towards preventing future crises, Khrushchev sought to improve communications between U.S. and Soviet leaders with a “hot line” between the White House and the Kremlin, so that a future misunderstanding could be corrected before it escalated into a crisis. Yet Khrushchev’s emphasis on preventing crises, did not dissuade other Soviet officials from seeing him as reckless, and his deployment of missiles to Cuba as a failure. The Communist Party Central Committee used that decision as one reason for removing him from power in October 1964.³⁴

The second lesson that Soviet officials took from the crisis was that the Soviet Union lacked sufficient military strength to restrain U.S. arrogance, which they viewed as the ultimate cause of the crisis. They assessed that only Soviet nuclear parity could curb the U.S. tendency to act aggressively. Once Khrushchev was ousted, the military moved quickly to close the missile gap.³⁵ Even Khrushchev acknowledged this lesson in his memoirs, noting, “The time is now past when the imperialist countries could issue their dictates and invade any place they wanted with impunity...”³⁶

Still, Soviet officials were surprised and dismayed by the anger that Cuba’s leaders expressed about the outcome of the confrontation.

The Soviets concluded that Castro was insulted both by the lack of consultation with him over the terms of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement, and by learning about the accord from a radio announcement. Years later, a former Soviet general still argued that “on the weekend of 27-28 October, there was no time for consultation with Havana.”³⁷ Similarly, former Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko remarked in 1989 that ideally the Soviets might have tried to extract more concessions from the United States to deal with “problems that interested Cuba...But, all the same, it was necessary to preserve the ally of time.”³⁸

While Soviet policy makers may have gained from the crisis a new appreciation for the danger of nuclear weapons, and a better understanding of the United States, they seemed unable—or unwilling—to derive much empathy for the Cuban point of view. The crisis formally ended on January 7, 1963 with two letters to U.N. Acting Secretary-General U Thant. One was a joint letter from the United States and the Soviet Union. The other one was from Cuba alone.³⁹

3. Conflict Averted But Crisis Endures: The Cuban Perspective

October Crisis

Cubans refer to the missile crisis as the “October Crisis.” The name embodies several elements of the Cuban perspective. According to Cuban political scientist Carlos Alzugaray Treto, Cubans at first used “Caribbean Crisis” and “October Crisis” interchangeably. But over time, he said, they “began to settle for ‘crisis de octubre,’ because there were so many crises with the U.S. that what defined each crisis was the month in which it happened and not the place.”⁴⁰ A second explanation for the Cuban appellation is that Cubans have used it to indicate that their understanding of the crisis differs from the Soviet interpretation. The name thus highlights both Cuba’s ongoing conflict with the United States, which Cubans argue led to the confrontation over the missiles, and Cuba’s claim that the Soviet Union betrayed it. From Cuba’s perspective, Soviet and U.S. interests

defined the terms by which an actual conflict was avoided. The two superpowers neither addressed nor resolved the underlying causes of the crisis, the U.S. war against Cuba.⁴¹

Cubans tend to locate the start of the missile crisis in 1959, when U.S. hostility towards the Cuban Revolution turned to active measures against Cuba state and society.⁴² In March 1960 these became a focused policy as President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the covert operation that became the Bay of Pigs invasion. Three months later he terminated Cuba's sugar quota, effectively ending Cuba's ability to sell its principal export to its largest market. Seventeen days before leaving office, on January 3, 1961, Eisenhower severed diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Cuban officials anticipated that Kennedy would retaliate against Cuba after the CIA-sponsored exile invasion failed in April 1961. Castro remarked in 1992,

But Girón, the Bay of Pigs, was undoubtedly the prelude to the October crisis, because, for Kennedy, this was a severe political blow. He was very saddened and embittered by these events, and as of then, the Cuban issue had a different, special connotation for him. This was reflected in the relations between our two countries...The idea was that in one way or another he [Kennedy] had to put an end to the revolutionary process in Cuba.⁴³

Their expectations were on the mark, as the Kennedy Administration decided in May 1961 to make a more determined effort to bring down the revolutionary government.⁴⁴

