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Planes, Plans, Plots: How They Found the Missiles

David M. Keithly

Introduction

This overview of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is designed to illustrate the phases and steps of the intelligence process, while also developing a basic conceptual framework for intelligence analysis. Initial focus is upon the intelligence product. The second part of the study puts in practice the “target-centric” intelligence process advocated by Robert M. Clark.¹ This process assists analysts and customers to fulfill the three basic tasks of asking the right questions, properly using existing intelligence, and creating new information by assembling all participants in the production of sound intelligence. With intelligence analysts having too little input in intelligence planning (developing research problems and research design), difficulties can arise about the reliability and validity of intelligence products.

Working at different levels of analysis, the intelligence analyst can identify various pieces of a multidimensional puzzle. But can these pieces be put together into a more general theory, one that has both descriptive and predictive functions? For the purposes of this discussion, the intelligence analysts are grouped into two anonymous Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) teams and represent actual members of the U.S. intelligence community, whose alert and prompt actions during the summer and autumn of 1962 caught the Soviet Union sneaking missiles and troops into Cuba.² The stage was set for the hottest hour of the Cold War.³

Substance of the Shadow

On August 27, 1962, two groups of intelligence analysts were assigned to prepare a preliminary report on the Cuban military buildup to be distributed to the Board of National Estimates on August 29. The request for the report had been stimulated by information received on August 24 regarding the unusually large number of Soviet and East Bloc ships docking in Cuban ports. Their report was to incorporate information then available from various intelligence sources. Teams One and Two had been involved in the review of Cuban intelligence information during 1962. Team One incorporated into its files evaluations of photographic information received from high altitude (U-2) reconnaissance flights and from long-range ocean surveillance by naval patrol aircraft. Team Two had possession of reports collected from refugees, exiles, and other human sources.

Both teams were present at the press briefing held by Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, on the previous Friday, August 24. Hilsman stated that the Soviet ships docking in Cuba had unloaded transportation, electronic, and

¹ Clark, Robert M., *Intelligence Analysis A Target-Centric Approach* 4th edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2013); see also Jack Davis, “Sherman Kent’s Final Thoughts on Analyst-Policymaker Relations,” *Occasional Papers* 2:3 (Washington, DC: Center for Intelligence Analysis, 2003).

² Raymond Garthoff, “U.S. Intelligence in the Cuban Missile Crisis”; James Wirtz, “Organizing for Crisis Intelligence,” 139, 142-45; James Blight and David Welch, “The Cuban Missile Crisis and Intelligence Performance,” *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1998).

³ “40 Years After Missile Crisis, Players Swap Stories in Cuba,” *Washington Post* (October 13, 2002): A28.

construction equipment along with communications vans, radar vans, trucks, and mobile generators. Hilsman said this equipment would be used to improve coastal and air defenses, and speculated that the equipment might include surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). The possible existence of SAMs would become the primary focal point for the initial CIA team review.

Team Two had been monitoring the increase in Soviet shipping to Cuban ports for some time. During July, thousands of refugee reports had been received that indicated a substantial increase in import activity at the Cuban ports of Mariel and Havana. Because refugee reports following the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion tended to exaggerate Soviet activity in Cuba, Team Two suggested that these reports needed confirmation prior to acceptance as reliable information. R. Jack Smith, head of the Office of Current intelligence at the time, recalled that the Director of Central intelligence (DCI) John McCone played an initial hunch:

“We had just begun to get some evidence that something more than anti-aircraft missiles were going in, from agent reports and refugees who said the Russians were building a big force to attack the United States. We needed U-2 over flights to establish this, and so we got authorization. McCone had all along said that the Russians were not putting in anti-aircraft missiles just for the fun of it: they were putting them in to defend something, and that was missile capability or something of that sort.”⁴

With the aid of Team One’s review of the Navy reconnaissance photographs, Team Two was able to confirm a marked increase in shipping. The analysts noted that during each of the first six months of 1962, an average of fifteen Soviet and other East Bloc dry cargo ships, in addition to four Soviet passenger ships, had docked at Cuban ports. But during July and August, over thirty-seven Soviet dry cargo ships and six passenger ships had arrived in Cuba. Team Two also noted that previous materiel shipments to Cuba had been made on ships chartered to the Soviet Union, but indicated that all known shipments to Cuba during July and early August were carried on Soviet ships manned exclusively by Soviet crews. Team One further remarked that none of the cargo carried on these ships had been loaded above deck. The arrival of these ships corresponded with refugee reports that ships were unloaded at night by Soviet personnel and that all Cubans were excluded from docks and loading areas. Some of the refugee reports had been quite explicit in their references to missiles, but in the absence of photographic confirmation, the analysts were inclined to discount these reports pending concrete evidence. The hearsay was nonetheless sufficiently disturbing for the analysts to follow up on the rampant RUMINT (rumor intelligence).

