Managing the Next Great Power Crisis: Lessons from '62

Today's cyber and space capabilities and vulnerabilities are examined against the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis, 55 years ago.

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> For Your Consideration
> - Are space and cyber capabilities eroding traditional conceptions of military strength and shifting the military balance of power toward offensive capabilities?
> - Could a war escalate solely from the space and cyber domains?
> - In what ways has military and civilian policy lagged behind the impact of new technology on the battlefield?

Crises between great powers are inevitable, but the outcomes are subject to many variables. Crises often stem from misperceptions of military strength and intentions, as well as miscalculations in assessing an adversary's escalatory response to an action. Capabilities relating to the space and cyber domains, however, are having a comprehensive and deleterious effect on these critical variables of crisis management. They are eroding traditional conceptions of military strength, increasing economic vulnerabilities and shifting the balance of military power toward offensive capabilities, while also giving disproportionate power to third-party actors and rogue states to influence events.

The threat of runaway escalation occurring is now greater than ever. Furthermore, the next crisis is likely to occur under circumstances not experienced since the Cold War, where the United States was confronted by a power of similar strength. Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis provide a useful case study to understand the dynamics of a great power crisis, as well as its applicability to current political and military developments.

Managing Cold War Crises

It is widely believed that the Cold War remained relatively cold between the United States and the Soviet Union due to successful management of a series of crises, the most famous of these being the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Key aspects of those 13 days reveal that misperceptions of capabilities and intentions nearly resulted in an all-out nuclear exchange between the two superpowers. In the early stages of the crisis, hardliners on the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) tried to convince President John F. Kennedy to order an invasion of Cuba, in the belief that Soviet forces on the island did not yet have nuclear warheads.

Kennedy and the ExComm were missing critical intelligence. At a January 1992 conference in Havana, Soviet General Anatoly Gribkov said "the nuclear warheads for both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons had already reached Cuba before the quarantine line was ever established–162 nuclear warheads in all."[1] The CIA had estimated 10,000 Soviet ground troops in Cuba; the real number was up to four times higher. Therefore, the ExComm was making recommendations based on faulty information.

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara said that "if the president had gone ahead with the air strike and invasion of Cuba, the invasion forces almost surely would have been met by nuclear fire, requiring a nuclear response from the United States."[2] Nikolai S. Leonov, who was

chief of the KGB's Department of Cuban Affairs for 30 years, said it would have been "inconceivable to me that the Soviet ground commander in Cuba would have neglected to arm and fire his tactical nuclear weapons."[3]

Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis

There are six important lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis, each of which can be applied to future crisis management:

- Doctrine and policy always lag behind new military technology.
- There always will be intelligence gaps of an enemy's intentions and capabilities.
- Hardliners reflect parochial interests and often discount the escalatory response.
- Individuals may take independent action, sending conflicting diplomatic signals.
- Deterrence has to be actively managed in an open process between both sides.
- Presidential leadership matters.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff accused President Kennedy of appeasement and believed Moscow would be deterred by air strikes and an invasion of Cuba. Kennedy deserves credit for ignoring their advice. As acknowledged years later, that action certainly would have resulted in nuclear war.

It is important to remember that Kennedy had been badly disappointed by the advice of his generals to proceed with the Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961. If it hadn't been for that disaster, he may not have been as skeptical of their judgement during this crisis. Presidential decisions can only guard against deliberate folly. Lower-level officials, government agencies and even allies, however, all had the capability to escalate the crisis, too, and did. For example:

- The commander of the Strategic Air Command, without informing the president or any national security staff member, raised the command's Defense Condition level to 2.
- Vandenberg Air Force Base test fired a missile without contacting the Pentagon.
- A Soviet air defense commander in Cuba shot down a U-2 spy plane without authorization.
- The CIA continued sabotage missions against the Fidel Castro regime.
- A Soviet submarine commander prepared to fire a nuclear-tipped torpedo after U.S. Navy ships dropped practice depth charges against the submarine. A lone Soviet officer vetoed its use.
- Castro pleaded with Moscow to immediately strike with nuclear weapons.

