

SEVEN LESSONS OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS FOR THE KARABAKH CONFLICT

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Introduction

This paper explores some lessons of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis the Armenian and Azeri leaders should consider institutionalizing if they wish to prevent reheating of their conflict over Nagorny Karabakh into a war.

The October 1962 crisis stands out as not only one of the most dangerous moments in human history, but also as the most thoroughly researched case of a confrontation between two great powers that ended up being peacefully resolved.

Scores of scholarly articles and documentary books have been written on lessons of the events that unfolded some 50 years ago¹. And this paper does not aspire to extract new lessons from that seminal event. It rather attempts to discern which of the so meticulously researched features of the 1962 crisis could be instructive for those in the

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¹For a comprehensive review of lessons of the Cuban missile crisis by participants and academics visit the web site that the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs has dedicated to the October 1962 events. Accessed September 20, 2012.

Available at <http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons>.

Armenian and Azeri leadership who want to prevent an 'accidental' war over Nagorny Karabakh.

There are, of course, profound differences between the current Armenian-Azeri stand-off¹ and the 1962 crisis. The most important of these differences is that neither party to the Karabakh conflict possesses nuclear weapons. Absence of such weapons in the Armenian and Azeri arsenals means that an escalation of conflict over Karabakh into a war is fraught with significantly less disastrous consequences for humankind than a nuclear war between Soviet Union and United States would have led to in 1962.² That said, the damage that some of the Armenian and Azeri conventional weaponry systems can cause, if used against national capitals and key infrastructure facilities, may prove to be almost as devastating for the population of these small nations as a limited nuclear exchange would have been for U.S. and Soviet civilians in the early 1960s.

Absence of nuclear weapons in the Armenian and Azeri arsenals also means that neither side is capable of surprising the other with a debilitating strike that would eliminate the opponent's capability to retaliate or resist aggression. Absence of such a first strike capability creates time and space, which allows the opponents to avoid rushing into decisions that would produce devastating consequences.

¹In fact, there are far greater similarities between the Armenian-Azeri stand-off and the situation along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which merit a comparative study of its own.

²If estimates by American scientists Dean Babst and David Krieger (See "Consequences of Using Nuclear Weapons, by Dean Babst and David Krieger." Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, 1997), that, 100 megatons would be enough to destroy humankind are true, then a thermonuclear war between USSR and USA in the 1960s could have done just that. Each US or Soviet warhead at the time had a yield of at least 0.1 megaton. The sides had a total of over 7,700 deployed strategic warheads in 1962, according to the National Resources Defense Council. Kennedy's brother Robert estimated that 200 million would have been killed if a nuclear war did break out between the two nations. Robert Kennedy, "*Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*," London: Macmillan, 1969.

And, yet, in spite of these and other profound differences, there are a number of very important lessons to be inferred from the Cuban missile crisis by those interested in averting another war over Karabakh. The wealth of evidence and quality of analysis that have been produced by participants, observers and scholars of the 1962 crisis make the latter an indispensable case study for anyone interested in prevention, management and resolution of almost any inter-state conflict, and the Karabakh conflict is no exception.

Using the October 1962 crisis as an example, the paper will demonstrate how dangerously mistaken national leaders could be when they place their bets on their ability to control escalation of a conflict. The paper will demonstrate how contingency routines developed by organizations can push conflicting sides into a war against wishes or even explicit orders of national leaders; how what a leader thinks is an incremental step in controlled escalation sets off a chain of actions on international, national, organizational and even personal level, the confluence of which could lead to an Armageddon. The authors will also demonstrate how escalation can acquire its own logic, pre-determining a sequence of events that may ultimately result into an all-out war and how damaging absence of direct communication between conflicting sides could be in times of crisis.

This paper will also demonstrate how difficult it may be to achieve de-escalation of a conflict in absence of either overwhelming superiority by one side or fear of mutually assured destruction on both sides. The authors will make a case for how vital it is to avoid cornering your opponent or yourself, and how important it is for the opponents to factor in interests of other key stakeholders. The paper will also highlight how poor execution can ruin most brilliant plans and cost the author of these daring designs his career.

The paper will conclude with a number of recommendations for Armenian and Azeri leaders interested in preventing a new war over Nagorny Karabakh.

Lessons of Cuban Missile Crisis for the Karabakh Conflict

Thousands of soldiers, hundreds of tanks, artillery pieces and rocket systems have been pitted against each other along the line separating Armenian and Azeri forces ever since these two former republics agreed to cease hostilities over the Armenian-majority enclave of Nagorny Karabakh in 1994.

All these years the leaders on both sides have been calling upon their militaries to get prepared for resumption of the war that ended in Azerbaijan's defeat 18 years ago. In fact, not a month goes by without Azeri President Ilham Aliyev threatening to take the self-proclaimed Nagorny Karabakh Republic (NKR) and adjacent Azeri districts, which are also under Armenian control, by force if the peace talks fail to soon produce an outcome favorable for the Azerbaijan Republic (AR). President of Armenia Serzh Sarkisian invariably responds to these threats by asserting that his country does not wish a war, but is prepared to fight and defeat Azerbaijan again. Karabakh Armenians – who are strongly represented in the top brass of the Republic of Armenia (RA) – and their leader Bako Sahakyan also never miss a chance to weigh in this battle of words.

The national armed forces, of course, take due notice of their commander-in-chiefs' fiery rhetoric as they plan to take on each other at the first signal from the top. The soldiers keep training, and exchanging fire, in anticipation for the decisive hour. Hardly a day goes by without one of the sides opening fire across either the inter-state border or so-

called Line of Contact, at some parts of which less than 100 meters separate the foes with no peacekeeping force standing in between them. The number of combat deaths at this line grew from 19 in 2009 to 26 in 2010 [1], but then declined to 24 in 2011¹ (see Table I in Appendix). In addition to combat casualties, there have also been a number of civilians killed either intentionally or by stray bullets.

