

Could America Re-Experience another Cuban Missile Crisis in the Near Future?

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In 1962, the world lived through a traumatic international event that came to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. This crisis was precipitated when the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) secretly transported nuclear missiles and installed them on the Cuban island as a direct threat to the United States, which created a huge worldwide fear of triggering a nuclear war. The international crisis lasted thirteen days and it was the tensest moment of the Cold War. Strategically, the USSR's action had two purposes: 1) to maintain Cuba under the Soviet influence, and 2) to press the United States to withdraw nuclear missiles it had recently installed in Turkey.¹

The current war between the Russian Federation (formed after the breakup of the USSR in 1991 and hereafter referred to as Russia) and Ukraine, and the long running conflict between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have several commonalities with the sixty-year-old Cuban Missile Crisis and run the risk of resulting in another similar crisis. This article analyzes the possibility of Russia establishing a nuclear capable military facility in a Latin American country strategically close to the US, which may initiate a new nuclear crisis between the two countries.

This article will analyze: 1) historical events related to the conflict between Russia and the US/NATO; 2) international relationships between the potential States that could be involved in a new crisis; 3) Crisis Theory as applied to this hypothetical potential crisis; and 4) strategic interaction between Russia and the US in a hypothetical crisis scenario.

Historical Analysis

Roots of the Conflict between Russia and the US/NATO

At the end of WWII, the USSR and the US began a long conflict-ridden relationship, commonly known as the Cold War, which highlighted a deep level disagreement between the two regimes. The split of Germany into distinct halves in 1945, followed by the Soviet Berlin Blockade and the American, British and

French Berlin Airlift in 1948-1949, further stressed the relationship between both sides. The establishment of NATO in 1949, under the strong influence of the US, served to provide conclusive evidence of the post WWII contention between the two regimes. In response to NATO, the USSR established the Warsaw Pact in 1955.

A few years later, in 1961, the US installed 30 Jupiter nuclear missiles in Turkey. This posed a significant threat to the USSR, which responded by installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, thus resulting in the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

These conflicts, amongst many others that followed over the 40+ year duration of the Cold War, continued until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the final act of the USSR as an empire, which precipitated its eventual breakup in 1991. This conflict-ridden relationship established the basis for the profound resentment and contention that currently exists between Russia, which assumed the role as the USSR's main heir post its breakup, and the US.

Continued Protracted Conflict Post USSR Breakup

After the disintegration of the USSR in December of 1991, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Other members of the now defunct USSR, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan joined the CIS as well. However, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia decided to not join.

Meanwhile, NATO took advantage of the USSR's fragmentation by progressively expanding towards the East, adding states previously belonging to the USSR as new members. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia followed suite in 2004. This precipitated Russian President Vladimir Putin, at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, to declare that NATO's expansion reduced the level of mutual trust between Russia and NATO.² Nevertheless, NATO continued its expansion, with Albania and Croatia joining in 2009, followed by Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. Amidst all this, in 2014 Russia invaded Crimea, part of Ukraine, which brought strong condemnation from both NATO and the US, albeit with no concrete retaliatory actions as Ukraine was not a member of NATO.

Although the Russia-US/NATO contention during this period was mainly relegated to Europe, it also extended into other regions as well, such as Latin America. For example, throughout the years, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have all kept close relationships with Russia in many areas of interest, which has been a tremendous source of concern and discomfort to the US.

While Cuba served in the USSR's best interests throughout the Cold War, including during the most intense moments of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Russian military investments in the island have decreased since then. However, in 2022, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov announced that President Putin had agreed to strengthen its strategic ties with Cuba and would not confirm nor deny the potential future development of Russian military infrastructure on the island.³

Meanwhile, practically all of Nicaragua's military inventory, including its T-72B, T-72B1, and T-55 tanks, its Mi-17 helicopters, and its BM-21P, D-20, and D-30 howitzers/rocket launchers, have come from either the old USSR or from Russia.⁴

In Venezuela, former President Hugo Chavez fortified its ties with Russia by buying around 100,000 AK-47 rifles, in addition to helicopters and fighter planes.⁵ Venezuela has also taken further actions to create closer ties with Russia, such as conducting a bilateral naval exercise in 2008, during which Russia sent its nuclear cruiser, *Peter the Great*, and its anti-submarine warship, *Admiral Chabanenko*, together with their escort ships;⁶ and allowing the establishment of Russian military bases in Valencia and Manzanares.⁷

At the time, the US harshly criticized these actions as Russian attempts to destabilize Latin America,⁸ and reactivated its Fourth Fleet in 2008 as a result.⁹ What's more, in 2015, the US declared Venezuela as threat to US national security.¹⁰

These events characterize the continued protracted conflicts between Russia, as the USSR's de facto heir, and the US. More importantly, these conflicts also represent a continuing growing concern for the US, as they continue their gradual approximation to US soil.