Upon completing the initial evaluation of the U-2 photographs, Team One concluded no SAMs or other type of missiles had yet been deployed in Cuba. The photographs revealed only the usual military transportation vehicles supplied to Cuba and the MiG-15, MiG-17, and MiG-19 fighter aircraft, which were known to be in Cuba at the time. As a result of their review, the two teams viewed the buildup in supplies and materials on a preliminary basis as defensive in purpose, as suggested earlier by Hilsman. They continued to assume that the arrival of Soviet personnel was an indication of increased technological assistance in the installation and operation of the complex equipment recently acquired. The use of SAMs for defensive purposes

⁴ Ranelagh, John, *The Agency: The Rise and Fall of the CIA* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1986), 395.

was viewed as possible, but there was, as yet, no firm evidence of such deployment.⁵ The analysts urged the continuation of both types of reconnaissance flights in anticipation of possible SAM shipments, and with an eye to furnishing more information regarding the nature of the materiel and personnel already arriving in Cuba. They emphasized that no confirmation had been received of missile-related activities at the dock areas, nor of the presence of Soviet ground combat units.

Their report was sent to the Board of National Estimates where it was received and reviewed on August 29. The Board then notified the group responsible for overhead reconnaissance of the decision to maintain routine air reconnaissance. The decision of the Board, based on the reports of the two CIA teams, was distributed throughout the intelligence community on August 30, 1962.⁶ The members of the overhead reconnaissance group then proceeded to review the collection plans that had been in effect prior to that date. At this time, the decision to continue U-2 flights at previously established intervals was justified on the grounds that the installation of ballistic missiles would be discovered by aerial reconnaissance before they could become operational.

The U-2 flights were then tentatively scheduled for 5, 10, 17, 26, and 29 September. On the basis of current intelligence and excluding the results of the U-2 over flights of August 29, which had not been evaluated, none of the previous reconnaissance photographs had revealed the presence of missiles in Cuba. The consensus was that current intervals for the flights would allow the United States sufficient lead time to determine policy if ballistic missiles were observed. Many in the intelligence community seemed reluctant to view the military buildup in Cuba as other than for defensive purposes. For instance, a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), written in early October, held that ground-to-ground missiles would probably not be installed.⁷

Meanwhile, the unprocessed film from the U-2 over flight of August 29 had been transferred by air to Washington from the Florida base and was immediately taken to the photographic interpretation center. To ensure proper exposition of the photographs, the coordinating authority for Cuban intelligence directed the photographic interpreters to review pictures of ICBM, IRBM, and MRBM sites taken by U-2s over Soviet territory. These photographs typically showed SAMs protecting surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) in a trapezoidal configuration to lower the profile of the sites, thereby reducing the efficacy of aerial reconnaissance. In addition, analysts reviewed data about Soviet combat aircraft and kept a careful lookout for the deployment of new weapon systems to Cuba.

By the middle of the first week of September, the results of the over flights had been compiled by Team One, which in turn made a startling observation. Evidence of SAM deployment was found in eight locations in Cuba. While five of the SAM sites were still under construction, three were already operational. Naval reconnaissance photographs, also taken on August 29, revealed

⁵ Defense Intelligence Agency, "Analysis of SAM Sites," *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 11, Cuba (1962-1963), 1-2.

⁶ U.S. Intelligence Board, "The military Buildup in Cuba," Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62, September 19, 1962, in CIA History Staff, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis 1961* (Washington, DC: CIA, 1992), 91-93.

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Military Buildup in Cuba," SNIE 85-3-62.

the recent installation in Cuba of KOMAR-class (mosquito) patrol boats, each equipped with two anti-ship missile launchers. The presence of these boats, developed primarily for coastal defense by the Soviets, was judged by Team One to be compatible with Cuban and Soviet statements that armaments would be made available to Cuba for defense against invasion by the United States. The newly constructed SAM sites were a different matter. Their installation would explain, for example, the careful maintenance of secrecy surrounding the arrival of the Soviet ships and the influx of technical personnel. In light of the standard SAM protection mission on Soviet ICBM sites, the team became dubious about the strictly defensive nature of Soviet weapons in Cuba. The team decided to notify the coordinator of Cuban intelligence that it could not exclude the possibility of the pending deployment of offensive missiles in Cuba that would provide a nuclear strike capability against the United States. The question raised was whether the Soviets were attempting to somehow reshuffle the deck.

Later that week, a presidential statement alluded to the presence of the SAMs in the Caribbean as revealed by the U-2 photographs. Kennedy's warning to Cuba and the USSR was explicit in its emphasis that the United States would not tolerate the deployment of Soviet offensive missiles in the Western Hemisphere. The possibility of such a missile capability led the Senate on September 7 to forewarn about the invoking of the Monroe Doctrine in the event that ballistic weapons were deployed to Cuba. At the same time, the Senate approved the activation of reserve units as a clear signal of intent.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev replied to the American warnings by stating that the Soviet Union had no need to locate missile bases outside Soviet territory in places such as Cuba. He insisted that the range and accuracy of Soviet ICBMs was sufficient to preclude the necessity of missile deployment outside of Soviet territory or beyond complete Soviet control. His comments drew upon prior Soviet policy statements that only obsolete and non-critical military equipment was deployed to non-Communist countries.

