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Was the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, instrumental in the origins of a Détente policy between the USA and Soviet-Russia?

Dedigama, Shania

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Master Thesis

Was the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, instrumental
in the origins of a Détente policy between the USA and
Soviet-Russia?



Universiteit Leiden

Shania Dedigama

The Institute of Political Science

Leiden University, The Netherlands

MSc Political Science (International Politics)

Thesis supervisor: Dr. S. Haigh

Second Reader: Dr. F. Ragazzi

Shania Dedigama (2727900)

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Abstract

The Cuban Missile Crisis, is the closest the world has ever come to nuclear annihilation. As such, it was one of the single events that dramatically altered Cold War, and global, foreign and military policies. This thesis will examine the possibility that the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 played a crucial role in the conception of a Détente policy between the US and Soviet Russia. This thesis will also explore the watershed marked by the Crisis due to the joint effort and cooperation of President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev in averting nuclear and military confrontation, which originated Détente. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources from US and Soviet recollections of the Crisis, and supporting theories, this thesis will contest conventional perceptions that place the origins of Cold War Détente in the late 1960s with the close of the Vietnam war, under Henry Kissinger, and instead explore the possibility that Détente originated earlier, in the October of 1962.

Keywords: Cuban Missile Crisis, Détente, nuclear deterrence, Kennedy, Khrushchev, cooperation.

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I. Introduction

On the 16th of October 1962, a US reconnaissance flight captured photographic evidence of Medium and Intermediate range ballistic missiles planted in Cuba by the Soviet Union. The Soviet decision to build a missile base in Cuba breached a pledge by Khrushchev to Kennedy that Russia would not take any action to further exacerbate US-Soviet relations. Additionally, the missiles were planted in Cuba in a clandestine operation. The discovery of the Soviet missiles therefore, incited what was to become the Cuban Missile Crisis; a 13 day long nuclear brinkmanship that permanently re-adjusted Cold War policies and fundamentally refigured the relationship between the US and Soviet Russia. This study will explore the argument that the Cuban Missile Crisis altered the diplomatic posture of the Cold War by allowing for the origins of a *Détente* policy.

The research question assessed by this thesis will ask the question of; was the Cuban missile crisis instrumental in the conception of a *Détente* policy between the USA and Soviet Russia? The research puzzle lies in contesting conventional assessments that the crisis propelled Cold War to adopt a more hostile Cold War policy, (which augmented US-Soviet confrontations in the late 1960s and 1970s) and that *Détente* did not originate in October 1962.

To provide clarity to the arguments and hypothesis in this thesis, *Détente* will be considered as a 'tempered phase' of the Cold War. *Détente* is characterized by agreements between the US and Soviet Russia; less tangibly it is a new mood or spirit, a different attitude or willingness to cooperate (White, 1981). Hanhimäki, and McMahon's (2012) definition of *Détente* encapsulates a similar theme; *détente* to them referred to an era when American administrations attempted to redefine their relationship with the Soviet Union in order to reduce the potential of direct military confrontation. *Détente* was a period of the Cold War that drifted away from confrontation (Hanhimäki, McMahon, 2012).

The measures adopted during and immediately following the Cuban Missile Crisis such as the ‘crisis hotline’ and Nuclear test-ban treaty, meant that the roots of Détente were now embedded in Cold War policy. These measures nurtured mutual understanding and cooperation between the US and USSR during the Crisis, which was sine qua non in the genesis of a Détente policy in 1962.

This thesis will explore the possibility that as the culmination of Cold War tensions, the Crisis did more than drive the two nations to the brink of nuclear and military confrontation- instead of escalating the vigor of communist vs capitalist pressures, the heat of the Crisis alleviated and relieved US and Soviet hostility and acted as a catalyst for Détente which was achieved through the deterrence of war. I will attempt to prove that the Crisis in October 1962 ‘provided renewed momentum for arms control as both Moscow and Washington recognised they might not be so lucky the next time (in averting nuclear war)’ (Siracusa, 2004), thus setting a new tenor of cooperation between the two states. The formidable threat of nuclear warfare and the intimate fear and reality of it, compelled President John F Kennedy and Chairman Nikita Khrushchev to agree upon a quid-pro-quo agreement that would decrease the imminence of nuclear war. A conciliation policy followed suit in the post crisis negotiations, in the form of newly founded, amicable correspondence and mutual endeavors to placate Cold War tensions (Rabe,1991). Extensive literature has identified the significance of the Crisis and its impact in altering the status quo, nevertheless it has failed to identify it as an event that instigated Détente and essentially a ‘cooling-off period’ between the two antagonists. This is the lacuna in the research that this thesis will fill.

This research question is relevant to both historians and political scientists alike, who aim to probe into the roots of Détente (which altered the Cold War trajectory) by tracing it back to a particular event. Additionally, this research question is paramount in determining the salience of diplomacy and arbitration in terminating high intensity conflicts. The

assessment of this topic is useful for conflict researchers investigating tactics for the placation of inter-state hostilities and also in analyzing the salience of exceptionally perilous international crises in forging pathways for negotiations and compromise. Effective policymaking requires a cardinal understanding of crisis management, conflict deterrence skills (seeing as war holds the potential to damage the status quo) and diplomacy, hence a clear comprehension of the roots of Détente is pivotal.

In order to validate and reinforce my argument, I will succinctly discuss and refute a potent competing idea that postulates that with Soviet advances into South-west and South-east Asia and Africa in the 1970s, America suffered traumatic defeats for example in Saigon and the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran. These humiliations threatened and deteriorated US supremacy in the international arena and consequently led to Détente (Gelman, 1985). This thesis will additionally refute orthodox evaluations that President Nixon and his National security advisor Henry Kissinger were the initial architects of Détente in the 1970s with the weakening of the US presidency subsequent to Watergate (Horne, 2009). I will however counter this and explore the possibility that Détente was conceived earlier in October 1962 with the cooperation that emerged from within US-Soviet negotiations to avert nuclear war. Evidence for this thesis is found for example, in Chairman Khrushchev's letter to President Kennedy upon finalizing arrangements to terminate the brinkmanship, when he expresses interest to pursue a "[...] détente between NATO and the Warsaw treaty countries" (Chairman Khrushchev's letter to President Kennedy October 28th, 1962).

