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Marc Trachtenberg

What role did nuclear weapons play in the Cuban missile crisis, and what does the episode tell us about the broader problem of the political utility of nuclear forces? In 1983, a number of veterans of the Kennedy Administration were brought together to look back and reflect on the affair, and in their minds these questions had very clear answers. What the crisis showed, according to Robert McNamara, who had been Secretary of Defense at the time, was that America's superiority in numbers of nuclear weapons "was not such that it could be translated into usable military power to support political objectives."¹ Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State under Kennedy, made an even stronger claim: "The simple fact is that nuclear power does not translate into usable political influence."² And indeed the argument is often made that the crisis demonstrates the political insignificance of the nuclear balance—or even the political irrelevance of nuclear weapons in general.³

On the other hand, there have always been those who maintained that America's "overwhelming strategic superiority," or simply the American willingness to risk nuclear war, had a good deal to do with the course that the

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1. Transcript of a Discussion about the Cuban Missile Crisis, June 28, 1983, pp. 1–2, Alfred Sloan Foundation, New York; hereinafter cited as "Sloan transcript, June 28, 1983." I am grateful to Mr. Arthur Singer for allowing me to view the videotapes of these discussions. McGeorge Bundy, who in 1962 had been Kennedy's national security adviser, elaborated the point: America's superiority, it was felt at the time, "was not a usable superiority in the sense that we would ever want to go first because if even one Soviet weapon landed on an American target, we would all be losers." Sloan transcript, January 27, 1983, reel 6, take 1, p. 7.

2. Sloan transcript, January 27, 1983, reel 6, take 1, p. 40.

3. See, for example, the joint statement by six veterans of the crisis (McNamara, Bundy, Rusk, Sorensen, Gilpatric, and Ball) in *Time* magazine, September 27, 1982: "The Cuban missile crisis illustrates not the significance but the insignificance of nuclear superiority in the face of survivable thermonuclear retaliatory forces" (Rusk et al., "The Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis," p. 85). See also Walter Slocombe, *The Political Implications of Strategic Parity*, Adelphi Paper No. 77 (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, May 1971), pp. 18–20 (although his Appendix 2, where he sets out his argument in greater detail, is more modest in tone); and Benjamin Lambeth, "Deterrence in the MIRV Era," *World Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (January 1972), pp. 230–234.

crisis took.⁴ Bernard Brodie, for example, took it for granted that America's "nuclear superiority" had been crucial in 1962. It was, he said, "a mischievous interpretation" of the crisis "to hold that its outcome was determined mostly by our conventional superiority."⁵

In the twenty years that have passed since the confrontation took place, claims about the Cuban missile crisis have played an important role in the discussion of strategic issues. Theories are tested by events, and people have looked to the sharpest crisis of the nuclear age for answers: how much of a political shadow do nuclear weapons cast? These debates, however, have always had a rather abstract and speculative character. But thanks to the release in the last few years of an extraordinary series of documents on the crisis, it is now possible to study these issues on the basis of hard empirical evidence.⁶

What does the missile crisis tell us about the way nuclear weapons affect international politics? The problem will be approached here by examining three schools of thought—about the crisis, and about the political utility of nuclear forces in general.

There is first the thesis that nuclear weapons played no political role at all in 1962—that is, that their sole function was to deter their use by others. Thus General Maxwell Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, once flatly stated that "the strategic forces of the United States and the U.S.S.R. simply cancelled each other out as effectual instruments for influencing the outcome of the confrontation."⁷ And claims of this sort are

4. See, for example, Arnold Horelick, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior," *World Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (April 1964), pp. 387–388; and Jerome H. Kahan and Anne K. Long, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Study of its Strategic Context," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 87 (December 1972), esp. pp. 579–581, 586; and especially Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 95–96.

5. Bernard Brodie, "What Price Conventional Capabilities in Europe?," Rand Paper P-2696 (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, February 1963), pp. 24–25; also published in *The Reporter*, May 23, 1963. Note also Brodie's comment in a letter to the French strategist Pierre Gallois of July 21, 1965: "I do not think gross superiority matters as little as you suggest. The Cuban affair of 1962 does not bear you out. . . . The reasons are several, but it is mostly that neither side threatens the other with total war. Instead they simply threaten actions which *could* escalate" (Box 1, Brodie Papers, UCLA).

6. Some of the most interesting material—extracts from the transcript of two secretly taped meetings held at the White House on October 16, and the minutes of two ExCom meetings held on October 27—is reproduced below. But the recently declassified material represents only a small portion of the Kennedy Library's holdings on the crisis. And there are important, but still unavailable, sources in other archives, and in private hands as well—for example, the extensive, almost verbatim notes that Paul Nitze took of meetings during the crisis.

7. Maxwell D. Taylor, "The Legitimate Claims of National Security," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 52, No.

often linked to more general arguments about the “uselessness” of nuclear forces. “Nuclear weapons,” McNamara recently argued, “serve no military purpose whatsoever. They are totally useless—except only to deter one’s opponent from using them.”⁸ From this point of view, it was the balance of conventional forces that was decisive.

A second major school of thought argues that nuclear weapons did matter, because the *risk* of nuclear war was bound to affect political behavior. This argument takes two basic forms. On the one hand, there is the notion of “existential deterrence”: the mere existence of nuclear forces means that, whatever we say or do, there is a certain irreducible risk that an armed conflict might escalate into a nuclear war. The fear of escalation is thus factored into political calculations: faced with this risk, states are more cautious and more prudent than they would otherwise be.

On the other hand, there is the notion that risk is not simply an inescapable fact of life. The level of risk is instead seen as something that can be deliberately and consciously manipulated. As Thomas Schelling laid out the argument: international politics in the nuclear age often takes the form of a “competition in risk taking, characterized not so much by tests of force as by tests of nerve.” The “manipulation of risk” was therefore the means of getting the upper hand in what was ultimately a kind of bargaining situation.⁹ The missile crisis was Schelling’s prime example: “The Cuban Crisis was a contest in risk taking, involving steps that would have made no sense if they led predictably and ineluctably to a major war, yet would also have made no sense if they were completely without danger.”¹⁰

A *third school of thought claims that it was the balance of nuclear capabilities*, and not the balance of resolve or conventional capabilities, that proved decisive. This interpretation is not logically inconsistent with the approach that emphasizes risk, since a government’s ability to manipulate risk might depend largely on the military power at its disposal. But those

3 (April 1974), p. 582. Taylor here denied that America’s “strategic superiority” played a meaningful role in the crisis. But at the time he had taken a radically different line: “We have the strategic advantage in our general war capabilities,” he wrote McNamara on October 26, 1962. “. . . This is no time to run scared.” Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 229n.

8. Robert S. McNamara, “The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Fall 1983), p. 79. Note also his comments on the role of nuclear forces in the missile crisis in Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p.167.

9. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 94.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

who emphasize the strategic balance tend to assume that its effects are virtually automatic: the Soviets were outgunned in 1962, and they had no choice but to accept the terms the United States insisted on.

No Role at All?

Is it true that the strategic forces of the United States and the Soviet Union “simply cancelled each other out” during the crisis? This claim is generally based on the notion that nuclear weapons are “unusable” weapons—that they are good only for deterring their use by others. This implies, with regard to the crisis, that nuclear forces neutralized each other and thus had no real effect on either side: it was as though they had been simply swept off the board, and that matters proceeded as though they did not exist. The effect of this line of argument, therefore, is to emphasize the importance of conventional forces—that is, of America’s conventional predominance in the Caribbean.

