

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Responsibility of the Great Ones’: How the Organization of American States and the United Nations Helped Resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis

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Abstract

This article draws on an international assemblage of sources to recover the history of the involvement of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN) in the Cuban missile crisis. It argues that, through the mechanisms of the OAS and the UN, Latin American citizens and officials helped shape the peaceful outcome of the crisis. This article challenges dismissive portrayals of both Latin American countries and multi-lateral organisations and, in so doing, joins the growing literature on how supposedly weak Latin American countries have used international organisations to influence world affairs.

Keywords: Cuba; Cuban missile crisis; Cold War; United Nations; Organization of American States

On 25 October 1962, *El Diario* newspaper in La Paz, Bolivia, published an editorial about the Cuban missile crisis entitled ‘Responsibility of the Great Ones’. The ‘Great Ones’ that the author referred to were not the usual suspects, however. The author was not calling on the United States or the Soviet Union to resolve the crisis; instead, the article emphasised the importance of multinational organisations. ‘We have the United Nations on the one hand and the Organization of American States on the other ... These are the organisms that should be speaking out about the dangers that lie in wait for men and threaten their peace and their lives.’¹ In looking to these multinational organisations instead of the United States or the Soviet Union, the editorial put forth two important arguments: first, that the Cuban missile crisis was actually a global crisis, owing to the shared danger of nuclear war; and second, because the missile crisis was a global problem, international organisations should help resolve it.

Bolivian journalists were not the only ones who turned to the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN) for help and hope during the Cuban missile crisis. From the very first day of secret White House meetings, when US Secretary of State Dean Rusk proposed diplomacy and OAS action as

¹‘Responsabilidad de los grandes’, *El Diario*, La Paz, 25 Oct. 1962.

an alternative to a military strike, to the waning days of the crisis, when Acting UN Secretary-General U Thant flew to Havana to negotiate inspection of the missiles' removal, the OAS and the UN played crucial roles in encouraging and enabling a peaceful end to the potentially devastating confrontation.

Yet the actions of Latin Americans and their multinational organisations remain under-appreciated in the vast literature on the Cuban missile crisis. The first wave of triumphalist histories of the crisis focused on the United States, and the second wave on the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, Cuba. Only recently has a third wave begun to broaden the scope of analysis to include the global repercussions of the crisis, but, even in this latest turn of the literature, multinational organisations are still largely absent.² The few histories of the crisis that do mention the OAS allude only briefly to the organisation's approval of the US quarantine, without taking into account the fact that OAS support was actually a crucial – and not entirely predictable – element of President John F. Kennedy's diplomatic strategy.³ Histories of the OAS itself pay only slightly more attention to the role that the OAS played in the Cuban missile crisis and portray the organisation as a simple tool that the United States used to impose its agenda on weaker neighbouring countries.⁴ Regarding the UN's response to the crisis, historians have focused especially on US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson's presentation to the Security Council and his heated questioning of Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin.⁵ But the United Nations served as more than just a stage for Stevenson's theatrics, and the OAS was more than just a tool of US hegemony.

This article draws on an international assemblage of sources to recover the history of OAS and UN involvement in the Cuban missile crisis. It combines archival records of the OAS and UN with State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports, published memoirs, transcripts of White House recordings and newspapers and magazines from across the Americas. These sources provide new

²For a description of how the literature on the Cuban missile crisis has evolved, see James G. Hershberg, 'The Global Cuban Missile Crisis – Surfing the Third Wave of Missile Crisis Scholarship', in Christian F. Ostermann and James G. Hershberg (eds.), 'The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: New Evidence from behind the Iron, Bamboo, and Sugarcane Curtains, and beyond', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 17/18 (Fall 2012), pp. 7–10.

³Don Munton and David A. Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edn (New York: Longman, 1999). In a previous article on the Cuban missile crisis, I touched on the OAS debates but focused more on governmental and public responses within specific Latin American countries. This article expands upon my previous work by taking a closer look at international organisations and their role in the crisis. See Renata Keller, 'The Latin American Missile Crisis', *Diplomatic History*, 39: 2 (April 2015), pp. 195–222.

⁴Monica Herz, *The Organization of American States (OAS): Global Governance away from the Media* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Andrew F. Cooper and Thomas Legler, *Intervention without Intervening? The OAS Defense and Promotion of Democracy in the Americas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Leticia Bobadilla González's history of Mexico and the OAS goes into greater detail about the debates surrounding the Cuban missile crisis, but focuses almost exclusively on Mexico's role: *México y la OEA: Los debates diplomáticos, 1959–1964* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2006).

⁵Amy L. Sayward, *The United Nations in International History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2017), p. 43. One noteworthy exception is A. Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk, 'Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Diplomatic History*, 33: 2 (2009), pp. 262–92.

insight into the various – and conflicting – ways that Latin American officials and citizens perceived both the missile crisis and their international organisations. The sources also reveal how and why the OAS provided the legal basis for the quarantine of Cuba, which made it easier for the United States to avoid resorting to a unilateral act of war and gave all parties involved the time to negotiate. And once the quarantine had been established, the UN served as a forum through which Cuban proposals ultimately helped pave the way to a peaceful resolution. Even though US and Soviet leaders deserve much of the credit for avoiding nuclear warfare, focusing exclusively on them overlooks the ways that other people and organisations contributed to the outcome of the crisis. At a moment of such extreme tension and danger, when the world teetered on the precipice of a nuclear Armageddon, actions and perceptions that might have appeared insignificant under normal circumstances took on heightened importance in encouraging the central actors to step away from the brink and towards a negotiated peace.⁶

In analysing OAS and UN actions during the Cuban missile crisis, this article sheds new light on the crisis itself as well as on the Latin American Cold War, the history of inter-American relations and the utility of international organisations. It demonstrates that, at moments of great tension, multilateral organisations have proven their worth by slowing the pace of dangerous events to allow for opportunities for negotiation. Furthermore, the OAS and UN provided venues for both central and peripheral actors to fight their battles, propose their solutions and voice their perspectives.⁷ This article also challenges dismissive portrayals of Latin American countries and their multilateral organisations, and, in so doing, joins the growing literature on how supposedly weak Latin American countries have used international organisations to influence world affairs.⁸ This new history of the Cuban missile crisis shows that international relations in the Americas were not limited to US bullying and Latin American submission. Rather, Latin American governments and citizens leveraged the foundational missions of their multinational organisations to support a cooperative approach to defusing a shared existential threat. Even the Cubans, who are usually portrayed as hot-headed warmongers excluded from the missile crisis negotiations, in fact used the UN to propose peaceful resolutions. Analysing the OAS and UN responses to the Cuban missile crisis shows that people, countries and organisations beyond the

⁶On the Cuban missile crisis as ‘the closest call to Armageddon’, see James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *Dark beyond Darkness: The Cuban Missile Crisis as History, Warning, and Catalyst* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), p. xix.

⁷On the tendency in the literature on the OAS to depict the organisation in dismissive terms, see Herz, *The Organization of American States*, p. 1. On scholarly treatments of the UN, see Elisabeth Roehlich, ‘State of the Field Essay on the History of the United Nations and its Organizations’, H-Diplo Essay No. 153, 20 April 2018, <http://tiny.cc/E153>, last access 1 Feb. 2019.

⁸On the influence of Latin American countries’ international politics and multinational organisations, see Max Paul Friedman, ‘Fracas in Caracas: Latin American Diplomatic Resistance to United States Intervention in Guatemala in 1954’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 21: 4 (2010), pp. 669–89; Michelle Denise Getchell, ‘Revisiting the 1954 Coup in Guatemala: The Soviet Union, the United Nations, and “Hemispheric Solidarity”’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 17: 2 (2015), pp. 73–102; Tom Long, *Latin America Confronts the United States: Asymmetry and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

traditional Cold War superpowers played crucial roles in helping resolve one of the most dangerous confrontations the world has ever faced.