For the assessment of this research puzzle and in order to fill the research gap, I will review and critically analyze an extensive volume of discourse and primary documentation on the Cuban Missile Crisis and Détente. Critical discourse and archival analysis will allow me to create a nexus between my Independent variable- the Cuban Missile Crisis and Dependent variable- Détente. The discourse will include among many, the opinions and

insights of Peter Kornbluh director of the National Security archives, Arthur M Schlesinger special assistant to President Kennedy, Robert F Kennedy advisor to President Kennedy, Sergei Khrushchev son of Nikita Khrushchev, and Fidel Castro. A substantial portion of the literature is descriptive of the Crisis and its influential impact on the Cold War, but it neglects to specifically place the genesis of Détente between the US and USSR during the Cuban Missile Crisis; apt examples would be Robert Kennedy's account '13 days' and Kornbluh's book based on primary documents from October 1962.

I will incorporate revisionist accounts on the Crisis, to highlight the gap in research because they narrowly discuss Détente and instead, maintain penetrating analyses on the lessons and revelations gained through the Cuban Missile Crisis in diplomacy and International Relations. One of the cardinal arguments presented is the salience of the Crisis in augmenting inter-state efforts for conflict deterrence. Lebow's "The Cuban Missile Crisis: reading the lessons correctly" (1983), for instance claims that for policymakers, the Crisis revealed severe tenets about the utility of nuclear power and methods of administering Cold War relations effectively (Lebow, 1983). Other revisionists such as S. G. Rabe (1991) despite vaguely admitting that the Crisis eased Cold War tensions, omits the discussion or even mention of the Détente policy. Additionally, there will also be a profound analysis of primary documents; letters and telegrams of correspondence between Washington and Moscow in addition to Kennedy's Executive Committee (Ex-Comm) meeting minutes.

It can be argued that the severity and capability of the Cuban Missile Crisis to stimulate nuclear war, coerced the two nations into nuclear brinkmanship and the realization of potential nuclear warfare encouraged both Chairman Khrushchev and President Kennedy to coordinate a quid-pro-quo agreement to terminate the threat of nuclear war. Additionally, Fidel Castro's (Prime Minister of Cuba) tenacity in imploring Khrushchev to wage nuclear war during the Crisis, meant that Khrushchev now had a common cause with Kennedy

against Castro and Ché Guevara, in maintaining peace and averting nuclear war (Blight, Lang, 2012). Following the end of the 13-day brinksmanship, The Crisis fueled talks for nuclear arms reduction and Détente between the two nations.

My hypothesis will be constructed on three theories, Hegemonic stability theory, Nuclear Deterrence theory and Prospect Theory. The three theories will allow me to explain how the decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis led to the conception of Détente. Hegemonic stability theory describes how the military and nuclear superiority of the US coerced an adjustment of Soviet policy of conciliation (Milner, 1992). Nuclear deterrence theory and Prospect theory both explain the maturation of Cold War policy during the Crisis from militancy to cooperation (Powell, 2003) (Haas, 2001). The operationalization of these theories in answering the research question therefore, will be explored and elucidated in the third section of this thesis.

To effectively tackle this question, I will adopt Theory-testing Process tracing on a single case analysis. This method will be employed to explore how and why the Crisis caused the conception of Détente in addition to developing and testing the theories used. Process tracing will also draw nexuses between my Dependent (Détente) and Independent variables (The Cuban Missile Crisis) in order to confirm the Crisis as the causal mechanism for the origins of Détente in 1962.

II. Literature review

Since 1962, a plethora of documents and studies on the Cuban Missile Crisis have been released. In the era subsequent to the Crisis, government documents have been declassified, contemporary accounts of the Crisis have been published, historians and political analysts have documented analyses on the Crisis and by the late 20th century revisionist literature, debates and arguments on the Cuban Missile Crisis have been released offering this International Relations debacle a seminal position in History and foreign affairs. Scholars of the Cuban Missile Crisis have not been modest about the importance of the event in human history (Munton, Welch, 2012), however, they have neglected to identify the instrumental role played by The Cuban Missile Crisis in the conception of Détente.

The proceedings accounted for in Robert F Kennedy's first-hand account of the Crisis '*13 Days*' (1968) is corroborated by the primary sources surrounding this event. The string of correspondence via letters and telegrams back and forth between President Kennedy and Khrushchev confirms Robert Kennedy's narrative in '*13 Days*' to a certain extent. However, the bias of being a member of the Ex-Comm and the brother of the President seeps in with light exaggerations of US efforts to end the brinksmanship. The account often belittles the Soviet intent and effort to resolve the conflict through the aversion of military confrontation and instead glorifies President Kennedy's role in ushering in a period of Détente; for example, Robert Kennedy writes of the 'President's decision to keep pulling back on the decision to attack and invade and kept trying other alternatives instead'. Robert Kennedy (1968) confirms the gradual acceleration towards the tedious process of disarmament and appeasement between the US and Soviet Russia. Kennedy's contemporary account of the Crisis is a source that allows one to discern the decision-making process during the Crisis and to indicate the resolve of both nations to normalize relations. Whilst it provides a first-hand glimpse into the consternation that plagued the White House and Kremlin, it neglects to

create a nexus within the trajectory of policymaking during the Cuban Missile Crisis that allowed for the origins of Détente.