Then, in November 1961, Kennedy authorized Operation Mongoose, a four-part plan explicitly intended to overthrow the Cuban government.⁴⁵ It included: (1) support for terrorist activities by counter-revolutionary forces inside Cuba (bombing factories and stores, burning fields, contaminating exports, and attacking literacy brigade teachers); (2) economic warfare (a formal embargo that Kennedy ordered in February 1962); (3) military intimidation (large naval exercises in the Caribbean that included practice invasions); (4) political demarches designed to isolate Cuba from potential

supporters in the Third World. In January 1962 the United States succeeded in suspending Cuba's membership in the Organization of American States. In addition, a separate covert operation, to assassinate Castro and other Cuban leaders, was started before the Bay of Pigs invasion, and lasted until at least 1966.⁴⁶

Largely because of his expectation of a U.S. invasion, Castro sought a military treaty with the Soviet Union under which "an attack on Cuba would be the equivalent to an aggression against the USSR." He did not ask for missiles, which he said were "not indispensable... here to defend Cuba."⁴⁷ In response Khrushchev offered ballistic missiles in May 1962.

By accepting the offer to place ballistic missiles on the island, Cuban officials took a calculated risk. First, the decision made Cuba a U.S. strategic target in the event of a major war. Yet from Cuba's perspective, the impending U.S. invasion was the equivalent of a nuclear holocaust—in the sense that it would have devastated the country. Second, there was the potential that Cuba would be perceived in Latin America as nothing more than an outpost of the Soviet Union. But the benefits of the decision seemed to be that the missiles, and associated Soviet military personnel, would deter a U.S. invasion, and that Cuba's close collaboration with the Soviets would serve, in effect, as an endorsement of Cuba's advocacy of hemisphere-wide revolution that Castro had voiced in the February 1962 Second Declaration of Havana.⁴⁸

While Castro wanted to make the missile agreement public, Khrushchev refused to do so. He told Castro's emissaries, Che Guevara and Emilio Aragonés, that revealing the plan in advance would lead the United States to intervene in Cuba. The Soviet leader wanted to confront his adversary with a *fait accompli* that it could not successfully challenge.⁴⁹

Ultimately Khrushchev's position became a source of Cuban anger and distrust. In 1968 Castro said, "we believe that the whole problem should have been dealt with in a different manner: Cuba is a sovereign, independent country, and has a right to own the weapons that it deems necessary...From the very outset it was a capitulation, an erosion of our sovereignty and our right to respond to that

campaign.” However, he acquiesced in the secrecy, no doubt because of Khrushchev’s intransigence, though he said later that in 1962 he believed the Soviets “had a much better grasp of the overall situation than we did and therefore we left the decision to them...”⁵⁰

Once the United States discovered the missiles, Castro was far less accepting of supposedly superior Soviet tactical prowess than he had been earlier. Anticipating that Kennedy’s October 22 address would be about Cuba, Castro ordered a rapid mobilization of the island’s forces before the speech was delivered. “The Nation on a War Footing,” was the headline emblazoned across the next day’s *Revolucion*, the official government newspaper. As nearly 400,000 Cuban soldiers and militia members prepared for a U.S. invasion over the next few days, Castro counseled Soviet generals about the placement of SAMs and about the need for anti-aircraft weapons to defend them.⁵¹

Castro’s October 27 cable, which supposedly led Khrushchev to believe the Cuban leader had “lost his bearings,” is remembered very differently by Castro, and the different interpretations contributed to his bitterness towards the Soviet Union. He explained to Khrushchev on October 31, 1962 that he was offering the Kremlin the same sort of tactical advice he was giving Soviet generals in Cuba. “I did not suggest to you,” he wrote:

that in the midst of the crisis the USSR attack, but rather that in the aftermath of an imperialist attack, the USSR act without vacillation and certainly not commit the error of allowing the enemy's chance to discharge against her a nuclear first strike....⁵²

Castro assumed, incorrectly but understandably, that the United States knew the Soviet nuclear warheads had reached the island, and that the Soviets also had transported tactical nuclear missiles to Cuba. He reasoned that if the United States launched an invasion, it would be expecting the Soviet military to respond with nuclear weapons. Under those circumstances, he calculated that the United States would opt to use nuclear weapons first.

