

MANAGEMENT OF DECISION-MAKING MECHANISMS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CUBAN ROCKET CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to follow and analyze and follow perception in the geopolitical and geostrategical context of international relations during the Cold War; the case study chosen in order to apply an interpretation to the perception is represented by the Soviet rocket crisis in Cuba.

In an attempt to underline the significant values of the concept of "perception" in international relations in general, and in international relations during the Cold War in particular, as well as to identify essential aspects related to other notions characteristic for geostrategy, such as the concept of "frog leap", applicable to the dynamics of the Soviet rocket crisis, we have decided to use the descriptive empirical research method with a subject that lies, from this standpoint, on the border between geopolitics and international relations.

The objective of this research will also be, if possible, to attempt to find, follow and analyze the gravest perception errors occurred during the tensions in October 1962 or preceding the crisis, as well as the harmful effects they were hiding with regards to interpreting and implementing actions and gestures of external politics, on both a national and international level, in the decision units belonging to the two superpowers.

KEY WORDS: geopolitics; perception; frog leap; Cold War; the Soviet Union; Cuba; Fidel Castro; international relations.

JEL CLASSIFICATION: M16, N40, N86

1. INTRODUCTION

A large number of information and remarkable attempts to define perception in international relations can be found in literature, but we shall focus on just one of these definitions. One of the remarkable works in the Romanian academic environment has the following to say regarding this subject: "*perception is a psycho-socio-cognitive process through which actors obtain information regarding economical and strategic features of a geographical space, form a coherent image regarding their own or their adversaries'/competitors' position in the power balance, as well as a functional view of the international relations system in order to impose their own interests in that space*"(Constantin Hlihor, 2005). In this context, the geopolitical actors referred to by this paper are Cuba and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, typical, state actors, to which we will refer solely from a geographical perspective,

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as well as from the standpoint of geopolitics, which is defined, from a certain perspective, as *“the discipline studying power rivalries and interest disputes between actors in a space (physical and geographical or web) at a given moment.”*(Constantin Hlihor, 2005.) Over the course of this paper, possible perception errors will also be followed – errors occurred on one side or the other – as well as their importance.

2. GEOPOLITICAL ARCHITECTURE OF TENSIONS GENERATED BY THE CUBAN ROCKET CRISIS

In order to follow the international relations dynamics between the two political actors involved in the 1962 crisis, our analysis is required to start with the events of February 1956, three years from J.V. Stalin’s death, which led to the seating at the head of the USSR of Nikita Khrushchev and his initiation of the De-Stalinization process at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party.(John R. Barber, 1993)

During his period in charge, Khrushchev’s attitude was characterized by inconsistency in pursuing political objectives, both internally and externally. An example in this sense is Marshal Zhukov’s situation, who had supported the Ukrainian into obtaining full control of the country. Rehabilitated by the new political leadership, he would eventually fall into disgrace again.(Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, 2001) Khrushchev would declare: *“If other countries fight among themselves, they can be separated, but should the war start between America and our country, no one will be able to stop it. It will a catastrophe on a colossal scale”*, just months before publishing his peaceful coexistence theory.(Mark Frankland, 1967) Nevertheless, American analyst Walter Lippmann considered Khrushchev to be a pragmatic man who left little room for visions and utopias.(Mark Frankland, 1967,)

The Soviet Union under Khrushchev’s leadership wanted to be seen as the equal of the United States of America; therefore, the Kremlin prized the nuclear arsenal it possessed, more for the prestige the missiles offered than for their actual use in a military conflict, being aware that: *“on the level of the actors’ behavior in the geopolitical field, be it state of crisis or even war, the behavior is redirected by the image they have of themselves compared to the image they have of their opponents/competitors”*(Constantin Hlihor, 2005.). This element is prized by scholars as serving an *orientation purpose* in the process of perception. In fact, even since the beginning of his mandate, N. Khrushchev “fell” in to the trap of perception errors because through his statements, meant to underline the performance of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (IBM’s) that *“could hit a fly in outer space”*, (Jennifer G. Mathers, 2000) the new leader was actually overestimating the USSR’s military potential.

