

# The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Deterrence Value of Nuclear Weapons

Written by Dominique Maritz

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### **To What Extent, if at all, did the Peaceful Resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 Demonstrate the Value of Nuclear Weapons as an Instrument for Deterring Great Power War?**

The peaceful resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis proved for many realist scholars, including was Waltz, Jervis and Mearsheimer, the value of nuclear weapons in deterring a major war between Great Powers. These academics explain the outcome of the crisis through the “rational deterrence theory”. This model holds that because the consequences of a nuclear war are too appalling, leaders, who are rational actors, behave cautiously and work towards the peaceful resolution of a crisis. In this essay, it will first be shown that this is a sound theoretical assessment by examining the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, in the second part, it will be demonstrated that policy makers drew very different conclusions from the crisis than did the theorists. Rather than working towards a long-lasting détente, hawks, meaning aggressive policy makers, continued to dominate both the US and the Soviet government. This negates to a degree the positive value that nuclear weapons have in resolving crises. This argument will be supplemented by Sagan’s “organisation theory”. He argues that the idea of a state being a rational actor is merely an assumption that is not based on reality. Rather, large organisations are prone to accidents due to their organisational constraints. Examining the Cuban Missile Crisis a second time, this time focusing on two of the many near accidents that could have led to inadvertent nuclear war, his theory will be confirmed. It will be concluded that in theory, nuclear deterrence does work, as has been pointed out by scholars studying the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, it is not a suitable model for the practice because of the differences between what should have been the outcome of the crisis and what was its outcome; as well as the risks of inadvertent war inherent in large “irrational” organisations such as states. From this follows that nuclear weapons are not a useful tool in deterring war between Great Powers.

Realists such as Jervis, Waltz and Mearsheimer believe that deterrence kept the peace between the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. According to Waltz (with Sagan 2003: 5), deterrence means “frightening a state out of attacking” by threatening severe punishment. Those realist authors assert that “because of the horror associated with their use, [nuclear weapons] really are the ultimate deterrent” (Mearsheimer 1985: 20). Reason will prevail and leaders will be cautious during crises (Jervis 1988: 81). They counter other scholars, who do not see nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent. Mueller (1988: 57-58) contends that the horrific memories of World War II and the superpower status quo made war undesirable for both sides. Therefore, nuclear weapons were essentially irrelevant in avoiding war between the US and the USSR (Mueller 1988: 68). Jervis and Trachtenberg, however, disagree with these arguments and point to the political effects that nuclear weapons have. Trachtenberg (1985: 143) asserts that the fact that both sides possessed nuclear weapons was deliberately manipulated in order to avoid direct confrontation: it was an exercise in escalating risks that involved threatening with major war, which made both sides more careful (Schelling in Trachtenberg 1985: 139). Jervis (1988: 90) concludes that Churchill is right in saying that “safety will be the sturdy child of terror”. Ultimately, what the deterrence theory proclaims is the old Latin saying *Si vis pacem para bellum* (If you wish for peace, prepare for war) (Brown and Arnold 2010: 296).

Proponents of the deterrence theory often point to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 in order to prove their

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point. This crisis is widely believed to have been the most dangerous period during the Cold War, as it was a time when both sides faced each other directly when nuclear weapons were involved (Rajagopalan 2000: 442). Gerson (2007: 94) called the crisis a “game of nuclear chicken”. In October 1962, the US learned of the secret deployment of Soviet missiles on Cuba (Lebow 1983: 432). To this day, it is unclear what exactly the Soviet Union wanted to achieve by placing those missiles there, but what ensued were thirteen days of intense diplomacy and in the end, the crisis was resolved peacefully (Swift 2007: 8). For a long time it has been assumed that the end of the crisis represented a clear US victory, but it now looks like the outcome was much more of a compromise than has been assumed (Jervis 1988: 80). Kennedy agreed to trade his Jupiter missiles in Turkey if Krushchev withdrew his nuclear weapons from Cuba (Swift 2007: 9). Rather than concluding that deterrence must have failed, deterrence theorists believe that the crisis showed that their theory works: “Once the crisis erupted, both sides were ready to make sacrifices because they feared war”, argue Lebow and Stein (1995: 163). Waltz (2003: 7) comes to the same conclusion and states that both leaders wanted to end the crisis quickly as they had not much to gain but everything to lose. This appears to be proven by the fact that both Kennedy and Krushchev made sure that command over the weapons were ultimately in the hands of the White House and the Kremlin respectively, rather than in the hands of just a few (Rajagopalan 2000: 447; Kramer 1993: 747). Those deterrent theorists therefore argue that nuclear war breaking out in October 1962 was much less likely than has been assumed due to mutual fears of a nuclear war (Scott and Smith 1994: 660; Waltz 1995: 11). Rajagopalan (2000: 452) ends with the conclusion that because nuclear deterrence was far more robust than has been believed, people should have more confidence in it. I will take issue with this deduction in the second part of the essay.