At the time of the crisis, nuclear weapons were incorporated into all aspects of military operations: missiles, bombs, artillery shells, torpedoes and even depth charges. Top U.S. and Soviet military chiefs were in support of their use since they were primarily focused first on winning, without concern for the likely escalatory response of their adversary. Mutually Assured Destruction was in its infancy as a deterrence concept. Doctrine and policy on nuclear use had not been fully determined prior to the crisis, and most importantly, there was no significant dialogue as to their acceptable military application and deployment between the sides.

The Next Crisis

In 1996, the first major crisis arose between the United States and China in the post-Soviet era. Mainland China had been intimidating the Taiwanese with military exercises across the Taiwan Strait in an attempt to influence their elections. In a show of force, President Bill Clinton sent two aircraft carrier groups near the strait.

Nearly a generation later, the United States can no longer operate so freely in the first-island chain. China's economy and military capabilities have grown exponentially. In a hypothetical Taiwan conflict, a RAND Corporation study found that China's military capabilities are either at parity or greater than the United States in six out of nine categories related to air, missile, naval, space and cyber forces.[4] The report focuses solely on a comparison of capabilities, however. It overlooks the psychological and operational impacts of space and cyber warfare on crisis management, and correspondingly, how that precipitates greater escalatory risks.

The majority of President Kennedy's ExComm felt it was necessary to immediately invade Cuba despite the grave escalatory risks. If a similar crisis happened today, the inclination toward action would be even greater. Space and cyber capabilities are biased toward first-mover advantage. A series of coordinated non-kinetic attacks on networks, sensing systems and infrastructure can provide a decisive advantage to the side who employs those capabilities first.

The United States has the world's best offensive cyber force, but it is by far the most vulnerable to an attack. Contrarily, China or Russia may be prepared to behave more aggressively in cyberspace because their economies are much less vulnerable to cyberattack.

Space capabilities are a similar issue. The United States is the number-one user of space, and therefore the most vulnerable. The weakness of effective deterrence in these domains erodes the mechanisms that normally stabilize escalation risk by encouraging a first-mover incentive.

Tensions could be further exacerbated by third-party or patriotic actors who had an interest in causing disruptions. The problem of identifying cyber attackers means that both sides may not be able to immediately determine the attack's origins, or even worse, hackers could make it appear as though one side was attacking the other. Such activity could embolden hawks' arguments for escalation, initiating a cascading effect.

A conflict employing the full use of space and cyber capabilities will create a chaotic battle environment where communications, timing, navigation, intelligence and cyberspace will all be in various stages of denial, degradation or disruption. This will reduce the ability of military leaders and politicians to accurately assess the situation as communications and intelligence are severely impacted. The fog of war will be great. Leaders who are accustomed to receiving the latest imagery and watching live drone feeds may have to make many decisions in the dark. It is a situation ripe for miscalculation.

Avoiding a Crisis

As during the Cuban Missile Crisis, new military technology is disrupting traditional means of deterrence. Similarly, military doctrine and civilian policy are lagging behind rapid technological change, and there are few international or bilateral agreements relating to the application and deployment of these new capabilities. This creates mistrust and precipitates an arms race to gain military advantage in the cyber and space domains.

The history of the Cuban Missile Crisis shows how quickly such an unstable status quo can lead quickly to the brink of conflict and nuclear war. Agreements, effective deterrence and

clear lines of communication are the best means by which to avoid a crisis. This requires a comprehensive, coordinated diplomatic and military strategy that is currently lacking.

Once a crisis begins, history demonstrates that a host of variables can drive escalation, even if both sides preferred peace. Without a new strategy, the great powers are drifting toward the next crisis; their fate in the hands of *Fortuna*.

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[1] Robert S. McNamara, "Forty Years After 13 Days," *Arms Control Today*, Nov. 1, 2002, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_11/cubanmissile.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Quoted in "A Conversation in Havana," edited by Thomas S. Blanton and James G. Blight, *Arms Control Today*, Nov. 1, 2002, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_11/cubanmissile#bio2.

[4] "An Interactive Look at the U.S.-China Military Scorecard," RAND Project Air Force, n.d., https://www.rand.org/paf/projects/us-china-scorecard.html.