Many of the combat casualties are attributed to shots fired by sharpshooters, but the sides also regularly use large-caliber guns against each other. Armenia has repeatedly proposed that the sides withdraw snipers from the line of contact, but Azerbaijan, which is unhappy with the status quo, is not interested. On the contrary, Azeri leaders seem to be interested in maintaining tensions on the line of contact, perhaps, in hopes that the latter, coupled with Azerbaijan's ever growing defense expenditures and their fiery vows to take Karabakh, will eventually convince the Armenians into concessions.

Aliyev's war-like rhetoric may help him to keep the Azeri public focused on the enemy across the border, and, therefore, distracted from flaws of his own rule, but it has so far done nothing to change the Armenian side's position on settlement of the Karabakh conflict. Similarly, President Sarkisian may be benefiting from the fact that the Armenians are more forgiving of his mistakes as long as they believe he is making a firm stand against the hostile neighbor.

Having battled from podiums for years while avoiding actual war on ground, Azeri and Armenian leaders, probably, think they have become so skilled in controlled escalation that they will be able to keep tight reigns on the situation even if the simmering tensions escalate into

¹ "Military Losses of Azerbaijan in 2011," Etiraz.com, December 30, 2011, and, "Armenian Army Death Toll Down In 2011," RFE/RL, January 20, 2012.

a full-blown crisis. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President John F. Kennedy also thought they were in full control during the initial stage of their stand-off over deployment of Soviet nuclear weapons to Cuba in 1962. But, as days went by and the stand-off escalated, events began to take such a dramatic turn that they almost plunged USA and USSR into a nuclear war against the wishes of the two leaders.

Parties to the Karabakh conflict should realize that games of brinkmanship over that enclave cannot be played forever. One day the situation may spin out of control and escalate into a full-blown war in such a dramatically rapid way that neither the Azeri nor Armenian leaders will be able to either predict or manage. Learning and institutionalizing the following lessons of the Cuban missile crisis can help to make sure that day never comes.¹

Lesson 1: In case of a crisis, standard operating procedures can lead to a war against leaders' wishes or even contrary to explicit orders

When the Cuban crisis erupted in October 1962, the U.S. and Soviet militaries had a number of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in place that could have pushed their countries into a war against wishes of their commanders-in-chiefs.

Some of these organizational routines were set in motion on the American side when President Kennedy ordered the U.S. armed forces to go to the DEFCON 3 alert on October 22, 1962.

DEFCON 3 required U.S. Air Force (USAF) fighters to carry air-to-air missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. Pilots of these aircraft were supposed to have fired those only when ordered. However, the

¹ While the authors acknowledge that the best way to prevent a new war over Karabakh is for sides to resolve their conflict through negotiations, the latter is not subject of this paper.

pilots also had positive control over these weapons, which meant they had the physical ability to launch these missiles even without orders. That routine of flying sorties with nuclear-armed missiles could have led to a nuclear war on October 28, 1962 when the crisis was in full swing. That day a U-2 was on a routine mission to take samples from air in the Far East when it accidentally veered off into the Soviet air-space. The Soviet Air Force scrambled fighters to intercept the U-2 and USAF responded by sending its own warplanes to protect the spy plane [2, pp. 73-77].

Fortunately the U-2 made its way out of the Soviet air space before the U.S. and Soviet fighters had a chance to get into a fight. There is no evidence to suggest that U.S. government officials realized that the fighters, which scrambled to protect the U-2 plane, carried nuclear weapons with pilots having positive control over them [3, p.240]. Having learned of the incident, President Kennedy was so aggravated that he exclaimed: “There is always some son of a bitch who doesn’t get the word.” And, yet, another U-2 would have taken off the following day for a similar mission if the U.S. government did not intervene to put that organizational routine on hold. As historian Arthur Schlesinger reflected afterwards: “The great concern of Kennedy and the great concern probably of (Soviet Premier Nikita) Khrushchev, too, was the issue of command and control – that somewhere down the line, someone might act on his own.”¹

¹ “On the Brink: The Cuban Missile Crisis” (speech at JFK Library and Foundation, Boston, MA, October 20, 2002). Cited at Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs’s web site dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Accessed on September 20, 2012.

Available at <http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons/lessons-from-policy-makers/>.

DEFCON 3 also required the Vandenberg Air Force base in California to convert most of its test ICBMs into nuclear missiles, which it did. But it also left a few of the missiles set aside for tests. On October 26, 1962 one of these few remaining test missiles was launched from this base to fly thousands of miles into the Pacific. If the Soviet side knew that Vandenberg base had converted most of its missiles into combat ready weapons, they might have thought this launch was a beginning of a nuclear strike and launched a counter-strike [3, p.239].

And on October 28, 1962 a U.S. early warning radar detected an apparent missile launch from Cuba. There was no time to react so the U.S. military awaited nuclear detonation in Florida. But, fortunately, it turned out that an U.S. early warning center had carelessly run a test procedure, simulating a nuclear attack [3, p.239]. If this accident occurred few decades later, when U.S. military already had ability to launch a retaliatory nuclear strike on warning, a nuclear war might have been unleashed.

While the crisis was brewing over Cuba, the U.S. military stood thousands miles to the east of that island ready to use nuclear weapons to defend America's European allies even without explicit orders of their Commander-in-Chief. NATO's European Defense Plan required U.S. forces to automatically retaliate with nuclear weapons in case of a "strategic contact" [3, p.198]. President Kennedy only learned about this pre-delegation, almost by accident, during a briefing by Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze when the crisis was already well under way [3, p.198]. Kennedy then acted to explicitly ban commanders in Europe from using nuclear weapons without his direct order even if attacked, and that ban was kept secret from America's NATO allies in Europe.

