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*The United States in the 1960s*  
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***Cuba and the Missile Crisis:***

***The Soviet Decision to Deploy Nuclear Missiles***

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## 1. Introduction

It might perhaps be correct to say that never in history has any historical event assembled such great importance in all of its aspects, and been studied in such depth. I believe that is fully understandable, because never before had humankind been so close to the brink of nuclear holocaust.

This short statement by Oleg Troyanovsky reveals that the Cuban missile crisis is indeed one of the most studied subjects in U.S. and Cold War history. Ever since the thirteen days in October 1962 there has been a lively discussion about the origins and the management of the crisis. Despite an enormous range of opinions, and an incredible output of books and articles by participants and scholars of the crisis, most of the approaches were limited to studying the events from an American perspective. However, during the last decade the discussion has continued due to the declassification of secret American documents. In fact it gained new speed after they became available for scholars to review.

Another important development that led to reconsiderations of the whole approach to the crisis was the opening of the Soviet Bloc under Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* efforts. The fall of the Soviet Union made it possible to reexamine the Cuban missile crisis by using Soviet information and questioning Soviet participants in the crisis. Between 1987 and 1992 a series of five conferences helped to bring together former participants and scholars from the United States, the Soviet Union and Cuba. Furthermore, Soviet documents now become available as the Russian government admits historians into the long well protected archives in Moscow. So now as more and more pieces of information are revealed it is possible to provide a more complex picture of how the Soviet leaders perceived the developments before and during the crisis of 1962. After studying American *and* Soviet material a more complete account of the crisis develops.

One issue that has been heavily disputed since 1962 is the reason for the Soviet missile deployment to Cuba. Even after more than 35 years, it is unclear why Nikita Khrushchev ordered nuclear missiles to be sent to Cuba. Even President John F. Kennedy and his advisers in the Executive Committee (ExComm) could not agree on *the* reason for the missile deployment. The official Soviet explanation states that the missiles were sent

to defend Fidel Castro's revolution and to deter American aggression in Cuba. However, this theory has been vigorously dismissed as facesaving propaganda for the test-of-will theory which states that the Soviets wanted to probe America's resolve in Cold War politics.

I will show in this paper that Khruschev did not send the missiles to Cuba because he wanted to directly challenge Kennedy, but rather two reasons were responsible for stationing strategic missiles 90 miles off the U.S. coast. After reconsidering the defense-of-Cuba theme it becomes apparent that the Soviets and the Cubans believed that the deployment of troops and finally nuclear missiles was necessary to save Cuba. This threat perception was not known to the United States. Secondly, American nuclear policy and the Soviet perception of the nuclear situation led to the deployment of Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs).

## 2. Testing America's Will or Trading Berlin?

As mentioned above, it has been widely accepted in America that Khrushchev's decision to send missiles to Cuba was directly linked with the idea of challenging the United States adversarial resolve in the Cold War

First of all, it was supposed that Khrushchev wanted to challenge and to weaken the American prestige, and to show that the Soviet Union had succeeded in becoming the first superpower. Apart from inflicting a political blow on the United States, the Soviets could also use the crisis to demonstrate their position as leaders of the communist world which was being challenged by the Chinese. It was also suggested that by reducing America's credibility in the world, the Soviet Union could encourage other Third World countries to follow Castro's example of breaking away from American control. Following the first ExComm meetings Theodore Sorensen summarized the discussion of this point by saying: „[I]t is generally agreed that the United States cannot tolerate the known presence of nuclear weapons in a country 90 miles from our shore, if our courage and commitments are ever to be believed by either allies or adversaries.“ Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon stressed the importance of the Third World nations:

[T]he Soviet Union has now deliberately initiated a public test of our intentions that can determine the future course of world events for many years to come. If we allow the offensive capabilities presently in Cuba to remain there, I am convinced that sooner or later and probably sooner we will lose all Latin America to Communism because the credibility of our willingness to effectively resist Soviet military power will have been removed in the eyes of the Latins. We can also expect similar reactions elsewhere, for instance in Iran, Thailand, and Pakistan.

Therefore it has been argued that President Kennedy's decision to impose a blockade and to reject any proposal for a diplomatic response to the missiles was influenced by the threat of losing control in other Latin American nations.

