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The Missiles of Havana: The View from Castro's Cuba

ABSTRACT

En octubre de 1962, la llamada Crisis de los Misiles, enfrentó a los Estados Unidos y a la Unión Soviética en un peligroso juego nuclear del que ambos, años después y pese a haber tenido que negociar una salida, se declararían victoriosos. Pero ¿qué hay de Cuba? A pesar de que los misiles soviéticos fueron instalados en la isla, la historiografía ha prestado poca atención al rol que Cuba y Fidel Castro jugaron durante la crisis. Con posterioridad a 1962, tres seminarios abocados a la resolución de dicho interrogante fueron realizados en Cambridge, Moscú y Hawk's Cay (Florida). Lo que sigue a continuación es un intento por reconstruir, a partir de la información recolectada en estos seminarios, los acontecimientos de 1962 desde el punto de vista de La Habana.

Palabras Clave: Crisis - Misiles - Estados Unidos de América - Unión Soviética - Cuba - Seminarios.

In October 1962, the so-called Missile Crisis confronted the United States and the Soviet Union in a dangerous nuclear game that both, years later and despite having had to negotiate a way out, would declare themselves victorious. But what about Cuba? Despite the fact that Soviet missiles were installed on the island, historiography has paid little attention to the role that Cuba and Fidel Castro played during the crisis. After 1962, three seminars aimed at solving this question were made in Cambridge, Moscow and Hawk's Cay (Florida). What follows is an attempt to reconstruct, from the information gathered in these seminars, the events of 1962 from a Havana point of view.

Key Words: Missile Crisis - United States - Soviet Union - Cuba - Seminars

Introduction

Most analyses of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis devote considerable time to the actions taken by the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had brought the missiles to Cuba. The United States found

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them, and for two weeks in October 1962, the world held its breath as the two superpowers played a dangerous game with nuclear weapons. Both sides jockeyed for position and leverage, and finally ended up working together to negotiate a settlement allowing both sides to claim victory. But lost in all this seemed to be Cuba, which was, after all, where the missiles were.

Little has been written about the role Cuba played in this episode. While it seems simplistic, a legitimate question to be asked is just: what was Cuba's role? Looking at the issue from the Soviet side, placing missiles in Cuba made sense. A mere ninety miles away from the US, it leveled the playing field in what had been an uneven arms race favoring the US. For years' American missiles placed in Turkey had the USSR living in danger of attack. Now Americans would know the same feeling. But the diplomatic and the political path the missiles took to get to Cuba, and ultimately to leave, and the degree to which the Cuban government played in the episode is what needs further examination.

From a big picture point of view, there's been no shortage of information about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Since 1962 and beyond, scholars and diplomats have weighed in on the issue. Over the years, seminars at Cambridge, Moscow, and Hawk's Cay, Florida, all of which featured the military and diplomatic players at the time, have given historians valuable first-hand information. The 1987 Hawk's Cay conference featured a reunion of the late President John Kennedy's Executive Committee, which dealt with the crisis: Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon, Under-

Secretary of State George Ball, and Presidential Adviser Ted Sorenson. The Cambridge conference added Soviet officials to the mix. The 1989 conference in Moscow provided a third and heretofore missing ingredient. This time, American and Soviet representatives were joined by their Cuban counterparts, including Sergio Del Valle Jimenez, who in 1962 was Chief of Staff for Cuba's armed forces. Another important figure in the Cuban delegation was Raphael Hernandez, Deputy Head of the Cuban Institute of American affairs. The revelations of the Moscow and Hawk's Cay gatherings were further clarified by a 1992 gathering in Havana.

Taken as a whole, these encounters offer historians a better understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis in order to tell the story of the Missiles of Havana.