The notion that nuclear forces cannot be harnessed to political purpose is thus often based on the assumption that the President of the United States would never deliberately start a nuclear war.¹¹ But if war could come without such a deliberate and conscious decision on the part of either the President or his Soviet counterpart, then the risk of war would be real and would therefore inevitably affect political behavior. The evidence in fact shows that: 1) leading officials believed that nuclear war could come without either side having to make a cold-blooded decision to start one; 2) these officials were willing during the crisis to accept a certain risk of nuclear war; and 3) the risk of nuclear war was consciously manipulated in order to affect Soviet options in the crisis.

First, McNamara, for example, in the postmortem he gave to a Congressional committee in February 1963, demonstrated a clear grasp of the logic of escalation—that is, of how one’s actions could set off a chain of events over which one could exercise only limited control. If America had invaded Cuba, he said, thousands of Soviet soldiers would have been killed, and the Soviets “probably would have had to respond.” Some of the Soviet missiles

11. Note, for example, the logic of McGeorge Bundy’s argument in “To Cap the Volcano,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), pp. 9–11—how he moves from the point about the impossibility of “any sane political authority” consciously starting a nuclear war to the conclusion about the irrelevance of the strategic balance; or the kind of argument McNamara makes in the Sloan transcript, June 28, 1963, pp. 1–2.

in Cuba might have been armed and operational, and if they were, "they might have been launched," so there was a danger of nuclear war. "In any event," he continued, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev "knew without any question whatsoever that he faced the full military power of the United States, including its nuclear weapons." McNamara's conclusion was chilling: "we faced that night the possibility of launching nuclear weapons and Khrushchev knew it, and that is the reason, and the only reason, why he withdrew those weapons."¹²

The general point that a nuclear war was possible because events could have a momentum of their own, quite apart from the conscious intent of statesmen, has been a staple of the strategic literature since the late 1950s. Even those who base claims about the irrelevance of the nuclear balance on the argument that no rational government would ever deliberately start a nuclear war have frequently argued along these lines. "The gravest risk in this crisis," according to McGeorge Bundy, McNamara, and four other former members of the Kennedy Administration, "was not that either head of government desired to initiate a major escalation but that events would produce actions, reactions or miscalculations carrying the conflict beyond the control of one or the other or both."¹³

Second, the highest officials in the American government clearly recognized that a confrontation with the Soviet Union would entail a certain risk of nuclear war. But they felt that this was a risk that simply had to be accepted. As Rusk put it on October 16: "I think we'll be facing a situation that could well lead to general war." The case of Secretary McNamara is again particularly interesting in this connection. On October 16, he argued that an attack on Cuba, after any of the missiles there were operational, would pose too great a risk: some of those missiles might survive an attack and be launched, and this could lead to a thermonuclear holocaust. But by October 27—that is, after the CIA had reported that some of the missiles on

12. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Department of Defense Appropriations, "Department of Defense Appropriations for 1964," February 6, 1963, p. 31. Note also the discussion of the escalation problem on pp. 152–156 below.

13. For the point about the strategic literature, see Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 355; and Albert Wohlstetter, "Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N + 1 Country," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1961), pp. 378–379. Note also Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," p. 18; and his "Strategic Deterrence After Thirty Years: What Has Changed?," *Atlantic Community Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter 1979–80), p. 486. The quotation is from Rusk et al., "Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis," p. 86.

the island were indeed operational—McNamara declared that “we must now be ready to attack Cuba. . . . Invasion had become almost inevitable.” In other words, even he, who was quite conservative in this regard, was willing by this point to accept what by his own reckoning was a serious risk of nuclear war.¹⁴

Finally, there is the point that the specter of nuclear war was deliberately manipulated to support American objectives in the crisis. McNamara, for example, pointed out on October 16 that American military action would probably lead to a Soviet military response “some place in the world.” The United States, he argued, should recognize that possibility “by trying to deter it, which means we probably should alert SAC, probably put on an airborne alert, perhaps take other s-, alert measures. These bring risks of their own, associated with them.”¹⁵ (McNamara here was probably referring to the danger that too much might be read into these preparations, and that they might touch off a Soviet preemptive attack. The fear of preemption was widely viewed at the time as lying at the heart of a semi-automatic process of escalation.)

Note that McNamara’s assumption was that nuclear preparations would serve to deter Soviet responses *in general*; that is, the implied nuclear threat was not directed simply at the possibility that the U.S.S.R. might consider using its *nuclear* forces. If the missiles in Cuba were attacked, the Soviets would very much want to take some kind of counteraction—in Berlin, most probably, or against Turkey, or maybe even in Iran or Korea—and the United States had to take “a whole series of precautionary measures. . . . All of our

14. For Rusk, see Presidential Recordings, Transcripts, Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, October 16, 1962, first meeting (11:50 a.m.–12:57 p.m.), p. 10, President’s Office Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston. Henceforth this source will be cited as “October 16 transcripts, I” (for the 11:50 meeting) or “II” (for the second meeting, which lasted from 6:30 to 7:45 p.m.). Extracts are published below. For McNamara, see October 16 transcripts, I, pp. 11, 13; “Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 8, October 27, 1962, 4:00 PM,” p. 5, Box 316, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library (and also published below)—cited hereinafter as “ExCom Minutes” with number and date; CIA Report, “Major Consequences of Certain U.S. Courses of Action in Cuba,” October 20, 1962, reporting that 16 MRBMs were then operational, and arguing that it was “prudent to assume” that nuclear warheads for them would be available, Declassified Documents Collection, 1975, 48E.

15. October 16 transcripts, II, p. 10; see also Dillon’s remarks, *ibid.*, I, p. 27. The same kind of point might be made about the effect of American military preparations during the Berlin crisis the previous year. In a letter to Chancellor Adenauer of October 13, 1961, President Kennedy remarked cryptically, “The Soviets have been warned and they appear to have taken cognizance of the warning that our present course is dangerous to them” (Box 117, Folder “Germany. Security. 8/61–12/61,” President’s Office Files, John F. Kennedy Library). Note, finally, General Burchinal’s remarks, quoted below, p. 157.

forces should be put on alert, but beyond that, mobilization, redeployment, movement and so on."¹⁶ The threat of general war—in fact, the threat of any U.S.–Soviet war, because of the risk of escalation it would inevitably entail—would be the means of dealing with these possible Soviet countermoves. These deterrent threats, by reducing the probability of any direct Soviet *retaliation*, would thus increase America's freedom of action in Cuba.

It is clear, therefore, that the risk of nuclear war did play a role. Indeed, this risk was overtly and deliberately exploited. But this was a deadly game, played reluctantly and without any trace of enthusiasm. Political necessity—the logic of the confrontational situation—prevailed over the government's horror of nuclear war and led it to adopt tactics of this sort.

The Balance of Resolve

The specter of nuclear war influenced both Soviet and American policy. But did these nuclear fears and anxieties simply make both sides equally cautious, or were the effects uneven?

The fear of a Soviet countermove against Berlin weighed heavily on American policy during the crisis. This was what McNamara wanted to prevent by taking his "series of precautionary measures." But why was it assumed that the prospect of nuclear war would have such a one-sided effect? The Soviets would be deterred from moving against the city (even though their forces in the Caribbean might already have been attacked); but the Americans presumably would not be deterred by the same threat of war from following through with their policy of defending the city. It was taken for granted that the same risk would have unequal effects.

