

John F. Kennedy, Latin America, and the Soviet Nuclear Threat: Reexamining the Cuban Missile Crisis

Takuji KIMURA

Abstract

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was not only global, but also regional crisis that directly involved the United States and entire Latin America. In order to manage the most dangerous event during the Cold War, Kennedy Administration chose to discreetly play up, in principle, the Monroe Doctrine and “Western Hemisphere idea”, both of which greatly contributed to unified support by the Latin American allies to the U.S. naval quarantine, and as a result peaceful settlement of the crisis. The U.S. traditional approach to Latin America successfully worked even in the first nuclear showdown in history.

Keywords: John F. Kennedy, Latin America, Cuban Missile Crisis, Monroe Doctrine, Western Hemisphere

1.

The purpose of this essay is to inquire into the significance of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 from the perspective of the United States-Latin American relations.

The profiles of American response to the Soviet SS-4 MRBMs (Medium Range Ballistic Missiles/1020 n.m.) and SS-5 IRBMs (Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles/2200 n.m.) in Cuba are consisted of three individual, though mutually related, aspects as follows; (1) the cold war or the East-West relations, (2) the U.S. domestic politics, and (3) the U.S.-Latin American relations.

The first aspect is concerned with the U.S.-Soviet relations. From this aspect, the Soviet motivations to introduce offensive missiles in Cuba and the U.S. naval quarantine (substantial blockade) can be explained in such international framework as to link the missile crisis with other crucial global issues, especially Berlin.

The second aspect is concerned with the congressional elections scheduled in November, 1962, where we could analyze the Soviet missiles in Cuba as one of the “hot issues” that would have changed the result of the elections.

The third and final aspect deals with the historical development of the U.S.-Latin American rela-

tions and, accordingly, is closely integrated with the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, a long-time guideline for the U.S. foreign policies toward Latin American countries.

We may find the complexity of the crisis in the fact that it is a component of different and multiple natures which characterized by these three aspects. It is because of this complexity that, despite more than 40 years passed since the crisis, there still remain many unsolved or even mysterious phases.

The main assumption here is that there had been some aspects of the American actions in the crisis which had been inspired by the principle of the Monroe Doctrine. At 7 P.M. (EST) on October 22, 1962, the U.S. President John F. Kennedy made a special statement to the nation and the world, which provides a good frame of analysis for us, since he emphasized the security and unity of the Western Hemisphere more than generally had expected. Was it just a rhetorical “lip-service” to obtain majority support to the U.S. actions from Latin American countries, or did it actually show the President’s understanding that the Soviet missiles in Cuba must be recognized as hemispheric as well as global crisis?

To answer these questions, I will begin the analysis undertaken in the following pages with examining Kennedy’s October 22 statement and attempt to find out some evidence that JFK, in announcing American positions and reactions to the Soviet bases in Cuba, had been inspired as well as reflected by the principle of the Monroe Doctrine.

2.

On October 22, 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis officially began when President Kennedy addressed to the nation and the world to disclose the Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba. He proposed seven initial steps as the American reactions to the Soviet missile bases in his statement which firmly demonstrated that the status quo would never be acceptable. From then on, until October 28, two superpowers had confronted at the brink of thermonuclear war.

Here I will examine the hemispheric aspect of the crisis as was emphasized in Kennedy’s statement. One of the fundamental questions is why JFK focused more upon historical significance of the U.S.-Latin American relations than upon such other crucial aspects as, for example, East-West relations. The statement described the striking capabilities of the Soviet missiles in a following way:

Each of these missiles...is capable of striking Washington, D.C., the Panama Canal, Cape Canaveral, Mexico City...Additional sites...appear to be...capable of striking most of the major cities in the Western Hemisphere¹⁾.