Imagine Castro’s surprise then to hear on October 28 that the Soviets had agreed to remove the missiles. He did not find the Soviet

explanation credible, that Khrushchev did not consult him because there was a lack of time given the urgency of the situation. In fact, Khrushchev made the decision to remove missiles three days earlier, which gave him sufficient time to inform Castro about the change in the Soviets' position, and to consult with him about strategy. The Soviet fear of nuclear war was real, but lack of time was not the reason for failing to consult with the Cubans. A more compelling explanation is that the Soviet leaders thought that if they involved Castro in negotiations, a peaceful resolution of the crisis would have been more difficult. They believed the Cuban leader was not ready to compromise.⁵³ In his memoirs, Khrushchev scornfully remarked, "In those days, you know, Fidel was very fiery....he hadn't even thought about the obvious consequences of his proposal [to launch a preemptive nuclear strike], which placed the world on the brink of destruction."⁵⁴

In addition, Soviet leaders judged that if they included Cuba's demands, their negotiations with the United States would have been even more complicated. Yet if the Soviet leaders had been less dismissive of their Cuban allies, they might have found it relatively easy to include at least one of Cuba's demands in the compromise, that the United States be required to negotiate directly with Cuba.⁵⁵ Kennedy would have found it difficult to justify an attack—which could have led to nuclear war—on the grounds that the United States was unwilling to talk to Cuba. But Cuba's "problems," in Gromyko's disparaging phrase, simply were not seen as serious enough to warrant negotiation, though the problems were nothing less than a well founded fear of U.S. aggression. A Soviet demand for direct negotiations between Cuba and the United States would have acknowledged that Cuba's conflict with the United States was the source of the crisis—as Khrushchev claimed it was—and that Cuba had the sovereign right to negotiate its own fate.

In accepting Kennedy's demand that international inspectors confirm the missiles' removal, Khrushchev cavalierly ignored Cuban sovereignty. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had asked Cuba for permission to do the inspections on Cuban territory. Meanwhile, the United States continued surveillance flights in Cuban airspace. Castro's insistence that the flights cease was one of

five points he addressed to U Thant, Acting Secretary General of the United Nations on October 28. The demands were an expression of Cuba's position on what was necessary to end the crisis.⁵⁶

Such was the circumstance when Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan arrived in Cuba on November 3. He had two purposes in meeting with the Cuban leadership. First, he hoped to assuage their anger. He also wanted to achieve Cuban acquiescence in some form of international inspection, because that issue had become an obstacle to concluding the crisis. Castro was absolutely unyielding, telling Mikoyan on November 4, "We cannot take that step. If we agree to an inspection, then it is as if we permit the United States of America to determine what we can or cannot do in foreign policy. That hurts our sovereignty."⁵⁷

Adding injury to insult, Khrushchev volunteered to remove all Soviet troops. Castro noted scornfully in 1968 that Kennedy's demands did not include those divisions, which were not offensive or strategic weapons." This decision, Castro said, "was a freely granted concession to top off the concession of the withdrawal of the strategic missiles."⁵⁸ Moreover, Khrushchev acquiesced to Kennedy's demands to take back both obsolete IL-28 bombers and Komar patrol boats which had been delivered to Cuba to ward off attacks from Operation Mongoose operatives.

The Soviet retreat on the IL-28s and Komars, despite a firm promise to Cuba that they would not be removed, was the final confirmation of Soviet treachery from Castro's viewpoint. Five years later he explained that Cuba found itself in "a special circumstance of... an aggressive and emboldened enemy, an ally on the retreat and... our resolve to prevent relations with that ally from deteriorating to the point of rupture."⁵⁹ Thus for Cuba, the crisis was never fully resolved. "An international conflict was avoided," Castro observed in 1992, "but peace had not been achieved. For our country, there was no peace."⁶⁰

Cuba's Lessons

Cuba's dilemma was daunting at the end of the missile crisis. As the locus for the nuclear confrontation that U.S. leaders believed

came harrowingly close to a devastating war, it had become a mortal enemy of the United States in the very heart of the traditional U.S. sphere of domination. The Cubans surmised that any appearance of weakness would stimulate a U.S. impulse to rid itself of this thorn in the Caribbean. While Cuba had strengthened its military after the Bay of Pigs invasion, it still lacked a meaningful air force, navy, and anti-aircraft weaponry, and it had even had lost the obsolete IL-28 bombers. Meanwhile, the Soviets demonstrated to the Cuban leaders that in a crunch they cared more about maintaining a positive relationship with their superpower adversary than they did about their small socialist ally. "We realized," Castro told the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee in 1968, "how alone we would be in the event of a war."⁶¹

At the same time, the Cuban economy continued to suffer from the loss of its principal market and supplier, the United States. As the U.S. embargo impacted Cuba's ability to buy spare parts, buses lay idle, electrical generators broke down, and even small chores of daily life became monstrous tasks. Trade with the Soviet Union provided some relief, but it was far from sufficient to enable Cuba to remake its whole economy.

