The North Korean nuclear and missile crisis presents one of the greatest threats to global security in decades. If mishandled, it could lead to another war on the Korean Peninsula and possibly catastrophic loss of life. Alas, this crisis cannot be understood or resolved on Twitter. But a sober reading of history could provide lessons for Washington and Pyongyang, as well as Seoul and Tokyo. Walter C. Clemens Jr. looks back at the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and explains how that harrowing standoff between Moscow and Washington is relevant today.

Cuba 1962

Lessons for the Missile Crisis in North Korea Today

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.
HISTORY YIELDS no precise repeats or lessons for current problems. Still, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis provides some parallels to today’s confrontation between North Korea and United States. It also offers a bevy of suggestions — both do’s and don’ts — to present the confrontational escalation into a major war.

A FRAMEWORK FOR COMPARISON

The starting point for analysis is The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis by Graham Allison (1971), updated by Allison and Philip Zelikow in 1999.1 To explain any interaction between states, they wrote, requires that we study not only each side’s rational calculation but also how their bureaucracies operated and how internal politics shaped decisions. Thus, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev probably calculated that deploying medium-range missiles in Cuba could match US missiles in Turkey and compensate for a growing US lead in strategic delivery vehicles. But his hope to surprise the administration of US President John F. Kennedy with a fait accompli was ruined by lack of co-ordination by each branch of the Soviet armed forces and by their habit of configuring medium-range missiles in a pattern that tipped off US observers. Neither in Moscow nor in Washington was there anything resembling “monolithic” policy-making, due to political infighting and the habit of each bureaucracy to follow its standard operating routine. In 1962, there was little political competition within the Kremlin but a great deal in Washington, where Kennedy feared Republican accusations of naiveté and weakness.

Each of these modes of explanation helps also to explain current North Korean and US behavior. Kim Jong Un probably calculates that a thermonuclear-ICBM capability will compensate for other North Korean weaknesses and ensure the security of his regime and state. Kim has surely intimidated any dissent, but some elements of his bureaucracy may resent the heavy allocation of state resources to strategic weapons. “We already deter outside attack with our artillery and rockets aimed at Seoul,” some may think (if not say). Outsiders know very little about political competition in Pyongyang, but political rivalries in Washington are manifest — not only between but also within the two main parties and even inside the White House.

While the three kinds of explanation put forward by Allison and Zelikow are necessary, they are not sufficient. They neglect the individual psychology and behavior patterns of each leader along with the peculiar political culture from which that leader emerged. No explanation of Cuba in 1962 can omit Khrushchev’s proclivity to gamble with little attention to possible dangers nor the political culture that permitted the top leader to make risky decisions based on his own impulses.2 While we know little of Kim Jong Un’s mind, his decisive actions against potential internal rivals demonstrate a ruthless addiction to the “who will destroy whom?” (kto kovo?) syndrome of Soviet politics.3 Into this mix, US President Donald Trump is less narcissistic than Kim Jong Un. Both leaders talk in extreme terms, but — as of 2017, anyway — their actions on the world stage have been somewhat cautious. Their bark has been stronger than their bite. Nicholas Kristof, however, even found in autumn 2017 that virtually all the North Koreans expected war with the US and believed they would prevail.4 Trump’s hardcore supporters, perhaps 40 percent of US voters, seemed to endorse his “fire and fury” orientation, even as many purchased more and more guns, ostensibly for personal defense.

POSSIBLE LESSONS

Avoid provoking the other side by changing the balance of power. The Cuban crisis took place in the context of a US-Soviet Cold War that dated back to 1945 at least and, in some ways, back to 1917. The competition intensified when Khrushchev warned “we’ll bury you” and “we are producing missiles like sausages.” Though Kennedy knew that Khrushchev’s claims were exaggerated, he opted in 1961 to expand America’s strategic triad — bombers, ICBMs and missiles under the sea — more numerous and superior to anything expected soon from Soviet factories. He also deployed nuclear weapons in Turkey and other NATO countries close to the USSR, for which there was no equivalent Soviet reaction. While he knew little of Kim Jong Un’s mind, his decisive actions against potential internal rivals demonstrate a ruthless addiction to the “who will destroy whom?” (kto kovo?) syndrome of Soviet politics.

