Fifty Years On, Midway Through the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Report Card

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Notwithstanding that it took place 50-years ago this week, the Cuban Missile Crisis remains of great interest to scholars of history and international relations, but it is quite alarming how little interest has been shown in the media on the 13-day unfolding of events, certainly in this country.

The crisis, probably, is the most studied event in Cold War history, but new questions are continuously being asked because the events, as we all readers of e-IR should know, brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Some new questions have been sparked by access to hitherto closed archives; others are unlocked by the emergence of new paradigms, or interest from other fields.

So, for instance, how decisions were reached during the crisis are taught in business schools nowadays. Not only do they shed light on the psychology of decision-makers but they offer understandings of the circumstances in which negotiations – particularly under pressure – take place. This particular interest stems from a book, the*Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, written by the Harvard academic, Graham Allison and who interviewed all the Americans involved in the deliberations, except US President John F Kennedy who was assassinated 25-months afterwards. The book is remains essential reading for anyone interested in international relations.

It was the 44–year-old Kennedy's January 1961 Inaugural Address which reminded the world of the stakes involved in those Cold War times with these gloomy words, "man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish…all forms of human life".

But, in the very next paragraph, he laid down a challenge: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

But, it may have been, as some explanations suggest, that the mood, not the missiles, that was the most dangerous feature of the times.

The infamous Bay of Pigs fiasco, where a CIA-led invasion of Cuba failed, which took place four months after Kennedy's Inauguration, confirmed that America's new President would aggressively pursue the Cold War.

The challenge facing his Soviet counter-part, 73-year old Nikita Khrushchev, was how to respond. Not that his own, or the Soviet, hands were clean in matters Cold War. In August, 1961, two months before the build-up over Cuba, the East German government, with Moscow's backing, erected a brick wall right through the middle of Berlin. As they did so, American tanks faced down Soviet ones at the famous Checkpoint Charlie: some Cold War experts, like Paul Nitze, considered the Berlin Crisis as more serious than the Cuban one.

Khrushchev's decision to send the missiles to Cuba was, if anything, beyond his usual quirkiness. After all, Cuba was in the very region where American power was most preponderant and the 1836 Monroe Doctrine was an article of

strategic faith in America's determination to protect Western Hemisphere**.**

Early in the crisis, the Soviets hoped to get away with a high-stakes game. But the discovery of the missiles (by a U-2 reconnaissance plane) on October 14th ended the initial phase of the drama. Three days later, talks between the two sides failed: their foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, had argued that Soviet aid to Cuba enhanced the island's "defensive capabilities".

The exchange between the two sides would intensify in the days that followed with Kennedy resisting pressure from his own military to invade Cuba and decided, instead, on an almost 18th Century naval tactic – a naval blockade of the island. In an exchange of letters, the Kremlin called the quarantine (which was Kennedy's word for the blockade) a "serious threat to peace and security".

The world would hold its breath for the next six days which, successively, saw US Forces go the highest nuclear alert; a Cuban attempt to conceal the missiles; an attempt to horse-trade US missiles in Turkey for those in Cuba; the downing of U-2 over Cuba; and, on October 27th, a letter from Kennedy to Khrushchev saying that he would publicly announce that the US would not invade Cuba.

The next day, over Radio Moscow, the Soviet leader announced that he would remove the missiles.

Some immediate steps were taken to prevent a repeat of the Cuban Missile Crisis: a telephone "hot-line" was established between the two Superpowers, and serious talk commenced on arms-control leading to the Partial Test Ban Treaty of a year later.

But the lack of public interest in the Crisis fifty years on suggests that understanding how, and why, humans make history, takes a little longer.

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