**Is Ukraine More Dangerous Than the Cuban Missile Crisis?**

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Sixty years ago this month, the US and Soviet Union faced off in, arguably, the most dangerous superpower nuclear confrontation of the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved in thirteen days. Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove Russian missiles from Cuba.

Ukraine is pounding Russian troops and recapturing formerly occupied territory. Vladimir Putin is threatening to use nuclear weapons; ordering a partial mobilization of 300,000 reserves; annexing four of Ukraine’s regions; possibly sabotaging the NordStream gas pipeline, and retaliating with a mini-Blitz after the Kerch Bridge was partially destroyed. Is the world at greater risk today than during that fateful October of 1962?

Contrary to folklore, the Cuban Missile Crisis was provoked by John Kennedy, not Khrushchev. Kennedy ran for president vowing to reverse the so-called Missile Gap. In reality, the USSR lagged far behind America in nuclear weaponry. Long before Kennedy took office in January 1961, Khrushchev had been slashing defence, shifting scarce rubles to the civilian sector.

Kennedy immediately started a massive nuclear and conventional defence buildup authorizing the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion that April. Khrushchev’s response attempted to mollify his angry generals and preserve his spending priorities. By secretly installing short-range nuclear missiles in Cuba that could target Washington and New York, Khrushchev believed America’s overwhelming nuclear superiority would be outflanked without a costly arms race. He was wrong.

For Khrushchev, Cuba was not existential nor worth a world war.

Today, Ukraine is not Cuba. Cuba was a Soviet ward, 90 miles off Florida. Ukraine borders its enemy, Russia, and NATO. NATO was not engaged in the Cuban crisis. NATO is engaged in Ukraine.

Putin’s “special military operation” is failing on the ground. But with winter looming, Putin retaliated against Ukrainian energy infrastructure after the Kerch bridge was struck; suggesting a long-term strategy to break Ukrainian will as Russia is currently unable to achieve that with Ukraine’s army.

Russia is also not the USSR. Russia is a nuclear superpower. In 1962, the USSR was not. Putin understands that.

Putin is not Khrushchev. Khrushchev had a Politburo that would fire him two years after Cuba. Putin is not so constrained. However, Khrushchev was not inflicted with civil unrest as the missile crisis was brief. Ukraine is far from over.

Khrushchev believed Kennedy would have no choice other than to accept the Cuban fait accompli. Putin believes he can win over the long term. But Kennedy gave Khrushchev a way out. Today, what is the off-ramp for all parties?

For Khrushchev, Cuba was not existential nor worth a world war. Putin views Ukraine far differently if his nuclear threat is no bluff. Should Putin decide to use nuclear weapons, assuming that might be limited to only one or two, would it be a grave mistake? Suppose he used 10, 20 or more?

Kennedy aggressively responded to Soviet missiles in Cuba; unaware of his role in provoking the crisis. Forming a secret Executive Committee (EXCOM) of experts for advice and disregarding Moscow’s first threatening hotline message were perhaps Kennedy’s two most important decisions of the crisis. Kennedy also made all the intelligence public at the UN.

Biden rejected an EXCOM. His staff has conferred with outside experts on an ad hoc basis. Biden has been cautious and even self-deterring in rearming Ukraine to prevent greater escalation. Biden also released advanced intelligence warning of Russia’s invasion plans. That might have had the opposite effect of taunting Putin to attack.

Putin’s strategy is clear and long-term. Break the alliance with threats. Accept the current situation on the ground as Putin believes Russia ultimately will prevail because Ukraine and NATO cannot stay the course. If the US has a strategy, it is to bleed Russia into concessions. Hence, refuse negotiations and ceasefires until a total Russian withdrawal from Ukraine and a firm commitment to reparations are achieved. However, that is very unrealistic, short term and may provoke dangerous escalations.

What must be done? First, a long-term strategy for ending the war on favourable terms is essential. To derive that strategy, Biden should establish an EXCOM drawing in more Russian expertise. Second, he should set up a discrete communications link with Moscow through appropriate intermediaries. Third, barring an outright victor, concessions by all parties will be required. What are they?Clever diplomacy resolved Cuba. Resolving the Ukrainian crisis will need more than clever diplomacy. A comprehensive, long-term strategy is crucial if the Ukrainian crisis is to end as peacefully as Cuba did in 1962.

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