Is this reference only “lip-service” to Latin America, or does it contain much more implications than rhetorical technique? Assumption here is that the Western Hemisphere mentioned in the statement represented more than the ranges of missiles. Rather, it connoted the historical development of the U.S.-Latin American relations, as President Kennedy frequently mentioned “the tradition and history of the Western Hemisphere.” He specifically stated:

This urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic bases...constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas, in flagrant and deliberate defiance of the Rio Pact of 1947, the traditions of this nation and hemisphere, the Joint Resolution of the 87th Congress, the Charter of the United Nations, and my public warnings to the Soviets on September 4 and 13²).

Reading these lines, we easily understand that, for JFK, the defense and the security of the Western Hemisphere was the the first priority. Thus, protesting against the Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba, Kennedy first mentioned the Rio Pact (Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance) to remind the Latin American friends of collective security measures. Both the U.N. Charter and JFK's September warnings were also mentioned but by relatively low priority.

Moreover, in condemning the Soviet actions as "deception," Kennedy then returned to this point with the clear understanding of the Western Hemisphere as:

an area well known to have a special and historical relationship to the United States and the nations of the Western Hemisphere, in violation of Soviet assurances and in defiance of American hemispheric policy³)...

Then we should go further to the second assumption that JFK's repeated reference to the "special and historical relationship" amounted to a implicit regional claim relied on what historian Authur P. Whitaker called "Western Hemisphere idea", that is a belief in special relations based on their common historical experiences⁴). One of the good approaches to verify this assumption is to examine the background of Kennedy's October 22 statement.

Here, we must focus upon a preparatory meeting on September 4 to discuss a draft paper for presidential statement, known as his second "public warning to the Soviet Union," scheduled on September 13. We should note two important facts relating to this meeting. First, the memorandum not only suggested but also implicitly provided Monroe Doctrine as a legal basis of the U.S. reactions, and President Kennedy at least accepted its essential principles. Norbert A. Schlei, Assistant Attorney General, drafted a memorandum for Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. This memorandum discussed the legality of any U.S. reactions against the use of Cuba as Soviet missile bases.

The memorandum contained two suggestive comments on the effectiveness of the Monroe Doctrine. First, it declared that the Soviet construction of the missile bases in Cuba would provoke an entanglement with the United States over the Monroe Doctrine. It is true that the provocation was left for events to decide, though the memorandum also mentioned declining aspects of the interest protected by the Doctrine⁵). It suggested in euphemistic fashion that the use of Cuban territory to mount offensive weapons "falls wholly outside the reason for mitigation by the United States of some aspects of the Monroe Doctrine"⁶). The memorandum continued to argue:

Equally important, it falls wholly outside the reasons advanced by our allies in Latin America for opposing interventionist aspects of the Doctrine⁶).

In sum, core of the suggestion reads that the United States should draw a rigid line between conventional military penetrations and those accompanied with nuclear striking capabilities. The line must be drawn in accordance with the degree of threat upon hemispheric security. In this sense, the memorandum assumed Cuba as Soviet missile base to be the most threatening as well as dangerous situation ever to emerge.

Originally, the Monroe Doctrine found its vital interest in maintaining political unity in the Western Hemisphere. At the earlier stage, its underlying principle was to protect the republicanism of governments in the New World. Thereafter, the United States has repeatedly addressed this principle to the different circumstances which in due course appeared in the flux. During the Second World War, for instance, the main target was to prevent fascism from penetrating in the Hemisphere. As the cold war globally developed, the primary objective shifted to protecting hemispheric freedom and democracy against communism.

No crucial danger, as Schlei argued, to the peace and security of other countries in the Hemisphere was presented until the Soviet missile build-up in Cuba. The missile installation must be more direct and somewhat reckless form of “extending their system to any portion of hemisphere”⁷⁾. The Doctrine, memorandum concluded, constituted an explicit qualification on an regional basis of general legal concept insofar as the Western Hemisphere was concerned⁸⁾.

