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Cuban Missile Crisis Provides 60 Years of Lessons:

We face the same risk of escalation and the same possibility of transformation

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The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis started because two superpowers, each capable of global annihilation but mis-judging the security expectations of their rivals, called the other's bluff and moved us all close to nuclear war.

When Soviet Premier Khrushchev and US President Kennedy faced off over Cuba's decision to host Soviet nuclear missiles, the world was only 17 years' distance from the mass slaughter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki civilians. Atomic destruction was still palpable, and fear was widespread. Today, we are more than 75 years removed, and it isn't clear how many people appreciate the severity of our emergency.

The Cuba crisis ended because sober heads were allowed room to discuss the peaceful route away from Doomsday, with some of that sobriety being in the conflict-resolution efforts of UN Secretary-General U Thant. Behind-the-scenes deals were engineered. (The US agreed to quietly remove their missiles from Turkey and the USSR theirs from Cuba). The resulting collaboration would benefit both sides, and humankind.

The crisis was so severe and tensions so high that far-reaching efforts were made afterwards to reduce risks even further. Over the next dozen years alone, an array of eight nuclear weapon-related treaties were agreed. Among them was the establishment in 1963 of a direct hot line between Washington and Moscow to reduce the likelihood of nuclear war by mistake or misinterpretation. This was followed by a Limited Test Ban Treaty (late 1963); the cornerstone Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968) which is today signed by 191 countries; and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (in 1972). [Other treaties](#) would follow.

Today in Europe, 60 years after the Cuba crisis, there is a hot war between Russia and Ukraine but also a proxy war that risks enlargement and escalation. In 1962, while a single American [U-2 pilot died](#) during an aerial reconnaissance mission over Cuba, there were [not thousands killed](#) nor cities destroyed, nor occupied regions annexed.

We also know more today about the [likely impact](#) of even a small nuclear exchange. According to modelled calculations, a relatively small nuclear weapon exchange could cause dramatic global cooling and result in a "nuclear famine" that would ravage the earth.

Eventually there will have to be peace in Ukraine. Until then, we must focus also on preventing this war from "going nuclear" wherein millions might be endangered in the fallout (and worse.)

It may seem unlikely in this moment that elimination of all nuclear weapons can be put back on the front policy burner. Threatened use of "tactical" nuclear weapons is ubiquitous in the daily news. Yet, Canada can have a role in the de-escalation of tensions and in the replacement security thinking and diplomacy that urgently need to be put into place. 60 years ago, we saw the quelling of an earth-threatening crisis then lead quickly to major arms control and disarmament opportunities. This is our urgent task now, too. Canada, get ready to help.