The situation in the Caribbean was the mirror image of the situation around Berlin. The Americans had conventional predominance, but (given that the missiles had already been put in) the United States was the power that was threatening to alter an existing situation. If the nuclear threat had perfectly symmetrical effects, American power should have been as stalemated around Cuba as Soviet power was around Berlin. But the fact that this was not the case shows that fears and anxieties were not perfectly in balance: the balance of resolve favored the United States.

16. October 16 transcripts, II, pp. 49–50. For discussion of the measures that were in fact taken, see Scott D. Sagan, "Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 106–122.

Thus an invasion of Cuba might lead to a general war. This put pressure on the Soviets to head off that invasion and accept terms. The Americans, for similar reasons, were also under pressure to settle the crisis before matters came to a head. But the pressures were not equal: if a settlement had not been reached, the United States, in spite of the risks that U.S. leaders themselves recognized, would almost certainly have invaded Cuba at the end of October.

How much of an imbalance was there? And what determines the level of tolerable risk? One way to test this issue is to examine the case of the Jupiters—that is, the question of an arrangement involving the withdrawal of the American Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for a withdrawal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba.

Kennedy, according to his close adviser Theodore Sorensen, was “quite amazed” when Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon (who had also served under Eisenhower) told him during the crisis that “everyone knows that those Jupiter missiles aren’t much good anyway. We only put them in there during the previous Administration because we didn’t know what else to do with them, and we really made the Turks and the Italians take them.”¹⁷ Could the Jupiters therefore be removed in exchange for a withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba? It is well known that the idea was seriously considered by American officials during the crisis, well before the Soviet government even formally proposed a “deal” of this sort.¹⁸

What has not been clear, however, is the degree to which the President was personally in favor of such an arrangement. In fact, there were from the outset very precise assurances to the contrary. When McNamara, for example, was asked during his Congressional testimony in February 1963 about a trade involving the missiles in Turkey, he said that “the President absolutely refused to discuss it at the time, and no discussion took place.”¹⁹ Taking such claims at face value, historians and political scientists have constructed many arguments on the basis of President Kennedy’s supposed refusal to consider a trade.²⁰

17. Transcript of oral history interview of Theodore Sorensen, by Carl Kaysen, March 26, 1964, pp. 65–66, Kennedy Library.

18. See *The New York Times*, December 6, 1962, p. 3:1; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 515; and Abram Chayes, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 81–82, 98–99.

19. U.S. Congress, “Department of Defense Appropriations for 1964,” p. 57; see also p. 74. Note also the passage in Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 714.

20. See for example Jack Snyder, “Rationality at the Brink: The Role of Cognitive Processes in

On the other hand, a number of scholars have argued, essentially on the basis of Robert Kennedy's memoir on the crisis, that there in fact was a "deal."²¹ According to Robert Kennedy, the Soviet Ambassador was told on October 27 that the President "had been anxious to remove those missiles from Turkey and Italy for a long period of time. He had ordered their removal some time ago, and it was our judgment that, within a short time after this crisis was over, those missiles would be gone."²² On the basis of these assurances, so the argument goes, the Soviets agreed to withdraw their missiles from Cuba. And within the space of a few months, the Jupiters were in fact dismantled. Did this mean that a "bargain" had been struck?

There are two ways in which the documents throw some light on this issue. First of all, the Executive Committee minutes published here show very clearly that at the peak of the crisis, on October 27, with an invasion of Cuba imminent, President Kennedy was in fact the strongest advocate of a trade in that high policymaking group. Repeatedly, he returned to the theme that some kind of trade involving the Jupiters would eventually be necessary. What he plainly wanted was to get the Russians to stop working on the missile sites in Cuba and maybe also make the missiles there inoperable; this would then be followed by a negotiation involving the missiles in Turkey. But he was opposed on this issue by all of his chief advisers. Rusk, Bundy, and his brother Robert all came out against the idea. Even McNamara was arguing by this point that an invasion of Cuba, which the President was then defining as the only alternative to a trade, was "almost inevitable."

The second point is that what Robert Kennedy told the Soviet Ambassador that very evening was not quite accurate: although the government had been interested in withdrawing the Jupiters for some time, their removal had not actually been *ordered* prior to the crisis.²³ What Dobrynin was told was thus

Failures of Deterrence," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (April 1978), esp. pp. 354–355; and Barton J. Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 97–125.

21. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 218, 228–230; Chayes, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 98; and Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 520–524.

22. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), pp. 108–109.

23. Roger Hilsman, a high State Department official at the time, claimed in his memoirs that the President had "ordered—in August 1962—that steps be taken immediately to remove the American missiles from Turkey." *To Move a Nation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 203; repeated in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, p. 519, and Allison, *Essence of Decision*, p. 226. But the document Hilsman evidently had in mind, National Security Action Memorandum 181 of August 23, 1962, merely stated that "in the light of evidence of new bloc activity in Cuba," the President

not just a simple statement of fact: a concession of sorts was being made, but it was a disguised concession. In view of the President's attitude about a trade and the more hostile attitude of his advisers, what all this implies is that the settlement that emerged after the assurances were given to Dobrynin should probably be understood as the conflation of a negotiation—as an “imposed negotiated solution,” so to speak.

Thus Kennedy had not ruled out an arrangement involving the Jupiters, and McNamara's recent comment about the President's attitude rings true: “I recall him saying very well, ‘I am not going to go to war over worthless missiles in Turkey. I don't want to go to war anyhow, but I am certainly not going to go to war over worthless missiles in Turkey.’”²⁴

But the implication here is that it was taken for granted that the level of risk should be commensurate with the political importance of the issues in dispute. If ultimately the issue came down to whether America was willing to withdraw the “worthless” Jupiter missiles from Turkey, then, no matter what the strategic balance was, the President was not going to dig in his heels and risk a nuclear holocaust over that. Kennedy's eagerness for something like a political settlement was therefore rooted not in a conviction that nuclear forces were politically impotent, but rather in the notion that the main obstacle to a solution was too trivial to warrant any serious risk of nuclear war. The same logic, however, implies that his attitude about the kind of risk worth running might have been very different if the political issues at stake had been viewed as basic—as in fact they had been during the Berlin crisis the previous year.

Thus one is struck, on the one hand, by the President's aversion to risk: he certainly did not view the crisis as a “contest in risk taking” in which the goal was to outbid the other side. But on the other hand, Kennedy's aversion to risk was by no means absolute: during the crisis, the Soviets were after all under enormous pressure. In fact the new evidence about the final settlement supports the idea that the basic situation was not one of simple parity. If the settlement was not tantamount to a Soviet capitulation, it was not really a bargain either—and above all, not a bargain between equals.

had directed that the Defense Department study the question of “what action can be taken to get Jupiter missiles out of Turkey?” (Box 338, Folder “Cuba(4). 8/23/62,” National Security Files, Kennedy Library). On the myth of the presidential “order,” see in particular Bernstein, “Trading the Jupiters,” pp. 102–104, and esp. fn. 24.

24. Sloan transcript, June 28, 1983, p. 63.

The Role of the Strategic Balance: The American Side

Political concerns therefore played an important role in determining the kind of risk the American government was willing to take on. But how did military factors affect the course of the crisis? Would it in particular have made a difference in 1962 if “the relative strategic positions of the Soviet Union and the United States had been reversed”? In 1969 McGeorge Bundy said no: “A stalemate is a stalemate either way around.”²⁵ But what does the historical evidence suggest?

