

Impetus to Détente!

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Dec. 25, 2007--Russia's military on Tuesday successfully test-fired a new intercontinental ballistic missile capable of carrying multiple nuclear warheads - a weapon intended to replace aging Soviet-era missiles.

The RS-24 missile was launched from the Plesetsk launch facility in northern Russia and its test warheads successfully hit designated targets on the Kura testing range on the Kamchatka Peninsula some 4,340 miles east, Strategic Missile Forces spokesman Alexander Vovk told The Associated Press.

Vovk said the missile carried multiple test warheads, but refused to say how many. The Interfax news agency said the RS-24 is capable of carrying at least three warheads.

“It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization.” JFK

The Test Ban Treaty of 1963 prohibits nuclear weapons tests "or any other nuclear explosion" in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. While not banning tests underground, the Treaty does prohibit nuclear explosions in this environment if they cause "radioactive debris to be present outside the territorial limits of the State under whose jurisdiction or control" the explosions were conducted. In accepting limitations on testing, the nuclear powers accepted as a common goal "an end to the contamination of man's environment by radioactive substances."

The signing of the Nuclear Test Ban treaty marked one of the high moments of the Kennedy administration. After a near catastrophic confrontation over Cuba, the agreement was reached in July 1963 as a “first step” toward controlling the nuclear arsenals of the superpower.

Did the threat of nuclear holocaust frighten the parties into signing? What role did the Cuban missile crisis play in the negotiations?

The Kennedy administration in January 1961 inherited an ongoing, although stalemated, Geneva Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Weapons Tests, which centered around a report issued in 1958 by a group of international scientists on the capabilities of a global monitoring station to supervise and report on any testing. They had devised a system of international monitoring stations to oversee any subsequent testing treaty. However, the diplomats were unable to agree on the structure of an inspection and monitoring network. If a detection needed further analysis, on-site teams were to be ready to move into the area. As new technical abilities continually changed the calculus of such a system, negotiations had finally adjourned without any resolution or recommendations. Simply put, the United States, using seismographic instruments, could detect virtually any disturbance, be it earthquake or manmade without physically being on Soviet soil.

John Kennedy, at his initial press conference, announced creation of a task force to write a draft test ban treaty to be presented at the Geneva talks. In March, Arthur Dean took his seat as the chief U.S. negotiator at the Geneva Conference. Dean, a Republican, was well suited to his task. He had been with John Foster Dulles during the Panmunjom negotiations ending the Korean conflict and had a deserved reputation as a tough and patient bargainer.

Immediately, the Soviet negotiators introduced the “Troika” proposal for administration of any control agency. the Soviets had previously

proposed a three-headed United Nations' Secretary-General. This new demand was a similar plan to monitor nuclear testing. The system would consist of one Western, one Communist, and one neutral member to jointly oversee the monitoring agency. No progress was made because the U.S. remained committed to a single administrator.

Dean's first visit to Geneva proved to be a short stay. He was recalled at the end of August in response to the Soviet announcement of resumption of atmospheric testing. When the General Assembly's fall meeting called for renewed negotiations, the Geneva conference resumed November 28 and without tangible results adjourned January 29 with the Soviet negotiator declaring "This is the end".

The complexities of the international negotiations were emphasized by the resolutions of the General Assembly. The body had not only encouraged a resumption of the test ban talks, but had scheduled a general disarmament Conference as well beginning in March. The latter turned into a 17 nation session (it was supposed to be 18, but France refused to participate) that produced mountains of paper, but no agreements and finally recessed in September.

While not "the end", 1962 came extremely close to being the year, not of a test ban treaty, but of World War III. The U.S. announced the intention to resume atmospheric testing if no general agreement was reached by the latter part of April. "The Americans had resumed testing because the Russians had resumed. The Russians then resumed again because the Americans had resumed." -Richard J. Walton.

While all of this was occupying the late spring and early summer, Raul Castro (yes--the same Fidel brother in charge of Cuba today!) paid a visit to Moscow. His official title at the time was Armed Forces Minister. Within three weeks of his visit, increased numbers of heavy cargo vessels were spotted sailing toward Cuba. The CIA learned that Cubans living near the

docks at Muriel, a deep-water port, had been moved and Russian personnel were both guarding the docks and unloading ships. during July and August, the intelligence community was confident in its view that the Soviet buildup was of a purely defensive nature. This opinion was bolstered by the fact that the Soviets had never placed an offensive capability outside the territory of the Soviet union.

When a U-2 flight on August 29 discovered surface-to-air (SAM) missile sites, Kennedy issued a warning to the Soviet Union that "the gravest issues would arise" if "a significant offensive capability" should be discovered in Cuba. On the same day as the warning, Robert Kennedy received a personal note from Khrushchev. The message was conciliatory and assured the President that the material sent to Cuba was exclusively defensive.

Unknown to the United States at the time was the extent of Khrushchev's commitment: he sent 42 medium range missiles; 24 intermediates (never arrived!); 42 IL-28 nuclear bombers; 24 anti-aircraft missile sites (SAMs); 22,000 Soviet troops and technicians.

CIA director John McCone, returning from a European honeymoon October 4, found that no photos had covered western Cuba for a month. Various delays over equipment and weather further delayed new flights until October 14. These new pictures gathered unmistakable evidence of a medium range ballistic missile installation at San Cistobal. Two days later a select Executive Committee from within the National Security Council met to begin to formulate possible courses of action. The immediate choices seemed to be either an air strike to destroy the unfinished bases, or mere acceptance of the situation. It was obvious to the President that additional options needed to be discovered.