Under these circumstances, Cuba derived three lessons from the crisis around which it organized policies for many years: (1) it could trust neither superpower; (2) it needed to intensify its internal security; (3) it needed to wage revolutionary struggles in the Third World.

Cuban leaders viewed U.S. no-invasion guarantees as ploys, and Soviet promises as hollow. Both countries had ignored Cuba's interests during the crisis and its immediate aftermath. Terrorist attacks resumed even US forces were at DEFCON-2 in November 1962.⁶² And Castro's suspicion that the Soviets were treating Cuba as a bargaining chip were confirmed early in 1963 during a trip to the Soviet Union, when he learned inadvertently that Kennedy had agreed secretly to remove U.S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for Soviet ones in Cuba.⁶³

Trusting neither superpower, Cuba attempted to codify the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement in a U.N. Security Council protocol that also would have addressed Cuba's desire to end the U.S. economic

embargo and to engage the United States in negotiations over the Guantanamo Naval Base.⁶⁴ But the United States refused to consider negotiating the proposed protocol seriously, and the Soviets did not insist on it.

The intensification of internal security followed logically from Cuba's perception of the threat it now faced. In fact, a crackdown on dissent had started even before the October Crisis, because Castro believed that "national unity" was key to the revolution's survival.⁶⁵ His determination to unify the country, for example, led the revolutionary government in 1961 to close down the vibrant literary review, *Lunes de Revolución*, which had gained international acclaim from the world's leading *avant garde* authors.⁶⁶

Confronted with the reality that they would need to defend the country without allies after the missile crisis, Cuba intensified its support for armed struggle in Latin America (and later in Africa). By fanning the flames of revolution in a wide variety of locations, Cuban leaders believed they could force the United States to "overextend" itself suppressing insurrections in many places.⁶⁷ Cuba's embrace for revolutionary movements also served a second purpose. Cuba hoped to diversify its markets and suppliers, to avoid repeating with the Soviet Union the kind of dependency it had suffered as a neo-colonial appendage of the United States. That meant supporting potential allies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who forged their identity in struggle, and shared a commitment to revolution.⁶⁸

4. Three Perspectives, Three New Lessons

The United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba developed and acted upon distinctive lessons after the crisis that did neither help them to achieve their goals nor served their interests well. In the case of the United States, Michael Dobbs aptly observes, "U.S. leaders drew the wrong lessons from the Cuban missile crisis in the case of both Vietnam and Iraq—the two greatest military disasters in modern American history."⁶⁹ The Soviet Union's patronizing approach to Cuba led to significant tension between the two countries for the next thirty years which had an impact on its efforts to achieve

“peaceful coexistence” with the United States. Its determination to achieve strategic parity also sapped the country of needed spending on internal development. Cuba’s concerns about U.S. subversion grew into an obsession with national security that distorted its development priorities. As some threats became exaggerated, fear replaced hope, and petty bureaucrats were able to engage in ego-maniacal acts of repression. Its forays into Africa were costly, while its support for armed struggle nearly led to a rupture with the Soviet Union, on which the viability of the revolution had come to depend.⁷⁰

Based on this fifty-year experience, and an appreciation for the distinctive way each of the three countries perceived the crisis, consider three new missile crisis guidelines that we can derive from knowledge we have now of the actual way the three leaders behaved during the crisis: (1) Crises cannot be managed, and therefore they should be prevented; (2) Flexibility and communication between adversaries is essential to ending a crisis without shedding blood; (3) The threat to use or the use of force is more likely to engender or deepen a crisis than to prevent a crisis or end it peacefully.