In theory, the strategic balance could have played a role by influencing either American policy or Soviet policy or both. This section will be concerned mainly with how the Americans might have been affected; the Soviet side will be examined in the next section. Three issues in particular will be considered here: 1) did people at the time think that America’s strategic superiority would be decisive? 2) how did people deal with the narrower problem of the military significance of the Soviet missiles in Cuba? 3) how was the problem of escalation handled, and how does this bear on the problem of the strategic balance?

To begin with the crudest way in which the balance might have played a role: was the American government more willing to face the prospect of general war with the Soviet Union because it knew that damages, even in the worst case, could be limited to a certain “tolerable” level of devastation? Actually, there is no evidence that President Kennedy and his advisers counted missiles, bombers, and warheads, and decided on that basis to take a tough line. The veterans of the crisis have often denied that any calculation of that sort had been made, and there is no reason to dispute them on this point.²⁶ Few assumed at the time that the strategic balance in itself meant that the U.S.S.R. would almost automatically back down; and there is no evidence at all in the documents that anyone believed that the United States could face a war with confidence because of its vast nuclear power.

In fact, one of the most striking things about the October 16 transcript is that no one even touched on the issue of what exactly would happen if the

25. Bundy, “To Cap the Volcano,” p. 11.

26. See, for example, Rusk in Sloan Transcript, January 27, 1983, reel 6, take 1, p. 40; or Paul H. Nitze, “Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (January 1976), pp. 214–216.

crisis escalated to the level of general war—although of course everyone might have learned all they felt they needed to know about the issue in some other way. But one does come away from the transcript with the sense that even rough calculations of this sort were not terribly important. No one discussed what American counterforce capabilities were—that is, how well the United States might be able to “limit damage” in the event of an all-out war. It was as though all the key concepts associated with the administration’s formal nuclear strategy, as set out for example just a few months earlier in McNamara’s famous Ann Arbor speech—in fact, the whole idea of controlled and discriminate general war—in the final analysis counted for very little. One of President Kennedy’s remarks on October 16 seems to capture this feeling: “What difference does it make? They’ve got enough to blow us up now anyway.”²⁷

But the absence of a crude belief in the decisiveness of the strategic balance does not in itself mean that the issue was not present in less direct ways. People were in fact concerned with the problem of whether the deployment of missiles in Cuba would make an important difference in military terms. The positions taken on this question reflect, in a rather crude and imperfect way to be sure, basic attitudes about the significance of shifts in the strategic balance. They thus can function as something of a surrogate for more direct notions about the role of the nuclear balance.

It is sometimes claimed that the general belief among high administration officials was that the deployment would not count for much from a strictly military point of view. And the chief document used to support this argument is a Sorensen memorandum of October 17, which claimed that it was “generally agreed that these missiles, even when fully operational, do not significantly alter the balance of power—i.e., they do not significantly increase the potential megatonnage capable of being unleashed on American soil, even after a surprise American nuclear strike.”²⁸ But Sorensen was simply wrong

27. October 16 transcripts, II, p. 15.

28. In Box 48, Folder “Cuba. General. 10/17/62–10/27/62,” Sorensen Papers, Kennedy Library. This document is the basis for Bernstein’s claim, in “Trading the Jupiters,” that the missiles “did not alter the strategic balance” (p. 118). In an earlier article, he developed this point at greater length, arguing, on the basis of the Sorensen memorandum, that most ExCom members agreed (among other things) that the deployment of the missiles in Cuba “did not add to the likelihood of a Soviet first strike.” But there is *nothing at all* in the Sorensen document that even remotely deals with this question. Bernstein’s claim was made in his “The Week We Almost Went to War,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (February 1976), p. 16. It is of course

on this point: there was in fact no consensus on the issue of whether the deployment of the missiles really mattered in strategic terms. The transcript of the October 16 discussions makes this very clear. "What," Bundy asked, "is the strategic impact on the position of the United States of MRBM's in Cuba? How gravely does this change the strategic balance?" And McNamara answered as follows: "Mac, I asked the Chiefs that this afternoon, in effect. And they said, substantially. My own personal view is, not at all."²⁹

What the military, and for that matter the CIA as well, were worried about was that the missiles currently in Cuba might just be an opening wedge, preparing the way for a more massive buildup there. The larger the force, the more the Soviets would be able, in the words of the CIA assessment, "to blunt a retaliatory attack,"³⁰ and thus to threaten the United States with a

odd that Sorensen in this document takes megatonnage as the basic index of strategic power—and this a couple of years after the total megatonnage of the American nuclear arsenal had begun its long and dramatic decline. The Kennedy Administration, in fact, wanted other things besides sheer destructive power from its strategic forces. In one typical document, Rusk called for improvements in the American strategic force "which would increase its survivability, its flexibility, and its ability to be used under a wide range of contingencies" (Rusk to McNamara, enclosed in Rusk to Bundy, October 29, 1961, Box 275, Folder "Department of Defense. Defense Budget FY 1963. 1/16–10/61," National Security Files, Kennedy Library). A shift in the strategic balance could be meaningful if it affected any of these things; and Rusk later recalled that in 1962 "we were concerned on the military side that substantial numbers of missiles in Cuba . . . could knock out our Strategic Air Command bases with almost no advance warning—they were so close" (Sloan transcripts, January 27, 1983, reel 1, take 1, p. 18).

29. October 16 transcripts, II, p. 12.

30. Gen. Taylor in October 16 transcripts, II, p. 13; CIA Report, "Soviet Reactions to Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba," October 19, 1962, Annex B ("Military Significance of Ballistic Missiles in Cuba"), Declassified Documents Collection, 1975, p. 48D. Note also Raymond Garthoff's analysis, written at the end of the crisis: his memorandum on "The Military Significance of the Soviet Missile Bases in Cuba" of October 27, 1962 was published (with commentary) in his article "The Meaning of the Missiles," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Autumn 1982), pp. 78–79, and again in his "A Retrospective Look at a 1962 Evaluation of the Soviet Missiles in Cuba," an addendum to *Intelligence Assessment and Policymaking: A Decision Point in the Kennedy Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1984), pp. 32–33. In his commentary, Garthoff asserted that the question of how the deployment affected the military balance was not "an issue of contention," and that in fact "it was not even fully analyzed in the hectic week of initial decisions" (*Intelligence Assessment*, p. 28; with some minor variations of wording, also in "The Meaning of the Missiles," p. 76). But the evidence just cited shows that these claims have to be taken with a grain of salt. There is additional evidence as well. The issue of the "effect of the missiles on the overall balance of power" was, for example, considered by the "main policy group" at its meeting at the White House on October 18, according to p. 46 of the recently declassified Sieverts Report, "The Cuban Crisis, 1962," an in-house history written mainly on the basis of interviews and completed in mid-1963 (Box 49, National Security Files, Kennedy Library). Indeed, the issue of the military significance of missiles in Cuba had been around ever since the administration had begun to worry about a possible deployment during the summer. For example, National Security Action Memorandum No. 181 of August 23, 1962 specifically

first strike. Neither President Kennedy nor anyone else at the meeting, however, seemed much concerned with how such a deployment would affect the vulnerability of America's strategic forces. But Kennedy did seem concerned that the initial deployment might be followed by a more massive one. He in fact linked this point to McNamara's argument about how the United States could not contemplate military action against the island once the missiles there were operational. No one could be sure an air strike would destroy all the missiles, and if any remained, some of them might be launched against America:

let's just say that, uh, they get, they get these in there and then you can't, uh, they get sufficient capacity so we can't, uh, with warheads. Then you don't want to knock 'em out [cause?], uh, there's too much of a gamble. Then they just begin to build up those air bases there and then put more and more. I suppose they really. . . . Then they start getting ready to squeeze us in Berlin, doesn't that. . . . You may say it doesn't make any difference if you get blown up by an ICBM flying from the Soviet Union or one that was ninety miles away. Geography doesn't mean that much.³¹

The President was clearly thinking out loud: he was not really sure how he stood on this issue. A little later in the meeting, he veered toward the McNamara line. The real issue now, he said, was a political or psychological one. He had said the previous month that we would not tolerate the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and now he had to follow through: "Last month I said we weren't going to. Last month I should have said . . . that we don't care. But when we said we're *not* going to and then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then . . . I would think that our risks increase."³² What perhaps made this line attractive was that it freed him from the need to agonize over the more difficult problem of whether the deployment was militarily important. It provided a straightforward rationale for the American decision to resist the deployment of the missiles, sparing the President from any need to resolve the perplexing issues of nuclear strategy.

