Overview. We study the strategic innovations of the Kennedy administration in the doctrine of flexible response, and the final flare-up over Berlin in 1961. We then look at two crises in the late 1960s: the Six Days War of 1967 and the Prague Spring of 1968.
We have seen that the New Look policy, although initially potentially useful, quickly became obsolete with the development of inter-continental delivery capabilities that undermined the credibility of its deterrent threat. The cornerstone of U.S. posture in Europe and around the world was therefore weakened because it appeared that the country could no longer rely on nuclear threats to provide security for itself and its allies. Although the Soviet Union had shown itself quiescent (at least since the death of Stalin), the Chinese were actively promoting their wars of national liberation and it was unclear for how long the Russians would sit behind their iron curtain.

The tumultuous 1956 saw discord in the Western Alliance when the U.S. had to force its British and French friends to abandon their collusion with Israel over the Suez Canal. Even though the problems were papered over and the alliance presented a united front to the Soviets, with the U.S. putting its forces on alert to compel the Russians to stop their rocket-rattling, the Soviets did score some victories around the globe.

First, the increasingly nationalistic Arab world turned to the USSR for its military equipment and training. The lightning Israeli invasion had shown just how weak the Egyptian army really was, and so the Russians quickly set about modernizing it. It was perhaps clear to everyone that the Arabs were not going to let the situation with Israel stand. Of course, from the Russian perspective, the enemy of their enemy was their friend, and so they paid little attention to the larger aspirations animating Nasser among others.

Second, the Russians have shown themselves determined to prevent any slide of a satellite from the defensive perimeter they had established. The Poles could have their October as long as they did not rock the boat too much. The Hungarians who nearly keeled it over, had to pay a dear price. For all its liberation rhetoric, the West was forced to sit by the sidelines and watch helplessly as Soviet tanks mauled the brave but unpolitic Hungarians.

Third, the Russians had also developed their missiles enough to make U-2 overflights of their bases a dangerous undertaking. When in May 1960 the Russians shot down an American spy plane on the eve of the Geneva conference, the diplomatic relations soured yet again precisely at the time when the Soviets seemed to be rapidly advancing their military technology and increasing capabilities.

However, the one thing that these overflights did reveal was that the missile gap was a myth: the Russians were all bluster and bluff but without actual capability. This proved to be a problem for the Soviets, both with respect to their enemy, the U.S., and their nominal friend, China. As we saw, Mao urged the Russians to make use of their enormous nuclear capability, which, as the Russians and now the Americans knew all to well, was non-existent.

Soviet prestige in the communist camp and among the non-aligned third world depended on their ability to stand up to the West. It was to redress this problem that Khrushchev attempted one of the largest secret operations in history when he tried to place nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962. We have seen
already what came out of it. By the end of 1962, the Russians were badly mauled internationally: (i) they had been forced to accept the division of Germany, (ii) they had to live with a re-armed West Germany being a member of NATO, (iii) they had to build a wall to stem the flow of escapes to the West, a singularly embarrassing situation for any system with pretensions for superiority, (iv) they had admitted their weakness by attempting to install missiles secretly in the Western hemisphere, and (v) they had demonstrated unequivocally that they would withdraw under direct threat by the U.S.

In short, by the end of 1962 the Soviets were in bad shape. It is not surprising that they concluded that the only way to deal with the situation and the triumphant West was by stepping up military spending, increasing production, and actually developing the capabilities they had been bragging about. Not unexpectedly, the 1962 American success virtually ensured that the Russians would embark on a large-scale arms race that would eventually transform them into a global superpower. Just as the Russians were beginning to indulge in this, the U.S. all but squandered its lead by stumbling into the Vietnam quagmire, which also laid bare the limitations of flexible response.

1 The Missile Gap and JFK

Let’s now look in a little detail at the new doctrine of Flexible Response and the last Berlin Crisis that emboldened Khrushchev to attempt his nuclear gambit with Cuba.

By May 1958, the Sino-Soviet split was so evident that even Dulles no longer believed the Soviet Union presented a threat—the USSR had been co-opted. However, in the 1960 presidential campaign, the young Democratic nominee JFK charged the Republicans with permitting the missile gap in Soviets’ favor. With one of the slimmest majorities (114,000 votes out of 68.3 million cast), JFK won the presidency and in his first inaugural message on January 30, 1961, he declared that in the conflict between “Freedom and Communism,” the US should strengthen its military tools.