(1) Crises must be prevented because they cannot be managed: Beginning with his statement at a 1989 critical oral history meeting on the missile crisis until the end of life twenty years later, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was eloquent in disputing the belief that the missile crisis was an example of how a future nuclear crisis could be resolved if Kennedy’s style of decision making were followed. In the Academy Award winning documentary *The Fog of War* he said,

It was luck that prevented nuclear war...Rational individuals came that close to the total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today. The major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations.⁷¹

Consider two examples from October 1962 that affirm McNamara’s assessment:

- The Soviets were storing 90 nuclear warheads in a cave near the port of Mariel, just west of Havana, though U.S. intelligence had

not identified the cave as a likely storage site. Had the United States invaded Cuba, 23,000 marines would have landed in the area surrounding Havana after large scale bombing. The bombing likely would have led Soviet military commanders to mount warheads on their tactical nuclear missiles, and perhaps even on the ballistic missiles, in order to prevent the Americans from capturing the nuclear weapons.⁷²

- On October 27, a U.S. navy commander followed standard operating procedures to force Soviet submarines in the quarantine area to surface. One of those submarines carried a nuclear tipped torpedo that had the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb. Reportedly the submarine captain went berserk when the U.S. depth charges exploded, and he nearly launched the torpedo.⁷³

(2) Find ways to be flexible, communicate with the adversary: Kennedy was both more flexible than early post-mortems suggested, and more sensitive to the Soviet need to salvage something positive from the crisis. For example, in order to avoid a direct confrontation with the Soviets, on October 25 he permitted a Soviet tanker (*Bucharest*) to proceed through the quarantine.⁷⁴ Between October 23 and November 20 Kennedy and Khrushchev communicated with each other almost daily. Perhaps most important, the U.S. president promised to remove ballistic missiles from Turkey—one of Khrushchev's demands—and was prepared to accept a public trade of the missiles in Turkey and Cuba if that were necessary to prevent a conflagration.⁷⁵ The appropriate lesson we should draw from this behavior is that flexibility, compromise, and regular communication with an adversary are essential for both the peaceful outcome of a crisis and a decreased chance that a misunderstanding will escalate into a crisis.

(3) Avoid the use or threat of force: As we include Cuba's point of view, we can appreciate that the U.S. threat to use force, and the "limited force" that U.S.-supported counter revolutionaries already had used in committing terrorist acts, led Cuba to search for drastic ways to defend itself. The terrorist attacks heightened Cuba's expectations of a U.S. invasion, and such an invasion was as threatening to Cuba as a possible nuclear strike was to the United States. The threat of force

—both the apparent U.S. preparations for an assault on Cuba and the U.S. build-up of its strategic forces— led the Soviets to propose installing missiles in Cuba.

But even the Soviets had difficulty in empathizing with the Cuban perspective. During Mikoyan's November 1962 mission to Cuba, the Soviet Deputy Premier could not understand why the Cuban leaders were angry that the nuclear confrontation had ended without violence. He said to them, "let our enemies die. We must live and live. Live like communists...A maneuver is not the same as a defeat..." This was not a choice the Cubans felt they had. The Soviet Union was a large country. It could absorb defeats. "Sometimes, in order to take two steps forward," Mikoyan advised, "it is necessary to take a step back."⁷⁶ But for Cuba, a small country, a defeat by the other superpower could mean annihilation.

In this light, a collateral lesson should be that leaders must appreciate that each country has a distinct calculus of vulnerability, and asymmetry adds to the difficulty one state has in accurately assessing another state's calculation. This lesson is especially important for the United States. As the most advanced military power in the world, it perceives events as virtually no other country does.

The ultimate lesson fifty years later is that we should stop focusing on the famous thirteen days of the missile crisis. That short period was a dramatic moment in a confrontation that lasted far longer than two weeks. At a minimum, the possibility of nuclear war hung over the world by a hair-like string until November 20, when the United States lowered the alert level of its strategic air forces from DEFCON-2, after Cuba agreed to allow the Soviet Union to retrieve bombers, patrol boats, and cruise missiles it had delivered to Cuba. In addition, we should move the starting date back to at least April 1961 and the Bay of Pigs invasion. As we extend the crisis beyond the thirteen days, we necessarily bring Cuba back into the Cuban Missile Crisis, and appropriately focus on the U.S. threat to Cuba's sovereignty as the central problem.

