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CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS: THE SOVIET STORY

by Raymond L. Garthoff

The phenomenon of *glasnost* has finally touched on the USSR's treatment of recent diplomatic history in an important and perhaps surprising case: the "Caribbean crisis" of 1962, as the Soviets call the Cuban missile crisis. The new openness over the past year has ensued from the combination of a spate of American reviews marking the 25th anniversary of the crisis and the call of Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" to fill in the "blank spots" in Soviet history.

For nearly two decades before 1985 the name Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader at the time of the crisis, was absent from the brief, occasional, and carefully circumscribed Soviet accounts of the crisis. Some writers even managed to address the topic without mentioning the presence in and removal from Cuba of Soviet missiles. Several recent Soviet articles appearing in conjunction with the anniversary have differed from earlier Soviet accounts by conveying a far more balanced treatment of events and of the Soviet and American roles in resolving the crisis. For the most part, however, these recent accounts have been just catching up with what has long been known about this major historical episode of the postwar era. New light on Moscow's key decisions in the crisis has scarcely begun to appear in the Soviet media—although it probably will within a year.

This article discloses new information from the USSR elaborating and, in some cases, significantly changing, the previous U.S. understanding of Soviet decisions during the Cuban missile crisis. Intriguing new details have now been learned about the decision to place missiles in Cuba and about Khrushchev's

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style of leadership. Most important, the startling new information presented here on Soviet efforts to resolve the crisis will require a revision of historical and analytic accounts of the events. Even some lessons learned from the crisis now warrant reconsideration.

How this new information became available reflects an incipient process of U.S.-Soviet cooperation in investigating common history. An exchange of views and information among Soviet and American scholars and former officials has begun. For various reasons the Cuban missile crisis is serving as a productive pilot boat in this new exploration. In October 1987, a conference at Harvard University brought together for the first time three knowledgeable Soviet participants and a number of American scholars and veterans of the crisis. A frank and wide-ranging discussion yielded some new information on Soviet actions in 1962, but the conference was most significant as the start of a dialogue and a process of collaborative historical analysis. At this writing, tentative plans are under way for a follow-on conference in Moscow in January 1989.

A few of us who participated in the conference had begun even earlier to exchange views. One fruit of this earlier contact came with the January 1988 publication in the Soviet journal *Latinskaya Amerika* of the first article on the Cuban crisis by an American participant and historian, myself, coupled with articles by a Soviet participant and historian, Sergo Mikoyan, and a Cuban scholar, Rafael Hernandez. At least one additional American article on the crisis is also slated for publication in the Soviet press. Most important, surviving Soviet participants in the crisis have become interested and begun to provide information.

Why? One apparent reason is a growing Soviet awareness of the value of careful historical and political analysis in dealing with current and future problems. Gorbachev himself is reported to have asked for a briefing on the Cuban missile crisis. Further, it has been discovered that Soviet archives on it are incomplete. A second reason is that the flood of declassified American records, memoirs, and

other accounts has primed the pump. Soviet officials increasingly are interested in telling their side of the story, too. Finally, an awareness has grown in both countries that the crisis was, after all, an interactive affair. If lessons are drawn from a one-sided account, no matter how scrupulously, they may be distorted. Largely to provide such an interactive analysis I prepared a new study last year, with some hitherto unreported information and attention to the Soviet role and the interplay of the two sides.¹ Yet only a year later contacts with knowledgeable Soviet sources have expanded—and in some cases significantly modified—what is known about Soviet calculations and actions related to the missile crisis. All of the new information has come from sources who unquestionably had direct knowledge of the events or access to the record on which they reported. But for various reasons several of them have preferred not to be named.

Heretofore the best—and almost only—source on the Soviet decision to deploy medium-range missiles in Cuba was Khrushchev's unofficial but authenticated memoir. Prepared from memory and without access to official records, it has most of the virtues and shortcomings of that genre. It tells parts of the story as Khrushchev remembered it and as he wanted it remembered. Khrushchev attributed the genesis of the idea to put missiles in Cuba to his musings while visiting Bulgaria in May 1962, after which, he said, he discussed the idea with "the collective leadership" several times before it was agreed upon. He does not elaborate on who discussed it, when, or what the others' views were.²

But recently Sergo Mikoyan, son of the late Soviet president and, in 1962, first deputy prime minister, Anastas Mikoyan, provided important new details—first at the Harvard conference and later in several discussions and in the Soviet scholarly press. Drawing on his

¹See Raymond L. Gartboff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1987).

²Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers, ed. and trans. Strobe Talbott, vol. 1* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), 492–494.

father's unpublished memoirs of the event, he reports that Khrushchev first raised the question of deploying missiles in Cuba with his father alone and then with a select group of Soviet leaders in late April or early May 1962. Fyodor Burlatsky, an aide to Khrushchev and also a participant in the Harvard conference, on another occasion stated that the idea occurred to Khrushchev in April or May when he was vacationing in the Crimea after he spoke there with Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, the defense minister. Malinovsky pointed toward the Black Sea and commented on the emplacement of American medium-range missiles in Turkey, just across that sea. While Malinovsky may have suggested that the Soviet Union could do the same in Cuba, it is far more likely that that idea came then or later to Khrushchev. Burlatsky and other Soviet sources available so far say they do not know. It is known from the open record that while Khrushchev was visiting Bulgaria in mid-May, he publicly railed against the U.S. missile installations in neighboring Turkey.

Startling new information will require a revision of historical and analytic accounts of the events of the Cuban missile crisis.

While some details are still elusive or unconfirmed, it seems clear that Khrushchev advanced the idea to several of his colleagues in the leadership at about the time of his visit to Bulgaria. Sergo Mikoyan states that the group Khrushchev initially consulted comprised only Anastas Mikoyan and Frol Kozlov, both of the Communist party Presidium, as the Politburo was then known; then Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko; Malinovsky; and Marshal Sergei Biryuzov, the recently appointed commander in chief of the strategic missile forces, which included medium-range as well as intercontinental ballistic missiles. Later the newly designated Soviet ambassador to Havana, Aleksandr Alekseyev, was also called in.

Khrushchev proposed deploying the mis-

siles in Cuba and doing so secretly. Their presence would be sprung on President John Kennedy as a *fait accompli* after the U.S. congressional elections. Sergo Mikoyan reports that his father objected to the idea on two grounds: Cuban leader Fidel Castro would not accept the risk, and the missiles could not be deployed without early detection by the United States. But Khrushchev proposed dispatching Biryuzov to Castro with a letter requesting permission for the deployment. If Castro approved, the marshal then could check out the terrain and determine whether a concealed deployment was feasible. The senior Mikoyan was certain that Castro would not agree and that the military would find secret deployment infeasible.³

Allowing for some uncertainty on exactly when the first meeting occurred, Sergo Mikoyan's account appears to be credible. It reflects Khrushchev's penchant for conducting business with *ad hoc* groups drawn from the leadership, omitting others but also including officials who were not in the top leadership—in this case, Gromyko, Malinovsky, Biryuzov, and Alekseyev.

No serious consideration was given to an alternative approach of reaching an agreement openly with Cuba to station Soviet missiles there—as the United States had done with Turkey. Leading members of the Kennedy administration, including national security adviser McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, have since agreed that in that circumstance it would have been much more difficult, perhaps impossible, for the United States to have made an issue of the Soviet missiles. But Khrushchev's plan, unchallenged in Moscow if the military was convinced of its feasibility, was predicated on installing the missiles in secrecy and springing a diplomatic surprise.

Soviet sources have not fully clarified the Soviet motivation for deploying the missiles in Cuba. Sergo Mikoyan stresses the desire to support Castro's Cuba. This explanation has been the official Soviet line since October 28,

³*Sergo Mikoyan, Latinskaya Amerika, 1988, no. 1: 70–71.*

FOREIGN POLICY

1962, the day an agreement to withdraw the missiles was reached. The agreement has been justified by claiming that a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba obviated the need for leaving the missiles there to deter an American attack. Many Soviet officials, however, privately concede that the principal purpose was to shore up the Soviet geostrategic position at a time when the United States had a growing missile gap in its favor and the USSR lacked sufficient intercontinental missiles to offset the American advantage. This defensive purpose probably led the Soviet leaders to take the risks involved with missile deployment. Soviet leaders undoubtedly were also mindful of the possibility that the missiles would offer an offensive advantage, bolstering their standing for other foreign-policy moves, such as a renewed confrontation over Berlin.