The View from Moscow

There may, arguably, be three reasons why Soviet missiles arrived in Cuba. First and foremost was a response to US hostility. Since Fidel Castro's climb to power in 1959, and his subsequent embrace of socialism, the United States had made his removal a cornerstone of its Latin American foreign policy. The Eisenhower administration reduced America's purchase of Cuban sugar, then broke diplomatic relations and later imposed an economic blockade, which is still in force today. That was followed by the Kennedy administration's failed attempt to depose Castro during the April, 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. The attack, regardless of its humiliating outcome, had emboldened

Castro. It had allowed him to consolidate his hold on Cuba. According to Rafael Del Pino, Castro's former Air Force advisor, Castro now felt ready to fight the war he had always wanted to wage against the United States...that would assure him a place in history.¹

Moscow drew other lessons from the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev was willing to gamble that Washington would take no further action against Cuba, even if it learned the country was bristling with Soviet weapons, even nuclear ones. Exploiting Castro's hatred of the US, his ambition to go down in history, and America's apparent reluctance to engage militarily, Moscow found itself with a priceless opportunity to locate a strategic base close to its primary adversary.² It would be a bold move, but one which might redress the balance of nuclear power.

Such a move might contribute to a second reason for Moscow's decision to dispatch military aid; socialist promotion. Both Castro and Khrushchev were on record as claiming the weapons were sent to show other socialist states that the Soviet Union could be counted on to help its friends. Castro described the aid as a way to "strengthen the Socialist Camp".³ Khrushchev saw Cuba as a litmus test upon which other nations in the region flirting with socialism would base their ultimate decision:

"We had to do everything in our power to protect Cuba's existence as a Socialist country, and as a working example to other countries of Latin America".⁴

Military aid to Havana would also raise the international stature of the Soviet Union in their conflict with China for the hearts and minds of the socialist world.⁵ But why missiles? They had a range of up to two thousand miles, a first-strike capability, and fell into the offensive weapons category. Additionally, the secret delivery of the missiles raised questions about the Soviet Union's true intentions. Prior to the discovery by the Cuban people that their country had become a missile launching pad, only Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, and Pedro Enrique Oropesa del Portal, head of the Cuban Anti-Aircraft Defense Force, knew they were coming.⁶ Were they coming just to defend Cuba? Or was there a larger geo-political agenda in play?

Castro attended the 1992 Havana conference and said he agreed to the missiles not for their defensive qualities, but rather to help Moscow gain "a more favorable balance of power arrangement with the West".⁷ But Aleksandr Alekseev, the Soviet ambassador to Cuba during most of the 1960's, and who may have known as much about Cuba as anyone in the Kremlin at the time, didn't think Castro was

¹ Rafael Del Pino. *Inside Castro's Bunker: The True Story of Fidel Castro's Inner Circle as Told by One of His Most Trusted Generals*; Washington, Self Published, 2012.

² Rafael Del Pino. *Inside Castro's Bunker*; Op cit., página 79.

³ Raymond Garthoff. *Reflections on The Cuban Missile Crisis*; Washington, Brookings Institution, 1989.

⁴ Nikita Khrushchev. *Khrushchev Remembers*; Boston, Little, Brown, 1970.

⁵ Ernesto, F. Betancourt. "Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro: A Participant's view of the Cuban Missile Crisis" en *Society*, 35 (5), 1998, páginas 77 y 86.

⁶ Rafael Del Pino. *Inside Castro's Bunker*; Op cit., página 80.

⁷ James Blight & David Welch. *On the Brink*; New York, Hill & Wang, 1989.

keen on the idea. He told attendees at the Havana conference about a meeting with Khrushchev, who wanted to know how Cuba might react to receiving missiles. He told him that “the first line of defense of the Cuban Revolution was the solidarity of Latin America and other progressive countries, and if we installed missiles, I thought this would provoke a rejection of the Cuban Revolution from the rest of the hemisphere”.⁸ So, if Castro was less inclined to see offensive nuclear weapons as a deterrent, yet willing to take them as a gesture of socialist solidarity, giving Moscow parity with the US in the process, while raising concerns in the Kremlin that they might undermine the legitimacy of Cuba’s revolutionary image while making it a target for attack, why take the risk?

