Diplomacy, military power combined to settle superpower dispute over missiles in Cuba

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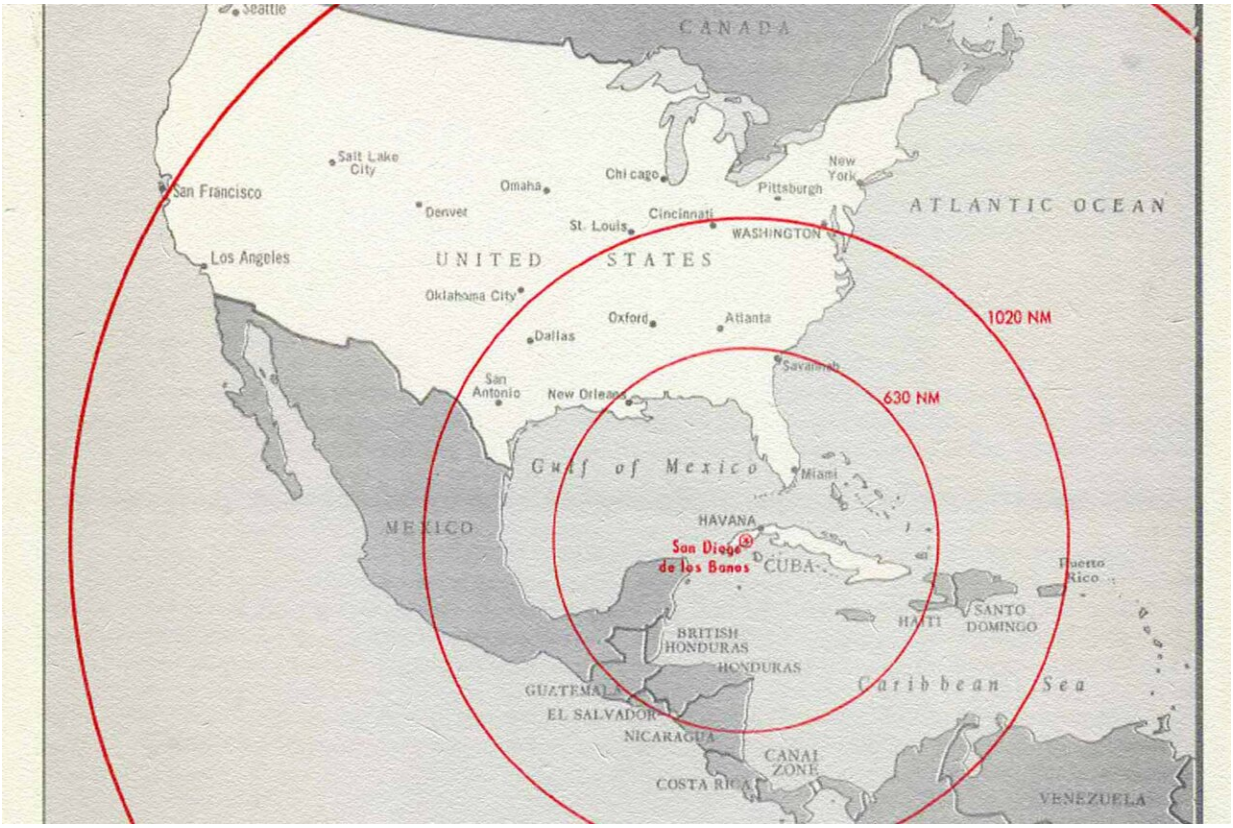

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev wanted to make it clear to the Americans that the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons that could easily threaten the United States. Credit: Contributed illustration/White House archives

As concerns grow that the war in Ukraine could expand into a nuclear

conflict, U.S. President Joe Biden compared the current situation to the Cuban missile crisis, a Cold War confrontation between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. over Soviet missiles placed in Cuba in 1962.

"We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis," Biden said recently—a quote frequently repeated in the media.

Not everyone thinks the comparison is apt.

"We're in another crisis that could escalate to a nuclear war that involves the United States and a government in Moscow," said Philip Zelikow, the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia. "Those points aside, I don't think the crises are very much alike."

Zelikow, the former director of the Miller Center and co-editor, with Ernest R. May, of "The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis" and co-author, with Graham Allison, of "Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis," looked back over the Cuban situation that unfolded 60 years ago this month.

The crisis started not with Cuba, but rather with the general test of nuclear strength that had come to a focal point over Berlin. The former German capital had been divided after World War II into sectors for the Soviets, the French, the British and the U.S., but was surrounded by Soviet-controlled East Germany.

The Berlin crisis was the most serious confrontation in the Cold War, Zelikow said, and the Soviets were adamant that the Western powers leave their sectors of Berlin. Zelikow said the construction of the Berlin Wall in October 1961 was only a stopgap measure that did not end the crisis.

"This kind of hole inside the Soviet bloc was no longer tolerable," Zelikow said. "Khrushchev delivered that ultimatum beginning in 1958. And the Americans were in a position where, from a conventional point of view, they didn't have the forces to stop it. The only way to keep the Soviets from doing that was to threaten to start a nuclear war."

Zelikow said Khrushchev regarded this American position as incredibly risky and arrogant. One way to bring American leaders to reason was to make it clear the Soviet Union, too, had plenty of nuclear weapons that could easily threaten the United States, Zelikow said.

"A deployment to Cuba would demonstrate that," Zelikow said.

But Khrushchev knew the deployment had to done secretly, until he was ready to unveil the missiles in November 1962. "At that time, he planned to bring the Berlin crisis to a victorious conclusion, and repeatedly, in quite crude and emphatic ways, secretly warned Kennedy and the West Germans that he would do this in November." Zelikow said.