Organising the American States

Prior to the Cuban missile crisis, the OAS did not appear to be the most promising mechanism through which to coordinate quick, decisive hemispheric action. The OAS was founded at the Ninth International Conference of American States in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1948, and had the lofty goals of achieving peace and justice, promoting solidarity and defending the member states' sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. The OAS Charter provided a somewhat contradictory and vague basis for cooperation, however; even though the charter stated that the organisation did not give any member country the right to intervene in another country's internal affairs, other parts of the document justified joint defence against military and non-military 'acts of aggression'.⁹ The year before the OAS was formed, the nations of the Americas had gathered in Brazil for a regional security conference. There, they signed the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, also known as the Rio Pact or Rio Treaty. This agreement was more explicitly focused on hemispheric mutual defence than was the OAS Charter, and warned that 'an armed attack by any State against an American State shall be considered an attack against all the American States'.¹⁰ Members of the OAS called meetings of foreign ministers and invoked the Rio Treaty whenever they perceived a threat to hemispheric security and wanted to take multilateral action. Prior to the Cuban missile crisis, the OAS's most prominent acts of hemispheric 'defence' against external threats had been various denunciations of international communism.¹¹

In late August 1962, the Guatemalan government, nervous about an increasing Soviet military presence in Cuba, had contemplated calling a meeting of foreign ministers to invoke the Rio Treaty.¹² But when the Guatemalan ambassador to the United States approached Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Edwin Martin about the idea, Martin dissuaded him. Martin argued that even though the Soviets had sent defensive military equipment and technicians to Cuba, the lack of hard evidence of the presence of Soviet troops meant that

⁹On the history of inter-American regional cooperation, including the OAS and its predecessor, the Pan-American Union, see Renata Keller, 'Building "Nuestra América": National Sovereignty and Regional Integration in the Americas', *Contexto Internacional*, 35: 2 (2013), pp. 537–64.

¹⁰Hans-Joachim Leu and Freddy Vivas (eds.), *Las relaciones interamericanas: Una antología de documentos* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1975), p. 135. See 'Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty)', US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/70681.htm>, last access 1 Feb. 2019.

¹¹On the history of the OAS, see David Sheinin, *The Organization of American States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996). By the time of the missile crisis, Cuba had been suspended from the OAS. It should be noted that even though the OAS itself had a relatively short and unimpressive history of coordinated action in defence against outside threats, individual Latin American countries had shown a great capacity for cooperative action in World War II. See Thomas M. Leonard and John F. Bratzel (eds.), *Latin America during World War II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

¹²On Cuban–Soviet relations and the decision to station missiles in Cuba, see James G. Blight and Philip Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 7–22.

the OAS could take no enforcement action.¹³ In addition to Martin's concerns about lack of evidence, other members of the US government identified further hurdles to multilateral action. The CIA reported that while some Latin American countries with firm anti-communist foreign policies, including the nations of Central America, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia and Argentina, preferred a formal meeting of ministers capable of initiating forceful joint action, others, like Brazil, Mexico and Haiti, would probably agree to participate only in an informal meeting and would not endorse direct intervention in what they perceived as Cuba's internal affairs. And if that were not enough, a boundary dispute over the Lauca River would probably keep Bolivia and Chile from attending any OAS meetings, formal or otherwise.¹⁴ Disagreements over the nature of the Cuban threat and the appropriate level of response, as well as completely unrelated conflicts, thus made the OAS an unlikely protagonist for taking decisive action.

Even when the OAS did eventually decide to address the Soviet military build-up in Cuba in early October, it was at an informal meeting where the only action the members could take was to issue a vague press communiqué calling for further action. In its communiqué, the OAS declared that 'the most urgent of the serious problems that face the hemisphere is the Sino-Soviet intervention in Cuba as an attempt to convert the island into an armed base for communist penetration of the Americas and further the subversion of the democratic institutions of this hemisphere'.¹⁵ The OAS left it up to future meetings and individual countries, however, to decide how best to counter the communist threat. The State Department's confidential report on the meeting acknowledged that the 'phraseology [was] not as strong or specific as we would have preferred on some aspects'.¹⁶

Given the OAS's apparent weakness and inability to take action, it is not surprising that Kennedy and others initially responded with more than a little scepticism when Dean Rusk recommended turning to the OAS for help during the Cuban missile crisis. On Tuesday 16 October, during Kennedy's first meeting with his advisors in the Executive Committee of the National Security Council to discuss the missiles in Cuba, Rusk framed the debate as a choice between two options: a military strike or diplomatic negotiation. He recommended convening a meeting of the OAS 'to make it quite clear that the entire hemisphere considers that the Rio Pact has been violated'.¹⁷ But Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, who had just spent the weekend with the ambassadors of the OAS, feared trusting them with such an important responsibility. 'I think this organisation is fine', Johnson told the rest of the Executive Committee, 'but I don't think, I don't rely on them

¹³'Discussion of Cuban Situation', 31 Aug. 1962, Record Group (hereafter RG) 59, Central Decimal Files (hereafter CDF) 1960-3, Box 1330, Decimal Folder 637.61/8-362, US National Archives and Record Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA).

¹⁴CIA Office of Current Intelligence, 'Current Intelligence Weekly Summary', 14 Sept. 1962, CIA CREST Database, NARA.

¹⁵'Acta de la sesión ordinaria celebrada el 9 de octubre de 1962', in Consejo de la Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA), *Actas de las sesiones*, vol. 42, julio-octubre 1962, Anexo C.

¹⁶Telegram from Department of State to All ARA Diplomatic Posts', 4 Oct. 1962, RG 59, CDF 1960-3, Box 1330, Decimal Folder 637.61/8-362, NARA.

¹⁷Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), p. 36.

much for any strength in anything like this'.¹⁸ Kennedy was even more dismissive, declaring: 'I don't think we ought to do the OAS. I think that's a waste of time.'¹⁹ US leaders' trivialising attitude toward the OAS betrayed a deep and longstanding distrust of both the organisation itself and of its member states.²⁰

But over the course of the next few days, as Kennedy and other members of the Executive Committee began turning away from the military option, the prospect of working with the OAS became more appealing. Secretary Rusk continued to push hard for OAS action, arguing on 18 October that 'The Rio Pact is, I think clearly, our strongest legal basis for whatever action we need to take.'²¹ When discussion turned to the possibility of a blockade or quarantine around Cuba, Rusk again piped up: 'You could have a blockade imposed under Article 8 of the Rio Treaty.'²² Lawyers from the Justice and State Departments also weighed in and told Kennedy that, under the UN Charter, the OAS could legally authorise a blockade.²³ Eventually, Kennedy settled on a two-pronged strategy of establishing a quarantine around Cuba to prevent the delivery of additional weapons and issuing an ultimatum to First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev that he remove the missiles already on the island. Officially, Kennedy and other US officials were careful to call the action a quarantine rather than a blockade in order to avoid thorny legal questions.²⁴ And, as Rusk had proposed, the OAS would play a crucial role in laying the legal foundations for the quarantine.

One question about the OAS remained, even as Kennedy was preparing to make his speech to the world on 22 October: would the United States get enough votes to approve the quarantine? In calling the meeting and proposing the quarantine, the United States was setting the agenda for the OAS, but it was up to the Latin American members to approve or reject the US proposal. Dean Rusk and Edwin Martin were confident that they could get the two-thirds required – 14 member countries – to pass a resolution invoking the Rio Treaty, but others were not so sure. That morning, in a conversation with former president Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy confessed that he was not certain of getting OAS support. 'If we get the

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁰On US attitudes and foreign policy toward Latin America, see Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of US Policy toward Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). On US–Latin American relations under Kennedy, see Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

²¹May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 80.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 94. Article 8 of the Rio Treaty states: 'For the purposes of this Treaty, the measures on which the Organ of Consultation may agree will comprise one or more of the following: recall of chiefs of diplomatic missions; breaking of diplomatic relations; breaking of consular relations; partial or complete interruption of economic relations or of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, telephonic, and radiotelephonic or radiotelegraphic communications; and use of armed force.'