One thing that disproves that the Soviet intentions in Cuba were solely driven by the desire to probe U.S. determination is Berlin. If the Soviets had wanted to test the American resolve, Soviet action in Berlin would have been easier to accomplish than attempting to send missiles to the other side of the globe, where the U.S. was the dominant power. In addition, to maintain support for the bases would have been difficult

if not impossible. On this matter President Kennedy said, „If they doubted our guts, why didn't they take Berlin?“ The American interest in the divided city had been obvious since the war, the last time during the Berlin wall crisis in 1961. If the Soviets had chosen Berlin instead of Cuba, much less effort would have achieved the same effect. This is also true for Cuba. A couple of MRBMs would have been enough to challenge America so that the deployment of IRBMs would not have been necessary. Therefore the „supreme Soviet probe of American intentions“ as the sole motivation for the deployment is questionable.

It was also argued that Khrushchev not only doubted America's determination in general, but also doubted President Kennedy's ability as an effective leader. Therefore the reason for Khrushchev's assumption that the missile bases on Cuba would not provoke a strong U.S. reaction was due to Khrushchev's picture of Kennedy as a young and inexperienced leader. Two events, which allegedly influenced Khrushchev's perception of Kennedy, were the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 and Kennedy's bad performance in the Vienna Summit later that year. With the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy's reluctance to support the invasion with American troops and air support was used often by analysts to prove this explanation. After the Vienna Summit, Khrushchev is said to have told the Central Committee Presidium: „Quite a guy. He comes to a meeting and can't perform.“

According to the test-of-will theory, Kennedy felt deceived by Khruschev. In September, he had explicitly warned the Soviets twice not to install any offensive weapons on Cuba. Before the crisis and even after he had just learned of the missile sites, he repeatedly received Soviet assurances that they did not intend to do so. „The Cuban crisis began with an act of deception, when the Soviets deployed missiles on the island while saying, or at least strongly implying, that this was something they would never do.“ This feeling led Kennedy to take a firm stand and to make every effort to get the missiles out of Cuba. Parts of his radio/TV-speech on October 22, 1962 support this assumption:

This urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base [...] constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas, in flagrant defiance of [...] my own public warnings to the Soviet Union on September 4 and 13.

After a closer examination, it is obvious that the Soviet threat against the resolve of the United States was not an intention of the USSR, but rather a perception of the American leaders. As a result Kennedy and the members of the ExComm did not consider a diplomatic approach, but sought a clear and swift solution against the missiles. After having drawn a line by warning the Soviets Kennedy now felt bound by his word.

Khrushchev in fact thought Kennedy to be a worthy adversary. In his memoirs he wrote of Kennedy after the Vienna summit: „[H]e rose in my estimation at once [...] He was, so to speak, both my partner and my adversary.“ Even if he might have had doubts, Kennedy's firm handling of the Berlin issue should have taught him otherwise. Furthermore, Khrushchev should have realized that Kennedy, who had authorized the invasion at the Bay of Pigs and other operations to remove Castro from power was committed to the protection of American interests in Cuba.

However, the argument of Kennedy's resolve can be used in reverse. For example, Khruschev could have decided to place the missiles because he respected Kennedy and because he knew Kennedy's determination to further impose pressure on Cuba. As the crisis developed, the Soviet's order not to challenge the imposed blockade, and to finally withdraw the missiles shows that Khruschev was convinced that Kennedy would not back down, but would rather use all available possibilities to avert any nuclear threat so close to the U.S.

During the ExComm deliberations and in later studies of the crisis, another explanation for the Soviet decision to deploy the missiles was proposed. The missiles might have been installed as a result of the situation in Berlin. In the months and years prior to the October Crisis, Khrushchev had tried a couple of times to pressure the Western allies out of Berlin and to force the signing of a peace treaty. After Kennedy had resisted Khrushchev's efforts, the missile deployment might have served to achieve a settlement for Berlin in a couple of ways. First, it has been supposed ever since the crisis that the missiles were intended to serve as a bargaining chip concerning the former German capital. A second assumption was that the Soviets considered the missiles to serve as a trap. If the United States reacted with military action to this provocation that

was posed to them in their hemisphere, the Soviet Union then could justify military revenge, and therefore take Berlin. Secretary of State Dean Rusk speculated about the Soviet motives in the ExComm:

I think that [...] Berlin is [...] very much involved in this. [...] [T]hey may be thinking that they can either bargain Berlin and Cuba against each other, or that they could provoke us into a kind of action in Cuba which would give an umbrella for them to take action with respect to Berlin. [...] If they could provoke us into taking the first overt action, then the world would be confused and they would have [...] what they would consider to be a justification for making a move somewhere else.

