

# A Reverse Cuban Missile Crisis: Fading Red Lines

*Ivan A. Safranchuk*

**Ivan A. Safranchuk**, PhD in Political Science  
MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia  
Leading Research Fellow;  
National Research University–Higher School of Economics,  
Department of International Relations  
Associate Professor;  
Member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Russia

SPIN-RSCI: 9754-1094  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2214-6628  
ResearcherID: 0-3257-2017  
Scopus AuthorID: 57193867458

E-mail: [i.safranchuk@inno.mgimo.ru](mailto:i.safranchuk@inno.mgimo.ru)  
Address: Office 4101, 76 Vernadsky Prospect, Moscow 119454, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-4-28-36

## **Abstract**

This article conceptualizes the current crises around Ukraine and Taiwan as “a reverse Cuban missile crisis.” The Cuban missile crisis was a turning point in the history of the Cold War. The two superpowers found themselves at the brink of mutual annihilation and turned to negotiations to prevent it. Today the transformation of the world order and escalation of the great power competition can culminate in a new crisis like the Cuban one, and with a similar outcome. However, in contrast to the USSR which ultimately recognized the United States’ red lines, today the U.S. does not recognize Russia’s and China’s red lines, denying the very legitimacy of red lines as such. The U.S. plans to retain its hegemony and seeks to achieve it with the help of its regional allies. This strategy of “offshore balancing” has proven to be quite useful for the U.S., which seems to ignore any discontent coming from Russia and China. It appears that the only viable option for the latter

two great powers is to maintain their interests without interacting with the U.S., which fiercely rejects any pleas for negotiations.

**Keywords:** Cuban missile crisis, red lines, world order, offshore balancing, American hegemony, China-U.S. relations, Russia-U.S. relations, the Ukraine crisis.

The Cuban missile crisis stands out in the history of the Cold War. The Soviet Union and the United States then literally reached the limits of their direct confrontation. Of course, on both sides there were professional practitioners who were ready for more escalation, but the political leadership realized that the superpowers had approached the brink. Stepping over it would be tantamount to triggering a nuclear war with consequences no one was prepared to accept.

This common awareness helped move towards the conceptualization of mutual nuclear deterrence, which laid the basis for launching nuclear arms control mechanisms that made deterrence more rational and safer to implement (Arbatov, 2021).

The adherents of the realist school of international relations understood that the Cuban missile crisis had led to the establishment of the balance of power (Kahan and Long, 1972). In later years, that balance was strengthened (although attempts were also made to win back some unilateral advantages). Further rivalry proceeded within its framework by and large. The liberal-idealist school interprets the Cuban missile crisis as a convincing demonstration of the dangers of confrontation in the nuclear age, so convincing that the adversaries had to give up the pursuit of their selfish interests and turn to the idea of the common good—the prevention of nuclear disaster (Nye, 2012).

On the one hand, the Cuban missile crisis went down in the history of the Cold War as a risky culmination of confrontation that must not happen again. On the other hand, as the rivalry between the great powers soared in the 21st century, there emerged a view that a new crisis would be inevitable and, perhaps, even necessary, provided it would have the same functional consequences as the Cuban one.

## **RED LINES**

Relations between Russia and the U.S. have been degrading steadily, but even the Ukraine crisis has not yet become the equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis. Some may say, of course, that the “real Cuban standoff” is yet to come. On another track of rivalry, the Sino-U.S. one, a rapid aggravation is in progress, but there are no signs of a “Cuban-like clinch” in sight either. Therefore, it would be appropriate to assume that technically a “new Cuban missile crisis” has emerged but fell short of its predecessor. In other words, it followed a different scenario, failing to bring about the structural consequences that the original crisis entailed in its day.

In October 1962, the U.S. essentially drew its own “red line.” Crossing it could have led to a direct military confrontation—it implied that a nuclear confrontation was inevitable. The Soviet Union preferred not to cross that “line,” although it put forward its own symmetrical conditions regarding U.S. nuclear missiles in Europe.

At the beginning of 2022, Russia, in turn, also drew a “red line”—the non-accession of Ukraine to NATO. The U.S. refused to guarantee that this line would not be crossed.