On May 30, 1962, alternate Presidium member Sharif Rashidov and a delegation of agricultural experts began a publicized 10-day visit to Cuba. A fact not then publicly revealed, and privately disclosed to me only now by a Soviet official, is that Biryuzov and two or three military experts were included in the party. Rashidov formally delivered the letter from Khrushchev requesting the missile deployment, but Biryuzov was there to answer questions and to investigate the deployment possibilities.

Contrary to Mikoyan's expectations, Castro agreed to accept the missiles as a contribution to strengthening the socialist camp; and Biryuzov reported that the deployment could be done clandestinely. The full Presidium was told of the decision only after it had been made, prior to the arrival in Moscow of Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro on July 2. Unusually stringent security precautions were taken in discussing the missile decision. Sergo Mikoyan states that all messages on the subject, both within Moscow and between Havana and Moscow, were carried by hand to ensure against leakage through any compromise of communications and codes.

New Revelations

In 1962 Soviet political and diplomatic sources were incompletely informed on most

aspects of Soviet military activity in Cuba. They remain so today. Nonetheless, some sources are able and now willing to provide some interesting new information.

Detailed arrangements for the Soviet missile deployment were made during the talks between Soviet officials and the high-level Cuban military delegation headed by Raul Castro. Khrushchev himself attended two meetings with the group. While the general flow of Soviet arms to Cuba during summer 1962 raised American concerns, it also made more difficult spotting preparations for missile deployment before the actual start of construction of the sites or shipment of the missiles.

While the United States had very good intelligence on the missiles in Cuba in October and November 1962, its information on the number of Soviet military personnel was weak. Official U.S. intelligence estimates rose from 4,500 on October 3, to some 8,000–10,000 by October 22, to 12,000–16,000 by November 19, and finally to 22,000 in a retroactive estimate in early 1963. But, it turns out, this figure was still far too low. Years later, Fidel Castro said the number was 40,000. Sergio Mikoyan has now confirmed that the full Soviet military complement in Cuba in October 1962 totaled 42,000 men.

In August 1979, after some unnecessary confusion and agitation over the discovery of a 2,600-man Soviet Army brigade in Cuba that initially was thought to be a new Soviet deployment, it was belatedly realized that such a unit probably had been there since 1962. Mikoyan now says that a brigade was left behind after other Soviet units assigned to protect the missile sites were withdrawn in response to a request by Castro.

Even the identity of the Soviet military commander in Cuba in 1962 has, until now, remained unknown. He was not identified at the time by American intelligence. When then Acting U.N. Secretary General U Thant visited Havana at the end of October 1962 to arrange for an inspection of the missile withdrawal, he and his military aide, Indian Major General Indar Jit Rikhye, were introduced to "General Igor Stazenko," who claimed that all

FOREIGN POLICY

Soviet forces in Cuba were under his command. This statement, as well as his claim that the overall Soviet military complement in Cuba was only 5,000 men, was not true. But Statsenko (the correct spelling) was business-like and reliable in dealing with the missile issues. At the time some had strongly doubted that a young, one-star general would be the senior Soviet commander. Moreover, U.S. intelligence had gathered indications of the presence of more senior officers in Cuba. One, identified publicly only in 1987, was Colonel General of Aviation Viktor Davidkov. Davidkov was apparently in charge of Soviet air defense. In the era of *glasnost*, when I asked a Soviet official involved at the time, without hesitation he identified the overall Soviet commander as the four-star general of the army Issa Pliyev.