Both explanations seem very unlikely. If the Soviets had really intended to trade the missiles against a Berlin settlement, it would have been sufficient to deploy several MRBMs. It is not credible that they would have made all the efforts to install so many missiles and especially the more costly IRBMs if they meant to dismantle them later anyway. Another obvious contradiction is the fact that Kennedy, who had already shown his determination to preserve the status quo in Berlin, would hardly have accepted any kind of a deal. Therefore the hypothesis of a Soviet intention to trade the Cuban missiles against Berlin is doubtful. The idea of Cuba as a diverting trap does not hold to closer examination either. Again it is questionable that the Soviets would have had to expend so much material to achieve their goal. It „would be much too costly [...] [and] also be much too risky.“ Obviously, had the purpose of the missiles been to function as a provocation for the Americans to attack Cuba, why did Khrushchev then withdraw the missiles before that happened? If he had left them in Cuba perhaps the Americans would have struck.

### 3. In Defense of Cuba

When president Kennedy asked for possible reasons for the Soviet missile deployment during the first ExComm meeting the answers included a couple of assumptions. But not one of Kennedy's top level advisers assumed that the reason for Khrushchev's decision might have been a defensive one. Nevertheless this was exactly the official Soviet explanation that Khrushchev immediately put forward:

We reaffirm that the armaments which are in Cuba, regardless of the classification to which they may belong, are intended solely for defensive purposes in order to secure the Republic of Cuba against the attack of an aggressor.

Some analysts have vigorously rejected the official Soviet statements as pure propaganda. They maintain that after the missiles had been detected and after the Soviets had to withdraw them, their claim that they only tried to help Cuba to deter an American invasion was an effort to save face. By sticking to this claim, the Soviet leader could declare that the USSR achieved the goal to defend Cuba and in fact did not lose in the crisis because of Kennedy's non-invasion pledge.

Reviewing the documents and statements of participants from both sides that are available today it seems that there is more truth to Khrushchev's reasoning than previously thought. In his memoirs the former premier claimed: „The main thing was that the installation of our missiles in Cuba would, I thought, restrain the United States from precipitous military action against Castro's government.“ To understand Khruschev's point and to see what finally led to his perception of an American threat to Cuba, it is necessary to have a closer look on the events in the months and years before the missile crisis and before the decision was made to send missiles to Cuba in spring 1962. Furthermore, it is important to understand what information thereof was known to the Cubans and Soviets. The Soviet claims that they had reason intervene because the United States intended to invade Cuba have been rejected by many scholars as false. But even if the U.S. did not want to do so, it is important for the decisionmaking process that the opponent thought so. If the Cubans felt threatened and the Soviets also believed in a threat, U.S. intentions did not matter for the final outcome. For that reason, I will focus my approach on how Cubans and Soviets perceived events and how they evaluated

information they received until they agreed in the spring of 1962 to station nuclear missiles on the Caribbean island. This will help to make plausible that Khrushchev indeed saw an imminent threat to Cuba, which was one reason for his missile decision.

To grasp how this understanding evolved it is necessary to examine the US-Cuban relations and to go back at least to the year 1959. Before Castro, Cuba under the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista was virtually controlled by U.S. interests. Americans owned Cuban utilities, most of the sugar plantations and the oil refineries on the island. Despite American investment and a higher standard of living when compared to other Latin American countries Cuba still faced severe problems like unemployment and poverty. Furthermore Batista's administration was characterized by corruption and inefficiency, not to forget its unscrupulous persecution of dissenters. Castro and his movement promised to restore the former Cuban constitution, to improve the situation of the poor by profit sharing for workers and to carry out agrarian reforms that would make owners out of tenants. When they finally succeeded in overthrowing the US-backed dictator Batista in January 1959, Castro was acclaimed by a majority of the Cuban people. Most of the citizens also supported Castro's view that the constant U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs since the 19th century was the reason for Cuba's bad situation.

