

Fidel Castro and the “Brilliant yet Sad” Days of the October Crisis

“Seldom these days has there been a statesman as brilliant...”

Che

Monday, October 22nd of 1962 was dawning; the guard staff from the division of Operations and Information of the General Staff (EMG) of the FAR (Revolutionary Armed Forces) started to make their rounds from office to office, waking up their comrades who had been at work until very late at night. Very few of them had been able to return to their homes. The new week promised to be very intense since, with the first rays of the morning sun, news had been coming in from the United States, each item more alarming than the last.

The previous day, around late afternoon, a coded phone message from the Eastern Army had everyone on guard; it told of troop and war ordnance reinforcements at the Guantánamo Naval Base. This information included the news, coming in on a trust-worthy channel, that the base commanders had ordered the immediate departure of civilians and relatives of the soldiers stationed there. From mid-month, Commander in Chief Fidel Castro had indicated that Commander Sergio del Valle, Chief of the General Staff, should maintain constant surveillance in the face of the increased military movements of American armed forces in the Caribbean.

At noon on the 22nd, we learned that the White House Press Secretary had requested time in the late afternoon on all the main US radio and TV channels for a speech to the nation by President Kennedy. As of that moment, the press began to report on a series of meetings that were taking place in the presidential circle.

The Commander in Chief took in this information and came to the conclusion that all these goings-on in the White House were related to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba and, even though one couldn't predict with any precision the kind of aggression they would be undertaking or the location where it would occur, he was sure that it would be taking place and so he made the decision to order Combat Readiness for the armed forces at 15:50 hrs. A short while later, at 17:35, he ordered the entire country to enter the Combat Readiness Phase. Fidel had put a maxim into practice, something he kept in mind throughout his life, of not letting himself be surprised by the enemy, as he explained days later to the Cuban military leaders in a meeting.

During that afternoon, the Commander in Chief met the Minister of the FAR, Commander Raúl Castro and Commanders Ernesto Che Guevara, Guillermo García Frías, Chief of the Western Army and Sergio del Valle. He instructed Raúl to leave immediately by land to Santiago de Cuba to command the Eastern Army, and as he went through Santa Clara, he was to speak with Commander Juan Almeida, Chief of the Central Army, to explain to him the situation determining the country's general mobilization and what measures to take. Che was also to travel promptly to Pinar del Río to take on the the leadership of the Army in that province. Fidel's instructions were clear and precise: take urgent measures to safeguard the population, troops and main military, economic and political objectives from possible enemy air strikes; should direct military intervention by the United States occur, they were to fight the invader without respite and create conditions in the mountain areas of the country to develop guerrilla warfare should the enemy succeed in occupying any of these regions.

Events proved Fidel was right to do this. Almost an hour and a half after the order for “Combat Readiness”, President Kennedy, using a recriminatory and laconic tone, announced that the Soviets,

suddenly and secretly, were installing offensive missile bases in Cuba affirming that their aim “(...) could be none other than setting up a nuclear strike force against the Western Hemisphere”, something that “(...) constitutes an evident threat to the peace and security of all Americans...”He continued, saying: “This action also contradicts the reiterated assurances given, publically and privately, by Soviet spokespersons that armament installed in Cuba would keep their original defensive character and that the Soviet Union had no need or wishes to locate strategic missiles in the territory of any other nation”.[1]

With these words, meticulously prepared to influence and psychologically justify to American and world public opinion the illegal military measures of the naval blockade on Cuba that President Kennedy had ordered U.S. armed forces to put in place, measures that would cause the most serious crisis occurring in the second half of the last century, since never before had humankind been so close to nuclear war. Cuba was not taken by surprise.

The possibility of U.S. direct military aggression was no surprise to Cuba. The top political-military leadership of the country, headed by the Commander in Chief, correctly saw that imperialism, after the crushing defeat suffered on the sands of Playa Giron, had no other option, militarily speaking, to defeat the Revolution than to use their armed forces in a direct intervention and they would do everything possible to prepare the conditions and justify it.