There was also the so-called nuclear Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) that allowed the NATO commanding general in Europe to launch nuclear-armed warplanes within 15 minutes after receiving a tactical warning of an attack [3, p.200]. Lauris Norstad was that commanding general and he explicitly opposed placing NATO forces in Europe on DEFCON-3. The U.S. commander rightfully worried that such a move would alarm the Soviet-lead Warsaw Pact. And yet, the U.S. Air Force commander in Europe still placed a large number of his planes on nuclear QRA, in compliance with wishes of his USAF superiors in Washington [3, p.201].

The Soviet military had its own routines, including positive control over nuclear torpedoes exercised by several commanders of Project 641 (NATO designation: Foxtrot) diesel submarines that were dispatched from the Northern Fleet as part of Operation “Anadyr.”¹ Prior to departure the commanders had received oral instructions to use what was coded as “special weapons” in case of a nuclear war.

On October 26, 1962, U.S. Navy warships detected one of these submarines. Following a U.S. Navy SOP the warships started to drop signaling charges onto the submarine in an effort to make the latter surface. The submarine’s commander Valentin Savitsky knew nothing about the U.S. Navy’s SOPs and the submarine came close to exhausting its reserves of air. Savitsky grew increasingly disgruntled, and, according to some accounts of the incident, he ordered the nuclear torpedo on board to be made combat ready [4, p.303]. Fortunately, Savitsky eventually decided not to engage into a fight and to resurface.

¹The operation to deploy the diesel submarines was designated separately as “Operation Kama” while the overall operation to deploy a division of Strategic Missile Forces and supporting units to Cuba was code-named “Operation Anadyr.”

Some of the scholars of the crisis have also claimed that commander of the Soviet forces in Cuba General Issa Pliyev had the authority to use nuclear-armed Luna tactical missiles without authorization by the Kremlin if in dire need and if communications with Moscow had been severed.¹ Others, however, claim that an order authorizing Pliyev to use tactical nuclear weapons without obtaining Moscow's permission first had been only drafted, but never sent [5, p.243]. For instance, Soviet Lt. General A.S. Budskiy recalled that then-commander of the Soviet Strategic Missile Forces (RVSN) Sergei Biryuzov "repeatedly stressed the necessity to inform the commander of the Soviet Group of Forces, General I.A. Pliyev, his deputy and the commander of the (RVSN division) that the missiles delivered to Cuba were the means of the supreme commanders and they must be used solely in accordance with an order from Moscow" [6, p.145].

Also, Soviet deputy prime minister Anastas Mikoyan – who initially opposed deployment of nuclear weapons in Cuba and, then played a key role in managing consequences of the crisis - recalled that after Kennedy announced the blockade and demanded removal of the missiles, Soviet Defense Minister "Malinovsky made a proposal to hand over command of the missile batteries to the Cubans and officials announce that the missiles are in the possession of the Cuban military" [6, p.148]².

¹General Anatoly Gribkov, who was a senior member of the Soviet General Staff during the crisis, made such a claim. Alexander Fursenko, "Night Session of the Presidium of the Central Committee, 22–23 October 1962." Accessed on October 15, 2012.

Available at <http://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/022a95fa-5ac0-40ad-8fe6-d332b30b5a3e/Night-Session-of-the-Presidium-of-the-Central-Comm>

²According to the book, The Soviet leaders also planned to secretly leave 100 tactical nuclear weapons in hands of the Fidel Castro government after withdrawing ballistic missiles from Cuba and sent Anastas Mikoyan to Cuba in November 1962 to discuss the transfer, but then reversed themselves because of obstreperous behavior by the Cuban leader.

The aforementioned incidents illustrate how close the sides came to a devastating war in spite of all the effort by the political leaders to avoid it. U.S. President John F. Kennedy estimated the odds of a nuclear war in October 1962 “between one out of three and even” [3, p.1] while Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev stated “we stood on the brink of war” [7].

These incidents demonstrate how routines established by bureaucracies for contingencies could produce disastrous outcomes even if commanders-in-chief categorically oppose war and explicitly warn their commanders to keep the guns at bay.

While leaders in Yerevan and Baku may think they are in full control and take an action which would be meant as just another incremental step in increasing pressure on the other side, that action may set in motion a mechanism that would lead them to war, only because one of their military commanders misinterprets incoming information in fog of crisis and implements a SOP on the basis of that misperception.

The U.S. military was under much more robust civilian oversight in the 1960's than the Azeri and Armenian armed forces are now. And yet the U.S. armed forces took a number of actions, as described above, that enhanced possibility of war all while playing by the book. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara saw so much confrontational potential in military SOPs of the time that he personally instructed commanders of individual U.S. Navy ships to avoid escalations during these vessels' interactions with Soviet vessels when enforcing blockade of Cuba, even though his actions dismayed some of the U.S. admirals.¹

¹ It should be noted that Soviet ambassador to U.S. Anatoly Dobrynin told U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy on October 23, 1962 that the Soviet ships would continue sailing towards Cuba in spite of the quarantine. Khrushchev also remained assertive, writing in an October 24, 1962 letter to Kennedy that he cannot agree to the “ultimatum” in the form of the naval quarantine.

Some may argue that top Armenian and Azeri defense chiefs would feel less obliged to intervene and overrule their militaries' SOPs than McNamara did because these militaries have no nuclear weapons, and, therefore, no action would have as devastating consequences. But a new war over Karabakh would be much more devastating than the one they fought 20 years ago, given the weapons that the sides have acquired since then. As stated above, some of the weaponry systems that the Armenian and Azeri armed forces possess, such as multiple-launch rocket systems or surface-to-surface missiles, can wreak havoc almost comparable to impact of a nuclear strike, if used against targets that are within their range, such as national capitals, or Azerbaijan's oil storages, or Armenia's nuclear power plant. These conventional weapons won't erase Baku or Yerevan from the face of Earth as nuclear weapons would, but entire parts of these cities could be obliterated with many thousands dead, which would be disastrous for such small nations.

Lesson 2: Logic of escalation can lead to war

While both Moscow and Washington realized that the only alternative to a compromise during the Cuban crisis was a nuclear war, the very logic of the October 1962 events was pushing them toward such a deadly development.