The Soviets’ priority at the time was to defend their own territory against an IBM attack from the United States by establishing an anti-ballistic system capable of nullifying all missiles launched by a potential adversary.(Jennifer G. Mathers, 2000) At that time, the political and the military factor of the USSR were competing to obtain influence in the decision making process. The reduction of defense-destined funds in favor of improving the population’s standard of living, despite Marshal Zhukov’s laudable initiatives, suggest a growing influence of the political factor to the detriment of the military one. (Sergiu Verona, 1992) This tendency was reflected in the Ministry of Defense’s loss of the party Presidium, marking the moment when the armed forces ceased to hold an influential position in the Soviet decision making and political processes at the time referred to.(Jennifer G. Mathers, 2000) The competition between the two factors would end after Khrushchev’s removal; he was

reproached for his reluctance with regards to modernizing the fleet and troop cuts in the ground army.(Sergiu Verona, 1992.)

The Kremlin leader's fascination with possibilities offered by science and technology was connected to his own ideas regarding the development of a war in which nuclear weapons would determine the fate of the belligerents in a matter of hours, short circuiting the conventional phase of war, implying engagements between millions of men.(Nikita S. Khrushchev, 1960, Apud, Jennifer G. Mathers, 2000.) This explains why he supported the anti-ballistic program with huge financial efforts, as well as his repeated exaggerations of the performance of his own military systems that made the West uneasy (Jennifer G. Mathers, 2000.)

The major problem in the USSR's external politics was the solution to the Berlin situation, where the westerners gave no signs of wanting to give up their prerogatives on the western side of the town. After successive attempts, including at Vienna, in which he tried to convince the westerners of the necessity of regulating the legal status of the town, Khrushchev resorted to closing the frontier and isolating the western part of the former German capital. The move was carefully studied by Soviet decision taking factors, including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the Counselor on German problems and was unexpectedly executed in the night between August 12th and 13th 1961.(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 2000)

In the Berlin problem, things reached unimaginable tensions, since both sides had firsthand interests in the area. Khrushchev himself remarked: "*We have exchanged opinions... and came to the conclusion that we will be able to withdraw our forces from Poland, Hungary and Romania... We have kept troops only in Germany. It was very clear to anyone that until our former allies, who had formed the North Atlantic Treaty, would agree upon a peace treaty, our soldiers would have to stay in Eastern Germany.*"(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960, Apud. Sergiu Verona, 1992.)

The success of the wall in Berlin may have given Soviet leaders the impression that the reproduction of such a bold move in Cuba would have had the same result. In this case, it is possible that Moscow's perception may have underestimated Washington's reaction to such an action. The idea to place nuclear missiles on the island was Khrushchev's, who was supported by Defense Minister Rodion Malinovski and Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko. (Oleg Sarin, Lev Dvoretzki, 1997. See also Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1970) Contributing to this decision were, probably, geopolitical factors beyond the presence of Jupiter American missiles in the vicinity of the Soviet Union, such as the ideological fracture between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, the latter trying to counterbalance China's influence in the non-alignment movement through the maneuver in the Caribbean.(John W. Mason, 1996.)

Another interesting aspect of the problem was the fact that the island in the Caribbean was a proper large-scale trampoline for Soviet missiles – the same way that Portugal probably represented a proper supporting point in the Atlantic, through the Azores archipelago, for the American army at the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Americans understood that an attack initiated by Cuba would shorten the reaction time, transforming in a shock with devastating potential that "*would have strengthened the temptation to use a preemptive strike*", according to Theodore Sorensen.(Theodore C. Sorensen, 1965, Apud. Bradley Lightbody, 1999) Equally plausible is the possibility that Washington officials had made connections between developments in the Caribbean and the Berlin crisis, the first becoming a

blackmailing opportunity regarding the tensioned situation in Europe.(Henry Kissinger, *Diplomația*, 1998.)