Current Environment

In 2019, Russian media outlets reported that Russia intended to establish a naval base on the Venezuelan island of La Orchila, approximately 1,500 miles from Florida, a strategic endeavor that began when Chavez initially made the offer to the Kremlin in 2009. At the time, Russia did not accept the offer but kept an active interest in the opportunity.¹¹ However, after the US withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, the threat of establishing of a new Russian naval base in Venezuela would serve as a clear retaliatory measure.¹²

Recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provoked a strong strategic reaction from NATO, which asserted that "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area."¹³ To punctuate this protracted conflict further, Finland was accepted as a NATO member in 2023, and Sweden is currently awaiting approval.

The addition of both these countries to NATO would tremendously increase the number of NATO forces surrounding Russia's borders.¹⁴

Against this backdrop, Russia has now further escalated this protracted conflict by threatening to send troops to Cuba and Venezuela.¹⁵

Analysis of the Current International Environment

In 1999, Samuel Huntington argued that since the US was a state with a unique global dominance in the economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological, and cultural domains, the international system had become uni-multipolar, with the US as the single most powerful actor worldwide, with other major regional powers such as Russia and China playing a multipolar role.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the power struggles between the US and other individual/allied states have increased the risk of destabilizing the international system. For example, the ascension of China in the global economy has created challenges for the US in both the economic and technology arenas.¹⁷ Therefore, instead of uni-multipolar, Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld assert that the current international system can be classified as polycentric, with no state exercising a unique hegemonic power in all domains, particularly in terms of security matters.¹⁸ This polycentric environment has often led to several international crises, due to the lack of an overarching international authority to avoid friction between states.

The US still retains hegemony over the Americas. However, China and Russia have increased their influences over certain states in the region through economic, military, technological and cultural ties. Moreover, many Latin American countries have currently been experiencing a resurgence in their support of leftist political parties, which furthers increases the risk of their alignment with China/Russia.¹⁹

Potential States of Interest in a Conflict with the US

Currently, while the US is considered second in the world in nuclear military power after Russia, it is rated as having the most overall powerful military. According to the Global Firepower database, the US is ranked as 1st among 142 countries with a power index score (PwrIndx) of 0.0453 (the closer to zero, the more powerful),²⁰ while Russia is the second with PwrIndx = 0.0501, and China as third with PwrIndx = 0.0511.²¹

While the US also has formidable economic, technological, informational, and cultural instruments of power, China is considered a strategic competitor, and along with Russia, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations, they pose a significant threat to US hegemony.²² The US has lost some of its influence

over some Latin American countries which have moved towards a leftist ideology, like Venezuela and Argentina.

Meanwhile, in addition to being the world's top nuclear military state,²³ Russia is also a formidable overall military superpower,²⁴ and one of the top 20 economic powers in the world. The possession of oil and natural gas also brings a strong strategic advantage to Russia's foreign relations with European states, which until now have heavily depended on Russia for their fuel supply. What's more, Russia is also an important food producer, crucial for food security worldwide.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Russia has been strategically approaching Latin American countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, causing disruption to US hegemony in the region. Moreover, due to US/NATO pressure on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, it is possible that Russia will attempt to increase its military presence in the region as retaliation.

Venezuela

Since the election of Hugo Chavez as president of Venezuela in 1998, Venezuela has adopted a leftist ideology and pursued closer ties with Russia, mainly to procure weapons and obtain diplomatic-political support in the international system. Consequently, its relationship with the US has deteriorated, to the point that the US government declared the Venezuelan government a national security threat in 2015,²⁵ and reaffirmed this status in 2022.²⁶ Even though Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world, it is currently considered a fragile state.²⁷ This opened an opportunity at the outset of the Russia-Ukraine war for the US to try to reach an agreement regarding the procurement of oil and the release of Americans detained in the country, to reduce the West's dependence on Russian oil.²⁸

