

Worse Than We Knew

Paris
A nuclear weapon has become a possibility on an enemy since World War II. The world knew it had come close to a catastrophe in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. But it never knew how close until Soviet diplomats, along with their missiles, had actually been deployed in Cuba.

At a remarkable meeting of Soviet, U.S. and Cuban officials in Moscow to exchange impressions a week after the crisis, it was revealed that the warheads were ready to be mounted on their carriers in a matter of a few hours. If they had been used, it would have been an American crisis, not a military installation.

Nikita Khrushchev's son, Sergei, then a rocket engineer, said that Soviet forces in Cuba had no orders to use nuclear weapons in the event of an American invasion in air strikes. "But, of course, orders could have been given at any moment.

The crisis was resolved after President Kennedy ordered a naval blockade to intercept further Soviet ships. Mr. Khrushchev ordered a Soviet ship to go home. The U.S. promised not to invade Cuba and, secretly, to withdraw its missiles from Turkey in return for withdrawal of the Soviet missiles.

These meetings showed there were many misconceptions, misunderstandings and intelligence failures before the record was reached. The Soviets had 42,000 troops in Cuba, not 16,000 as the U.S. thought, and only some 20 intercontinental missiles were in the Soviet Union, not 50, as the U.S. estimated.

Now there are 50,000 nuclear warheads deployed around the world. The Soviet-U.S. treaty removing medium-range missiles from Europe reduced the last couple of years. That Moscow's session sharing old secrets is an example. But it cannot be said that the danger of catastrophe has disappeared.

There is better monitoring now, but the world is still a long way from being able to prevent a nuclear war. There is still a long way to go before the capacity to improve the world is brought to grips. The improved political climate, however, is a step in the right direction.

Overall strategic review before resuming START negotiations on 50 percent cuts in long-range missiles, began in the Reagan Administration. That is possible if it doesn't believe that its many have pointed out the need to improve confidence in stable deterrence. Just cutting numbers of weapons is not necessarily achieve that.

When the Cuban crisis showed again how difficult the perception of the hardware information is given if intentions and motives can be directly misinterpreted. That is the struggle for hardware constraints most likely to be adopted, and therefore to increase assurance that neither would try.

Brent Scowcroft, the new national security adviser, has come out for a stand of more advanced missiles in "less bang for a buck," in effect Foster Dulles's phrase. When both sides have about equal numbers of weapons as targets, the risk of attack might be expected to be less than any gain that might be expected.

But that means building new missiles, when the defense budget needs to be capped, and it will take time. For that reason, the political momentum control must be kept from new citizens in other areas, especially in winding down regional wars.

There are interim ways to meet the need of maintaining balance while their aberrant form. Moscow reconsider require agreements and some national decisions. The main remaining obstacles in the SALT talks are Mr. Reagan's vision of space-based missiles and the res-launched missile defense.

There should be room for a trade-off on these issues, as suggested by Sidney Drell, a Stanford physicist, and Thomas H. Johnson, director of the West Point Science Research Laboratory. The U.S. could agree to a reduction of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty for 1962, and the Soviets could agree to a limit on the number of slow-moving SLCMs, which the U.S. says can't be verified.

The reasons of the Cuban crisis re-emerge as policy makers to formulate the plan for a new administration, and should serve as a reminder that the task has only begun.