

Dynamics of trust and distrust: An analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis

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The Cold War was 'cold' because it was fought in almost every field except the open battlefield. It was fought the fields of ideology, coalitions, political influence, technological development, scientific development, space and military stock piling. It was also fought through proxy wars. The reason for this new and almost sublimated form of war was the advent of the nuclear age. Both the USA and the USSR had thousands of nuclear missiles pointed at each other. Any first strike would lead to retaliation and mutually assured destruction. As Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier, wrote:

You can regard us with distrust, but, in any case, you can be calm in this regard, that we are of sound mind and understand perfectly well that if we attack you, you will respond the same way. But you too will receive the same that you hurl against us. And I think that you also understand this. (26th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 351)

Although the nuclear stock piling grew out of distrust, the outcome of mutually assured destruction was a degree of trust. Mutually assured destruction provided a guarantee that the other would not initiate war, that is, as long as one can trust that the other is "of sound mind." Mutual knowledge of the power of nuclear weapons combined with mutual knowledge that the other is "of sound mind" enables Khrushchev to say, in a sense, that despite distrust there can be trust.

One microcosm in which we can analyse these Cold War dynamics of trust and distrust is the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis began in mid October 1962, when the US administration became aware of Soviet missile sites being constructed in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy called this a “clandestine, reckless and provocative threat to world peace” (22nd October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 95). In an attempt to halt the importation of nuclear warheads into Cuba, Kennedy instituted a naval blockade of Cuba. Unbeknownst to the US administration, nuclear warheads were already in Cuba, and moreover Castro had written to Khrushchev imploring him to use these weapons to “eliminate” the USA should there be an invasion (Castro, 1962) . Knowing this fact with hindsight is chilling, because the USA was on the verge of an invasion when a diplomatic solution was reached on the 28th October.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is interesting, from a social psychological point of view, because although the Crisis was global the actual decision making processes involved just a handful of people. The Crisis was a minefield of potential triggers for global thermonuclear war. As such the Crisis was global. But the vast majority of the world only watched and did not contribute to the Crisis. Navigating through this minefield were several people sitting around a table in the White House and another handful of people in Moscow. It was within and between these two small groups that this major inter-group struggle was played out. The Crisis was carried forward by the fears, plans, hopes, assumptions, and suspicions of these two small groups. In the midst of this crisis the world found itself hostage to interpretations, communications, and miscommunications arising between these two groups, and to the communication channels which existed between these two groups (which as we will see, included a bicycle).

While there are relatively few files pertaining to the interactions in Moscow, there are full transcripts for many of the discussions that took place in the White House between President Kennedy and his advisors – the group known as ExComm. An audio recording system was installed in the White House in 1940, enabling Presidents to secretly record discussions at their own discretion. President Kennedy had the system upgraded in 1962, only months before the Crisis, and fortunately was particularly keen on using the system during the Crisis. The quality of the audio recordings is poor, but fortunately, teams of dedicated scholars have patiently transcribed the data. The following analysis is based upon over 1500 pages of transcribed discussion pertaining to the Cuban Missile Crisis which has been compiled, annotated and edited by Zelikow and May (2001a, 2001b) and supplemented by various documents which have been made public.

The following analysis focuses upon the discussions of Kennedy and his advisors as they tried to deal with the puzzling and threatening actions being undertaken by the USSR in Cuba. In the absence of direct verbal communication with Moscow, Kennedy and his advisors had to work hard to interpret the significance of the Soviet actions which they observed, the public statements with Khrushchev made and the letters which he sent to Kennedy. On this limited basis, and against a background of distrust, Kennedy and his advisors had to decide how to respond, and they struggled to understand how their potential responses would be interpreted by Moscow and the world. They were forced to reflect upon possible ulterior motives for each of Khrushchev's moves, and yet, as we will see, they were also forced to trust in Khrushchev as a rational actor. Analysing these discussions provides a window on the dynamics of trust and distrust as they directly feed into and contribute to a potentially catastrophic global crisis.

The analysis is organised in four sections and covers four issues: (1) the way in which Kennedy and his advisors distrusted Khrushchev and strove to understand his motives, (2) the way in which Kennedy and his advisors trusted that Khrushchev was a rational actor and how this trust was guaranteed by world opinion, (3) the dynamics of trust and distrust in brinkmanship, and finally, (4) miscommunication in a context of distrust and the development of the hot line between the Kremlin and the Pentagon.

