

To the Brink: Turkish and Cuban Missiles during the Height of the Cold War

The events of the Cuban missile crisis, during which the Cold War between the American and Soviet superpowers nearly went hot, were, according to Jeffrey D. Sachs, “the most perilous in the planet’s history” and the closest belligerent forces have ever come to engaging in mutual thermonuclear conflict.¹ The thirteen days of the crisis—which took place during the latter half of October, 1962—hallmarked the pacifying, diplomatic intentions of the American and Soviet heads of state. By offering an analysis of the events of the crisis, this paper will demonstrate that cooperation between capitalists and communists could occur in the interests of the preservation of their respective systems and states. Both superpowers publicized the progress of the situation to their citizens, with frequent updates via newspapers, radio broadcasts, and television features. However, the diffusion of the Soviet-American tensions around Cuban shores was not won precisely the way either country’s public media announced. Negotiations focusing on nuclear missiles stationed by NATO in Turkey were central to the rise of the crisis and were an important bargaining chip in American President John F. Kennedy’s and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s diplomatic strategy, a secret which was held by both parties for over twenty years.²

Sputnik’s 1957 success is renowned for bringing the United States and Soviet Union into the Space Race, with humankind taking, as Neil Armstrong famously put it, a “giant leap” into the future.³ However, this contest to conquer space before the Soviets was analogous to a dangerous, earthly American campaign to close a “confidence gap” that emerged when Sputnik caused the Eisenhower administration to fear “that the Soviets were leading the West in nuclear armament.”⁴ To reinforce Western interests, President Eisenhower secured the unanimous approval of NATO states to position intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Europe,

but only Britain, Italy, and Turkey actually agreed to host the weapons. In October 1959, it was arranged to place fifteen Jupiter IRBMs in Turkey, with the Turkish government agreeing to keep the armaments sovereign to the US and to keep the negotiations and acceptance of the missiles secret from the Turkish nation.⁵

Earlier that year, Eisenhower predicted that positioning warheads near the USSR could cause a backlash and that “If Mexico or Cuba . . . began getting arms and missiles from [the Soviets], we would be bound to look on such developments with the gravest concern and . . . it would be imperative for us to take . . . even offensive military action.”⁶ John F. Kennedy, who took over the operation upon his 1961 inauguration, shared these concerns. He believed the Soviets would use the Turkish IRBMs to justify arming Cuba—if Turkey could attack across the Black Sea for the US, Cuba could attack across the Gulf of Mexico for the USSR—so, three months before the crisis, he urged US officials to see what needed to be done to remove the missiles, telling Undersecretary of State George Ball to progress the issue. However, Ball, after discussing the issue with the Turkish ambassador, allied with other State Department officials and decided to not try to remove the missiles so as to preserve US-Turkish relations.⁷

Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were right: the seemingly ubiquitous nature of the American presence around the Soviet Union was on Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s mind as early as 1958 when he said that the Soviets “see [themselves] surrounded by military bases” in Europe.⁸ Fearing encirclement, Soviet leaders criticized NATO missile installations, with special emphasis on the project in Turkey. Moscow had warned Ankara that such construction of IRBM bases would jeopardize their standing with the USSR, only to receive the (perhaps extraordinary) Turkish reply that the missiles’ installations were “not aimed at the Soviet Union.”⁹

Despite Turkey's façade that hosting American nuclear warheads had nothing to do with the Soviet Union, the installation process of the Jupiter missiles in the subsequent years furthered Khrushchev's concerns about American encirclement and, along with other reasons, motivated the Soviet Union to covertly install their own intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. The Premier believed placing such missiles had several advantages: 1) they would put the same pressure on the US that the USSR was feeling by the Turkish IRBMs; 2) involvement with Cuba would capitalize on Kennedy's earlier Bay of Pigs fiasco; 3) the placement would be relatively inexpensive; 4) the Soviets could bargain with them later to secure contested issues.¹⁰

