

# The Role of Nuclear Weapons during the Cuban Missile Crisis

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### The Ambiguous Role of Nuclear Weapons in the Resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis

#### Introduction

The Cuban missile crisis, one of the most studied events in international relations, is widely believed to be the closest the world has come to thermonuclear war. The fact that nuclear weapons were not used to resolve the crisis has attracted scholarly attention. In this essay, I contend that while the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis provides some evidence that nuclear weapons have a deterrent effect with respect to great power wars, this is substantially negated by the possibility of their accidental or inadvertent use and the dire consequences this would entail. In the first section, I present a brief overview of the crisis and outline the difficulties involved in, but the necessity of, drawing conclusions from the missile crisis. Next, I examine arguments about the deterrence value of nuclear weapons with regard to great power wars, concluding that they are of moderate value, though for reasons not commonly advanced in the literature. In the final section, I aver that, notwithstanding this deterrent effect, the clear potential for miscalculation, misperception and accident with regard to the use of nuclear weapons undermines faith in their capacity to keep the peace.

#### The Cuban Missile Crisis: Historiographical Context

On October 16 1962, President John F. Kennedy was informed that US intelligence had discovered the existence of Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba (White 1997: 79). In the week following, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) met in the White House, in secret, to craft a response. To simplify, there were three camps in ExComm. The 'hawks' proposed either a tactical air strike to eliminate the weapons, or an invasion of Cuba, or both (Blight, Nye and Welch 1987: 173). The 'doves' argued that the US should only negotiate with the USSR, with a view to trading American Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy for Soviet missiles in Cuba (Blight, Nye and Welch 1987: 173; Bernstein 1980: 104-107). The 'owls' believed in a third option whereby the US would place a naval quarantine around Cuba, thus preventing incoming Soviet supplies of nuclear material; this would allow for negotiation, while leaving the option of further escalation open (Blight, Nye and Welch 1987: 173). Eventually, the owlish option was decided on and announced by Kennedy on October 22 (White 1997: 107). In subsequent days, despite the USSR largely respecting the quarantine, numerous provocative events occurred. The most well known of these are the shooting down of an American U-2 flying over Cuba (Scott and Smith 1994: 674), and the apparently accidental straying of a different U-2 into Soviet territory (Pious 2001: 93). This prompted Kennedy and Khrushchev to come to a deal, whereby the US would publicly pledge to not invade Cuba, and the USSR would withdraw its missiles; in addition, the USSR was privately assured the US missiles in Turkey would be removed (Blight and Welch 1989: 165-166; Bernstein 1980: 98).

The skeletal nature of the foregoing account of the crisis belies the disagreement surrounding much of its history and interpretation. In recent decades, the opening of US and USSR archives and a series of conferences with scholars and participants of the crisis have dramatically increased the amount of information available. This brings with it a risk that analyses of the crisis will become less, not more, clear (Scott and Smith 1994: 660). Furthermore, in

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conducting such analyses one must be wary that a single historical event can provide only limited foundation for generalised conclusions. An analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, therefore, cannot justify all-encompassing statements as to the deterrent value of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, given the gravity of the consequences of nuclear war and the common belief that the Cuban missile crisis is the closest the world has come to the use of nuclear weapons since 1945 (Blight, Nye and Welch 1987: 170), one must seek to arrive at some tenable conclusions about what the enduring lessons of this event may be.

## The Cuban Missile Crisis and Deterrence

The question of how much value nuclear weapons have in deterring great power wars given the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis can be answered in one of three obvious ways: they are very valuable; they have no value; or they are moderately valuable. Arguments that nuclear weapons are very valuable rely to an unwarranted degree on the capacity of rational deterrence theory to explain the crisis. On the other hand, arguments that nuclear weapons have no deterrent value are not reflected in the actions of the participants in the crisis. An argument that nuclear weapons were probably of some deterrent value, however, is able to account for the actions of participants in peacefully concluding the crisis while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of rational deterrence theory. In this section, I address each argument in turn, dealing with them at a length reflective of their prominence in the literature. In doing so, I demonstrate why the best conclusion is that nuclear weapons have some deterrent value.

### *Nuclear Weapons are Very Valuable – Rational Deterrence Theory*

Rational deterrence theory posits that in order to deter attacks, a state must persuade its attacker that it has the capability to, and will, impose unacceptable costs on it in the event of an attack or a challenge to the status quo (Quackenbush 2011: 742). The corollary of this with respect to nuclear weapons is that “a country cannot sensibly attack unless it believes that success is assured. A nation will be deterred from attacking even if it believes that there is only a possibility that its adversary will retaliate.” (Waltz 1988: 626) As regards the Cuban missile crisis, this is prima facie convincing given the simple fact that nuclear weapons were not used. Indeed, the validity of the rational deterrence theory explanation has been recently asserted in passing, and uncritically, by Jervis (2009: 140-141), a prominent realist and cold war scholar.

