



JFK's Cuban missile crisis: Lessons for Biden

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"I've got a guy over there in Moscow who's in a corner," President Kennedy mused about Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis, "and I don't want to get him in a corner. I want to give him the opinion he can get out."

Kennedy's recognition that Khrushchev would need to find a way out of his corner (i.e., a political off-ramp) if he were going to remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba, as the United States was demanding, was but one savvy piece of JFK's seasoned diplomacy that helped resolve the crisis peacefully.

This month marks the 60th anniversary of that crisis, and Washington now faces a leader in Moscow who is threatening to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine, which could trigger a full-scale nuclear war. If the Cuban Missile Crisis was the most perilous moment of the Cold War, Vladimir Putin's nuclear threats may mark the most perilous moment to date of the post-Cold War period.

JFK's leadership during 13 days of high drama provides five lessons to help President Biden navigate today's crisis.

First, maintain private communication. While JFK and Khrushchev let their United Nations ambassadors square off publicly at Turtle Bay, the two leaders exchanged about a dozen letters, helping them express their grievances privately and share their desire to avoid nuclear war as they sought a solution.

In the current crisis, U.S. officials are communicating privately with their Russian counterparts, warning Moscow not to use nuclear weapons, but there are no reports that Biden is doing the same with Putin. Biden told CNN that he wouldn't meet with Putin at next month's G-20 meeting (except perhaps to discuss jailed basketball player Brittney Griner), but he can shun Putin publicly while reaching out privately.

Second, ignore histrionics. JFK was shaken by Khrushchev's bullying behavior at their Vienna summit in June 1961, telling close colleagues that he felt "savaged" and even shedding tears on Air Force One a few days later at the prospect that the U.S.-Soviet stand-off over Berlin could lead to nuclear war. More than a year later, he wisely ignored Khrushchev's public bluster during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Biden, of course, must take Putin's nuclear threats seriously, but, as former Russian diplomat Boris Bondarev wrote for *Foreign Affairs*, Putin "likes his luxurious life and should recognize that using nuclear weapons could start a war that would kill even him." Like JFK, Biden should focus on private efforts that can reduce tensions.

Third, don't tip your hand. Facing Soviet missiles in Cuba, JFK announced a "quarantine" (i.e., embargo) on offensive military equipment to Cuba but was vague about what he would do next if the crisis spiraled. In essence, he signaled that while he wanted peace, he was prepared for war.

Biden, by contrast, has sent mixed signals publicly, perhaps emboldening Putin to issue his threats. Yes, he has forcefully condemned Russian behavior and vowed to stick by Ukraine. But he has agonized about how to "avoid World War III" and has provided U.S. military aid more slowly than Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sought it. Explaining the pace of U.S. aid, U.S. officials have said that Biden doesn't want to "provoke" Putin. Biden should keep Putin guessing rather than voice concern about his reactions.

Fourth, remember Putin's a politician. Even autocrats have constituencies, be it political colleagues, military leaders, or a restive public. JFK chose to view Khrushchev as a fellow politician with his own domestic pressures, rather than the "madman" that former Secretary of State Dean Acheson had labeled him. That helped JFK see the crisis through Khrushchev's eyes and fashion a solution.

Biden would be wise to do the same. Putin faces a hard-right faction that wants more aggressive military action, an opposition that wants peace, low troop morale, and a public increasingly willing to protest in the streets. He needs to navigate his competing constituencies if he hopes to weather the war and retain power.

Fifth, find the off-ramp. To withdraw his missiles, Khrushchev secured a public pledge from JFK not to invade Cuba and a secret promise to remove U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey a few months later. It was enough to enable an increasingly frantic Khrushchev to both avoid war and save face. Putin needs his own off-ramp — something with which to claim at least a symbolic victory while making peace — and it won't be an easy one to devise.

By October of 1962, JFK knew who he was dealing with in Moscow and tailored his strategy accordingly. The question is whether Biden can size up Putin and chart the right path before the war spirals out of control.

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