Tens of thousands of Soviet troops and weapons accompanied the missiles to Cuba. It was the largest deployment of troops outside of Europe in the Soviet Union's history. The buildup also included anti-aircraft missiles, which were among the first missiles that they deployed there before the nuclear missiles arrived.

The U.S. could see the Soviets were shipping weapons and people into Cuba, though the Soviets downplayed the deployments. CIA director John A. McCone was skeptical of the official Soviet explanation and persuaded Kennedy to order a U-2 spy-plane flight over Cuba.

"And the flight, to everyone's shock except McCone's, confirmed that Soviet ballistic nuclear missiles were, in fact, being deployed in Cuba," Zelikow said. "Kennedy's reaction, of course, was of surprise and real

concern."

Kennedy and his advisers weighed options including destroying the missiles or negotiating with Soviet leaders.

"What they chose was a middle solution in which they would quarantine the island to keep further weapons from coming in and display the seriousness of the situation, while also delivering an ultimatum, demanding that the missiles that were already there should be removed," Zelikow said.

Kennedy gave a televised address on Oct. 22, 1962. Once the missiles' presence was made public, the world shared "a sense that we are now in the most serious military confrontation with the Soviet Union ever and there is a real danger that this could escalate into World War III," Zelikow said.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President John Kennedy talk together in the residence of the U.S. ambassador in a suburb of Vienna on June 3, 1961. Credit: U.S. Department of State Archives

The U.S. moved thousands of Marines to Florida for a possible invasion of Cuba. Navy ships began forming a quarantine line, where they encountered Soviet submarines. Khrushchev knew he had lost the element of surprise.

"The Kremlin was shocked and surprised the Americans had discovered the missiles," Zelikow said. "They had just delivered new threats to Kennedy about solving the Berlin problem in a meeting the Soviet foreign minister had in the White House just four days before his speech, and Kennedy had given no hint that he knew that the nuclear missiles were in Cuba."

Khrushchev considered a military confrontation at the blockade line, but ultimately ordered his ships—including some carrying nuclear missiles—to turn around.

"Khrushchev's unveiling of the full missile deployment never happened in November, as he had planned," Zelikow said. "And then Khrushchev also quietly abandoned his plan to force a victorious November end to the Berlin crisis. He pretended that the crisis had already ended. 'Berlin crisis? What Berlin crisis?' That ended in 1961 when we built the wall. And most historians since then have kind of bought that position, though at the time, Kennedy and his key advisers on the Soviet Union, who—like the British and West Germans—were aware of Khrushchev's blunt but secret warnings, knew better."

As a face-saving gesture, Khrushchev secretly suggested the U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba.

Kennedy had earlier decided against an invasion, so he was willing to accept the deal. While his administration was preparing to confirm the agreement the next morning, Khrushchev announced publicly the Soviets would remove the missiles from Cuba if the U.S. removed its Jupiter

missiles from Turkey.

Kennedy assumed this was a clever ploy to bog the two sides into fruitless and protracted negotiations, while the Soviet missiles would remain in Cuba. Since the U.S. had already planned to remove the Jupiter missiles because they had become obsolete, Kennedy's ambassador to Turkey suggested that the U.S. simply take the issue off the table by secretly assuring the Soviets that the missiles would be gone the next year. But the President made it clear that the Soviet missiles had to be removed from Cuba immediately, within the next two or three days.

While the heads of state negotiated, events on the ground escalated.

"The Soviets shot down an American reconnaissance aircraft over Cuba and killed its pilot," Zelikow said. "There was a lot of other anti-aircraft fire going up against American aircraft. So it looked like fighting was beginning."

Initially, Khrushchev did not know it was his own forces, in Cuba, that had shot down the U-2 plane.

"There was this real sense that both sides were beginning to lose control of their own forces," Zelikow said. "There were other incidents that were beginning to happen; that Saturday, there were some close and dangerous encounters involving Soviet submarines, a previously scheduled missile test over the Pacific that could have been misinterpreted, and an American U-2 accidentally entered Soviet airspace in Siberia accidentally, with fighters on both sides scrambling before the American plane got out of there. The American fighters carried air-to-air missiles armed with nuclear weapons."

The next morning, in Moscow, at a Sunday meeting of the Presidium of

the Supreme Soviet meeting on Oct. 28, Khrushchev—who had not yet received the further threats and assurances being relayed from Washington, announced to his colleagues that they had to remove the missiles.

"In fact, the Soviet leaders were so nervous about this that they decided to go on the radio and announce this right away and not wait to try to communicate this through secret diplomacy," Zelikow said. "And everyone started breathing a great sigh of relief. That relief was a little premature, because the details of how to withdraw the missiles and verify that turned out to be very difficult and require three weeks of very careful negotiation."

The deal was done on Nov. 20, 1962.

"One undeniable positive is that the Berlin crisis dissipated and that was the most dangerous crisis in the Cold War," he said. "Another big positive result was that Kennedy and Khrushchev were both visibly sobered by the experience of coming so close to a calamity and made real efforts to reduce nuclear tensions, including the successful negotiation of a treaty to ban open-air nuclear tests. Kennedy gave a remarkable speech at American University trying to offer a vision of enemies working together to at least preserve world peace and to wind down this nuclear danger.

"In general, having been terrified, the world now shared a real sense that somehow a corner has been turned and that the superpowers were beginning to be more constructive in managing the nuclear danger and averting the fear of destroying the world," Zelikow said. "And so by getting through the crisis, it made the world a lot safer."

"That," he added, "might be an insight now—this current period of danger is not likely to remain static. It is likely to worsen or ease, and a

positive outcome could become a turning point toward more cooperation in handling this century's problems."

Provided by University of Virginia