Rafael Del Pino thinks he might know. Writing in 2012, Del Pino suggested that after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro found himself and Cuba in need of long term financial assistance. If taking Soviet nuclear weapons and surviving a US-USSR showdown would secure Moscow’s help, he was willing to take that chance.⁹

Whatever the real motive, nearly everything about the missiles’ journey to Cuba was cloaked in secrecy, casting doubt on Moscow’s true intentions. That said, it’s worth mentioning that the transfer was helped in part first by US inattention, and later disbelief that Moscow would run such a risk. American

leaders were in such a state of denial about the possibility that Soviet missiles might be in Cuba they rejected out of hand eye-witness evidence of their arrival and installation. The Russians had never positioned missiles outside its own borders.¹⁰ Moscow kept a tight rein on its nuclear arsenal, entrusting it only to the KGB, the Soviet Union’s national security agency. Even the Soviet military was never allowed near the weapons, let alone control them until the mid-1960s.

In March 1962, less than a year after the Bay of Pigs debacle, the Central Intelligence Agency landed a team of anti-Castro Cuban agents on the island. The insertion, code named Operation *Cobra*, was part of the agency’s larger Operation *Mongoose*, a comprehensive effort to again depose Castro.¹¹ The agents were to organize other anti-Castro Cubans, develop an intelligence network to relay information to the US, and, in time, strike the first blow against the Havana regime.

But in August, an agent reported peculiar activity going on at the Pinar de Rio port of Mariel. A large Soviet cargo ship had arrived, and all non-essential personnel, including dock workers and customs officials were sent home. They were replaced by other workers, who, according to the agent, were either Czech or Russian, who winching flatbed trucks into the ship’s holds. When the trucks were lowered back on the dock, the agent

⁸ James Blight & David Welch. *On the Brink*; Op cit.

⁹ Rafael Del Pino. *Inside Castro’s Bunker*; Op cit.

¹⁰ Bruce Miroff. *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy*; New York, David McKay, 1976.

¹¹ Sean D. Naylor. *Operation Cobra: The untold story of how a CIA officer trained a network of agents who found*

the Soviet missiles in Cuba recuperado de <https://news.yahoo.com/operation-cobra-untold-story-cia-officer-trained-network-agents-found-soviet-missiles-cuba-100005794.html>. Consultado el 30/01/2019.

reported they were loaded, and the cargo completely draped in canvas. The trucks were then driven off under an armed escort. The agent concluded his report with “it is probable that the trucks were loaded with rockets...”¹²

The missiles which flooded Cuba that summer were part of Operation Anadyr. It had been ordered by Khrushchev and planned by General Anatoly Gribkov, head of the main Operations Directorate of the Soviet General Staff.¹³ US Central Intelligence Agency director John McCone drafted a memo compiling “approximately 60 reports” on “stepped up” Soviet bloc military support of Cuba. That included thousands of Soviet military personnel, tons of equipment, and the deployment and installation of SA-2 (surface to air) anti-aircraft missiles. And now, the possibility of medium-range missiles. Much of what McCone had in terms of high-grade intelligence came from agents on the ground, but stories of the Soviet build-up were also coming from returning tourists, diplomats and newspaper reporters.¹⁴ But the reports were dismissed by CIA analysts who believed the Soviet Union would never place missiles beyond its borders, and especially in Cuba. To either corroborate or disprove what human assets were reporting would take aerial reconnaissance. The CIA had been conducting U-2 spy flights over Cuba twice a month since February 1962 without finding anything unusual. But the August 29 flight was different. At least eight SA-2

installations were identified, all nestled in the same general vicinity in western Cuba.

The connection the CIA was yet to make was that the SA-2s were deployed as a defensive cordon for the missiles which were now beginning to arrive. Evidence of their installation could have been recorded by follow-up U-2 flights. But an SA-2 had shot down Gary Powers’ 1960 U-2 during a flight over the Soviet Union, and that left planners nervous. So, all missions over Cuba were routed away from the western part of the island, away from the SA-2 sites, and, ultimately, away from the incoming missiles. It provided perfect cover for the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Khrushchev’s goal was to deliver the missiles to Cuba and have them operational before the US became aware of their existence, thereby presenting Washington with a new reality.

