**Lessons from the Cuban missile crisis**

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Sixty years ago, we survived a nuclear standoff between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev that inspired literature on crisis management and crisis avoidance regarding the Cuban missile crisis. From that crisis, we should have learned something about the essentials of secret diplomacy and compromise.

The Biden administration, however, is ignoring the most important lesson of the missile crisis: all lines of communication – political, military and diplomatic – must be kept open at all times, particularly in the nuclear age. The missile crisis ended without a formal agreement, but less than a year later the two sides signed a formal agreement to ensure safe and quick communications between Washington and Moscow. The so-called “hot line” was the most tangible result of the crisis. The Department of State objected to locating the line in the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon, but this decision was dictated by the anxiety over nuclear weapons.

Several decades after the crisis in October 1962, we learned how close we were to the actual firing of nuclear weapons. In early October, the Soviets deployed four diesel submarines, each of which carried one nuclear-armed torpedo, as part of the logistics in deploying Soviet missiles in Cuba. One of these submarines surfaced on October 27 only to confront US antisubmarine warfare ships and planes. The sub’s captain, believing that he was under attack, ordered an emergency dive and the launch of the sub’s nuclear torpedo. Fortunately, a Soviet naval officer convinced the sub’s captain that the US ships were signaling and not attacking. As a result, the captain’s decision to fire the nuclear torpedo was never transmitted, and the Soviet submarine signaled back to the Americans the importance of avoiding provocative actions.

There were diplomatic options for resolving the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 because neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev wanted to go to war, and both leaders presumably understood the importance of maintaining control of the situation. Khrushchev could not act alone and had to consult with a Politburo that presumably offered differing views of the confrontation. Kennedy created an Executive Committee that ultimately rejected the case for an air strike and recognized the importance of negotiations. Neither leader wanted to lose control of the situation. A former US ambassador to the Soviet Union, Llewellyn Thompson, played a key role in convincing Kennedy that, if the United States gave Moscow some diplomatic room, the Kremlin would find a way to withdraw its missiles and bombers from Cuba, and avoid a military confrontation.

Diplomacy was the key to success in 1962, but fateful decisions in the Clinton administration in the 1990s set in motion the current crisis in Ukraine. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker told Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze that the United States would not “leap frog” into East Europe if 360,000 Soviet forces were withdrawn from East Germany. President Bill Clinton ignored this assurance and his own diplomats, led by retired ambassador George F. Kennan, who presciently argued that the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into East Europe would lead to a confrontation with Russia. Former German chancellor Angela Merkel tried to educate President George W. Bush that further NATO expansion involving Ukraine and Georgia would be unacceptable to the Kremlin. President Barack Obama contributed to the escalation of bilateral tensions by basing US fighter aircraft in Poland and continuing the deployment of a sophisticated regional missile defense in Poland and Romania.

The current crisis in East Europe is marked by a continuing escalation between Russian and Ukrainian military forces on the ground and the absence of any indication that Moscow and Kyiv are prepared to negotiate. As a result of Ukrainian advances and the deployment of sophisticated Western weaponry, Putin is threatening the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Putin’s recent statements have been particularly chilling with the insistence that, in the event of a nuclear war, “we would go to paradise as martyrs, while they would simply perish.”

If Putin continues to face humiliating reversals on the battlefield, his resort to tactical nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. Unlike the Khrushchev scenario 60 years ago, there is no Politburo to exercise a restraining influence on the Russian leader. Putin appears to be ignoring the environmental devastation, the elevated cancer rates, and the radiation sickness that would accompany even the limited use of tactical nuclear weapons. It is reasonable to ask if Putin has lost touch with reality.

Meanwhile, the war between Russia and Ukraine shows no signs of abating, and the rhetoric between the two sides is hardening. Putin continues to trumpet the destructive capabilities of his military forces, and Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, warns of “catastrophic consequences” for Russia if nuclear weapons were used. In the wake of the Cuban missile crisis, Washington and Moscow understood the dangers of escalation, and negotiated a Partial Test Ban Treaty in addition to establishing the Hot Line communications system.

In the current crisis, there have been no serious discussions between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov or between Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu. The Biden administration has resorted to group think, with no one in the administration promoting substantive discussions as a way to ameliorate the current crisis. Kennedy had a devil’s advocate in Llewellyn Thompson, and Lyndon Johnson had George Ball during the Vietnam war. Biden seems to have no devil’s advocate; all of his advisors are singing from the same page of music.

As a result of the escalating confrontation, the United States and Russia are unable to discuss important geopolitical matters that finds the two sides in general agreement. This is true for arms control and disarmament; nonproliferation; counter-terrorism; and climate control. Moscow, for example, has been supportive of US efforts to engage North Korea in talks on nuclear disarmament as well as US and Iranian efforts to return to the 2015 nuclear agreement that Donald Trump abandoned. (The fact that Iran has abandoned both its insistence that the United States remove Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards from its official list of foreign terrorist organizations and that the Biden administration guarantee that a future US president would not withdraw from the nuclear pact suggest that a renewal of the agreement is possible.)

We’ve come a long way from John F. Kennedy’s advice: “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.” It bears repeating, however, that in order to do so all lines of communication must be open. In addition to North Korea’s increased missile testing as well as Iran’s enhanced uranium enrichment, Putin’s nuclear threats add to the anxiety of a nuclear age that most of us believed was over.

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