

Cuban Missile Crisis Reaction Chart

Imagine that you are President Kennedy at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. You are listening to your advisors regarding how to respond to the Soviet missiles in Cuba. When each advisor comes to brief your group, note down which options they favor and which options they oppose, and the reasons for their preferences. After you heard all the advisors, please rank the options 1-5 in order of your preference (1 = best option, 5 = worst option) and then briefly explain the reasons for your choice.

Option	Advisors supporting(+)/opposing(-)	Likely positive results	Likely negative results	Rank
Do Nothing				
Surgical air strike on missile sites				
Diplomatic pressure only				
Invasion of Cuba				
Blockade				

Option selected and your reasons

Advisor Notes

Read your assigned advisor opinion and then answer the following questions as a group. Be prepared to share your recommendations with the class.

1. Advisor's name:
2. Advisor's job:
3. Which option does this advisor recommend?

2. What are two reasons for this recommendation? Each reason should be followed by a supporting quote from the advisor's sheet)

Reason	Quote

3. Which of the other options does this advisor like the least? Why

“We're impressed, Mr. President, with the great importance of getting a strike with all the benefit of surprise, which would mean ideally that we would have all the missiles that are in Cuba above ground where we can take them out.... What we'd like to do is to...try to get the layout of the targets in as near an optimum position as possible, and then take them out without any warning whatsoever...” (1)

“A decision now to impose a blockade is a decision to abandon the possibility of an air strike. A strike will be feasible for only a few more days; after that the missiles will be operational. Thus it is now or never for an air strike. I favor a strike. If it were to take place Sunday morning, a decision would have to be made at once so that the necessary preparations could be ordered. For a Monday morning strike, a decision would have to be reached tomorrow. Forty-eight hours' notice is required.” (4)

“Now is the time to act, because this is the last chance we have to destroy these missiles. If we do not act now, the missiles will be camouflaged in such a way as to make it impossible for us to find them. Therefore, if they are not destroyed, we will have to live with them with all the consequent problems for the defense of the United States....

“Personally, I doubt that it would be possible to prevent the Russians from deploying warheads to Cuba by means of a blockade, because of the great difficulty of setting up an effective air blockade.” (5)

1. Transcript of a Meeting at the White House, October 16, 1962
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba018.htm>
4. Record of Meeting, October 19, 1962
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba031.htm>
5. Minutes of the 505th Meeting of the National Security Council, October 20, 1962
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba034.htm>

“The political advantages are, are very strong, it seems to me, of the small (surgical) strike. It corresponds to the [idea that] the punishment fits the crime in political terms, that we are doing only what we warned repeatedly and publicly we would have to do. We are not generalizing the attack....

“I think there's an enormous political advantage, myself, within these options, granting that all the Chiefs didn't fully agree, taking out the thing that gives the trouble [i.e., the missiles] and not the thing that doesn't give the trouble [i.e., Cuba itself].” (2)

“I've reflected a good deal upon the situation in the course of a sleepless night, and I doubt whether the strategy group is serving the President as well as it might, if it merely recommends a blockade.... A blockade would not remove the missiles. Its effects are uncertain and in any event would be slow to be felt. Something more is needed to get the missiles out of Cuba. This would be made more difficult by the prior publicity of a blockade and the consequent pressures from the United Nations for a negotiated settlement. An air strike would be quick and would take out the bases in a clean surgical operation. I favor decisive action with its advantages of surprise and confronting the world with a fait accompli.” (4)

2. Off the Record Meeting on Cuba, October 16, 1962

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba021.htm>

4. Record of Meeting, October 19, 1962

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba031.htm>

“The existence of strategic missiles in Cuba is, in my opinion, not negotiable. I believe that any effort to negotiate the removal of the missiles would involve a price so high that the United States could not accept it. If the missiles are not removed or eliminated, the United States will lose all of its friends in Latin America, who will become convinced that our fear is such that we cannot act. However, the limited use of force involved in a blockade would make the military task much harder and would involve the great danger of the launching of these missiles by the Cubans.” (5)