As result of this conclusion, measures were taken to ensure national security and improve the country's defensive capacity. The Revolutionary Armed Forces, without losing the guerrilla spirit of their origins, underwent substantial changes to their organic structure and composition.

The Cuban strategy drawn up by the high command of the Revolution was based on creating a national security force, with the massive participation of all the people, so that in the event of direct U.S. military aggression, they would provide impenetrable resistance capable of taking a high toll of lives and ordnance from the invader, something the politicians of the day who were in power were not ready to pay.

The correctness of this effort of the Revolution was not in vain. The government of the United States continued its secret war against Cuba and with that purpose in mind new aggressive plans were drawn up and under-cover, subversive actions were intensified. In November of 1961, the American Administration spawned a new counter-revolutionary project called Operation Mongoose, execution of which extended into 1962. This project included all possible types of aggression: economic blockade, political-diplomatic isolation, internal subversion, attempts to assassinate Cuban leaders – especially Fidel Castro – psychological warfare and finally, military invasion.

Soviet Missiles in Cuba

This counter-revolutionary activity on the part of the U.S. forebode direct military aggression on Cuba in the spring of that year and served as an argument to justify the Soviet proposal to deploy mid and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba. This initiative had as its instigator the top leader of the Soviet Union at the time, Nikita S. Khrushchev it was also intimately connected to the threat that the installation of Jupiter Missile U.S Bases in Turkey and Italy meant for the security of the USSR. “We must pay them back in their own coin, have them taste their own medicine and force them to feel in their own flesh what it means to live surrounded by nuclear weapons”, [2] Khrushchev repeated on several occasions to his closest aides. After a process of consultation and discussion at the heart of the highest Soviet political and military levels, they agreed to make a proposal to the Cuban leadership.

At the end of May 1962, this initiative was presented to the top leadership of the Cuban Revolution which, after profoundly analyzing it, made the decision to accept since that measure would be an important internationalist contribution by Cuba towards the strengthening of the defensive capability of the socialist bloc as a whole and, in fact, it would contribute to the defence of the country as it was a significant dissuasive measure.

In looking back over those events, the Commander in Chief has explained that he immediately noted

that the proposal was something to improve the defensive ability of the entire socialist bloc or that it would contribute to doing so. From that point of view he was inclined to accept it, even though he was convinced that missiles were not essential for Cuban defence because a military agreement that should clearly state that armed aggression on the country was equivalent to an attack on the USSR could have obtained the same outcome. And stated: “We didn’t like missiles. If it had just been a matter of our own defence, we would not have accepted the missiles”. [3]

Upon giving an affirmative answer to the Soviet proposal, the Cuban leadership expressed the necessity of drawing up a military agreement and making it public at the most convenient time.

Khrushchev had the opinion that the agreement should not be made public until the missiles were deployed, and believed that the moving and deployment of this armament could be done secretly. Unlike Fidel and Raúl who, knowing more details about the magnitude of the entire operation and the size of the missiles, doubted it would be impossible for US special services to be able to detect what was going on. That was why, the Minister of the FAR Raúl Castro visited the Soviet Union in July by to discuss the details of the military agreement and the operation. He was directly entrusted by the Commander in Chief to personally ask Khrushchev about what would happen if the operation were to be discovered before it concluded. The intention was to warn him about that situation. The Soviet leader’s answer was not very convincing: if it happened, he would send the Baltic Fleet to Cuba.

From the end of July right up to October, 1962, a mighty Soviet military contingent was deployed to Cuba composed of approximately 42,000 soldiers, including all types of weapons and forces. From mid-August, their arrival in Cuba created an escalating whirlwind of press and political reaction in the United States that, according to Fidel’s canny evaluation, forecast the birth of a dangerous crisis.

In the face of such circumstances, the Commander in Chief met with the top Cuban political and military leadership to analyze the convenience of facing the American propaganda campaigns that were starting with immediate publication of the military agreement, since its validity, fairness and legality were all undeniable. For that reason, he agreed to send Commander Ernesto Che Guevara and Captain Emilio Aragonés to Moscow to discuss these points of view, person to person with Nikita S. Khrushchev. Once again the Soviet leader did not take into account the Cuban warning.