Representing the mind of Khrushchev

One of the most striking features of the White House transcripts concerns the way in which Kennedy and his advisors represent the USSR in general and Khrushchev in particular. Much of the social psychological research on intergroup conflict has focused upon social categorisation, and particularly the way in which categorisation leads to a distinction between the outgroup and the ingroup, a homogenization within each of these categories, and then an exaggerated differentiation between these categories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The differentiation between ingroup and outgroup usually entails denigrating the outgroup and positively affirming the ingroup. Certainly during the Cold War, outgroup denigration of the 'red menace' was widespread in Allied propaganda. However, no such denigration is evident in the White House transcripts.

There are times when Kennedy calls Khrushchev a "son of a bitch" and accuses him of lying (e.g., Zelikow & May, 2001b, p.342). Also, on occasion, he refers to his Russian advisors as "demonologists" (Zelikow & May, 2001a, p.45). But in these cases, the denigration is very slight and seems to be done almost in jest. Especially the term "demonologists" seems to satire simplistic denigration of the Russians. Indeed, he calls upon his 'demonologists' not

because he wants to denigrate the outgroup, but because he wants to understand the perspective of the outgroup.

The question Kennedy asks of his 'demonologists' is, essentially: why have the Russians moved the missiles to Cuba? The responses to this question reveal an uncertain but nuanced understanding of Khrushchev's motives and situation. Kennedy finds the move puzzling, because he had assumed that Khrushchev was a "cautious" leader:

Kennedy: Why is it – can any Russian expert tell us – why then....? After all, Khrushchev demonstrated a sense of caution over Laos, Berlin, he's been cautious – I mean, he hasn't been....

Ball: Several possibilities, Mr. President [...] possibly use it to try to trade something in Berlin, saying he'll disarm Cuba if we'll yield some of our interests in Berlin and some arrangement for it. I mean that – it's a trading ploy.

Kennedy: [...] It's just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs [mid-range ballistic missiles] in Turkey. Now that'd be goddamn dangerous, I would think.

Bundy: Well, we did, Mr. President.

Johnson: We did it [...] That's when we were short. We put them in England too when we were short of ICBMs [inter-continental ballistic missiles].

Kennedy: But that was during a different period then.

Johnson: But doesn't he realize he has a deficiency of ICBMs vis-à-vis our capacity perhaps? In view of that he's got lots of MRBMs and this is a way to balance it out a bit.

Bundy: I'm sure his generals have been telling him for a year and a half that he was missing a golden opportunity to add to his strategic capability

Ball: Yes. I think you look at this possibility that this is an attempt to add to his strategic capabilities. A second consideration is that it is simply a trading ploy, that he wants this in so that he can –

Johnson: It's not inconsistent. If he can't trade then he's still got the other. (16th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001a, p. 450-451)

Kennedy and his advisors do not represent Khrushchev as moving missiles to Cuba because he is evil or because he is crazed. Indeed such simplistic understandings, in this context, would lead Kennedy to make detrimental decisions. Each of the reasons put forward assume that Khrushchev is a rational actor. One possible reason, put forward by George Ball, is that Khrushchev aims to trade his newfound advantage in Cuba for a development in Berlin. At this time West Berlin was isolated and completely surrounded by Communist East Germany, and the Communists were keen to annex it.

A second explanation, developed by Alexis Johnson, is that Khrushchev may be trying to do what the USA had done a number of years earlier. Previously in the Cold War, it was the USA that was at a military disadvantage, because the USSR had more advanced long-range rockets. Accordingly, the USA positioned missiles in Europe, in order to make their shorter range missiles more strategic. But by 1962, the tables had turned and the USSR was behind the USA in the development of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles. Accordingly, Johnson speculates that maybe the Soviets are trying to gain the same advantage that the USA previously gained.

According to social identity theory, social categorisation underlies intergroup conflict, because the mere act of categorising ingroup and outgroup leads to an exaggeration of the differences between the groups. However, in the present case, the evidence does not support such an account. Not only is there minimal evidence for denigrating the outgroup, but there is arguably more evidence for identification than differentiation. Johnson's argument that Khrushchev may be trying to gain a strategic advantage is based on identifying with the Soviet position. In the past the USA had been in a similar position, and they had moved missiles into Europe.

