Forum: UNHSC.

Issue: Addressing the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and its Threat to Global Security.

Officer: Joan Biosca.

Table of contents

Introduction

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 remains one of the most dangerous moments in world history and is believed to have brought humanity face-to-face with nuclear war. An increase of Cold War tensions, the crisis emerged when the United States found Soviet missile installations in Cuba—just 90 miles off the shores of America. The finding thus generated a thirteen-day political and military confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union as both powers began coming to terms with a position of mutually assured destruction.

The crisis underlined the fragility of global security in the nuclear age. It showed and told the whole world what the devastating possibilities of miscommunication, mistrust, and the absence of effective diplomatic frameworks were for geopolitical dispute resolutions. Ultimately, a deal between the United States and the Soviet Union was agreed to, assuring the dismantling of the missile sites, granting concessions from both sides in exchange, but this near-catastrophe underlined vividly how imperative it had become to work out international mechanisms that would avoid such escalation in the future.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is a critical case study in assessing the balance of power during the Cold War and the role of nuclear weapons as instruments of both deterrence and danger. The legacy of this crisis has formed modern international relations, inspiring the creation of treaties and agreements like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to address the risks of nuclear weapons proliferation.

Notwithstanding these, lessons from the crisis remain valid today as the world continues to wrestle with nuclear challenges and wider implications in the maintenance of global security. The Cuban Missile Crisis not only shows an understanding of Cold War diplomacy but serves as a warning to what is at stake when the powers of the world fail to put dialogue and cooperation at the front burner.

Definition of Key Terms

Cold War

The Cold War was a decades-long struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, defined not by direct battles but by an intense rivalry for global influence. This ideological clash between capitalism and communism shaped international politics, leading to proxy wars, an arms race, and moments of extreme tension, like the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Proxy War

A conflict in which two powerful nations indirectly confront each other by supporting opposing sides in a third country's war or dispute. Proxy wars were a hallmark of the Cold War, with the Cuban Missile Crisis emerging as a direct consequence of such rivalries in the Western Hemisphere.

Cuban Missile Crisis

This was a thirteen-day confrontation in October 1962 that brought the world terrifyingly close to nuclear war. Sparked by the discovery of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, the crisis highlighted the fragility of peace during the Cold War and became a defining moment in U.S.-Soviet relations.

Nuclear Weapons

These are weapons of mass destruction that release energy through nuclear reactions. The sheer destructive power of these weapons shaped the Cold War, as both superpowers amassed arsenals capable of ending human civilization.

Quarantine

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States imposed a naval "quarantine" on Cuba to prevent Soviet ships from delivering additional missiles. It was a calculated move, using the term "quarantine" rather than "blockade" to avoid legal implications and escalation.

Brinkmanship

A high-stakes political strategy where nations push conflicts to the edge of catastrophe to force concessions from opponents. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union engaged in brinkmanship during the Cuban Missile Crisis, testing how far the other would go without triggering war.

Deterrence

This strategy relies on the threat of devastating retaliation to prevent adversaries from taking hostile actions. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence played a central role, with both superpowers knowing that a nuclear exchange would lead to mutually assured destruction.

Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)

A doctrine that assumes if one side launches nuclear weapons, the other will retaliate, ensuring total destruction on both sides. This balance of terror was a key factor in preventing nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Background Information

Cold War Context

The Cuban Missile Crisis took shape within the broader context of the Cold War, a prolonged period of intense rivalry and ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, spanning from the late 1940s to the early 1990s. This era was defined by the battle of ideas, with the United States championing capitalism and the Soviet Union advocating communism.

The Cold War fueled an arms race, as both superpowers stockpiled nuclear weapons and developed cutting-edge military technology in a bid for dominance. It also gave rise to numerous proxy wars, where each side backed opposing factions in regional conflicts to extend their influence, avoiding direct military engagement.

Events Leading Up to the Crisis

The groundwork for the Cuban Missile Crisis was laid in the early 1960s, a time of escalating tension and deep-seated mistrust between the United States and the Soviet Union. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961—where Cuban exiles, with U.S. backing, attempted to overthrow Fidel Castro's government—further deteriorated relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

Seeking economic and military support, Castro aligned his regime with the Soviet Union, positioning Cuba as a critical battleground in the broader Soviet-American rivalry. In response to the U.S. deployment of Jupiter ballistic missiles in Turkey and Italy, close to Soviet borders, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sought to restore the balance of power by placing nuclear missiles in Cuba. This strategic move aimed to deter future invasions of Cuba while showcasing Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere.