Despite the absence of the U-2 flights, the US still had plenty of evidence of the missiles’ existence. On September 18, one of the CIA’s Operation Cobra agents now reported that an even larger area in central Pinar del Rio province had been sealed off by the Soviets. The report gave the grid locations of four small towns that marked the boundaries of the area and concluded with the comment that “very secret and important work is in progress, believed to be concerned with missiles”.¹⁶ Finally, on October 14, a U-2 was dispatched over western Cuba. The hundreds of photos taken during the reconnaissance

¹² Idem.

¹³ James Blight & David Welch. *On the Brink*; Op cit.

¹⁴ Rafael Lima. “Cuba During the Missile Crisis: Fifty years later, Cubans remember preparing to fight the Americans” en *Air and Space Magazine*, Volumen 27

recuperado de www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/cuba-during-the-missile-crisis-31990119/?all.

¹⁵ Sean D. Naylor. *Operation Cobra*; Op. Cit.

¹⁶ Idem.

operation confirmed what human assets on the ground had been saying for weeks; the presence of medium-range ballistic missiles.¹⁷ Eight days later, President John Kennedy told Americans-and the world-about the missiles. The rest of October was more about two super-powers finding a way back from the brink of nuclear war than it was about Cuba.

If the missiles were being just sent to defend Cuba or even as a gesture of socialist solidarity, why the cover-up? Why not publicly announce the missiles were coming? The US had done so when it deployed missiles to Europe. A public declaration from Moscow, that it sought to bolster Cuba against the hostile intentions of the United States, might have scored world public opinion points. Full disclosure might also have won over nations flirting with the idea of establishing socialist regimes. And, there were other ways to defend Cuba, or allow Moscow to demonstrate its commitment to socialism without risking war with the US. University of Miami historian Jaime Suchlicki has argued that "... if they (Moscow) had wanted to protect Fidel, they would have made him part of the Warsaw Pact, and made the island a protectorate".¹⁸

Not that transparency would have helped advance socialism in the Western Hemisphere. By 1962, Cuba was an isolated state. It had been expelled from the Organization of American States, and at least fifteen Latin American nations had severed

diplomatic relations. Add to that the weight the US brought to bear, and the idea that anything Moscow could have done to further the socialist cause in the region would have had a hard time gaining traction. And this might also give supporters of the defense/promotion of socialism theory pause: among the duties of Soviet troops sent to Cuba during the summer and fall of 1962 was "the security of the missile sites".¹⁹ If Khrushchev's goal was to install and activate the missiles without US knowledge, the only other possible threat to the secrecy (as well as the safety) of the weapons might be the Cuban government. "Moscow reserved the exclusive right to decide if and when to make use of the nuclear weapons placed in Cuba" according to del Pino.²⁰

Putting missiles in Cuba may have been less about scoring a hit on the United States, but rather, perhaps scoring points for the Soviet Union. Rash actions by Castro would not be tolerated. Khrushchev's memoirs described him as "hot-headed".²¹ And, after the missile crisis had passed, Che Guevara, a member of Castro's inner circle gave an interview to the *London Daily Worker* and said had Castro gained control of the missiles, "We would have used them against the very heart of the U.S."²² If Moscow's real reason for the placing the missiles in Cuba had little to do with promoting socialism or even defending Castro from the Americans, but instead were intended to leverage the United States, the last thing it would want would be for the missiles

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Rafael Lima. "Cuba During..." Op. Cit.

¹⁹ Raymond Garthoff. *Reflections on The Cuban...*; Op. Cit.

²⁰ Rafael Del Pino. *Inside Castro's Bunker...*; Op. Cit., página 78.

²¹ Rafael Lima. "Cuba During the Missile Crisis..." Op. Cit.

²² Idem.

left in Castro's control to use them for something other than what Moscow intended.