Khrushchev had also placed missiles in Cuba, according to historian Martin Walker, because of "honor," as the Kremlin felt great pride in Cuba becoming communist without the "help" of the Red Army. To maintain their beloved system in the Western Hemisphere, the Soviets felt duty-bound to defend Cuba against future American invasion. The threat of nuclear retaliation from Cuban bases would be a sufficient deterrent for the current American president and his successors should they ever consider another assault on Cuba. Additionally, because the USSR had an inferior set of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), the way for it to create balance in the nuclear field was to place its IRBMs more strategically, which meant locating them closer to the American homeland. Cuba—a Communist state only ninety-three miles from the tip of Florida that had just survived a U.S. military incursion at the Bay of Pigs—was prime real estate to host the intermediate-range Soviet missiles.¹¹ Khrushchev wanted to gain from the venture, but "the one thing that [he] did not want from this move was war."¹²

In the time before missiles were placed in Cuba, Khrushchev, Kennedy, and their respective advisors analyzed the probable situation that would emerge should armed conflict take place between the US and USSR. Both sides concluded that if the Cold War went hot, it would

probably also go nuclear. They presumed that “future war would require coordination of all arms, nuclear and conventional.”¹³ Hence the Soviet Premier adjusted military spending, reducing the size of conventional forces and increasing the Soviets’ Strategic Rocket Forces.¹⁴ The American nuclear program expanded as well; at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, the United States possessed approximately 27,000 nuclear weapons, while the Soviet Union had approximately 3,000, which is the same number of nuclear armaments the US had prepared to launch should the situation escalate. The USSR had 250 ready-for-launch nuclear warheads in October, 1962.¹⁵

The Soviet nuclear investment in Cuba was as follows: medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), which had a range of 600-1,000 miles (far enough to reach Washington, DC) were unloaded in Havana in the second and third weeks of September, and six bases were prepped to house them at San Cristobal and Sagua La Grande. Three bases at Guanajay were erected to house IRBMs with a range up to 2,200 miles that granted them access to most of the continental United States. According to the State Department, “The planned deployment of forty launchers with eighty warheads would have increased the Soviet first-strike capability by about eighty percent” and if the Cuban bases all were fully operational, “only fifteen percent of the US strategic forces could be assured of surviving a Soviet first strike.”¹⁶

On October 14, an American U-2 surveillance aircraft discovered the Soviet projects in western Cuba, having photographed the construction of sites characteristically fit for SS-4 MRBMs.¹⁷ In response, President Kennedy immediately created the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, commonly known as *ExComm*, which consisted of Robert Kennedy—President Kennedy’s Attorney General, foreign policy advisor since the Bay of Pigs, and brother—and a number of senior officials (fluctuating around one dozen in total). These men

gathered over the proceeding thirteen days to resolve the crisis in the way which best preserved the interests of America, NATO, and the world.¹⁸

The group, which consisted of both civilian and military men, analyzed the situation but were not able to reach consensus on the strategic effect the Soviet missiles in Cuba would have should war break out. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara believed that they held zero net effect, as the USSR already possessed ICBMs which could, from Soviet territory, already assault the United States.¹⁹ National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and President Kennedy agreed with McNamara, believing that the Soviet missiles in Cuba, with respect to the other missiles they already had stationed, did not further jeopardize the United States.²⁰ Military leaders disagreed, though, believing that Soviet missiles so close to the homeland enhanced their rival's power, in large part because the Soviet strategies depended on bombing campaigns that featured traditionally difficult paths to the United States.²¹

Regardless of the opposing views as to the military significance of the missiles, ExComm unanimously made the non-negotiable decision that the Soviet weapons must go. This gave two options: peaceful diplomatic removal or removal through military action.²² The latter of these contained two options in itself: to destroy the missile bases via air assault or to engage in full-scale invasion and potential occupation.²³ Robert Kennedy, the advisor with the most influence over the President, while not necessarily endorsing an invasion and occupation of Cuba, did call it preferable to an air strike, believing a bombing campaign to be short-sighted as the destruction of the current bases would not be able to prevent further installations a few months later.²⁴

In preparation of another assault on Cuba, "The biggest amphibious invasion force assembled since World War Two was massing in Florida ports."²⁵ Fortunately for the United States, these soldiers were never given the green light to attack. In secret, Soviet forces on the

island doubled US intelligence estimates (having massed 42,000 men) and were equipped with tactical nuclear weapons of which the Americans were unaware. Local officers who were expected to not have enough time to contact Moscow while defending against a surprise assault were granted authority to use these armaments at their discretion. Had ExComm chosen to attack Cuba, it “would almost certainly have provoked a nuclear attack upon the beachhead and the naval force.”²⁶

