

Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis for the Doklam Standoff

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On 28 March 2017, India's former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon at a talk at the O. P. Jindal Global University on his new book, *Choices*, made an important observation. When quizzed about his views on the value of International Relations theory in the praxis of international relations he replied that it was not just theory that was essential to negotiating the vagaries of world politics but it was also necessary to know 'ones cases well'. Thus, in order to fully comprehend the contours of any current inter-state dispute it might be helpful to sift through the annals of international history to find appropriate cases that more or less fit the current circumstances and draw lessons from them to meet contemporary challenges.

Menon's advice is particularly pertinent in the current stand-off between China and India in Doklam area of Bhutan. A comparable case would be the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 from the annals of Cold War. Beginning from 16 October 1962 it was perhaps the most anxious 13 days in the history of world politics since the end of the World War II. Never had the two superpowers ever come so close to the brink of nuclear apocalypse before 1962 and fortunately, since then.

Comparing the Cuban Missile and the Doklam Crisis

On 16 October 1962 it came to the notice of American President John F. Kennedy that a U-2 spy plane flying on a regular reconnaissance sortie over Cuba had captured photographic evidence of missile-building activities on the east coast of Cuba. Given the closeness of Cuba to the shores of the United States, this Soviet move of emplacing missiles – a clearly offensive weapon – on Cuban territory was perceived by the US as the most serious national security threat since WWII.

After intense discussions among members of the ExComm – a special group assembled by President Kennedy in the immediate aftermath of the discovery – over what the US' next moves should be, Kennedy publicly declared a blockade on Cuba on 22 October and demanded the Soviet Union immediately withdraw the missiles (BCSIA 2017a).

On 28 October, after a week of back and forth between Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev – both operating with the conscious knowledge that their decisions were critical to the very survival of their two states – the two compromised and backed-off by

preempting disastrous consequences in the event of further escalation.

Now fast forward to the current Doklam crisis between India and China. Playing out on the lines of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, here too are nuclear armed adversaries in a pitched contest of political brinkmanship. Although the current crisis has comfortably surpassed the 13-day mark of the 1962 US-Soviet crisis, there is little sign of either India or China backing down to settle the dispute. Like in the case of the US and Soviet Union, both India and China seems fixed in making political points vis-à-vis each other.

Never had the US and the USSR come so close to the brink of nuclear apocalypse as during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

To be sure there are some critical differences between the two crises. Firstly, and most importantly, the two superpowers were operating under high-pressure conditions of the Cold War as leaders of two clearly outlined camps. This meant that room for maneuver was significantly limited.

In contrast, India and China today operate under considerably less pressure. Notwithstanding the nature of systemic power politics India and China share a far closer relationship than the US and Soviet Union did. At the least there is no mention of ‘war’ to describe the context of their current relationship. Instead, they have a large trading relationship and given the economic potential of the two states, benefits from economic interdependence are only expected to grow manifold in the coming years. Sensible leaders on both sides of the border clearly understand the adverse impact that any conflagration could have on potential economic benefits.

Secondly, both the Soviet Union and the US had far more nuclear weapons than do India and China. Moreover, given the intense conditions of the Cold War, nuclear war was

never off the strategic radar. As a result the stakes in comparison to the current crisis were much higher. There are no signs that either India or China envisages a nuclear war, save some rash, tunnel-eyed war-mongers in both countries. However, any small escalation leading to a shooting match could easily end in a nuclear war.

International politics is a dangerous business and therefore, any poorly thought out move could quickly spiral out of control. As Khrushchev remarked in a letter to Kennedy on 27 October 1962 – with the mushroom clouds of nuclear war still hanging ominously over the two countries – that even a spark of military conflict could render all negotiations ‘superfluous because other forces and other laws would then come into play—the laws of war’ (Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States n.d.). Uncertainty and unpredictability are the core elements of the laws of war.

Thirdly, unlike in the Cold War there is no significant ideological competition between India and China. It is true that one is a democracy and the other an authoritarian state but neither sees themselves nor the other solely through that lens, as was the case with the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As pointed out above India and China share extensive trade relations with each other and both have allies that effectively are from the other side of their own political inclination. Moreover, China has a nominally democratic Pakistan as an all-weather friend and India has a communist Vietnam as a close ally in the southwestern neighborhood of China.

Finally, both Kennedy and Khrushchev could derive much needed political capital from the Cuban incident. For Khrushchev the move to create a security risk for the US was aimed at, among others, in symbolizing to the Communist camp that the Soviet Union and not China was still the leader in revolutionary class struggle.

For Kennedy acting decisively in the face of a blatant Soviet threat was imperative to save face in an election year when he had repeatedly

reassured electorates and his vigorous Republican opponents that the Soviet Union was not involved in any ‘offensive’ military buildup in Cuba. Moreover, after the disastrous failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, Kennedy could surely not afford yet another foreign policy blunder. With the surprise discovery of nuclear tipped missiles at US’ door steps, any political vacillation would have *at best* cost Kennedy an election.

Contrast this with the virtual absence of any such external or domestic political needs for Narendra Modi in India and Xi Jinping in China. Both these leaders now have a firm grasp over domestic affairs and perhaps are the most popular leaders in their respective countries. Of course generating nationalism through such incidents always pays political dividends, but risks associated with the current standoff far outweigh any benefits that nationalism could derive for the leaders. Most importantly, any escalation leading to war would significantly dent the very foundation of their popularity: their economic agenda.

Learning from the Cuban Missile Crisis

These important distinctions between the US-Soviet standoff in 1962 and the present India-China notwithstanding, the Cuban Missile Crisis can serve as an important ‘case’ for both Indian and Chinese leaders to reflect upon while they try to think of a way out of the current dispute. Five lessons have been pointed out below. The purpose is not to provide concrete steps by which the current dispute can be diffused, rather to only highlight some lessons that can be drawn from the 1962 crisis for it to be useful in thinking about a path to meet the challenges of the Doklam crisis.