²³May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 124. For further elaboration of the OAS's role in authorising the blockade, see David L. Larson, 'An Interpretation by Department of State Legal Adviser Abram Chayes on US Legal Position, November 3, 1962', in *The Cuban Crisis' of 1962: Selected Documents and Chronology* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 244–8.

²⁴Larman C. Wilson, 'International Law and the United States Cuban Quarantine of 1962', *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, 7: 4 (1965), pp. 485–92.

two-thirds we'll operate under the Rio Treaty. If we don't get the two-thirds, then we'll do it under our own act of [...] self-defense', Kennedy told his predecessor.²⁵ That same morning, Kennedy elaborated further in a conversation with congressional leadership, explaining to Senate majority leader Richard Russell: 'We're going to do the blockade in any case, Senator. The legality of the blockade depends – if it's a peacetime blockade – upon the endorsement, under the Rio Treaty, of the OAS, which meets tomorrow morning.' Kennedy also told the senator of his contingency plan: 'If they don't give us the 14 votes, the two-thirds vote, then we're going to do it anyway. But in that case, we are going to have to have what's legally an illegal blockade or a declaration of war.'²⁶ Therein lay the importance of the OAS: the organisation did not determine US policy – Kennedy was going to move forward with the quarantine either way – but if enough of its member countries voted to support a legal quarantine, they could help the United States avoid declaring war.

In order to head off the possibility of losing the vote in the OAS, the State Department sent top-secret instructions on 21 October to US ambassadors across Latin America to coordinate the hemispheric response. The instructions told the ambassadors to wait until they received another message with the single word 'GO' and the date and time of Kennedy's speech. Then, the ambassadors were to set up meetings with the chiefs of state of their host countries half an hour before the speech. At those meetings, they would deliver a letter from Kennedy along with the text of his speech. 'You should also reinforce the President's request for [OAS] support', the instructions read; 'you should make clear that this is a first vital step to deal with a major threat by the USSR to the peace and security not only of this hemisphere but the whole free world'. The State Department told the ambassadors to 'strongly emphasize' the importance of passing an OAS resolution 'as promptly as possible, and very preferably on the same day, agreeing that the governments of the Hemisphere should take all actions they may deem necessary against Cuba as provided for in Article 8 of the Rio Pact'.²⁷ Through this coordinated approach, the State Department sought to balance the need for secrecy with the equally compelling need for support from the rest of the Americas.

The OAS Confronts the Crisis

At 7pm Eastern time on 22 October 1962, President Kennedy alerted the world to the presence of Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba and called on the OAS and the UN to take action. Kennedy emphasised the shared danger of the situation, characterising the military build-up as 'an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas' and a 'flagrant and deliberate defiance of the Rio Pact of 1947, the traditions of this nation and Hemisphere ... and the Charter of the United Nations'. He explained that the Soviets were installing two different types of missile sites in Cuba: medium-range missiles capable of reaching Washington DC, the Panama

²⁵May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 144.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁷Dean Rusk, 'Eyes Only Ambassador from Secretary', 21 Oct. 1962, RG 59, CDF 1960–3, Box 1625, Decimal Folder 737.00/10-1262, NARA.

Canal or Mexico City, and intermediate-range missiles that could strike most of the major cities in the western hemisphere, including those in countries as far away as Canada and Peru. Kennedy requested an immediate meeting of the OAS 'to consider this threat to hemispheric security'.²⁸

Kennedy's words jolted the OAS into action. At the time of his speech, the OAS's Inter-American Economic and Social Council had just begun a conference in Mexico City about the Alliance for Progress.²⁹ Kennedy's announcement prompted a rush for the exits, as diplomats and functionaries hurried to the airport and crowded onto planes in order to get to Washington DC in time for the next morning's emergency meeting. Many of them arrived exhausted after flying all night, and the Argentine ambassador to the OAS reportedly couldn't find a seat on an aircraft and had to be replaced at the last minute by the Argentine ambassador to the United States.³⁰ Venezuela and Uruguay also had to send substitute representatives; but, one way or another, every OAS member country answered Kennedy's call to action. Even Bolivia, which had suspended its participation in the organisation in protest over the lack of OAS attention to its dispute with Chile over the Lauca River, sent a representative to the emergency meeting about the missile crisis.

When the Council of the OAS convened its extraordinary session on the morning of 23 October, Dean Rusk wasted no time in laying out the US proposal and the stakes of the OAS's decision. After reminding the council members of their collective responsibilities and contending that 'the Soviet intervention in this Hemisphere with major offensive weapons challenges as never before the determination of the American governments to carry out hemispheric commitments solemnly assumed in inter-American treaties and resolutions', Rusk laid out a two-part proposal. He asked that first, the Council constitute itself provisionally as an Organ of Consultation and, second, that it approve the quarantine and issue a call for the immediate dismantling and removal of all missiles and other weapons of offensive capabilities.³¹ The second part of the proposal, if approved, would be the most forceful action that the OAS had ever undertaken. 'All the world will be watching how wisely, how resolutely, how unitedly this Council acts to meet a challenge within our Hemisphere', he urged them. 'The future of peace and freedom in the world has never before been so dependent upon the inter-American system as it is today.'³²

Some Latin American representatives whose governments were already pursuing anti-communist foreign policies responded enthusiastically to Rusk's call to arms. The first to speak up, Argentina's substitute Ambassador Roberto T. Alemann, declared that his country, as an 'indivisible part of the West', would comply with

²⁸ May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 184–7.

²⁹ On the Alliance for Progress, see Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³⁰ 'Al fin y al cabo', *Bohemia Libre*, Caracas, 11 Nov. 1962.

³¹ The first part of the proposal was a formality. According to OAS procedures, member states have to hold a vote to invoke the Rio Treaty and approve meeting as an 'Organ of Consultation' in order to consider urgent problems.

³² Acta de la sesión extraordinaria celebrada el 23 de octubre de 1962', in Consejo de la OEA, *Actas de las sesiones*, vol. 42, julio–octubre 1962, pp. iii–33.

the commitments of the inter-American system and the Rio Treaty. The Guatemalan ambassador, whose government had already advocated unsuccessfully for OAS action against the Soviet build-up back in August, declared that 'Faced with the lethal danger that threatens us all equally, categorical definitions must prevail. This is no time for half measures and lukewarm responses.' Venezuela's representative launched into a tirade against the Cuban government, accusing Premier Fidel Castro of being a counterrevolutionary who 'wanted to drag the American republics back to their former colonial condition'. In his view, the presence of the missiles proved that Cuba had become a Soviet satellite and the beachhead for a communist invasion of the Americas. The Honduran representative predicted that the OAS vote to protect the peace and security of the hemisphere would be 'transcendental in the history of America'. The Nicaraguan ambassador took an especially internationalist stance as he stated that 'Last night we listened with Pan-American emotion to President Kennedy's speech ... The continent should respond with collective action to the Soviet provocation, putting our hemispheric solidarity to work.'³³ Nicaragua's ambassador and the other participants in the OAS meeting emphasised the shared nature of the threat and the need for a cooperative response.