At other times, however, Kennedy's remarks point in the other direction: "In his view the existence of fifty planes in Cuba [the IL-28 bombers] did not

requested an analysis "of the probable military, political and psychological impact of the establishment in Cuba of either surface-to-air or surface-to-surface missiles which could reach the U.S." (Box 338, National Security Files, Kennedy Library). It is unclear whether such a study was ever written; an attempt to locate it via the Freedom of Information Act proved unsuccessful.

31. October 16 transcripts, II, p. 13 (for JFK), and I, p. 11 (for McNamara).

32. October 16 transcripts, II, p. 15.

affect the balance of power, but the missiles already in Cuba were an entirely different matter."³³ Or, on October 27, when he was making a case for a trade involving the Jupiters: "The President recalled that over a year ago we wanted to get the Jupiter missiles out of Turkey because they had become obsolete and of little military value. If the missiles in Cuba added 50% to Soviet nuclear capability, then to trade these missiles for those in Turkey would be of great military value."³⁴

One of the ways that President Kennedy tried to get a handle on the issue of the military significance of the missiles was by raising the question of Soviet motivation. If they did not matter strategically, why would the Russians put them in? Were they unhappy with their ICBMs? Khrushchev was running a major risk. What did he think he could get out of deploying these missiles in Cuba? "It's just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs in Turkey," he said. "Now that'd be goddam dangerous, I would think." "Well, we *did*, Mr. President," Bundy replied. "Yeah, but that was five years ago."³⁵ They had been warned, the President said, and still they put the missiles in: "I don't think there's any record of the Soviets making this direct a challenge, ever, really . . . since the Berlin blockade."³⁶ But then Bundy placed this issue in its proper perspective by pointing out that the Soviets had made their decision *before* the President had issued his warning; they could have drawn back later, of course, but proceeding with a decision that had already been made was not quite the same as an outright act of defiance.

One therefore has the sense that President Kennedy's feelings on this issue had not really taken definite shape: it was as though he was groping for answers. Indeed, it seems that the administration in general, ever since it took office, was being pulled in two opposite directions: by intellectual argument, and by its extreme distaste for the idea of massive retaliation, it was drawn toward notions of discriminate and controlled war-fighting, and in fact nuclear war-fighting, strategies; but revolted by the very idea of nuclear war, and convinced that matters would in all probability very quickly get out of hand as soon as nuclear weapons began to be used in a major way, the

33. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, pp. 510–511. Since one of the basic differences between bombers and missiles relates to warning time, this quotation suggests that by this point Kennedy was concerned with how the missiles might affect Soviet first strike capabilities.

34. ExCom Minutes No. 7, October 27, 1962, p. 4.

35. October 16 transcripts, I, p. 13, and II, p. 26.

36. *Ibid.*, II, p. 32.

most important people in the Kennedy Administration found it hard to take such notions seriously. As a result, the nuclear strategy of “controlled response” never really cut very deep under Kennedy³⁷; and a certain ambivalence about these basic issues was very characteristic of that administration’s approach to military policy.

Thus the administration was still sorting out its views on this issue: it was unclear exactly what the strategic significance of the Soviet deployment was, and people’s attitudes were so uncertain, and so divided, that the discussion tells us very little about more fundamental beliefs about the political meaning of the strategic balance.

But views about escalation throw a much sharper light on the problem. What is striking here is the sense that peace was hanging on a thread, that it did not take much to touch off a nuclear holocaust—attitudes that would have been inconceivable if the sense was that the Soviets were simply out-gunned and would have to back down, or even if the assumption was just that they were desperately anxious to avoid war and would draw back in a simple test of will. General David Burchinal, the Director of Plans on the Air Staff in 1962, later recalled how during the crisis an American U-2 spy plane had gotten lost and turned up over Soviet territory. Word of this “came into the ‘tank’ where McNamara and the Chiefs were meeting: ‘We’ve got a U-2 at 75,000 feet over the Kola Peninsula.’” McNamara, he said, “turned absolutely white and yelled hysterically, ‘This means war with the Soviet Union. The President must get on the hot line to Moscow!’ And he ran out of the meeting in a frenzy.”³⁸

Whether this story is true or not, it is clear from other sources that McNamara was very sensitive to the danger of things spinning out of control. But President Kennedy also, in some comments on the crisis he gave to the National Security Council in January 1963, stressed the importance of having time to work out policy: if the Russians had had to react in only “an hour or

37. It is now well known that the influence of declaratory strategy on actual planning for general war is much slighter than many people used to assume. Note in this connection the testimony, for example, of Air Force General Bruce K. Holloway. What role did McNamara’s strategy of “assured destruction” play in the elaboration of the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP)—the basic plan for general war? “This is one place I can certainly say something nice about McNamara,” Holloway remarked. “He never reversed us to my knowledge while I was JSTPS on the SIOP as it was presented to the JCS and as it was approved” (Holloway oral history interview, August 16–18, 1977, p. 359, Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C.).

38. Transcript of oral history interview of General David Burchinal, April 11, 1975, pp. 114–115, Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C.

two, their actions would have been spasmodic and might have resulted in nuclear war."³⁹

Fears of this sort had an important effect on policy: there was in particular a great concern about the risk of escalation within the Cuban theater. With regard to the air strike option, Taylor and McNamara argued on October 16 that it was crucial to take out every target that might have any nuclear capability. The Joint Chiefs, Taylor said, unanimously believed that an attack should not be limited to the missile sites:

it would be a mistake to take this very narrow, selective target because it invited reprisal attacks and it may be detrimental. Now if the, uh, Soviets have been willing to give, uh, nuclear warheads to these missiles, there is every, just as good reason for them to give nuclear capability to these [air] bases. We don't think we'd ever have a chance to take 'em again, so that we lose this, the first strike surprise capability. Our recommendation would be to get complete intelligence, get all the photography we need, the next two or three days, no, no hurry in our book. Then look at this target system. If it really threatens the United States, then take it right out with one hard crack.⁴⁰

McNamara fully accepted the basic argument about the risk of retaliation from surviving forces on the island, and in fact developed it in a number of ways. One point was that if military action was to be undertaken, it had to be done quickly, before the missile sites became operational. Otherwise, since there was no guarantee a strike would destroy all the missiles, some of the surviving ones might be launched against American cities: once any missiles became operational, he argued, the risk of an attack would be too great.⁴¹ Another point was that there could be no warning: "if you are going to strike, you shouldn't make an announcement."⁴² If you went the political route, that meant giving a warning, and hence a chance for an adversary to prepare his missiles for launch, thus effectively preventing the U.S. from taking military action: the political approach "almost *stops* subsequent military action"; "once you start this political approach, I don't think you're gonna *have* any opportunity for a military operation."⁴³

39. "Notes on Remarks by President Kennedy before the National Security Council, Tuesday, January 22, 1963," National Security Files, Box 314, Kennedy Library.