However, deploying missiles in the name of Cuban defense is still worth considering, if only momentarily. American efforts to get rid of Fidel Castro had been intensifying after he took power, and culminated in the 1961 Bay of Pigs misfire. But both Washington and the Moscow had been jockeying for influence over Cuba for some time. The US had been among the first to recognize Castro when he came to power. There had also been a long-standing arrangement between America and Cuba which allowed nearly three million tons of Cuban sugar to be sold in the US at a price considerably above that of the world market. But the balance of power began to shift in February 1960, when Soviet Foreign Minister Anastas Mikoyan arrived in Cuba, the first visit by a top Kremlin official, during which a Soviet-Cuban trade agreement was signed. That was followed by a trip to Eastern Europe by Che Guevara, who lined up at least \$100 million in credits.²³

The Soviet Union was gradually becoming an economic alternative to the US. Washington had tried to work with Castro, but the two sides hit an impasse on economic aid and a satisfactory compensation package for nationalized foreign holdings.²⁴ Meanwhile, Moscow began to supply crude oil to Cuba in return for Cuban products. American oil companies, which owned Cuba's refineries, and acting on the advice of the US

government, refused to refine the crude. In response, Cuba nationalized the refineries, the American-owned sugar plantations and all foreign banks. Washington retaliated by eliminating the Cuban sugar deal, breaking off diplomatic relations, and imposing an embargo on most US exports.²⁵

During the 1960 Presidential election, Democrats used the fall of Cuba into communist hands to bash Republicans, in much the same way the GOP had used Mao Zedong's victory in China to trash Democrats a decade earlier. John Kennedy called Castro's revolution, happening on the Republican's watch, the opening World Communism was looking for to gain a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. He took Eisenhower and the Republican Party to task for allowing Communism to spread throughout Latin America. At a campaign stop in October, Kennedy even suggested the US take steps to aid what he referred to as "Cuban fighters for freedom".²⁶ The provocative rhetoric must have resonated with Eisenhower: as he prepared to leave office, he gave the go-ahead for what ultimately become the Bay of Pigs operation. The bungled job portrayed Castro as a near victim of American meddling and moved him closer to the Soviet camp.

Undeterred by the embarrassment of the Bay of Pigs, the US stepped up its military efforts with a series of military exercises, all of which seemed, at least to Cubans, to be dress rehearsals for another invasion. "Lantphibex

²³ Harry E. Vanden & Gary Prevost. *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game*; New York, Oxford University Press, 2018.

²⁴ Wayne Smith. *The Closest of Enemies*; New York, W.W. Norton, 1987.

²⁵ Esteban Morales Dominguez & Gary Prevost. *Cuba: A Critical History*; Lanham, Md, Lexington Press, 2008.

²⁶ Arthur Schlesinger. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in The White House*; Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1965.

I-62 involved 10,000 marines storming beaches in Puerto Rico in April 1962. (Tomlin, 2016) The following month, 40,000 marines, soldiers, and sailors were assaulting Osnlow Beach in North Carolina, part of Operation Quick Kick. Covert enterprises, such as Operations Cobra and Alpha-66 were also rolled out during the spring and summer of that year. All of these did not go unnoticed in Moscow, which began moving to formulate a response. It recalled Sergei Kudryavtsev from his post as ambassador to Cuba and replaced him with Aleksandr Alekseev. Castro liked him, and so did the Kremlin; he'd been its top KGB operative in Cuba for several years, nimbler and more adroit than the oafish, ham-fisted Kudryavtsev, whom Castro hated.²⁷

The perceived US belligerence towards Cuba convinced Moscow that vigorous measures would have to be taken to defend it. A defensive arms package, including troops, the surface to air missiles, shore defense batteries, and even MiG fighters and bombers were in the pipeline. But the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) didn't seem to be part of the order. Afterthought? Error of omission? It may depend on who you ask. In an early edition of his memoir, Khrushchev claimed he decided to add the missiles and the nuclear warheads which went with them while on a state visit to Bulgaria in May 1962.²⁸ And Castro told his biographer Tad Szulc that while he agreed it was necessary to make it clear to the U.S. that an invasion of Cuba would imply a war with the Soviet Union, there was no direct Cuban request for the missiles. The idea of the missiles was