This example of perspective-taking through identification is not isolated. Instances of identification far outweigh instances of denigration. The following example is the basis upon which Kennedy resisted pressure from his Joint Chiefs of Staff to invade Cuba:

They, no more than we, can let these things [such as an invasion of Cuba] go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and then do nothing. (17th October 1962, Freedman, 2000, p. 180)

Kennedy's concern is that an invasion of Cuba might force the Russians into a situation in which launching the missiles becomes necessary. The USSR has made public its commitment to protect Cuba in the same way that the USA had made public its commitment to protect West Berlin. These public commitments are difficult to renege upon, precisely because they are public. Kennedy feels the potential danger of creating such a situation because this is the situation that he himself feels he is falling into. Kennedy's insight into Khrushchev's situation comes through identification not differentiation.

Why is there more evidence of identification than differentiation in the White House transcripts? I suggest this is because of a combination of distrust and necessary engagement. Simplistic denigration is a luxury born of distance and non-engagement. However, when one

needs to engage and interact with a distrustful other, either in negotiation or in battle, then it is advantageous to try and understand the mind of the other. Given that Kennedy and his advisors could not take the world or actions of Khrushchev at face value, they were forced to elaborate an intricate representation of his motivation. In such a context it would be naïve to simply categorise Khrushchev as an outgroup member, and dismiss him as mad or bad. And positive self differentiation would only lead to hubris and over-confidence. Distrust in this context implies that the other has an ulterior motive, and that in turn implies that in order to out-manoeuvre Khrushchev, Kennedy and his advisors had to understand him as accurately as possible. In this particular context, identification enabled perspective taking because both the USA and the USSR were, despite their differences, in very similar positions in the Cold War, facing similar political, international, external and technological constraints. This similarity became, through identification, a useful resource in understanding and domesticating the untrustworthy mind of Khrushchev.

World opinion: A guarantor of rationality

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a situation of extreme distrust. The crisis began with public denials by the USSR that it had introduced offensive weapons into Cuba. Then, once the missiles are discovered, the Soviet administration insisted that the missiles were only for defensive purposes. However, Kennedy and his advisors never take this account at face value. They assume there is an ulterior motive: Maybe Khrushchev is trying to gain a strategic advantage, or a psychological advantage or maybe a trade. Dean Rusk even speculates whether Khrushchev is trying to “provoke” the USA into making an offensive move on Cuba, which will then provide a justification for the Soviets to make a move in Berlin (16th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001a, p. 411).

However, it would be overly simplistic to say that the relationship between Kennedy and Khrushchev is characterised only by distrust. Even in this extremely distrustful relationship, there are domains of taken-for-granted trust. Specifically, there is trust in Khrushchev being a reasonable actor. It is assumed that his actions are not meaningless, crazy or evil. If he were only to be distrusted, then he could not be negotiated with and thus the only course of action would have been violence. We are dealing here with the form of rationality that communication, or in this case negotiation, presupposes (Habermas, 1981). The full extent of this communicative trust in Khrushchev as a reasonable and rational actor becomes evident when we examine the moves and counter-moves being made in the negotiation process.

In response to discovering the missiles in Cuba, Kennedy's military advisors recommended a military strike. However, President Kennedy instead opted for a blockade because he was worried about a direct attack providing justification for a Soviet incursion into Berlin. In response to this blockade, Khrushchev offered Kennedy a deal. Khrushchev draws an equivalence between the nuclear missiles which the USA has in Turkey and the missiles in Cuba. If Soviet missiles should not be in Cuba, he argues, then it follows that the American missiles should not be in Turkey. Thus he offers to withdraw the missiles from Cuba if Kennedy withdraws the missiles from Turkey. Kennedy is quick to recognise this as a deft political move because it sounds so reasonable. It is the very reasonableness of the proposition that troubles Kennedy and consequently he struggles to claim the rational ground:

They've got a very good product. This one is going to be very tough, I think, for us. It's going to be tough in England, I'm sure, as well as other places on the Continent. If we then are forced to take action, this will be, in my opinion, not a blank check but a pretty good check [for the Soviets] to take action in Berlin on the grounds that we are wholly unreasonable. Emotionally, people will think this is a rather even trade and we ought to take advantage of it. Therefore, it makes it much more difficult for us to move [against Cuba] with world support. These are all the things that – why

this is a pretty good play of his. That being so, I think that the only thing we've got him on is the fact that, while they put forward varying proposals in short periods of time, all of which are complicated, under that shield this work [on the missile sites] goes on. (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 381)

Kennedy is under pressure because the deal proposed by Khrushchev seems reasonable – its “a very good product.” It is the kind of argument which, Kennedy suspects, will go down well in Europe. And, according to Kennedy, the deal means that if the USA does invade Cuba, then that will provide justification, a “blank check,” for a Russian move on Berlin. The justification would be that the USA by turning down the deal, and by invading Cuba, is “wholly unreasonable.” The only defensible position that the USA has is that “work is going on” on the missile sites in Cuba. The USA could even argue that the messy negotiations are merely a “shield” providing cover from an invasion while the missiles are made operational. What is interesting in Kennedy's externalised thoughts is that he feels boxed in by the reasonableness of Khrushchev's proposal.