40. October 16 transcripts, II, p. 8.

41. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 11, 13, 14.

42. *Ibid.*, II, p. 17.

43. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 9, 44.

Note how this kind of reasoning thus tends to draw one to the extremes: either a full-scale surprise attack or no direct military action at all, but not the brandishing of threats to coerce an adversary. Military power is viewed primarily as a way of affecting an enemy's capabilities rather than as a means of influencing his will. And this is based on the notion that once the ball starts rolling, things may very well become uncontrollable; the enemy cannot be counted on to behave rationally and control his own behavior.

But it was precisely this set of assumptions that was attacked by Rusk and Bundy. There were great political advantages to limiting the attack to the missile sites; there was no reason to assume that the Soviets would retaliate with whatever they had left, since such behavior would be suicidal for them. Rusk, for example, did not believe that "the critical question" was whether, in the event of an attack, every missile could be destroyed before it went off, because if the remaining missiles were launched, "we are in general nuclear war": "In other words, the Soviet Union has got quite a different decision to make."⁴⁴ And Bundy refuted the notion that if the United States attacked the missiles, the other side would retaliate with bombers, some of which might have nuclear capability: if their bombers attacked America in retaliation, then *they* were opting for general war—"it then becomes much more *their* decision."⁴⁵ President Kennedy himself saw both sides of the argument—one again has the sense that he was thinking out loud—but on balance it seems he favored the more limited form of attack: he just did not believe that if the missiles were destroyed, there might be a reprisal with nuclear weapons dropped from bombers, "because obviously why would the Soviets permit nuclear war to begin under that sort of half-assed way?"⁴⁶

This argument turned to a certain degree on the technical issue of Soviet command and control: how automatic retaliation would be would depend to a considerable extent on whether the decision to strike back would be made in Moscow or by some low-level Soviet commander in charge of a missile battery in Cuba. McNamara's disagreement with Rusk focused on this point: "We don't know what kinds of communications the Soviets have with those sites. We don't know what kinds of control they have over the warheads."⁴⁷

The problem of command and control thus relates to the broader question of whether the deployment of nuclear missiles in a given country deters all

44. *Ibid.*, I, p. 13.

45. *Ibid.*, II, p. 18. See also I, p. 25, and II, p. 43.

46. *Ibid.*, I, p. 25. See also I, p. 17, and II, pp. 10, 17.

47. *Ibid.*, I, p. 13.

forms of attack on that country—an issue that bears on the current debate over the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe. The deterrent effect in 1962 seems real enough, even if in the final analysis the presence of operational missiles would not in itself have been sufficient to prevent an American attack on Cuba. But was this effect rooted solely in assumptions about the possible looseness of an enemy's control apparatus? While the evidence on this point is not very strong, it does seem that a sense for the danger of attacking Cuba after nuclear weapons were deployed there had a somewhat broader base than uncertainty about Soviet command and control. For one thing, one is struck by the casual way in which people referred to Cuban control over the missiles.⁴⁸ And this was linked to a visceral fear that the missiles might be *deliberately* launched if, for example, the United States sent troops to Venezuela: Robert Kennedy was worried about an implicit Cuban threat "that if you go there, we're gonna fire it."⁴⁹

From McNamara's point of view, the air strike option clearly had its problems: for political reasons, a "bolt from the blue" was obviously unattractive, but to give warning would allow the other side to take actions that could effectively paralyze the United States. He therefore proposed a blockade as an alternative. The missiles in Cuba posed, to his mind, not a military problem, but rather a "domestic political problem."⁵⁰ America had said it would act if missiles were brought in, and now it had to do something—not necessarily enough to force the withdrawal of the missiles, but measures that would prevent their use: a continuous surveillance of Cuba and a permanent naval blockade to prevent any more missiles from coming in. The United States would declare to the world that, "if there is ever any indication that [the missiles in Cuba were] to be launched against this country, we will respond not only against Cuba, but we will respond directly against the Soviet Union with, with a full nuclear strike." This was not "a perfect solution by any means," and he said he did not want to argue for it; but if this alternative did not seem very acceptable, "wait until you work on the others."⁵¹

The fear of escalation thus went a long way toward neutralizing whatever advantages might have accrued to the United States by virtue of its "strategic superiority"—at least from the point of view of the American government.

48. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 14, 46.

49. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 14–15.

50. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 46, 48.

51. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 46–48.

This was most true in the case of McNamara, but to one degree or another, these fears were shared by most of his colleagues, and the American government was very cautious during the crisis.⁵² The Kennedy Administration did not plunge eagerly into the poker game of risk manipulation, encouraged by a sense that strategically it had the upper hand.

But it is also important to remember that its fear of escalation did not drive the threshold of acceptable risk down to zero. On both the air strike and the blockade, McNamara's initial views were not accepted. The blockade did in fact eventually function as a political instrument—that is, as a “first step,” raising the prospect of further, more extreme steps if a settlement was not reached. If the blockade did not “achieve the removal of the missiles,” the President seemed ready, on October 20, to approve an air strike “against a minimum number of targets to eliminate the main nuclear threat.”⁵³ And of course at the peak of the crisis, the United States was ready to invade Cuba, even though some of the missiles there were by then considered operational: even McNamara at that point thought that an invasion was “almost inevitable.”

The Strategic Balance: The Soviet Side

There were two possible ways in which the strategic balance could have influenced the course of the crisis: through its effect on American policy or through its effect on Soviet behavior. We have already seen that its direct

52. Note in this context General Burchinal's later account of how the blockade was actually implemented: “So about that time, also, we decided to impose a blockade, and we put our naval vessels out on picket—no more ships coming into Cuba. They would be challenged on the high seas regardless of flag, and they'd be searched, and if they had anything that falls under war materiel they will be turned around or they will be sunk. So, we set it up. And, there was control in detail, so there was a phone from the Secretary of Defense's office right to the deck of the damn destroyer on patrol in this blockade. So, the first ship comes up to the blockade line. He's a Swede. They give him the signal 'heave-to.' 'Standby, what is your cargo?' And he said, 'Go to hell!' Full steam ahead and right through the damn blockade and right on into Havana. Nobody stopped him. He just said, 'The hell with you—nobody tells me what to do on the high seas with my ship.' So, they just looked at each other, these people who were now learning to 'manage crises' and run wars. 'That didn't work very well. What do we do now?' And so our signal caller had said, 'Don't shoot,' and the destroyer had said, 'I'm ready to stop him.' 'No, no, let him go, let him go.' So the next ship comes along and he's Lebanese—he's flying a Lebanese flag. So, they challenge him. And he said, 'Oh, I'm very happy to comply. I'll stop, come aboard, here I am, I'm just a poor Lebanese out here running my ship into Cuba.' So they went aboard and opened up his hatches, and he's got a bunch of military electronic gear, and they shut the hatches down, pretended it wasn't there, and said, 'Pass friend.' And he steamed merrily into Havana. That was our naval blockade. And that's the way it was being run under the kind of civilian control we had.” Burchinal oral history, pp. 116–117.

53. Sieverts Report, p. 75.

effect on the United States was apparently minimal. But a strong, although somewhat speculative, case can be made that Soviet policy was very much influenced by the strategic balance. This case rests on a study of what was going on in the area of military preparations during the crisis.