Initially, America was optimistic concerning the future relations with the new Cuban government. However, after Castro declared himself Premier and suspended elections, persecuting Batista supporters and legalizing the Communist party, the US hopes for good relations with Cuba soon evaporated. In a couple of speeches he made clear that „[h]is primary objective [...] was to decrease American leverage over Cuban affairs.“ This became obvious when he started to put his vows for reforms into action. By introducing the Agrarian Reform Law, the Castro administration expropriated land owners and prohibited future foreign ownership. Consequently, this measure severely damaged U.S. investment. Finally, Castro began to remove liberal members of the administration, replacing them with Socialist and even Communist members. All these developments were literally like a *red* rag to a bull because „in American eyes the acceptability of a Latin American regime depended on its being perceived as non-communist.“

This fact was known to Castro. He did not forget what had happened in Guatemala during the first years of the 1950s. In 1952, the Guatemalan president Arbenez introduced an agrarian reform bill that enabled the state to expropriate uncultivated land and to distribute it. This state measure was also applied to the American owned United Fruit Company , which damaged American interests. The company, which was not content with the compensation offered by the government, started a massive publicity campaign that claimed the Guatemalan government and its actions were influenced by Communism. A number of U.S. government officials, who were involved in United Fruit affairs, supported the Boston based banana producer. In 1953, the CIA with White House permission started to train a small rebel army that was under the leadership of Castillo Armas. American money, weapons, and even planes were put at Armas's disposal. In June 1954, Armas and his small force penetrated from Honduras into Guatemala, gaining control after Arbenez fled the country. After the setup of his government, Armas returned as one of his first actions the land to United Fruit.

Castro, wary that the Americans would try their Guatemalan strategy on Cuba, knew that he had to be careful. Therefore, Castro turned to Western Europe, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to obtain military supplies. Despite heavy American pressure on the European allies, France and Belgium complied with Cuban orders. When in March 1960 the ship „La Coubre“ that brought arms to Cuba exploded in the Havana harbor, Castro openly accused the United States of sabotage. It was clear to Castro that his accusations would trigger American action. He said to Aleksandr Alekseev, the Moscow representative in Havana: „The USA will take the following steps [...] 1.The implementation of terrorist acts [...] 2. A break in diplomatic relations 3. The introduction of economic sanctions 4. An overt attack.“ Having already started to diminish American influence by expropriations the Cuban leader tried to go farther by opening Cuba to the East. By the end of 1959, he had established close connections to the Soviet Union and he was rather cordial with Alekseev. In February 1960, Cuba hosted a Soviet trade exhibition when Castro welcomed Anastas Mikoyan to Havana. The outcome was a Cuban-Soviet aid and trade agreement that was perceived in the U.S as proof of a communist Cuba.

As feared by Castro, his approach to the Soviet Union and his accusations that the United States was responsible for „La Coubre“ triggered off the implementation of a „Program of Covert Actions Against the Castro Regime“ by President Eisenhower. It had been prepared by the CIA since the beginning of the year. The program was designed to overthrow Castro and included four parts:

- (1) creation of a [...] Cuban opposition to the Castro regime located outside of Cuba; (2) a powerful propaganda offensive against Castro; (3) creation of a covert action and intelligence organisation within Cuba responsive to the exile opposition; (4) the development of a paramilitary force outside Cuba for future guerilla action.

Via the Cuban exile community in Florida news of the American program reached Cuba. Fearing an American attack, Castro asked Moscow for military aid. In a letter on March 12, 1960 Khrushchev assured Castro: „With regard to supplies of weapons [...] the Soviet government is prepared to render assistance in the supply and delivery of them from the Czechs [...] and if necessary, then directly from the Soviet Union.“ In April, Khrushchev received intelligence reports that made him aware of the Cuban threat, such that he ordered to supply the Cuban government with weapons free of charge.