The Case for Gloom

By early October, however, Team One became convinced that the Soviets were indeed preparing to install an offensive missile capability in Cuba. The U-2 over flight of September 5 had shown additional work on the SAM sites already detected on August 29. No clear evidence of SSMs yet presented itself, but the flight revealed for the first time the operation of MiG-21 aircraft in the area. MiG-17 and MiG-19 fighters had been deployed to Cuba from the Soviet Union beginning in 1961. The MiG-21 was a new factor: it was an advanced, high-performance aircraft that had been deployed to only a few countries outside the USSR. It was equipped with air-to-air missiles (AAMs), while the MiG-17 and MiG-19 were equipped only with two 23mm guns. The MiG-21s were much faster, with maximum speeds of nearly 1200 miles per hour, as compared to the approximate speed of 800 miles per hour for the MiG-19. The MiG-21s were thus a more effective threat to U.S. attack aircraft, and one team member observed that their deployment was standard procedure for protecting Soviet missile sites. This circumstance further increased apprehensions about the possibility of such an offensive weapon capability being introduced into Cuba.⁸

⁸ Allison, Graham and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 2nd edition (New York: Longman, 1999), 226-227.

The September 10 U-2 flight was canceled because of political disaffection in the wake of Kremlin bluster about a U-2 flight over Soviet territory earlier that week.⁹ The flight of September 17 produced few results, mostly because ground fog had obscured the SAM sites. Naval reconnaissance flights of late September, however, furnished information that only heightened CIA concerns. Photographs taken on September 20 showed two Soviet freighters en route to Cuba. Large crates were evident on their decks, and CIA analysts noted their odd zigzag shape. Following comparison with other information, a Team One analyst was able to determine that the length and shape of the crates coincided with the specifications of the Soviet Ilyushin 28 (IL-28 Beagle) light jet bomber. The IL-28 had been operational since 1950, and U.S. intelligence knew that this aircraft, armed like the Mig-17 and Mig-19 with cannon for aerial combat, was also capable of carrying a nuclear weapon payload. Other collection agencies were asked immediately to track the crates, with the aim of confirming the conclusions of the photographic interpreters. Ten days later, a report was received indicating that the crates had been delivered to an unused airfield where the Beagles would apparently be assembled. Team One estimated that it would probably take the Cubans about two months to render the aircraft operational.

Other Navy photographs of late September showed Soviet freighters (similar to Figure 1) with 70-foot hatches and bulk cargo transport vehicles on decks. The ships were identified as Soviet lumber ships, which would explain the oversized hatches, and it was notable that some types of ballistic missiles were about sixty feet long.¹⁰ Coincidence? The freighters were riding high enough in the water to indicate low-density, high-volume cargo.¹¹ No knowledge of the cargo of these ships was received from collection services in Cuba. Team One knew only that the ships had been unloaded at night, and that the cargo was transported under heavy military guard to an unknown destination east of Havana.

Figure 1: Soviet Freighter with 70-foot Hatches.



⁹ For the broader implications of the 10 September decision, see David Barrett and Max Holland, *Blind Over Cuba: The Photo Gap and the Missile Crisis* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 109-115.

¹¹ Cline, *The CIA Under Reagan, Bush and Casey* (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1981), 222; The CIA's photographic analysis was especially impressive to the President and ExCom. The Office of Current Intelligence had developed "crateology," a specialized form of photo-interpretation involving the study of Soviet methods of crating weapons for shipment. From a photograph of a crate they could tell what weapon it was probably carrying. They produced the first hard intelligence that the Soviets were shipping missiles to Cuba from analysis of crates photographed on the decks of Russian cargo ships.

During September, two classified intelligence reports contributed to the growing suspicions about the nature of the military buildup on Cuba. Data and information about the development of missile systems of all types in the Soviet Union were being carefully evaluated. Patterns were noted. Technical developments continued to be marked by strenuous attempts to conceal test sites from U.S. reconnaissance. Yet U.S. intelligence was able to determine that ballistic missiles of intercontinental, intermediate and medium-range were being equipped with mobile, caterpillar-tracked launchers. The Soviets began deploying road-mobile missiles in various forest sites to minimize U.S. aerial detection. Among other things, the mobile ballistic missiles would make counterforce targeting much more complex.

Such information reawakened analysts' interest in some of the photographic details of the Cuban SAM sites. Attention was quickly drawn to the photographs of the San Cristobal site and of the Sagua La Grande site. Both of these sites seemed to be in unusual geographic locations in thick woods. The San Cristobal area photographs had revealed the presence of SAMs by late August. San Cristobal itself was located about 100 miles east of Havana and was readily accessible to supply routes from the port of Havana. Since both the San Cristobal and the Sagua La Grande sites were heavily wooded, they afforded natural protection from observation and, in that sense, bore an uncanny resemblance to the most recent Russian areas of mobile missile testing and development. Team One noticed also that the San Cristobal SAM sites were placed in a disturbing trapezoidal pattern, which was a usual feature of the configuration of Soviet ICBM sites. A four-slash pattern was also evident within the SAM-protected area, which was also typical of Soviet missile installations. The Sagua La Grande site showed the same four-slash pattern, although the most recent photographs had not indicated that the SAMs were operational.