The second is the President Kennedy’s attitude toward the Monroe Doctrine. Schlei’s letter on May 22, 1968, to Abram Chayes, the legal adviser at the State Department, revealed President’s relative reluctance to accept the Doctrine at September 4 meeting. Schlei wrote in the letter:

We discussed the statement and the President was crucial of our draft because it mentioned the Monroe Doctrine. “The Monroe Doctrine,” he snapped at me, “What the hell is that?”⁹⁾

Then Schlei attempted to answer his question by specifically explaining the legal significance of the Doctrine, but the President seemed to be unwilling to accept the draft as it was. Schlei concluded his letter as he said on Kennedy’s attitude to the Doctrine that “whatever it was or meant, he did not want to mention it in his statement.”¹⁰⁾

We may find one of the interpretations on this JFK’s negative attitude in his statement on October 22, not the one on September 13 for which Schlei had originally prepared his draft. As is apparent in the forgoing analysis, Kennedy emphasized the hemispheric aspects of the crisis. Above all, “the traditions of this nation and the hemisphere,” or “our special and historical relationship” was the key concept to outline the Doctrine. “The traditions” meant to the United States her superior and dominant roles over Latin American countries. From Latin American perspectives, on the other hand, what forged “traditions” was nothing but the U.S. interventions which had repeated for more than 130 years. It was this wrong message that JFK wished to avoid conveying in any of his statements concerning Cuba.

President Kennedy seemed to well understand the reflections of using the word “Monroe Doctrine” in any of his public statements. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, a presidential special adviser, summarized, Kennedy never mentioned the Doctrine throughout the subsequent crisis because he knew how

much Americans resented unilateral declarations from Washington¹¹). It was because the Doctrine, or at least the verbal reference to the name, had a tendency to “convey a definite impression of hegemony of supercilious arrogance to the mind of Latin American neighbors.”¹²) In other words, presidential statement on October 22 marked realization of the fact that the word “Monroe Doctrine” still retained for Latin American friends connotations of imperialism¹³). This was particularly important, for the United States at that time sought to gain majority support from the O.A.S. (Organization of American States) to her series of actions against Soviet missiles in Cuba, as will be examined in detail later.

In sum, missile crisis laid open to question the fundamental assumption in the Monroe Doctrine that the change in status quo of the Western Hemisphere must not come about as a result of extra-hemispheric actions¹⁴). Consequently, the Doctrine retained as notable a vitality as it had possessed in 1823¹⁵).

Another important fact on September 4 meeting is that Schlei’s suggestions were totally reflected in Kennedy’s statement on October 22. More specifically, four important points which Kennedy agreed to accept in his forthcoming statement were that the statement should:

- (1)emphasize the historical and regional aspects of the right being asserted by the United States.
- (2)emphasize the threat to other countries as well as the United States.
- (3)indicate an intention to have resources first...to collective security arrangements...
- (4)acknowledge an obligation on the part of the United States to observe a rule of proportionality¹⁶).

In short, Schlei’s suggestions proved to be more appealing to the rights asserted by the United States when the crisis was at closer hand than before. In his suggestions, he explicitly implied that the United States looked at the Soviet missile build-up in Cuba as an unacceptable change of status quo by outside intrusion. The increasing interest in the principles of the Monroe Doctrine met the U.S. objectives in the serious hemispheric crisis, or at least, the idea still stubbornly lived. To sum up, as President’s negative attitude showed, verbal reference to the Doctrine was likely to be less frequent than in the past, but essential idea behind it was even more valid than it was in 1823¹⁷).

3.

As is evident in the foregoing analysis, the United States emphasized the hemispheric aspect of the Cuban Missile Crisis endorsed by the principles of the Monroe Doctrine. Here the discussion will center around the Soviet failure to correctly grasp the geopolitical importance of the Western Hemisphere to the United States which resulted in miscalculating the American reactions. The main issue is whether or not the Soviet Union had anticipated firm and drastic responses by the U.S. government. For this purpose, I should also explore how the Soviets recognized historical significance of the Hemisphere to the United States which President Kennedy emphasized in his statement on October 22. Roger Hilsman, the intelligence and research director at State Department, deliberately pointed out three major miscalculations by the Soviets, one of which they made in estimating the most probable

American reactions. Combining this miscalculation with the U.S.-Latin American history, he explained:

American attitudes toward Latin America, particularly Cuba, derive from an intimate history, which the Soviets seem not to, have fully appreciated¹⁸⁾.