In trying to keep the operation in secret, the Soviet leadership committed serious political and military errors. Instead of confronting American pressure on the basis of Cuba’s rights to adopt measures guaranteeing its security they resorted to deception and lies.

For example, on September 11, 1962, the TASS news agency divulged a statement by the Soviet government that reaffirmed their intentions of providing military aid to Cuba in the event of aggression, calling on the US to show good sense. But paradoxically it stated “...the Soviet Union does not need to move to any country, for example Cuba, the means it has to repel aggression, to deal the counter-strike.” [4] This awkward and poorly-handled political mismanagement served as an excuse for the US government to justify the unjustifiable, the use of military actions such as the naval blockade to Cuba and other similar measures if they were needed to achieve their aims. What the Cuban leadership did was quite different, from the very beginning it faced U.S. propaganda under the legal and moral consideration that Cuba, as an independent and sovereign country, could possess all the weapons it considered convenient for its own defence.

To the bungled political handling we must also add the military inconsistencies. The Soviets had conveniently located anti-aircraft missile silo units all over the country; had these been used correctly they would constitute a strong dissuasive measure to prevent U.S. planes from making reconnaissance flights over Cuban territory and to preserve the secret they wanted to keep at all costs; just as they hadn’t carried out adequate cover-ups and camouflage for the missiles deployed in Cuba. The poor weather conditions of September and at the beginning of October helped that the missile sites being built would not be discovered early.

The Crisis Breaks Out

On October 14th, when the weather had improved, a U.S. U2 spy plane took photos of the medium range missile sites in the western region. On the 16th, Kennedy was informed of that discovery. For one week the top-level US political and military leaders met to decide on how to eliminate those sites; should it be with a naval blockade, air strikes or the invasion of Cuba? On October 22nd, the U.S. president publically announced his decision to implement the naval blockade of Cuba and he demanded the withdrawal of Soviet missiles, immediately and under supervision.

On the evening of October 23rd, the Commander in Chief was on the Cuban radio and TV explaining the existing situation to the people and refuting the accusations made by the American president. Fidel left it abundantly clear that the Cuban government was under no obligation to be accountable to the United States and he said that country had no right to decide on the type and number of weapons Cuba should have. He categorically advised that they had taken the pertinent measures to resist and to turn back any direct aggression. He also opposed Kennedy's claim to inspect the country, because "(...) we shall never renounce the sovereign prerogative that we are the ones making the decisions within our own borders (...) and nobody else." [5]

Public and secret news reaching Cuba from Moscow on that day, the 23rd, showed the determination of the Soviet leadership in not permitting the materializing of American intentions and to not give way to their demands. We Cubans were clear that the task was to prepare ourselves well, to resist steadfastly against the imperialist aggression – and that's what happened.

On the morning of the 24th, the Commander in Chief met with a group of top-level chiefs and officers, and after hearing reports on fulfilment of the measures implemented for the defence of the country, he went on to analyze the fundamental aspects on protecting the country from air strikes. Fidel proposed that they couldn't permit those planes to fly over with impunity and he suggested they study locations where it was necessary to strengthen anti-aircraft defence and shoot at them when they were flying over at low altitudes.

When the meeting was over, the Leader of the Revolution emphasized on the need of working to solve the weak points in the defence without delay, since all precautions taken meant time gained. He gave instructions about anti-aircraft defence measures.

During the afternoon, Fidel visited a Soviet land-air missile group to the Northeast of the capital. There he observed the units' vulnerability to low-altitude air strikes. He immediately ordered that 50 reservist anti-aircraft batteries should be moved to provide protection for those groups and the medium-range missile installations.

The Cuban leadership, from the the earliest moments, understood the danger these low-flying planes represented. On the morning of the 26th, the Commander in Chief made the decision to prevent those flights and, from the 27th, he ordered that all low-flying enemy planes should be shot at; decision expressed in a written statement.