Scholars who study the Cuban Missile Crisis through the lens of deterrence theory learnt two major lessons from it. The first is that nuclear superiority did not seem to have helped the US. While Kennedy enjoyed a 17:1 nuclear superiority (Rajagopalan 2000: 444), he said on October 16 “What difference does it make? They’ve got enough to blow us up now anyway” (in Trachtenberg 1985: 148). All that mattered, therefore, was mutual fear (Scott and Smith 1994: 681). McNamara insists, “the assumption that the strategic nuclear balance (or ‘imbalance’) mattered was absolutely wrong” (in Lebow and Stein 1995: 169). However, despite this conclusion being reached by scholars, policy makers in the Kremlin seem to have drawn a different conclusion. The Soviets behaved differently during the crisis because of their nuclear inferiority (Trachtenberg 1985: 161). Due to the perceived failure during the crisis (they had to withdraw their missiles from Cuba), the Soviet Union vowed to never again let the US play with them in this way; a dramatic arms build up was the consequence and in the 1970s, the Soviet Union reached nuclear parity with the US (Gerson 2007: 129). Similarly, the hawks in the US government who had preferred a pre-emptive air strike to the more diplomatic actions that were being utilised, believed that the US superiority was paramount in the outcome of the crisis (Blight et al. 1987: 175-176). These men continued to influence US policies after the crisis was over and propagated for an arms build up (Blight et al. 1987: 175-176).

The second lesson that scholars have drawn from the Cuban Missile Crisis is that once the crisis erupted, both leaders were ready to make sacrifices because each side was determined to avoid war at all cost (Lebow and Stein 1995: 163; Scott and Smith 1994: 682). They also point to the results of the crisis, which was the establishment of a direct hotline between the White House and the Kremlin to ease future communication during crises and the establishment of the nuclear test ban treaty, which led to a period of détente (Garthoff 1994: 28; Lebow and Stein 1995: 179). However, this did not result in an alteration of superpower behaviour towards each other (Tucker 1985: 1). Furthermore, scholars underestimate the importance Kennedy and Krushchev played in ending the crisis peacefully. Segments of the US government did not favour the trade of Jupiters versus the missiles on Cuba; hawks had drawn very different conclusions to doves and continued to propagate a more forceful action such as a pre-emptive strike in the face of aggression (Blight et al. 1987: 172). As these two lessons show, scholars and policy makers came to very different conclusions during and after the crisis. While for scholars, the peaceful resolution was a direct consequence of dealing with nuclear weapons, which induced caution in policy makers, hawks in both governments deduced that more forceful action was a better option when they possess nuclear superiority. This points to the fact that the theory may not hold in practice; an argument I will advance in the remainder of this essay.

Deterrence theorists believe in the rationality of an actor: “Deterrence [...] requires a threat that, if carried out, would inflict damage on a scale that no rational opponent could risk” (Copp 1986: 4, emphasis added). Nevertheless, deterrence is not a game played by “two chess grandmasters employing deliberate moves” (Brown and Arnold 2010:

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303). This is also Sagan's view (2003: 50); he contends that the notion that states act rationally is an assumption by political scientists that is not rooted in evidence. Sagan (1993: 19) asserts that "human beings are not perfectly rational machines, but rather operate with limited and fallible cognitive capabilities". MccGuire (2006: 774) also criticises the deterrence theory's supposition of rational actors by stating that it favours hypotheses over realities in international politics. In reality, states are large organisations that strive towards rationality but cannot achieve this due to "inherent limits of calculation and coordination" (Sagan 1994: 71).