The 3 key accounts of the Crisis from the Soviet perspective describe Khrushchev's management of the Cuban Missile Crisis- one of them an account documented by Chairman Khrushchev's son; 'How my father and President Kennedy saved the world', the other an account by the Head of Nuclear arsenal in Cuba General Nikolai Beloborodov titled 'The war was averted', and third, J. Roeschley's (2011) study on Khrushchev and the Crisis. The Soviet accounts acknowledge that by 1962, Moscow was aware that the US had significant military advantage and so the deterrence of nuclear or military confrontation was a priority for the Kremlin; for example, when President Kennedy announced the quarantine of Cuba on October 22nd to mitigate the entry of Soviet missiles and ships, Khrushchev adhered (backed down) instead of resisting the naval blockade (Roeschley, 2011). The texts, Roeschley's *Nikita Khrushchev, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Aftermath*, *How my father and President Kennedy saved the world* and *How the war was averted*, arrive at relatively similar conclusions- that it was almost certain that nuclear war would not be born of Soviet intentions. Additionally, there is consensus amongst the three sources that nuclear war was to be averted at all costs in October 1962 and that the Soviets placed the missiles in Cuba for defensive not offensive purposes.

Beloborodov's account contains Soviet bias in reporting that US hostile actions against Cuba greatly increased and that US leaders were 'inciting war hysteria' (Beloborodov, 1962). His account therefore paints a distorted picture that the US misunderstood the intentions behind the Soviet placement of the missiles (which according to the Soviets was for defence against US militaristic hegemony in the west) and overreacted to the presence of the missiles (thinking it was placed for offensive purposes) by contemplating an invasion of Cuba. Beloborodov omits offering an explanation as to why the placement of

the missiles was done in a clandestine operation and furthermore neglects to discuss Détente as an outcome of the Crisis.

Sergei Khrushchev's (2002) account contrastingly, does not overtly place blame on either party for the escalation of the conflict, but reflects on the astute decisions of both leaders to avert war. The 3 texts overall emphasise on nuclear deterrence during the Crisis but only slightly links the role of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the conception of Détente in 1962: there is only one mention of the word Détente (In Roeschley's article) in all of the three Soviet sources for instance. Roeschley (2011) delves into a deep analysis of the Soviet decision-making process during the Crisis but neglects to probe the outcomes of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The article does however offer a meticulously detailed narrative of the Soviet perspective which helps me to make my arguments as objective as possible. Through the analysis of this literature, the thesis aims to direct attention towards the function of nuclear deterrence in the genesis of Détente in October 1962.

Given that a large number of Soviet accounts on The Crisis were only released subsequent to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, US secondary sources on The Cuban Missile Crisis have dominated research. American historians, political scientists and members of the Kennedy administration such as Arthur Schlesinger (1965) and P. Kornbluh (1991) inter alia, are in consensus that despite administrative coercion to pursue military confrontations with the Soviets, President Kennedy made negotiation and the deterrence of war the highest national priority. With traces of western bias, the texts fail to acknowledge Soviet efforts to terminate The Crisis, and instead concentrates on the appraisal of Kennedy's crisis management. Schlesinger (1965) alludes that the Crisis revealed Kennedy's eagerness to cooperate and replace conflict with conciliation, and Kornbluh (1991) narrates the process of decision-making that terminated the conflict when Washington and Moscow decided to dismantle their missiles in Turkey and Cuba respectively. However, both sources neglect to

imply that Détente originated during the Crisis. The texts provide narrow insight into the aftermath of the Crisis and do not provide substantial discourse on the importance of the 'Crisis Hotline' and nuclear test-ban treaty of 1963 for the development of a cooperative policy. This thesis will also refer to Blight and Lang's (2012) article published in the New York Times titled '*How Castro held the world hostage*' that follows Castro's commitment to supporting a Soviet nuclear attack on the US, and in response, Moscow and Washington's indifference to nuclear Armageddon. Despite alluding to the idea that Kennedy and Khrushchev cooperated to curb Castro's resolve to launch nuclear war, the authors place little emphasis on the new phase of cooperation and re-defined Cold War relations that was entered into by the US and Soviets to reduce the risk of nuclear confrontation.

Revisionist literature on the Cuban Missile Crisis whilst aiding the answer to the research question to a certain extent, parsimoniously discusses the role of the Crisis in the origins of Détente. Rabe (1991), Pollard (1982) and Lebow (1983), provide detailed revisionist accounts that maintain the overarching analysis that nuclear brinkmanship was new to foreign policy and that what was most important was effectively deterring war whilst saving face in the Cold War arena. All three accounts give an overview of how the US and USSR prudently calculated the risks and costs of nuclear brinkmanship. The revisionist literature insightfully identifies the role of the Crisis in re-shaping Cold War policy, but despite being titled 'Reading the lessons correctly', Lebow's (1983), account primarily focuses on the Soviet costs and risks of placing missiles in Cuba and offers explanations for the brinkmanship, instead of probing the consequences of the Crisis. The most significant lesson learnt during the Crisis, as indicated in Rabe's (1991) article was that both Kennedy and Khrushchev gained a clearer understanding for the dangers of inherent nuclear war. There is no clear indication however that this sobered and tempered US-Soviet relations. Pollard (1982) for most of his article, fixates on the proceedings of the Crisis and neglects to

assess the efficacy of the 'Crisis Hotline' and the nascent nuclear test-ban treaty as features of the newly conceived cooperative policy of *Détente*. There is insufficient mention therefore, that the Crisis had a 'sobering' effect on Cold War relations and that it encouraged the two superpowers to completely jettison the notion of nuclear war in the future.