While belatedly identifying the Soviet military commander in Cuba in 1962 is but a small historical detail, it is an interesting point. A more incongruous selection would be difficult to imagine. Not only did Pliyev lack any experience with ballistic missiles, air defense, and concealment from aerial reconnaissance, but virtually his whole career had been as a cavalryman. He had had prior experience as a military adviser abroad, but in Mongolia from 1936 to 1938. Apart from daring horse cavalry raids behind German lines during World War II, his principal distinction was that he had led the last major cavalry charge in history—the Soviet-Mongolian “Horse Cavalry–Mechanized Group” that crossed the Gobi Desert and the Greater Khingan Range to attack the rear of the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria in August 1945. A few months after the Cuban crisis he was quietly returned to the command from which he had been surreptitiously “borrowed”—the North Caucasus Military District. Except for the Cuban interlude, Pliyev headed the North Caucasus command from 1958 until his semiretirement to the general inspectorate in 1968. Yet he was Malinovsky’s selection, with Khrushchev’s approval, for the delicate Cuban mission.

Incidentally, it should be kept in mind that, even apart from any deliberate attempt to revise history, some assertions made in good

faith may be based on incomplete or irrelevant information. For example, Sergo Mikoyan and the late General Statsenko both suggested that a key flaw in the Soviet attempt to achieve secrecy was the heavy volume of shipping, which they believed tipped off the Americans; Khrushchev made a similar comment in his memoir. Perhaps this was a general Soviet conclusion reached after the crisis. The increased volume of shipping during summer 1962 was known to consist of weapons, which certainly raised American concerns. But this played no real role in raising American suspicions about possible Soviet missiles owing to the wide range of other military materiel being supplied. For instance, when Kennedy, in response to the missile deployment, imposed the naval blockade on October 23, 16 Soviet ships were en route to Cuba with military supplies, of which only 7 were related to the missile deployment. Castro also has complained that if the Soviets had taken him more into their confidence in planning the deployment he could have provided cover through Cuban construction activities.

Then Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin in Washington knew nothing about the Soviet missiles in Cuba until Kennedy's nationally broadcast address on the crisis on October 22. In separate conversations in September 1962 he had told U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, presidential adviser Theodore Sorensen, and U.S. representative to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson that only defensive weapons were being supplied to Cuba. These assurances were made, on instructions from Moscow, in the absence of any information on the Soviet missiles. Dobrynin, in a May 1988 conversation in Moscow, commented to me that the Soviet embassy in Washington had been cut out of Moscow's deliberations and decisions before, during, and after the crisis. Khrushchev, he said, often made foreign-policy decisions without the advice of Soviet diplomats. (The question whether Dobrynin had been informed was a matter of speculation in Washington during the crisis. Llewellyn Thompson, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and then special adviser on Soviet affairs to Secretary of

FOREIGN POLICY

State Dean Rusk, and a number of State Department officials, including this writer, were inclined to believe that Dobrynin had not been.) Gromyko, however, is now known to have been not only informed but directly involved from the outset, even though not as a decision maker. He became a Politburo member only some 10 years later.

Information on Moscow's management of the crisis, particularly in the early days following Kennedy's demand to remove the missiles, remains sparse. The first critical decision facing the Soviet leaders was how to react to the American naval blockade. Soviet sources have now indicated that Khrushchev's initial angry reaction was to run the blockade, letting Soviet ships proceed and placing the responsibility for initiating the use of force on the United States. First reported by the maverick Soviet historian Roy Medvedev, Sergo Mikoyan has now confirmed that fact. He also states that it was his father who persuaded Khrushchev to reverse his initial decision.

The available information suggests that at least until October 25 Khrushchev harbored hopes of American acquiescence in the permanent presence of at least the medium-range missiles already in Cuba—24 launchers with 42 of 48 planned SS-4 missiles; all 32 SS-5 missiles for 16 planned launchers were still en route. Those of us watching for any indication of Soviet intentions during the crisis noted on October 25 several diplomatic signs of apparent Soviet interest in seeking a compromise resolution, in particular in remarks by Ambassadors Nikita Ryzhov in Turkey and Nikolai Mikhailov in Indonesia. These were brought to the attention of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (Ex Comm), a group created by President Kennedy to manage the crisis; but these signals were not clear or conclusive.