Empathize with your adversary

In a crisis in which significant risks are at stake, as is the case with nuclear war, it is important that leaders put themselves in the shoes of their adversaries. Decision-making influenced by rigid ideological predilections could easily lead to self-defeating outcomes. Kennedy noted in the aftermath of the crisis that an adversary should never be pushed to such a degree that

s/he is left with only a binary ‘choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war’ (BCSIA 2017c); for such a move would be a ‘collective death-wish for the world’ (Ibid).

Theodore Sorensen, one of Kennedy’s closest counsels during the thirteen days, echoed Kennedy when he recollected that ‘we had won by enabling Khrushchev to avoid complete humiliation’ (BCSIA 2017b). Thinking how one’s actions would be seen by the other is fundamental in resolving critical crisis situations.

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In the current scenario, China’s inflexible demand that ‘Indian troops unconditionally pull back to the Indian side of the boundary’ (*Financial Express* 2017) is an indication of its failure to understand that pushing India to the wall is unlikely to diffuse the crisis. In democratic states, leaders operate in stifled decision-making corridors with immense pressures to prove their decisiveness to the electorate and therefore, ultimatums like the one mentioned above are going to make compromises increasingly difficult.

Beware of non-rational factors

Graham Allison in his classic book – *Essence of Decision* – made a significant observation regarding the nature of actors in the Cuban Missile crisis (Allison 1971). He pointed out that the rational actor model is an inadequate tool in predicting the outcome of a crisis. Rather, two other factors, namely internal government politics and structures and principles of organizations are equally important to the outcome of a crisis. What may seem irrational from the perspective of the rational actor may be outdone by either rigid organizational structures or vested political interests.

For instance, had it not been for the Standard Operating Procedure (SOPs) of Soviet missile

building teams to work without a camouflage, the missiles in Cuba would perhaps not have been discovered by the U-2 planes (Allison 1971: 111). With a camouflage things would have turned out very differently. Leaders of India and China, therefore, must keep in mind that crisis situations can often lead to unintended consequences by actions of actors who are miles away from Delhi and Beijing.

Civilian leadership is critical

A recurrent theme during the Cuban Missile crisis, in fact since the time Kennedy took office, was the hawkishness of his military personnel. The chiefs were game to go one up on the Soviets and therefore, enthusiastically advised the president for a surprise air attack on Cuba; confidently expecting the Soviet Union to be a mere spectator. Wisely ignoring the counsel of his military staff, Kennedy instead decided to order a blockade and postponed an attack as the last resort.

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Gen. Curtis Lemay, chief of US Air Force, scoffed at this move, saying that 'this blockade and political action... will lead right into war... this is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich' (Dallek 2013). And when the dangers of a nuclear war had been averted on 28 October, Lemay noted that 'it was the greatest defeat in our [the US'] history' (Dallek 2013).

Civilian leadership, most crucially the heads of states, should keep these overly militaristic elements at bay. Comments by the Indian Army chief of India's preparedness for a 'two-and-half front war' (*The Indian Express* 2017) and the Chinese media's provocative editorials (see *Global Times* 2017; Gong 2017; Zhang 2017) should not be allowed to frame policies. Modi and Xi must take charge in calmly weighing their options and peacefully diffusing the crisis.

Military option a last resort in a MAD world

The distinctive aspect of the outcome of the Cuban crisis was that even though both sides came extremely close to war, negotiations to resolve the crisis by finding a common ground never stopped. Given the reality of mutually assured destruction (MAD) in a world with nuclear weapons, a war, even a limited one between the two states would potentially have been profoundly devastating. Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, noted later that 'it is impossible to predict with a high degree of confidence what the effects of the use of military force will be because of the risk of a miscalculation, misperception and inadvertence' (BCSIA 2017b).

This is a deep insight for all war-mongers on both sides of the LAC. One critical reason that 1962 conflict between India and China was a limited war was because neither India nor China was armed with nuclear weapons. But in a MAD world it is difficult if not impossible to predict the consequences of a military escalation and therefore war-speak must be toned down.

Malleability in decision-making is critical

Allison has observed that 'the first and most important lesson from the missile crisis... is that when presented with a binary choice between unacceptable options, it is important to explore alternatives that however unacceptable are less catastrophic' (BCSIA 2017d). It is absolutely imperative for leaders on both sides of the border to not operate with binaries. With catastrophic consequences at stake neither should shut their eyes to innovative non-militaristic alternatives.

Conclusion

Finally, a word on what we all should hope for: avoidance of any sort of war. After the Cuban Missile Crisis Khrushchev drew an important lesson that perhaps is apt for the current situation between China and India, 'The two most powerful nations of the world had been squared off against each other, each

with its finger on the button. You'd have thought that war was inevitable. But both sides showed that if the desire to avoid war is strong enough, even the most pressing dispute can be solved by compromise' (BCSIA 2017b).

The current India-China standoff is much less dramatic. India and China are not the two most powerful nations in the world and neither think war is inevitable, to say nothing of their fingers not being on 'the button'. However, both sides have yet to show a strong desire to compromise. Disputes between big nations with even larger egos cannot be resolved with a zero-sum approach. And the possibility that a flare up could occur will continue to exist as long as both India and China do not find a face-saving compromise. Leaders from both India and China need to realise that any conflict today will have a profoundly adverse impact on the potential positive-sum economic benefits that the two countries can achieve in the future. The futility of a war perhaps has never been as clear as it is in this case. ■

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