With growing apprehension, both teams now began to presume the clandestine installation of offensive ballistic missiles on the island, and in consequence they requested immediate additional aerial surveillance of all missile sites detected by the previous reconnaissance over flights. Available information regarding the influx of materiel and personnel to Cuba was sufficient to conclude that the broader purpose was to provide a nuclear strike capability against the United States. The presence of the SAMs, their deployment locations, their sudden appearance and rapid installation, were indicative of an almost reckless offensive gamble. The Soviets, as far as was known, had not heretofore deployed nuclear weapons outside the borders of the USSR. In light of this circumstance, some CIA analysts hypothesized that Cuba offered the Kremlin a new opportunity. The sheer distance from the USSR made Cuba unique among Communist countries. As wary of socialist allies as of capitalist adversaries, the Soviet leaders could safely conclude that medium-range and intermediate-range missiles transferred to the Caribbean could never be turned to threaten Soviet territory. Hence, the Kremlin apparently believed it could affect the weapons transfer with relative impunity. Such a strike capability in Cuba would enhance Soviet bargaining power with the United States in any future confrontation, such as during standoffs over Berlin. It would afford a much more potent striking power against North America, reducing the warning time for a missile attack from fifteen minutes to about one minute, seriously limiting the ability of the United States to deter or circumvent the launching of the missiles. Cuban missiles offered the sweetener from the Kremlin's perspective of increasing Cuban President Fidel Castro's public image and bolstering his influence in South America.

The request for additional U-2 over flights to monitor the San Cristobal, Sagua La Grande, and other SAM sites then hit a bureaucratic snag, resulting in a delay for over a week. The heightened danger to U-2 pilots as the SAMs became operational, along with the fact that U.S. aircraft over Cuba had already been fired upon in early September caused considerable disquiet among the members of the overhead reconnaissance group. Previously, all U-2 flights over Cuba had been under the command of the CIA. The latter developed control centers for its U-2 operations and trained its own pilots for the missions. Despite CIA objections, the overhead reconnaissance group now decided that the Strategic Air Command (SAC) should take over the flights. The flights were therefore delayed while SAC pilots were trained in the operation of the U-2. On October 14, the pilots were ready, and the first U-2 missions under SAC's control took place. Nearly ten days had passed since Team One's request for immediate additional reconnaissance activity over the suspected missile sites.

In anticipation of the U-2 flights on October 14, a Team One analyst briefed the photographic interpreters about the likelihood that the aerial photographs would reveal the presence of offensive missiles, recommending they focus their attention on areas where SAM sites had been detected. He explained the significance of the SAM trapezoidal configuration as it was employed on Soviet SSM sites, deliberating upon the four-slash ground pattern, the equipment used, and the typical buildings used for storage and missile control on Soviet airfields. The film was received later that day and promptly developed at the center.

Dawn Like Thunder

The photographic interpreters then began the tedious job of examining each of the thousands of individual frames of film (Figure 2). By late afternoon, October 15, the results began to accumulate. At San Cristobal, eight medium-range ballistic missiles, still loaded on their missile trailers, were discovered.¹² Four missile erectors were already in position. Missile fuel trailers and other vehicles were identified, despite attempts of the Soviet technicians to camouflage them. Also visible was a tent city, capable of housing 500 personnel. At the Remedious SAM site, launch pads for intermediate-range ballistic missiles were detected. The four concrete pads were already close to completion. Two control bunkers were in place, and a tent city, similar to the one at San Cristobal, had been erected. The Sagua La Grande site had been an empty field six weeks earlier. Now, the analysts were able to identify mobile medium-range ballistic missiles on missile trailers near the launch pads. Two of the four launch pads on this site were already equipped with launchers. Groups of military transport vehicles, a tent city, and three completed buildings, which would probably house missile control centers, were also detected. At Guanajay, in western Cuba, another four partially completed launch pads were visible on the photographs.

¹² CIA, "Probable Soviet MRBM Sites in Cuba, October 16, 1962 in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, 1992), 141.

Figure 2: Example Film Frame Examined by Photographic Interpreter.



Thus the analysts obtained the proverbial smoking gun. Team One immediately notified the chief of intelligence operations and supplied him with copies of the photographs and a hastily written summary of the strike capability now present in Cuba. From the configuration of the sites and the nature and amounts of equipment visible, Team One determined that the ballistic missile installations were exclusively a Soviet operation. Deputy Director of Intelligence (DDI) Ray Cline later noted: “The photo experts alerted me to what they had found late in the afternoon of Monday, October 15, and my missile experts assured me we were seeing a major investment in nuclear missiles that would double the number of nuclear warheads the USSR could fire on the United States.”¹³

On Tuesday morning, October 16, Cline presented the President with the hard evidence of Soviet offensive missile deployment in Cuba. The President immediately requested that U-2 over flights be increased to twenty missions during the next six days. He demanded that the strictest security measures be employed regarding the detection of the missiles and observed by personnel involved in analytical activities. He then requested that a group of trusted advisers be brought to the White House for consultation. This assemblage of luminaries, called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExCom), would meet regularly during the following weeks.¹⁴ Their job was to assist the President in the interpretation of Soviet activity, in the establishment of action plans based on current intelligence, and in the estimation of all conceivable consequences of proposed courses of action.¹⁵