At first President Kennedy thought it was inevitable that the United States would have to use force to get the missiles out of Cuba.¹ The U.S. leader and his advisors deliberated whether to order an air

¹ Kennedy said on the first day of the crisis to his advisors: "Maybe just have to just take them out, and continue our other preparations if we decide to do that. That may be where we end up. I think we ought to, beginning right now, be preparing... because that's what we're going to do anyway." "President Kennedy's Appointments," Audiotape recording, John F Kennedy presidential library and museum, October 16, 1962. Accessed January 11, 2012. <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct16/doc2.html>.

strike on Cuba or even launch a ground invasion before opting for a naval “quarantine” of Cuba.¹ Had Kennedy decided to launch a ground invasion, it would have set off a chain reaction in which the Soviets would have retaliated by sieging West Berlin or striking on the U.S. missiles in Turkey, thereby escalating the conflict in what would have inevitably lead to a nuclear war, according to Graham Allison, one of the most thoughtful scholars of the Cuban missile crisis [3].

Similar conventional scenarios could materialize in the South Caucasus. Political leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia may think they have fully mastered the art of controlled escalation, but one can imagine how a minor incident can set off a chain of events that would plunge the two republics into war.

It won't require extraordinary power of imagination, for instance, to construct the following sequence: The Azeri military sends a group of scout saboteurs across the line at night as it has done before. The group is detected and starts retreating, but gets bogged down in fighting close to the line of contact. An Azeri commander decides that he should help the group and orders an artillery or rocket strike or sends rein-

¹U.S. warships formed the quarantine line 800 miles from Cuba on October 26, 1962, but President Kennedy remained doubtful whether the quarantine would lead to a successful resolution of the crisis, even as U.S. Navy inspectors boarded the first Soviet ships, according to “Summary Record of the Sixth Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council.” John F Kennedy presidential library and museum, October 26, 1962. Accessed January 11, 2012. <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct26/doc1.html>. Kennedy's reservations were not completely groundless. By the time the he ordered a naval quarantine of Cuba on October 22, enough shipments had reached the island to make some of the Soviet missiles fully operational. However, sixteen SS-4 missiles, were already operational in Cuba as of October 20, 1962 and could be fired approximately eighteen hours after a decision to fire was taken. The bearing of these launchers was 315 degrees, i.e. toward the central area of the United States. “Minutes of the 505th Meeting of the National Security Council.” John F. Kennedy presidential library and museum. Washington 2:30-5:10 p.m. October 20, 1962, Accessed December 28, 2011.

<http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct20/doc1.html>.

forcement or both. The artillery unit miscalculates and shells end up exploding in an Armenian town where multiple-story apartment buildings are located, killing dozens or even hundreds. The Armenian side reciprocates and the once frozen conflict quickly reheats to a level, where leaders on both sides feel compelled by the public outrage and their own past vows to retaliate with more and more firepower. It should be noted that the Azeri and Armenian military personnel may be even more trigger-happy than the Soviets and Americans ever were, given that the level of animosity between the two South Caucasian nations, as well as that theirs are conventional weapons, ordering massive use of which is far less psychologically difficult than pushing nuclear red buttons.¹

***Lesson 3. Secure confidential direct communication
between nation leaders is vital during crisis***

During the Cuban missile crisis Kennedy and Khrushchev had to make a number of extremely important decisions, that were urgent, but that had to be preceded by gauging of the opposite's likely reaction. That need and the urgency of the situation in general begged for a direct confidential communication channel between the White House and Kremlin. But there was none. The established channels were too slow as they were based on multi-step SOPs that involved not only ambassadors, but also cipher officers and even, sometimes, a Western Union messenger riding a bike.

¹The recent pardon and promotion of Azeri Army Lieutenant Ramil Safarov – who hacked an American officer in his sleep with an axe – by President Aliyev represents one recent example of how deep hatred runs. “Azerbaijan pardon of officer who hacked Armenian to death with ax raises fears of new war,” Associated Press, September 13, 2012.

The sides also communicated through informal channels, which worked well, but they also slow and occasionally distorted the information that was passed through them.¹

As a result, Kennedy and Khrushchev were forced to convey some of their more urgent messages through such mediums, as radio in what excluded any possibility for candid discussion while leaving open possibility of misinterpretation of intent that had to be couched in public rhetoric.

This is why one of the few tangible and immediate results of the Cuban missile crisis was signing of the so-called Hotline Agreement in 1963 to connected Washington and Moscow by a direct line so that the leaders of the two countries could communicate during crisis.²

The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan did communicate regularly even during the fighting³ and they continue to do so. But there is no

¹One channel involved Alexander Feklisov, chief of KGB's station in Washington D.C. and ABC's foreign-policy correspondent, John Scali. The other channel involved Georgii Bolshakov, an officer at the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, or GRU, stationed in D.C. and U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who was also the president's brother. Andrei Kokoshin, "Razmyshleniya o Karibskom krizise v kontekste problemy strategicheskoy stabilnosti (Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Context of Strategic Stability)" URSS, Moscow, 2012.

²"U.S. and Soviet Sign 'Hot Line' Accord in Geneva," The New York Times, June 21, 1963 <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50E1EF93B5D117B93C3AB178DD85F478685F9&scp=2&sq=Moscow Washington hotline&st=p> (accessed January 11, 2012).

³One particular interesting episode that illustrates lack of a direct hotline occurred when the war was still under way in 1992. Then leader of Nakhichevan (and future president of Azerbaijan) Heydar Aliyev called Ashot Manucharian, the Armenian presidential security adviser, at home to ask for clearance to fly from Turkey over Armenia to his home in Nakhichevan. Manucharian was not at home, but his mother promised Aliyev Sr. to relay the message to her son. She was, however, unable to locate him. Subsequently, an Armenian aircraft tried to intercept Aliyev's plane in mid-air. The Armenian pilot radioed Aliyev's plane, asking who had given them permission to fly across Armenian airspace. The message that came back said: "Ashot's mother!" Thomas de Waal, "Black garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through peace and war," New York: New York University Press, c2003, pages 209-210.

publicly known secure hotline connecting the presidential offices in Yerevan and Baku.