The theories postulated by H. Milner (1992), R. Powell (2003, 1990) and M. Haas (2001) will be applied in this thesis to buttress and explain my hypothesis. According to Milner (1992) Hegemonic Stability theory maintains that the stronger partner in an inter-state relationship can coerce the other state to alter its policies. If the stronger party also adjusts its own policies and acknowledges the mutual gains, then cooperation results through the strategy of reciprocity. This theory can be directly applied to US manipulation of Cold War policy in averting war and allowing for the genesis of *Détente*. The Nuclear Deterrence theory quintessentially maintains that the two states at Nuclear brinksmanship, make decisions with the knowledge that both possess destructive nuclear capabilities and that confrontation could result in the obliteration of their respective countries. Accordingly, the decisions aim to coerce the other party to forfeit brinksmanship (Powell, 1990). Powell's rationalization and elucidation when positing his theory grants clarity, albeit omitting to include examples of when and where the theory would be most operational. The rationale behind using Nuclear Deterrence theory is in proving that the deterrence of war during the Crisis through negotiation and cooperation, improved US-Soviet relations and thereby facilitated the origins of *Détente*. Haas's (2001) Prospect theory similarly posits that high-risk decisions are taken when a party experiences losses or faces a period of uncertainty regarding cooperation. However, when a solution to the crisis is near, policymaking becomes more coherent and consistent (Haas, 2001). Whilst Haas particularly applies this theory to the Cuban Missile Crisis, he fails to test it in a general international status-quo. The latter two theories are applicable in assessing effective crisis management, the aversion of nuclear war,

the progression of foreign policy from risky to precautionary, and in the event of successfully eliminating eminent war, allowing the conception of *Détente*.

One of the contesting ideas for my thesis is supported by Gelman's (1985) *The rise and fall of Détente* which postulates that the propagation of Soviet geopolitical power in Africa and Asia between the late 1960s- 1979, coincided with American humiliations in Vietnam and Tehran (with the seizure of the US embassy). Gelman argues that consequent to the escalation of Cold War tensions outside of the western hemisphere, there was an advent of *Détente*. According to him, the origins of *Détente* should be placed at the end of the Vietnam war. This argument submits to conventional wisdom that *Détente* was birthed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but this explanation and Gelman's study on the rise of *Détente* is flawed, as it neglects to assess the crucial role of the Cuban Missile Crisis in laying the foundation for and fostering *Détente*.

Through this thesis, I will seek to build and contribute to the insights explored in the literature. Considering that the role of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the origins of a *Détente* policy is virgin territory in studies encapsulating the rise of Cold War *Détente*, I will explore and enhance evaluations on this concept in this thesis. This study will bridge the gap in the literature on the salience of the Crisis in the conception of a policy of cooperation and limited confrontation- *Détente*, from the midst of an uncompromisingly traditional, hardline Cold War policy.

III. Theory and Hypothesis

The hypothesis I will explore is that the cataclysmic impacts of nuclear war and the realization that the Cuban Missile Crisis had serious potential to escalate into nuclear confrontation, had a sobering effect on hostile Cold War policies and therefore originated Détente. The Crisis played a crucial role in the origins of Détente because it stimulated the realization and conceptualization that nuclear missiles were not a feasible instrument of war, as the US and USSR acknowledged its power; the medium- range and intermediate-range ballistic Soviet missiles placed in Cuba alone had the capacity to kill approximately 200 million Americans in addition to radiation, casualties and cancer patients (Sherwin, 2012). I will now further elaborate on the evidence that supports this hypothesis.

The nuclear brinkmanship that emerged with the Crisis in October 1962 became an existential threat that could only be constrained by a Détente policy. Furthermore, this hypothesis will maintain that the Cuban Missile Crisis marked a watershed in Cold War policy because it was the first time that a conflict of national interest had in fact, nurtured a sense of mutual understanding between both Khrushchev and Kennedy that allowed them to perceive the conflict from each other's perspective (Kennedy, 1968). The string of correspondence between Moscow and Washington despite being wary in the initial days of the Cuban Missile Crisis became increasingly tolerant. The decisions reached at the time of the Crisis were made after thoughtful deliberations so as not to humiliate or intimidate the other side, but to prioritize national security and create opportunities for negotiations and the novel conception of a Détente between the two nations. In a later interview with the New York Times, Fidel Castro posited that when the war came very close, then the two leaders of the big powers became more aware about that danger. (MacNeil, 1985). This awareness implies therefore that both Kennedy and Khrushchev were also aware of the importance of cooperation in the face of nuclear war. Furthermore, The Cuban Missile Crisis allowed the

Détente policy to flourish upon progressive talks regarding the arms reduction agreements and nuclear-test ban treaties between the US and Soviet Russia (Kahan, Long, 1972). The arms reduction agreements, and the Washington-Moscow hotline were methods to reduce tensions and generate Détente.

Additionally, my hypothesis will also explore that the Cuban Missile Crisis led Kennedy and Khrushchev to have a common cause against Fidel Castro and Che Guevara—the Cuban revolutionaries who persistently implored Khrushchev to initiate nuclear strikes on the USA. Unlike Castro, Kennedy and Khrushchev were aware of the devastation that would ensue nuclear war and so the Soviet Union effectively refused to consider Cuban demands for war. Whilst Cuba was convinced the US must be attacked, Washington and Moscow tempered tensions and began drawing up peaceful resolutions unbeknown to Castro (Blight, Lang, 2012). In a response to a letter from Khrushchev on the 26th of October 1962, Kennedy wrote to the Soviet Premier “I would like to say again that the United States is very much interested in reducing tensions and halting the arms race; and if your letter signifies that you are prepared to discuss a Détente affecting NATO and the Warsaw pact, we are quite prepared to consider with our allies any useful proposals” (Kennedy’s response to Khrushchev’s letter, 1962). Khrushchev and the Kremlin took a similar stance regarding their intentions to avert war; “We (The Soviets) were confident that reason would triumph and this (war) would not happen” (Beloborodov, 1998). There was a deliberately conscious effort to assure each other that an escalation of the conflict was fatuous and that Détente and an immediate halting of nuclear build up was necessary.