The next confrontation began when in July 1960 the American owned oil companies refused to refine oil the Cubans had bought from the Soviets. Castro used this incident to nationalize the refineries after getting assurances of Soviet assistance. The U.S. reaction to this was an almost 95 percent reduction of the sugar quota that had guaranteed the export of Cuban sugar to the U.S. for prices that were higher than on the world market. As a next step, the U.S. administration stopped exports to Cuba. From the Cuban perspective, the economic sanctions were devastating and raised fears that more economic action and even military operations were to come. As a result of this Cuban invasion scare, the Soviet Union rendered assistance in form of a nuclear protection pledge, when Khrushchev proclaimed: „Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people with their rocket fire should the aggressive forces in the Pentagon dare to start intervention against Cuba.“

This development and the Soviets' assurances led the Americans to step up their anti-Castro program. They recruited more exiles for their guerilla training camps located in Guatemala, intensified planning for the assassination of Castro, and continued covert

operations in Cuba like bombings in Havana. The United States tried to impose more diplomatic pressure on Cuba by anti-Cuban agitation in the Organisation of American States (OAS). This was done, for example, at a regional foreign ministers' meeting in Costa Rica in August. Again the Cubans interpreted all the information they gathered about the American actions as preparations for US-backed military intervention. Meanwhile, the rhetoric in the American presidential election campaign became more and more focused on demanding action against Cuba. Castro feared that president Eisenhower would order U.S. military action in Cuba to give Nixon support in the close election to come. This too added to the Cuban perception that an attack was close at hand, such that by the end of October the Cuban military was put on the highest alert.

In late December of 1960 as the next invasion scare hit the Cubans, Castro demanded the reduction of the U.S. embassy staff because he feared that the American diplomats were involved in planning covert actions and the expected attack. Instead of complying with the Cuban demand, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with the Caribbean island in January; just before the inauguration of president Kennedy.

When Kennedy came to office a major part of his foreign policy centered around Cuba. In his election campaign, he used the Cuban situation and had promised to take a firm stand against the Communist intrusion into the Western hemisphere. Kennedy inherited the anti-Castro program from Eisenhower and stuck to it. In fact, he not only continued the actions begun by the Eisenhower administration but instead expanded the U.S. efforts. The covert operations came to a climax in April 1961 when he ordered to carry out the long prepared Bay of Pigs invasion. 1400 CIA-trained Cuban exiles and mercenaries landed on the Cuban shore after initial air strikes. In the face of international pressure on the U.S. in the UN, President Kennedy refused the order to provide U.S. air cover for the invaders. Therefore, the operation did not succeed in accomplishing the destruction of the Cuban Air Force. This enabled the Cubans to sink some of the support ships and to prevent the invaders from establishing a secure beachhead. The Cubans succeeded in holding the attack and in repulsing the whole invasion. The exiles and mercenaries, if not dead, were arrested. Finally, the Cuban fears of an US-backed were justified.

Despite this disaster the United States did not cease its operations. Especially the CIA continued in 1961 to plan and implement assassination plots against Castro and other Cuban leaders. Whereas many of the plots were never detected by the Cuban security forces, several of the attempts were detected. The discovery of plans or materials and the arrests of some assassins caused Castro and Khrushchev to recognize the American determination to overthrow the Cuban government, despite the clear defeat at the Bay of Pigs.

The Kennedy administration intended to further intensify the actions against Cuba. To accomplish this, President Kennedy ordered General Edward Lansdale to plan and initiate the CIA program „Operation Mongoose“, which was to be controlled by a panel of top level politicians and high ranking Pentagon officers. Mongoose was a „multitrack program of covert, economic, diplomatic and propagandistic elements calculated to overthrow the Castro government.“ The program’s covert actions included sabotage by attacking the Cuban coast, burning cane fields, and bombing factories and utilities. The CIA also operated in Europe to make products that were going to be shipped to Cuba unusable. The United States further expanded trade restrictions by banning Cuban imports to the United States and applied pressure on American allies to cut their trade relations. The economic sanctions finally became a full embargo such that the Soviet Union now became Cuba’s sole trading partner. Another major part of the operation was to isolate Cuba diplomatically. The most severe diplomatic blow for Cuba was the US-initiated OAS decision in January 1962, which excluded Cuba after Castro in December had publicly declared to be a Marxist-Leninist. This fact convinced Castro and Khrushchev that the United States was preparing a second invasion attempt. Apart from the obvious public measures by the U.S., Cuban and Soviet intelligence knew that the Americans conducted and coordinated the covert and subversive operations. Edward Martin, in 1962 undersecretary for Latin America, summarized the intentions of „Operation Mongoose“ in the 1992 conference held in Havana:

[O]ur policy had two purposes. One was to do as much damage as we could by trade restrictions to the Cuban economy, preventing trade with Cuba by our friends, thereby increasing the costs to the Soviet Union [...]. At the same time, we were doing everything we could to diminish and curtail the impact of Cuba and its Soviet friend in the Latin American countries in their

efforts to increase the power of the communist parties and other various elements which would [...] make them additional allies of the Soviet Union in the Western Hemisphere.

