

The Cuban Missile Crisis 50 Years Later

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On the evening of Monday, 22 October 1962 as the Soviet Union's strategic gamble to put nuclear missiles into Cuba became public knowledge many believed the world stood at the brink of nuclear war. Fortunately, that war didn't happen and by the following Monday the world was slowly returning to a more stable condition. The Cuban crisis was a milestone of the Cold War from which many valuable lessons were learned. The question now is, 50 years after the crisis, are any of those lessons still useful?

Perhaps a prior question is whether analyses of past political and military events really help us understand and deal with present-day incidents. Some people believe that such history is now irrelevant and has nothing to teach them, others believe that the lessons of history are important and go to great lengths to develop 'lesson learned' from past crises and wars. Who is right? That is not an easy question to answer. I still find it surprising how often parallels exist between present-day political and military incidents and past events. That said, I must admit that at times detailed analysis and lessons drawn from the past can be misleading while at other times such lessons are invaluable. For instance, an analysis of British battle fleet tactics in the First World War has little or no relevance to contemporary naval operations but understanding the workings of the naval staffs that controlled those fleets holds the promise of gaining insights into the complicated relationships between politicians and the naval leadership – a relationship that remains complex in most countries.

Naval operations, high-level diplomacy and intense political wrangling in Canada, the Soviet Union and the United States were central to the evolution and resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. There were other participants

in the crisis – obviously Cuba was involved, while some NATO countries, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations were engaged on the margins. In many ways, it was a textbook political crisis but with nuclear weapons thrown in for added intensity. At the time, we learned a great deal from the crisis particularly about what became known as nuclear diplomacy. The crisis scared many politicians and a new respect for nuclear weapons emerged. From a Canadian point of view, some aspects of the crisis still have relevance, some of which might come under the uncomfortable heading of 'lessons not learned.' To explain these we need to review the key events.

The way in which the crisis was managed politically in Canada remains controversial. The accepted explanation of the government's handling of the crisis is that the Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker, refused to put the military and thus the Emergency Measures Organization on a higher state of alert to match the changes made by the Americans. He claimed that he had not been adequately consulted beforehand by President John F. Kennedy under what he believed, wrongly, was an agreed procedure. Despite a careful explanation of the situation and intended American response by US Ambassador Livingston Merchant, who was handpicked by Kennedy to go to Ottawa to brief the Prime Minister, Diefenbaker believed the President was overreacting and saw no need for a nation-wide Canadian alert – he said he did not want to alarm the people needlessly. Whether any part of his decision was a reflection of his difficult relationship with Kennedy is open for debate. What is very clear is that Diefenbaker either did not understand or chose to ignore the provisions of the Canada-US agreements for continental defence under situations like those of the evolving missile crisis.

Normally, the War Book gave the Minister of National Defence authority to raise the alert state to the first level, but in October 1962 the War Book had been withdrawn for revision and technically the Minister's authority was rescinded. Hence, Defence Minister Douglas Harkness took the request to increase the alert state directly to Diefenbaker believing he would approve the change without delay. The Prime Minister refused the request and said it would be discussed at Cabinet the next day. The refusal left Harkness shocked and facing a quandary. Believing that the threat to national security was real he considered



USN P-2H Neptune flying over a Soviet merchant ship, October 1962.



Credit: Diefenbaker Centre Archive

President John Kennedy and Prime Minister John Diefenbaker meet in the Oval Office, February 1961.

Diefenbaker's delay unconscionable and so ordered the military to begin taking the necessary steps to increase the alert state quietly.

Harkness took the request back to Cabinet the next day, 23 October, but despite his explanations of the obligations under the bilateral defence agreements and his belief that taking no action could leave the country needlessly vulnerable, Diefenbaker again refused to increase the alert state. Going against the Prime Minister's direction Harkness then told the military to begin implementing the measures to increase the alert state but to do so unobtrusively. Harkness went back to Diefenbaker again next morning, Wednesday, 24 October, and managed to get Cabinet to revisit the situation, but without success. Diefenbaker remained adamant that he would not be forced into taking action. Later that day the Americans increased the alert state even further, to DEFCON 2, and Harkness once again confronted Diefenbaker, and after a stormy session obtained permission to match the American alert state. The Canadian military began the formal process of increasing the alert state at 10:00 that morning.

Diefenbaker's indecisiveness can be attributed in part to the fact that he had systematically divorced himself from military advice over the previous two years. It is fair to say that in the fall of 1962 he did not understand the military issues implicit in the evolving crisis. It is often said that the Cuban Missile Crisis represented a dangerous failure in Canadian civil-military relations because the military,

albeit with the Minister's blessing, took independent action in the face of the deepening crisis. This is nonsense, as I have argued elsewhere. The real crisis in Canadian civil-military relations was the failure of the Prime Minister to respond to sound military advice on the situation thereby potentially putting national security at risk. This situation and its implications remain controversial. Why?