Furthermore, Nicaragua's ambassador and a few others argued that the US proposal for a quarantine was not enough to defend against the greater communist threat. The Salvadorean representative explained that 'for us, the danger doesn't end with the missiles. Cuba's subversive activities in our countries, with the terrorist hordes that it is unleashing, are impeding our governments from doing the work necessary to help our people.' He urged the council to look beyond the immediate danger of the missiles and put an end to Cuba's other destabilising activities as well. Peru's representative spoke up next, reviewing the long history of inter-American security cooperation and, specifically, the various charges of communist intervention that the government of Peru had brought against Cuba in the OAS in the preceding years. He argued that the current crisis only proved the wisdom of those concerns, and that Cuba, as the base of operations for communism's war against the free world, 'posed the greatest threat to peace and security that America had ever confronted'.³⁴ Costa Rica's representative expressed the hope not only that the US proposal for a quarantine would pass, but that its approval would be unanimous and that the OAS Council would also address larger issues. 'I want to declare that my government, even though it gives priority to the problem of the [missile] bases, believes that it is impossible to separate it from the problem represented by the existence of a communist regime in the heart of the Americas.' According to the Costa Rican representative and others, the US response to the missiles was a good start, but it was not enough to resolve the overall threat that Cuba and communism posed to the region. In their view, Castro's efforts to destabilise their governments were just as great an existential threat as the Soviet missiles.³⁵ Their statements demonstrate that collective action against Cuba was not simply a US policy imposed

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵On Castro's efforts to export revolution – and Latin American governments' responses – see Jonathan C. Brown, *Cuba's Revolutionary World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

on Latin America or the OAS, but was in fact a goal shared by many – though certainly not all – member governments.³⁶

While most countries responded positively to the idea of collective action against Cuba, three of the biggest and most powerful nations in the region demonstrated notable restraint. In contrast to his colleagues' long speeches about communist threats, the Brazilian representative's response consisted of one sentence. He voiced support for the preliminary proposal to convoke the Organ of Consultation, but said nothing about the missiles, Cuba or communism. Mexico's representative also pointedly avoided making any specific remarks about the missiles in Cuba, and merely stated that even though his government had sometimes voted against hemispheric action, he had received instructions on this occasion to approve the convocation of the Organ of Consultation.³⁷ Colombia's representative, who was president of the OAS Council at the time, also limited his remarks to a one-sentence approval of the proposal for convocation.³⁸ These less enthusiastic responses indicated that not all the governments of Latin America perceived the Cuban threat in the same way.

That afternoon, the OAS turned to the more controversial issue of the specific measures that the organisation and its member countries should take to guarantee the security of the hemisphere. The original resolution that the United States had proposed included a paragraph that stated that the Council of the OAS would:

recommend to the member states, in conformity with Articles 6 and 8 of the Rio Treaty, that they adopt all the individual and collective measures, including the use of armed force, that they consider necessary to assure that the Government of Cuba will no longer be able to receive from the Sino-Soviet powers military supplies and provisions that threaten the peace and security of the Continent, and to prevent the missiles with offensive capacity in Cuba from being converted at any moment into an active threat to the peace and security of the Continent.³⁹

³⁶On Latin American-led efforts to fight communism, see Stephen G. Rabe, 'The Caribbean Triangle: Betancourt, Castro, and Trujillo and US Foreign Policy, 1958–1963', *Diplomatic History*, 20: 1 (1996), pp. 55–78 and Gustavo Salcedo Avila, 'Más allá de la Doctrina Betancourt: Ayuda encubierta como instrumento de la política exterior de Venezuela durante la guerra fría (1959–1964)', *Revista OPSIS*, 14: Especial (2014), pp. 74–92. On earlier collective efforts to defend the hemisphere, see Aaron Coy Moulton, 'Militant Roots: The Anti-Fascist Left in the Caribbean Basin, 1945–1954', *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 28: 2 (2017), pp. 14–29.

³⁷Acta de la sesión extraordinaria celebrada el 23 de octubre de 1962'.

³⁸On Colombian responses to the Cuban Revolution, see Robert A. Karl, 'Reading the Cuban Revolution from Bogotá, 1957–62', *Cold War History*, 16: 4 (2016), pp. 337–58.

³⁹Article 6 of the Rio Treaty states: 'If the inviolability or the integrity of the territory or the sovereignty or political independence of any American State should be affected by an aggression which is not an armed attack or by an extra-continental or intra-continental conflict, or by any other fact or situation [that] might endanger the peace of America, the Organ of Consultation shall meet immediately in order to agree on the measures which must be taken in case of aggression to assist the victim of the aggression or, in any case, the measures which should be taken for the common defense and for the maintenance of the peace and security of the Continent.'

The debate revolved around the crucial question of the limits of multilateral action: should the OAS approve the use of military force to remove the missiles from Cuba? The Brazilian representative was the first to express concern; he said that his country would support the quarantine to prevent more weapons from arriving in Cuba, but would have to abstain from approving the use of armed force to remove the missiles already on the island. Brazil's government still maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba, and the country's embattled leftist leaders feared that endorsing military intervention would set a dangerous precedent.⁴⁰ Brazil's representative insisted that the proposed resolution be broken into smaller parts to allow his country and others to draw a distinction between approving the preventative measure of a quarantine and the more interventionist measure of an armed invasion – otherwise, he threatened, Brazil would abstain from voting on any action at all. The Mexican, Chilean and Bolivian representatives also explained that their countries' constitutions prevented them from approving the joint use of armed force, and they could vote only for a resolution that allowed each country to decide its own actions. These countries, some of the most influential ones in the Americas and among the few that still maintained relations with Cuba, did not just blindly follow the US lead but instead used their reservations to protect their leftist credentials at home and their ability to determine their own foreign policies.⁴¹ By breaking the proposed resolution into smaller parts, they sought to find ways to defend both their national sovereignty and hemispheric security.

As a result of these reservations, the OAS ultimately accommodated Brazil's demands and voted on the resolution both in whole and by section. The vote on the resolution as a whole passed unanimously, but when broken into specifics about the actual measures, the section on the quarantine passed with 16 votes in favour and three abstentions and the section on the use of armed force passed with 16 votes in favour and four abstentions.⁴² Brazil, Mexico and Bolivia inserted a note into the final record of the meeting clarifying that their support for the resolution as a whole should not be interpreted as support for an armed attack against Cuba.⁴³ The votes demonstrated that all the member countries of the OAS perceived the missiles in Cuba as an urgent threat and shared the common goal of ending the crisis, but they did not all agree on the best methods of doing so.

Even though the OAS vote was not entirely unanimous, it was enough to provide a legal foundation for the quarantine. Furthermore, the multinational nature of the organisation changed the character of the quarantine; instead of being a unilateral US act of war against Cuba, now it was multilateral defence of hemispheric security. President Kennedy used the OAS resolution in the last sentence of his ultimatum to

⁴⁰On Brazil's role in the missile crisis, see James G. Hershberg, 'The United States, Brazil, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962 (Part 1)', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 6: 2 (2004), pp. 3–20; James G. Hershberg, 'The United States, Brazil, and the Cuban Missile Crisis (Part 2)', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 6: 3 (2004), pp. 5–67.

⁴¹At the time of the missile crisis, the only countries in the Americas that still had diplomatic relations with Cuba were Brazil, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay. On the Brazilian, Mexican and Bolivian governments' defence of Cuba to protect their own leftist credentials, see Keller, 'The Latin American Missile Crisis'.

⁴²Acta de la sesión extraordinaria celebrada el 23 de octubre de 1962'.

⁴³Bobadilla González, *México y la OEA*, p. 155.

Khrushchev, in which he warned the Soviet leader: 'I hope that you will issue immediately the necessary instructions to your ships to observe the terms of the quarantine, the basis of which was established by the vote of the Organization of American States.'⁴⁴ When Dean Rusk reported the results of the OAS meeting to the rest of the members of Kennedy's Executive Committee, the relief was palpable. Amid general exclamations of 'Oh gee!' and 'Wonderful!' and 'Terrific!', Deputy Undersecretary for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson remarked: 'If the OAS has acted before the [UN] Security Council, oh, that's going to be a big help. Our diplomacy is working.'⁴⁵ Robert Kennedy congratulated his brother in private later that evening: '[Y]ou got all those South American countries and Central American countries to vote unanimously. When they've been kicking us in the ass for two years, and they vote[d] unanimously for this.'⁴⁶ These reactions of surprise and relief demonstrated both the importance and the contingency of OAS approval.