NOTES

1. Michael Dobbs (2008). "Why We Should Still Study the Missile Crisis," *Special Report* No. 205, U.S. Institute for Peace, June 2008; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein (1994). *We All Lost the Cold War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 14, 120-130, 320-322.
2. The U.S. government released many of its documents in response to Freedom of Information Act requests from the Washington, DC-based National Security Archive. Information about the National Security Archive's document sets is available at: <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>>. Between 1987 and 2002, James G. Blight organized or co-organized five major meetings about the crisis, and developed the methodology of "critical oral history." See: James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang (1995). "Burden of Nuclear Responsibility: Reflections on the Critical Oral History of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* vol. 1, pp. 225B64.
3. This summary of the U.S. understanding of the crisis is repeated in the revised edition: Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow (1999). *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, second edition. New York: Longman, p. 77. Dean Rusk originally used the metaphor "A eyeball to eyeball" during the crisis. See, Dean Rusk (1991), as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It*. New York: Penguin Books, p. 237.
4. Kennedy administration officials enshrined the thirteen days in their memoirs. For example: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1965). *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, chapters 30-31, and Robert F. Kennedy (1969). *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: New American Library.
5. CIA Intelligence Memorandum, "Recent Soviet Military Aid to Cuba," August 20, 1962, in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh (1992). *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*. New York: New Press, Document No. 11, pp. 57-60; "Memorandum on Cuba," August 20, 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, ed., Mary S. McAuliffe (1992). HRP: 92-9. Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, Document No. 5, pp. 19-20.

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7. "Statement by President John F. Kennedy on Cuba, September 4, 1962," U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin*, Volume XLVII, No. 1213 (September 24, 1962), p. 450.
8. *CINCLANT Historical Account of Cuban Crisis - 1963*, Serial: 000119/ J09H, 29 April 1963, in *CMC Document Set*, Document No. 003087, pp. 39-40; James G. Hershberg (1992). "Before the 'Missiles of October': Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike Against Cuba?" in *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, ed. James A. Nathan. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 252-254.
9. James G. Blight and David A. Welch (1990). *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Second Edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 248.
10. Scott D. Sagan (1989). *Moving Targets: Nuclear Strategy and National Security*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Robert Jervis (1989). *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
11. William Taubman (2003). *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*. New York, Norton, pp. 493-500; Michael R. Beschloss (1991). *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963*. New York: HarperCollins, pp. 224-228.
12. Michael Dobbs (2008). *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 216-217; Sheldon M. Stern (2003). *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 68-69; Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, pp. 100-107.
13. Alexander L. George (1991). *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*. Washington, DC: US Institute for Peace, p. 36.
14. Reprinted in Raymond L. Garthoff (1989). *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Revised Edition. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, p. 216.

15. Nikita Khrushchev (2007). *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev, trans. George Shriver. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 338; James M. Goldgeier (1994). *Leadership Style and Soviet Foreign Policy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 265-268; Central Intelligence Agency, "The Crisis, USSR/Cuba," Memorandum, October 24, 1962, in McAuliffe, *CIA Documents*, Document No. 87, p. 296.
16. Chang and Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, Document 81, p. 310.
17. James A. Nathan (1975). "The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now," *World Politics*, vol. 27, No. 2 (January), p. 269. Also see: Richard Ned Lebow, "The Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated: Why Was Cuba a Crisis?" in Nathan, *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, p. 178.
18. Samuel W. Lewis, "Foreword," in George, *Forceful Persuasion*, p. ix.
19. Khrushchev used this phrase in a January 1963, as quoted in Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, p. 355.
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21. Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, p. 321.
22. Anatoli I. Gribkov and William Y. Smith (1994). *Operation ANADYR: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Chicago: edition q, p. 13; Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali (1997). *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*. New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 170-171.
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24. "Address by Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, before the Business Council at The Homestead, Hot Springs, Virginia," October 21, 1961, Unclassified Speech No. 1173-61, in *CMC Document Set*, Document No. 00115; "Soviet Now Seen Facing 'Missile Gap' As U.S.