Absence of secure direct communications channels between leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan means that neither political nor military leaders will have a guaranteed capability to talk to each other candidly without mediators in case of an emergency if such peacetime media, as cellular, satellite and Internet communications, are disrupted by hostile actions.

***Lesson 4. In absence of military superiority
neither side would back down***

At the time of the Cuban missile crisis the Soviet Union was still significantly lagging behind the United States in numbers of nuclear warheads that it could deliver to the foe's territory. Back then the Americans estimated the ratio of U.S. and Soviet nuclear warheads that could have been delivered in a single launch to the other side's territory to be 17 to 1.¹ As of 1962 Americans had 7,211 deployed strategic warheads while Soviets had only 522 (see Table II in Appendix.) In addition to strategic nuclear weapons, Americans had hundreds of nuclear warheads assigned to bombers and medium-range ballistic missiles deployed in Europe and Turkey that could reach the Soviet territory while the Soviets' first deployment of nuclear warheads in a foreign country adjacent to the United States took place in 1962. The Soviet leadership knew about that superiority even though Khrushchev publicly boasted that

¹ Robert McNamara, U.S. Defense Secretary at the time of the crisis, gave such an estimate in an interview with Andrei Kokoshin in the 1980s. Andrei Kokoshin, "Razmyshleniya o Karibskom krizise v kontekste problemy strategicheskoy stabilnosti (Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Context of Strategic Stability)," USSR, Moscow, 2012.

the Soviet nuclear forces were superior, claiming that the national defense industry was “making rockets like sausages from a machine.”¹ The Americans, of course, also had an overwhelming superiority in conventional forces in the Caribbean.²

Given the overwhelming American superiority, it should come as no surprise the Soviet leadership backed down when the Cuban crisis peaked.³

If were to ignore public trumpeting of their military potentials done by Azeri and Armenian leaders and look at actual systems that the sides possess, then we will see that neither side in the Karabakh conflict enjoys such an overwhelming military superiority. Azerbaijan has more aircraft, helicopters and tanks, but Armenia has such equalizers, as S-300 air defense systems⁴ and Scud-B surface-to-surface missiles with a

¹U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric delivered a speech October 1961, claiming that the U.S. nuclear forces were so superior that their second strike capability equaled the Soviet first strike capability. Four months later Khrushchev convened a meeting of top commanders and designers who told him that Soviet ICBMs, such as SS-7, were in no shape to stand up to Americans. “Before we even get to launch, there won’t be even a wet spot left of us,” said Marshal Moskalenko. Khrushchev then asked everyone to think of ways of how to catch up with Americans. William Taubman, “Khrushchev: The Man and His Era,” New York : Norton, 2003, page 537.

²And some of the members of the Executive Committee that - President Kennedy - set up to deal with the crisis - even argued it was that conventional superiority that forced Khrushchev to back down. McGeorge Bundy wrote: “Nuclear ambition caused the crisis; a sense of nuclear affront forced the response; an awareness of nuclear danger drove both governments toward rapidity of resolution; but it was conventional superiority on the scene that determined the eventual outcome.” McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, page 453.

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⁴Russia transferred up to eight batteries of S-300’s to Armenia. Andrei Areshev, “Nagorny Karabakh: kontsa protivostoyaniyu ne vidno (Nagorny Karabakh: the end of confrontation is not visible),” *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozrenie*, August 17, 2012.

range of 300 km [8]. (See Table III in Appendix for comparison in selected types of weapons between AR and RA.)

In absence of an overwhelming military superiority, neither the Armenian nor the Azeri sides would feel compelled to back down the way Khrushchev did in October 1962 should the simmering tensions soar to the brink of an all-out war.

Baku and Yerevan would also be less inclined to exercise extra caution in confrontations because they possess no nuclear weapons. Having looked into the nuclear abyss in October 1962 Moscow and Washington deemed nuclear weapons unusable¹ and avoided direct military confrontations to reduce risk of a devastating war. While some of the conventional weapons that parties to the Karabakh conflict could cause horrendous devastation in selected urban areas, all of these weapons are 'useable' in the eyes of leaders since they lack nuclear arms' potential for causing physical, psychological and economic damage.

Lesson 5: Avoid cornering the opponent or yourself

That Khrushchev was able to back down during the crisis is partly a result of a deliberate strategy by his American counterpart. John Kennedy built pressure on the Soviet leadership with determination, but incrementally, leaving a way-out that Khrushchev could take without completely losing face. Therefore, when Khrushchev announced on October 28, 1962 that the Soviets would withdraw their missiles from Cuba, he could frame it as a result of a bargain, in which withdrawal of

¹“It is impossible to win a nuclear war, and both sides realized this, maybe for the first time,” Fyodor Burlatsky, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s speechwriter, said. Cited at Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs’s web site dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Accessed September 20, 2012.

Available at <http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons/lessons-from-policy-makers/>.

missiles was traded for Washington's public assurances not to invade Cuba in the future.¹ Khrushchev could have also leaked information to international media that the bargain struck included Kennedy's assurances that Jupiter missiles would be withdrawn from Turkey within a short period of time.

As Kennedy himself later reflected: "Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy -- or of a collective death-wish for the world."²

Similarly, Armenian and Azeri leaders should consider whether their actions may corner their opponent into a position where he will have no other option, but to dig in heels or even escalate the stand-off into a full-blown war.

During the non-military phase of confrontation, actions that could corner the opponent include issuing of any kind of ultimatums or setting any deadlines that the either side would find impossible or too humiliating to accept. And even if an embattled leader does begin to lean towards accepting a skewed deal, chances are that he may fail to honor it and that aggravated public may replace him with someone who would pursue a harder line vis-à-vis the opponent. That was the case with post-Communist Armenia's first President Levon Ter-Petrosyan.