The "breakthrough," however, came on Friday, October 26, when Soviet embassy counselor Aleksandr Fomin—known to be the KGB station chief in Washington—arranged a lunch with ABC News correspondent John Scali where he outlined a potential deal: The Soviets would remove the missiles from Cuba under U.N. inspection in exchange for a

public U.S. commitment not to invade Cuba. Scali's encounter was quickly conveyed to Rusk, who, after checking with the president, made a guardedly positive reply that said Fomin's idea had real possibilities but that also stressed the urgency of the situation.

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Only hours later the second shoe dropped: A message from Khrushchev to Kennedy received in sections between 6:00 P.M. and 9:00 P.M. in Washington proposed what seemed to be the same deal that Fomin had scouted out. Although Khrushchev's message was vaguer and did not mention any inspection, in combination with the Fomin trial balloon it triggered a jubilant belief in the White House and the Ex Comm that a basis had been found to resolve the crisis. But the next morning, October 27, as a positive reply was being prepared, the optimism was dashed with the receipt of a new message from Khrushchev. This "second letter"—although both messages actually were part of a continuing series—raised the stakes by also demanding the dismantling of the U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Turkey. Meanwhile, one of the Soviet ships, the tanker *Grozny*, resumed movement toward the blockade line. Almost immediately, more bad news followed: An American U-2 reconnaissance airplane had been shot down over Cuba.

The president and his Ex Comm advisers debated why the Soviet position had hardened and how to respond. Was Khrushchev coming under pressure from hard-liners? Could he even fulfill the deal outlined by Fomin and in the first letter, and, if so, would he? Was Khrushchev himself displaying a mailed fist by shooting down the U-2? Or was a hard-line political and military faction now calling the

tune? Had the Fomin probe and first letter been designed only to determine how soft the American position was? Were they never intended as the basis for resolving the crisis? The KGB probe and personal style of the first letter, together with the stiffer "committee style" of the second letter, led most to believe that Khrushchev was at least under pressure and possibly no longer in control. The recently released transcript of the Ex Comm meetings of that day reveals the participants' tension.⁴

Scali was instructed to send a firm message through Fomin: What the hell were they up to? Was this a "double-cross"? Fomin told Scali he did not know but would find out. Kennedy finally sent a reply to Khrushchev late on October 27 accepting the first deal and, by ignoring it, effectively rejecting the second. Moreover, he told his brother Robert to deliver a copy personally to Dobrynin with an implied ultimatum coupled with acceptance of the Fomin deal.

When Dobrynin raised the matter of the missiles in Turkey, Robert Kennedy offered a "sweetener"—a private assurance that, separate from this deal, the president intended to remove the missiles from Turkey (and Italy as well) within several months after the crisis was resolved. "Black Saturday" ended with anguished uncertainty in Washington as to whether the crisis was about to be settled or intensified. Preparations for a possible air strike and invasion on Tuesday, October 30, were proceeding, although the president had not decided what he would do if Khrushchev rejected his proposal. It was recently disclosed that Kennedy also was preparing for diplomatic negotiation and a possible further concession on the missiles in Turkey.⁵

Khrushchev accepted with alacrity. A positive reply and an announcement of orders to dismantle the missile facilities in Cuba were made public by Khrushchev only hours after

⁴See "October 27, 1962: Transcripts of the Meetings of the ExComm," trans. McGeorge Bundy, ed. James G. Blight, *International Security* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1987-88): 30-92.

⁵J. Anthony Lukas, "Class Reunion: Kennedy's Men Relive the Cuban Missile Crisis," *New York Times Magazine*, 30 August 1987, 58.

the president's message was dispatched, even before the reply could be officially transmitted to Washington by the U.S. embassy in Moscow. The crisis was essentially over. This is the basic story of the crisis's resolution as it was understood by members of the Ex Comm in 1962.