Khrushchev's proposal is accepted by Fidel Castro, since the new type of weaponry was to protect Havana's interests on the one hand, and contribute to consolidating socialism on the other, in the Havana leader's view.(Warren I. Cohen, 1996) At the Defense Council meeting in June 1962, where Central Committee secretaries, as well as representatives of the Defense Ministry were present, Khrushchev put his subordinates before the *fait accompli*; only Anastas Mikoyan, Deputy Prime to the Soviet Prime Minister, argued against his superior's recommendation. Following the discussions, a decision was made according to which major-general Vladimir Statenko was to deploy in Cuba a division of missiles composed of five regiments.(Oleg Sarin, Lev Dvoretzki, 1997.) The unit was to transport, install and maintain functional approximately 60 ballistic missiles and nine *Luna* mini-devices, four of them destined to protect the mid-range rockets, and the other five meant to defend troops in case of an invasion. Besides these nuclear systems, surface-to-air missiles were also deployed, along with an entire range of armaments.(Peter Calvocoressi, 2001.)

The entire operation was to be executed in the utmost secrecy, the final order of the mission, codenamed *Anadir*, being sent on May 24 1962 by Marshal Malinovsky. It is interesting that the stationing of Soviet troops in Cuba was initiated prior to this date in order to camouflage them: uniforms were given up until the assistance treaty between the two countries was made official.(Oleg Sarin, Lev Dvoretzki, 1997 - . *Anadir* is the name of a river in the Far East of Russia and was given to the operation in order to calm suspicions regarding the mission objective.) General Issa Alexandrovich Pliyev was named commander of the force deployed in Cuba, being a veteran of the Second World War and one of Moscow's most obedient generals.(*Ibidem*, p. 196. General Pliyev was the commander of approximately 42,000 soldiers of the Red Army, a force whose value was not correctly estimated by the US information services, the tendency being to reduce the number by up to four times.) Technicians sent to the Caribbean could speak Spanish, in most cases being descendants of fighters of the Spanish Civil War.(Stephen J. Randall, Graeme S. Mount,1998.) Troop transportation and equipment was supposed to last between the 15th of June and 15th of October 1962. The main effort was made by the 85 Soviet commercial navy ships. They completed their mission with some minor delays. Their course to Havana, with no stop in European ports, drew the suspicion of American intelligence director, McCone, whose warnings were ignored at that time.(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960.)

Regarding evolutions in Moscow during the clash, the first reaction came relatively late, after President John F. Kennedy's speech. Until then, the Soviets had denied the presence of offensive missiles in Cuba. Therefore, the United States, through C.I.A. Director McCone, had a first correct perception regarding the Soviets' intentions.

The Soviets, in the Central Committee meeting of 23 October 1962, suggested through the voice of Vasili Kuznetsov the pressuring, at the same time, of Berlin in the rocket crisis problem. Khrushchev replied: "*Keep such an advice to yourself. We do not know how to get out of one problem and you throw us into another*", showing the Kremlin leader's moderation as well as his willingness to avoid possible complications.(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960.). Regarding the American president's fears towards incidents with Soviet submarines in the area, they were completely justified. The four captains of the Soviet submarines in the area had received authorization from the commander of the North Fleet to use the nuclear weaponry they had without approval from Moscow.(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960.-. Admiral

Rossoka had ordered the use of nuclear torpedoes in three cases: if the submarines were under attack; if they were forced to emerge; if Moscow was to order an attack.)

