During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, Acting U.N. Secretary-General U Thant sent a letter to Soviet Premier Khrushchev asking that he halt the Soviet ships then headed for Cuba in defiance of a U.S. quarantine. U Thant’s request gave Khrushchev a plausible—and honorable—explanation for preventing an impending clash, and he accepted it. As Richard Walton states in his Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy: “The Acting Secretary General [was] responsible for the breathing space that avoided confrontation at sea and possible escalation into nuclear war.”

Of course today’s strategic environment is different from that of the early ’60s, when the policy of mutual assured destruction (MAD) seemed to restrain the nuclear powers by its threat to lay waste both countries. In the 1980s, when each side is bent on acquiring a “counterforce” capability that threatens the other side’s nuclear arsenal, the terrible pressures upon decision-makers to preserve the ability to attack that arsenal may well lead to a pre-emptive strike in a crisis.

The U.N. secretary-general’s visibility and saliency in international affairs militates for his playing a crucial role in crisis situations of all kinds. Yet because of the pressure to opt for pre-emption, it would seem far more difficult for the secretary-general to “buy time” in a “counterforce crisis” than it was during the earlier crisis in the Caribbean. To combat this pressure and offset each side’s perception of military vulnerability, the secretary-general must promote the perception of diplomatic cooperation between the superpowers.

NEGOITIATING TEAMS

One way to do this and thus “buy time” during such a crisis is to create an impartial international negotiating framework that seeks to reassure both sides that its opposite continues to seek a peaceful resolution of the crisis. This international negotiating framework should be seen as an extension of the secretary-general’s “good offices” in times of strife and would be complementary to, not competitive with, the ongoing negotiations that presumably would take place between the superpowers. For this mission, the secretary-general will draw on diplomatic procedures that ought to be acceptable to both sides: (1) dispatch of U.N. negotiating teams, headed by an under-secretary-general or diplomat of comparable rank, to the capitals of both superpowers during the first hours of a crisis; (2) creation of alternative channels of communication between the superpowers via these negotiating teams and the secretary-general’s office; (3) mobilization of the diplomatic communities of New York, Moscow, and Washington to aid in the U.N. effort at defusing the crisis and offering proposals for ending it; (4) introduction of these proposals in the ongoing bilateral negotiations between the superpowers; (5) a commitment to implement any agreement between the superpowers designed to reduce tensions, including verification procedures.

The symbolic-and substantive-value of such international negotiating teams should not be overlooked. Their very presence in a superpower’s capital signals that both sides are actively seeking a diplomatic, not military, solution to the crisis. That both sides inevitably seek a peaceful solution should not be taken for granted. Policy-makers in the Kennedy administration, for example, have admitted that U.S. leaders made rather short shrift of U.N. Ambassador Stevenson’s proposal to seek a diplomatic solution to the Cuban crisis, spending most of their time discussing military options.

Furthermore, and perhaps more important, the very participation of international diplomats in ongoing negotiations can serve as a moderating influence and strengthen the hand of those in both capitals who urge conciliation. Especially during the incipient stages of a crisis there are competing centers of policy and power within each government involved in a confrontation, with some high-ranking government officials favoring conciliation, others favoring force. Diplomatic communications through regular channels do not always identify these competing centers of power, and diplomats can’t always support those officials who favor conciliation. High-ranking international diplomats, however, are in a unique position to strengthen the voice of conciliatory government leaders. It is thus important that U.N. officials representing the secretary-general go directly to the leaders of the nations locked into a confrontation and communicate, on secure channels, back to U.N. Headquarters in New York.

ALTERNATIVE CHANNELS

The research of Graham Allison and of Peter Suedfeld and Philip Tetlock suggests that effective crisis diplomacy requires multiple points of contact and communications between governments at conflict. To rely upon a single type,
or source, of communication and information is to court disaster, since important nuances of meaning tend to be transmitted ineffectively amidst the inevitable "noise" of the crisis. Thus, as part of the international negotiating framework the secretary-general will strive to create supplementary channels of communication and information between the superpowers. Such a responsibility is also consistent with the "information-management" role that several U.N. member-states are encouraging the organization to develop. However, this role will require, among other things, a significant upgrading of the U.N.'s current communication capacity, now limited to a spotty radio and Telex network.

There may also be a link between better communications and buying time. If the analysis Daniel Frei offers in *Risks of Unintentional Nuclear War* is correct, "Metagame theory...has found that communications can be interpreted as a substitute for time. If the opponents have an opportunity to contact each other...they gain time. Thus, the opportunity to communicate offers an opportunity to make conditional steps."