The question whether the United States intended to invade Cuba in 1962 has been discussed ever since. Today it is impossible to say if the Americans would have invaded the island or not. While some scholars explicitly reject this possibility, others claim that there is now enough evidence to support this assumption. What is definitely known is that the U.S. prepared contingency plans in coordination with Operation Mongoose, deployed troops to the Caribbean and that the American military exercises were perceived by the Soviets as proof of invasion plans. In fact, the Mongoose plan guidelines assumed that the direct use of U.S. military forces would be unavoidable to achieve the task of overthrowing Castro: „In undertaking to cause the overthrow of the target government, the U.S. will make maximum use of indigenous resources, internal and external, but recognises that final success will require decisive U.S. military intervention.“ Throughout the spring and summer of 1962 the U.S. military performed public maneuvers that were designed to train for an actual invasion of islands. During one exercise (PHIBRIGLEX-62) Marines even invaded a mythical island to overthrow its dictator Ortsac - Castro spelled backwards.

Facing all these developments and receiving information on American activities, it is understandable why the Cubans and Soviets perceived a threat and feared that Cuba would be attacked if the Soviets would not give further assistance. The Soviets had already sent conventional arms to Cuba and had given public pledges to defend Cuba, but the U.S. still continued its actions. Nuclear missiles were only the logical next step in trying to secure Cuba. Even if scholars doubt that Kennedy intended to invade it is obvious that Khrushchev had reason to assume an attack. Consequently, the American covert operations enabled Khrushchev to station his missiles on Cuba. Robert McNamara once admitted: „If I had been in Moscow or Havana at that time [...] I would have believed the Americans were preparing for an invasion.“ Therefore, Khrushchev's claims of defending Cuba cannot be seen as face-saving propaganda as his post-crisis speech at the Supreme Soviet on December 12, 1962 has been labeled:

The United States reactionary forces have been doing everything [...] to overthrow Cuba's revolutionary government and to restore their domination

there. They broke off diplomatic relations [...], were and are conducting subversive activity, established an economic blockade of Cuba. [...]

Cuba needed weapons as a means of containing the aggressors, and not as means of attack. For Cuba was under real threat of invasion. [...] Everything indicated that the United States was preparing to attack the Cuban Republic [...]. Naturally, neither we nor our Cuban friends had in mind that a small number of IRBMs would be used for an attack on the United States or any other country. Our aim was to defend Cuba.

#### 4. The Nuclear Balance

Many scholars have doubted that the defense of Castro was the sole purpose for the Soviet decision. It is widely accepted today that another reason for the deployment of missiles to Cuba was to counter the American nuclear superiority of the early 1960s. Whereas the public Soviet statements always claimed that the need to defend Cuba had initiated their operation, Khrushchev later admitted in his memoirs that strategic thinking played into the decision making process as well: „In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call ‘the balance of power’.“ This statement shows that Khrushchev knew of American nuclear superiority and saw the need to counter it. Therefore, this shows that the Soviets felt threatened by American nuclear superiority and policy. To understand this reasoning it is necessary to have a look at the strategic situation, the nuclear policy of the two countries and to examine why Khrushchev felt threatened. This will have to include a short discussion of how nuclear stability was defined in the early 1960s.

Nuclear theory at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s was shaped by the belief that stability could only be achieved by securing a nuclear second-strike capability. Being able to absorb an enemy’s first strike while still having enough nuclear weapons to retaliate in a way that would impose unacceptable damage to the opponent consequently would prevent the enemy’s first strike. Building secure retaliatory forces was therefore the most important part of achieving deterrence. In order to accomplish a stable situation, it was necessary that both superpowers have these secure retaliatory weapons at their disposal. One side knowing that the other was able to destroy its nuclear arsenal without leaving enough warheads to retaliate would be tempted to order a first strike. Therefore, the question of targeting the enemy’s weapons, the counterforce strategy, became crucial, because it was the only possibility to effectively defend against nuclear weapons. Albert Wohlstetter pointed this out in 1959:

Suppose both the United States and the Soviet Union had the power to destroy each others’ retaliatory forces and society, given the opportunity to administer the opening blow. [...] It would be extraordinary risky for one side *not* to attempt to destroy the other, or to delaying to do so, since [...] this is the sole way it can reasonably hope to emerge at all. Evidently such a situation is extremely unstable. On the other hand if it is clear that the aggressor too will suffer catastrophic damage in the event of his aggression,

he then has strong reason not to attack. A protected retaliatory capacity has a stabilizing influence [...] in deterring rational attack.

