

Fifty years from missile crisis, Cuba lowers guard

In October 1962, Cuba nearly found itself at the centre of World War III. Fifty years later, one of the last remaining communist regimes shows signs of opening up to the outside world.



GEOGRAPHY
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Fifty years ago this week, humanity came as close as it has ever come to complete annihilation. For thirteen terrifying days two enormous superpowers stood at the brink of war. In secret bunkers in the USA and the communist USSR, thousands of nuclear missiles were prepared for launch. A single command from either side would have unleashed a hail of radioactive fire – enough to poison half the world.

At the centre of this global storm? A Caribbean island tucked under the US's long southern flank, smaller than the state of Florida and with fewer inhabitants than New York. That October of 1962, the fate of the world depended on Cuba.

During World War II, Cuba had been a US ally. But in 1956, a group of young communists led by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro rebelled against the Cuban government. By 1959, Castro had become leader of a new, communist Cuban state. US leaders were horrified. As a communist

country, the new Cuba was a natural enemy of the USA, and an ally of the hostile USSR.

Soon America's worst fears were confirmed. In 1962, a US spy plane spotted the unmistakable silhouettes of Russian nuclear missiles hidden in the Cuban countryside. With Cuba as a base, the USSR now had the power to hit targets anywhere in the US.

President John F. Kennedy reacted by putting Cuba under virtual siege. Russian ships bringing reinforcements to the island were turned away by the US navy. Threats and counter-threats flew across the Atlantic – nuclear war seemed imminent. Finally the USSR gave way, and the Russian missiles were withdrawn.

But Cuba's isolation has continued. The US still maintains a trade embargo against the island. Meanwhile, the Castro government (now led by Fidel's brother, Raul) has made it difficult for Cubans to leave the island at all.

Only last week did the Cuban govern-

ment finally decide to drop some of its restrictions on overseas travel. From January, it was announced, Cubans will no longer need an exit visa in order to leave. After fifty years under siege, Cuba may be opening itself up to the outside world.

The hedgehog principle

One of the world's last communist dictatorships is reaching out – but is the world ready to welcome it back into the international community? The mood in the USA is still unforgiving. Most Americans (including the more than a million Cuban exiles whose families fled the Castro regime) want to keep up the trade embargo until Cuban communism is gone for good.

But some foreign policy watchers think an open hand could be more persuasive than a closed fist. Cuba has been a difficult neighbour, they acknowledge, but it was always responding to hostility from the USA. Like hedgehogs or porcupines, countries are most prickly when they feel most under threat.

Q&A

Q How dangerous was the missile crisis, really?

A People genuinely thought the world was going to end. Without a political solution, wrote one US official 'we will all fry.' And it was worse even than he knew. Russia had more weapons and soldiers on Cuba than

anyone realised. A US airstrike (strongly considered) against Cuba would have ended in disaster.

Q I'm glad we don't have to worry about that sort of thing today!

A Don't get too comfortable. There are still thousands of warheads scattered around the world – enough to destroy the planet several times over. And although there is

now only one real superpower, more weapons today are in danger of falling into the hands of terrorist groups.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'The USA has done more harm than Cuba to world peace.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



RAINFORD
HIGH

READING HOMEWORK

1. How dangerous was the Cuban Missile Crisis?

2. Do you think that Khrushchev would have fired his missiles at the United States of America? Explain your view.
