

The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of Nuclear War, but long-term it encouraged dialogue and 'Détente' between East and West. Discuss.

The Cuban Missile Crisis serves as a historical monument of political fragility and its possible impacts on the very existence of humankind. The crisis serves as a lesson of how complex political structures and relations can be diminished through even the slightest of miscommunications, exposing the fragile nature of the systems that stand to serve and protect our existence. Fortunately, the crisis did not end in the nuclear detonation of our world and instead, is widely regarded as a crucial turning point in US-Soviet relations. The 'diplomatic' ending of the crisis that will be examined in paragraphs to come, has been heralded as the pinnacle of peaceful relations known as 'Détente' between the East and the West. This assertion of 'Détente' as a byproduct of the Cuban Crisis has its merits, but also supports an illusionary narrative of 'peace' between the two superpowers that is undermined by enduring mistrust, unequal concessions and a failure to confront ideological differences.

A crucial element of understanding the Cuban Crisis lies within the early motivators of the conflict. After years of oppressive dictatorship under the rule of Fulgencio Batista, the Cuban Revolution emerged. The revolution was nationalist in nature and led by the charismatic Fidel Castro. Castro was highly favoured by the Cuban public and rapidly gained power as a result. His model, though not initially communist in nature, was entirely Pro-Cuban which posed a great threat for US relations at the time, as their connection to Cuba had been imperialist in nature (Benjamin, 1990). Anti-American sentiment became popular through the Castro government and as a result, were under close suspicions of the US government as Castro's ascent posed a threat to their hegemony. Regardless, the absence of outright communist affiliations prevented any intervention from the US government albeit Cuba was being closely monitored.

The US' stance of non-intervention finally came to a halt, after the Cuban Revolution took a Communist turn, intertwining its nationalism with communist ideals. The US retaliated with various economic measures, including decreasing their quota for Cuban sugar imports and placing embargos on their oil, all of which was counteracted by Castro and his government (Clayton, Conliff and Gauff, 2017). Finally, newly elected President Kennedy with the aim of portraying his clear stance against communism, supported a military invasion of Cuba that sought to overthrow Castro's government. Acknowledged as 'The Bay of Pigs', the 1961 invasion failed miserably, as Castro had been informed of the plans by his counterparts in the US and the Cuban army was able to swiftly capture the American forces (Clayton, Conliff and Gauff, 2017). The failed attempt brought great humiliation to Kennedy and his government and effectively severed any ties between Cuba and the US that may have lingered on. This intervention by the US was the main catalyst for the Missile Crisis that followed.

Alarmed by The Bay of Pigs incident, Castro consulted with Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev to supply Cuba with nuclear missiles with the goal of deterring another military invasion by the US. As a retaliatory move to the US' allocation of nuclear missiles to Turkey which the USSR was in geographic range of, Krushchev agreed and began the secret shipment of

missiles to Cuba. The news soon broke in the US, and a plan of action began being debated within the government. Instead of a 'surgical' air strike on the missiles which was supported by many US officials, Kennedy opted to place a naval blockade around Cuba which was carefully referred to as a 'quarantine' by Kennedy. Many attributed the use of the term 'quarantine' to be less associated with military intervention, highlighting Kennedy's approach to diffuse the situation and its proximity to a nuclear war. Upon the imposition of the quarantine, tensions rose to a boiling point as Soviet Ships came into contact with the US' blockade. Luckily, at the discretion of one Soviet Submarine Captain Vasily Arkhipov against his peers, no physical aggression was enacted and instead, the Soviet ships retreated (Borger, 2022). The situation highlighted just how fragile relations between the two Superpowers were, and brought to the fore the possible consequences of such a strained relationship on the living world. The event now known as 'Black Saturday' is considered one of the most significant events of the Cold War, as never before had the world come so close to Nuclear War during that period than as a result of this occasion.

By the Monday following Black Saturday, the crisis had been averted. Through two letters sent by Soviet leader Khrushchev to Kennedy, the Soviet Union had offered to remove the missiles from Cuba on the condition that the US refrain from invading the island and remove their nuclear missiles in Turkey. Khrushchev's request were reportedly 'emotional' in nature, as the seriousness of a possible nuclear war was not lost on him. In his letter to President Kennedy he alluded to the necessity of resolving the crisis as if not, "What that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly what terrible forces our countries dispose" (Pollard, 1982.) The crisis shocked the world, and the diplomatic manner in which it was resolved was welcomed and supported by both sides.

Many viewed the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis as a turning point in Cold War relations between the East and the West. As the narrowly averted nuclear war was exposed, it brought a different perspective to the Superpowers, who mutually agreed that greater communication must be developed between the two alongside more diplomatic relations. This period is often associated with the concept of 'Détente' which refers to the easing of hostility between nations, emblematic of Cold War relations. In 1974, then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described Détente as,

"Détente is not rooted in agreement on values; it becomes above all necessary because each side recognizes that the other is a potential adversary in a nuclear war. To us, Détente is a process of managing relations with a potentially hostile country in order to preserve peace while maintaining our vital interests." (United States Department of State, 2023)

In the East, Détente was recognised similarly, yet often referred to as 'peaceful coexistence' by Soviet leaders. The shared notion that 'Détente' or 'peaceful coexistence' did not require ideological agreement between the superpowers remained, as the concept was described by the Soviet camp in the following statement.