However, this explanation is deficient in two important respects. First, it relies upon problematical logic. This is evident in the assumption that nuclear conflict is the worst possible outcome for all sides. The logical consequence of this is that “deterrence cannot ever be successful. Any state that is attacked will always capitulate rather than bring about its own worst outcome, and knowing this, challengers will always attack.” (Quackenbush 2011: 751). That there was a crisis precisely because Kennedy did not decide to quickly capitulate – in fact he originally favoured a military response (White 1997: 81-85) – is a fundamental refutation, if any was needed, of this claim. Moreover, rational deterrence theory is unable to explain why the USSR put missiles in Cuba in the first place (Blight and Welch 1995: 845), something that evidently entailed “a possibility that its adversary [would] retaliate” (Waltz 1988: 626). What the missile placement illustrates is that it is rational to start a war, or run the risk of starting one, if it is believed that the likely consequences of not fighting are even worse (Jervis 1988: 81). The extreme damage nuclear weapons may inflict, contrary to the assertion of nuclear deterrence theorists, does not categorically undermine this notion (Quackenbush 2011: 751-752).

Second, rational deterrence theory’s fundamental assumption of rational actors is simplistic and misleading. This assumption is that statesmen determine a course of action, following some internally consistent value system, on the basis of a calculation of the advantages and disadvantages it will bring about (Schelling 1960: 108; Allison and Zelikow 1999: 15). It is from this that rational deterrent theorists infer that there is a very low likelihood of nuclear war, given it is not in any actors’ interests. The problem with the rational actor assumption is that it lacks any “empirical referent” (Lebow and Stein 1989: 224). Put differently, it is at root an idealisation upon which a theory has been built.

It is an idealisation because, firstly, statesmen operate at the helm of vast and complex organisations, which act as intermediaries between them and the implementation of policy. Such organisations are difficult to control completely, are vulnerable to a variety of failures and may have different interests to their nominal leaders (Blight and Welch

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1995: 817-819; Sagan and Waltz 2003: 50-53). The subordinate Soviet commander's shooting down of the American U-2 flying over Cuba (Scott and Smith 1994: 674), and Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay's determination, in response, to launch a massive reprisal attack against Cuba such that presidential orders were required for him to stand down (Pious 2001: 96), are but two examples of the complicating effect of organisations.

Secondly, psychological considerations support a more pessimistic view of leaders' ability to rationally determine costs and benefits. Leaders misperceive adversaries as a result of normal psychological tendencies, which are themselves compounded in high-stress situations (Blight and Welch 1995: 820). Examples of misperceptions can be found throughout the crisis (Blight and Welch 1995: 833-841). The most obvious are Kennedy's discounting of the possibility that the placement of the missiles may have been motivated by genuine Soviet concern that Cuba needed defending, and Khrushchev's belief that the placement of missiles in Cuba was justified both morally and legally (Blight and Welch 1995: 836-837). Such steadfast beliefs contributed to the transmutation of the missile placement into a 'crisis', in turn increasing the tensions and thus the risk of nuclear war.

For these reasons, rational deterrence theory provides an unsatisfactory explanation of the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis. Concomitant arguments regarding the high value of nuclear weapons in deterring great power wars are thus unfounded.

## *Nuclear Weapons have No Value*

The argument that nuclear weapons played virtually no part in the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis starts from the assumption that the possession of operational nuclear forces by the US and the USSR meant that both participants in the conflict were capable of inflicting intolerable damage upon one another. Consequently, the use of nuclear weapons was simply not an option, and the crisis proceeded as if they did not exist (Trachtenberg 1985: 140). As such, "it was conventional superiority on the scene that determined the eventual outcome" (Bundy 1988: 453). This explanation is related to a much broader argument that nuclear weapons are "essentially irrelevant" in explaining the peace that has existed between the superpowers, because that peace would have most probably occurred even without them (Mueller 1988: 56, 78; Garthoff 2000: 245).

Asserting that nuclear weapons played no part in the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis is untenable given the extent of the attention the participants gave to the risk of nuclear war. While neither leader desired nuclear war (Scott and Smith 1994: 684), they recognised the distinct possibility that the situation could progress beyond their ability to control risks due to the extreme tension and the myriad organisations involved (Trachtenberg 1985: 141; Allyn, Blight and Welch 1989: 166). For this reason, notwithstanding the irrelevance of US nuclear superiority (to US policy at least) at the time given Kennedy's unwillingness to countenance any nuclear strike on America (Trachtenberg 1988: 143-156), nuclear weapons played a deterrent role in promoting the crisis's speedy resolution. Broader arguments as to the essential irrelevance of nuclear weapons are also unconvincing. Even if "nuclear weapons simply compound and dramatize a military reality that by 1945 had already become appalling" (Mueller 1988: 57), that itself is emblematic of their value as, at least, an additional deterrent to great power war (Jervis 1988: 87-88; Garthoff 2000: 245).