“In my view a blockade would either inevitably lead to an invasion of Cuba or would result in negotiations, which I believe the Soviets would want very much. To agree to negotiations now would be a disaster for us. We would break up our alliances and convey to the world that we were impotent in the face of a Soviet challenge. Unless the Russians stop their missile buildup at once, we will have to invade Cuba in the next week, no matter what they say, if we are to save our world position. We cannot convey firm intentions to the Russians otherwise and we must not look to the world as if we were backing down.” (6)

5. Minutes of the 505th Meeting of the National Security Council, October 20, 1962

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba034.htm>

6. Minutes of the 506th Meeting of the National Security Council, October 21, 1962

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba038.htm>

“Consequences of action by the United States will be the inevitable ‘spilling of blood’ of Soviet military personnel. This will increase tension everywhere and undoubtedly bring retaliation against U.S. foreign military installations, where substantial U.S. casualties would result....

“The situation [missiles in Cuba] cannot be tolerated. However, the United States should not act without warning and thus be forced to live with a ‘Pearl Harbor indictment’ for the indefinite future. I would therefore:

- (a) Notify Gromyko [foreign minister of the USSR] and Castro [president of Cuba] that we know all about this.
- (b) Give them 24 hours to commence dismantling and removal of MRBMs, coastal defense missiles, surface to air missiles, IL 28s and all other aircraft which have a dual defensive-offensive capability, including MIG 21s.
- (c) Notify the American public and the world of the situation created by the Soviets.
- (d) If Khrushchev and Castro fail to act at once, we should make a massive surprise strike at air fields, MRBM sites and SAM sites concurrently. (3)

“In my view a blockade is not enough. It is too risky to allow a long drawn-out period during which the Cubans could, at will, launch the missiles against the United States. (5)

3. Memorandum for Discussion, October 17, 1962

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba026.htm>

5. Minutes of the 505th Meeting of the National Security Council, October 20, 1962

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/forrel/cuba/cuba034.htm>

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

“I would say that [in an air strike] you're dropping bombs all over Cuba.... You're covering most of Cuba. You're going to kill an awful lot of people, and we're going to take an awful lot of heat on it.... And then...you're going to announce the reason that you're doing it is because, they're sending in these kinds of missiles. Well, I would think it's almost incumbent upon the Russians, then, to say, well, we're going to send them in again, and if you do it again, we're going to do the same thing to Turkey, or we're going to do the same thing to Iran.” (1)

“I think that we should also consider what Cuba's going to be a year from now, or two years from now. Assume that we go in and knock these sites out, I don't know what's going to stop them from rebuilding the sites six months from now....” (2)

“There seem to be three main possibilities: one is to do nothing, and that would be unthinkable; another is an air strike; the third is a blockade. I think it would be very, very difficult indeed for the President if the decision were to be for an air strike, with all the memory of Pearl Harbor and with all the implications this would have for us in whatever world there would be afterward. For 175 years we have not been that kind of country. A sneak attack is not in our traditions. Thousands of Cubans would be killed without warning, and a lot of Russians too. I favor action, to make known unmistakably the seriousness of United States determination to get the missiles out of Cuba, but I think the action should allow the Soviets some room for maneuver to pull back from their over-extended position in Cuba.” (4)

“I think we should first institute the blockade. In the event that the Soviets continued to build up the missile capability in Cuba, then we should inform the Russians that we will destroy the missiles, the launchers, and the missile sites. I favor a short wait during which time the Russians can react to the blockade. If the Russians do not halt the development of the missile capability, then we can proceed to make an air strike. The advantage of proceeding in this way is that we would get away from the Pearl Harbor surprise attack aspect of the air strike route.” (5)

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“Now, I do think we have to set in motion a chain of events that will eliminate this base. I don't think we can sit still. The questioning becomes whether we do it by sudden, unannounced strike of some sort, or we build up the crisis to the point where the other side has to consider very seriously about giving in, or even the Cubans themselves take some action on this. The thing that I'm, of course, very conscious of is that there is no such thing, I think, as unilateral action by the United States. It's so heavily involved with 42 allies and confrontation in many places, that any action that we take, will greatly increase the risks of direct action involving our other alliances and our other forces in other parts of the world. So I think we have to think very hard about two major courses of action as alternatives. One is the quick strike.... I don't think this in itself would require an invasion of Cuba. I think that with or without such an invasion, in other words if we make it clear that what we're doing is eliminating this particular base or any other such base that is established. We ourselves are not moved to general war, we're simply doing what we said we would do if they took certain action. Or we're going to decide that this is the time to eliminate the Cuban problem by actually eliminating the island.” (1)