In order to try and “retain the initiative” Kennedy tries to regain the rational position (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 400). He suggests responding to Khrushchev's proposed deal by insisting that nothing can be discussed until work on the missile sites ceases. Kennedy and his advisors suspect that such a statement will appear reasonable, and they also speculate that Khrushchev will be forced to reject the deal because he wants the missile sites to be completed so as to strengthen his hand. Kennedy says:

I think we ought to put our emphasis, right now, on the fact that we want an indication from him in the next 24 hours that he's going to stand still, and disarm these weapons. Then we will say that under those conditions, we'll be glad to discuss these matters. But I think that if we don't say that, he's going to say that we rejected his offer and, therefore, he's going to have public opinion with him. So, I think our only hope to escape from that is to say that, we should insist that, he should stand still now. We don't think he'll do that. Therefore, we're in a much better shape. (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 398)

By making Khrushchev reject a reasonable deal, Kennedy hopes to position Khrushchev unfavourably in world opinion, and thus retain the moral high ground. However, even though this would help reposition the USA as a rational actor in the eyes of the world, it would not enable the USA to invade Cuba, because if they did invade then Khrushchev would still have a 'blank check' for invading Turkey.

On the horns of this dilemma, Robert McNamara the Secretary of Defence, proposes the following course of action. He suggests secretly removing the nuclear missiles from Turkey and then at the same time as invading Cuba announcing that the missiles have been removed from Turkey. McNamara says:

The Soviets are very likely to feel forced to reply with military action someplace, particularly if these missiles – Jupiter missiles – are still in Turkey. We might be able to either shift the area in which they would apply their military force, or give them no excuse to apply military force, by taking out the Turkish Jupiters and the Italian Jupiters before we attack Cuba. (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 415)

The interesting thing about this idea is again the importance of being *reasonable* and having *justifications*. McNamara is suggesting that if the missiles were secretly removed from Turkey and their removal was only made public once the Cuban invasion is initiated, then the USA might prevent an invasion of Turkey because they would have undermined the justification for a Soviet invasion (i.e., removing the missiles). That is to say, in the eyes of the world, a Soviet invasion of Turkey would cease to be justifiable if Turkey ceased to present a threat to the USSR.

A major constraint operating on both Kennedy and Khrushchev is the need to act rationally, to act with justification and to appear reasonable. Invading another country, whether that is Cuba or Turkey, is not simply a question of military ability, it is importantly, also a question of justification. The White House transcripts reveal strenuous efforts to both guard the

justification for an invasion of Cuba and to try to deny the justification for a Soviet invasion of Turkey.

If both sides are governed by the need to appear reasonable and to have justification, *to whom* do these supreme superpowers need to appear reasonable and justify themselves? Whose judgement of reasonableness matters? Hovering in the background of these discussions, as a superaddressee (Bakhtin, 1986), is world opinion as the guarantor of the rationality of Kennedy's and of Khrushchev's actions. Often this superaddressee is objectified in the UN or a particular nation's point of view. No matter how tempting an invasion or an air strike on Cuba may be to Kennedy, he cannot initiate these measures if they will appear unreasonable or unjustified according to world opinion. But by the same token, Kennedy assumes that Khrushchev too is subject to the gaze of world opinion, and Kennedy uses this knowledge to interpret and predict Khrushchev's actions. Thus, while Kennedy and his advisors are, at a reflective level, highly sceptical of Khrushchev's moves and his motives, at a non-reflective level they trust Khrushchev to act in a way which could be deemed reasonable by the normative standards of rationality maintained in world opinion. In the same way that mutually assured destruction is the guarantor for not initiating a first strike, so world opinion seems to be a guarantor for world leaders to trust each other to act rationally.

Brinkmanship: Between trust and distrust

The advent of nuclear weapons introduced a new form of war. This new mode of war was fought more in the political arena than in the battlefield, yet the weapons of the battlefield gave necessary weight to threats, guarantees and political posturing. This new form of war, the Cold War, finds its peculiar dynamic in the fact that neither the USSR nor the USA

wanted a nuclear war. On the one hand, fear of nuclear war caused each side to be cautious, but on the other hand, because each side knew that the other side was inclined to caution so it encouraged each side to try and bully the other side in the expectation that the other side would be cautious and back down. This new art of war was called 'brinkmanship.'