¹ Letter from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 28, 1962, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, available at <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct28/doc1.html>.

² John F. Kennedy, "American University Commencement Address," June 10, 1963. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, October 27, 1962. Accessed December 28, 2011. Available at http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/~link.aspx?_id=D6B0660281E4407E91B1E8FBD57A13C0&_z=z k

One of the major factors behind his February 1998 decision to resign before his term expired was strong criticism of support for step-by-step resolution of the Karabakh conflict that most of key stakeholders in RA and NKR opposed.¹

Massive deployment of game-changing weaponry systems, such as medium-range missiles of Scud-B type and/or air defense systems of S-400 type that may deny the opponent's capability to massively retaliate against a first strike or to effectively resist ground assault would also amount to cornering the opponent. The latter would himself in a situation where he will either have to strike first or adopt a launch-on-warning posture. As a result of such a posture, a medium-level violation of ceasefire by the newly empowered foe could be interpreted as a beginning of a massive strike that would have to be pre-empted by launch of all of one's own delivery systems. And that is just in the short-term. In the longer-term the opponent will also seek to try to restore parity, which is exactly what the Soviet side did in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis,² or even pre-empt further strengthening of the opponent by waging a preventive war as ancient Sparta did vis-à-vis Athens in the fifth century BC.

¹“The Karabakh leadership, the Armenian defense ministry, the Guardians of the Homeland, the interior and national security ministry, the opposition, the intelligentsia, most diasporan organizations, and most of the Armenian media expressed their opposition to Ter-Petrosyan's support for the proposed settlement.” Stephan Astourian, "From Ter-Petrosian to Kocharian: Leadership Change in Armenia," University of California, Berkeley, 2000.

²It fell to Leonid Brezhnev - who replaced Khrushchev in the Kremlin in 1964 - to oversee the Soviet effort to reach parity. Driven by the quest for this parity as well as the need to respond to the deterioration in relations with China, Brezhnev continuously increased military expenditures throughout the second half of the 1960's. The Soviet military budget grew by almost 40 percent in 1966-1970. As a result the Soviet Union already had an advantage in both number and throw-weight of ballistic missiles over the United States in 1972. The United States had a total 1,710 of ICBMs and SLBMs while the Soviet Union had an estimated total 2, 358 of these missiles. Catudal, Honoré M., "Soviet nuclear strategy from Stalin to Gorbachev: a revolution in Soviet military and political thinking," Verlag Arno Spitz, Berlin, 1988, Page 67.

It is equally important for leaders to retain a face-saving way out for themselves too. Again, this means avoiding issuing of any ultimatums or drawing red lines that the other side is known to have no intention to accept. Aliyev - whose nation has already lost one war to Armenia and whose rhetoric is ridden with threats to take Karabakh by force - should be, perhaps, particularly mindful of cornering himself.

Lessons 6. Consider interests of other key stakeholders

During the October 1962 crisis Kennedy and Khrushchev had to negotiate not only with each other, but also with other stakeholders that had significant potential to impact the course of events. Locked in a global stand-off, USSR and U.S.A. were keen to avoid creating impression that they were somehow sacrificing vital interests of their allies to resolve the crisis, as this would send wrong signals to their allies all over the world.

On the U.S. side, Kennedy had to factor in interests of NATO's European members, including those that hosted U.S. nuclear weapons. Knowing how disgruntled the Turks would be if told that Jupiter missiles would be withdrawn in a deal - that they had no say in - Kennedy insisted that he will keep his promise to Khrushchev to withdraw these weapons from Turkey only if it remains a secret.

The United States also had to consider reaction of its neighbors during the stand-off. Specifically, Kennedy chose the word "quarantine" rather than "blockade" when announcing action to deny Soviet ships access to Cuba. It was done because U.S. government lawyers had determined that a Western Hemisphere mutual defense treaty allowed the United States to declare a blockade of Cuba only if the Organization of American States passed a resolution authorizing Washington to do so.

The need to factor in other stakeholders was even stronger on the Soviet side. Foremost, Khrushchev had to contend with interests of the Fidel Castro government. Initially skeptical of the idea to deploy the Soviet nuclear weapons on Cuba, the Castro government took a harder line during the active phase of the conflict with the Cuban leader even cabling Khrushchev on October 27 to claim that the U.S. invasion was imminent and urging a nuclear strike against the United States if the invasion began.¹ After the resolution of the crisis, it took considerable efforts on Soviet leaders' part to mend fences with Castro who was convinced that the Kremlin had sold him out. In the end the Soviet Union reached an accommodation with the Castro government.²

Armenian and Azeri leaders should also keep in mind interests of all key stakeholders, including not only outside actors, such as allied nation states, but distinct entities within. Azeri leaders may be assuming that self-proclaimed Nagorny Karabakh Republic will blindly follow Republic of Armenia's lead in crises, but reality could be quite different, given that Karabakh Armenians – who have always had their own distinct identity and whose representatives dominate Armenia's power establishment – are unlikely to concede to any qualitative change that would be perceived as threatening survival of their entity. Like Cubans urged Soviets not to back down during the crisis, Karabakh Armenians may end up taking a harder line in a crisis with support of the influen-

¹“Fidel Castro's Letter to Khrushchev.” John F. Kennedy presidential library and museum, October 26, 1962. Accessed December 28, 2011. <http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct26/doc2.html>.

²The People's Republic of China was not so easily convinced. The Chinese Communist leaders accused Khrushchev of caving in to the United States during the crisis, asserting that the Soviet leader “adventurism to capitulationism” in the course of the October 1962 events.

tial Armenian diaspora, as it is their homeland that will be at stake in such a crisis.¹

Lessons 7: Bold, but ill-prepared moves can cost a leader his post

Chronologically, deployment of Soviet nuclear weapons to Cuba followed an unsuccessful attempt by Washington to take down Fidel Castro with the help of Cuban émigrés in 1961, and the deployment of U.S. Jupiter ballistic nuclear missiles in Turkey also in 1961.