“There are two other problems that we are concerned about [regarding an air strike]. If we strike these missiles, we would expect, I think, maximum Communist reaction in Latin America. In the case of about six of those governments, unless the heads of government had some intimation, requiring some preparatory steps from the security point of view, one or another of those governments could easily be overthrown—Venezuela, for example, or Guatemala, Bolivia, Chile, possibly even Mexico. And therefore the question will arise as to whether we should not somehow indicate to them in some way the seriousness of the situation so they can take precautionary steps, whether we tell them exactly what we have in mind or, or not.

“The other is the NATO problem. We would estimate that the Soviets would almost certainly take some kind of action somewhere. For us to take an action of this sort without letting our closer allies know of a matter which could subject them to very great, danger is a very far-reaching decision to make. And we could find ourselves isolated and the alliance crumbling.” (2)

“I do not think we should initiate such a strike because of the risk of escalating actions leading to general war. I doubt that we should act without consultation of our allies. A sudden air strike has no support in the law or morality, and, therefore, must be ruled out. I urge that we start the blockade and only go on to an air attack once we know the reaction of the Russians and of our allies.” (5)

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Special National Intelligence Estimate

October 19, 1962

The Problem

To estimate probable Soviet reactions to certain US courses of action with respect to Cuba.

The Estimate

1. A major Soviet objective in their military buildup in Cuba is to demonstrate that the world balance of forces has shifted so far in their favor that the US can no longer prevent the advance of Soviet offensive power even into its own hemisphere. In this connection they assume, of course, that these deployments sooner or later will become publicly known.
2. It is possible that the USSR is installing these missiles primarily in order to use them in bargaining for US concessions elsewhere. We think this unlikely, however. The public withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba would create serious problems in the USSR's relations with Castro; it would cast doubt on the firmness of the Soviet intention to protect the Castro regime and perhaps on their commitments elsewhere.
3. If the US accepts the strategic missile buildup in Cuba, the Soviets would continue the buildup of strategic weapons in Cuba. We have no basis for estimating the force level which they would wish to reach, but it seems clear already that they intend to go beyond a token capability. They would probably expect their missile forces in Cuba to make some contribution to their total strategic capability vis-a-vis the US...
4. US acceptance of the strategic missile buildup would provide strong encouragement to Communists, pro-Communists, and the more anti-American sectors of opinion in Latin America and elsewhere. Conversely, anti-Communists and those who relate their own interests to those of the US would be strongly discouraged. It seems clear that, especially over the long run, there would be a loss of confidence in US power and determination and a serious decline of US influence generally.

Effect of Warning

5. If the US confronts Khrushchev with its knowledge of the MRBM deployment and presses for a withdrawal, we do not believe the Soviets would halt the deployment. Instead, they would propose negotiations on the general question of foreign bases, claiming equal right to establish Soviet bases and assuring the US of tight control over the missiles. They would probably link Cuba with the Berlin situation and emphasize their patience and preference for negotiations, implying that Berlin was held hostage to US actions in Cuba.
6. There is some slight chance that a warning to Castro might make a difference, since the Soviets could regard this as a chance to stand aside, but it also would give time for offers to negotiate, continued buildup, and counterpressures, and we think the result in the end would be the same.
7. Any warning would of course degrade the element of surprise in a subsequent US attack.

Effect of Blockade

8. While the effectiveness of Castro's military machine might be impaired by a total US blockade, Castro would be certain to tighten internal security and would take ruthless action against any attempts at revolt. There is no reason to believe that a blockade of itself would bring down the Castro regime. The Soviets would almost certainly exert strong direct pressures elsewhere to end the blockade. The attitudes of other states toward a blockade action are not considered in this paper. It is obvious that the Soviets would heavily exploit all adverse reactions.