- ICBMs Take Clear-Cut Edge,” *Washington Post*, October 26, 1961, p. A2.
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 27. Dino A. Brugioni (1991). *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: Random House, p. 461.
 28. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation ANADYR*, pp. 66-67.
 29. The full text of the letter is reprinted in James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn and David Welch (2002). *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*, enlarged paperback edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 509-510.
 30. Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, p. 348.
 31. Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 510-511, 514.
 32. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation ANADYR*, pp. 167-168; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 133-134, 154-156.
 33. Mark Kramer, “The ‘Lessons’ of the Cuban Missile Crisis for Warsaw Pact Nuclear Operations,” in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 110; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 184.
 34. Goldgeier, *Leadership Style and Soviet Foreign Policy*, p. 72; Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, pp. 353-355.
 35. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 182-183; Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, pp. 180, 194-195.
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 39. Carlos Lechuga (1995). *In the Eye of the Storm: Castro, Khrushchev, Kennedy and the Missile Crisis*, Trans. Mary Todd. Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, pp. 176-181.

40. James G. Blight and Philip Brenner (2002). *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 256, n 81.
41. Fidel Castro and Ignacio Ramonet (2007). *Fidel Castro: My Life*, trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Scribner, p. 271. In 1968, Castro gave a 12-hour secret speech about the crisis to the first full meeting of the full Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The speech is reprinted in Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, Chapter 2. Also see: Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 53-317; Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm*, and Tomás Diez Acosta (2002). *October 1962: The 'Missile' Crisis as Seen from Cuba*. New York: Pathfinder Press; Ramón Sánchez-Parodi (2011). *Cuba-USA: Diez tiempos de una relación*. Melbourne: Ocean Press, pp. 152-155; Philip Brenner, "Thirteen Months: Cuba's Perspective on the Missile Crisis," in Nathan, *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, pp. 187-217.
42. Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm*, pp. 13-14.
43. Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 196.
44. "Action at N.S.C. Meeting, Friday, May 5 (Recommended Decisions for NSC Meeting on Cuba)," May 5, 1961, and "Record of Actions by the N.S.C. at its 483rd Meeting," May 5, 1961, *CMC Document Set*, Document Nos. 00074 and 00075.
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46. Senate Select Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots*, pp. 71-135; Central Intelligence Agency, Inspector General, "Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro," May 23, 1967; National Archives and Records Administration, JFK Assassination System, Record Series: JFK; Record Number: 104-10213-10101; Agency File Number: 80TO1357A;

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47. Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 206.
 48. Fidel Castro (2007). "Manifesto for the Liberation of the Americas: 'The Second Declaration of Havana'," in *Fidel Castro Reader*, eds. David Deutschmann and Deborah Shnookal. Melbourne: Ocean Press.
 49. Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, p. 331; *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 83-84, 349-351.
 50. Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, pp. 41-42.
 51. Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 211.
 52. Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, p. 55; Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 517-519. Also see Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm*, pp. 87-89.
 53. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation ANADYR*, p. 69.
 54. Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, p. 348.
 55. Castro and Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: My Life*, p. 278; Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm*, p. 106.
 56. Castro declared that the only effective guarantee "that there will be no aggression against Cuba" would be ending: (1) the U.S. economic embargo; (2) U.S. subversive activities against Cuba; (3) "piratical attacks" from U.S. bases; (4) violations of Cuban airspace; (5) U.S. presence at Guantanamo Naval Base. Chang and Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 241-242; Diez Acosta, *October 1962*, pp. 179-180, 256-271.
 57. "Mikoyan's Mission to Havana: Cuban-Soviet Negotiations, November 1962," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 95; Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm*, chapter 8.
 58. Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, pp. 57-58. Also see: Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, p. 332.
 59. Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, p. 61.

60. Blight, et al, *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 297.
61. Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, p. 60.
62. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 122; Diez Acosta, *October 1962*, p. 187; Desmond Fitzgerald, "Memorandum for the Record," *FRUS, 1961-1963*, vol. XI, Document No. 348, June 19, 1963, pp. 837-838; Senate Select Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots*, p. 173.
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68. H. Michael Erisman (2000). *Cuba's Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, pp. 42-47.
69. Dobbs, "Why We Should Still Study the Cuban Missile Crisis," p. 4.
70. Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, Chapters 3 and 4.
71. Quoted in James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang (2005). *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 59.
72. Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*, pp. 125, 170-177.
73. William Burr and Thomas S. Blanton, eds., "The Submarines of October: U.S. and Soviet Naval Encounters During the Cuban Missile Crisis," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 75, October 31, 2002, p. 3; accessed November 18, 2011 at: <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB75/index.html>>.
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75. James Hershberg (1995). "Anatomy of a Controversy: Anatoly F. Dobrynin's Meeting With Robert F. Kennedy, Saturday, 27 October 1962," in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring), pp. 75, 77-78.
76. "Mikoyan's Mission to Havana," pp. 108, 159.