In his memoir *Thirteen Days*, Robert Kennedy claimed that he had resolutely opposed the offensive attacks proposed by American military leaders, calling a surprise American attack of the island analogous to the Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor which resulted in American involvement in the Second World War. This comparison discredited the war hawks who endorsed belligerence.²⁷ Alternatively, the diplomatic approach of appealing to the United Nations “was dismissed as taking too much time,” as, according to the frequent U-2 flights, “the missile bases [were] being established with remarkable speed.” The only remaining option was the one ultimately elected by ExComm: to enact a naval blockade of Cuba (referred to as the *quarantine*) and demand the Kremlin to withdraw their missile installations.²⁸

On October 22, President Kennedy addressed the nation, explaining the Cuban missile crisis and the American leaders’ decision. “Jet bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons,” President Kennedy elaborated, “are now being uncased and assembled in Cuba while the necessary air bases are being prepared.”²⁹ October 27—“Black Saturday,” as Robert Kennedy later labeled it—was the day the Soviet ships approached the established quarantine line. With the US Strategic Air Command’s jets scrambled and on full alert, and with the Soviet diplomats in New York destroying their sensitive documents, the Soviet flotilla slowed to a halt. The tension between the two opposing states was so thick that top government officials on both sides

of the iron curtain believed they were experiencing their last few days. Fyodor Burlatsky, one of Khrushchev's advisors, had telephoned his wife, pleading with her to leave everything and flee Moscow before American bombers could strike. Robert McNamara, reflecting back, said, "It was a beautiful fall evening, the height of the crisis, and I went up into the open air to look and to smell it, because I thought it was the last Saturday I would ever see."³⁰

Meanwhile, the White House, having received two conflicting ultimatums from the Kremlin, was in a state of desperation and confusion.³¹ The first message was sent through a secret channel the previous evening and demanded the US "would declare that [it] will not invade Cuba with its forces," stating that if the US agreed to not intervene militarily in Cuba, "then the necessity for the presence of [the Soviet] military specialists in Cuba would disappear."³² The second message, which was broadcast over Moscow Radio earlier that day, contained a tougher ultimatum. It declared that the Soviets would "agree to remove those weapons from Cuba which [the US regards] as offensive weapons" so long as the US "will evacuate its analogous weapons from Turkey."³³

Robert Kennedy advised his brother to accept the terms offered in Khrushchev's letter of October 26: to promise not to invade the island of Cuba and to enable the removal of the Soviet missiles from the island. Accepting exclusively these terms meant ignoring the final term that arrived on the morning of the twenty-seventh which demanded the United States withdraw their Jupiter missiles from Turkey.³⁴ Kennedy publicly accepted the first deal, agreeing not to condone further American or US-related invasions of Cuba. He then sent his brother to consolidate the second part of the deal in private, agreeing to remove the fifteen Jupiter missiles from Turkey. Publicly, this final term went unanswered, so long as the Soviet Union did not announce its acceptance.³⁵ Conditionally, this arrangement had to remain secret on both sides; only about half

of ExComm knew about the agreement, and even Lyndon Johnson did not learn about his president's secret deal with Khrushchev until after succeeding him in office in 1963, but the crisis had been resolved and the threat of nuclear war diffused.³⁶ The United States would remove its Jupiter missiles and promise not to invade Cuba; in return, the Soviet Union would withdraw its own missiles from the island.