Preemption was also an option for one country if it possessed a decisive advantage in nuclear weapons over its enemy, such that it could strike first and be sure to take out all the adversary's weapons. Such a situation, the first strike capability, would add to the insecurity of the other side, and therefore, lead to an immense effort to compensate this missile gap.

The two theoretical approaches just mentioned were both implied in the events leading to the Cuban missile crisis. At first the United States feared that a missile gap favouring the Soviet Union would arise after the Soviets had achieved several successes in rocket and space technology. The launch of Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin's space flight raised assumptions that the East was also far ahead in missile technology. The result was a build up of the U.S. strategic forces. Despite their successes, the Soviets had to restart their program for Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) after technical problems appeared and made the whole project useless. It would take years to get to the actual deployment of the second generation of ICBMs. It was clear to Khrushchev that in the meantime the Soviet Union would face an enormous missile gap as the U.S. capability of deliverable nuclear warheads constantly increased. Whereas the Americans further developed and expanded their triad doctrine of strategic weapons based on bombers, ICBMs and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), the Soviets had to rely on their obsolete bomber fleet (most of which were only able to fly one-way missions) and only a couple of ICBMs. The numbers of nuclear weapons clearly favoured the U.S. with an overall advantage in warheads of 12:1 and a 4:1 numerical advantage in ICBMs. This would be a typical first strike possibility for the Americans should they get to know about the actual balance of power. Therefore, Khrushchev started a „campaign to create in Western minds an exaggerated understanding of the size and power of the Soviet nuclear forces.“ He constantly boasted that the Soviet Union was able to stand up to any nuclear challenge.

The U.S. administration already supposed that Khrushchev's claims were false, but until the summer of 1961 they lacked proof for their theory because U-2 flights over

the Soviet Union had been halted following the Garry Powers incident in 1960. In 1961, the U.S. successfully launched the first Samos satellites that delivered the long awaited pictures of the Soviet Union which showed that the perceived missile gap did not exist. When Kennedy was challenged by Khrushchev over Berlin and the Soviets restarted nuclear testing, he decided to reveal „the Kremlin’s bluff of ‘strategic superiority’“. Kennedy let his Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatrick reveal the truth in October 1961. Gilpatrick told in his speech of recently gained intelligence that the Soviet Union had much less nuclear weapons than the U.S. and that it was known exactly where these few missiles were stationed. He also described the U.S. nuclear capability and made clear that America could absorb a Soviet first strike and would still be able to retaliate with more warheads than the Soviets could use for their first strike. This declaration completely shocked Khrushchev and his administration. It had already been devastating for them to know that they lacked nuclear power, but now the enemy knew of their inferiority as well. With Gilpatrick’s speech, the Soviet strategic arsenal became useless as a deterrent. The Soviets now faced a real crisis because they were not able to redress the strategic balance with the deployment of ICBMs. The Americans had just deprived the Soviets of their second strike capability while telling them that they still had one.

Khrushchev now had to think of other possibilities to counter this threatening situation because the Soviet Union’s ICBMs would not become operational for the next 10 years. As opposed to the ICBMs, the USSR had an enormous amount of MRBMs and IRBMs that they used for targeting Western Europe. Therefore Khrushchev thought of using these medium range weapons as kind of „ersatz ICBMs“ by stationing them as close as possible to the United States. The Americans had used this method already against the Soviet Union by establishing military bases all around the Soviet Union. Khrushchev was well aware of this before the October crisis. In his memoirs he wrote: „The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you.“ Khrushchev was especially annoyed about American Jupiter missiles in Turkey that became operational in April 1962. It is rumored that during a vacation on the Black Sea Khrushchev said, „I see U.S. missiles in Turkey, aimed at *my dacha*.“ Therefore, he felt it just to do the same to the Americans by sending his missiles to Cuba.