Another factor that had a huge influence on the course of events was the decision made by Khrushchev on the 23rd of October to turn back the ships transporting equipment forbidden by the blockade.(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960)

The tension was so high over those days that there was a tendency to short circuit standard procedures, which meant a huge risk for the dynamics of decision making. The Soviet Prime Minister understood the danger of the deviations and took over complete authority regarding the launch of the missiles as the situation escalated. For example, Pliyev did not receive approval to move the warheads closer to their launch pads and was reiterated the order to not use them without authorization. The reason for this was to avoid an accidental detonation, very likely if we are to consider the stress factor that the Soviet officers were submitted to in an unfamiliar environment and under imminent attack.(John Lewis Gaddis, 1997.) When acting under pressure, some military structures tend to solve their tasks by improvising. The downing of the U-2 aircraft was the result, most likely, of improper communication between Russian commanders, after which Soviet anti-air battery commander, Stepan Grecko, concluded that if the Cubans opened fire at low altitude the war had been started;(John Lewis Gaddis, 1997.) he had, in fact, a faulty perception and accordingly acted in an irrational way. The night before, Castro had sent Khrushchev a telegram suggesting a preemptive strike, which in our opinion would convince the Soviet leader of the necessity to withdraw the missiles from the island. He would respond to the Cuban leader in a letter from the 30th of October: "... *But we do not fight imperialism in order to die...*".(Sergei N. Khrushchev,, 1960. Apud, John Lewis Gaddis, 1997.)

Regarding the meeting between Robert Kennedy and Anatoly Dobrynin, it is worth mentioning that the American managed to give the Soviet ambassador the impression of a man exhausted and ready to crack at the smallest pressure. The American president's brother underlined the element according to which the Cuban-American problem had become a Soviet-American one. In front of a negotiation witnessed by the entire international public opinion, said Kennedy, there were no possible substantial concessions, nor the imposing of an ultimatum.(Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960.)

At the end of the crisis, the American President's answer on October 29th is a classic example of relaxing a situation by short circuiting the usual diplomatic procedure. The text of Khrushchev's telegram reached the same ambassador that informed him of the content of the Soviet document only after Kennedy's response.(Sergei N. Khrushchev,1960.) The defusing of the situation was fast, and between October the 29th and November the 11th 1962 the incriminated military forces left Cuba using nine ships that brought them back to the USSR. (Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzki, 1997-. The missiles were transported on the deck of the ships so that American aviation could easily photograph them.)

After the rocket crisis, the United States accepted a status of relative equality with the Soviet Union. The two countries realized the danger that they were exposing themselves to by provoking each other was too great in comparison to accepting a *modus vivendi*. The explanation regarding the inexistence of a dispute degenerating into an armed conflict lies in the fact that the two superpowers had very few points in which their vital interests overlapped.

The scarcity of differences which could be exacerbated can also be explained this way. The Cuban case is a point which could have started a war between the two countries.(Sir William Hayter, 1970. See also Claude Delmas, 2003, where the author mentions that the two

countries realized that the stakes were much too small to risk nuclear war, with one exception – an attack on one another.) However, Cuba is a far too distant ally for the Soviet Union. For Nikita Khrushchev, the crisis in 1962 was a slow, but fatal blow. Two after the events in the Caribbean, the man who had brought the red flag with the sickle and hammer at the Tropic of Cancer was removed from leadership on the basis of “*health deterioration*”. (Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, 2001- Nikita Khrushchev is “released” from service on the 15th of October 1964.)

In order to observe the measure in which the rocket crisis was a three-way dispute, not strictly a two-way one, a very realistic image must be given showing what Cuba meant to the United States of America and what the Castro regime meant to the Soviet Union. In reality, this is called *the knowledge function of perception*, which is “*a process accompanying the geopolitical reality/phenomenon, perception is the medium through which actors process information and compose an image of the geopolitical field. As an instrument/decoder in geopolitical analysis, perception allows the scholar/analyst to gain certain knowledge about the geopolitical reality, integrate it in a coherent interpretation system and evaluate the geopolitical position of one actor or another in a given space.*” (Constantin Hlihor, 2005.)