With the deployment of the missiles verified, groups of intelligence analysts were tasked to determine the precise scope and nature of the total Soviet military deployment to Cuba. The

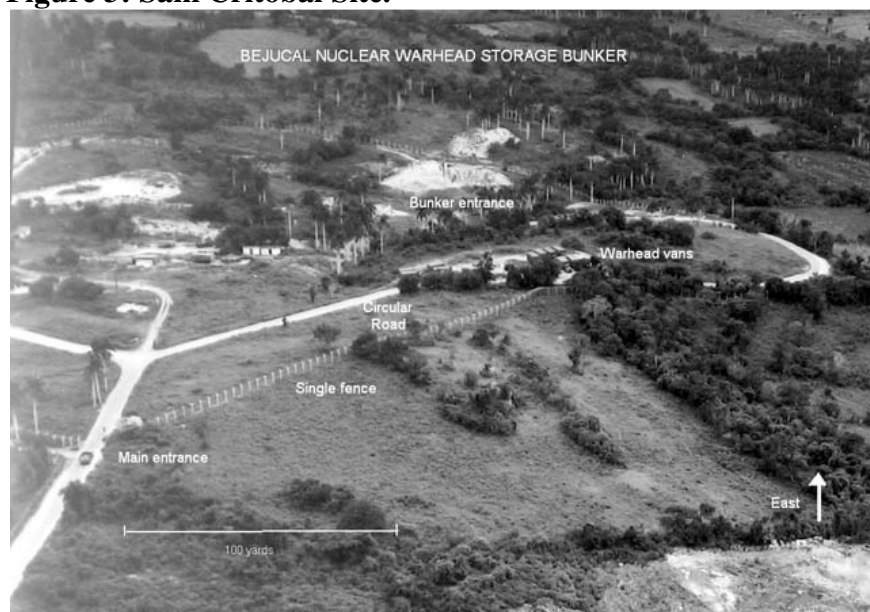
¹³ Cline, *The CIA Under Reagan, Bush and Casey*, 219-220.

¹⁴ For a detailed account of the ExCom meetings, based closely on the White House tapes, see Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, “Major Consequences of Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba, SNIE, 11-18-62.

number, configuration, location, and state of readiness of the missiles were to be carefully assessed. Team One prepared and distributed the first report on October 18. Incorporating the information resulting from the analysis of the intensified U-2 flight surveillance, it noted that twenty-eight launch pads were under construction at ten sites. Team One estimated that completion of the sites would result in forty launch pads. The photographs of the Sam Cristobal site (Figure 3) revealed eight medium-range ballistic missiles to accommodate the four launch pads under construction. It estimated that if each of the other launch pads was similarly supplied with back-up missiles, a total of eighty missiles could then be present in Cuba. As yet, the analysts were unable to identify nuclear warheads attached to the thirty visible missiles, but they assumed that several unusual dome-shaped buildings had been constructed to store warheads.

Figure 3: Sam Cristobal Site.



The two types of missile sites that had been detected were those for the intermediate-range, fixed-position missile with a range of up to 2200 nautical miles, and the 1200-nautical-mile, mobile, medium-range missile.¹⁶ From detailed reports of the capability of Soviet mobile missiles, Team One knew that mobile missile sites could be dismantled, transferred to another location, and reassembled within six days. With the existence of prepared sites, the mobile missiles could become operational in a matter of hours. If the Soviets deployed such new missiles in Cuba—and there was every indication they had— Team One realized their features and capabilities would lower the original estimates of the readiness of the sites. According to prior assessments it might take as long as six weeks for the IRBMs to become operational and about four weeks for the MRBMs. On the basis of the rapid progress made on the installations in previous days, Team One hypothesized that some of the medium-range ballistic missiles could be operational within twenty-four hours.

¹⁶ Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Fall of the CIA*, 396.

As of October 18, Team One had not received evidence to verify the allegations that Soviet ground combat units were present in Cuba. Since Soviet personnel debarking from ships at Havana and Mariel had been observed as wearing only civilian sports clothes, observers assumed that they would serve as technical consultants assisting in the installation of the complex technical equipment currently arriving. While Team One knew that the missile sites were guarded by Soviet military personnel, and that Cubans were not allowed on or near the sites, they were aware that no photographic confirmation had been received regarding combat units. The report estimated that 5000 Soviet technical personnel were working on weapon systems in Cuba.

Accordingly, President Kennedy moved swiftly in the few days that remained before the Soviet missiles became operational.¹⁷ There was no time for long-winded discussions in the UN or even with NATO allies, though he did confer with Congressional leaders. On October 22, the President made public the presence of the Soviet ballistic installation in Cuba and initiated the blockade or “quarantine” that was to encompass Cuba for the next few weeks. In a nationwide television appearance, he grimly announced the “quarantine” on all ships carrying weapons to Cuba.¹⁸ So grave was the crisis and so convincing the photographic evidence that the Organization of American States (OAS), in an unusual display of unity, voted unanimously to support the United States.¹⁹ Missiles that could shoot north could also shoot south. The President demanded the immediate and complete removal by the Soviets of the ballistic missiles, SAMs, the supporting and operating equipment for both missiles and bomber aircraft. He did not include in his statement a demand for the removal of organized combat units since confirmation of such a deployment was pending. To continue the flow of information on the installations and equipment, additional low-level reconnaissance flights were authorized. Navy RF-8A aircraft, operating in groups of four to eight, flew two or three missions daily for the next week.