“The bourgeois and Communist world outlooks cannot be reconciled; moreover, this is not necessary for peaceful coexistence among states... The recognition of the necessity and possibility of peaceful coexistence does not signify rejection of the class struggle, of the idea of the inevitability of the victory of communism over capitalism.” (Rubinstein, 1974)

Before the *triumph* of Détente as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis can be examined, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the existence of Détente before the crisis emerged. Infact, a major success of Détente occurred in 1959 when Soviet Premier Krushchev by invitation, visited the White House meeting with US President Eisenhower. This meeting signified a massive leap in East-West relations and decreased the intensity of vilification that occurred between the two powers (Benjamin, 1990).

Nevertheless, the Cuban Missile Crisis certainly acted as a catalyst for improved Détente. After the crisis, it was evident that the two powers expressed more commitment to peaceful coexistence than before. One of such major moves can be seen in 1972, after US President Nixon and Soviet leader Brezhnev signed the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) agreement which placed restrictions on the use and testing of specific armaments. This was followed in 1973 by the Washington Summit Conference which was attended by Brezhnev and saw the signing of multiple agreements supporting East-West negotiations and broadening their economic endeavours. In a steady fashion, a year later the Moscow Summit proceeded, with Nixon in attendance facilitating more agreements on armament controls. These series of events highlighted the era of Détente and seemingly satisfied many that consistent attempts were being made at diplomacy between the US and Soviet Union.

Despite the seemingly impressive nature of the developed US-Soviet relations, it can be argued that the triumphs of Détente during this period served mainly as a facade which placated the masses on both sides. For instance, this is epitomised in the previously mentioned agreements on the control of armaments. Despite the negotiations made and the agreements signed, the military arms race on both sides was hardly affected (Rubinstein, 1974). The agreements failed to prevent improvements on missiles or limit even the amount deployed. Most importantly, the agreements failed to even consider a moratorium on missile testing, which is argued to have been the most effective way of controlling and slowing the arms race (Rubinstein, 1974).

On many accounts, Détente was a flawed operation. The most obvious of its flaws being the continued contention that was allowed between the two powers, enshrined in their mutual understandings of Détente to exclude ideological agreement. Its shortcomings are easily understood, as the Soviet's policy and their ideological motor of Communism is the antithesis to virtually all of the US' Capitalist values. This acknowledgement of its fundamental shortcoming does not discount Détente as a necessary and useful concept, but instead questions its practicality and effectiveness.

The practicality of Détente can be meaningfully assessed through the examination of the fourth Arab-Israeli War. This conflict brought forth once again high tensions between the two Superpowers that had not been seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis (Aljazeera, 2018). The situation was highly emblematic of the importance and problematic nature of Détente. Firstly, it has been argued that the primary motivation for the war between Egypt, Syria and Israel, was the very concept of Détente. To be exact, Egypt's leader Sadat admitted that the objective of his initial attack on Israel was not in the hopes of defeating the Israeli army, but instead to invoke a crisis of Détente that would proffer the creation of an Arab-Israeli peace agreement. As the Arab states were supported by the Soviet Union and Israel by the US, Sadat felt that the best way to secure this agreement was through the creation of this conflict between the two superpowers as their Détente policy would support (Daigle, 2012, pp.295–311). In reality, this move turned out to be a result of great overconfidence in the solidity of Détente, as the war between the Arab and Israeli states proved to move to the US and Soviet Union (Mickelson, 2023).

After tensions between the states reached a boiling point, it was US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was able to open negotiations between the countries, eventually ending in a ceasefire some months later. The situation opened up discourse about the effectiveness of Détente, with Kissinger being quoted commenting on the selective nature of Détente, stating, "It is not possible for a country to exacerbate tensions in one area and seek relaxation in another." The situation highlights the debate of the nature of the facade surrounding Détente, as the Egyptian leader Sadat portrayed public perception of the significance of Détente meanwhile the reaction of the Soviet Union and the US revealed the flawed nature of the system.

In 1974, following the events of the Middle East conflict, President Nixon addressed the discourse surrounding Détente in the following statement,

"If we go back to the old policy of confrontation, not negotiating to limit nuclear arms and other arms possibly in the future, not negotiate with the hope of resolving differences at the conference table rather than on the battlefield, then what you have to do is to face the necessity for the United States to enter an arms race, and instead of an \$8 billion increase in the arms budget, you would have \$100 billion increase in the arms budget." (United States Department of State, 2019)

Nixon's comments, while in true American fashion, prioritise the monetary cost of a nuclear war rather than the possible effects on human life, hold great merit. Despite the inconsistent nature of Détente, it was a more suitable choice than its alternative of sustained confrontation. The existence of Détente between two powers so fundamentally opposing to one another can be argued to be a feat in itself. Albeit this feat did not exist sharely out of the goodwill between the two powers but as a result of the very severe consequences that would emerge in its absence, which was accurately embodied in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In conclusion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, in its infamously dangerous and shocking nature was a major catalyst in the development of Détente and more open communication between the Soviet Union and the US. The crisis that occurred in revolutionary Cuba served as a cautionary tale to the world on the dangers of nuclear warfare and magnified the fragile and narrow precipice that separated our world from one of mutually assured destruction. As a result, the popularity of Détente arose and despite its questionable practicality and effectiveness, its importance is well understood. In a world as ideologically divided as during the Cold War, any semblance of goodwill and attempts at peaceful coexistence were useful and necessary, even in its most basic sense.

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