Khrushchev claimed that he had ordered deployment of Soviet nuclear weapons to defend Cuba from a U.S. invasion, but he also later wrote in “in addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call ‘the balance of massive nuclear missiles around the globe.’”² At the time the Soviet Union was lagging behind the United States in numbers of nuclear warheads it could deliver to the foe’s territory.³

Khrushchev's decision to send a full division of the Strategic Missile Forces (RVSN) armed with 40 nuclear-armed variants of medium- and intermediate-range R-12 missiles (NATO designation: SS-4 Sandal) and R-14 missiles (NATO designation: SS-5 Slean) made sense militarily as it allowed to at least narrow the aforementioned nuclear warheads

¹Influential natives of Karabakh, including then Prime Minister of Armenia Robert Kocharyan and NKR leader Arkadii Ghukasyan, openly came out against Ter-Petrosyan’s decision in 1997 to support an OSCE plan for a phased resolution of the Karabakh conflict.

²John Correll, “Airpower and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” AirForce-Magazine.com, August 2005.

³At the time of the crisis, the United States had 203 ICBMs, 144 SLBMs and 1,595 strategic bombers while USSR had 75 ICBMs, 36 SLBMs, and 190 intercontinental range bombers. U.S. had 7,211 nuclear warheads deployed on strategic delivery systems while Soviet Union had 522 such warheads. Web site of the Natural Resources Defense Council. Accessed October 1, 2012. Available at <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab3.asp>. At the same time Soviet Union had 600 SS-4 medium range missiles deployed as of 1964. Catudal, Honoré M., “Soviet nuclear strategy from Stalin to Gorbachev: a revolution in Soviet military and political thinking,” Verlag Arno Spitz, Berlin, 1988.

gap, if not close the window of strategic vulnerability to America's first nuclear strike. The range of the R-12 missiles was 2,200 km while the range of the R-14 missiles was 4,500 km, which allowed Soviet military to considerably expand the number of nuclear warheads it could deliver to the American homeland.

However, the execution of that decision was poorly planned in what turned what otherwise would have been remembered by (at least Soviet) historians as a bold strategic move into a showcase of adventurism.

Some argue that Khrushchev should have announced the Soviet-Cuban pact on deployment of nuclear missiles and that Americans would not have necessarily reacted so strongly to such a deployment. But the pact was made secret and it was the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces that was put in charge of the operation. While meticulously planning concealment of transportation of missiles and personnel to Cuba, the Soviet General Staff didn't pay attention to camouflaging actual construction of missile launch pads as at that time SOPs of the Soviet Union's Strategic Missile Forces (RVSN) appeared to require concealing missiles only from surface-level observation.¹

The missiles ended up being detected before Khrushchev could present the American side with a *fait accompli*. And, as it is often the

¹ After debating whether to conceal first Soviet ballistic missiles in silos, it was decided that a simple earth wall around the launch pad would suffice and such walls were built in 1957 around launch pads of R-7s at the Plesetsk base in northern Russia. Also, according to the Russian Defense Ministry's version of Cuban missile crisis: "The operation had one significant flaw: it was impossible to conceal the missiles from U-2s... therefore the plan factored in possibility that Americans would detect the missiles before they were put together. The only way-out that the military could find was to deploy several air defense batteries at places where missiles were to have been unloaded." "Operatsia Anadyr (Operation Anadyr)", Russian Defense Ministry's web site. Accessed on October 15, 2012. Available at <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/history/more.htm?id=10946077@cmsArticle>.

case, with matters of national security, the buck stopped at the national leader's desk even though someone at lower level else had made the fateful errors.

When unseating Khrushchev exactly two years after the crisis fellow members of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union listed the Cuban 'adventure' among greatest mistakes made by the premier. First deputy premier Anastas Mikoyan told the October 1964 plenum of the Presidium: "I argued (with Khrushchev) about the Cuban crisis. Sending of the submarine fleet was adventurism."¹ Also Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic Dmitry Polyansky prepared a harsh speech for the plenum to support the ouster of Khrushchev.²

Leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan should think twice or even thrice before deciding to pursue military adventures vis-à-vis each other, especially given that they have even less opportunities for appropriate vetting of major policy decisions than the Soviet leadership did. The cost of losing a war may mean not only losing the post, but also exile or even imprisonment if a successful coup take place.³

¹ Here Mikoyan was referring to the decision to send submarines to escort Soviet transport ships which were to deliver missiles and nuclear warheads to Cuba in 1962. Arkhivnyy Kremlyan (Kremlin Archives), Prezidium TsK KPSS (Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Postanovleniya (Resolutions) 1954-1964," Rosspan, Moscow, 2003, Page 869.

² The part dedicated to the Cuban crisis said the following: "Only an adventurist can assert that our state can deliver real military assistance to countries of this continent..... This caused a very deep crisis, put the world on the threshold of a nuclear war and scared the organizer of this adventure a lot... . This story caused damage to the international prestige of our state, our party, our armed forces while also increasing the authority of the United States." Journal "Istochnik", Issue No 2, Moscow, Russia, 1998.

³ One can recall one such coup that occurred when Azerbaijan was losing the Karabakh war in 1993. That year saw prominent Azeri businessman and commander of the self-styled Gyandzha brigade Surat Guseinov turned his troops on Baku in what eventually forced then-President Abulfaz Elchibey to flee and facilitated Heydar Aliyev's ascent to presidency.

Conclusion

Having familiarized themselves with the aforementioned factors that increase likelihood of an accidental war over Karabakh, even congenial optimists would have to concede that probability that one of the many incidents, which occur along the lines separating Armenian and Azeri forces, can escalate into a war is not negligible. Even if we were to assume that this probability was just one percent on any given year, then the chances of another war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994–2014 are roughly one in five.¹

There are a number of steps that Azeri and Armenian leaders can take to decrease this probability, building on the above-listed lessons of the Cuban crisis, even if public de-escalation of animosity between the two nations is not an option (unless, of course, either of them intends to fight another war.)