While the committee discussed possible responses, the military began preparing a task force of 40,000 Marines. Also available, an additional

5,000 already at Guantamano Bay. The 101st and 82nd Airborne divisions were alerted. Relocation of air defenses into the Southeast was begun.

Over the course of the week, the Executive Committee met frequently, devising various theories as to why Khrushchev had taken such drastic action, as well as discussing possible U.S. responses. Theodore Sorensen, who attended the meetings, compiled six possible avenues open to the United States.

1. do nothing
2. UN or OAS diplomatic pressure
3. secret mission to Castro to break the soviet alliance
4. blockades of various types
5. air strike on the construction sites
6. invasion

Although all the alternative were seriously considered, an air strike or blockade soon were the center of attention. Ultimately the airstrike was rejected because of the distinct possibility of killing Russians, the inability of locating all missiles, and the vigorous objection of Robert Kennedy. The Attorney General was convinced that an air attack would be "a Pearl Harbor in reverse." By Thursday night, majority opinion of the Executive Committee had swung toward a blockade. President Kennedy decided on a television address to be delivered Monday night as the method of announcing both the discovery of Soviet missiles and the U.S. response.

"All ships of any kind bound for Cuba...if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, will be turned back.... It shall be the policy... to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union....I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless and provocative threat to world peace...."

Within minutes of the conclusion of the president's speech, Adlai Stevenson, our ambassador in New York, requested an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to consider the crisis. The subsequent televised meetings gave Stevenson an excellent forum for his eloquent and forceful justification of the position of the United States.

A possible solution to the crisis presented itself on Friday. A counselor at the Soviet Embassy in Washington called ABC's State Department correspondent John Scali arranged a meeting and presented a plan to settle the crisis. Both sides should promise one thing. The United States--no Cuban invasion. The USSR--no offensive weapons in Cuba. After hurried consultation with the State Department, Scali was told that "real possibilities" existed for agreement. Letters were exchanged and after a couple of snags (agony over a second Khrushchev letter and a stray U-2 plane over Siberia) the deal was announced. Khrushchev's acceptance of the arrangement included this sentence: "We should like to continue the exchange of views on the prohibition of atomic and thermonuclear weapons, general disarmament, and other problems relating to the relaxation of international tension."

The international Disarmament Conference reconvened in Geneva on November 26. Late in the year Khrushchev wrote Kennedy, "that time has now come to put an end once and for all to nuclear tests...."

Technical discussions began in January, but tremendous opposition made the meetings fruitless. But, Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan continued to push the talks. Khrushchev gave an interview to the Saturday Review in April conceding on the issue of on-site inspections.

One of the long-time opponents, Sen. Thomas Dodd of Connecticut reversed his position and supported an atmospheric test ban in May.

(A small aside: Sen. Dodd, U. of Louisville law school, was the father of current Presidential hopeful Chris Dodd.)

The full Senate passed a test ban resolution May 27.

At American University June 10, Kennedy announced a new round of talks and pledged not to be the first nation to again resume atmospheric testing. This speech, written mainly by Theodore Sorensen, was a major call for peace:

“Our problems are manmade--therefore, they can be solved by man....No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue.... Almost unique among the major world powers, we have never been at war with each other. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons.... And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”

Averell Harriman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and the senior man regarding all things British or Russian, having long service in both places, was tapped to head the final push for a treaty. The tripartite talks were concluded in Moscow in late July. Harriman's analysis of the Soviet leader's motives weren't greatly complex. Khrushchev simply feared nuclear war and desperately needed to level off and possibly reduce military expenditures to divert resources to agriculture and consumer goods. Of particular concern to Khrushchev was the effect on China. Khrushchev called it a “pathological hatred of the Chinese for the Soviet Union.” An agreement would further isolate China from the rest of the world.

The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was never intended to be a culmination of efforts at nuclear weapons control. The official communiqué at the conclusion of the negotiations declared that the treaty “constituted an important first step toward the reduction of international tension....”

In the Foreign Relations committee and Senate debate that followed there was acknowledgment of the Cuban impetus, but little time was devoted to the idea of a causal connection. Only four Senators mentioned Cuba on the Senate floor. Barry Goldwater introduced a reservation calling for a delay in the formal deposit of the treaty until inspections had revealed that Soviet missiles were in fact out of Cuba. This proposal was defeated, 75 to 17. The final Senate vote recommending ratification was even more overwhelming, 80 to 19.

Arthur Dean’s phrase, “a sobering appraisal,” very well described the effect of the missile crisis. The United States and the USSR had never before been so close to the brink of nuclear war. Both powers, perhaps for the first time, considered the very real possibility of mutually assured destruction. As a result, more serious thought on both sides of the Atlantic culminated in a willingness to compromise. Kennedy and Khrushchev were anxious to continue discussions. They regarded the Nuclear Test Ban treaty as only the beginning of a series of treaties to further control and possibly reduce the huge arsenals of nuclear weapons. After the crisis, both leaders saw the necessity of moving toward détente.

As we know, neither would see those discussions bear additional fruit. Ironically for Khrushchev, forced retirement was made more likely as a result of his “humiliation” over Cuba. If it led directly to a treaty -- it also led to another round of weapons construction. The Soviet military was not going to be backed into another wall due to inferior equipment.

The Kennedy administration was even more brief--the treaty entered into

force October 10--JFK went to Dallas Nov. 22.

“It’s infinitely better to prevent a war than it is to try to survive one.”
Nikita Khrushchev

A post-note:

In September 1996, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. Signed by 71 nations, including all those possessing nuclear weapons, the Treaty prohibited all nuclear test explosions including those conducted underground.