It should be noted that all formal questions regarding the legitimacy of drawing red lines do not have any practical importance. In 1962, the U.S. had no formal right to restrict military-technical cooperation between the Soviet Union and Cuba. Moscow accused the U.S. leadership of piracy. But these rhetorical exercises and appeals to legitimacy were nothing but smokescreen. The U.S. firmly declared its understanding of national interests and its readiness to protect them no matter what. The Soviet Union denied the legitimacy of those demands but, being well aware of the opponent’s resolve, agreed to recognize the “red line” that had been drawn. In 2022, the U.S. has defied Russia’s “red line.” In this case, what really matters is that the U.S. has refused to recognize it functionally. All speculations about the illegitimacy of red lines as such are generally meaningless.

The U.S. is employing the same tactic of denying red lines in the case of Taiwan. A superpower—and China is widely recognized as one (Nesmarshnyi, Zhornist and Safranchuk, 2022)—lacking control over

part of its own territory is an anomaly. Eventual reunification with Taiwan is a red line for China, although it has demonstrated flexibility over its time framework and format. However, the Americans' emphasis on the inviolability of the "status quo," in combination with professed formal recognition of the "One China" principle, means that Washington will be resisting China's unification policy.

The U.S.' refusal to recognize Russian or Chinese red lines is easy to explain. Suffice it to recall the emotional and psychological background that was cultivated after the Cold War. A great deal has been said in recent decades about the U.S. leadership and superiority (Krauthammer, 1990). Rhetorically the Americans have long propelled themselves to the very top of the world hierarchy, and so they just cannot afford to make concessions to those who challenge them and try to set conditions. Such an attitude persists despite heralds of a U.S. decline being particularly active recently (Wohlforth, 2021; Lachmann, 2020; Cooley and Nexon, 2020; Safranchuk, Zhornist and Nesmarshnyi, 2021). There is also a rising discourse about the profound transformation of the world, about new problems and the inadmissibility of return to the past. Within the framework of such a narrative any mentioning of some red lines cannot be perceived in any way other than a historical relic. So, it is only natural for the U.S. to brush aside any restrictive conditions someone else may try to voice.

### **BALANCING BY PROXY**

But this is not the only reason, though. In real politics, the U.S. has moved closer towards the type of actions that Professor John Mearsheimer has called "offshore balancing" (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016). This implies indirect (by proxy) regional balancing/containment, i.e., creating a balance in crucial parts of the world based on relations among regional players. It does not really matter that none of the top figures in the foreign policy establishment has openly accepted such a concept.

The essence of the British approach has long been as follows: no dominant power should be allowed to emerge on the continent to challenge the global maritime power (Hoard, 1925). With this in mind,

London has pursued a direct balancing strategy, which can already be called classical. Unable to defeat everybody alone, Britain would provide the services of its fleet (the strongest in the world) to one of the coalitions of warring powers, thus making a decisive contribution to its victory and gaining the right to a hefty share of the spoils of war. Such a tactic did yield success, but the problem of associated costs from a major war was left unresolved. As a result of two world wars, Britain, although a winner on both occasions, lost its position in world affairs. The U.S. tries to avoid this path. Therefore, instead of Britain's direct global balancing, the Americans prefer indirect regional balancing/containment (by proxy).

In the Ukraine crisis the U.S. has also pulled out an ace it has kept up its sleeve—it has imposed economic sanctions of unprecedented magnitude on Russia. Although the Americans stopped hiding this secret weapon at the end of last year, its practical implementation still seemed incredible to many. Now the prevailing opinion in the West is that a geo-economic siege will ensure the achievement of geopolitical goals, that is, it will deprive Russia of the resources to continue the geopolitical conflict (The Economist, 2022). However, one may also assume the opposite: in fact, the geopolitical dimension of the Ukraine crisis was only a pretext for launching a geo-economic blitzkrieg, for substantiating it somehow. In other words, the geo-economic dimension comes first, and the geopolitical one, second, and not the other way round.