Ballistic Blackmail

Officially, Washington was stunned by the aerial photographs revealing that hundreds of Soviet technicians were emplacing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. With this supplement to its strategic arsenal, the Kremlin had the opportunity to get tough in the world’s hotspots. The United States, facing almost immediate nuclear weapons attack, might have to submit.²⁰ In a sardonic way, Cuba’s made-in-Moscow muscle was indeed defensive, because the United States would never dare attack the island if the swift result would be the devastation of several major American cities. At the same time, Castro would have a free hand to export his revolution to the rest of Latin America.

¹⁷ May, Ernest and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 88-105.

¹⁸ For comprehensive coverage of the blockade, see Chief of Naval Operations, “The Naval Quarantine of Cuba, 1962,” available at: <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq90-5.htm>.

¹⁹ James Hershberg, “The United States, Brazil, and the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962 (Part 2),” *The Journal of Cold War Studies* 6 (2004): 20-30.

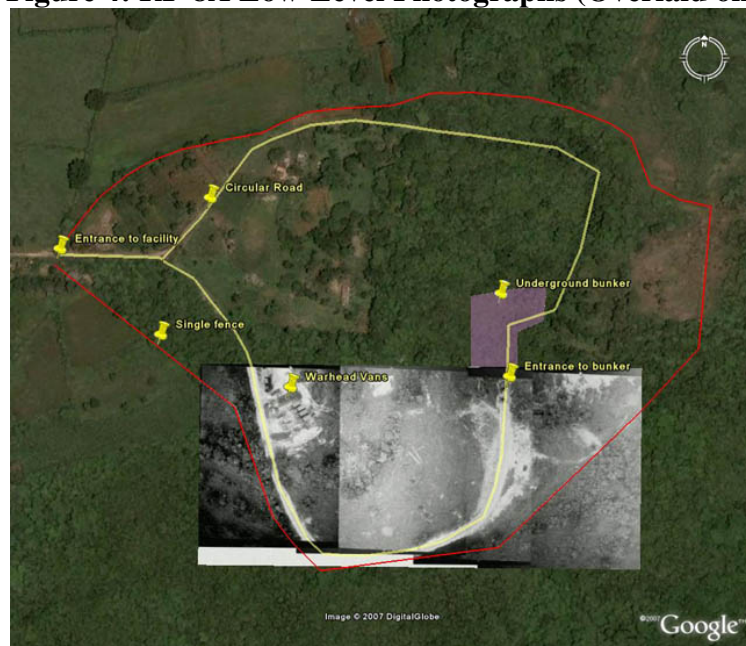
²⁰ Blight, James G., *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 19-30; Fursenko, Aleksandr and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble* (New York: Norton, 1997), 277-87; Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, translated and edited by Jerrold L. Schecter, with Vyacheslav V. Luchkov (Boston: Little Brown, 1990), 177; Blight, James G., Bruce J. Allyn and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 116-120.

The establishment of Cuba as a missile-launching pad, a move that would upset the world balance of power, constituted the most lethal challenge ever to confront the Monroe Doctrine. Working through the Cuban leadership, Khrushchev could presumably cow the United States and take over parts of the Western Hemisphere.²¹ The presumed menace of the Holy Alliance in 1823 or Napoleon III's Central American adventures during the U.S. Civil War seemed child's play when compared with such a prospect.

International law does not sanction a blockade in time of peace, though Kennedy called it a "quarantine," and moreover the Cold War was hardly peace. The blockage of merchant ships on the high seas in peacetime ran afoul of the hallowed American principle of freedom of the seas.²² It is ironic that two basic policies here clashed: freedom of the seas and the Monroe Doctrine. The United Nations Charter forbade the use of force or threats of force in such instances, except in "self-defense if an armed conflict occurs (Article 51). Cuba had not started shooting yet. Some legalists argued that in this instance the potential danger was so great as to constitute an armed attack. If Soviet ships refused to stop and be searched for offensive weapons, U.S. commanders were authorized to fire upon them. Soviet submarines prowled Caribbean waters, and if they shot back, World War III might have been unleashed.

Reconnaissance flights brought back the alarming photographs that indicated continuing work on all missile sites, despite the President's stern warnings. Then, the RF-8A low-level flight photographs (Figure 4) yielded clear evidence of Soviet combat troops in Cuba. By late October, organized units had been detected in forty-seven locations throughout the island. Three Soviet-built airfields were located with some twenty Beagle bombers being rapidly assembled.

Figure 4: RF-8A Low-Level Photographs (Overlaid on Google Earth).



²¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Soviet Reaction to Certain US Courses of Action on Cuba, SNIE 11-18-62.

²² *American Journal of International Law*, LVII, July 1963; Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 109-115.