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Do not insult the other side. Many of Khrushchev’s words and gestures were insulting to Kennedy and his country. Fortunately, Kennedy kept his cool. But Kim Jong Un and Trump show little mutual respect (psychopathic “dotard” versus “little rocket man”) even as each threatens to destroy the other. Outsiders cannot know when one or both leaders, offended and pressured on all sides, might snap. It could be difficult for anyone to restrain their impulses.

Look for non-violent ways to resolve the crisis. Kennedy looked for the least violent way to press the USSR to withdraw its missiles and decided on a quarantine. Yes, a blockade is an act of war, but no shots were exchanged. Still, a Soviet submarine commander, his communication links with the Soviet General Staff down, prepared to fire his nuclear-tipped torpedo at US surface ships, only to reconsider and surface instead.5

Do not force the other side into a corner from which it cannot retreat without losing face. Develop a quid pro quo so that each side can claim victory. The Soviets withdrew their missiles but got a US promise not to invade Cuba. They also received an assurance, kept secret for a while, that the US would not force the other side into a corner from which it cannot retreat without losing face.

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Do not regard small players as mere tools of larger ones. Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl were not mere pawns of the USSR. The Castro brothers — like the two Koreas — were dependent in some ways on their great power patron but also had a mind and interests of their own. When Soviet missiles were withdrawn, Havana refused to admit international inspectors. To verify the missiles’ withdrawal, the superpowers resorted to deploying for US cameras the missiles lashed to the deck of Soviet ships.

Moscow manipulated Cuba and embarrassed Castro. Trying to assuage Castro’s hurt feelings after the crisis, Soviet First Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan told him: “It’s all right to deceive enemies.” With friends, however, “sincerity and openness” are necessary to “resolve differences and reach a consensus. With enemies things are different.” But then, Mikoyan lied to Castro as well, implying that Moscow’s only goal had been to protect Cuba.6 Fidel later said that if he had known that the Soviets were thinking about how to improve the balance of power, and how few missiles they had in 1962, he would have “advised them to be more prudent.” Since the late 1940s, Washington has often treated North Korea as a Soviet or Chinese pawn. In recent decades, at least three US presidents have assumed that China could rein in

to the Kremlin reporting on the US ultimatum and its proffered concession in Turkey. Fortunately for humanity, Khrushchev decided to retreat even before the telegram arrived. Recognizing how dangerous these gaps in communication were, the Kremlin and White House established a hotline in April 1963. Later, several US and Soviet leaders agreed to talk by telephone — a risky practice because of possible mistranslation and temper outbursts.

Seoul and Pyongyang have used a hotline at times, but North Korean officials have several times shut it down precisely when it was needed most. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has said that the US communicates with North Korea through three channels. One of these is the North Korean mission at the United Nations, but each side may question whether the messages delivered by the other’s diplomats are authoritative. Pyongyang could even doubt whether Tillerson’s assurances would be endorsed by Trump. Since Trump sometimes contradicts even himself, even his own words also lack credibility.

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**Guidelines for Crisis**

Here are ten guidelines for decision-makers in Washington and, adapted to different circumstances, in Pyongyang:

**Pursue mutual gain and openness**

Even with strong rivals, explore conditional co-operation buttressed with safeguards. Better to compromise and create joint values than retreat or march toward war.

**Blend firmness and flexibility, potential punishment and reward**

Be sure your strength is evident and credible, but do not bluster needlessly. Consider what the changing balance of power means for potential foes as well as for yourself. Be aware how hard it is to communicate. A bull-headed Khrushchev may have read conciliatory gestures as weakness and ignored stern warnings. Only when Kennedy blockaded Cuba did Khrushchev get the message.