Cuba

Cuba's historic involvement in the 1962 Missile Crisis has kept it under close US observation and severe economic sanctions, even after the end of the Cold War. Consequently, Cuba has continued to foment close ties with Russia throughout the years, further exacerbating US concern.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua has maintained a good relationship with Russia (then USSR) since 1979. The relationship became even closer after the US and Europe withdrew their support in 2008 due to concerns about electoral fraud and handling of human rights and democracy. Furthermore, Nicaragua backed Russia just after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as in the invasion of Ukraine.²⁹

Main Ongoing Events that can Precipitate an Eventual Crisis

There are several events in progress that are considered to pose the highest risk of precipitating an eventual crisis in the American Continent: 1) the Russia-Ukraine war; 2) NATO's continued pressure on Russia; 3) Europe's energy crisis; 4) the ongoing worldwide financial crisis; and 5) political change in several Latin American States.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has only served to amplify the underlying conflict between Russia and the US/NATO. The success of US leadership in rallying worldwide support in the application of economic sanctions against Russia³⁰ and military support to Ukraine³¹ has raised the tension between these countries.³² Additionally, NATO's ongoing efforts to add Sweden and Finland as members has increased Russia's perception of being under a siege threat as well. The Russian government has responded firmly, to include the threat of using nuclear weapons.³³ Recently, some Russian politicians have even started to clamor for the return of Alaska as retaliation for US economic sanctions.³⁴ An increase in US/NATO pressure on Russia could cause "the bear" to feel cornered to the point of having no other option than forcefully react for its survival.³⁵

Furthermore, Europe's ongoing energy crisis, a second-order effect of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, can also precipitate an eventual crisis. On the one hand, many European States are integrated into NATO, but on the other, they also depend on Russian gas and oil, which can eventually cause a reduction in their support for Ukraine. As this situation poses a significant risk to the balance of power between the US/NATO and Russia, the US has already responded by providing 15 cubic billion meters of gas to Europe in 2022,³⁶ as well as trying to procure gas from Venezuela for this purpose as well.³⁷

To complicate matters further, on top of the economic impact of the Russia-Ukraine war, the COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the world's economic situation. Not only has this increased the risk of inflation and recession worldwide, but it has also affected US/NATO's ability to invest in defense and logistics efforts to support Ukraine.

Finally, as previously mentioned, there has been an ongoing left leaning resurgence in Latin American politics. Such a shift can represent an eventual distancing between Latin American states and the US, and the development of closer ties between these countries and Russia.³⁸

Borders

Neither Cuba, Nicaragua nor Venezuela have a physical border with US. However, they are sufficiently close to pose a viable threat not only to the US, but

NATO territories as well, as such close distances can be rapidly traversed by a nuclear device capable missile. La Orchila Island of Venezuela, for instance, is only approximately 1,500 miles from Florida and even closer to other US and NATO member islands in the Caribbean, such as Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Curaçao, Aruba and Boniare, among others.³⁹

Constraints for a Crisis Between Russia and US

There are constraints that can inhibit a crisis from developing between two international actors, such as international public opinion, internal public opinion, or even other international actors. However, constraints by themselves will not necessarily avoid a crisis, as any international actor, depending on their power and freedom of action, can overcome them. Between a hypothetical crisis on the American continent between the US/NATO and Russia, the following can serve as constraints: 1) US/NATO's military capability versus Russia; 2) the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (ITRA) of 1947, which considers that an attack against one member is an attack against all treaty members; 3) the TLATELOLCO Treaty of 1947, which forbids nuclear weapons in Latin America and Caribbean; and 4) the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone of 1986, which aims to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and eventual military presence of other States in the zone.

Crisis Theory as Applied to a Hypothetical Crisis in the American Continent

According to Brecher and Wilkenfeld, an international crisis is an interaction between two or more states experiencing a change or destabilization in their relationship, with an increase in intensity of disruptive actions, heightened probability of military hostilities, and challenges to the international system/subsystem structure. Three key aspects characterize an international crisis: 1) a threat to one or more State's fundamental values; 2) a finite time to respond to the threat; and 3) heightened probability of military conflict between states.⁴⁰

Julien Freund defined conflict as "an intentional clash between two individuals or groups of the same species that demonstrate hostile intent toward one another, generally over a right, and that, in order to maintain, assert, or reestablish such right, endeavor to eventually break down the others' resistance by means of violence, which could, as the case may be, lead to the physical annihilation of the other."⁴¹ A crisis starts within an existing conflict through a trigger; and even moderate conflicts can evolve into crises.⁴²