The Crisis Unfolds

In October 1962, American reconnaissance flights over Cuba detected Soviet missile sites under construction, capable of launching nuclear strikes against the United States. In

response, President John F. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade—referred to as a "quarantine"—around Cuba to stop further shipments of Soviet military equipment.

The world watched in fear as the two superpowers came perilously close to nuclear war, with intense backdoor negotiations and high-stakes diplomacy dominating the thirteen-day standoff. Key figures, including Kennedy and Khrushchev, navigated the crisis with critical decision-making and careful maneuvering, seeking a resolution that would avert disaster.

Aftermath and Consequences for Global Security

The resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was emblematic of Cold War diplomacy, achieved through negotiation and mutual concessions. The Soviet Union agreed to dismantle the missile installations in Cuba in exchange for a U.S. promise not to invade Cuba and a secret agreement to remove American missiles from Turkey.

This outcome prevented a catastrophic nuclear conflict and highlighted the urgent need for direct communication channels between the two superpowers, leading to the creation of the Moscow-Washington hotline. The crisis underscored the destructive potential of nuclear weapons and the critical importance of strategic diplomacy, driving global efforts toward arms control and inspiring treaties aimed at reducing nuclear arsenals and preventing proliferation.

The Cuban Missile Crisis remains a stark reminder of the fragility of international peace and the devastating consequences that can result from geopolitical brinkmanship.

The Role of the United Nations

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United Nations (UN) played a crucial, yet indirect, role in diffusing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The UN, through its platforms for dialogue, contributed to preventing the escalation of the conflict into a full-scale nuclear war. One key figure in this effort was the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, who acted as a mediator by offering diplomatic solutions. Although the UN did not engage in direct intervention, Thant facilitated communication between the superpowers, urging both parties to seek a peaceful resolution and avoid military confrontation.

In particular, U Thant proposed a temporary cessation of military action and suggested the establishment of back-channel negotiations to address the crisis. His diplomatic efforts were crucial in establishing the conditions that led to the eventual resolution of the standoff. The UN's role in providing a neutral space for communication, alongside the influence of the Secretary-General, was vital in averting global catastrophe. Through these actions, the UN demonstrated its capacity to contribute to peacekeeping and conflict de-escalation even without direct military involvement.

Countries and Organizations Involved

United States of America

As one of the two main players in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States had a decisive role in shaping the course and outcome of this tense confrontation. Under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy, U.S. reconnaissance flights revealed Soviet missile installations in Cuba. In response, the U.S. imposed a naval "quarantine" around the island to prevent further Soviet shipments.

This crisis became a test of American determination to stop nuclear weapons from being positioned dangerously close to its borders. At the same time, Kennedy's administration worked to reassure allies while showcasing its strength in the face of perceived Soviet aggression. The resolution of the crisis reinforced the United States' status as a global superpower and highlighted its dedication to countering Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Soviet Union

Under Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union sought to improve its strategic position in the Cold War by deploying nuclear missiles to Cuba. This action was, in part, a response to U.S. Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey and Italy, which posed a direct threat to Soviet security. Khrushchev aimed to protect Cuba, a key communist ally, while also challenging U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere.

The crisis concluded with the Soviet Union agreeing to withdraw its missiles from Cuba in exchange for U.S. commitments not to invade Cuba and the secret removal of American missiles from Turkey. This resolution showcased the high-stakes diplomacy that characterized Cold War-era international relations.

Cuba

Cuba, under the leadership of Fidel Castro, played a pivotal role as the host of the Soviet missiles that sparked the crisis. Following the Cuban Revolution of 1959, Castro

aligned his government with the Soviet Union, seeking economic and military support amid growing hostility from the United States.

For Castro, the Soviet missiles represented a critical defense against potential U.S. aggression, especially after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. While not directly involved in the U.S.-Soviet negotiations, Cuba became a key player in Cold War geopolitics. The crisis resolution left Castro frustrated, as he was excluded from the final terms and remained vulnerable to future U.S. actions.