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean basin. The official language is Spanish. It is included in the category of nations that have liberated themselves from the domination of Madrid in the 19th century, generically called *Latin America*, even though the island won its independence from Spain only a century later. In the 1970’s, countries in this region had reported significant progress in exporting manufactured goods, and deficits were compensated through north-American support. (John Ward, 1997.)

Before the revolution led by Fidel Castro, Cuba was a country of discrepancies, with an unemployment rate of 30% of the total population, which suffered from malnutrition. There was an economic gap between the rural and the urban environment. (Stephen J. Randall and Graeme S. Mount, 1998.) Between 1920 and 1952, a series of corrupt governments, like that of Geraldo Mañhadò and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes destroyed Cuba’s economy and annihilated the democratic process, legalizing terror, false and venality.

Corruption would generalize during Fulgencio Batista’s government, when Havana became a true paradise for pleasures and night clubs for businessmen and American gangsters. Here and in other cities in the country, the locals developed an exacerbated hate for the United States, whose citizens were humiliating them. (Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 1966. Apud. Andre Fontaine, 1944, See also James Ciment, *op. cit.*, p. 501, who puts forward the number of 11,500 prostitutes spread in the capital’s bars, while approximately 20 dignitaries of the Batista government held accounts worth over \$ 1 million in Swiss banks.)

The year 1960 witnessed the exacerbation of tensions between Washington and Havana. In May, in the geopolitical context of nationalizations and the withdrawal of economic support of the United States, Cuba starts diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union once again. An important part in this sense was played by Alexandr Ivanovich Shitov, a.k.a. Alekseev, the future ambassador of the USSR in Havana during the October crisis. (Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievski, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-326.) In July of 1960, Khrushchev announced the Soviet Union’s intention to purchase the sugar that America was refusing to buy from Cuba. (André Fontaine, 1994.)

The incident in the Bay of Pigs, April 1961, triggered the institutionalization of the revolutionary ideology through the merging, in July 1961, of *The 26th of July Movement* and

of the *Revolutionary Directory* with the *People's Socialist Party* in the *Revolutionary Integrated Organizations*, the germ of the new communist party. Another consequence was Castro affiliation to the Marxist ideology. A third effect of the April 1961 crisis was that the Soviet Union and Cuba came closer, the first seeing Havana as a possible contraposition to the influence of the People's Republic of China in the third world. (Sebastian Balfour, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.)

Regarding the assistance treaty between the two countries signed at Moscow by a Cuban delegation comprising Raul Castro, Osvaldo Dorticos and Che Guevara, it stipulated, among other things, military cooperation. The future residency of Soviet militaries on Cuban territory had a temporary title. Soviet units deployed at the Tropics were to remain under Moscow's authority, but had to respect Cuban jurisdiction. The accord was valid for five years, with the possibility of renewal at the request of both parties. (Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzki, 1997.)

The placing of nuclear missiles in Cuba was due to Khrushchev's decision, favored by Fidel Castro's perception, according to which this move would have tipped the strategic balance in favor of the socialist camp; this perception was based on the assumption of the balance of power that Khrushchev was supporting. The Soviet was mainly concerned, however, with the protection of the island; the national Soviet interest in the strategic balance was only secondary. In this case, "*Marxism-Leninism produced more romance than realism*", because the two leaders assumed that their interests coincided, but did not actually check if it was so. Khrushchev was willing to risk a nuclear war for a far away nation, while Fidel Castro did not understand the discrepancy between the Soviet claims and possibilities. (John Lewis Gaddis, 1997).