The main existing tensions that might trigger a crisis in the American continent are as follows: 1) the long-running conflict between the US and Russia, with roots in the post-World War II era; 2) NATO's expansion towards the Russians' border after the USSR's disintegration, which increased Russia's perception of a threat to their national security; 3) President Putin's declaration in 2007 that Russia would not accept NATO's expansion; 4) NATO's Steadfast Defender 2021 military exercise, which was close to Russia's borders;⁴³ 5) US push to add Ukraine as a NATO member over the years, which contributed to Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine; 6) Sweden and Finland proposals to join NATO; and 7) Russia's threats of retaliation against the US, including the use of nuclear weapons, due to the role the US undertook leading worldwide economic sanctions against Russia, together with the direct provisioning of economic and military support to Ukraine and NATO as a result of Russia's invasion.

A hypothetical sequence of events that might trigger a crisis in the American continent are as follows:

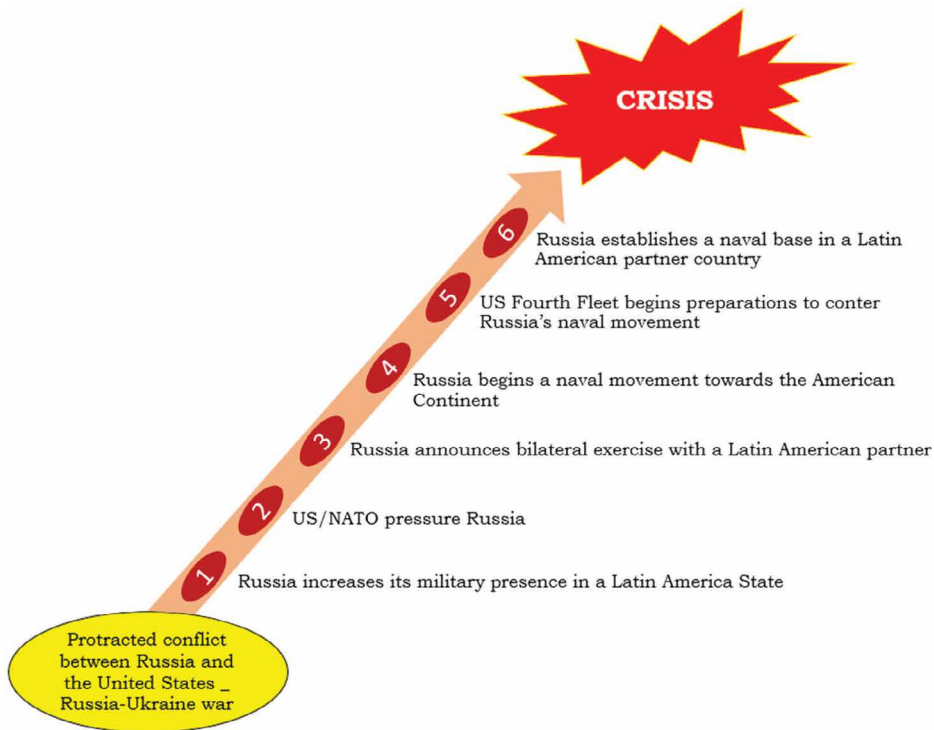


Figure 1. Hypothetical sequence of events that might cause a crisis in the American Continent

Source: Author

As per Brecher's Unified Model of Crisis (UMC),⁴⁴ this article will analyze the onset phase of this potential crisis' development based on 1) polarity, 2) existence of protracted conflict, 3) balance of power, 4) territorial contiguity; and 5) political regimes.

Polarity

Polarity depends on the number of power and decision centers in the international system. As previously mentioned, the international system is currently experiencing a polycentric polarity in which the US and China are disputing full hegemony, while other geopolitical decision centers contend for regional dominance.

According to Brecher and Wilkenfeld, stability is greatest in a bipolar system, whereas stability is lowest in a polycentric system. The rationale for such an argument is based on the security costs involved, as financial burdens increase concurrently with the number of decision centers. Thus, thus poly- and multi- centric polarity incurs a higher security cost than a bipolar system. For example, the polycentric system favors interrelated processes, which in turn increases adversarial pairings and coalitions, and consequently, disruptions. From 412 crises analyzed, 195 occurred in a polycentric system (representing 47.3 percent of crises) compared to only 74 in a multipolar system.⁴⁵ Thus, the world's current polycentric polarity increases the propensity of a crisis occurring between the US/NATO and Russia.