In establishing the quarantine around Cuba, the OAS thus served its foundational functions of encouraging peace, promoting solidarity and defending the member states' sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. For the United States, the OAS vote demonstrated Latin American support for US policy and offered a legal justification for exercising US power. And from the Latin American perspective, a multilateral quarantine established with Latin American consent was an attractive alternative to unilateral US military intervention. Latin American countries were able to use Kennedy's reliance on the OAS to endorse the quarantine as leverage to strengthen both the organisation itself and their own individual national sovereignty. In its response to the missile crisis, the OAS reinforced its own utility as a tool for both weak and strong nations to exert power, coordinate action and, most importantly, pursue nonviolent resolutions to conflicts.

The OAS vote also influenced the response in the UN. Immediately after the conclusion of the 23 October meeting, Secretary-General of the OAS José A. Mora sent the text of the resolution to UN Secretary-General U Thant.⁴⁷ He appended to the message letters from individual Latin American countries, including Argentina, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua and El Salvador, offering their cooperation in hemispheric security measures.⁴⁸ That same day, Adlai Stevenson informed the other members of the UN Security Council that the OAS had adopted a resolution calling for the removal of the missiles. Venezuela's representative to the UN, who was

⁴⁴May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 212.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁴⁷José A. Mora, 'Letter from José A. Mora, Secretary-General, Organization of American States', 23 Oct. 1962, S-0873, Box 1, File 4, UN Archive (hereafter UN), New York City. Thant was appointed acting secretary-general in November 1961 following the death of Dag Hammarskjöld, then secretary-general on 30 Nov. 1962, with the title retroactively applied to his entire time in office. The remainder of this article will use his retroactive title.

⁴⁸Informes de los gobiernos sobre las medidas adoptadas de acuerdo con el párrafo segundo de la resolución aprobada por el Consejo de la Organización de los Estados Americanos, actuando provisionalmente como órgano de consulta, en la sesión celebrada el 23 de octubre de 1962', Oct. 1962, S-0872, Box 2, File 5, UN. The Argentine and Dominican governments followed through with their offers by deploying ships to participate in the naval quarantine. See Keller, 'The Latin American Missile Crisis', p. 204.

serving as a temporary member of the Security Council at the time of the crisis, reminded the council about OAS action at the next day's meeting on 24 October. Claiming to speak 'on behalf of all Latin American countries in voicing their serious concern over the installation of rocket bases and nuclear missiles in Cuba', the Venezuelan announced that 'the OAS had already adopted a resolution which reflected that concern'. He told his fellow UN representatives that he 'considered it imperative that the Security Council take measures to stop nuclear weapons from arriving in Cuba and to ensure the dismantling of the existing bases'.⁴⁹

In his account of the Cuban missile crisis written years after the fact, U Thant expressed conflicting feelings about the juridical basis for the OAS resolution, especially the part that authorised the use of armed force. He described the UN's failure to request that the International Court of Justice issue an advisory opinion on the question of regional enforcement action earlier in 1962 as 'a tragedy'.⁵⁰ 'By this *non-action*', Thant reflected, 'the Security Council implicitly endorses "Monroe Doctrines" everywhere on Earth'.⁵¹ Thant interpreted the quarantine not only as a multilateral effort, but also as a continuation of the United States' longstanding effort to dominate hemispheric politics and keep other foreign competitors out. Furthermore, Thant personally sympathised with the Cubans; he recalled later that 'My judgment was that Cuba was fully within its rights to ask for and receive the missiles and bombers from a Big Power, in the same way that Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand, and Japan, on the perimeters of communist countries, were fully within their rights to act similarly'.⁵² The only difference that Thant saw was that Cuba had received the weapons in secret. But the secretary-general believed that his hands were tied; the UN had to accept the quarantine because refusal would have infringed on the regional sovereignty of the OAS.

The UN Confronts the Crisis

Even though U Thant had to accept the OAS's quarantine, there was still a great deal of room for the UN to determine its own response to the Cuban missile crisis. Furthermore, some people believed that the UN was actually the more appropriate multilateral forum for resolving the crisis and the one most likely to do so peacefully. As a writer for the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* put it, 'Since the Cuban conflict is greater than just a regional matter and has profound repercussions for the entire world ... the United Nations, more than the OAS, is the organisation that should find a peaceful solution to this grave problem'.⁵³ An editorial in the Bolivian newspaper *La Nación* agreed, arguing that 'in this fateful atmosphere,

⁴⁹UN, *UN Yearbook 1962*, Part I: The United Nations. Section I: Political and Security Questions. Chapter 8: Questions Relating to the Americas, p. 106, <http://www.unmultimedia.org/searchers/yearbook/page.jsp?volume=1962&page=112&searchType=advanced>, last access 1 Feb. 2019.

⁵⁰U Thant, *View from the UN* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1978), p. 160.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 173. Emphasis in original. On the Monroe Doctrine, see Brian Loveman, *No Higher Law: American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere since 1776* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), chap. 2.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵³'La instalación por Rusia de bases en territorio cubano viola seguridad continental', *El Mercurio*, Santiago, 25 Oct. 1962.

the United Nations faces a critical responsibility, greater than any it has faced in its history. Never before has a terrified humanity turned its gaze with greater hope toward the global organisation, trusting in its wisdom and prudence to find a way to establish peace.⁵⁴

The authors of the articles were right: the world was looking to the UN for salvation. As U Thant put it, his office was 'deluged with cables and letters' throughout the crisis, as people begged him to intercede.⁵⁵ Individuals wrote, as well as heads of state and local, national and international organisations. The messages expressed a wide range of emotions, from fear to anger to defiance to hope. Some proposed solutions, others sought an international audience for their position, and still others merely beseeched the UN for help. These pleas are preserved in the UN archive, which contains the hundreds of cables that the organisation received during those tense days.

A few of the messages voiced support for the blockade, but the vast majority of the people and organisations that wrote to the UN seemed more worried about Kennedy's quarantine than Cuba's missiles. The Federation of Dominican Students in Santo Domingo wrote: 'We energetically protest the US imperialist aggression against Cuba', while the Argentine Peace Council in Buenos Aires called upon the UN Security Council to 'condemn the United States' bellicose measures that violate the UN Charter and threaten to drag the world into nuclear war'. The leaders of women's groups in Mexico City expressed 'profound indignation over the North American military blockade against our sister republic of Cuba that endangers world peace'. I. Grant from Toronto told U Thant: 'We depend on you to stop Kennedy.' Mrs. Jean Lee, also from Toronto, begged the UN leader: 'My children want to live. Please help.'⁵⁶ Lee, Grant, the Mexican women, the Argentine Peace Council and the Dominican students may have had different reasons for opposing the blockade, some more personal and others more ideological, but they all agreed that Kennedy's actions threatened world peace and looked to the UN as the organisation most likely to curtail US aggression. The ways that these private citizens perceived the Cuban missile crisis stood in stark contrast to the anti-Castro and anti-communist positions that most of the Latin American diplomats took at the OAS.

Furthermore, some of the people who wrote to the UN had very specific – and creative – ideas about the steps the organisation should take to ensure peace. G. de Vries from Berkeley, California, who was disgusted with both superpowers, proposed that Thant 'meld the two monsters USSR and USA into the minerals of mountains'.⁵⁷ Canadians were especially vocal in proposing solutions, perhaps believing that they had a less biased perspective than their neighbours to the south.⁵⁸ The Welland Committee for Nuclear Disarmament in Ontario advised the UN to appoint inspection teams in order to confirm that there were, in fact, nuclear

⁵⁴Dramático aniversario de la ONU', *La Nación*, La Paz, 24 Oct. 1962.