Soviet.²⁹ Somewhere along the line, Cuban leaders were persuaded to take the missiles, because in July, 1962, Raul Castro was in Moscow to sign a weapons deal which included offensive nuclear weapons.³⁰

So, according to Castro, the ICBMs, which began arriving with all the other Soviet military equipment was Moscow's idea. Khrushchev is on record of proposing them, and when he heard no protests about the missiles and their warheads, he might have inferred that silence as consent. But if Cuban fears about another US invasion were mounting in the spring of 1962, the ICBMs, once discovered, would have raised those fears to a near certainty, putting Cuba in even greater danger than before. It would be hard to justify the missiles as defensive in nature, given their nuclear payload and their long-range capabilities. That classification would be even harder when stacked against the more traditional defensive weapons the Soviet Union had provided. And if they were to be treated as weapons for self-defense, shouldn't there have been Cuban military personnel operating and defending the sites, and not Soviets, as revealed by agents working for the Central Intelligence Agency? Finally, why was there no public documentation between Moscow and Havana concerning the deployment? In other words, terms and conditions such as how long the missiles were to remain, or when they might be removed.

The Cubans recommended a five-year agreement (although never signed), followed

²⁷ Tim Naftali & Aleksandr Fursenko. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy: 1958-1964*; New York, W.W. Norton, 1997.

²⁸ Nikita Khrushchev. *Khrushchev...*; Op. Cit.

²⁹ Tad Szulc. *Fidel*; New York, William Morrow, 1986.

³⁰ Rafael Del Pino. *Inside Castro's Bunker...*; Op. Cit.

by a public announcement. Transparency might have bolstered claims that Moscow's intentions were to defend an ally, and world public opinion might have tilted against the US if it had taken steps to interfere. And lastly, although perhaps, most fundamentally, why Cuba in the first place? The Russians had never positioned missiles outside its own borders.³¹ Moscow kept a tight rein on its nuclear arsenal, entrusting it to the KGB. Even the Soviet military was never allowed near the weapons, let alone control them until the mid-1960s. Socialist allies would find themselves waiting even longer.³²

Everything up to this point makes it hard to conclude that the missile shipments to Cuba were a full-throated gesture of Socialist solidarity, or even a marginal commitment by Moscow to defend an ally, but rather a calculated move to redress its balance of power problem with the United States. Nikita Khrushchev himself may have proved to be the best source on the issue, writing about American missiles in Italy and West Germany putting the Soviet Union in grave danger. But he seemed especially worried about the deployment of US missiles to Turkey. It seemed he thought the time was right to put the shoe on the other foot: "...the Americans had surrounded our country with military bases, and threatened us with nuclear weapons...now they would have enemy missiles pointed at them...our missiles would have equalized the balance of power".³³

Moscow wanted to rectify the imbalance, but ICBMs were expensive and took time to produce. In the meantime, placing existing missiles in Cuba seemed an effective work-around. As had been the Soviet experience, the Americans would now find themselves directly threatened.³⁴ And, not surprisingly, their first-strike capability would increase by an astounding 80 per-cent.³⁵

The View from Havana

Once the US discovered the missiles in mid-October 1962, Cuba became a bit-player in a super-power showdown which gripped the world for nearly two weeks. Much has been written about the Moscow-Washington exchange which played out as the US announced its discovery of the missiles, its insistence that the missiles threatened national security, and the steps it intended to take to eliminate the threat. The back-channel negotiations which ultimately led to a defusing of the situation have become diplomatic legend. On the table were demands the US publicly renounce any intention to invade Cuba in return for the removal of the missiles. Also, on the table were the status of US missiles in Turkey, which were quietly removed after the uproar died down. Few knew about the significance of the Turkish-based Jupiter missiles, including Fidel Castro. In fact, the entire negotiations which ended the Cuban Missile Crisis were conducted without Castro's

³¹ Bruce Miroff. *Pragmatic Illusions...*; Op. Cit.

³² Richard Ned Lebow. "Was Khrushchev Bluffing in Cuba?" en *Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists*, 44 (3), 1988.

³³ Nikita Khrushchev. *Khrushchev...*; Op. Cit.