Another strategic thought that certainly played a role in Khrushchev's thinking was the fear of an American first strike. The Gilpatric speech had also sent the message to the Soviets that the Americans knew they possessed a first strike capability. Soviet intelligence had reported a couple of times about Pentagon plans to launch a preemptive nuclear strike on the USSR. In addition, Robert Kennedy had mentioned in May 1962 in a meeting with Georgi Bolshakov, Khrushchev's direct link to the White House, that „the Chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff] offered the President a report in which they confirmed that the United States is currently ahead of the Soviet Union in military power and that *in extremis* it would be possible to probe the forces of the Soviet Union.“ This confirmed to the Soviet leadership that there was a real threat of an American first strike that had to be countered in some way.

The Jupiter missiles previously mentioned added to the Soviet fears that the U.S. planned a first strike on their country. When the construction of the missile sites in Turkey started the Jupiter missile generation was already outdated and was even considered obsolete by the Americans. The missiles, which were very vulnerable to an attack and needed hours before getting ready for the launch, could only be used by the Americans for a first strike. The situation the Soviets faced with the American missiles in Turkey was the same that Wohlstetter in his theory already had described as a provocation to an enemy:

Missiles placed near the enemy, even if they could not retaliate, would have a potent capability for striking first by surprise. [...] The existence of such a force might be a considerable provocation. [...] When not coupled with the ability to strike in retaliation, such a capability might suggest [...] an intention to strike first.

After having examined Khrushchev's strategic threat perception it is now clear that defending Castro was not the only reason for setting up a Soviet nuclear base on Cuba. The nuclear situation and the Soviet need to counter their strategic inferiority at least influenced the decision just as much as the need to deter American aggression.

## 5. Conclusion

The intention of my paper was to show how the Soviets perceived the situation in the spring of 1962 when Khrushchev made the decision to send nuclear missiles to Cuba. Because of this, I did not want to judge the Soviet action as justified or not. But to understand the reasons for the installation of nuclear weapons it is necessary to distinguish between U.S. intentions and Soviet understanding. I think that it became obvious during the explanation of the Soviet and Cuban point of view that they had genuinely perceived a possible American invasion in 1962. The Soviets therefore assisted Cuba so that they would not lose their new ally. By doing this Khrushchev secured a launchpad for the spreading of Communism in Latin America and maintained the Soviet leadership of the Communist world.

The defense of Cuba also enabled the Soviets to counter their ballistic missile inferiority by increasing the amount of deliverable nuclear warheads to the United States. Khrushchev and the Soviet leaders felt threatened by the American nuclear policy and even feared a first strike. Cuba offered the possibility to at least try to redress the strategic balance of power and to answer to American missiles threatening the USSR from outside the American territory. It is possible that the strategic reason for setting up the Soviet missile bases was more important to Khrushchev than the defense of the Caribbean island, despite the fact that the official Soviet explanations claim the defense of Cuba to be the only motive.

From today's point of view it is impossible to judge which of the two reasons might have been the primary one. But after having learned that the Soviet deployment was certainly influenced by both motives, it is obvious that the Cuban missile crisis must be seen in the entire context of the Cold War, which dominated international politics. Examining the events in this context, the missile crisis was a kind of crossroad where two major strings of Cold War policy came together. The pre-crisis events show how vigorously both superpowers fought to gain influence in the Third World. Whereas the United States was determined to counter the loss of Cuba and to prevent the spreading of revolution and communism in Latin America, the Soviet Union was eager to respond to

the Cuban quest for help. „A loss for ‘us’ meant a gain for ‘them’“ was a widely accepted assumption during that time. The second major theme was the continuing arms race and the effort to overcome the other superpower. The Soviets in trying to achieve missile parity, and the United States in trying to prevent even the appearance of it, were both willing to accept a confrontation.

The importance of the Cuban missile crisis in Cold War history is obvious. Its ramifications are still relevant today as can be seen in the controversial discussion the crisis triggered. John Lewis Gaddis summed this up:

What has not changed, in all of these revisions and reconsiderations [of the crisis], is the central place the Cuban missile crisis occupies in Cold War history: if anything, it appears to have been a *more* important turning-point than we had earlier believed it to be. It was the only episode after World War II in which *each* of the major arenas of Soviet-American competition intersected: the nuclear arms race to be sure, but also conflicting ideological aspirations, „third-world“ rivalries, relations with allies, the domestic political implications of foreign policy, the personality of individual leaders.

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