**Strive to see yourselves as others see you**

Had the Kennedy team seen itself through Khrushchev’s eyes — as materially strong but irresolute — Washington might have predicted Khrushchev’s gamble.

**Expect surprise**

Beat down preconceptions and wishful thinking. Investigate how worst-case and unlikely scenarios might unfold. Ask if rationality and value for the other side may differ from how you see them.

**Do not merely adapt to circumstances but seek deeper learning and new solutions**

It is easier to adjust tactics than to make substantive changes. After the Cuban crisis, both sides modified their behavior to avoid more collisions. Still, Soviet leaders also pledged: “Never again” — never again would they have to back down in the face of overwhelming US power. The Kremlin “learned” to intensify its arms buildup, a costly exercise that helped bring on the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire.

**Learn. Do not make the same mistakes twice**

But do not learn the wrong lessons. Review assumptions and standard operating procedures to cope with change. Decide beforehand what evidence would count for or against your expectations. Weigh competing hypotheses. Integrate new data methodically with your existing beliefs. If an event comes as a surprise, reevaluate your expectations. Discuss misjudgments internally and perhaps with the other side.

**Know that things often go wrong**

Do not count on good fortune.

**Avoid stereotyping others**

Understand that they may change. Khrushchev became a sober statesman as the 1962 crisis evolved. Had Kennedy typed Khrushchev once and forever as a cheat, give-and-take negotiations would have been unthinkable.

**Expect duplicity but try to prevent it**

Lies can be expected certainly from foes who endorse any means to their ends. Lying was part of the Soviet operational code. Do not trust assurances, especially those using ambiguous terms such as “defensive” weapons.

**Avoid cheat, give-and-take negotiations**

Khrushchev became a “chicken” with such regimes. Had the Soviets not fired on an unchangeable path.

**Do not count on a science of crisis management**

Some observers said that Kennedy and his top advisers successfully stepped back from the brink due to their skills at crisis management. Several years after the crisis, however, Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, told a group of Harvard professors not to trust in tools of crisis management.7 What avoided Armageddon, he said, was luck. While McNamara probably overstated the case, the fact remains that much can go wrong when two rival powers challenge each other head on. The nations that went to war in 1914 understood one another much better than do Washington and Pyongyang. They were also deeply interdependent in many ways. Still, nervous about who would strike first, how, and where — they marched into disaster.

Kim Jong Un in 2017, like Khrushchev in 1962, appears ready to risk bold moves, and he faces even fewer domestic restraints than did the Soviet leader. If Kim felt his regime were collapsing from within or from external pressure, he might take desperate steps. No one should play “chicken” with such regimes. Had the Soviets not veered away in 1962 but instead detonated just one hydrogen bomb over US cities, few Americans would have applauded Kennedy’s firmness.

Americans soon learned to live with a far larger Soviet missile threat than the force Khrushchev tried to deploy in 1962.

**THE WISE RESPONSE**

A wise leader needs confidence but not hubris; willingness to use force but only as a very last resort; tolerance for ambiguity along with an ability to act under uncertainty; an ability to obtain and absorb advice without producing paralysis; an ability to adapt to underlying problems so that potentially violent confrontations do not arise.

The main lesson from 1914 and from 1962 is: *Don’t play with fire.*

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9 See also Robert S. McNamara, *Forty Years after 13 Days,* Arms Control Today, 32, 9 (November 2002): 4-8.
10 For a comparison (on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor) of “Japan 1941, North Korea 2017?,” see Eri Hotta interviewed by Jeff Baron at 38 North, December 7, 2017 www.38north.org/2017/12/paran120717/stm_source=38+NorthBulletin+120717&utm_source=38+NorthBulletin+120717_&utm_campaign=38+North&utm_medium=email

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