In regards to Castro's contribution to the evolution of the situation during the rocket crisis, it had a secondary – and, at times, disruptive – part to play. For example, in the night of October 26th, the Cuban leader stayed in the bunker of the Russian embassy in Havana because he was expecting, at the time, an attack from the United States. (Warern I. Cohen, 1996.) In the basement of the building housing the Soviet institution and assisted by ambassador Alekseev, *El Lider Maximo* would write to Khrushchev the telegram implying the necessity of a preemptive strike against the United States. This gesture comes to complete the idea according to which the Cuban leader failed to see, at the time, Moscow's primary objective, which was to ensure the defense of the island. (Stephen J. Randall, Graeme S. Mount, 1998 -. The author takes an affirmation of the Soviet leader from his memories in *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, Jerrold Schechter and Vyacheslav V. Luchkov eds., Boston, Little Brown, 1990, p. 511, according to which Castro initially opposed the stockpiling of nuclear weapons on the island.) This time, Fidel Castro's perception was, therefore, mistaken with regards to the security of the island.

Castro was not consulted by any of the two superpowers regarding the agreement reached between them. He found out about it only on October the 28th, through mass-media; his rage was more or less justified. (James Ciment, *op. cit.*, p. 517.)

Cuban-Soviet relationships went through a tense period, which ended in May 1963, when the Havana leader visited the Soviet Union for a long time; the second visit was made a year later. (Sergei N. Khrushchev, 1960.)

Both during Khrushchev's mandate and after his removal from party and state leadership, Havana only represented a puppet regime for the Soviet Union, like one of the countries in Eastern Europe. In the 1980's, Cuba would become more and more economically dependant

on the Soviet Union, but would lead a policy different from that of its protector during the rocket crisis.(Peter Calvocoressi, 2001.) Nevertheless, it is certain that in the case of nuclear war, Havana would have represented only a pawn on the huge chess board called Earth, on which the two superpowers were fighting. The attitude of the Havana regime towards the United States would not change after October 1962, frictions persisting between the two countries, at least regarding the naval base of Guantanamo. On the 6th of February 1964, it would be deprived of drinking water by the Cuban government; a futile action, since the base was equipped with its own water cleaning station.(A. Axelrod and C. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 93). Regarding Havana's external politics after 1962, it was concerned with implementing a political system in other Latino-American countries against which the United States has remained fundamentally hostile. The failure of Che Guevara's campaign in Bolivia, where he would also die, is an illustrative example of the isolation which the Castro regime found itself in.(Allan Todd, 2001.)

The United States' defeat in Vietnam and the dissolution of the Portuguese colonial empire – after the revolution in the metropolis – would make Castro turn his attention to the African continent.(Robbins Keith, 1998) Between 1970 and 1979, Havana is involved in the revolution export in Africa, in some cases alongside the Soviet Union, in others on its own, generating a new “leap frog”, this time in a direction almost opposite from the USSR's initial move from 1962. In 1977, in Africa there were approximately 5,900 Cuban technicians, of which 4,000 in Angola and 400 in each of Ethiopia and Mozambique. On year later, in Angola there were approximately 19-20,000 Cuban militaries, and in Ethiopia between 16,000 and 17,000; by 1978, Cuban military personnel meant to export revolution was stationed in 16 countries in Africa (Martin McCauley, 1993).

3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the rocket crisis in October 1962 showed the support given to Washington by Latino-American states when their national security was threatened. From a geopolitical standpoint, the USA limited itself, however, to isolating the Castro regime, which was in full effort to revolutionary export its own type of socialism in other regions of the globe. Fidel Castro, as opposed to the principal actors of the October 1962 dispute, has survived both the crisis and the Cold War, as well as the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and Cuba has remained a neighbor difficult to tolerate for the United States.

The Cuban rocket crisis was a significant moment in the two-way international relations system, as well as a good model for the USSR of applying the “frog leap” theory in the 1970's (Constantin Hlihor, 2005)

One can also surely claim that, for Kremlin, from a geopolitical and geostrategic perception standpoint, Cuba in the Cold War was an ally too far away in order to make it worth paying the sacrifices of an open armed conflict with the United States of America, with all its implications.

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