

Sixty Years after the Cuban Missile Crisis: Lessons for the 21st Century

Geneva Security Debate

**Opening Remarks by
Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Director, GCSP**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is, once again, with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the GCSP for this 5th edition of our **Geneva Security Debates** titled "Sixty Years after the Cuban Missile Crisis: Lessons for the 21st Century".

For those of you who are loyal participants of these debates, please bear with me. For those new to our discussions, please allow me to give you some background information.

The Geneva Security Debates are a series of public discussions which explore pressing and current security challenges. Every month, we bring together some of the world's leading thinkers, experts, and practitioners for an interactive discussion on a specific challenge.

In the short term, we hope that our Geneva Security Debates will help inform, provide new insights, stimulate joint reflections, and facilitate networking for policymakers in Geneva and abroad.

In the long term, we hope these debates will allow us to shape a better and more peaceful global future for all of us.

So, why are we reflecting on the "Cuban Missile Crisis" today?

The current escalation in Ukraine, accompanied by worrisome nuclear rhetoric, is arguably leading us closer to nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. **We need to move back from this brink.**

On 16 October 1962, the world was on the margin of a major atomic escalation. The only forces that could trigger and prevent such disastrous escalation were the two great powers during this period, the USSR and the USA. They eventually did prevent it through a negotiated compromise and cooperation. The crisis, known in the West as "Cuban Missile Crisis" and in Russia as the "Caribbean Crisis", may already seem like history, but I believe **its lessons** are more relevant today than ever.

Today, on the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Missile crisis, we invite you to **pause** and **reflect** on how humanity escaped a nuclear catastrophe.

We are delighted to have gathered a panel of outstanding experts from the United States and the Russian Federation to uncover some lessons learned from managing this crisis and defusing a potential escalation.

Allow me to share just a couple of reflections of my own as you delve into this hopefully stimulating and thought-provoking debate.

As I was alluding to, one might be inclined to perceive the current situation as worryingly familiar to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Indeed, we are facing again a major rift in the relations between Russia and the West.

Yet, if we take a closer look, we recognise that the security landscape has changed dramatically over the years.

Let me briefly mention some of the evident differences:

60 years ago, there were only four **nuclear powers**, with heavy bilateral tensions between two of them – the United States and the Soviet Union. However, the number of nuclear powers has increased and more than doubled since (adding India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, and China to the list). So, in a way we have moved from a bipolar to a multi-polar security environment, while I would acknowledge that the bulk of nuclear weapons still is with the United States and Russia and thereby also the political responsibility that goes with it.

60 years ago, the crisis transformed into the **first peak of the unfolding arms race**. At that time, there were no fundamental arms control mechanisms to regulate state's behaviour in the nuclear sphere. Since then, the Cuban Missile Crisis has incited significant international efforts to reduce nuclear arms proliferation and reduce atomic supplies. Examples include the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Agency's efforts, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, to name a few. Still, today, in the highly polarised environment characterised by a deep lack of trust among key security stakeholders, we have been witnessing the gradual unravelling of the arms control system that has provided us with relative stability for quite a while.

60 years ago, the **security landscape** was clearer and simpler to understand. Security threats have become increasingly obscure, complex, and transnational. Traditional concepts, including the concept of mutually assured destruction are challenged by rapidly developing cyber and artificial intelligence technologies. Moreover, trust in multilateral institutions is undermined amidst the nuclear threat we face.

Today, the **doctrine of deterrence** again dominates the European security order practically exclusively. Defence budgets are on a steep increase, taking us to another arms race in the conventional and nuclear fields. The concept of Cooperative Security is totally marginalised.

Today, **no one wants to speak of dialogue or détente**. That there is no business as usual with a war at the heart of Europe seems normal to me, but that shouldn't mean "no business at all". On the contrary, we cannot afford to be frozen at a time when our security environment is so fluid.

What remains crucial and identical to the situation 60 years ago is the importance of **keeping channels of communication open** and **fostering dialogue** among diplomats, militaries, academics, and civil society.

And that is what we are trying to do here at the GCSP.

Guided by **the principles of impartiality, independence, and inclusivity, we bring together like-minded and non-likeminded individuals to meet and share their views** on complex issues, aiming at fostering a greater mutual understanding and ideally also cooperation.

As such, we are not here to promote any specific policy choice or geopolitical alignment - but to **offer this safe space to you to contribute your ideas and insights** to a timely debate needed in our joint pursuit for peace in Europe.

In this spirit, I invite you to immerse yourself into today's Geneva Security Debate with an open mind and share your thoughts and questions after the panel discussion.

I thank you all for your valuable insights and contributions during today's timely event.

Without further ado, I would like to hand the floor over to Dr Christina Schori Liang, Senior Advisor of our Research and Policy Advice Department, she will introduce today's speakers and moderate this panel discussion.