³⁴ Joseph Nye. "Cuban Graffiti" en *New Republic*, 13 de marzo de 1989, 1989.

³⁵ Nestor Carbonell. *And the Russians Stayed*; New York, Morrow, 1989.

involvement, something Anatoly Gribkov reaffirmed during the 1992 Havana Conference.³⁶ No one could predict his (Castro's) reaction if he were to conclude that the only reason the Russians brought missiles to Cuba was to wrest a US promise to take missiles out of Turkey.³⁷

So just what was the Cuban role in the Cuban Missile Crisis? Did Moscow orchestrate a situation which made it look like it was rushing to the defense of a socialist comrade, but with the real intention of advancing its own agenda? Or was Cuba's chance to assert itself in all this waiting to come after the crisis passed? If the latter is the case, then it's also a case of a missed opportunity.

The bilateral arrangement between the US and the Soviet Union included an end to the US naval blockade, Washington's promise not to invade Castro's Cuba, and later, the removal of US missiles from Turkey. The Soviets agreed to remove the ICBMs, allow the UN to observe their removal, and Khrushchev issued a promise not to reintroduce 'offensive weapons' to the Western Hemisphere.

But what about Cuba? Was it merely a staging area from which Moscow could attempt to level the arms-race playing field? To both sides' credit, war was avoided. The US could reassert that in the words of John Kennedy, the Western Hemisphere had remained the master of its own house. Nations questioning its commitment to contain Communism were reassured. For Moscow, it had given the impression it was willing to go to the brink of war to aid a socialist comrade facing possible

invasion, and that might have helped bolster its standing among socialist nations. What did Cuba get? Precious little, at first blush. Few of the conditions agreed to by the US and the USSR would meet with Cuban approval, and its muted resistance would probably characterize its greatest role in the missile drama.

The USSR removed the missiles, weapons the US declared were "offensive" in nature. But Washington's understanding of what constituted an "offensive weapon" didn't stop there. It extended to aircraft, especially the Ilyushin-28 medium range jet bomber.³⁸ The Il-28 had a range of over 1,100 miles, which made it a threat to US security. Cuba was not a party to the missile negotiations, but the bombers and other items of the original Soviet arms package were a different matter. Sergo Mikoyan, who accompanied his father, Deputy Soviet Foreign Minister Anastas Mikoyan to Cuba after the crisis saw first-hand just how sensitive the "other offensive weapons" issue was to Castro: "...Fidel had to be convinced of the necessity to take out the other armaments. Some of them were part of his army. We had given them to him and now we had to take them away".³⁹

It took three weeks of talks between Soviet and Cuban officials before Castro agreed to release the bombers. But not before Moscow helped soften the blow by increasing its annual aid package.⁴⁰ It also left behind a Soviet military brigade, which allegedly

³⁶ James Blight & David Welch. *On the Brink*; New York, Hill & Wang, 1989.

³⁷ Joseph Nye. "Cuban Graffiti..."; Op. Cit.

³⁸ James Blight & David Welch. *On the Brink...*; Op. Cit.

³⁹ Idem.

⁴⁰ Raymond Garthoff. *Reflections on The...*; Op. Cit.

managed to escape US notice until the late 1970s.⁴¹

But there was more. The American pledge not to invade Cuba was linked to the presence of United Nations observers on the island to witness to removal of the ICBMs. In the behind the scenes negotiations between the two superpowers, President Kennedy had given “assurances against the invasion of Cuba,” conditioned on “the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations to ensure the carrying out of these commitments”.⁴²

In effect, the successful resolution of a crisis which might have led to world war was now in Castro’s hands. For the US to honor its non-invasion pledge, he had to let UN representatives monitor the missile removal. Castro seized the opportunity to leverage the situation to his advantage. The Cuban government dashed off a communique to the UN with its own conditions, including the end of the US economic blockade, a halt to U-2 flights over Cuba, and Washington’s evacuation of the naval base at Guantanamo.⁴³

The communique went nowhere. The US economic blockade had been imposed in part to force Cuba to compensate American citizens and corporations for property and assets seized by Castro between 1959-1961. The US didn’t see it as having any relevance to the larger issue, which was the presence of inter-continental ballistic missiles. At the most it was an issue between two UN

members, and that was about it. The best Cuba could hope for would have been some kind of supporting resolution from the General Assembly. But the request would have died in the UN Security Council, since the US held veto power over any and all business brought to that committee.