Soviet Reaction to Use of Military Force

9. If the US takes direct military action against Cuba, the Soviets would be placed automatically under great pressure to respond in ways which, if they could not save Cuba, would inflict an offsetting injury to US interests. This would be true whether the action was limited to an effort to neutralize the strategic missiles, or these missiles plus airfields, surface-to-air missile sites, or cruise missile sites, or in fact an outright invasion designed to destroy the Castro regime.
10. In reaction to any of the various forms of US action, the Soviets would be alarmed and agitated, since they have to date estimated that the US would not take military action in the face of Soviet warnings of the danger of nuclear war. They would recognize that US military action posed a major challenge to the prestige of the USSR. We must of course recognize the possibility that the Soviets, under pressure to respond, would again miscalculate and respond in a way which, through a series of actions and reactions, could escalate to general war.
11. On the other hand, the Soviets have no public treaty with Cuba and have not acknowledged that Soviet bases are on the island. This situation provides them with a pretext for treating US military action against Cuba as an affair which does not directly involve them, and thereby avoiding the risks of a strong response. We do not believe that the USSR would attack the US, either from Soviet bases or with its missiles in Cuba, even if the latter were operational and not put out of action before they could be readied for firing.
12. Since the USSR would not dare to resort to general war and could not hope to prevail locally, the Soviets would almost certainly consider retaliatory actions outside Cuba. The timing and selection of such moves would depend heavily upon the immediate context of events and the USSR's appreciation of US attitudes. The most likely location for broad retaliation outside Cuba appears to be Berlin. They might react here with major harassments, interruptions of access to the city or even a blockade, with or without the signing of a separate peace treaty.
13. We believe that whatever course of retaliation the USSR elected, the Soviet leaders would not deliberately initiate general war or take military measures, which in their calculation, would run the gravest risks of general war. (7)

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara

“The political course of action...by approaching Castro, by approaching Khrushchev, by discussing with our allies...seems to me likely to lead to no satisfactory result, and it almost stops subsequent military action. Because the danger of starting military action after they acquire a nuclear capability is so great I believe we would decide against it....

“A second course of action...would involve declaration of open surveillance; a statement that we would immediately impose a blockade against offensive weapons entering Cuba in the future; and an indication that with our open-surveillance reconnaissance, which we would plan to maintain indefinitely for the future, we would be prepared to immediately attack the Soviet Union in the event that Cuba made any offensive move against this country.

“It seems to me almost certain that any...form of direct military action will lead to a Soviet military response of some type some place in the world. It may well be worth the price. Perhaps we should pay that. But I think we should recognize that possibility, and, moreover, we must recognize it in a variety of ways. We must recognize it by trying to deter it, which means we probably should alert S[trategic] A[ir] C[ommand], probably put on an airborne alert, perhaps take other alert measures. These bring risks of their own.... We should accompany an invasion following an air strike with a large-scale mobilization, a very large-scale mobilization, certainly exceeding the limits of the authority we have from Congress requiring a declaration therefore of a national emergency. We should be prepared, in the event of even a small air strike and certainly in the event of a larger air strike, for the possibility of a Cuban uprising, which would force our hand in some way. Either forces us to accept an unsatisfactory uprising, with all of the adverse comment that result; or would force an invasion to support the uprising.” (2)

“An air strike would not destroy all the missiles and launchers in Cuba, and, at best, we could knock out two-thirds of these missiles. Those missiles not destroyed could be fired from mobile launchers not destroyed....

“After a blockade, the United States should negotiate for the removal of the strategic missiles from Cuba. We would have to be prepared to accept the withdrawal of United States strategic missiles from Turkey and Italy and possibly agreement to limit our use of Guantanamo to a specified limited time. We can obtain the removal of the missiles from Cuba only if we are prepared to offer something in return during negotiations. I believe that issuing an ultimatum, to the effect that we would order an air attack on Cuba if the missiles were not removed, is too risky. I am prepared to tell Khrushchev that we consider the missiles in Cuba as Soviet missiles and that if they are used against us, we will retaliate by launching missiles against the USSR....

The disadvantages of the blockade route are as follows:

1. It would take a long time to achieve the objective of eliminating strategic missiles from Cuba.
2. It would result in serious political trouble in the United States.
3. The world position of the United States might appear to be weakening.

The advantages are:

1. It would cause us the least trouble with our allies.
2. It avoids any surprise air attack on Cuba, which is contrary to our tradition.
3. It is the only military course of action compatible with our position as a leader of the free world.
4. It avoids a sudden military move which might provoke a response from the USSR which could result in escalating actions leading to general war. (5)

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