One of the most striking features of the Cuban missile crisis, in fact, is an extraordinary asymmetry in the area of general war preparations. On October 22, President Kennedy announced the presence of the missiles and the measures the United States was taking to force their removal, and every day, from that point on, the Central Intelligence Agency prepared a memorandum outlining the military measures the Soviet Union was taking in response. The first order of business at each morning ExCom meeting was a briefing by the CIA Director, John McCone, essentially summarizing the latest intelligence memorandum. Day after day, the theme was the same: the U.S.S.R. was not making preparations for war. Thus, the CIA, on October 24, did not believe that "measures to achieve a higher degree of action readiness for Soviet and bloc forces are being taken on a crash basis." The same point was made in the October 25 memorandum; and still on October 27, at the climax of the crisis, the CIA said it simply had not been able to detect any "significant redeployment" of Soviet forces.⁵⁴

The United States, on the other hand, was making very serious preparations for a general nuclear conflict: America's ICBMs were put on alert, and the Strategic Air Command as a whole, as one writer put it, was "fully mobilized for war."⁵⁵ "We increased the airborne alert force of B-52's up to a third of the force," General Burchinal recalled. "We had SAC bombers on nuclear alert with weapons in the bomb-bays on civilian airfields all over the US. We dispersed the air defense force, with nuclear weapons, also on civilian airports all over the country." But the point that Burchinal stressed was that "all these moves were signals the Soviets could see and we knew they could see them. We got everything we had, in the strategic forces, nuclear forces, counted down and ready and aimed and we made damn sure they saw it without anybody saying a word about it."⁵⁶

How is Soviet inaction to be understood, and what inferences from the disparity between Soviet and American military measures might have plausibly been drawn at the time? Military preparations, of course, strengthen

54. Both the CIA memoranda and the Executive Committee minutes are in Boxes 315 and 316, National Security Files, Kennedy Library.

55. See David Detzer, *The Brink: Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1979), p. 164.

56. Burchinal oral history, p. 115.

one's bargaining position. They are an indication of resolve, a hint of what one might actually do, a means perhaps of preventing the enemy from making certain countermoves and thus of preemptively increasing one's own freedom of action. It is clear that these bargaining advantages of preparing for war were understood at the time.⁵⁷ But if taking these measures can have such effects, it is even clearer that a *refusal* to make serious preparations during a confrontation, when one's adversary has put his strategic forces on full alert, can have important political effects. It is a question here not just of the Soviets' reluctance to declare an official alert of their own. This might be explained by the specific character of what an alert might have meant in the Soviet system. For instance, the Soviets might have been unable for technical reasons to hold their strategic force on alert for more than a short period of time, and therefore might have been reluctant to place their forces on alert unless they were certain a war was coming.⁵⁸ The more important point is that the Soviets evidently did nothing, even in the way of major ad hoc measures (such as putting some of their bombers on strip alert), to reduce the vulnerability of their strategic forces. A national leader like Khrushchev may take a tough position in diplomatic contacts, in effect threatening war if his opponent perseveres with his policy; but how seriously can such threats be taken if what is going on in the military sphere is giving exactly the opposite signal?⁵⁹

It can be taken for granted that the Soviet Union of Nikita Khrushchev was not oblivious to considerations of this sort. Khrushchev had tried over the past few years to extract political advantages by brandishing the specter of nuclear war. If anything, he had tended to overestimate the bluff value of nuclear weapons, and to overlook the ways in which the tactic of exploiting the nuclear threat could backfire.⁶⁰ But during the Cuban crisis, the Soviets

57. October 16 transcripts, I, p. 27, and II, p. 10.

58. The Soviet missile guidance system evidently used gyroscopes with metal ball bearings that would fail if they were subject to continuing stress—that is, if the missile were held ready for launch over a prolonged period. See Robert P. Berman and John C. Baker, *Soviet Strategic Forces: Requirements and Responses* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1982), p. 88.

59. See the Khrushchev–Kennedy correspondence published in the Department of State *Bulletin*, November 19, 1973, and republished in Ronald R. Pope, ed., *Soviet Views on the Cuban Missile Crisis: Myth and Reality in Foreign Policy Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 28–67. Note also the account of Khrushchev's interview with the American businessman W.E. Knox in Hilsman to Rusk, October 26, 1962, Box 36a, Folder "Cuba. General. 10/15/62–10/23/62," National Security Files, Kennedy Library.

60. Arnold L. Horelick and Myron Rush, *Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), is the classic study.

backed away from a strategy of bluff: something more compelling had intervened, leading them to pay the price, in bargaining terms, of not seriously preparing for war.

It is reasonable to suppose that their view of the United States had a good deal to do with the choices they made. For they saw a country whose whole way of thinking about nuclear issues had focused on the question of how much an advantage there might be to getting in the first blow; where responsible officials, from the President on down, had stressed how the United States would not rule out the option of striking first in certain circumstances; and where the logic of preemptive action—of semi-unintended war, resulting from the fear of surprise attack—was very widely recognized.⁶¹

The important volume on *Soviet Military Strategy* (1962), edited by Marshal Sokolovskii, shows just how sensitive the Soviets were at this time to the American emphasis on the logic of preemption. The Americans, the Soviet authors pointed out, understood that “the one who strikes first will undoubtedly gain an important advantage.” This was why the United States was so afraid of surprise attack. But the Americans assumed that the fear of surprise attack—and here the Soviet authors were quoting directly from a U.S. Senate document—“gravely increased the temptation to strike first in a nuclear war.” The Americans thought they might have to attack simply because they felt their enemy was about to strike: “a pre-emptive blow . . . is defensive, according to American military theorists, since it is dealt to an enemy who is ready to attack (to initiate a preventive war or deal a first blow). It is considered to be the final and only means of avoiding disaster.”⁶²

It is clear that the Soviet authors understood some of the basic arguments American strategists were making during the period; official doctrine, and the capabilities with which it was linked, would naturally be viewed in this context. The most disturbing thing here, from their point of view, would be the notion of “damage limitation” and the American counterforce capabilities that supported it. “Damage limitation,” whatever official attempts were made

61. See especially Khrushchev's July 10, 1962 speech, published in *Pravda* the next day, and in English in the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol. 14, No. 28 (August 8, 1962), esp. pp. 3–4, for the Soviet leader's reaction to President Kennedy's refusal to rule out a first strike option. Kennedy's remarks were originally made in an interview with Stewart Alsop, “Kennedy's Grand Strategy,” *Saturday Evening Post*, March 31, 1962, p. 14. See also Michael Brower, “Nuclear Strategy of the Kennedy Administration,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 18, No. 8 (October 1962), esp. p. 38f.