Relief from U-2 reconnaissance flights met essentially the same fate. The surveillance missions had been a staple of US intelligence operations. It was a U-2 which had confirmed existence of Soviet missiles in Cuba in mid-October.⁴⁴ The flyovers were justified by the US under the UN’s very own Article 51, granting each member nation the right of self-defense. That assertion would gain even greater credibility when the Cuban government refused requests for independent observation of the missiles’ removal.⁴⁵

And Guantanamo? The US had operated that location since the end of the Spanish American War. New agreements in 1903, modified by the Good Neighbor Policy of 1934 crafted a leasing agreement with no expiration date, and the understanding the base would not be shuttered unless both sides agreed. The chances the US would leave this critical post now would have to range between slim and none.

In the end, none of Cuba’s demands gained any traction. It’s one and only fallback position, and a way to embarrass Moscow, was the issue of UN on-site inspection. It was

⁴¹ James Blight & David Welch. *On the Brink...*; Op. Cit.

⁴² David Larson. *The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962*; Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1963.

⁴³ Raymond Garthoff. *Reflections on The...*; Op. Cit.

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ Charles Fenwick. *International Law*; New York, Meredith, 1965.

tioned to the US non-invasion pledge. Without independent verification, that pledge was off the table. When Deputy-Premier Mikoyan visited Havana to soften the blow of the missile removal by ramping up Soviet aid, he also brought a message from the Kremlin, pleading with Cuban officials to allow UN inspection. But Castro adamantly refused to accept onsite UN verification.⁴⁶ Even a direct appeal from UN Secretary-General U-Thant, who flew to Havana to confer directly with Castro failed to turn the tide. Castro had been humiliated by the total lack of regard for him and for Cuba by the US and the USSR. And U-Thant ended up agreeing with him in principle that neither the Soviet Union or the United States had any legal right to impose verification measures on Cuba.⁴⁷ And to drive home his point, Castro turned the tables on everyone, linking any third-party inspection to his demand that observers witness the dismantling of émigré anti-Castro training camps in the United States.⁴⁸ The US never agreed to that, so Castro slammed the door on what he must have considered an invasion of Cuban sovereignty. In the end, all Moscow could do remove the missiles and promise Washington they were gone. But without third party verification, the US must have felt less than honor bound to promise Castro it wouldn't attack in the future.

The Soviet Union's unilateral decision to pull the missiles from Cuba soured relations between Havana and Moscow, no matter how much economic aid the Kremlin shoved Castro's way. The depth of the fissure

between the two countries wasn't known to its fullest extent until the January 1989 Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, where Cuban participants focused on three Soviet actions (or inactions). First was Moscow's failure to make public its decision to provide missiles to Cuba. It led the US, in the words of one of the Cuban delegates, "...into a blind alley...faced with a fait accompli and would have to react with a certain degree of violence when faced with something that could be seen as some sort of deception".⁴⁹ Second was Moscow's failure to think through all the subsequent possible moves the US would make once the missiles were detected. And third, the Kremlin's failure to consult Cuba in negotiations ending the crisis which might win concessions from the United States.

In the end, by refusing to allow third-party inspection, Castro played his trump card, and finally brought Cuba into the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was a position which has stood the test of time. Unable to move him from that stance, the US and the Soviet Union both informed the United Nations that, from their perspective, the issue of missiles in Cuba was officially closed.

But closed without a firm US pledge of non-invasion.

⁴⁶ Nestor Carbonell. *And the Russians...*; Op. Cit.

⁴⁷ Idem.

⁴⁸ Raymond Garthoff. *Reflections on The...*; Op. Cit.

⁴⁹ Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight & David A. Welch (eds.). *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow*

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