Protracted conflict

According to Edward E. Azar et al., protracted conflicts are hostile interactions or processes which extend over long periods versus specific events.⁴⁶ Protracted conflicts amid the same rivals creates mutual suspicion and a higher probability of violent behavior. Brecher and Wilkenfeld argue that actors in a protracted conflict are more likely to experience violent triggers and employ more severe violent actions in crisis management: 60 percent of international crises between 1918 and 1994 were born from 31 protracted conflicts.⁴⁷

While the conflict between the USSR and the US dates to 1918, the end of World War II exacerbated the conflict further, with Russia, as previously mentioned, continuing this conflict post the breakup of the USSR. Therefore, this century old, protracted conflict also increases the propensity of a crisis occurring between the US/NATO and Russia.

Balance of power

Although the concept of balance of power is controversial,⁴⁸ theorists agree on two common traits: it is based on international outcomes and involves state strategies.⁴⁹ Regarding balance of power and the onset of crisis, Brecher and Wilkenfeld, citing Organsky, argue that a war is most likely when both states have parity in power,⁵⁰ as it leads states to reciprocate each other's conflict behavior.⁵¹

As discussed, the US has the most powerful overall military worldwide, with Russia following second. The US has preponderance in 1) manpower; 2) defense budget (almost five times more than Russia); 3) three times more fighter aircrafts and helicopters; 4) ten times more aircraft carriers; and 5) six times more destroyers.⁵² Although Russia has a bigger nuclear arsenal (6,257 weapons) than the US (5,550),⁵³ they are practically equivalent in terms of weapons of mass destruction, as Jacek Kugler and A. F. K. Organski argue that in nuclear parity, there is a mutual deterrence between both contenders.⁵⁴

Therefore, despite the American's superiority in conventional military capabilities, the relative nuclear equivalence between Russia and the US suggests that they can both test each other by initiating a crisis.

Territorial Contiguity

Brecher and Wilkenfeld argue that geography is one of several environmental factors that can increase or constrain the probability of war between two states. In terms of territorial contiguity, it seems that such contiguity causes more interaction between the belligerents, which can lead to violence, particularly when the adversaries can strike one another.⁵⁵

With regards to the hypothetical crisis posed in this article, a Russian military base in Cuba, Nicaragua, or Venezuela would be the equivalent of contiguity, as their closeness to the US would reduce valuable time needed to implement defensive measures, creating an imminent threat to the US, and thus further increases the probability of a crisis starting between Russia and the US.

Political Regimes

Stuart A. Bremer found that there is no conclusive data that democracies are less prone to war than non-democracies.⁵⁶ However, this is contradicted by Brecher and Wilkenfeld, who found that as the number of democratic states increases, the likelihood of a violent crisis decreases.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, the political regime differences between the US and Russia (Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) do not provide the best conditions for peaceful interactions. Thus, such differences favor the outbreak of an international crisis.

Strategic Interaction between Russia and the US in a Hypothetical Crisis Scenario

In a strategic interaction between states, each one has assumptions and expectations about what the other side would be prone to do.⁵⁸ These assumptions and expectations depend on how much information each state has about itself and its opponent. With an accurate situational awareness, a target state will be able to know if a threat is genuine. If the threat is real, a targeted state would then know that resistance would lead to war.⁵⁹ If the threat were a bluff, the target state would know it should resist, as any concession to the challenger state would incur a cost. On the other hand, when there is uncertainty created due to an asymmetric information knowledge, the probability of a crisis increases.⁶⁰

The hypothetical case for a crisis in the Americas, between Russia and the US, is directly linked to the Russia–Ukraine war. Recently, Russia published its naval doctrine which states that the US quest to dominate the oceans, in addition to NATO’s continued expansion, were the biggest threats to Russia.⁶¹ Depending on the actions that the US/NATO take in support of Ukraine and against Russia, the Russian government could reach a point where it feels sufficiently cornered to initiate a crisis to directly challenge the US by establishing a military base in the Americas. If so, the US would have only one of two options: 1) concede and accept the establishment of a Russian naval base in the region, which would increase the risk of an indefensible nuclear attack; 2) reject the challenge, thus escalating the crisis. If the US rejects the challenge, Russia could then dismantle the base and move back; or proceed to war, with the possibility of the war escalating to a nuclear conflict.