On the night of that October 26th, after adopting all measures and defining the smallest of details in the plan for the defence of the country, Fidel was wondering what still needed to be done and he decided to write a message to Khrushchev for the purpose of encouraging him to maintain a steadfast position and to not commit irreparable errors in the event war should break out.

But what Fidel didn't know, nobody in Cuba knew, was that from October 25th, Khrushchev and Kennedy were involved in an exchange of secret correspondence in order to seek a settlement between the two superpowers. Of these letters, those written by Khrushchev on the 27th and 28th, were promptly and openly broadcasted by radio Moscow, thus their contents were known in Cuba. On Khrushchev's message, the 28th, unilaterally and without consultation, the Soviet leader commits to withdraw, with guarantee for verification of the weapons that the U.S. considered to be offensive, in

exchange for the commitment made by the U.S. President that they wouldn't invade Cuba and would prevent their allies from taking that step.

The terms of that settlement did not resolve the problem and were inconvenient for Cuba. That same day, the 28th, in a public statement, Fidel communicated the position of the Revolution, based on five points that would make possible the achievement of a true peace: “(...) that the guarantees Kennedy was talking about did not exist unless, besides eliminating the promised naval blockade, the following measures were adopted:

“First. An end to the economic blockade and all measures of commercial and economic pressure exercised by the United States all over the world against Cuba.

“Second. An end to all subversive activities, launchings and landings of weapons and explosives by air and sea, organization of mercenary invasions, infiltrations by spies and saboteurs, all actions being carried out from US territory and from accomplice countries.

“Three. An end to pirate raids that are carried out from bases existing in the United States and in Puerto Rico.

“ Four. An end to all violations of air and naval space by US planes and warships.

“Five. Withdrawal from the Guantánamo Naval Base and the return of Cuban territory occupied by the United States. [6]

Five concrete points, based on decency. The U.S. government did not want to consider them and, at the same time, demanded to inspect Cuban territory as a form of verification of the Soviet commitment. Fidel understood that this demand had the distinct goal of humiliating the country, of morally weakening the Cuban people and their confidence in the Revolution; as well as to create an international precedent that could be applied by the superpowers against any weak, small nation, and for that reason it was uncompromisingly opposed.

If indeed it is certain that the Khrushchev-Kennedy understanding had found a negotiated solution to the serious crisis threatening humanity with nuclear war, it did not resolve the profound causes that had brought it to life. For Cuba, the danger of military aggression was not left in the past. New days of tension arrived. In that difficult situation, the Commander in Chief defended with dignity and courage the self-determination and sovereignty of the country in the face of the actions of the two superpowers of the era. He dealt with the arrogant and pushy U.S. policy with integrity and he discussed the discrepancy arising with the Soviet Union, based on reason and right of the Cuban people, because of the unilateral form that it used in solving the conflict.

A close look at those events, allows us to have a more objective and calm view of its lessons and what it meant for Cuba, because it reaffirmed Fidel's conception that the security of the nation depends primarily on the courage, decisiveness and will of all the people, united, participating in their defence and that world solidarity would play a significant role as long as the nation would be able to resist imperialist aggression.

As of the “shining yet sad” of the October Crisis, described by Che, bitter but enlightening experiences arose. The capacity and commitment of the Cuban people who backed its top-level leader who shined.

[1] John F. Kennedy: Trece días, pp. 129 and 131.

[2] Alexander Alexeev, article published in the Eco del Planeta magazine, Nº 33, Moscow, November 1988, pp. 26-33.

[3] Fidel Castro Ruz: Transcripts from the Tripartite Conference on the October Crisis, Havana, January 1992.

[4] Noticias de Hoy, Havana, Thursday, September 12, 1962.

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[5] Fidel Castro Ruz: On Cuban radio and TV. Tuesday, September 23, 1962. Noticias de Hoy newspaper, September 24, 1962, p.5.

[6] Idem, p.10.

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