As a guest at the ExComm session on Black Saturday, Dean Acheson—Truman's Secretary of State central to developing NATO and the containment-promoting Truman Doctrine—said that if the Soviets did not accept the naval quarantine, they would likely “knock out [the American] missiles in Turkey” with the US likely responding by “knocking out a missile base inside the Soviet Union” in a dangerous escalation of conflicts that could easily end in full-scale war.³⁷ Luckily for both states, the situation never came to this. Instead of the Soviets responding to the blockade with an attack on Turkey, the two countries had concurred to a mutual withdrawal of overextended missiles, officially ending the crisis on the twenty-eighth of October, 1962.³⁸

Despite all of the Soviet anxieties that surrounded the IRBMs placed in Turkey, their effectiveness had been under heavy criticism from Western officials. The Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy recommended that “construction should not be permitted to begin on the Jupiter sites in Turkey.” Calling the missile systems *obsolete, inaccurate, and vulnerable*, the committee favored Polaris submarines which they considered “mobile, concealed, and thus virtually immune from a Soviet attack.” Furthermore, a study from 1962 that analyzed the “American administration on the Jupiters” declared that the missiles were “worthless” and “should be phased out.”³⁹ The missiles deployed in Turkey slipped further into obsolescence between 1962 and 1964 when the United States developed and deployed six new nuclear

armaments, including two new types of self-propelled warheads and nuclear mines, which were designed specifically to overwhelm the Soviet's vast tank army should a land invasion occur.⁴⁰

To this point, General Thomas Power recommended axing the IRBM programs, so as to relocate their funds into research and development for ICBMs which had "rendered the IRBMs obsolete." The Jupiter missiles positioned in Turkey were stationed above-ground and were not enclosed; they were unprotected to environmental hazards, easily identifiable, and vulnerable to enemy assault. Additionally, they were dependent on highly volatile liquid fuels that rendered the missiles "too slow in alert reaction," as painstaking and dangerous procedures needed to be made in preparing the missiles for launch. Far-reaching ICBMs like the Atlas and Titan missiles and fast, solid-fueled armaments like the Minuteman and Polaris quickly overshadowed the Jupiter IRBM program, causing military and political leaders to favor them over the NATO installments sanctioned by the Eisenhower administration, which added to the desire to pull the Jupiter missiles from their Turkish homes.⁴¹

In 1961, President Kennedy, upon hearing about the obsolescence and vulnerabilities of the missiles in Turkey questioned their presence and instructed a committee of State and Defense Department officials and members of the Central Intelligence Agency to "review the stationing of IRBMs in Turkey." The group concluded that removal had several issues: 1) The missiles had just been set up for placement, committing Turkish money, which caused the Turkish foreign minister to oppose their removal because it "would be difficult for the Turkish people to understand" why their funds were spent without adding security to their borders; 2) Khrushchev's hard position on Berlin at the Vienna Conference earlier that year might make the cancellation seem like weakness on the part of the Kennedy administration; 3) Turks would feel insulted if their defense was removed by the American government, which could cause Turkey to

not comply with NATO decisions in the future, an outcome that would be hazardous in the struggle against the Warsaw Pact.⁴² Turkish foreign minister Selim Sarper explained that if the installations were canceled before Polaris submarine substitutes were available, Turkish morale and faith in NATO and the United States would be undermined.⁴³

Turkey was a well-placed ally of the United States, but in the wake of the 1960 coup d'état that changed its government, it was also viewed as “a politically volatile country on the Soviet border.” Because of this, removing potentially first-strike nuclear weapons from a country that could readily be capricious became a foreign policy concern for Kennedy’s cabinet before the Cuban missile crisis had even started, so the President’s concession to secretly remove the political lightning rods that were the Jupiter missiles may have been a mutual win for both the American and Soviet heads of state.⁴⁴

Additionally, the peaceful resolution of the crisis, facilitated in part by the mutual withdrawal of overextended missiles, fostered a stronger relationship between the President and Premier. On October 28, the day after the frightful “Black Saturday,” Nikita Khrushchev sent an auspicious letter of praise to John Kennedy, expressing his “great appreciation” toward the young president for having sent Robert Kennedy to negotiate the Jupiter missiles’ removal. “I hope, Mr. President,” the letter said, “that agreement on this matter, too, shall be a no small step [*sic*] advancing the cause of relaxation of international tensions.”⁴⁵ The crisis had been resolved, and—so it seemed—both states were able to have their demands met, with the mutual removal of missiles in Cuba for the missiles in Turkey fostering deeper understanding between the two conflicting states.