Sagan (1994: 85-95) advances this argument and he has identified four major problems inherent to large organisations such as a government. First, they have "numerous interrelated, yet unplanned interactions". Second, in large organisations, decisions are often made very quickly without assessing every possible outcome. Third, there are conflicting interests: While top leaders may favour security; lower officers often prefer increased production due to the pressure they are under to perform. Finally, military and civilian leaders often have conflicting interests. While civilians are more restrained, many military officers favour pre-emptive strikes. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, command over nuclear missiles was under civilian control but Kennedy and Krushchev were both unable to fully control their militaries (Gerson 2007: 95). "If all participants could be counted on to act rationally and there were no accidents or mistakes [there would be] a low level of risk" (Blight et al. 1987: 175). However, this cannot be guaranteed as has been established by Sagan's theory. As was seen earlier, during the Cuban Missile Crisis the risk of deliberate war was much lower than has been assumed. However, the risk of inadvertent war was much higher (Scott and Smith 1994: 660), which was shown by examining Sagan's theory. The assessment of the irrationality of large organisations confirms the earlier judgment that the deterrence theory does not hold up to the test of reality.

Waltz (1995: 6) tries to counter Sagan's arguments by stating that "[f]ear of accidents works against their occurring". However, examining two near-accidents during the Cuban Missile Crisis can refute his claim. Sagan's organisation theory is supplemented by two incidents that could easily have led to inadvertent nuclear war between the two superpowers. The first incident occurred on 28 October, when the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD) was informed that a nuclear-armed missile from Cuba was about to hit Tampa Florida. Only a short time after the expected explosion, which did not occur, it became clear what had happened. A radar operator had inserted a test tape that contained the simulation of a possible attack, which had confused control room officers who did not know about the test and passed on the information to NORAD (Sagan 1994: 96). Former General David Burchinal, who was Director of Plans on the Air Staff in 1962, remembers a second accident. One day, a US military U-2 spy plane had gotten lost. Shortly later it turned up over Soviet territory and when McNamara heard about this incident, he was in hysterics, as he knew this could mean war with the Soviet Union (in Trachtenberg 1985: 152). Fortunately, neither of these two accidents during the crisis resulted in war, but it is not difficult to imagine what could have happened in slightly different circumstances. These two incidents clearly show the high possibility of inadvertent nuclear war breaking out between the two Great Powers of the Cold War. Especially the first accident proves Sagan's theory of accidents being possible in complex organisations that are, unfortunately, not rational actors that can be trusted to act as one.

In this essay, it was shown that nuclear deterrence is a good theory but it cannot be applied to the real world, which is much more complex than this theory gives it credit for. This argument was developed by first examining the rational deterrence theory and applying it to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which showed the value of this particular model. In the following part, however, it was shown that scholars and policy makers drew different conclusions from the same instance, which illustrates that the theory is not infallible when applied in reality. While scholars studying the crisis concluded that nuclear superiority does not bring any advantages, because even one missile has enough deterrence value, policy makers in both the US and the Soviet Union continued to build up their nuclear arms caches. The second lesson that policy makers drew from the crisis is that both Kennedy and Krushchev acted rationally by compromising and finding a peaceful solution. However, not all policy makers in either Washington or Moscow agreed with this form of accession and would have preferred more forceful action. It is therefore likely that with other leaders and decision makers, the outcome of the crisis would have been very different. This line of argument was furthered by utilising Sagan's organisation theory, which holds that states are not rational actors but rather large organisations, in which accidents can easily happen. How close the world came to inadvertent nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis was demonstrated by examining two accidents that occurred during October 1962. The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that nuclear weapons would deter deliberate nuclear war if the world

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were full of rational actors to which the nuclear deterrence model could be applied. In reality, however, governments are too complex an organisation to be trusted to act rationally so that the risks of inadvertent nuclear war were very high during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Consequently, nuclear weapons did not keep the peace and cannot be counted on to do so in the future.

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