Three foundational theories will be used to validate my claim and hypothesis. The theories will explain the origins of a cooperative policy during a Crisis. The first is Hegemonic stability theory. This theory posits that the stronger party in a relationship can enforce cooperation by coercing the other (weaker) side to alter its policies. If the stronger

party also adjusts its own policies and acknowledges the mutual gains of conciliation, then cooperation has occurred because of the adoption of a strategy of reciprocity (Milner, 1992). Acknowledging the military superiority of the stronger party makes compliance during negotiation a simpler undertaking.

The second, Nuclear deterrence theory. This theory holds that during a crisis, both powers are aware that they each possess highly destructive capabilities. This mutually assured destruction and awareness encourages both parties to deter war because either one of the opponents would acknowledge the futility and ludicrousness of launching a nuclear attack on the other. The second strike capability of both states therefore discourages the escalation of nuclear brinkmanship and persuades one of the powers to forfeit. Furthermore, the knowledge that nuclear strikes could continue even after the second strike, increases the risk and eagerness to deter war. Accordingly, since nuclear war is not the rational approach opted for by the two powers, they resort to adopting a strategy by which the states rely on limited sanctions. This is a strategy of limited retaliation where a state would apply coercive pressure on their adversary through limited, non-nuclear attacks to maintain the hostile status-quo with the hope that their adversary would forfeit (Powell, 1990); for example, imposition of the naval blockade on Cuba by the US. Nuclear deterrence theory offers explanations for the immediate reactions to the threat of nuclear attacks and how nuclear war can be averted by states by playing on the fear of potential nuclear confrontation.

Similarly, Prospect Theory also offers explanations for decision-making during Crisis time. This theory posits that when states face losses and when their probability estimates of peace and conciliation are low, the decisions made, have risky predispositions. Vis-à-Vis the Cuban missile crisis, the theory supports that when Kennedy and Khrushchev were pushed into a sphere of losses, uncertainties and when the estimates for success in ending the Crisis were low (in the midst of the 13-day nuclear brinkmanship), both the leaders opted for high-

risk policies that would not result in the best expected value of costs, benefits and success. However, towards the end of the 13-day brinksmanship, as the tide of hostility and wariness waned, and the estimate of key outcomes approached certainty of conciliation and an end to brinksmanship, both the US and Soviet Russia diverted away from risky policies and towards more comprehensive decisions of a maximizing framework (Haas, 2001)- a framework of cooperation, i.e. *Détente*.

The three theories chosen are appropriate for this thesis because they each explain how the decision-making processes adopted during crisis time can produce conciliatory results. Hegemonic stability theory, Nuclear deterrence theory and Prospect theory fit the case study the best as they draw nexuses between how the high-intensity pressures of a potential confrontation can discourage two states from pursuing war and instead work towards amicably negotiating a cooperative framework. Given that by 1962, both the US and USSR possessed exceedingly destructive military and nuclear capabilities, the theories are justified in implying that the unfeasibility and destruction of confrontation in the nuclear age, dissuaded war.

Through the adoption of research methods, the following section of this thesis will elucidate how the theories mentioned in this chapter explain and place the origins of *Détente* during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Furthermore, the methods will allow me to use the theories to explain why I perceive the Crisis as the causal mechanism of *Détente* by using the reasons outlined in my hypothesis.

IV. Methods

The method employed to answer this research question will be theory-testing process tracing through single case analysis. Theory-testing process tracing is a fitting ‘within-case method’ to explain the causal mechanism by linking Dependent and Independent variables, to test theories and to eliminate alternative explanations by invalidating them. Content analysis will also enable this study to identify the common themes and concepts that percolate into the archival and secondary literature that will be used to support my argument.

I chose this case-study to contest conventional wisdom that holds that Détente between the US and Soviet Russia emerged in the late 1960s with the close of the Vietnam war. Furthermore, the Cuban Missile Crisis, albeit accepted as one of the most seminal international crises of the 20th century, does not have sufficient standing within the discourses on Cold War Détente- discourse on this crisis fails to or insufficiently identifies the influential role played by the Cuban Missile Crisis in transforming Cold War militancy to a Détente policy. Through this case study, this thesis will investigate the possibility that a Détente policy originated during and immediately following the Cuban Missile Crisis (despite escalation of tensions after Kennedy and Khrushchev’s terms in office).

The Dependent variable in this thesis will be the Détente policy between the US and Soviet Russia, the Independent variable or causal mechanism will be identified as the Cuban Missile Crisis. What are the variables that can be found directly linking the causal mechanism to the Dependent variable? The decisions made by Kennedy and Khrushchev became focused on efforts to appease and negotiate rather than to heighten the arms race and nuclear brinkmanship. These decisions made during the Crisis then resulted in the conception of Détente between the two countries; For example, once there was certainty that the Soviet Union would be willing to compromise, a quid-pro-quo agreement was outlined to halt the problems stemming out of Cuba. Khrushchev agreed to remove the Cuban missiles under UN

supervision, in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba and an additional tacit agreement that the US will render their Jupiter missiles in Turkey inoperable (President Kennedy's response to Khrushchev's letter, 1962). How did the consecutive days of negotiation and correspondence during the Crisis produce Détente through the deterrence of war? The Cuban Missile Crisis set the stage for the development of a cooperative policy which culminated in the Nuclear test-ban treaty of 1963 (and a general appeasement of Cold War tensions). Subsequently, these talks to reduce confrontation (inter alia) could possibly have led Kennedy and Khrushchev to galvanise their desire to pursue a policy of Détente. The string of correspondence via letters and telegrams back and forth between Washington and Moscow over the 13 days of the Crisis (Moscow from the 16th- 28th October 1962), serve as primary source documents that support the causal mechanism of Détente (the Dependent variable) as being the Cuban Missile Crisis. The documents evidence that despite the initial tensions and wariness between the two nations, both Kennedy and Khrushchev acknowledged the devastation that would entail a nuclear confrontation and subsequently expressed their inclination to deter war and forge relations of cooperation; for example, Kennedy indicates keenness to consolidate a Détente with the countries under the Warsaw pact (President Kennedy's response to Khrushchev's letter October 26th, 1962).