This observation by Hilsman gives considerable insight into the U.S. responses combined with her historical relations with Latin America. The firmness in the U.S. responses, in his explanation, was induced not only by the magnitude of threat from the missiles in Cuba, but also by the Soviet ignorance of such intimate history. This intimacy partly stemmed from the fact that the United States had been located close enough to be next to Latin America, which to some extent corresponded with its greater importance of the geopolitical position. On this point, Hilsman further argued:

Americans came to nationhood behind the protective moat of two oceans, and the first major intrusion of foreign military power into this hemisphere was to have a shock power that the Soviets, growing up on the European Continent, could not easily understand¹⁹⁾.

Historical development of the U.S.-Latin American relations shows the United States sensitivity to foreign intrusions into the Hemisphere. It must be noted here, among other things, the United States has traditionally defined the Hemisphere as the defensive line for her national as well as regional security. More importantly, the Hemisphere has implied a space beyond national territory, where the U.S. special interest had been strictly protected. As long as two oceans, the Pacific and the Atlantic, existed and separated the Western Hemisphere from European Continent, the United States would enjoy the sense of being well-secured. In short, the Hemisphere offered to the United States a naturally exclusive "security zone." The Monroe Doctrine, in this connection, seems to have been a public proclamation, especially addressed to Europe, of the existence of such a "security zone."

Next, we must look at the relatively ambivalent characters of the Monroe Doctrine. On the one side, the Doctrine has served as a manifestation of the disengagement policy in European affairs. On the other side, the United States has used it at discretion as a cloak for some form of interferences within the Hemisphere, in order to maintain their common political systems. The invocation of the Doctrine led to the aggrandizement of the U.S. military presence, territorial occupation, and military interventions. In short, the Western Hemisphere offered to the United States a "private space" for her unilateral political, economic, and military actions²⁰⁾. The United States has historically been sensitive to any extra-hemispheric intrusions into this "private space."

It is quite doubtful whether or not the Soviets correctly understood the U.S. sensitive attitude toward Latin America. Actually, the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had been neglectful of such sensitivity throughout the missile crisis. He obviously understood the disturbance of Cuba to the United States when he confessed in his memoir that the Americans would "never reconcile themselves to the existence of Castro's Cuba"²¹⁾. But mysteriously, in spite of this understanding, he was optimistic enough to have expected that the United States would have generously accepted Cuba as turned into the Soviet missile base. On July 12, 1960, approximately two years before the missile crisis, he de-

clared at a press conference in Kremlin that the Monroe Doctrine was so obsolete as to “now naturally die”²²).

Khrushchev was consistent in insisting that the reason for introducing missiles was to deter “expected” U.S. military invasion. In addition, his memoir shows Khrushchev’s keen interest in giving “a lesson” to the United States by missile deployment, as he confessed:

The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons and now they would learn just what it feels like to have every missiles pointing at you...And it was high time America learned what it feels like to have *her own land and her own people threatened*(italics by author)²³).

Khrushchev seemed to have been unaware or even negligent of understanding the magnitude of impact caused by Soviet missile installation in American “private space.” Eventually, his unawareness directly led to miscalculating the most expected U.S. reactions. On this point, he was occupied by wishful thinking which went further beyond to anticipating the United States to “think twice before to liquidate their installation by military means”²⁴). In his opinion, any drastic measures including naval quarantine was the most unlikely reactions by the U.S. government. In fact, the Soviets anticipated from Kennedy Administration even either acceptance of status quo (so called “do-nothing option”) or some concessions as Hilsman explained:

The Soviets apparently thought that only two were likely; (1) that the United States would protest loudly, appeal to the United Nations, but ultimately acquiesce even though strategic advantage had been sharply reduced; or (2)that the United States would first threaten, but then sit down to negotiate²⁵).