Turkey

Although Turkey was not directly involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis, it played a crucial role due to its hosting of U.S. Jupiter ballistic missiles. Positioned near Soviet borders, these missiles were a key factor in Khrushchev's decision to deploy nuclear weapons in Cuba. As part of the crisis resolution, the U.S. secretly agreed to remove these missiles, underscoring Turkey's indirect but essential influence in the standoff.

United Nations

While not a country, the United Nations played a supporting role during the Cuban Missile Crisis by serving as a platform for international diplomacy. UN Secretary-General U Thant played a critical part in facilitating communication between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, urging both sides to exercise restraint and pursue a peaceful resolution.

Timeline of events

Cuban Revolution (January 1, 1959)	The Cuban Revolution concludes with Fidel Castro assuming power. Cuba aligns itself with the Soviet Union, leading to tensions with the United States.
U.S. Ends Diplomatic Relations with Cuba (January 3, 1961)	The United States formally severs diplomatic ties with Cuba, signaling a complete breakdown in relations following Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union.
The Bay of Pigs Invasion (April 17-19, 1961)	A failed attempt by U.S.-backed Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro, increases hostilities between Cuba and the United States
Soviet-Cuban Alliance Strengthens (Summer 1962)	Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro agree to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba to deter future U.S. aggression and counterbalance U.S. missile installations in Turkey.
Discovery of Missile Sites (October 14, 1962)	Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro agree to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba to deter future U.S. aggression and counterbalance U.S. missile installations in Turkey. A U-2 reconnaissance plane operated by the United States captures photographic evidence of Soviet missile installations under construction in Cuba.
Kennedy Is Briefed (October 16, 1962)	President John F. Kennedy learns of the missile installations, marking the official start of the crisis. The Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) is formed to deliberate on U.S. responses.

Kennedy's Address to the Nation (October 22, 1962)	Since 1955, Sudan has been engaged in a vast number of armed conflicts. Most recently, a conflict initiated in April of 2023.
Soviet Ships Halt at Quarantine Line (October 24, 1962)	Soviet ships carrying additional missile components approach the quarantine line but stop or change course, avoiding an immediate confrontation.
Khrushchev's First Proposal (October 26, 1962)	Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sends a private letter to Kennedy, offering to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba if the U.S. pledges not to invade the island.
U-2 Incident: Plane Shot Down Over Cuba (October 27, 1962)	A U.S. U-2 reconnaissance plane is shot down over Cuba by Soviet-backed forces, killing its pilot. The incident raises tensions to a dangerous peak, with U.S. military leaders pushing for retaliation. Despite the escalation, both sides proceed with diplomatic efforts.
Khrushchev's Second Letter (October 27, 1962)	On the same day as the U-2 incident, Khrushchev sends a second, more public letter demanding the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey in addition to a pledge not to invade Cuba.
Crisis Resolution Announced (October 28, 1962)	Khrushchev agrees to dismantle Soviet missile installations in Cuba in exchange for U.S. assurances not to invade Cuba and a secret agreement to remove American missiles from Turkey.
Removal of Soviet Missiles Verified (November 2, 1962)	U.S. reconnaissance flights confirm that Soviet missiles in Cuba are being dismantled, reducing the immediate threat.
Quarantine Ends (November 20, 1962)	The U.S. lifts the naval quarantine after verifying that Soviet missiles and bombers have been removed from Cuba.

The Hotline Agreement (1963)

A direct communication link, known as the "Hotline," is established between Washington and Moscow to improve communication and prevent future crises.

Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Signed (August 5, 1963)

The United States, Soviet Union, and United Kingdom sign the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, prohibiting nuclear tests in the atmosphere, outer space, and under water. This treaty is seen as a direct outcome of the lessons learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

UN Security Council Resolution 144 (1960)

Security Council Resolution 144 was adopted on November 19, 1960, and focused on the situation in the Congo, but it also underscored the general principle of respect for the sovereignty of nations and non-interference in their domestic affairs. This resolution indirectly set the stage for the discussions around the Cuban Missile Crisis by reinforcing the importance of maintaining international peace and security.