62. V.D. Sokolovskii, ed., *Soviet Military Strategy* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Rand edition, 1963), pp. 160–162. The original Soviet edition was published in 1962.

to rationalize it in “second-strike” terms, must have struck them as a code term for preemption. This certainly was how Carl Kaysen, Bundy’s aide during the Kennedy Administration, explained it a few years later: “Should sufficient warning of preparations for a Soviet strike or actual launching of one be available, U.S. missiles could be launched against Soviet missile sites and airfields, thus limiting to an extent depending on warning time the damage the Soviet strike would inflict.”⁶³

Given all this, Soviet leaders might have viewed war preparations as very dangerous—and quite possibly because of the disparity in force levels and in degrees of force vulnerability, risky in a way that the corresponding American alert simply was not. Indeed, the famous remark of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov to John McCloy shortly after the crisis—“You Americans will never be able to do this to us again”—suggests that the Soviets drew back because of a relative, but remediable, weakness, and obviously their conventional inferiority in the Caribbean was not what Kuznetsov had in mind.⁶⁴

But however the asymmetry in military preparations is to be explained, the important thing to note is that people in Washington were aware of it during the crisis. What conclusions might they have realistically drawn from it? Could they have felt that the lack of parallelism reflected a Soviet sense of their own strategic inferiority? This is why speculation about the Soviet motivation for the deployment can be so revealing: did anyone feel that the Soviets had made what was assumed to be the very risky move of introducing missiles into Cuba out of weakness—for example, because they had been so uncomfortable with the existing strategic balance during the Berlin crisis the previous year? And what conclusions were drawn from the fact that the deployment had been carried out in such a furtive and deceptive fashion, tactics of this sort being traditionally associated with the weak?⁶⁵

63. Carl Kaysen, “Keeping the Strategic Balance,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (July 1968), p. 668.

64. The quotation is from Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929–1969* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), pp. 495–496. There is also the related question, about which there has been so much conjecture, of the connection between the Cuban missile crisis and the development of Soviet strategic capabilities after 1962. It is hard to believe there is no connection at all, but it is still too early for firm conclusions on this subject.

65. This is no accident, since everyone knows that one pays a price for deceptive or devious behavior: the risk of embarrassment if one is found out, a discrediting of one’s future claims and promises, possibly increased self-righteousness on the part of one’s adversary and the bargaining advantages this gives him. For these reasons it is pointless to lie or cheat without sufficient cause: the disadvantages have to be offset by some other consideration, and the most natural candidate is a sense of one’s own relative weakness.

These certainly are the kinds of things to look out for as more evidence is released. It is already clear that some people close to the crisis did in fact draw these sorts of inferences. General Burchinal, for example, later stressed that Khrushchev “never alerted a bomber or changed his own military posture one bit. We had a gun at his head and he didn’t move a muscle”; and Burchinal implied that this issue was discussed at the time with his civilian superiors.⁶⁶ One would like to see how the arguments were played out and what effect they had on policy. In any event, the mere fact of asymmetry does not seem consistent with the picture that Bundy painted in 1969. It suggests in itself that the nuclear situation was not one of simple “stalemate” in 1962.

What then was the role of the strategic balance in 1962? America’s “superiority” apparently did not have much of a direct effect on American policy during the crisis—or at least this is what the limited evidence now available seems to indicate. But with regard to the Soviets, the evidence points in the opposite direction: their strategic “inferiority” appears to have had a profound effect on their behavior in the crisis.

Conclusions

What role did nuclear forces play during the Cuban missile crisis? We began by considering three different lines of argument: 1) the claim that nuclear weapons played no role at all, that they just cancelled each other out; 2) the set of arguments that emphasize the notion of risk; and 3) the strategic balance interpretation, which asserts that America’s nuclear superiority played a crucial role in determining the course and outcome of the crisis. How well have each of these interpretations held up in the light of the evidence examined here?

There is first the argument that nuclear forces simply neutralized each other—that nuclear forces were “unusable,” and that because they were militarily useless, they could not be harnessed to any political purpose, beyond simply deterring their use by others. Of all the arguments considered here, this is the most difficult to sustain. It is obvious that the fear of nuclear war affected both Soviet and American behavior in the crisis; and indeed these fears were consciously manipulated, most notably by the American

66. Burchinal oral history, p. 116.

strategic alert. For such anxieties to have a real effect on political behavior, there was no need for the President to decide consciously that he would under certain circumstances start a nuclear war: escalation could be largely inadvertent. It was sufficient, as Brodie pointed out in a 1963 talk on the crisis, that the government was able simply to "threaten the next in a series of moves" that seemed to tend in the direction of general war.⁶⁷

The risk of nuclear war could therefore affect behavior. But the threshold of acceptable risk could vary, and nuclear anxieties in fact did not have an equal effect on both sides. The "balance of resolve" was therefore crucial. The balance was not so completely lopsided that the crisis was ended by a total Soviet capitulation. Nor, on the other hand, was the final arrangement a bargain negotiated between equals. The balance was unequal, but not so unequal that it makes sense to view the crisis as a simple "contest" with a clear victor.

It would therefore be a bit too extreme to view the crisis as a "competition in risk-taking" à la Thomas Schelling. "Until we can manipulate the risk of general war and engage in competitive risk-taking with the Soviets," Schelling said a few months after the crisis, ". . . I don't think we are going to learn to take care of Berlin, much less to take care of Indonesia and Finland, when the time comes."⁶⁸ But this kind of attitude is really not reflected in the documents on the Cuban crisis. To be sure, people felt they had to act. Both for foreign policy reasons—the Soviet deployment was in direct defiance of an American warning—and for reasons of domestic politics as well, the administration knew that it could not sit this one out. But no one wanted to keep upping the ante, to keep outbidding the Soviets in "resolve," as the way of triumphing in the confrontation.

As for the argument about the strategic balance, the evidence at this point suggests that it did not have an important direct influence on American policy. The Kennedy Administration's fears of escalation substantially cancelled out, in its own mind, whatever benefits it might have theoretically been able to derive from its "strategic superiority." The American ability to "limit damage" by destroying an enemy's strategic forces did not seem, in American eyes, to carry much political weight. Thus in practice the more

67. Bernard Brodie, "AFAG Talk: Political Impact of U.S. Force Postures," May 28, 1963, p. 7 (recently released by Rand).

68. David Abshire and Richard Allen, eds., *National Security: Political, Military, and Economic Strategies in the Decade Ahead* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 646.

subtle official theories about nuclear war-fighting evidently did not have much of an effect on American policy.

But the Soviets seem to have been profoundly affected by their “strategic inferiority.” The ironic thing is that they probably took American ideas about “damage limitation” and “discriminate and controlled general war,” and the capabilities with which they were linked, far more seriously than the Americans did. And this was in spite of the fact that just a few months earlier, after the Ann Arbor speech, they had contemptuously dismissed the McNamara strategy as absurd. It really does seem that “we had a gun to their head and they didn’t move a muscle”—that their failure to make any preparations for general war was linked to a fear of provoking American preemptive action. And this meant that it was more essential than it otherwise might have been to head off an invasion of Cuba through a political settlement. The danger of provoking an American preemptive strike tended to rule out countermeasures—or even the serious threat of countermeasures, around Berlin or elsewhere—that would significantly increase the risk of war. The effect therefore was to tie their hands, to limit their freedom of maneuver, and thus to increase their incentive to settle the crisis quickly.

This implies that the strategic balance mattered in 1962. Does this conclusion have “hawkish” or “pro-nuclear” implications? Its real meaning is more complex: the point that nuclear forces can carry political weight in itself tells us very little about basic issues of policy—about whether, or in what ways, nuclear power *should* be used to support political objectives. The lessons of history are rarely clear-cut.

The historical analysis of the Cuban missile crisis is still in its infancy. The new documents on the crisis, as revealing as they are, represent just the tip of the iceberg. It is only as more material is released that the full meaning of the crisis can begin to unfold. If this material is approached correctly—if questions are framed so that answers turn on what the archival evidence shows—the historical study of the crisis can be of real value. It is one of the best ways we have of bringing the problem of the political utility of nuclear forces into focus—of going beyond speculation and reaching some solid conclusions about one of the most basic problems of the nuclear age.