These leaders should order a comprehensive review of contingency SOPs that their militaries and paramilitaries have developed and weed out any organizational routines that may lead to unauthorized escalation. No stone should be left unturned in search for any ‘automated’ procedures that could escalate either the tensions or actual fighting, such as pre-delegation of authority to use heavy weaponry or launch-on-warning.

While revising their own contingency routines, the sides should also take pains to familiarize itself with similar procedures on the other side, if only to avoid misinterpretation of signaling through action during contingencies.

¹ Provided that probability persists for 30 years.

It would be useful for the political leaders to personally direct strategic games specifically designed to identify points of no return in a hypothetical confrontation to make sure no action – that could lead to a qualitative change - is taken without their explicit authorization.

When playing out such crises, the leaders should also identify what steps of theirs could potentially corner the opponent into a situation where he will be forced to escalate the confrontation or even launch an attack.¹ As said above, when gauging actions of the opposite side, the Azeri leaders should also not assume that NKR would blindly follow RA's lead.

Armenian and Azeri government leaders should also enhance civilian oversight over their military and paramilitary forces. There must be a much more robust oversight by the legislative branch. And there has to be a broader discussion of both national security policies in general and policy on the Karabakh conflict in particular. Independent experts and academia should be allowed to have a greater input in these discussions to help their governments avoid adventurism or rush into action without thorough planning.

The leaders should also consider establishing a direct channel of secure communication between them and should also consider establishment of such channels between the chief commanders of formations deployed along the line of contact. To paraphrase U.S. President Barack

¹ As American diplomat George Ball said of the Cuban missile crisis: "We didn't react immediately, of course, and that's very important. Today, the temptation is always to react immediately. If we had done that then, there's no doubt in my mind that the crisis would have unfolded differently....Most of us felt that we had no business taking irretrievable action." "I would like to emphasize...the importance of not taking irrevocable action. Once you get into a fixed action/reaction dynamic, you can't predict where it's going to go," he said. Cited at Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs's web site dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Accessed September 20, 2012. Available at <http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons/lessons-from-policy-makers/>.

Obama's reflections on lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis Parties to the Karabakh conflict should have both courage and confidence to talk to their enemies to avoid crises altogether.¹ As **Kennedy's top advisor** George McBundy observed after looking into the nuclear abyss in October 1962: **the best way to manage a crisis is to avoid it.**²

December, 2012.

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¹"In Montana, Obama said President Kennedy's willingness to engage the Soviets defused the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Obama asked, 'Why shouldn't we have the same courage and the confidence to talk to our enemies?'" Cited at Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs's web site dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

Available at <http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons/lessons-from-presidents/>.

²"I entirely agree with Robert McNamara, who never loses an opportunity to make the point that the only really good way to 'manage' such a crisis is to avoid it," McBundy said. Cited at Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs web site dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Accessed September 20, 2012.

Available at <http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons/lessons-from-policy-makers/>.

Appendix

Table I

Combat Deaths on Line of Contact by Year¹

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Armenia	6	5	5	6	3	6	8	10
Azerbaijan	13	24	13	21	22	13	18	14
Total	19	29	18	27	25	19	26	24

Table II

Strategic Warheads Deployed by United States and Soviet Russia in 1954-1964²

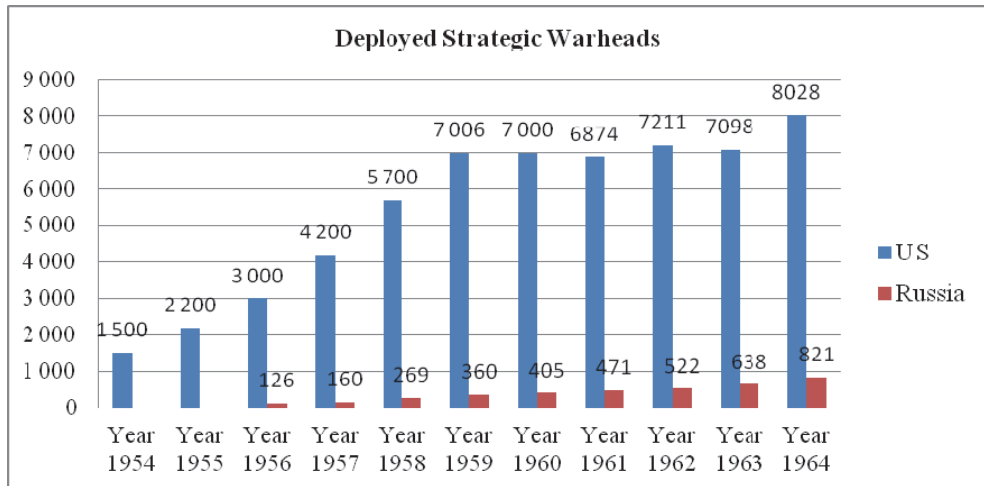


Table III

Balance of Forces of the Republic of Armenia and Republic of Azerbaijan³

Country	Army	Paramilitary	MBTs	ALFVs	APCs	Artillery	Combat aircraft	Attack helicopters
Armenia	45,846	6,694	110	104	136	239	16	8
Azerbaijan	56,840	15,000	339	111	357	458	44	26

¹ Data for 2004-2010 taken Emil Sanamyan, "Tight Leash," Jane's Intelligence Review, vol. 23, no 3 for May 2011. Data for 2011 taken from "Military Losses of Azerbaijan in 2011," Etiraz.com, December 30, 2011, and, "Armenian Army Death Toll Down In 2011," RFE/RL, January 20, 2012.

² Natural Resources Defense Council, Accessed September 20, 2012. Available at <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab10.asp>.

³ Chapter Four: Europe, The Military Balance-2012, 112:1, pages 71-182.