Using Theory-testing process tracing, the following analysis will trace how the decision-making process during the Cuban Missile Crisis delivered a Détente policy, and therefore apply, test and validate the Hegemonic stability theory, Nuclear Deterrence theory and Prospect theory. The trajectory of decisions progressed from high-risk policies, such as the blockade on Cuba imposed by Kennedy which was considered an act of war by the Kremlin, to policies of cooperation such as the quid-pro-quo agreement that ended nuclear brinkmanship, and negotiations for arms reduction programs. The naval blockade could also be considered an act of 'limited sanction', which is a retaliatory strategy that would

intimidate the adversary of a state to forfeit brinksmanship (Powell, 1990)- through Nuclear deterrence theory, this strategy of limited sanctions allows me to identify Détente as a Dependent variable of the Crisis.

During the Crisis, American and Soviet interlocutors played a crucial role in helping to formulate the cooperative trajectory of decision-making. For example, John Scali a senior reporter for ABC news was approached by the Soviet embassy with a proposal that laid a framework to initiate negotiations to end The Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet Union pledged to remove the missiles under UN supervision, if the US would lift the blockade and guarantee that there will be no invasion of Cuba (Kennedy, 1968). The Kremlin sent the proposal after the first week of heightened pressure between the two countries, when Cold War relations began to shift towards deterrence. Subsequently, Kennedy and his Ex-comm moved to discuss the proposal from the Soviets with Soviet ambassador to the USA, Anatoly Dobrynin (Kennedy, 1968), once plans for an amphibious invasion of Cuba had been jettisoned and there surfaced a spirit of Détente- this applies Prospect theory to this case study. The application of both Nuclear Deterrence theory and Prospect theory to the series of decisions taken by the Ex-Comm and President Kennedy in retrospect therefore, proceed to explain how the Independent and Dependent variables of this thesis are connected. The theories provide a lens through which the decision-making process during the Crisis can be viewed as a potential causal mechanism of Détente.

The naval blockade issued by Kennedy over Cuba on the 22nd of October for instance, directly links the Cuban Missile Crisis to cooperation (Détente). Through the lens of the Hegemonic stability theory, the Crisis can be identified as a causal mechanism of Détente; Khrushchev could have directed the Soviet vessels to breach the blockade, instead he ordered all Soviet ships to halt and adhere to the quarantine/blockade imposed by the US (Roeschley, 2011), because he wholly acknowledged America's significant nuclear and military

advantage. The theories therefore provide probable explanations for my hypothesis that the devastation of impending nuclear war which could have erupted following the nuclear brinksmanship of the Cuban Missile Crisis, sobered Cold War tensions between the US and Soviet Russia, consequently coercing them to take comprehensive decisions that would originate Détente in October 1962.

Process tracing enables me to question and dispute alternative explanations/answers to the research question and focus on the key causal mechanism of Détente- The Cuban Missile Crisis. Contesting arguments have postulated that a Détente policy emerged with increasing US-Soviet confrontations in the late 1960s and 1970s. According to Gelman (1985) Détente officially originated at the end of the Vietnam war and matured in the 1970s (Gelman, 1985). The evidence gathered by this thesis however, invalidates this and proposes instead the possibility that the seeds of Détente were sown in 1962 with the termination of nuclear brinksmanship during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Détente policy between the US and Soviet Russia that tempered Cold War tensions did not emerge in my opinion, spontaneously and impulsively out of the heightening concurrence of US and Soviet intervention in Asia and Africa in the 1970s, instead one can derive from the evidence that Détente was forged in the transformation of Cold War spirit, and a new willingness to cooperate consequent to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The final letters and statements made in Washington and Moscow (on the 28th of October) whilst effectively terminating The Crisis, ended the arms race and reduced world tensions (Public statement by president Kennedy, 1962). By neglecting to identify the prominence of the Crisis, contesting arguments stress the salience of the Vietnam war and Cold War of the 1970s in crafting a Détente policy.

The methods will draw on conditions identified in the abundance of archival documentation on the Cuban Missile Crisis, which requires the use of content analysis that will detect the common themes and concepts within it. The correspondence tacitly evidences

that *Détente* was achieved albeit the word *Détente* is mentioned parsimoniously in the correspondence. The primary sources indicate transition from hostile, wary relations to *Détente*, therefore it is evidence that could support that *Détente* was forged in the heat of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Additionally, the archival documents coherently carry the themes of urgency to cooperate and normalize relations. Whilst acknowledging the cataclysmic outcome of potential nuclear war, the unequivocal urgency of the two statesmen to comply and cooperate, runs through the latter part of US-Soviet communications (from the 26th-28th of October). The themes recurrent in the correspondence belonging to the latter phases of the Crisis differs from that in the early letters and telegrams. From the 15th to the 25th of October 1962, the Kennedy-Khrushchev communication is plagued with mutual wariness and suspicion. The initial communication is a tacit blame game that plays out until Kennedy and Khrushchev recognise the need to compromise and end brinkmanship.

Conclusively, process-tracing allows this study to eliminate alternate variables and indicate the Cuban Missile Crisis as the causal mechanism for the origins of *Détente*. Furthermore, the theories used in this thesis were tested through a close evaluation of the decision-making process during the Crisis, that could possibly have led to *Détente*.

V. Analysis

When America discovered the presence of Small and Medium range ballistic Soviet missiles in Cuba, the White House and the President took the initial steps to prepare for confrontation. Kennedy now felt deceived by Khrushchev's violation of their agreement at the Vienna summit in 1961 to avert any action that would further strain US and Soviet relations. Instead of augmenting hostilities and nuclear and military confrontation however, the Cuban Missile Crisis- an acute nuclear brinkmanship which presented the opportunity for any miscalculation to trigger a nuclear war, annihilating millions, sobered the two nations; the proof lies in the implications laid in the primary, secondary and revisionist sources on the Crisis. For example, empirical research has deduced through the assessment of states' behaviour, that both the US and Soviet Russia acted according to 'the rules of responsible diplomacy' (Lebow,1983) thus cooperating to end brinkmanship.