The aggravation of the crisis around Taiwan, although its setting is different, is following a trajectory pretty much like the Ukrainian one. The U.S. does not recognize China's red lines. It is pushing Beijing towards an escalation, which, on the one hand, provides an excuse for the policy of beefing up the political and military-technical potential of China's opponents and, on the other hand, might legitimize unprecedented instruments of pressure, such as the opening of a geo-economic front.

Theoretically, this looks like a winning scheme for Washington. Its regional vassal, who bears the brunt of containing the U.S.' global rivals, will either earn acclaim as a geopolitical superhero and hold firm

against a stronger adversary with broad American support (and then offshore balancing will work) or it will have the fate of a geopolitical suicide bomber, whose suffering can be used for propaganda to the maximum extent and provide an excuse for using measures of geo-economic coercion, inconceivable in a normal situation.

In any case, the U.S.' aim is not to negotiate with rivals on the basis of a balance of power, but to tell them where their place in the global system is and to keep them in this spot.

### **AGAINST OR WITHOUT AMERICA?**

Russia and China have long hoped to create conditions for making deals with Washington that would agree with Moscow's and Beijing's perception of their worthy place in history and the contemporary world. By and large, both countries reacted with understanding to the U.S.' unwillingness to abandon its dominant position, but at the same time they considered it a temporary phenomenon, an after-effect of the Cold War and believed that it was simply unreasonable to press for its perpetuation. Therefore, they sought to lead the U.S. to agreements, and, if necessary, force it to compromise by creating counterthreats and demonstrating their own economic and geopolitical potentials.

For a long time, it seemed that a sufficient level of pressure had not yet been created for Washington to agree to equitable agreements with Russia or China. For this reason, it was considered necessary to reach the tipping point of the escalation, a "new Cuban missile crisis," a "moment of truth."

However, the way the U.S. has handled the Ukraine and Taiwan crises suggests that it sees the nature of its rivalry with Russia and China in a fundamentally different way. The U.S.' task is precisely to avoid agreements with Russia and China as independent entities (actors in their own right). It wants to see both countries only as invariably loyal parts of an international system tailored according to U.S. templates.

The picture outlined above shows a marked distinction between the nature of the current rivalry and the Cold War. In the latter case there were two antagonistic systems, different in philosophical, ideological,

and socio-economic terms. Each side laid claim to universality and ultimate truth. In this sense, they were equal. Even their mutual non-recognition did not cancel this basic equality. Now there is nothing of the sort. Russia, just like China, does not try to pass its views as universal. On the contrary, both Russia and China are developing systems of views based on the ideas of one's own uniqueness and originality. Neither Russia nor China plans to remake the internal structure of America or any other country by including other societies in their own system of values. In the meantime, the U.S. positions itself as the sole guardian of universal values and a missionary whose historical task is to spread them. In this respect the American exceptionalism, which ultimately boils down to the postulate that America is better than others, and therefore has the moral right and even obligation to remake others (Pratt 1927), differs from Russia's and China's views about their own uniqueness (that is, distinction from the others and originality).

Accordingly, during the Cold War, there was a symmetrical struggle in terms of basic goal-setting, which, however uncompromising, made it possible to come to the negotiating table, when the awareness of the ultimate risks of a nuclear war gained the upper hand and, in general, in a military-political impasse. Now there is no such symmetry.

Moreover, the logic of offshore balancing, as practiced by the U.S., leaves no chance for picking the right moment for negotiations. By avoiding direct rivalry and relying on the containment/balancing of its main rivals "by proxy" the U.S. in fact does not recognize Russia and China as potential parties to direct agreements but tries to force them into obedience through pressure exerted by its regional allies. Meanwhile, Russia and China see them as vassals devoid of any agency, which means that there is nothing to talk about or negotiate with them. This is a vicious circle, where at each level one of the parties does not recognize the agency of the other. This situation bars all chances of coming close to full-fledged negotiations and agreements.

In such circumstances, Russia and, apparently, China face the question of basic goals in relations with the U.S. Is it worthwhile to

keep trying to force the U.S. to accept them as equal partners and push it towards a mutually acceptable settlement of disputes or conflicts, or would it be much better to handle critical security and economic issues without U.S. participation?

