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The world doesn't want another Cuban Missile Crisis

By DOUGLAS ROCHE OCTOBER 12, 2022

We are not bereft of key ideas and high-level persons to find creative ways to end the present carnage in Ukraine. The Cuban Missile Crisis ended because John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev took a risk with crisis diplomacy. Can Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin take a similar risk for peace? Canada should push diplomacy, not arms, to end the Ukraine war.



The possibility of Russia's use of nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war has led to comparisons with the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago this month, in which, for 13 days, humanity stood on the brink of World War III. The crisis passed because U.S. president John F. Kennedy, left, and Soviet Union president Nikita Khrushchev, right, engaged in crisis diplomacy and negotiated a solution to the problem of the Soviets installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

EDMONTON—The possibility of Russia's use of nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war has led to comparisons with the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago this month, in which, for 13 days, humanity stood on the brink of World War III.

The crisis passed because U.S. president John F. Kennedy and Soviet Union president Nikita Khrushchev engaged in crisis diplomacy and negotiated a solution to the problem of the Soviets installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. But negotiations today to end the Ukraine war seem farthest from the minds of the Western leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin, let alone Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. For Canada's part, the word "negotiations" does not escape the lips of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau or Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly. The G7, which includes Canada, has just signed on for more weapons to be sent to Ukraine.

I am undoubtedly speaking against a headwind when I call for Canada to support the creation of an international commission, composed of eminent figures, to reach beyond the clamour and hubris engaged in by both the West and Russia to deal with the practical realities of the Ukraine war. The essential reality is to stop the war before it escalates into World War III.

The history of the Cuban Missile Crisis should be a guide. Here is what happened in the momentous days, Oct. 16-29, 1962.

The Cuban crisis arose when the U.S. discovered—on the basis of aerial surveillance photos—that the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles in Cuba.

Kennedy imposed a naval quarantine around Cuba to stop Soviet ships carrying nuclear missiles for further installation. But for some of the president's advisers, that was not enough: they wanted a full-scale invasion or bombing of Cuba. Kennedy feared such action would launch World War III with both Moscow and Washington using nuclear weapons against each other.

Tensions throughout the world ran sky-high in what was quickly recognized as the greatest atomic bomb threat since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the eighth day of the crisis, UN Secretary-General U Thant sent an urgent message to Khrushchev and Kennedy, appealing for a moratorium to halt further military action. Suddenly, Kennedy saw a way for the Soviets to stop their shipments without looking like they had capitulated to the U.S. He responded to U Thant and asked him to send a second message to Khrushchev, stating that if the Soviets would hold up shipments, the U.S. "would be glad to get into conversations about how the situation could be adjusted."



U.S. president John F. Kennedy, right, meeting with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, centre, in the White House's Oval Office in October 1962. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

U Thant picked up the signal and sent a second message to both leaders, asking Khrushchev to instruct Soviet vessels to stay away from the quarantine area, and asking Kennedy to instruct U.S. vessels to avoid direct confrontation with Soviet ships. To both leaders, he stated: “This would permit discussions of the modalities of a possible agreement which could settle the problem peacefully.”

The crisis ended a few days later when Khrushchev agreed to verifiably remove his missiles from Cuba in return for a U.S. non-invasion pledge. There was also a deal, kept secret at the time, in which Kennedy agreed to de-commission aging U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey six months later.

When it was over, the U.S. and Soviet governments sent a letter to U Thant expressing, in diplomatic understatement, “appreciation for your efforts in assisting our governments to avert the serious threat to peace, which recently arose in the Caribbean area.” Kennedy added his own note of praise: “U Thant has put the world deeply in his debt.” Publicly,

the Americans took the credit for ending the crisis. U Thant, never a showman, returned to his duties.

Should the 1962 lesson of “crisis diplomacy” be applied today? The answer is yes. And the need is urgent. U.S. President Joe Biden has warned the world could face “Armageddon” if Putin uses a tactical nuclear weapon to try to win the war.

Some argue that a comparison of the Ukraine war to the Cuban Missile Crisis is invalid because it’s too late: Russia has already invaded Ukraine causing horrendous suffering; Ukraine has counter-attacked and Russia has responded with more shelling and deaths. The militarists argue that Russia must be defeated; vengeance must be obtained. This mantra has closed the minds of the West to negotiations. But if the war continues— with or without nuclear weapons—it will soon be NATO vs. Russia, and that will indeed become World War III.

Putin’s military doctrine has always been “escalate to de-escalate.” I think he is actually getting ready to negotiate because he now realizes that NATO, the growing military alliance which he saw as a threat to Russian imperialism, is more strongly determined than ever to stop him.

What is there to negotiate? My colleague Ernie Regehr, author of *Disarming Conflict: Why Peace Cannot Be Won on the Battlefield*, argues that intensified diplomacy “in pursuit of mutually acceptable security arrangements” is in the interests of both Russia and Ukraine.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has called for a high-level “commission for dialogue and peace,” led by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Pope Francis, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

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