The Soviet Story

Earlier Soviet accounts have been largely based on this same record, relying mainly on American information. The exception was Khrushchev's incredible account of the Dobrynin-Robert Kennedy meeting, which portrayed the latter more as a supplicant pleading that the military might take over the U.S. government if a political compromise were not reached promptly. Now, however, well-informed Soviet participants in the crisis have disclosed fascinating information that shows that this American understanding of developments was incomplete and, in a number of key assumptions, simply wrong.

First, Fomin was not testing the waters for Khrushchev. Operating with Dobrynin's cognizance but not Moscow's, Fomin was actually trying out an idea of his own. Dobrynin's guideline to Fomin had been simply to explore possibilities for a negotiated resolution. Similarly, the perceived signals by Ryzhov and Mikhailov were not orchestrated from Moscow but were merely diplomatic soundings by those ambassadors on their own authority. Moreover, neither Fomin's probe nor its elicitation of a positive American response was the basis for Khrushchev's first letter with a similar proposal. In fact, Dobrynin was unsure whether Fomin's account reflected an American probe through Scali since Fomin presented it with a twist in that direction, and he held up the reporting message on the Fomin-Scali discussion while this issue was clarified. It could not in any case have reached Moscow in time to influence Khrushchev's own similar probe in the first letter. The American reading of the Khrushchev letter in the context of the Fomin "message" was not warranted. Had the truth been known, the U.S. position probably would have been much

FOREIGN POLICY

more tentative, especially after receipt of the second letter.

Only the unauthorized Fomin probe had mentioned inspection of the removal of offensive arms; Khrushchev's letter had not. But Fomin's later report to Moscow on American anger at the second letter with its broadened demands may have played a part in reinforcing Khrushchev's decision to accept promptly the American proposal of October 27. Fomin later told Scali that it had. Sources in Moscow do not, however, have information on that point; perhaps some clarification will come in the future.

What accounted for the change between the soft first letter received late on October 26 and the tougher second letter received early the next day? The first letter did indeed bear the imprint of haste and of Khrushchev's own style. But the haste was not because Khrushchev was sending it "on his own" without Presidium backing; and the stiffer demand in the second letter was not because he was compelled or pressured into its dispatch. A fully informed and senior Soviet participant has told me that the first letter, with its vague but attractive offer, was sent hurriedly because Soviet intelligence sometime during the night of October 25-26 reported hard evidence of preparation for a possibly imminent American attack on Cuba. Time, Moscow believed, had run out. The second letter was then sent after new intelligence information on October 26 suggested that an American attack was less imminent, leaving more time for diplomatic negotiation and bargaining.

On October 25 or 26 the Soviet embassy in Washington recommended exploring a linkage between the Cuban- and the Turkish-based missiles, but that idea already was being discussed in Moscow. Until October 25, however, the hope was to keep Soviet missiles in Cuba analogous to the American missiles in Turkey. Once the exigencies of the situation shifted to a withdrawal of the Soviet missiles, the operative rationale had to be a U.S. guarantee of Cuba's security as a *quid pro quo* justifying the withdrawal of Soviet missiles. A reciprocal missile withdrawal was an additional desideratum but not the central element.

The October 27 meeting between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin was crucial. Dobrynin's account of the meeting as reported to Moscow is generally consistent with Kennedy's reporting, though with a few interesting variations. In the first place, Dobrynin's account, which contradicts Robert Kennedy's in *Thirteen Days*, states that the meeting took place in the Soviet embassy, not in Kennedy's office at the Department of State. According to a well-informed Soviet source, Robert Kennedy opened his conversation with Dobrynin by asking, with a quick look around the room and at the chandeliers, whether it was "safe" to talk freely. Dobrynin was not sure whose possible eavesdropping was of concern to Kennedy. Also, Dobrynin's account attributes raising the subject of the missiles in Turkey to Kennedy rather than to himself. While the Soviets understood that the sweetener—the unilateral American intention to remove the missiles from Turkey and Italy—was parallel to and was to be regarded as separate from the public quid pro quo resolving the crisis, it was to them an integral part of the package. While this Soviet rendition may be self-serving, other aspects of the new Soviet account have been scrupulously reported. It is probably accurate. For example, the detailed account of the unsuccessful subsequent Soviet effort to nail down the American intention on these missiles given in my *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* was confirmed by the same Soviet source.