⁵⁵Thant, *View from the UN*, p. 168.

⁵⁶Cables Sent to the United Nations', Oct. 1962, S-0872, Box 1, File 2, UN.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, File 5.

⁵⁸On Canadian government officials' reactions to the Cuban missile crisis, see Asa McKercher, 'A "Half-hearted Response"?: Canada and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962', *The International History Review*, 33: 2 (2011), pp. 335–52.

missiles in Cuba.⁵⁹ Paul Simon from Toronto wrote to ‘suggest a UN initiative in establishing [a] zone of non-belligerence around Cuba [and] suggest a request to Canada, Mexico, and Brazil for placing naval units under [the] UN’.⁶⁰ One Canadian citizen, Solomon Kalnitsky, who had been closely following the debates in the UN, proposed the most elaborate scenario. Believing that Adlai Stevenson had ‘badgered’ Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin ‘into war’, Kalnitsky felt compelled to volunteer himself as a ‘counter cross-examiner to make Stevenson admit harboring [and] arming Cuban exiles [as a] basis for the Cuban crisis. Sharing the guilt, Stevenson will have to meet Russia halfway to save face.’⁶¹ The details of the proposed actions thus differed significantly, but they all demonstrated the belief that the UN had the responsibility and the capacity to intercede in the crisis.

Though people from across the Americas turned to the UN, Cubans were the organisation’s most prolific correspondents. Cuba had been suspended from the OAS in January 1962, so the UN was the only multilateral forum where Cuban citizens and groups could make their voices heard. Workers from Bayamo, Cuba, wrote: ‘We condemn and repudiate the imperialist blockade. We are ready to defend our independence until death or victory.’⁶² A Committee for the Defence of the Revolution in Havana warned: ‘We support peace but are ready to defend our country from the invading gangsters and pirates.’⁶³ A conglomeration of furniture stores in Havana declared: ‘We condemn the attitude adopted by President Kennedy toward the self-determination of the Cuban people. We support our Marxist-Leninist revolution.’⁶⁴ Unlike most of the other messages that U Thant received, the ones from Cuba did not ask the UN to take action; instead, they insisted that Cubans could defend themselves and merely sought an international forum where they could demonstrate their independence. In addition to being more defiant and numerous than the other messages, the ones from Cuba were also more uniform, suggesting that the authors may have received instructions and encouragement from the Cuban government.⁶⁵

Members of the Cuban government also used the UN as a global forum to air their points of view. On 8 October, mere weeks before the missile crisis exploded, Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticós gave a speech before the UN General Assembly in which he claimed that Cuba favoured world peace and only reluctantly armed itself in defence against US aggression. ‘If the United States could give assurances, by word and by deed, that it would not commit acts of aggression against our country, we solemnly declare that there would be no need for our weapons and our armies’, Dorticós told the assembly.⁶⁶ Cuba’s ambassador to the UN, Mario

⁵⁹‘Cables Sent to the United Nations’, Oct. 1962, File 1.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, File 3.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²*Ibid.*, File 1.

⁶³*Ibid.*, File 2.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, File 3.

⁶⁵On the impact of the missile crisis in Cuba, see Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*.

⁶⁶UN General Assembly, Seventeenth Session, Official Records, ‘Address by Mr. Osvaldo Dorticós, President of the Republic of Cuba’, 8 Oct. 1962, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/PV.1145, last access 13 March 2019. For the version of Dorticós’s speech published in Cuba, see ‘Cuba en la ONU’, *Cuba*, Havana, Nov. 1962.

García Incháustegui, struck a less conciliatory note when he took the floor on 23 October, during the first day of debates over the missile crisis. 'Who are these who accuse Cuba of being a threatening base against American territory? Those who possess the only foreign base in Cuba against the will of our people', the Cuban ambassador insisted. García Incháustegui went on to ask what right the US government had to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons, or, as he put it, 'the good military bases and the bad ones, the good rockets and the bad rockets'. Furthermore, he pointed out, the United States had bases all over the world 'that are aggressive bases against member states of this organization'.⁶⁷ According to the Cuban president and ambassador, their country was one of many victims of the United States' cynical and dangerous policies.

While the Cubans were using the UN to express their perspectives on the crisis, representatives of other countries wanted the global organisation and its leader, U Thant, to take a more active role in resolving the nuclear showdown. On the morning of 24 October, 45 member states, mostly non-aligned countries led by Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Mali, Guinea and Ghana, petitioned the secretary-general to intervene in the conflict.⁶⁸ Specifically, they asked Thant to appeal to the United States, the Soviet Union and Cuba to 'take no action that would "exacerbate" the crisis'.⁶⁹ The secretary-general told the diplomats who presented the petition that he planned to speak at the Security Council meeting that very evening. Even before the meeting, however, Thant acted upon their request. He sent identical messages to Kennedy and Khrushchev, in which he began by explaining:

I have been asked by the Permanent Representatives of a large number of Member Governments of the United Nations to address an urgent appeal to you in the present critical situation. These Representatives feel that in the interest of international peace and security, all concerned should refrain from any action which may aggravate the situation and bring with it the risk of war. In their view, it is important that time should be given to enable the parties concerned to get together with a view to resolving the present crisis peacefully and normalizing the situation in the Caribbean.⁷⁰

By framing his message as a request from multiple member countries, Thant used the numerical weight of the UN to pressure the superpowers to consider the global implications of their actions.

Thant appeared to have listened to the petitions of the UN ambassadors, as well as to the hundreds of cables pleading for help, when he spoke to the UN Security Council at its televised meeting on the evening of 24 October. He opened by reminding those gathered that 'What is at stake is not just the interests of the parties directly involved, nor just the interests of all member-states, but the very fate of mankind.' He then read the text of his message to Kennedy and Khrushchev, and, even though he had not sent

⁶⁷David L. Larson, 'Excerpt from Statement by Cuban Ambassador García-Inchaustegui [sic] to UN, October 23, 1962', in *The Cuban Crisis* of 1962, pp. 63–4.

⁶⁸Thant, *View from the UN*, pp. 161–2.

⁶⁹Thomas J. Hamilton, 'Stevenson Charges in U.N. Cuba Is Soviet Bridgehead', *New York Times*, 24 Oct. 1962.

⁷⁰Thant, *View from the UN*, Part III, Appendix A, p. 460.

the initial message to Osvaldo Dorticós or Fidel Castro, belatedly included the Cuban leaders in his efforts. 'I should like also to take this occasion to address an urgent appeal to the president and prime minister of the Revolutionary Government of Cuba', Thant continued. He reminded the Cubans of Dorticós's own proposal that if the United States would give assurances not to commit acts of aggression against Cuba, then Cuba would have no need for its weapons. Thant suggested that this offer could be the basis for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, and asked the Cubans to suspend construction on the missile installations in order to allow a period of negotiations. The secretary-general closed his remarks with the hope that 'not only in the Council Chamber but in the world outside, good sense and understanding will be placed above the anger of the moment or the pride of nations'.⁷¹

U Thant's Peace Offensive

After his speech to the Security Council, U Thant continued to work in public and behind the scenes to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis. The most urgent danger when Thant sent his messages and gave his speech on 24 October was the fact that Soviet ships were steaming toward the quarantine zone. But on the afternoon of 25 October, Thant received a reply from Khrushchev in which the Soviet leader welcomed Thant's initiative and agreed to his proposed suspension of activities to allow for a period of negotiations. 'I understand your concern over the situation which has arisen in the Caribbean, for the Soviet Government too regards it as highly dangerous and as requiring immediate intervention by the United Nations', the message read.⁷² That same day, Thant received a somewhat tepid reply from Kennedy, in which the US president also agreed to the prospect of initial talks. Thant then sent two more rounds of messages to the two leaders, in which he set a time for preliminary negotiations and asked Khrushchev to instruct his ships to avoid the quarantine zone and asked Kennedy to instruct his ships to do everything possible to avoid confrontation with the Soviets.⁷³ Both parties agreed immediately, thankful that Thant's intervention had allowed them to back a small step away from the brink while still saving face.⁷⁴

Even though Thant had neglected to involve the Cubans in his initial diplomatic efforts, perhaps because the most immediate danger was a confrontation on the high seas, he later endeavoured to include them in the process of negotiating a peaceful end to the crisis. On 26 October, after Thant had got Kennedy and Khrushchev to agree to preliminary talks, the secretary-general reached out to Cuba's leaders. In a message to Fidel Castro, Thant once again repeated President Dorticós's proposal that his country would give up their weapons if the United States could prove, 'by word and deed', that it would not carry out aggression against Cuba. Thant then informed Castro of Kennedy and

⁷¹Statement Made by Acting Secretary-General U Thant before Security Council, 24 October 1962', S-0872, Box 2, File 6, UN. See also Ramses Nassif, *U Thant in New York, 1961-1971* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 27-9.