Avenues of negotiation were kept open nonetheless. Kennedy communicated directly with Khrushchev at the most critical stage, and the Secretary-General of the UN did yeoman mediatory work. Kennedy had not specifically invoked the musty Monroe Doctrine, but the principle was clearly present and Congress had already made mention of it. A deadly earnest United States was not bluffing; if the Soviets did not take their missiles out of Cuba, U.S. armed forces would seize or destroy them, Russian technicians, troops and all.²³ On October 27, when a U-2 aircraft was shot down over Cuba, there seemed to be no indication that the Soviets would comply with the President's demand. Then, rather suddenly, word was received from Moscow that the Soviets would begin to dismantle the missile installations and ship them back to the Soviet Union. At that time, the Executive Committee knew that six MRBM and three IRBM sites were operational and that about 22,000 Soviet ground troops were in Cuba. Twenty-three underground arsenals had been constructed and about seventy IL-28s had been delivered.

Hence, Khrushchev veered away from the collision course. The Kremlin did not desire a nuclear incineration over Cuba. Khrushchev had gravely miscalculated the fiber of Kennedy and the vital concerns of the American people, reaching far back into the nineteenth century. A number of Cuban-bound Soviet ships turned back, and the others never challenged the blockade. After anxious interchanges, a compromise settlement was announced on October 28, whereby Khrushchev agreed to pull his offensive weapons out of Cuba, under verification by UN representatives; Kennedy agreed to lift the "quarantine" and not invade the island.

The Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement was never fully honored. The Soviets, with remarkable speed, crated all their missiles and shipped them home, together with most of the bombers. But a jilted Castro, humiliated before the world, defiantly stood on his sovereignty by refusing to permit on-site inspection. As long as he did so, Kennedy was released from his provisional no-invasion pledge.

The Kremlin, which traditionally knew how to practice strategic retreat, suffered a spectacular setback.²⁴ Yet its propaganda machine ground out the line that since it had gone to the defense of Castro, and since it had secured a no-invasion pledge, it had saved Cuba. Hence the missiles were no longer needed. As custodians of the dove of peace, the Soviets had averted catastrophe and "saved civilization" at a time when the "adventuristic warmongers" of the Pentagon seemed insanely bent on nuclear war. But the Chinese Communists harbored no illusions: they accused Moscow of "capitulationism" for having turned tail and betrayed the Cuban comrades.²⁵ Khrushchev sternly reminded them that although the United States might be a paper tiger, it had "nuclear teeth."²⁶ In the ensuing months the Kremlin, presumably thrown off balance, soft-pedaled the explosive Berlin issue.

²³ CNN.com, 10/12/02, "Cuban missile crisis brushed up against nuclear war."

²⁴ CNN.com, 10/10/02, "Castro lays some blame on the Soviet's Khrushchev."

²⁵ NBC Nightly News, 10/10/02, "Meeting in Havana commemorates 40th anniversary of Cuban missile crisis."

²⁶ A short record of the conversation between A. I. Mikoyan, E. Guevara, and A. Mora, November 17, 1962.

[Source: From the personal archive of Sergo A. Mikoyan donated to the National Security Archive. Translated by Amanda Conrad for the National Security Archive]

Soviet Strategic Priorities

The USSR found itself in an unfavorable strategic position in the early 1960s. The lack of large-scale Soviet ICBM deployments and the sizable and expanding U.S. strategic arsenal had led to a reversal of the missile gap. Moreover, the dramatic disclosure in mid-1961 that the United States was able not only to count but to locate and target the USSR's small missile force and its bomber bases caused some Kremlin leaders to fear that the United States was moving toward a first-strike doctrine. Public pronouncements of American superiority added to Soviet concern. Some Soviet officials accused the United States of preparing a surprise nuclear attack, and a statement attributed to President Kennedy in early 1962, suggesting that the United States would be prepared to use nuclear weapons first in certain circumstances, was apparently interpreted by Khrushchev as an effort to intimidate the Soviet Union. Finally, when Defense Secretary Robert McNamara articulated the no-cities doctrine in June 1962, Soviet fears that the United States was pursuing a counterforce strategy were exacerbated.²⁷

Most Kremlinologists claim that, aside from the potential threat to Soviet deterrent forces, the nature of the nuclear balance raised serious foreign policy problems for Moscow.²⁸ The crisis over Berlin in late 1961, which coincided with U.S. exposure of the missile gap myth, seemed to demonstrate to Soviet officials that it was no longer possible to sustain the image of superiority and underscored the danger as well as the futility of attempting to obtain political benefits through Sputnik diplomacy. The Kennedy administration's posture during the Berlin crisis and the accelerated U.S. strategic buildup may have been viewed by the Kremlin as a systematic strategy to use nuclear power for diplomatic purposes. With the strategic balance shifted against them, Soviet leaders apparently feared that they might be unable to protect their vital interests in diplomatic dealings with the West and to maintain their image as leader of the Communist bloc. In addition, planned improvements in U.S. nonnuclear capabilities threatened to deprive the Soviet Union of its conventional superiority in Europe, and thus negate what the Kremlin considered to be a crucial counterweight to Washington's nuclear advantage.²⁹

By mid-1962, therefore, the prospect of overwhelming U.S. military superiority gave the Soviet Union a strong political, as well as military incentive to redress the balance of intercontinental strategic forces. It was not enough for the USSR to rely on its large medium-range missile and bomber capability targeted against Western Europe, since long-range strategic missiles had become the most relevant measure of nuclear strength. Ironically, Khrushchev's rocket-rattling policy of the late 1950s had actually enhanced the value of these systems as political currency. But attempts to overtake the United States in numbers of intercontinental systems would have entailed a massive Soviet effort, for the United States had a considerable lead in ICBMs and SLBMs—apart from its established superiority in long-range bombers. Furthermore, the existing Soviet technology of slow-reacting missiles would have made a crash ICBM program particularly costly while yielding marginal security benefits. In any event, the Soviet leader

²⁷ Blight, Allyn and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*, 29-30.