This chapter will present the findings of the thesis. The peril that lay in allowing nuclear brinkmanship to potentially escalate into war meant that Kennedy and Khrushchev now created an atmosphere of mutual understanding and common ground to deter nuclear war; for example, both leaders found common cause in making decisions against the protest of the revolutionary zealots Castro and Che Guevara to launch nuclear war. Both Kennedy and Khrushchev began to perceive the situation from each other's perspective, working towards a mutual goal of cooperation and a period of declining confrontation following the recognition that nuclear war had the capability to obliterate their nations.

This thesis places the origins of Détente in October 1962. How can this hypothesis be substantiated? The Cuban Missile Crisis offered the US and Soviet Russia an opportunity to cooperate and temper their relations. Following the Eisenhower policy of confrontation, and military build-up in the 1950s (Chernus, 1999), The Crisis was an ensuing opportunity to ease Cold War tensions, thus witnessing the birth of Détente. It took an international crisis

with potential cataclysmic consequences to sober the hostile state of Cold War affairs and direct policy towards cooperation.

The wealth of archival material available on the Crisis reveals the gradual development of a *Détente* policy throughout each of the 13 days. Historians and political scientists have however, failed to identify this development. The correspondence between Moscow and Washington until the 25th of October 1962, were consumed with wariness and confrontational rhetoric, however by the 26th, Kennedy and Khrushchev began to express their interest for a *Détente* and an end to the brinkmanship with the realization that Nuclear war was not a feasible method of military confrontation (Letter from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy October 28th 1962, Public statement by President Kennedy effectively ending the 13 day crisis October 28th 1962). As per the conditions in the primary sources, it can be derived that The Cuban Missile Crisis indelibly enabled the birth of a *Détente* policy between the US and USSR, giving impetus for arms control (Siracusa, 2004), and a ‘cooling off’ period.

My definition of *Détente* as encompassing a tempered phase, a new attitude, willingness to cooperate, a period of agreements between the two states and a period that drifted away from confrontation (Hanhimäki, and McMahon, 2012, White, 1981) is a plausible definition constructed on conventional understandings of *Détente*. Despite using a conventional foundation to define this period of *Détente*, this thesis has explored the possibility that *Détente* occurred much earlier than conventional wisdom posits. How do the theories explain why the Cuban Missile Crisis was a causal mechanism of *Détente*? Hegemonic stability theory explains that *Détente* occurred because of Soviet acknowledgment of American nuclear and military superiority; by 1962, the US had 25,500 warheads whilst the Soviet Union had 3,350 (Kristensen, 2012). Given the missile gap, a Soviet effort at nuclear war would have undeniably failed, and therefore, adjusting their

policy by de-operationalizing the missiles in Cuba was the most secure option available. Because the Soviets adhered to US pressures to de-operationalize and remove the missiles from Cuba, the US too, directed their policy towards conciliation which then resulted in cooperation through reciprocity.

Nuclear Deterrence theory explains and allowed me to explore that Détente occurred because the US and USSR deterred war through their acknowledgement of each other's destructive nuclear capabilities, which then subsequently increased the probability of one state conceding to the other out of fear or unwillingness to take the risk. As elucidated by the theory, the strategy of limited sanctions (like the naval blockade on Cuba for example), was used by the US to exert pressure on the Soviets and encourage them to concede. The fear of second strike capability furthermore, encouraged the deterrence of war (Powell, 2003) and the realization that nuclear confrontation was not a feasible method of confrontation. The deterrence of war subsequently allowed the US and Soviet Russia to produce and enter into a period of comprehensive policies of cooperation/Détente.

Prospect Theory explains that Détente occurred when Kennedy and Khrushchev were both certain that they would not pursue military or nuclear confrontation. When certainty of negotiations to deter war approached, the two countries rejected their framework of risky, wary policies and pursued cooperation (Haas, 2001) originating therefore, a period of Détente. It was only at this point that cooperation was pursued because an initiative taken by either towards negotiation to end the brinkmanship rather than to engage in military confrontation earlier, would have been perceived as weakness in the Cold War arena. For example, in the initial phases of the Crisis from the 13th to the 26th of October, Kennedy and Khrushchev remained intransigent and refused to compromise in negotiating a settlement to end the nuclear brinkmanship. Both statesmen were in the midst of an arms race and did not want to forfeit. However, subsequent to the intervention of UN secretary general U Thant,

certainty of cooperation and the deterrence of nuclear war became further defined. The urgency to resolve the Crisis was now evident, and a period of *Détente* was conceived in which not only the Cuban Missile Crisis was deterred but a ‘crisis hotline’ was established, a nuclear test-ban treaty was agreed upon and trade relations between the US and Soviet Russia developed (BBC History extra, 2020).

There was persistence from his military advisors for the President to invade Cuba and prepare for military confrontation with the Soviets, however, with word from Russia that Khrushchev had convened the Politburo to find a politically acceptable way to dismantle the missiles in Cuba, Kennedy made it a priority to back down and terminate policies that would intimidate and heighten animosity between the two states. When the world came close to nuclear war in 1962, the commitment to the efforts that would deter war was more important than luck (Kornbluh, 1990) and confrontation. It was the search for a ‘diplomatic solution in which both sides got something their leaders needed to save face and evade the horror of nuclear war’ (Kornbluh,1990). This tests and applies the Nuclear deterrence theory and Prospect theory of when deterrence of war is achieved after states fully comprehend their destructive capacities, prompting both states to search for common grounds of *Détente* only once there is certainty of negotiating an end to the brinkmanship.