## *Nuclear Weapons have Some Value*

The argument that nuclear weapons played some deterrent role in October 1962 relates to what has been called the shattering of the "crystal ball effect" (Blight 1990). The crystal ball effect is the notion that the risks of nuclear war are very low given leaders' knowledge of the destruction that the initiation of such a war would cause (Blight 1990: 3). However, leaders during the Cuban missile crisis, concerned that the crisis was spinning out of control and increasing the risk of preemptive attack, feared the shattering of the crystal ball effect and the deployment of nuclear weapons (Blight 1990: 22; Trachtenberg 1985: 141-142, 152). They not only feared the consequences of such an occurrence, but also their bearing primary responsibility for it (Blight 1990: 109). This fear manifested itself not in the preemptive use of those weapons in an attempt to minimise relative losses, but in a speedy desire to peacefully conclude the crisis while it was still possible to do so (Blight 1990: 8). Admittedly, this is not a catch-all explanation of why the crisis unfolded the way it did as no such explanation is possible. It is, however, an intuitively appealing and

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justifiable position.

There are two primary benefits of this approach. First, it avoids the theoretical deficiencies inherent in the rational actor model of deterrence. Rather than simplistically assuming statesmen to be predictable utility-maximising entities (Quackenbush 2011: 749), the crystal ball approach recognises their psychological complexity as human beings. At the same time, leaders are not assumed to be hostage to their psychological and cognitive limitations such that they are irrational; these are instead seen as motivations explaining their actions to avoid nuclear war. Though it is important to refrain from vesting too much confidence in conclusions about the specific psychological state of participants based purely on the historical record (Blight and Welch 1995: 833), this approach is realistic and largely commonsensical. Leaders seek to avoid nuclear war not purely on the basis of a zero-sum calculation of interests, but out of a broader appreciation of the unmitigated horror of such an event, and their involvement in it.

This leads to the second benefit of this explanation: it more closely accounts for the behaviour of the leaders during the Cuban missile crisis than others. Arguments based on rational deterrence, and those alleging nuclear weapons played no role, are incapable of explaining why apparently rational leaders during the crisis feared and contemplated the use of nuclear weapons (Trachtenberg 1985: 141, 152; Blight 1990: 39). Equally, perspectives which assume the participants were irrational can only point to the role of 'luck' in the peaceful conclusion of the crisis (Blight 1990: 39-40). The crystal ball explanation constitutes a satisfying alternative: leaders feared the inadvertent use of nuclear weapons in a situation that had become perverse and uncontrollable. Consequently, they attempted, and managed, to bring the crisis to a swift conclusion. Thus, nuclear weapons probably exercised a deterrent effect during the missile crisis, but not in the way commonly assumed by the literature with its focus on rational deterrence models.

## Nuclear Weapons: The Dangers of Inadvertent Use

Though one must strive to arrive at justifiable conclusions as to why the Cuban missile crisis ended peacefully, it would be significantly misleading to assume that a peaceful end was inevitable. The role of contingency and, indeed, 'luck' in this event is important insofar as it undermines claims that nuclear crises can always be safely managed (Scott and Smith 1994: 683; White 1997: 154-155) and in turn, that nuclear weapons are necessarily peace-inducing given their deterrent value. Numerous points at which the crisis could have escalated and ended differently exist. Though they are incapable of being extensively catalogued here, two examples were mentioned previously in the historical overview section, and another in the organisation theory critique of rational deterrence. One further issue, however, concerns the extent to which command and control systems adequately performed their functions of safeguarding nuclear weapons from accidental use. While some argue that the historical evidence should instil more confidence than is usually thought (Kramer 1993: 749), others argue that there was still significant potential in those systems for accidents to occur, a possibility heightened by the tense situation of the crisis (Blight and Welch 1995: 818-819).

Leaving such technical points aside, what is indisputable is that there were those in ExComm and the military who advocated quite strongly for a military intervention irrespective of the consequences such a provocative gesture could cause. It is fortunate that Kennedy did not feel required to make a swift decision on October 16, and instead waited a week; for if he had felt so pressured, the evidence suggests he would have ordered military action, something to which the Soviets would most likely respond (White 1997: 84). For reasons such as these, the role of the crystal ball effect needs to be kept in perspective. The crystal ball argument is not that leaders' fears will mean the possibility of inadvertent nuclear war is nil due to those leaders acting quickly to resolve crises. Such a general hypothesis could not be justified on the basis of the limited case example that is the missile crisis. The crystal ball argument's relevance is confined to the missile crisis, where events occurred such that it was possible, when they realised the nature of the perverse situation being created, for leaders to untie the metaphorical knot and avoid nuclear war. Given the possibility for a combination of technical mishaps, misperceptions and personnel breakdowns to lead to disaster (Blight and Welch 1995: 846; Sagan 1993), the situation could have been different. As such, the Cuban missile crisis's peaceful resolution is not ipso facto justification for a view that the risk of inadvertent nuclear warfare is low given the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons.

## Conclusion

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I have argued that the Cuban missile crisis, while not supporting the traditional concept of rational deterrence, provides some evidence of the value of nuclear weapons in deterring war between the great powers. This evidence comes chiefly in the form of leaders resolving the crisis peacefully and quickly for fear that the situation could escalate such that nuclear weapons could be used. However, the significant possibility that errors, misperceptions and miscalculations could have led to a different outcome cautions against drawing a strong conclusion, from this one event, that nuclear weapons are peace-inducing deterrents.

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