Dobrynin's official account of the meeting does not support the allegation in Khrushchev's memoir that President Kennedy feared a military coup. Rather, it corresponds with Robert Kennedy's version that the U.S. military was pressing for military action—which was true, both as a general course and in retaliation for the shooting down of the U-2 aircraft.

Contrary to other reports and speculation, Soviet sources say that the U-2 was shot down by a Soviet-manned SA-2 missile unit without authorization from Moscow. These sources are uncertain about the precise standing instructions but state that the action was ordered on the spot by a local Soviet command-

er. Sergo Mikoyan has reported that Statsenko, shortly before his death in October 1987, confided that he had made the decision to fire. This has not, however, been corroborated. Several sources who were involved in the crisis deliberations in Moscow, including Burtalsky, stress that the downing came as a surprise to Khrushchev. Perhaps the incident contributed to Khrushchev's concern that events on both sides could slip out of control and hence to his rapid acceptance on October 28 of President Kennedy's proposal for a settlement based on the first letter.

Khrushchev had earlier left Moscow for his dacha at Kuntsevo, about 20 miles outside the city, and composed his October 28 letter there. He was aware that the U.S. embassy had experienced delays in transmitting the previous message through Soviet telegraph connections, the only channel at that time. So he arranged for the reply to be carried by hand from the dacha to Radio Moscow and authorized its immediate broadcast. Khrushchev may also have resorted to this method to preclude delays that might have followed from requests for consultation by other leaders not at the dacha, though this reason was not adduced by my sources. Soviet sources believe, but cannot confirm, that by the time Khrushchev sent his positive reply, additional alarmist intelligence had become available to him on American preparations for an attack on Cuba. That would not be surprising, given the president's instructions on the morning of October 27 to prepare for a possible strike on the morning of the 30th. Also, though not mentioned by my sources, both Khrushchev's own account in his address to the Supreme Soviet in December 1962 and subsequent official histories refer to intelligence at that juncture from the Cubans on an imminent American attack. And, not least, there had been Robert Kennedy's ultimatum.

In all, these new Soviet revelations about the USSR's decision making during the crisis complement, but in some cases modify, the now well-documented American record. Undoubtedly, more will become known from Soviet sources on the aftermath of the crisis,

including Mikoyan's negotiations with Castro, in due course.

The Importance of Details

The most important lesson of the Cuban missile episode is that many elements of superpower crises are likely to be beyond the control of the parties. This fact has always been recognized by most participants in a crisis, as well as in the analytic literature generally. But the implications of this lesson may still be insufficiently appreciated. What is being learned now about the Soviet side of the experience underlines the point: The management and resolution of the crisis from both sides was even more haphazard than was originally realized.

The new information also casts light on the complex interaction that occurred throughout the generation, management, and resolution of the crisis. Again, this has been understood generally but is rarely given proper weight. The new information also draws attention to the need for collecting information from all sides in reconstructing and analyzing historical events such as the missile crisis and in drawing lessons from them.

Indeed, in the missile crisis both the United States and the Soviet Union were groping almost blindly for a bottom-line basis for compromise that would serve the interests of both. Of course, each wished to extract the maximum advantage, but both recognized early that such standard political bargaining considerations must be subordinate to preventing events from spinning out of control, which could result in a catastrophe.

Several aspects of the search for an end to the crisis were unpredictable and subject to the hazards of chance and subjective error. Take, for example, the Fomin-Scali contact, which at the time was considered the crucial breakthrough by the Kennedy administration. The Fomin meeting with Scali was not a probe by Khrushchev, and it did not even prompt Khrushchev's own probe in the first letter. Yet American leaders were prepared to assume that Fomin was a legitimate channel for communication by the Soviet leadership, despite the absence of any explicit claim on his

part. One reason was the prevailing—and incorrect—American view that Soviet diplomats, intelligence officers, and officials of any kind did not act on their own. In this vein, the United States looked for other Soviet diplomatic “signals,” sometimes seeing what in fact was no signal at all.