Brinkmanship was described by John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower's Secretary of State as the "ability to get to the verge without getting into the war" (Dulles, 1956, cited in Donaldson, 1997). Within the context of the Cold War, brinkmanship seemed unavoidable. The dilemma is that if one is scared and does not engage in brinkmanship, then one's opponent is likely to make ever escalating demands. Yet, if one pushes brinkmanship too far, then it ends in war. Bertrand Russell (1959, p. 30) scathingly compared brinkmanship to playing a game of chicken with nuclear weapons.

In brinkmanship the aim is to push the other far enough so that they back down, but not so far as a war results. Accordingly, in the White House transcripts there is discussion about how much Khrushchev has been pushed and can be pushed. Dean Rusk reviews the situation in the following terms:

Now there are a variety of rumors, gossip, contacts, and reports. But I don't think I can give a definitive view today as to what the real attitude of the Soviet Union is on this matter. Our best judgement is that they are scratching their brains very hard at the present time and deciding just exactly how they want to play this, what they want to do about it. Mr. Khrushchev did send a telegram to Bertrand Russell, saying: "The Soviet Union will take no rash actions, will not let itself be provoked by the unjustified actions of the United States. We will do everything which depends on us to prevent the launching of a war." [...] In other words, I think that we can report that there is no confirmed frozen Soviet reaction to the situation, as yet. (24th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 209-210)

Rusk is uncertain about how close Khrushchev is to the brink and draws into the analysis a communication from Khrushchev to Bertrand Russell. Russell at this time was very involved in nuclear disarmament and had written letters to both Kennedy and Khrushchev about the

crisis. Rusk points out that Khrushchev's response to Russell suggests that he is both some distance from the brink and that if pushed to the brink would back down.

Yet as the crisis progresses, this assumption is shaken. On the night of the 26th Khrushchev sends a letter to Kennedy offering to remove the missiles in response for a guarantee from the USA not to invade or interfere with Cuba. Then on the morning of the 27th a second letter arrived which was more assertive and which asked not only for a guarantee of Cuba's sovereignty but also for the removal of the missiles in Turkey. Vice President Johnson and Llewellyn Thompson discuss the second letter in terms of brinkmanship.

Thompson: I can't believe it's [the Cuba-Turkey trade] necessary. You know, the night before he was willing to take this other line [asking for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba].

Johnson: So what happened? Is somebody forcing him to up his ante? Or did he try to just say: "Well, maybe they'll give up more. Let's try it; and I can always come back to my original position" [...]

Thompson: [Khrushchev is saying]: "These boys are beginning to give way. Let's push harder. I think they'll change their minds when we take any forceful action" (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p.471-472)

There are two possible interpretations of the second more hard line letter. Either it is Khrushchev engaging in brinkmanship, trying to get more out of the USA and confident that they will back down. If this is the interpretation, then, as Thompson suggests, taking some "forceful action" may make the Soviets change their minds. The alternative interpretation is

that, as Vice President Johnson suggests, maybe somebody is forcing Khrushchev to take this action. Maybe there are hard line elements in Moscow that have “overruled” Khrushchev (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 405 & p. 471). If this is the case, then, the question is, might forceful action push the situation over the brink?

Ironically, although brinkmanship creates distrust, it is actually premised upon a certain trust. Brinkmanship is a form of communication or negotiation, and as such it presupposes that the other is a rational actor who wishes to avoid nuclear war. By engaging in brinkmanship one is trusting, or at least hoping, that the other when pushed to the brink will be rational enough to back down rather than let catastrophic consequences follow.

If brinkmanship presupposes trust in a rational opponent, then convincing one's opponent that one's actions are no longer rational should be an effective move. One way of doing this is to try and convince one's opponent that one is crazy and without concern for the future. While such a strategy would doubtless have been effective for either Kennedy or Khrushchev to pursue, it would have the unintended consequence of meaning a widespread loss of public support. Neither political system could tolerate a leader who attempted to appear unstable and unpredictable. Robert Kennedy, however, hit upon an alternative strategy for convincing Khrushchev that President Kennedy's actions might cease being rational. Robert Kennedy did this by suggesting that his brother, the President, was losing control in the White House and that there was a risk that militant elements might take over. The implication was that Khrushchev should no longer assume that USA policy in Cuba would be rational and bound subordinated to world opinion.