Civil-military relations can be seen as a contract or understanding between a government and its military leaders: just as the political leadership expects the military leadership to be sensitive to political imperatives, so the military leadership has an expectation that the political leadership will show executive competence and also have knowledge of what various military forces can and cannot do. In October 1962, Diefenbaker did not display executive competence in responding to the crisis and was only forced into taking appropriate action by his Minister of National Defence.

Today, in a vastly different world to that of 1962 and one which is far more complex technologically, one can't really expect Cabinet Ministers and members of parliamentary committees to be experts on military matters – the issues are far too technical for part-time study. However, it is vital that senior decision-makers be fully aware of national obligations inherent in standing security agreements and understand the implications of any military commitment. In this respect, advice by the country's military leadership must be taken carefully into consideration whenever

a military commitment is being considered. The Prime Minister and members of Cabinet cannot afford to isolate themselves from the military in the way John Diefenbaker did in October 1962 especially in an era when the unexpected can happen quickly.

Even in the early years of the Cold War, the process by which the Canadian military and the Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) – which was run by the army in those days – were placed on a higher state of operational readiness was efficient and well rehearsed. EMO was organized to alert the Canadian population of an impending nuclear attack and to set in motion the civil defence organization to minimize the effects of that attack. The RCAF Air Defence Command was integrated with the US Air Force under the NORAD agreement. The RCN and RCAF Maritime Air Command were integrated operationally in Halifax and Esquimalt with the task of finding, tracking and, when ordered, attacking Soviet submarines and ships in the Canadian areas of responsibility which extended well to seaward beyond submarine-launched missile range.² The aim was to conduct surveillance with patrol aircraft, ships, submarines and the passive sonar system, SOSUS, to gain advance warning of any increase or change in Soviet submarine activity in the western North Atlantic. These activities were dovetailed into similar operations conducted by the US Navy to the south of the Canadian area and in the vicinity of the Grand Banks where combined operations were routinely scheduled. All these operations were coordinated and conducted under a series of nationally-approved contingency plans.

On 17 October Canadian maritime forces were alerted to a possible increase in Soviet submarine activity. This was confirmed a few days later by a sighting of a Soviet submarine refueling from an auxiliary tanker well to the west of the Azores. Surveillance was increased on 18 October and intensified on 22 October just before President Kennedy announced the nature of the crisis to the world. These actions were completely within the established authority of the Maritime Commander in Halifax, Admiral Kenneth Dyer. The Minister's discrete direction to begin increasing the readiness state didn't really make any difference to maritime operations – the ships, submarines and aircraft were already at an appropriate level of readiness in keeping with approved procedures. When the formal notice to increase the readiness state came on the morning of 24 October, the fleet was quickly brought to war readiness and sailed to

conduct anti-submarine warfare (ASW) surveillance over the entire Canadian area of responsibility as called for by the bilateral contingency plans.

Even though the RCN and RCAF Maritime Air Command were able to rise quickly to the challenge of the new situation and conduct sustained ASW operations in conjunction with the US Navy over a large area for almost two months, those operations were not undertaken without difficulty. Nevertheless, by late November 1962, the combined Canadian and American maritime forces were able to send the Soviet submarines back to the Soviet Union with their tails between their legs. The Soviet Navy did not try to return to the Caribbean in strength until the fall of 1969 but continued to deploy one or two submarines into western North Atlantic waters on a near-constant basis where they were routinely found and tracked by Canadian and American ASW forces.

Despite the soundness of the contingency plans and the many hours of practice, there were problems with the potential to de-rail them. For instance, the intensity of ASW operations conducted over such a large area for extended periods resulted in acute shortages in some key operational stores, particularly sonobuoys. Although reserve stocks of sonobuoys existed they were under the control of the central staff in Ottawa which was reluctant to release them because the full nature of the operations was not understood at all staff levels. Also, RCAF maritime patrol aircraft had to exceed maximum flying hours to meet the operational requirement and the central staff



A Soviet *Foxtrot*-class submarine.

Credit: From author's collection



Credit: Robert L. Knaudsen

President Kennedy signing the Cuba Quarantine Proclamation, White House Oval Office, 23 October 1962.

were reluctant to authorize extensions. Simply, despite an adequate exchange of information at the higher staff levels, the subordinate staffs did not understand the operational imperative. The RCN had similar staff problems over fuel and the Naval Staff tried to impose constraints on operations as a means of conserving fuel. In several instances while the RCN and RCAF operational staffs tried to resolve logistic problems, the US Navy loaned the Canadians enough stores to maintain the level of operations.