ABSTRACT

**The Missile Crisis Fifty Years Later:
What We Should Have Learned**

The traditional lessons derived from the 1962 missile crisis were based on major distortions about what actually happened in 1962. A far different picture has emerged from declassified documents and critical oral histories accumulated largely in the last 25 years.

Based on this new information, the article examines the way each of the three countries perceived the origins and resolution of the crisis, and the distinct lessons each derived from the experience. The examination leads to three new lessons: (1) Crises must be prevented because they cannot be managed; (2) adversaries in a crisis must be flexible and communicate with each other in order to reduce the possibility of violent conflict; (3) the use or threat of force is not an appropriate way to reduce the chance of violent conflict. In addition, two general observations emerged: (1) The addition of the Soviet and Cuban perspectives to the traditional understanding of the missile crisis extends the appropriate time frame from 13 days to at least 19 months; (2) the extended time frame leads to an analysis that focuses on the U.S. threat to Cuba's sovereignty as the central problem of the crisis.

RESUMEN

A cincuenta años de la crisis de los misiles: ¿Qué deberíamos haber aprendido?

Las lecciones tradicionales que dejó la crisis de los misiles de 1962 están basadas en una gran distorsión de lo que realmente ocurrió en 1962. La gran cantidad de documentos desclasificados y relatos fundamentales transmitidos verbalmente que se acumularon durante los últimos 25 años cuentan una historia totalmente diferente.

Sobre la base de esta nueva información, el artículo explora la forma en que cada uno de estos tres países percibió el origen y la resolución de la crisis, y las inconfundibles lecciones que resultaron de la experiencia. El análisis lleva a tres nuevas lecciones: 1) las crisis deben ser prevenidas, ya que no pueden ser manejadas; 2) los adversarios en una crisis deben ser flexibles y comunicarse entre sí para reducir las posibilidades de llegar a un conflicto violento; 3) el uso o amenaza de uso de fuerza no es la manera apropiada de reducir las posibilidades de que se desencadene un conflicto violento. Asimismo, surgen dos comentarios generales: 1) la incorporación de las perspectivas soviética y cubana al entendimiento tradicional de la crisis de los misiles prolonga el período de tiempo correspondiente de 13 días a por lo menos 19 meses; 2) este plazo extendido conduce a un análisis que se centra en la amenaza estadounidense a la soberanía de Cuba como el problema central de la crisis.

SUMMARIO

A 50 anos da crise dos mísseis: o que deveríamos ter aprendido?

As lições tradicionais deixadas pela crise dos mísseis de 1962 são baseadas em uma grande distorção do que realmente ocorreu naquele ano. A grande quantidade de documentos desclassificados e de relatos fundamentais transmitidos verbalmente que se acumularam durante os últimos 25 anos contam uma história totalmente diferente.

Tendo como base esta nova informação, o artigo explora a forma como cada um dos três países envolvidos percebeu a origem e a resolução

da crise, e as inconfundíveis lições que resultaram da experiência. A análise nos leva a três novas lições: 1) as crises devem ser prevenidas, já que não podem ser manejadas; 2) os adversários em uma crise devem ser flexíveis e comunicar-se entre si para reduzir as possibilidades de chegar a um conflito violento; 3) o uso ou a ameaça de uso da força não é a maneira apropriada de reduzir as possibilidades de eclosão de um conflito violento. Desse modo, surgem dois comentários em linhas gerais: 1) a incorporação das perspectivas soviética e cubana ao entendimento tradicional da crise dos mísseis prolonga o período de tempo correspondente de 13 dias para, pelo menos, 19 meses; 2) este prazo estendido conduz a uma análise que enfoca a ameaça dos Estados Unidos à soberania de Cuba como o problema central da crise.