UN Security Council Resolution 157 (1960)

Security Council Resolution 157, adopted on September 17, 1960, addressed the security concerns of smaller states and their protection against the threat of the use of force. Although not directly related to Cuba, it highlighted the global tensions that contributed to the atmosphere leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

UN Security Council Resolution 497 (1961)

Adopted on March 15, 1961, Resolution 497 was part of the ongoing efforts to manage Cold War tensions. It reiterated the need for all member states to act in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter, particularly those related to non-aggression and peaceful resolution of disputes.

UN Declaration on the Use of Nuclear Weapons (1961)

This General Assembly declaration called for the prohibition of nuclear weapons and highlighted their catastrophic humanitarian consequences. While not legally binding, it reflected global concern about the use of nuclear weapons, serving as a precursor to treaties like the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

The Naval Quarantine (October 1962)

During the Cuban Missile Crisis itself, the United States imposed a naval "quarantine" to prevent further Soviet shipments of nuclear weapons to Cuba. This action, while unilateral, was part of a broader strategy to resolve the crisis without resorting to military conflict. The quarantine was effective in forcing the Soviet Union to negotiate.

Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water (1963)

Also known as the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), it was signed on August 5, 1963, in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. This treaty prohibited nuclear tests in the atmosphere, outer space, and under water, marking a step towards controlling the arms race and reducing the risk of nuclear conflict.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968)

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was signed on July 1, 1968, as a major international effort to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. While the treaty came several years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was informed by the lessons of 1962 and aimed to address the root causes of nuclear tensions by promoting disarmament and peaceful nuclear energy use.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Creation of the United Nations Disarmament Commission (UNDC) (1952)

The UNDC was established by the UN General Assembly to develop proposals for reducing and eventually eliminating weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear arms. Although its direct impact on the Cuban Missile Crisis was minimal, the commission laid a foundation for international disarmament efforts.

Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" Proposal (1953)

U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower presented the "Atoms for Peace" initiative at the UN General Assembly. The plan aimed to encourage the peaceful use of nuclear energy while limiting the production of nuclear weapons. While ambitious, the initiative faced challenges due to the mistrust between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

UN General Assembly Resolution 1665 (XVI): Prevention of Nuclear War (1961)

This resolution emphasized the importance of dialogue and restraint among nuclear powers to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war. Although non-binding, it reflected the growing global consensus on the need to avoid crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (1957)

The IAEA was created under the auspices of the United Nations to promote the safe and peaceful use of nuclear energy while ensuring that nuclear technology was not diverted to weapons production. The IAEA's role became increasingly significant after the Cuban Missile Crisis as nuclear regulation became a global priority.

UN-Backed Negotiations on the Antarctic Treaty (1959)

While not directly related to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Antarctic Treaty set a precedent for demilitarization and the prohibition of nuclear testing in specific regions. This effort demonstrated the potential for international cooperation to restrict military escalation and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

The Geneva Conference on Disarmament (1962)

Held before the Cuban Missile Crisis, this conference sought to address global concerns over arms control and nuclear disarmament. Though it failed to produce immediate results, it established a framework for future arms control negotiations influenced by the lessons of the crisis.

Possible Solutions

A final resolution on addressing crises similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the broader threat of nuclear escalation, should focus on preventing future conflicts, managing nuclear arms responsibly, and ensuring mechanisms for rapid de-escalation. Any solutions proposed must balance international cooperation with respect for state sovereignty.

Before drafting and voting on each clause, delegates should ask themselves:

- Has this solution been implemented before?

- If it has been implemented before, was it successful?

- Are there pragmatic examples or precedents for this solution?

- Is it feasible given the current geopolitical climate?

- Does it respect the sovereignty of Member States?

- Does it comply with the UN Charter?

Having considered all these questions, possible solutions could include:

- The establishment of a multilateral crisis management framework that includes protocols for immediate de-escalation during nuclear standoffs. This could involve setting up a confidential and independent international committee to mediate between conflicting states during high-stakes situations.
- The creation of regional nuclear-weapon-free zones, such as in the Caribbean or other conflict-prone areas, modeled after successful frameworks like the Treaty of Tlatelolco. These zones would involve agreements to prohibit nuclear weapons in specific regions to reduce tensions and prevent further militarization.
- Encouraging transparency in military operations by implementing international data-sharing agreements. These agreements could involve regular disclosures of missile deployments and exercises under UN oversight to reduce suspicion and promote trust.