The problem, in a nutshell, was that the national command and control system, especially for maritime operations, was virtually the same as that used during the Second World War whereby headquarters staff in Ottawa looked after procurement with virtually no direct influence on or over operations.

Political involvement in the crisis lasted for 13 days, from 15 October when the Soviet missile sites were discovered in Cuba until 28 October when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev ordered an end to the arms shipments to Cuba and the withdrawal of the missiles. The maritime

dimension stretched from 17 October when the first Soviet submarine was detected until mid-November when all the submarines were confirmed as being on their way back to Murmansk. The Canadian role in the political phase of the crisis was badly handled and deeply angered the Americans. RCN and RCAF ASW operations, however, were excellent especially where cooperation was needed with the US Navy. The Naval and Air Headquarters staffs in Ottawa did not cover themselves with glory; in fact, there were times when they could be considered obstacles to the operations. But, it must be remembered that the staffs were not structured or trained to oversee or support operations – they remained constrained by Second World War concepts.

So, can the lessons of history still provide useful guidance for handling present-day situations? Using the Cuban Missile Crisis as a case study I hope I have shown that some historical facts remain valid over time because the basic determining factors in crisis management do not change. Human nature is a constant, and political suspicion of the military is an ever-present factor. Under our Western concept of civil control of the military that suspicion is healthy but only to a point. Here, a basic premise of the civil-military relations contract I introduced earlier is key: *just as the political leadership expects the military leadership to be sensitive to political imperatives, so the military leadership has an expectation that the political leadership will show executive competence and also have knowledge of what various military forces can and cannot*



Credit: Shearwater Naval Aviation Museum

An RCAF Argus long-range patrol aircraft overflying an 'A'-class submarine of the Halifax-based 6th S/M Division in 1960.

do. Except for the efforts by Defence Minister Harkness in October 1962 the Canadian government certainly seemed to lack executive competence in its initial handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This concept of civil-military relations goes further than crisis management situations; it is equally important in the day-to-day management of the military infrastructure. Politicians must accept the fact that if they expect the military to respond quickly to situations, it must be appropriately structured. Because it takes 10-15 years to bring a new ship, aircraft, or fighting vehicle into service, military modernization plans presented to government invariably represent major capital expenditures outside the mandate of the government of the day. Somehow, the notion that major defence spending represents a political partisan opportunity has to be put aside in favour of the concept that such defence spending is for the national good and thus above partisan politics.



Credit: UN photo archive

Fidel Castro gives a speech to the General Assembly at the United Nations.

In 1962, centralized control of fuel and operational stores could have severely restricted the ability of the RCN and RCAF to conduct ASW operation against the Soviet submarines. Had the operational commanders not forced the issue with their superiors in Ottawa, ASW operations would have ground to halt well before the last Soviet submarine had left the western North Atlantic. Because

operations were eventually and somewhat reluctantly given priority, the combined Canadian and US maritime forces were able to send the Soviet submarines home. The simple lesson from this is that excessive centralized bureaucratic control of operational stores and fuel is counter-productive in crisis management and war. Moreover, it makes the point that logistics, writ large, need to be an integral part of any contingency or operations plan. We should know that by now.

The last point to make is that time spent developing versatile contingency plans is time well spent. That the RCN and RCAF had a well-tested and up-to-date series of contingency plans to deal with Soviet submarine intrusions saved the day in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Today, when the scenarios to which the Canadian military may need to respond are more numerous and, in all probability, more complex the need for contingency planning is far greater. But contingency plans that are not routinely practiced have little value – to do this requires resources and once again, excessive centralized control of those resources and the fuel and operational stores defeats the basic aim of maintaining effective, ready armed forces.

To many, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was just one incident a long time ago and should be committed to the dusty history books. To others, that crisis provided some useful lessons that remain valid today despite the changes in the international political structure and the technology of naval operations. Who can honestly say that Canadian or North American security will never be challenged from the sea again?

It is said that those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. The Cuban Missile Crisis remains a great case study of Canadian civil-military relations and a first-rate example of the benefits of sound contingency planning. 🇨🇦

Notes

1. This article is based on: my book *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1993); my article “Canadian Involvement in the Cuban Missile Crisis Re-considered,” *The Northern Mariner*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (April 2007), pp. 39-65; and related research, mainly about civil-military relations in Canada at the time, that has not yet been published.
2. In 1962, the Soviet capability to launch cruise missiles from submarines was relatively new and although the concept had been tested for several years the first missile-firing submarines only became operational in the early 1960s. The range of the first cruise missiles was about 300 nautical miles. At the time of the Cuban crisis Canadian and US naval authorities believed the Soviets would deploy missile-firing submarines in a strategic role.

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