⁷²Thant, *View from the UN*, p. 165.

⁷³*Ibid.*, Appendices C and D, pp. 461-2.

⁷⁴On Thant's role in setting up negotiations and Khrushchev and Kennedy's responses, see Dorn and Pauk, 'Unsung Mediator'.

Khrushchev's encouraging responses to his initial call for negotiations, and appealed to Castro's notorious ego in his request for Cuban help. 'Your Excellency can make a significant contribution to the peace of the world at this present critical juncture', Thant wrote to Castro, 'by directing that the construction and development of major military facilities and installations in Cuba ... be suspended during the period of negotiations which are now under way'.⁷⁵

Castro replied immediately and forcefully. He rejected the very premise of the quarantine, calling it 'an act of force and war' and a violation of Cuba's sovereignty. Furthermore, Castro rejected the presumption that the United States had the right to dictate 'what actions we are entitled to take within our own country [and] what kind of arms we consider appropriate for our defence'. He argued that Cuba had violated no international law in accepting Soviet weapons and was merely defending its own security and sovereignty. Castro said that he would agree to stop construction on the missile bases only 'provided that at the same time, while negotiations are in progress, the United States Government desists from threats and aggressive actions against Cuba, including the naval blockade of our country'.⁷⁶ This rejection of Thant's proposal was a significant blow. But, in the same message, Castro also offered his own olive branch: an invitation for the secretary-general to come to Havana to continue discussions.

Thant seized the opportunity to gain Cuban cooperation in the peace negotiations. The next day, 28 October, he accepted Castro's invitation, writing, 'It would be my hope that as a result of these discussions, a solution would be reached by which the principle of respect for the sovereignty of Cuba would be assured.' In the same message, Thant also reminded Castro that other people and nations had a great deal at stake in the outcome of the crisis. The secretary-general wrote of his hope 'that it may also be possible for action to be taken which would reassure other countries which have felt themselves threatened by recent developments in Cuba'.⁷⁷ Two days later, on 30 October, Thant left for Havana on a chartered Brazilian plane, accompanied by almost 30 other UN officials, staff, interpreters and telecommunications personnel.⁷⁸

By the time the UN secretary-general travelled to Havana, however, the height of the missile crisis had already passed. On the morning of 28 October, the news had broken that Khrushchev had agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for a US pledge not to invade the island. Essentially, the United States and the Soviet Union had embraced Cuban President Dorticós's original proposal – the one that U Thant had been promoting at every opportunity – but without any Cuban participation in the process. The Cubans were furious. Castro issued a declaration, which he sent to the UN as well as to the international press, that any promises that Kennedy made to cease aggression against Cuba were meaningless unless the United States took five concrete measures: ending the economic blockade against Cuba, ending the subversive activities against Cuba, ending the 'piratical'

⁷⁵Text of Message from Acting Secretary-General U Thant to Premier Fidel Castro and his Reply', S-0872, 26 Oct. 1962, Box 2, File 6, UN.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Text of a Letter from Acting Secretary-General U Thant to Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba, Dated 28 October', S-0872, Box 2, File 6, UN.

⁷⁸Secretary-General and Staff Accompanying him to Cuba – 30 October 1962', S-0872, Box 2, File 14, UN.

attacks against Cuba, ending the violations of Cuban naval and airspace and returning the Guantánamo naval base to Cuban control.⁷⁹ Thant's mission to Havana took on the new goal of placating Cuban leadership enough to convince them to allow international inspection of the missiles' removal.

Under these inauspicious circumstances, it is little wonder that Thant's mission to Havana failed to accomplish its main objective. The secretary-general held two meetings with Cuban leaders, one on the record and the second private. In the first meeting, he told Prime Minister Castro, President Dorticós, Foreign Minister Raúl Roa and Cuba's UN representative that he had insisted that any inspections on Cuban territory had to be approved by the Cubans themselves. Thant said that he had informed the US and Soviet leadership that 'before sending a team to verify [the dismantling of the missile bases], the most important thing is to obtain prior consent from the Cuban government'.⁸⁰ But Castro adamantly refused to consent to any sort of inspections, either on the part of the UN, or, as the Soviets had suggested, the International Red Cross. He described the very idea as 'one more attempt to humiliate our country'. President Dorticós spoke up at the meeting as well, asking Thant why Cuba should submit to inspections if the United States did not agree to similar inspections on US territory to guarantee Kennedy's non-aggression pledge. 'World peace is not threatened by our weapons', Dorticós insisted, unknowingly echoing many of the telegrams that the UN secretary-general had received; 'World peace is threatened by the aggressive conduct of the United States.'⁸¹

After his frustrating initial meeting with the Cubans, Secretary-General Thant's spirits were lifted when two Soviet officials made a surprise visit to his Havana guest house that evening. The Soviet ambassador to Cuba and the general in charge of the missile sites thanked Thant for his efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Thant asked when the dismantling of the missiles would begin, and was shocked to learn that the process was already under way and would be concluded within the week. The secretary-general thanked the Soviet officials for their visit, which he interpreted as an effort by Moscow to communicate to the UN that Khrushchev was following through with his end of the agreement. After the Soviet ambassador and general left, Thant's military attaché remarked that this first-hand information from an authentic source had made the trip to Havana 'extremely worthwhile'.⁸²

U Thant's second, private, meeting the next day was slightly more successful, though he still did not manage to convince the Cubans to agree to inspections on the island. According to Thant's confidential notes on the meeting, Castro started the discussion in a bitter mood. He denounced both Kennedy and Khrushchev for excluding Cuba from the negotiations and told Thant that he was planning to make his displeasure with the Soviets public in his radio broadcast that evening.

⁷⁹Letter from Fidel Castro Ruz to U Thant', 28 Oct. 1962, S-0872, Box 2, File 10, UN.

⁸⁰'Boletín de Prensa Latina', *Prensa Latina*, Havana, 2 Nov. 1962, José Revueltas Papers Box 96, Folder 3, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection (hereafter Benson), Austin, TX.

⁸¹'Comparecencia del Dr. Fidel Castro, Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario y Primer Secretario de las ORI, ante las cámaras y micrófonos de la televisión nacional, para explicar al pueblo de Cuba sobre las conferencias y conversaciones sostenidas con el Secretario General de la ONU, Señor U Thant y de la situación actual de la crisis ocasionada por el bloqueo naval impuesto por los Estados Unidos', 1 Nov. 1962, S-0872, Box 2, File 10, UN.

⁸²Thant, *View from the UN*, p. 186.