The occasion of this self-presentation was at the height of the Crisis, on the night of the 27th October. President Kennedy sent his brother to meet Anatoly Dobrynin, the Russian Ambassador in Washington. This meeting is widely regarded as heralding the resolution of the Crisis. Robert Kennedy communicated two explicit messages. First, there would be a public announcement in which President Kennedy would guarantee the sovereignty of Cuba in exchange for the USSR withdrawing its missiles. Second, there was a secret promise that if the USSR withdrew the missiles from Cuba, the USA would follow by removing its missiles from Turkey. This second message was never written down, and was to be considered void if it was leaked to the public. These two agreements are seen to be the basis of the solution to the Crisis because the next day, Khrushchev announced the public acceptance of the first message and that he would withdraw the missiles. Shortly afterward, the USA began removing its missiles from Turkey.

I want to suggest that there was a third message communicated to Dobrynin at this historic meeting, but this third message was 'given off' rather than 'given' (Goffman, 1959). That is to say, this third message was not meant to appear as a communication. Robert Kennedy merely indicated, as if in passing, that President Kennedy might be losing control of the situation. Although an implicit communication, the message certainly reached Khrushchev. Khrushchev, in his autobiography, comments on the report that he received about the meeting from Dobrynin in the following way:

'The President is in a grave situation,' Robert Kennedy said, 'and does not know how to get out of it. We are under very severe stress. In fact we are under pressure from our military to use force against Cuba. [...] Even though the President himself is very much against starting a war over Cuba, an irreversible chain of events could occur against his will. That is why the President is appealing directly to Chairman Khrushchev for his help in liquidating this conflict. If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power. The American army could get out of control.' (Khrushchev, 1971, p. 551-552)

It is possible that Khrushchev's account is unreliable, that it is post-hoc rationalisation for the fact that he agreed to back down and remove the missiles from Cuba. But Dobrynin was a meticulous diplomat (Lebow & Stein, 1994) and he wrote a detailed memo of his meeting with Robert Kennedy which supports Khrushchev's account (Dobrynin, 1962). But exactly what Robert Kennedy said is not the issue. What is important is that he succeeded in creating the impression on both Dobrynin and Khrushchev that President Kennedy might be losing control, and thus that the USA might actually be sliding over the brink.

I suggest that Robert Kennedy's third communication, which was 'given off,' was an unconventional, but nonetheless highly effective act of brinkmanship. The aim of brinkmanship is to make one's opponent back down. Given that brinkmanship assumes a rational opponent, convincing ones opponent that one is no longer able to act rationally compels one's opponent to back down. Returning to the comparison between brinkmanship and the game of chicken, where opponents drive cars directly towards each other to see who will swerve away first, this move of Robert Kennedy's is akin to shouting at one's opponent "help! – my steering wheel won't move!" If one believes that one's opponent in such a game is no longer in control of their actions, then one has to back down. The key to this move is shattering the trust that one's opponent has that one's action is volitional and rational.

Miscommunication in a context of distrust

At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, on the 27th October, President Kennedy and his advisors were in the midst of discussing the two letters which they had received from Khrushchev. The first was concessionary while the second was more demanding seeking not only a guarantee for Cuba but also the removal of missiles in Turkey. Kennedy's advisors

wondered whether the first letter had been written by Khrushchev and the second one by some hardliners within the Politburo. They wondered whether Khrushchev was still in control of the situation. Then, in the midst of this uncertainty, produced in part through ineffective and slow means of communication, there was news that a U-2 spy plane has been shot down by SAM missiles while flying over Cuba and that other planes have been shot at with flak guns.

Kennedy: A U-2 was shot down? [...] Well, now, this is much of an escalation by them, isn't it? [...] How do we explain the effect of this Khrushchev message of last night and their decision [to shoot down U.S. planes], in view of their previous orders [to fire only if attacked], the change in orders? We've both had flak and a SAM site operation. How do we... I mean, that must be –

McNamara: How do we interpret this? I don't know how to interpret it.

(27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p. 446)

President Kennedy and his advisors try to interpret the shooting as a rational act. They assume that the act is communicative, and they try to reconcile it with the letters they had received from Khrushchev. The interpretation which the President makes is that this is an “escalation.” This is the general view adopted by the whole group. After further discussion, Thompson sums it up:

They've upped the price, and they've upped the action. And I think that we have to bring them back by upping our action (27th October 1962, Zelikow & May, 2001b, p.478)

Khrushchev has “upped the price,” in the sense that he sent the second letter with tougher demands, and then as if to give emphasis to this second letter, it is assumed, he has “upped the

action.” Both the second letter and the shooting are interpreted in the light of each other, and both are interpreted in terms of brinkmanship. Khrushchev, it is assumed, is deliberately pushing the crisis closer to the brink. The most common advice from Kennedy's advisors is not to back down, but to up the ante in return. Only this, it is argued will “bring them back”. Otherwise, it is argued, the Soviets will take the advantage and become more strident in their demands. Fortunately, Kennedy resists these pressures for military action.

