

THE CUBAN-TURKISH MISSILE CRISIS

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October of 1962 is often remembered as a moment when the world held its collective breath. Although the Cold War had been unfolding for over a decade, it was at this moment that humanity stood on the brink of its own demise as the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America stared each other down over the deployment of ballistic missiles in Cuba. The historical recollection of these events in the United States largely contends that the crisis was the result of Soviet aggression. When one examines the historical evidence, however, it is clear that the United States' collaborative efforts with Republic of Turkey provided the catalyst for the crisis that was to follow. This paper will examine the diplomatic connection between the United States and Turkey, the strategic reasons as to why the United States would deploy Jupiter missiles in Turkey, how this deployment became correlated with the Soviet missiles in Cuba, and why the leaders saw removal of both sets of missiles as the key to resolving the crisis.

From the start of the twentieth century Turkey had been viewed as the sick man of Europe. The struggling Turks saw their opportunity to reverse their hardships with the coming of the Great War, yet from the start Turkey was dependent upon German financial aid.¹ Yet the war would only further ruin the Turkish economy and add to an already substantial international debt so that by the cessation of hostilities the victorious Allied Powers formally recognized that “the resources of Turkey are not sufficient to enable her to make complete reparation.”² A financial commission was established under the direction of the British to help guide and aid the Turks, but by the conclusion of the Second World War, the United Kingdom was no longer able to bear

¹ The first loan between Germany and the then Ottoman Empire was made in two installments: the first on 11 October 1914, and the second followed shortly after the Ottoman declaration of war. Eric Dorn Brose, *A History of the Great War: World War One and the International Crisis of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 102.

² Treaty of Sèvres, August 10, 1920, United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, accessed October 31, 2015 <http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/pdf/1920/TS0011.pdf>.

the burden. Speaking before a joint session of Congress in March of 1947, President of the United States Harry Truman acknowledged that support for Turkey was “essential to the preservation of order in the Middle East,” and that “if Turkey is to have the assistance it needs, the United States must supply it.”³ What was it that made Turkey so important that Truman felt it necessary to call a special session of Congress to secure financial aid?

The answer to this question lays within the address itself and the administration’s policy afterward. The address is more readily recognized as establishing what would come to be known as the Truman Doctrine: a policy whereby the United States actively sought to contain the Soviet Union within its present boundaries and prevent the spread of communism abroad. The Republic of Turkey, which bordered the Soviet Union, was a crucial key to this plan. Half a century of economic strife combined with political discontent provided a perfect setting for communist philosophy to take root. If the United States’ containment policy were to succeed, then it must begin with Turkey.

To achieve this end, the United States would pursue a diplomatic course aimed at assuaging Turkey and bringing her in league with the western states allied against the “threat” of communism. In an effort to accomplish this task, the United States opted to give Turkey what it desired most: an equal seat at the table of world affairs. The western powers moved quickly, and by October of 1951 the Republic of Turkey had been invited to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Under Article 9 of the North Atlantic Treaty, each member state held a

³ Harry S. Truman, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947 via Avalon Project, Yale Law School accessed October 31, 2015 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp.

seat on the council and each had an equal voice in the collective decisions of that body.⁴ Here Turkey would be treated as a respected equal partner in matters of European and world concerns.

Just as importantly, the North Atlantic Treaty also provided for collective defense of all member states. The strategic location of Turkey was important to the NATO powers because it controlled the Bosphorus Straights through which Soviet vessels seeking the warm water ports on the Black Sea needed to traverse, but also because Turkey's location provided "an excellent base from which to threaten the southern flank of the enemy."⁵ The collective defense was designed to "prevent war by creating an effective deterrent to aggression... with all the forces at [NATO's] disposal, including nuclear weapons."⁶ In order to bolster its Turkish allies and add to the growing nuclear deterrent, the United States signed an agreement allowing for the deployment of fifteen Jupiter missiles to Turkey in October of 1959.⁷