Experienced diplomats, especially those representing the allies of the superpowers, constitute an invaluable resource during a crisis. The U.N. negotiating team in each capital will therefore actively seek the participation and suggestions of senior diplomats who already have extensive contacts with, and knowledge of, senior decision-makers in both Washington and Moscow. Their access to such people, and their suggestions for possible diplomatic solutions to the crisis, may well be crucial in the matter of buying time. Such was the case when, in 1962, the British ambassador to the United States, David Ormsby-Gore, urged President Kennedy to pull back the radius of the U.S. naval quarantine to give Khrushchev more time to seek a solution. Kennedy saw the wisdom of this move and tried to implement it over the heated objections of the U.S. naval command.

Again, the positioning of international negotiating teams in the capitals of conflicting countries should not be seen as an attempt to bypass the diplomatic community at the United Nations in New York; the delegations at the U.N., and certainly those of each superpower, can play an invaluable role during a crisis by advising the secretary-general about ongoing negotiations and by providing yet another solid, supplementary channel of communications between the U.N. and their governments. It is important to recall that during the Cuban missile crisis, the permanent diplomatic delegations gave needed encouragement and support for U Thant's intervention in the confrontation.

The secretary-general and his negotiating teams will be attempting at this time to enunciate a series of escalation controls to establish "freeze points" in the crisis. These controls may be in the nature of mutual acts of restraint and confidence-building measures or may involve a strategy of graduated initiatives in tension reduction such as Charles Osgood has enumerated in *An Alternative to War or Surrender*. A series of such controls will be necessary, since the momentum of events may well sweep away the first few points of restraint.

**SETTLEMENT & AGREEMENT**

One of the most important functions of the international negotiating framework will be to interject proposals for a solution of the crisis into the necessarily antagonistic bilateral negotiations between the superpowers. In fact, although overlooked in the literature on the Cuban crisis, U Thant's letter of October 24, 1962, to both Kennedy and Khrushchev proposed the terms of what eventually became the settlement between the United States and the Soviet Union. Specifically, U Thant pointed out that "some common ground may be found" if the Americans were to study the speech given at the General Assembly by Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticos two weeks before the outbreak of the crisis, to wit: "Were the U.S. able to give us proof...that it would not carry out aggression against our country, then we declare before you here and now, our weapons would be unnecessary." As we know, the U.S. eventually did agree to the essence of Dorticos's proposal, offering to respect the territorial integrity and political independence of Cuba in return for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles. Thus, as the world stood at the brink of nuclear war, did the secretary-general call the attention of the "best and the brightest" in the Kennedy administration to what they had missed in their earlier reading of the Cuban president's message.

A final responsibility of the secretary-general is to provide the institutional and diplomatic mechanisms for supervising, and perhaps verifying, compliance with the terms of the settlement reached between the superpowers—yet another way of ensuring the winding down of military alertness. Admittedly, the U.N. role in verifying the terms of settlement in the Cuban crisis was a failure, owing largely to the lack of prior consultation with the Cuban Government about international supervision of the removal of Soviet missiles. This failure underscores the need to involve each of the superpowers' allies in ongoing consultations as the crisis unfolds. Only when there have been continuous diplomatic consultations can one expect continued cooperation by the superpowers and their allies in helping to implement verification procedures as the crisis winds down.

**CODA**

The same international negotiating framework could be instrumental in defusing a non-nuclear crisis involving countries other than the U.S. and USSR. What gives a confrontation between superpowers added urgency, of course, is their vast nuclear arsenals and the pressures attendant upon their growing counterforce capability. In all such cases, the secretary-general of the United Nations has additional, if marginal, leverage as mediator in a conflict situation. Presumably, neither of the two governments at confrontation would refuse to admit a U.N. negotiating team—and certainly not when the other side had agreed to the arrangement—or risk the world's bad opinion by telling the secretary-general's representatives to pack up and go home. Nor would either party wish to be accused by the secretary-general or other participating diplomats of negotiating in "bad faith" by continuing its military moves and initiatives while giving verbal support to diplomatic efforts.

As U Thant's initiative in the missile crisis illustrates, any such "marginal" leverage the secretary-general exerts can also buy time—time that may enable the superpowers to arrest the dangerous escalation from threatened military confrontation to all-out war.