Although Ankara wanted to retain the Jupiter missiles, Turkey’s “very survival” was invested in the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis, which likewise ended well for Turkish

interests.⁴⁶ As predicted, Turkey felt it was “being informed rather than consulted” about its national security and foreign policy matters and abhorred its imbalanced relationship with the United States, but the removal of the Jupiter missiles did not cause any serious discord in the Turkish-American relationship.⁴⁷ When the Turks agreed with NATO in 1959 to receive the Jupiter missiles, Ankara and Washington shared desires to establish the nuclear bases, so American-Turkish negotiations had been easy for the Eisenhower administration.

Kennedy four years later, however, experienced a Turkish government very reluctant to remove its new armaments, and negotiations were much tougher. “Nevertheless,” says historian Philip Nash, “reaching a removal agreement with the reluctant Turks of 1963 required no more than four months—still significantly less time than that needed to achieve a deployment accord with the enthusiastic Turks of 1959.” Despite Ankara’s reluctance to concur at first, the removal of the Jupiter missiles brought benefits to Turkey as well. More than two thousand sorely needed Turkish technicians were freed for other projects. Turkey also enjoyed the Jupiter missiles’ substitution with the coveted Polaris submarine, which had “27 percent better reliability, 25 percent greater accuracy, a 65 percent less destructive warhead, [and a] 100 percent better survivability without warning” when compared to the Jupiter missiles it had made obsolete.⁴⁸

With the removal of the IRBMs from Turkey one year after the final missile became operational, “The Jupiter phase-out proved to be as mysterious as its deployment,” but the missiles’ importance during the crisis in Cuban has, through the slow declassification process, become less opaque.⁴⁹ The missiles’ presence in Turkey, so close to the Soviet Union, had furthered Nikita Khrushchev’s paranoia about American encirclement and helped motivate his decision to place Soviet missiles in Cuba. The tension this reciprocation caused was palpable, often considered the closest the world has ever come to a nuclear holocaust. Fortunately the

situation never escalated that far, and two deals (one public, the other private) were brokered between the two superpowers, each leader's demands having been met. The Jupiter missiles—like many other events in the Cold War—manifested reciprocity. As the presence of American missiles in Turkey caused Soviet missiles to arise in Cuba, so too did their removal cause a mutual withdrawal of Soviet armaments.

As the missiles were overly exposed, slow to react, housed in a potentially volatile country that bordered Soviet states, raised pre-crisis concerns from the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, had been declared obsolete by several investigations, and caused the most tense situation in the whole Cold War, President Kennedy's National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy did not misrepresent the Jupiter missiles in Turkey when he declared them to have been “worse than useless.”⁵⁰ Yet the history of these armaments has taught important lessons to the American executive branch. Two administrations after its resolution, President Richard Nixon, upon discovering that the Soviets were constructing a submarine base at the Cuban port Cienfuegos, instinctively scrambled together a plan to install missiles in either Turkey or the Black Sea to give the US some “trading stock” which could help negotiate the base's cancellation. While Nixon never resolved the issue, this incident, according to Philip Nash, “suggests that the Jupiter missiles had maintained some presence in official memory” well after the Kennedy administration removed them.⁵¹

The Cuban missile crisis surprisingly benefitted the different states involved. Cuba was promised to not be invaded by the United States again. Turkey received stronger protection via ICBMs. The Soviet Union no longer needed to fear nuclear missiles coming from Turkey. Likewise, the United States no longer needed to fear nuclear missiles coming from Cuba. The situation took relations between the Soviet and American heads of state to a high and fostered

mutual understanding between the two leaders; both states had been willing to grant concessions in favor of the other, perhaps opening a new doorway to the mollification of American-Soviet relations.

With President John F. Kennedy's assassination thirteen months after the Cuban missile crisis, and Premier Nikita Khrushchev's removal the following year, this new passage of understanding was transient at best, and hopes of a mutual movement to ease the Cold War ended with the respective administrations.⁵² It is impossible to speculate what would have happened had the two heads of state remained in office. Perhaps more understandings between the United States and Soviet Union would have transpired; perhaps not. Such thought experiments cannot rewrite history, and after the crisis in Cuba, there would be another quarter of a century until the Cold War would end, and tensions between these two bodies have yet to fully diffuse.

ENDNOTES

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¹² Sachs, 28.

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- ³⁶ Bernstein.
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