In actuality the shooting was not an escalation on the part of Khrushchev. Rather it was initiated independently by Fidel Castro. This act gained such significance in the minds of Kennedy and his advisors as a hard-line communication from Khrushchev that it was sufficient basis for an invasion of Cuba. Yet, in reality it implied nothing about Khrushchev's intentions. Nevertheless, this miscommunication brought humankind possibly as close as it has ever come to nuclear war.

This potentially catastrophic miscommunication is revealing about the dynamics of communication in a context of distrust. In such a context, ambiguous communication becomes more of a projective test than an actual communication. Fears and suspicions thus gain support from ambiguous communications. We know that when the means of communication is reduced, and the content of communication becomes vague and ambiguous, then people must rely increasingly upon their own expectations (Krauss, Fussell, & Chen, 1995). In order to interpret a minimal and ambiguous communication people are forced back upon their own shared knowledge and assumptions about their interlocutor (Collins & Marková, 1999). In the stressful, distrustful and suspicious context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, relying too heavily upon assumptions was clearly dangerous.

In everyday communication, errors of misunderstanding are detected and repaired with great ease and rapidity. During verbal communication people provide ongoing feedback about their understanding of a communication. These demonstrations of comprehension create opportunities for third turn repairs (Schegloff, 1992) in which misunderstandings are detected and corrected. But in the brinkmanship observed during the Cuban Missile Crisis there were few opportunities for repairing misunderstandings.

What channels of communication could Kennedy and Khrushchev have used to try and repair miscommunication? Three channels of communication existed. First, there was the formal channel, in the form of letters sent by telegram usually via embassies. This channel was slow, with letters often taking 12 hours to get from one leader to the other and in a number of instances the letter arrived disjointed with some hours delay between the parts. Second, there were informal channels which occurred through face-to-face interactions. These interactions occurred between proxies who reported back directly to the leaders. Robert Kennedy's meeting with Dobrynin is one such example. However, this channel was neither fast nor guaranteed. In fact, Dobrynin's memo on the meeting was collected by bicycle courier who sent it by Western Union telegram. Third, there was the public media. Each leader made public announcements knowing that the other side was listening. Indeed, this means of communication was usually speedier than the formal and informal channels, and thus was used frequently. However, public communications have the problem of reaching too wide an audience. Often the leaders needed to present different positions to different audiences, as we saw when Kennedy agreed privately with Khrushchev to remove the missiles from Turkey, on the condition that this part of the deal would not reach the public. Similarly Robert Kennedy's communication that President Kennedy might be losing control would not have been suited to the public channel.

None of these three channels is suited to resolving the kind of misunderstanding which arose out of the shooting down of the U-2 spy plane. The formal and informal channels were too slow and the public channel was too public. One outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that both sides recognised that events in the nuclear age could move much faster than the traditional means of communication. Accordingly, in June 1963 the USA and USSR signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a direct communications link between the Kremlin and the Pentagon.

This communications link became known as the 'hot line,' and in some Hollywood movies was known as the 'red phone.' However, there was no red phone, indeed, the first implementation of the hot line did not have any voice component. The architects of the system feared that direct voice communication, with direct translation, might be too rapid, potentially leading to misunderstanding either through mis-translation or through misunderstood intonation. Accordingly, the first system was a teletype system that could transmit a page of text in three minutes. To use the system, the President would send a message by phone, or messenger, to the Pentagon. The message would then be verified with the president, before being encrypted and transmitted to the Kremlin in English. In the basement of the Kremlin, the message would be decrypted, translated and conveyed directly to the Premier.

The hot line was first used in 1967 during the Arab-Israel war, when Israel launched a surprise attack on Egypt. Fearing that the situation might escalate and that there would be a retaliatory attack on Israel, perhaps by the Syrians, the US military deployed an aircraft carrier to be ready to defend Israel. The Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, who had links with

Egypt and Syria, interpreted the move as offensive. To check the validity of his interpretation, he sent a message on the hotline that read "If you want war you're going to get war" (McNamara, 1993, p. 15). The message caused a stir, not least because it was the first time that the hot line had been used. Using the hot line, President Johnson was able to reassure Premier Kossygin that the USA did not want a war. Over the six days of the war, 20 messages were sent over the hot line, and the war that Premier Kossygin had anticipated was averted.