Castro then reiterated his position from the previous day to the effect that his government would strongly oppose any inspections on Cuban territory. But the Cuban leader also offered an alternative. He proposed that 'the United Nations could inspect anything outside the Cuban territorial waters', and asked Thant to convey this view to both US and Soviet leaders.⁸³ After trying one last time to convince the Cubans to allow inspections on the island, Thant admitted defeat. He did, however, manage to convince Castro to 'practice restraint' and soften the tone of that evening's speech so as to 'not create more difficulties in finding a just and peaceful solution to the problem'.⁸⁴ Thant also inquired after a US Air Force pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson, who had been shot down over Cuba on 27 October. After denouncing the US overflights as 'illegal and intolerable' provocations, Castro agreed to return the pilot's body as a humanitarian gesture of goodwill. Castro ended the meeting much mollified, thanking the secretary-general for his visit to Havana to ease tensions and for his 'positive action for the achievement of peace according to the [UN] Charter'.⁸⁵

Thant focused on the positive results of his trip to Havana when he returned to New York that evening. Smoothing over the fact that Castro had refused to allow inspections, Thant told the reporters who gathered to meet him at Idlewild Airport that his discussions with Cuban leaders had been 'fruitful'. 'There was agreement that the United Nations should continue to participate in the peaceful settlement of the problem', Thant stated. The secretary-general also revealed that he had been 'reliably informed' that the dismantling of the missiles was already in progress and would be completed soon. He concluded by acknowledging Cuba's humanitarian gesture of returning Major Anderson's body.⁸⁶

After his return from Cuba, Thant continued to work to make sure that Kennedy and Khrushchev's agreement could be implemented even without on-the-ground inspection and verification of the missiles' removal. Thant hosted many meetings over the next two months between the US and Soviet negotiating teams at UN headquarters. To address US concerns about verification, Thant raised the possibility of inspections at sea.⁸⁷ This was actually Castro's idea, which he had suggested in his private meeting with the UN secretary-general. But Castro had already publicly committed himself to his intransigent five-point demands, and needed Thant to broach the idea for him in order to avoid looking weak. The UN secretary-general thus served a similar face-saving role for Castro as he did for Kennedy and Khrushchev, using his position as a neutral go-between to officially propose solutions that the three world leaders had privately suggested to him. Eventually, US, Soviet and Cuban officials tacitly agreed that the United States would be

⁸³U Thant, 'Notes on my Second Meeting with Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba in Havana on the 31st of October, 1962', in Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, pp. 38–48, p. 39.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 45 and 47. It is important to note that even though Castro moderated his public statements after his meeting with Thant, years later the Cuban leader remained extremely distrustful of the Soviets and bitter about the way they had treated him during the missile crisis. See Castro's secret 1968 speech in Blight and Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days*, pp. 35–71.

⁸⁶Statement Made by Acting Secretary-General U Thant on Arrival at Idlewild Airport, 31 October 1962, S-0872, Box 2, File 6, UN. Idlewild Airport would be renamed John F. Kennedy Airport in 1963 after the president's assassination.

⁸⁷Dorn and Pauk, 'Unsung Mediator', p. 288.

assured of the missiles' removal through a combination of overflights of Cuban territory – which the Cubans and Soviets did not shoot down – and air and naval visual verification of Soviet ships in international waters.⁸⁸

Thanks to the UN and its secretary-general, Cuban leaders' suggestions thus become important parts of the basis for the resolution of the missile crisis. This fact was immediately apparent to observers at the time, especially supporters of the Cuban Revolution who were desperately looking for a silver lining to the humiliating affair. In the Leninist Spartacist League's bulletin, Mexican writer José Revueltas called the outcome of the crisis 'a historic triumph for the policy of peaceful coexistence ... followed by the Soviet Union'. Revueltas reminded his readers that the first person to propose the dismantling of the bases in exchange for an end to US aggression was Cuba's very own President Dorticós in his speech to the UN Assembly. 'Cuba, then, was the first to lay out the proposition that the Soviet Union now, in virtue of its strength and its unwavering decision to help the Cuban people, has brought to reality in preventing a US invasion', Revueltas concluded.⁸⁹ He argued that the people of Latin America should show profound gratitude to the Soviets and the Cubans for finding a way to protect the Cuban Revolution and world peace.

Conclusion

Latin American citizens and officials encouraged and enabled the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis through the mechanisms of the OAS and the UN. In their speeches, written messages and private conversations, Latin Americans entrusted the OAS and the UN with the responsibility of laying the groundwork for negotiation. The two international organisations rose to the occasion and served their foundational purpose of using diplomacy and strength in numbers to help resolve international conflicts.

The OAS was the first to act, providing hemispheric support for a nonviolent alternative to a US military first-strike or a declaration of war. Thanks to the OAS vote, the quarantine became a legal, multilateral defence of hemispheric security rather than a unilateral act of war. The UN and its secretary-general, U Thant, played a crucial role in continuing to slow the pace of the confrontation once the quarantine had gone into effect. Responding to the pleas of government officials and hundreds of frantic civilians, Thant used his position as intermediary to both buy time for negotiations and propose the basis of the ultimate peace agreement. Ironically, it was the 'hot-headed' Cubans who gave Thant some of the foundations for his proposals. Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticós was the first to argue that his country would not need weapons if the United States ceased its aggressive behaviour, and Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro was the first to suggest that verification of the missiles' removal take place in international waters. Even though Castro was furious with the way his Soviet allies had ignored and abandoned him during the crisis, he found ways to insert Cuban priorities into the final negotiations through the auspices of the UN.

⁸⁸On the resolution of the inspection issue, see Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: Norton, 1997), chap. 15.

⁸⁹'Boletín Espartaquista', 30 Oct. 1962, José Revueltas Papers Box 32, Folder 16, Benson. On Revueltas, see Roberto Simon Crespi, 'José Revueltas (1914–1976): A Political Biography', *Latin American Perspectives*, 6: 3 (1979), pp. 93–113.

Taking a closer look at the multiple ways that the OAS and UN helped defuse the Cuban missile crisis reveals that Latin American citizens and officials trusted their international organisations. We can see this trust in Bolivian and Chilean editorials, in Mexican and Dominican telegrams to the UN, in Nicaraguan and Honduran speeches to the OAS and in Cuban speeches to the UN. Because Latin Americans trusted their international organisations, they used them to play a crucial, and heretofore unrecognised, role in helping resolve a dangerous confrontation. In so doing, Latin Americans both reinforced the legitimacy of multilateral action and challenged the idea that the superpowers alone could influence the outcome of global events.

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Spanish abstract

Este artículo utiliza un ensamblaje internacional de recursos para recuperar la historia del involucramiento de la Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA) y las Naciones Unidas (ONU) en la crisis de los misiles de Cuba. Señala que a través de mecanismos de la OEA y la ONU, ciudadanos y funcionarios latinoamericanos ayudaron a configurar el resultado pacífico de la crisis. El artículo desafía los relatos que otorgan poca importancia tanto a los países latinoamericanos como a organismos multilaterales, y, al hacerlo, se une a la creciente literatura que muestra cómo los supuestamente débiles países latinoamericanos han usado a las organizaciones internacionales para influenciar en los acontecimientos mundiales.

Spanish keywords: Cuba; Crisis de los misiles en Cuba; Guerra Fría; Naciones Unidas; Organización de Estados Americanos

Portuguese abstract

Este artigo utiliza-se de um conjunto internacional de fontes dedicadas a recuperar a história do envolvimento da Organização dos Estados Americanos (OEA) e da Organização das Nações Unidas (ONU) na crise dos Mísseis de Cuba. Argumenta que, através dos mecanismos da OEA e da ONU, cidadãos latino-americanos e oficiais de governo ajudaram a definir o resultado pacífico da crise. Este artigo rechaça representações desdenhosas tanto da América Latina quanto das organizações multilaterais, e, ao fazê-lo, junta-se ao crescente conjunto literário que demonstra como países supostamente fracos da América Latina utilizaram organizações internacionais para influenciar questões mundiais.

Portuguese keywords: Cuba; Crise Cubana de mísseis; Guerra Fria; Organização das Nações Unidas; Organização dos Estados Americanos

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