An authentic back channel established earlier, the Soviet diplomat Georgy Bolshakov, who had served as an intermediary in a secret exchange of letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev for more than a year, lost all credibility when Khrushchev shortsightedly used him for deception on the missile deployment in early October before the missiles were discovered. With this intermediary discredited, no channel for authoritative but unofficial communication seemed to exist until Fomin was perceived as presenting himself in this role. Clearly, authoritative informal channels should not be wasted on disinformation efforts.

The new information also points up that unmanaged details can change events. For example, unknown to the American participants until now, new Soviet intelligence information and evaluations prompted both the timing and the different content of the first and second Khrushchev letters. Yet the United States did not seek to influence Soviet intelligence evaluations—and thereby decisions—by orchestrating military moves. Nor did U.S. officials recognize the possible impact of these evaluations in their attempts to understand the reasons for the shift in the second letter. While this experience may suggest opportunities for indirect management of actions by the other side, the more important lesson is that the process of crisis communication is fragile and uncertain.

If Khrushchev had known on October 27 or 28 that President Kennedy was considering further diplomatic negotiation, including the possibility of a more formal linkage of withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey and Italy with withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, he might have rejected the president's proposal of October 27. This course, however, would have entailed considerable risk. Several members of Kennedy's Ex Comm believed

that he would have ordered an air strike on October 30 and a subsequent invasion of Cuba. Most of those who did not, including Bundy and McNamara, believed that he would tighten the blockade. No one can be certain what would have occurred under unforeseen circumstances. What, for example, might have happened if another American aircraft had been shot down, possibly a low-altitude aircraft hit by Cuban anti-aircraft fire? While the actions of both sides might have been different, in retrospect it seems likely that a negotiated settlement would have been reached. Nonetheless, the real possibility that events could escape control was wisely recognized by Kennedy and Khrushchev.

During and since the crisis, American participants have reflected a strong correlation between perceived danger and preferred policy. Hawks, such as then Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze and then Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon, believed then, as they believe now, that the Soviet Union would not have responded militarily to a U.S. strike on the missiles or an invasion of Cuba. Doves, such as McNamara, have tended to believe that Soviet leaders would have had to retaliate militarily, if not in Cuba then elsewhere. (I was an exception to both groups because like the hawks I believed then and believe now that the Soviet leaders would not have resorted to military action, though like the doves I favored continuing the blockade and negotiation.)

There is still no direct evidence of what the Soviets would have done after a U.S. military strike, and it is likely that the matter was never decided in Moscow; such matters, there and here, usually are only decided when it becomes absolutely necessary to do so. An American intelligence report from a "reliable, well-placed" Soviet source received about 6 months after the crisis said that a very secret Central Committee directive issued during the crisis stated that the Soviet Union would not go to war over Cuba even if the United States invaded Cuba. That report, however, has never been either confirmed or refuted. At the Harvard conference, Sergo Mikoyan, whose special interest is Soviet-Cuban relations, ex-

FOREIGN POLICY

pressed his conviction that the Soviet Union would have had to respond militarily in some way. The other Soviet participants in the conference were less sure. Several Soviet officials privately have expressed the opinion that the Soviet leadership in 1962 would not have turned to military action in Cuba or elsewhere, even in response to a U.S. air attack or invasion. But none profess knowledge of a clear-cut decision at the time. The Soviet leadership archives might reveal answers if they ever become available.

Little is still known as well about the political deliberation, and, presumably, debate, among Khrushchev and other leaders involved during the crucial week of October 22–28. Soviet officials generally argue that Khrushchev at that time could not be directly challenged. In addition, the views of the Soviet military on what action to take, and indeed, on what options were seen, remain unknown. It can only be hoped that the few surviving participants and the records will permit clarifying such matters.

One final lesson that should be reinforced from the Soviet disclosures is that crisis management, even when handled well, is a poor alternative to crisis prevention. Political dialogue, from the summit to other levels, covering both differences and common interests, can help to prevent crises. *Glasnost*, in policy as in politics and history, can help to avert new superpower crises.