Today the hot line still exists. It has been upgraded and now includes a telephone component. It is manned on both sides 24 hours a day, and it is tested every hour. Recently it has been integral in the search for a post-war settlement in Iraq (Novosti, 2003). It is fruitful to speculate about the reasons for the success of the hot line.

The hot line persists because it serves an important communicative function. Kennedy and his advisors were distrustful of Khrushchev, in part, because they did not know his mind or his motivations. Moreover, the means of communication between the leaders was limited and, because of the distrust, much emphasis was placed on military manoeuvres. But military manoeuvres are a blunt medium of communication. Modern armies are so complex, with so many people in the chain of command, that unintended actions are likely. And in the context of limited information, such actions can have dangerous interpretations, as was the case with the U-2 spy plane. The medium of military manoeuvres as a medium of communication is slow, unreliable, and does not afford third turn repairs. The hot line, on the other hand, enables interrogating the mind of the other, and holding the actions of the other to rational account. The hot line enables misinterpretations to be voiced and repairs to be initiated. It is somewhat ironic that after focusing technological development on the arms race and bringing

the world to the brink of nuclear war, Kennedy and Khrushchev would rediscover one of the most ancient but powerful technologies, namely, direct communication.

Conclusion

This brief and preliminary analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, focusing on the White House transcripts, has made four basic points.

First, in a context of highly reflective distrust where there is a necessity to engage with the other and try to out-smart the other, the dynamics of social categorisation which are assumed to underlie intergroup conflict do not hold. Social categorisation assumes that intergroup conflict is based upon the positive differentiation of the ingroup from the outgroup. However, Kennedy and his advisors would be foolish to simply denigrate their opponent or to dismiss his perspective. Instead they make every effort to understand the mind of Khrushchev and his situation. One particularly useful resource for this understanding, which recurs several times, is identification. By identifying with Khrushchev, Kennedy and his advisors are better able to understand and thus negotiate with Khrushchev.

Second, although at a reflective level Kennedy is deeply distrustful of Khrushchev and his motivations, at a more implicit and taken-for-granted level there is a remarkable degree of trust in Khrushchev as a rational actor. Such trust runs counter to the stereotype of Russian Premiers as unreasonable war-mongers promoted in Hollywood films (e.g., *Thirteen Days*). Analysis of the actual negotiation process shows both Khrushchev and Kennedy trying to impale each other upon the horns of world opinion. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a battle, but it was fought out, like much of the Cold War, in the field of public opinion. Each side sought

to position the other side as dangerous, hostile and irrational. Each side sought to justify their actions while undermining any justification for the actions of the other. The guarantor of this rationality, I have argued, is the gaze of world opinion.

Third, brinkmanship again presupposes trust in the other as a rational being – otherwise one would not be willing to risk pushing them to the brink. The fact that brinkmanship presupposes a rational opponent, I argued, is supported by the powerful effect that Robert Kennedy's appeal had on Khrushchev. Once Khrushchev believed that President Kennedy might be losing control, then he could not presuppose rational actions from the White House, and needed to quickly accept the terms offered to him.

Finally, distrust and ambiguous communications are dangerous companions, especially in the context of brinkmanship. Castro initiated shooting at US military planes. But Kennedy and his advisors thought that this was a communication of escalation coming from Khrushchev. Their inclination was to respond with corresponding escalation. In a context of distrust, ambiguous communications are likely to be interpreted as antagonistic. It is this potentially catastrophic miscommunication that instigated the construction of the 'hot line' between the Kremlin and the White House. In the nuclear age, the development of weapons raced ahead of the means of diplomatic communication. Letters sent via ambassadors are suited to an age in which warfare is a more drawn out affair, not to an age in which nuclear missiles travel at several thousand kilometres per hour. The hot line, a complex and elaborate technology that enables elementary processes of communication, is the major outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Mutually assured destruction provides a guarantee that the other will not initiate nuclear war.

World opinion provides a guarantee that the other will make an attempt to justify their actions

and act within reason. The hot line is also a technology of trust and also provides a guarantee. The hot line makes each leader available for interrogation any time of the day or night. The hot line does not give leaders time to concoct elaborate and strategic accounts, it does not give leaders time for extensive consultation, and it denies leaders the opportunity to hide from awkward questions. As such the hot line builds trust by providing almost immediate accountability.

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