In the Soviet Union, Premier Nikita Khrushchev looked on with concern over the growing threat to his nation. "The United States had surrounded the Soviet Union with its military bases and placed its missiles all around our country. We knew the United States had missile bases in Turkey," Khrushchev recalled. "Couldn't we counter with the very same thing?"⁸ Khrushchev was seeking to accomplish many of the same goals in Cuba as the United States was undertaking in Turkey. "From the perspective of Moscow," wrote long-time Kennedy

⁴ North Atlantic Treaty, August 24, 1949, North Atlantic Treaty Organization Archives accessed October 31, 2015 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

⁵ North Atlantic Military Committee, "Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area," MC 14/2, May 23, 1957, p. 22 via North Atlantic Treaty Organization Archives, NATO Strategy Documents 1949-1969, accessed October 31, 2015 <http://www.nato.int/archives/strategy.htm>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ "The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Chronology of Events," 347 via National Security Archives, George Washington University accessed October 31, 2015 http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/590101_620919%20Chronology%201.pdf.

⁸ Nikita Khrushchev, Serge Khrushchev trans., *The Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Volume 3: Statesmen 1953-1964* (Philadelphia, Penn State University Press, 2007), 325 accessed via Google Books October 31, 2015 https://books.google.com/books?id=nR0f25dmbn0C&pg=PT325&source=gbs_toc_r&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false

historian Sheldon Stern, “the missiles were meant to provide a beleaguered Cuban ally with deterrence against covert or overt U.S. attacks and to give the Americans ‘a little taste of their own medicine’ after JFK’s decision to activate the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.”⁹

From the start of the crisis the missiles in Cuba were inexorably linked to those in Turkey. This did not go unnoticed by President Kennedy who recognized the correlation and proposed a possible missile exchange in discussions as early 16 October.¹⁰ However, the Executive Committee which oversaw the United States’ response to the crisis largely ignored the Turkish association, opting instead to focus on Cuban military strike capabilities. It was not until 27 October when Khrushchev’s second letter was delivered to Kennedy and broadcast on Radio Moscow proposing the Soviet Union “remove from Cuba the means which you regard as offensive” if the United States “will remove its analogous means from Turkey” that Kennedy became adamant about the missile swap.¹¹

Although he had proposed a similar trade eleven days prior, Kennedy was irritated to learn from Secretary of State Dean Rusk that no discussions had yet been held with the Turkish government.¹² “To any man at the United Nations, or any rational man, it will look like a very fair trade,” Kennedy admonished his committee, there was simply no way the United States could proceed militarily, it must agree to the deal.¹³ For both Kennedy and Khrushchev the

⁹ Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths Versus Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹ United States Department of State Office of the Historian, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath, Document 91, Message from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy,” accessed October 31, 2015 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d91>.

¹² Stern, 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 65.

reciprocating removal of each party's missiles could be deemed a political victory and avoid further escalation into an all-out military conflict that neither leader was eager to pursue.

Ultimately the United States and the Soviet Union reached that agreement whereby the Soviets removed their missiles in Cuba for a delayed removal of American missiles in Turkey. Yet the irony of the situation remains that the entire Cuban Missile Crisis could have been avoided. In April 1961 Rusk had met with Turkish Foreign Minister Salim Sarper about the possibility of removing the Jupiter missiles from Turkey, but the Turkish Parliament had just appropriated funds to the missile sites. In an effort to avoid embarrassing its Turkish ally, Kennedy begrudgingly approved the activation of the missile sites.¹⁴ "We last year tried to get the missiles out because they're not militarily useful." Kennedy recalled in the 27 October meeting.¹⁵ Yet the link in Turkey remained, ultimately spurring Khrushchev to deploy reciprocal missiles in Cuba. It was the failure of the United States to recognize the larger diplomatic picture whilst it pursued its Turkish relations that would ultimately lead to the crisis of October 1962 and the showdown between the superpowers.

¹⁴ National Security Archives, 349.

¹⁵ Stern, 138.

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