Khrushchev’s letter to President Kennedy on October 27 is a typical example of the Soviet miscalculation. In this letter, Khrushchev proposed to remove Soviet offensive missiles from Cuba in exchange for dismantling American missile bases in Turkey²⁶). Kennedy Administration found this proposal completely unacceptable because it contained extra-hemispheric issue (Turkey) as a crucial condition to close down the crisis. Then JFK, in his statement on the same day, attacked Soviet “missile exchange” proposal as follows:

It is the Western Hemisphere countries and they alone that are subject to the threat that are produced the current crisis-action of soviet Government in secretly introducing offensive weapons into Cuba²⁷).

To sum up, the Soviet Union was led by misunderstanding on the importance of the Western Hemisphere to the United States. It was inconceivable to the Soviets that any interventions by outside powers would trigger the United States reactions firm and drastic enough to show that the American government resisted such interventions “by any means necessary”. In this sense, the Soviet missile

deployment in Cuba resulted from unawareness and negligence of “Western Hemisphere idea” by the Soviet Union.

4.

President Kennedy’s statement on October 22 helped to obtain unanimous support by the O.A.S. to the U.S. course of actions. Secretary of State Dean Rusk called a special session of O.A.S. meeting on October 23 to discuss their collective actions against emergent situation in Cuba. The member states without difficulty reached a consensus as to the magnitude of threat to the Western Hemisphere security. Thus, the meeting unanimously voted to endorse the course of actions which President Kennedy had outlined. By a vote of 19-0, with one abstention by Uruguay, it adopted the resolution to call for immediate withdrawal of all missiles and other offensive weapons from Cuba. Uruguay, having waited for the official direction from her government, registered its affirmative vote the next day²⁸⁾. In accordance with unanimous support, JFK proclaimed that naval quarantine to be effective at 10:00 P.M.(EST) on October 24. Venezuela and Argentine each sent two destroyers to join quarantine forces, and other Latin American countries offered token assistance under O.A.S. auspices²⁹⁾.

In spite of the history that, due to the U.S. dominant influence, the O.A.S. was the vehicle to impose the the U.S. policies on the other parts of the Western Hemisphere, we may find this unanimous support quite unique with two important facts in mind. First, no previous O.A.S. meetings successfully achieved unanimity on drastic actions against Cuba. At the 8th O.A.S. Foreign Ministers Conference in Punta del Este, Uruguay, in late January, 1962, the United States succeeded not only in imposing collective economic sanctions on Cuba, but in excluding Cuba from the membership of the O.A.S. This meant that the majority of the American republics agreed on Cuba being incompatible with the inter-American system. Thus, the conference marked “the most important steps” in U.S.-Latin American relations³⁰⁾. It was also true, however, that some O.A.S. members looked at these measures as “much too far-reaching”³¹⁾. In fact, the resolution to exclude Cuba was adopted by 14-1 with six abstentions, which implied more repellent attitude would come in case that the United States sought drastic or even radical actions accompanied with use of force against Cuba. In the missile crisis, fortunately for the United States, this did not come into reality.

Second, pessimism prevailed among the U.S. leaders as to the possibility to obtain unanimous support at the O.A.S. The O.A.S. approval by two-thirds of the members was particularly vital as it provided legal basis for the quarantine and eventually strengthened U.S. position in the light of international law. Yet, as Elie Abel argued, there was no assurance the vote would be forthcoming³²⁾. Without O.A.S. support, naval quarantine would have been no more than U.S. unilateral and illegal action. On the contrary, only with O.A.S. approval, the United States had a chance to justify quarantine as one of the collective security measures stipulated in the United Nations Charter.