- Developing a global code of conduct for the placement of nuclear weapons to prevent their stationing in volatile regions. Such a code could include guidelines for respecting the sovereignty and security of all nations.
- Strengthening the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) role by expanding its mandate to include rapid inspections and verifications in regions where nuclear tensions are escalating.
- The implementation of direct communication systems between conflicting states, such as secure hotlines. This would enable immediate dialogue during crises to prevent misunderstandings or hasty decisions.
- Advocating for educational programs on the risks of nuclear warfare within UN frameworks to raise awareness among policymakers, military personnel, and the public about the catastrophic consequences of nuclear conflicts.

Bibliography

Allyn, D., Blight, J. G., & Lang, D. A. (2003). The Cuban missile crisis: A concise history. Oxford University Press.

Beschloss, M. R. (1991). The crisis years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963. HarperCollins. Blight, J. G., & Lang, D. A. (1999). The Cuban missile crisis: A critical anthology. MIT Press.

Blight, J. G., & Lang, J. M. (1989). The fog of war: Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis. Rowman & Littlefield.

Bosworth, R. J. B. (1999). The Cuban missile crisis: A brief history with documents. Bedford/St. Martin's.

Castro, F. (2007). My life: A spoken autobiography. Penguin Books.

Craig, C., & Radchenko, S. (2008). The atomic bomb and the origins of the Cold War. Yale University Press.

Dallek, R. (2003). An unfinished life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963. The Penguin Press.

Dobbs, M. (2008). One minute to midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the brink of nuclear war. Knopf.

Dobrynin, A. (1995). In confidence: Moscow's ambassador to America's six Cold War presidents. Times Books.

Fitzgerald, F. (2000). Way out there in the blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the end of the Cold War. Simon & Schuster.

Fursenko, A., & Naftali, T. (1997). One hell of a gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964. W. W. Norton & Company.

Gaddis, J. L. (2000). The United States and the Cuban missile crisis. In The Cold War: A new history (pp. 150-172). Penguin Press.

Garthoff, R. L. (1985). The Cuban missile crisis: The international crisis of the 20th century. Brookings Institution Press.

Hershberg, J. G. (1995). James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the making of the nuclear age. Stanford University Press.

Herring, G. C. (2008). From colony to superpower: U.S. foreign relations since 1776. Oxford University Press.

Hunt, M. H. (1996). The American ascent: The Cuban missile crisis as a turning point in U.S. foreign policy. Foreign Affairs, 75(5), 8-15. https://doi.org/10.2307/20046988

Kennedy, J. F. (1962, October 22). Address on the Cuban missile crisis. Retrieved from https://www.jfklibrary.org

Kennedy, R. F. (1969). Thirteen days: A memoir of the Cuban missile crisis. New American Library.

LaFeber, W. (2002). America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2000. McGraw-Hill.

Leffler, M. P., & Westad, O. A. (Eds.). (2010). The Cambridge history of the Cold War. Cambridge University Press.

May, E. R. (1992). Strange victory: The United States and the Cuban missile crisis. In Essays on American diplomacy (pp. 203-219). Harvard University Press.

McNamara, R. S. (1995). The Cuban missile crisis: A retrospective analysis. In In retrospect: The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam (pp. 93-120). Vintage Books.

Pious, R. M. (2001). The Cuban missile crisis and the limits of crisis management. Political Science Quarterly, 116(1), 81–105. https://doi.org/10.2307/2657821

Rojas, F. (1998). The Cuban missile crisis: The diplomatic and military dynamics. Palgrave Macmillan.

Schlesinger, A. M. (2002). A thousand days: John F. Kennedy in the White House. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Sherwin, M. J. (2020). Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Knopf.

Stern, S. M. (2003). Averting 'the final failure': John F. Kennedy and the secret Cuban missile crisis meetings. Stanford University Press.

Trachtenberg, M. (1991). History and strategy. Princeton University Press. 21

Barcelona International Model United Nations 2025

Walters, J. R. (1992). The Cuban missile crisis: A study in crisis decision-making. Harvard University Press.

Zubok, V. M. (2007). A failed empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev. University of North Carolina Press.