²⁸ Allison, Graham and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 92-93; Blight, James G., David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 31.

²⁹ CPSU CC Politburo Member A. I. Mikoyan, White House Envoy John McCloy, and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson, November 1, 1962. [Source: Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation; provided to the CWIHP. Copy on file at the National Security Archive. Translation by Vladislav M. Zubok for the National Security Archive. Published in *Cold War International History (CWIHP) Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, 315-320.]

remained unwilling to commit his country to an enormously expensive strategic program that would detract from his ability to meet domestic requirements. Thus, Khrushchev was faced with the need to increase the USSR's strategic strength rapidly while holding expenditures in check.

Cuba offered a solution to Khrushchev's dilemma. The Soviet Union had a foothold on the island and had begun supplying Castro with many types of arms, including surface-to-air missiles. By installing MR/IRBMs within range of the United States, Kremlin officials apparently concluded that they could obtain many of the benefits of an ICBM construction program more quickly and at less cost.³⁰ The Soviet scheme made sense, and some U.S. intelligence analysts realized this. Although a number of important ancillary objectives were served by emplacing missiles in Cuba—and these considerations undoubtedly contributed to Moscow's decision—the desire to redress the strategic balance was the primary motivation behind the Kremlin's decision to install missiles on the island. Even Khrushchev later acknowledged that Soviet missiles “would have equalized what the West likes to call the balance of power,” although he claimed that the main Soviet goal was to defend Cuba.

When the U.S. quarantine was imposed, the USSR had already delivered seventy-five MR/IRBMs—almost twice the number of ICBMs in their inventory—and there is no evidence that they intended to stop at that point.³¹ Missiles located in Cuba would have been vulnerable to nuclear and conventional strikes, but they would have made an attack by the United States more difficult, thereby strengthening the USSR's deterrent until a survivable intercontinental force became available. At a minimum, Soviet officials may have felt that the deployment of a few hundred MR-IRBMs would have the political payoff of blunting the U.S. strategic advantage, possibly permitting Moscow to regain the strategic initiative.³²

As it turned out, the Cuban experience highlighted problems associated with the USSR's inferior strategic position. Because of America's recognized preponderance of strategic power during the crisis, the USSR was at a disadvantage psychologically as well as militarily. As the crisis intensified, Soviet officials feared that U.S. leaders, buttressed by strategic superiority, would be apt to initiate conventional military action on the assumption that the Soviet Union would be reluctant to respond with a nuclear strike. Soviet anxieties were heightened by President Kennedy's reference to the full retaliatory policy in his statement of October 22, which the Kremlin may have perceived as a threat to launch a preemptive nuclear attack against the USSR if it did not remove the missiles. Through nonnuclear means, the Soviet Union could not have prevented the United States from invading Cuba or from destroying the missile sites with conventional air attacks. This feature could have resulted in adverse political consequences for the USSR. Yet, since U.S. strategic power more than neutralized that of the USSR, Soviet nuclear retaliation to U.S. air attacks or invasion would have been irrational.

³⁰ Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 138-139; Garthoff, Raymond L., *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution), 21.

³¹ "Small Missiles Heightened Peril in 1962 Cuban Crisis," *Washington Post*, January 14, 1992, A7.

³² Allyn, Bruce J., James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, "Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 14, no.3 (1989/1990), 136-172.

Where Does This Put Us?

At least four prominent intelligence guidelines present themselves in this discussion of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the first instance, the prevailing intelligence situation gave few grounds for being especially alert to the introduction of Soviet offensive missiles into Cuba. One should consider how different the outcome of the crisis might have been if the surreptitious introduction had not been detected until complete.³³ Second, the American intelligence system, in fact, became attentive to the possibility of Soviet offensive missile deployment in Cuba, and, against considerable obstacles, persevered in the acquisition of additional data necessary to confirm the dire suspicions. Once the hard evidence was in hand, the U.S. Government demonstrated its capacity quickly and correctly to assess the situation, to frame and appropriate responses, and ultimately, to force the Soviets to back down. A less timely and professional intelligence performance would have significantly increased the dangers of the confrontation. Third, the key to converting a potential intelligence fiasco into an astute operation was the resourcefulness of dedicated personnel, following the discipline of their profession, even though largely self-directed. A collaborative team of analysts, collectors, and consumers collectively focused on the intelligence target. Fourth, from an existing knowledge base, a model of the target was developed, and then the model was analyzed to extract information for additional collection.

³³ Allison, Graham, "The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy Today," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July-August 2012), 15-16.