The conditions outlined by the theories therefore, disconfirm prior posited hypotheses about the origins of *Détente*. Using evidence from literature and primary sources, this thesis will disconfirm the hypothesis postulated by Gelman (1985), that the advent of *Détente* came at the end of the Vietnam war under President Nixon and Kissinger. I will explore the possibility that whilst US defeat in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the gradual decline of the Cold War, it was the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 that altered Cold War foreign policy towards *Détente*. Gelman (1985), places the origins of *Détente* much later in Cold War history, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to him, the advent of

Détente came at the end of the Vietnam war when American humiliations like the siege of Saigon (where North Vietnam and the Soviets emerged victorious) augmented. Hegemonic stability theory however, helps to explain the importance of the Cuban Missile Crisis earlier on, in revealing US nuclear superiority which encouraged the Soviets to adopt an anti-confrontational policy. Subsequently when the US too rejected their policy of aggression, cooperation occurred. The theory therefore disconfirms Gelman's hypothesis by emphasizing the salience of the Crisis in transforming an aggressive Cold War policy to Détente, because recognition of the utility and destructive capacity of military/nuclear confrontation between the world's superpowers in the 1960s, came only in October 1962 in the midst of nuclear brinkmanship- the theory thus disconfirms that US defeat in Vietnam gave impetus for the advent of Détente.

In relation to the explanations provided by the 3 theories, the Cuban Missile Crisis provided the opportunity firstly, for Soviet acknowledgement of US military and nuclear superiority which then discouraged them from confrontation. Secondly it gave both states the opportunity to abandon a hard-line militaristic Cold War policy upon realization of the unfeasibility of nuclear war, and finally as posited by the theories, negotiations instead of confrontation were decided upon whilst allowing Kennedy and Khrushchev to save face in the international arena because Détente was pursued only once the keenness for cooperation had been signalled by both Washington and Moscow. By the 26th of October, Moscow and Washington came to express interests to normalize relations and to sincerely 'remove the threat of war' (Premier Khrushchev's letter of October 26th, 1962). Having assessed and analyzed the theories and evidence according to the conditions laid out in the literature and primary evidence on the Cuban Missile Crisis, my hypothesis has held and been substantiated by my investigation in this thesis, that the Cuban Missile Crisis in all its severity and faculty, pushed the world to the brink of nuclear warfare, and the astounding reality of this prospect

coerced Kennedy and Khrushchev to dampen the pressure, enter into a tempered phase of cooperation and negotiate a quid-pro-quo agreement that facilitated the origin of Détente in October 1962.

The employment of Process tracing as a method traced the causal mechanism of Détente between the US and Soviet Russia, as being the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Crisis was responsible for the nascent grounds upon which communication and correspondence between the two superpowers grew and for the beginning of the Nuclear test-ban treaty. Additionally, a mutual understanding of the futility of nuclear war emerged through the negotiations during the Crisis, along with a reduction of nuclear threats with the dismantling of Soviet missiles in Cuba and America's Jupiter missiles in Turkey. "Both Kennedy and Khrushchev were terrified of nuclear war and exercised restraint and made whatever concessions were necessary to resolve the crisis [...]" (Lebow, 1998). The solution to the Crisis was built on a foundation of trust that stemmed out of a fear of nuclear war (Plokhy, 2021) and this trust built the cooperation imperative for Détente.

Founded on the conditions laid out by the evidence presented in this thesis, Détente therefore undoubtedly originated out of the heat of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and not, as history predominantly posits in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the close of US and Soviet interventions in South East Asia. Thus making the Crisis instrumental in the conception of Détente.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis provided in this thesis explores and to a great extent confirms the possibility that the Cuban Missile Crisis was instrumental in the origins of a *Détente* policy. Not only did it provide impetus for *Détente*, but it can also be argued that the Crisis drastically altered the power dynamic between the US and USSR. Some political historians have postulated that before the Crisis Khrushchev was in the driver's seat setting the agenda and pace of Cold War relations and Kennedy was simply reacting each time. However, this changed after the Crisis and Kennedy was no longer perceived as weak, but as the stronger power (Plokhy, 2021).

My research question developed from my interest in investigating the shifts and fluctuations in the intensity of Cold War policy and dynamics. The Cuban Missile Crisis, despite being the closest the world has come to nuclear war, broke with the extremely belligerent policies of the 1940s and 1950s and sobered both states, giving rise to cooperation and reduced confrontation- *Détente*.

By confirming that *Détente* originated during the Crisis, this thesis also reiterates the significance of the Cuban Missile Crisis in altering the international status-quo. Nevertheless, despite Kennedy and Khrushchev's initiative to birth *Détente*, Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Soviet leader Brezhnev increased Cold War confrontations in Asia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hints of *Détente* however, remained in Cold War policy subsequent to the Crisis and despite sporadic moments of increased hostility between the US and USSR, the essence of cooperation and opportunities for tempering Cold War relations was permanent after October 1962. Thus, with the world as its witness, in the midst of one of history's greatest Crises, the most hostile inter-state relation was swiftly re-directed towards a policy of *Détente*.

The Crisis provided the impetus necessary for a dramatic alteration in Cold War policy, with UN secretary general U Thant intervening in the negotiations. For 13 days, in October 1962, the world was filled with trepidation as they watched two of the world's superpowers at nuclear brinksmanship. However, for the greater good, both Kennedy and Khrushchev decided to drive Cold War policy towards mutual understanding, to quell the risks of nuclear war (by de-operationalizing each of their missiles in Turkey and Cuba respectively) and enter a new era of foreign relations constructed on cooperation.

Although my thesis is restricted (due to word and time limitations) to the study of the salient role played by the Cuban Missile Crisis in the origins of Détente between the US and USSR, it opened up avenues for further research; such as the issue of why Détente was temporarily abandoned to a great extent after October 1962, with the escalation of US and Soviet involvement in the war in Vietnam.

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