The cost for the US to concede a Russian military base in the Americas means loss of hegemony in the region, loss of power in the world, and a clear demonstration of weakness to China and other adversaries. Yet, to concede would represent the preservation of the nation against the possibility of nuclear destruction. The cost for the US to go to war, considering a nuclear conflagration, could mean devastation for the US and potentially lead to a global nuclear war.

The cost for Russia, if it cedes to US rejection of its military base after launching the challenge, would be loss of internal political support and further concessions to NATO. The cost for Russia, if it resists US rejection, would be an escalation of the conflict to the point it could end in a nuclear war, risking national devastation.

Recently, Russian President Putin stated that “no one can win a nuclear war.”⁶² Such declaration shows that Russia understands the high cost of a nuclear war,

and it suggests that, in the case of a crisis with the US, Russia would try to find another way to solve the conflict.

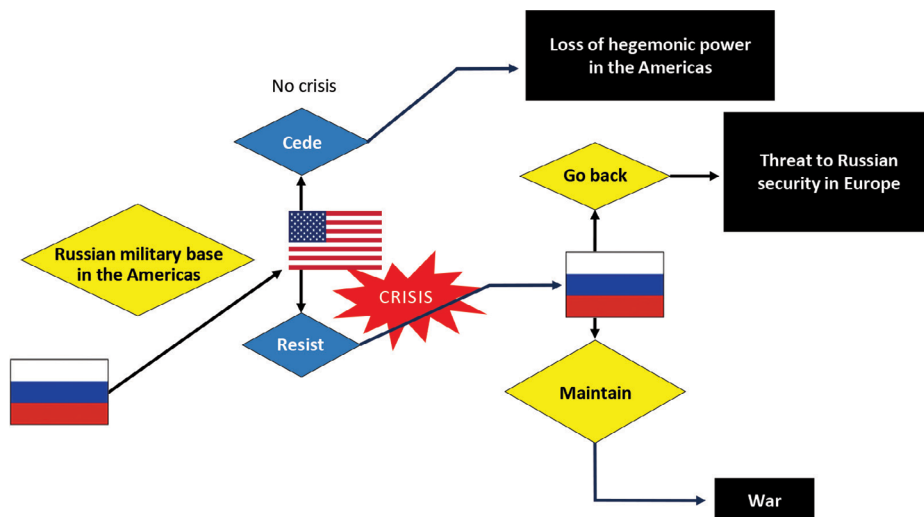


Figure 2. Strategic Interaction between Russia and US

Source: Author

In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the USSR decided to dismantle its military base and move it back to Russia. The US, in turn, removed its Jupiter nuclear missiles from Turkey, while trying to not demonstrate weakness in the face of USSR's challenge.

Conclusion

The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 caused tremendous stress worldwide and put the world on the edge of a nuclear war. Nowadays, with the increased conflict brewing between Russia and the US due to the Russia-Ukraine war, the possibility of a crisis in the American Continent emerges as a way for Russia to directly threaten the US. Historical analysis, as well as analysis of current international and regional systems, highlight significant elements to consider in such a hypothesis.

Analysis of the salient aspects of Crisis Theory (polarity, protracted conflict, balance of power, territorial contiguity, and political regimes) suggests that the onset of a crisis between Russia and the US is very feasible. Depending on the course the Russia-Ukraine war takes and US/NATO pressure on Russia, “the bear” could feel cornered and could not see another option than threatening the US in its “own backyard.”

On the other hand, analyzing a hypothetical strategic interaction, both nations have sufficient military parity to actively resist any challenge posed by the other.

However, the cost of war would be high, and under a worst-case scenario, could lead to the escalation into a full global nuclear war, with the potential to devastate humanity. Russia has stated its desire to avoid such an outcome, but the perception of an existential threat could change that. Therefore, although Crisis Theory points to a high probability of a crisis between the Russia and the US, the high cost of such a conflict suggests the contrary.

Nonetheless, as UK national security adviser Stephen Lovegrove alerted in 2022: “a breakdown in dialogue among rival powers is raising the risk of nuclear war, with fewer safeguards now than during the Cold War.”⁶³ Thus, it would be prudent for Russian and American leaders to take under consideration that the possibility of a “black swan,” —an apparently unlikely, but not impossible, event, is always present. □

Notes

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