Coercion seems to be the only viable tool that might make the U.S. to conclude equitable agreements. But so far, such efforts have not yielded results. Agreements are possible (but not guaranteed) only as a result of new rounds of escalation. So, it appears that in order to reach agreements in the current conditions, when no equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis that happened during the Cold War has occurred yet, it will be necessary to go through an intense and, most likely, long period of confrontation with the U.S. However, in a situation where Russia and China do not have the basic goal of remaking America, an anti-U.S. policy as such does not make sense. It can be used only as an attempt at reaching an agreement. It may turn out that this path is not only quite costly, both in terms of time and resources, but also does not guarantee a positive result.

A policy of disengagement from the U.S. may be an alternative to confrontation, where the basic goal would be not to act against the U.S. but to gain the ability for solving core security and development issues without agreements with the U.S. The absence of agreement with the U.S. and even the absence of any need for such agreement can be considered precisely the main indicator of success.

It is clear that in the acute phase of any crisis the U.S. is much likely to impose its participation. By acting indirectly (by proxy) the U.S. deprives Russia (and China, potentially in the Taiwan crisis) of the opportunity to respond directly and adequately, but at the same time gives enough grounds for blocking the U.S.' participation beyond the acute phase of the crisis.

One may argue that exclusion of the U.S. is practically impossible and, therefore, is a wrong basis for decision-making. But what are the alternatives? Either a no more probable successful coercion of Washington to clinching equitable agreements, or an implicit consent to compromise and retreat behind one's own red lines, or being over-focused on military muscle and an immanent risk of nuclear war.



## References

- Arbatov, A., 2021. The Ten Aporias of Our Time. The Theory and Practice of Nuclear Deterrence. *Polis. Political Studies*, 4(8), pp. 88-111. DOI: 10.17976/jpps/2021.04.08
- Cooley, A. and Nexon, D., 2020. *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*. Oxford University Press.
- Hoard, E., 1925. British Policy and the Balance of Power. *The American Political Science Review*, 19(2), pp. 261-267.
- Jervis, R., 1988. The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons: A Comment. *International Security*, 13(2). pp. 80-90.
- Kahan, J. and Long, A., 1972. The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Study of Its Strategic Context. *Political Science Quarterly*, 87(4), pp. 564-590.
- Krauthammer, C., 1990. The Unipolar Moment. *Foreign Affairs*, 70(1), pp. 23-33.
- Lachmann, R., 2020. *First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship: Elite Politics and the Decline of Great Powers*. London: Verso Books.
- Mearsheimer, J. and Walt, S., 2016. The Case for Offshore Balancing. A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy. *Foreign Affairs*, 95(4), pp. 70-83.
- Nesmashnyi, A., Zhornist, V. and Safranchuk, I., 2022. International Hierarchy and Functional Differentiation of States: Results of an Expert Survey. *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, 15(3), pp. 7-38. DOI: 10.24833/2071-8160-2022-olf2
- Nye, J., 2012. The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50. *Project Syndicate*. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/kennedy--khrushchev--the-cuban-missile-crisis-and-nuclear-deterrence-from-cuba-to-iran-by-joseph-s--nye-2012-10> [Accessed 30 September 2022].
- Pratt, J. W., 1927. The Origin of "Manifest Destiny". *The American Historical Review*, 32(4), pp. 795-798.
- Safranchuk, I., Zhornist, V. and Nesmashnyi, A., 2021. Hegemony and World Order: An Overview of the Concept 'Hegemony as Complexity'. *International Organisations Research Journal*, 16(1), pp. 172-183. DOI: 10.17323/1996-7845-2021-01-09
- The Economist, 2022. Are Sanctions on Russia Working? The Lessons from a New Era of Economic Warfare. *The Economist*, 27 August [online]. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/08/25/are-sanctions-working> [Accessed 30 September 2022].
- Wohlforth, C., 2021. How (Not) to Evaluate US Decline and the Emerging Great Power Rivalry. *Journal of International Analytics*, 12(3), pp. 12-18. DOI: 10.46272/2587-8476-2021-12-3-12-18.