

Jonathan Gast

**THE REALIST PERSPECTIVE & THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS**

**Professor Nau**

IAFF 005 : FALL 2003

The Cold War reached its peak in October of 1962 when US reconnaissance discovered Soviet long-range ballistic missiles in Cuba (Zelikow 77). The USSR tolerated NATO forces in West Berlin, and it faced a sizable NATO nuclear arsenal directly on its border with Turkey (Brussel 5). Furthermore, the USSR's nuclear arsenal lagged far behind that of the USA, who also had a first strike capability exceeding anything the USSR could conjure up (Zelikow 92). From the perspective of the US, these new missiles in Cuba tipped the balance of power toward Moscow. With sudden striking capability off the shore of the US, the USSR could bargain their way out of any conflict and come out on top. If they really did intend to use this capability, it spelled almost certain annihilation for the US (Zelikow 94). By analyzing the Cuban Missile Crisis one can see what the USSR and the USA did throughout this crisis, why they chose their particular courses of action, and how realism does and does not explain these actions.

The USSR was not wholly responsible in bringing about the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it was the first to trespass on the US's sphere of influence. To further the revolution in Latin America the USSR had been secretly selling arms to Cuba since 1959 (Zelikow 83). On September 4, 1962 Russian Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin alleviated Attorney General Robert Kennedy's worries that offensive weapons were being supplied to Cuba. He stated that they were only installing defensive systems to repel any attempt to take out Castro or his government. This pledge came again from Dobrynin and seven days later in an official declaration from the USSR (Zelikow 78-79). As it seems, the Soviets were buying time to complete the installation of the missiles (Zelikow 81). Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko denied knowledge of offensive weapons in Cuba after US spy planes discovered these sites on October 15th. On October 22nd in a speech with photos Kennedy

proved the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba, but thereafter Dobrynin denied these allegations (Brussel 29). Even Russian Ambassador Valerian Zorin stonewalled the UN security council when confronted about the missiles (Brussel 18). Krushchev needed to escalate the conflict until the US backed down, but with the enforcement of the naval blockade and its strategic integrity backed up by air strike plans, Krushchev was now forced into a position where a compromise would be preferable to failure (Zelikow 128).

The United States could very well have initiated the Cuban Missile Crisis through the attempted Bay of Pigs coup (Brussel 3). This convinced Castro that the US was willing to plan an invasion of Cuba, causing him to seek closer relations with Krushchev (Zelikow 83). The reconnaissance flights over Cuba and military exercises off the coast of Florida were not helping things along (Brussel 14). Krushchev was outraged that Kennedy called up reservists and sent fighter planes to Florida (Zelikow 100). Lastly, the occupation of West Berlin in Soviet controlled territory and the Jupiter missile defense along the Turkish-Soviet border gave Krushchev the needed pretext to legitimize his dealings with Cuba deep within the American zone of influence (Zelikow 104).

Although Kennedy and ExComm could not know for sure what Krushchev's true motives were for placing missiles in Cuba, they could ascertain the benefits. Krushchev reflected in his memoirs that the most important goal was to protect Cuba from an American invasion to maintain the USSR as the sole center of the communist revolution. Secondly, he desired to "repair the strategic imbalance in deliverable missiles" (Brussel 5). To balance the US's first strike capability, the USSR strategically placed their arsenal in Cuba to compensate for their warhead deficiency (Zelikow 96). Just as Jupiter missiles were placed by NATO along the Turkish-Soviet border, Krushchev hoped to achieve the

same with Cuba (Zelikow 98). This also gave the USSR a bargaining chip for the removal of missiles in Turkey (Brussel 20). If the US were to invade Cuba, they would risk dividing NATO and "fueling anti-American sentiment through the world" (Brussel 5).

Naturally the US felt threatened by the specter of nuclear war looming just off the coast of Florida. The US had three choices with which to react to the crisis: a) an air-strike of the missiles sites, b) a "quarantine" of the island to achieve the removal of the warheads, or c) a tradeoff for the Jupiter missiles in Turkey or forces in Berlin (Nye 142). The quarantine was chosen to slowly escalate the matter as need be (Brussel 9). Without a show of force, Kennedy could not resolve the conflict, and so he made plans for an air strike (Zelikow 121). This threatened to break out into war, and the losses that the USSR would bear outweighed any remote victory. At this point the US secured the removal of the missiles under the condition that they promised not to invade Cuba (Brussel 23).

A realist perspective can logically explain why the USSR finally backed down, while the security dilemma explicates the causes of the crisis. Each state wanted to protect itself. The USA and NATO placed forces in West Berlin and Turkey to defend against Soviet aggression, just as the USSR placed weapons in Cuba to defend against an American attack. However, the US had more forces at its disposal in the Caribbean than the USSR, and since the US retained a first strike capability, it had overall dominance (Zelikow 92-93). The blockade did not necessarily deter Krushchev, but because it was backed by an air strike, Krushchev found it opportune to back down, given that the US take out the Jupiter missiles from Turkey and not invade Cuba (Zelikow 128). Through these concessions the causes for a security dilemma were minimized. A realist might argue that diplomacy was ineffective, for had the US believed Soviet reassurances that only defensive

mechanisms were being installed in Cuba, the impending crisis would have been much more detrimental to the US (Brussel 6). In anarchy each state must act to protect itself and employ the most viable means to do this. Therefore, it is understandable that the USSR's Cuba solution to the US presence in West Berlin, Turkey and Cuba caused the US to escalate the dilemma until one side prevailed and a bipolar balance could be achieved.

Realism predicted a US victory because of its superior military might in North America, but it does not address the role of the OAS or the UN (Brussel 11). The OAS legitimized the quarantine of Cuba through international law agreed upon by participating members, and the USSR's position worsened when Soviet Ambassador Zorin stonewalled the UN (Brussel 18). Toward the end, Krushchev may only have believed Kennedy's promise not to invade Cuba, because he knew the UN would never condone such an action in light of the recent conflict. The back channel relations between the two powers also played an important role in how the crisis continued. Krushchev was unwilling to admit the existence of *offensive* missiles in Cuba in an official statement, but through back channels like William Knox, Krushchev could address this to Kennedy and still retain deniability in the UN (Brussel 18). In January 1962, the US and OAS members put an embargo on Cuba's exports (Zelikow 85). Realists could not have foreseen that this action contributed to the cause of the crisis by driving Castro further into Krushchev's arms.

Realism has a rational but simple application to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Had the US not accounted for supranational organizations like the OAS or the UN, Kennedy could not have blockaded Cuba without aggressive Soviet retaliation. Through OAS backing, Kennedy chose a path of slow escalation that avoided going directly to war. On the other hand, realism shows that the US primarily succeeded due to its commitment to use force.

### Works Cited:

1. Brussel, Gabrielle S. The Cuban Missile Crisis: U.S. Deliberations and Negotiations at the Edge of the Precipice. Washington, DC: PEW Case Studies in International Affairs., 1988.
2. Zelikow, Philip and Graham Allison. Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis, Second Edition. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999.
3. Nye, Joseph S. Jr. Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History, Fourth Edition. New York: Longman, 2002.