Bearing these facts in mind, therefore, we must properly see O.A.S. unanimous support as a “unique sense of unity” by the American republics rather than as one of the regular formalities or fait accompli³³⁾. To obtain unanimous support, JFK’s October 22 statement worked as a strong leverage. It contained no verbal reference to the Monroe Doctrine. The United States definitely understood that

the phrase “Monroe Doctrine” would convey to the Latin American mind some not too subtle suggestion of hegemony, would awaken recollections to the advantage of the United States, and would weaken the hemispheric solidarity³⁴). Thus, Kennedy demonstrated outstanding skill to manipulate this issue by mentioning special relations of the Western Hemisphere without using the word “Monroe Doctrine” and, as a result, it successfully provoked Latin American allies to willingly follow the U.S. leadership in the missile crisis.

Such willingness was, according to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, a heavy and unexpected blow to Khrushchev³⁵). The unanimous support by O.A.S. justified U.S. quarantine as a legally-endorsed action. The opinion came to the forefront in Kennedy Administration that Moscow might be inclined to take it seriously if the O.A.S. should pass a resolution endorsing the quarantine³⁶), for the Soviet disobedience to quarantine could have charged Moscow with action in violation of international law. Aware of this possibility, on October 24, Moscow ordered fourteen ships heading for Cuba to stop and then return to Russia. The O.A.S. support as such had a major psychological and practical effect on the Russians³⁷).

Herbert Dinerstein’s assessment on the O.A.S. action provides a reason to believe that it came as a surprise to the Russians. The events following Kennedy’s statement, he argued, were more support than he himself had anticipated and certainly much more than his Soviet opponent had expected. Further, he explained the Soviet miscalculation on the role of the O.A.S. when he wrote:

For years the Soviet press had been chronicling the decline of U.S. control of the O.A.S. U.S. influence in Latin America had been eroding over years and was to continue to do so³⁸).

The presidential statement constituted a sense of unity among the O.A.S. members. Moscow was staggered by the show of inter-American solidarity³⁹), because it erased almost unilateral character of the U.S. quarantine. Instead, it drove the Soviets in relatively difficult situation in the light of international law. To sum up, the resolute actions of the United States and the cooperative support of the O.A.S. members indicated that the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine was far from being dead⁴⁰).

5.

As I have so far explored, it is evident that the Cuban missile crisis must be properly placed in the history of the U.S.-Latin American relations. With no doubt, it was a global crisis when we focused upon the magnitude of nuclear threat by the Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba. Simultaneously, it was also a regional crisis in a sense that entire Latin America as well as the United States risked their own security within the range of Soviet missiles and that the U.S. government centered its reactions around the principles of the Monroe Doctrine.

Cuba played no important roles as the missile crisis developed. The settlement came to the missile crisis as a result of direct communications between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Cuban Premier Fidel Castro, on the contrary, never joined in any negotiations with Soviet Union or the United States, particularly in the final phase leading to the settlement. Castro considered it nothing other than hu-

miliation to himself and his country.

Yet the United States could not but applying the hemispheric framework to the missile crisis for two reasons. First, the United States needed any legal bases for her initial reactions. There was no way of justifying the naval quarantine without unanimous support by the O.A.S. unified under the U.S. leadership. Banishing fear that quarantine might be condemned as a violation of international law, President Kennedy successfully established it as originally scheduled. The second reason, which is more important, was the U.S. obsession with traditional "Western Hemisphere idea." In his October 22 statement, President Kennedy chose to emphasize the principles of Monroe Doctrine without verbal reference. To do otherwise would have resulted in O.A.S. reluctance or even opposition to support the U.S. naval quarantine. It was because the word "Monroe Doctrine" would have conveyed to the Latin American minds the negative image of the United States as "Colossus of the North."

To sum up, in contrast to some students arguing otherwise, this hemispheric framework, deeply based upon the principles of the Monroe Doctrine, demonstrated its further utility in the face of the Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba. In this sense, the Monroe Doctrine, "Western Hemisphere idea," and other traditional factors which had forged the core of U.S.-Latin American relations successfully survived in the first major nuclear crisis in history.

NOTES

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26) *Documents* 1962, pp.392-395.

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