The administration immediately asked for more money for defense, above the budget allocation for the year. The money was spent on conventional forces and programs that would give the US a secure second-strike capability. The defense budget was increased by 15% in 1961. By October 1962, the strategic balance was definitely in favor of the U.S.: the Americans had about 226 ICBMs, 114 SLBMs, and 1350 bombers versus 75 ICBMs, 0 SLBMs, and 190 bombers on the Soviet side. Kennedy’s buildup began out of initial fears of the putative missile gap. However, once the gap was shown to be a myth, the most important reason for doing it was still solid: the Soviets could (and did) build a vast number of ICBMs on a short notice. The buildup was designed to cope with that future threat.

How was the administration going to deal with such threats? It rejected Massive Retaliation (and its sibling, Graduated Deterrence) in favor of a new
strategic doctrine called **Flexible Response**, which posited mutual deterrence at strategic, tactical, and conventional levels, emphasized multiple options supposed to enhance credibility of deterrence threat. This strategy effectively remained in use throughout the remainder of the Cold War.

### 1.1 Flexible Response

Flexible Response emphasized mutual deterrence at all levels of nuclear forces; that is both strategic and tactical. The US strategic forces deterred the Soviets from using their strategic arsenal (and vice versa); just like the US tactical forces deterred the Soviets from using nuclear weapons in the local theater (and vice versa). This extended to conventional forces: the total combined forces of America and its allies would be large enough to deter the Soviets from using their conventional forces (and vice versa). These forces could also be used in limited wars should deterrence fail and Soviets attack somewhere, Khrushchev-style. The US would not have to make the choice between defeat and using nuclear weapons.

This symmetrical approach to deterrence should be familiar: it was borrowed almost wholesale from General Taylor’s book *The Uncertain Trumpet*, which criticized massive retaliation on the grounds that it left the U.S. only two choices in a Korean War-style confrontation: defeat on the ground or the resort to nuclear weapons. As Kennedy told Congress, the idea was

> to deter all wars, general or limited, nuclear or conventional, large or small—to convince all potential aggressors that any attack would be futile—to provide backing for the diplomatic settlement of disputes—to insure the adequacy of our bargaining power for an end to the arms race.

Technological improvements in communications and transportation meant that US forces could be deployed and used more effectively and flexibly than before. The advocates of Flexible Response stressed the value of having “multiple options” that would allow the president to employ just the right amount of force at the right place without having to fear or risk losing alternatives. This also was supposed to improve credibility since the availability of low-level forces/options would make the US more willing to use them. This doctrine was accepted and continued to be used through the Cold War (it’s so imprecise that it is easy to make it accommodate changes).

As soon as he entered office, JFK began implementing Flexible Response aided by his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The administration did that with considerable zeal although it quickly found out that the Soviets had grossly exaggerated their ICBM capabilities. Still, the military buildup was not a result of some cynical economic agenda but the result of genuine concern that even though the Soviets lacked the advantage they claimed they had, they could rapidly build up their capabilities on short notice. (Which they did in the lat-
ter half of the 1960s after they solved their technological problems with the missiles.

By October 1962, the US deployed 226 ICBMs (of which 100 were the advanced Minuteman, solid-fueled missiles in hardened silos, and 36 were the Titans which could carry larger loads; the other 90 Atlas rockets were retired soon) as opposed to 75 by the Soviet Union. In strategic bombers, US advantages were overwhelming: 1350 vs. 190. In addition, the US developed the Polaris SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) and deployed nine subs with 144 SLBMs when the USSR had none. Somewhat unexpectedly, then, the result of stunning Russian success in 1957 was a clear and significant advantage for the US: the impressive military buildup fueled in large part by fears caused by Soviet boasts, had given the US its second era of military superiority. This time, however, the Soviet Union would attempt to redress the balance, precipitating the worst crisis of the Cold War.

After the Kennedy administration realized that although the missile gap did exist, it was definitely in US’s favor, it became interested in using its military superiority within the framework of Flexible Response. The first innovation was the Strategic Triad doctrine. By 1960, the US had three kinds of offensive strategic forces: ICBMs, SLBMs, and bombers. The triad doctrine held that each of these forces should be able to impose unacceptable damage on the Soviet Union independently of the other two! The concept of a permanent triad of forces also lasted through the Cold War.

Different forces had different advantages and disadvantages: Bombers were vulnerable while on the ground, took a while to reach their targets, and could be shot down by defenses. On the other hand, they could deliver large pay-loads and strike their targets with great accuracy. The ICBMs were more secure (the hardened silo could take anything but a direct hit) but were less accurate than bombers, and most importantly, could not be recalled once launched. The SLBMs were least vulnerable but also least accurate and communication with the subs was also very limited.

There were innovations not only in the type of weapons but also in their intended use. The accepted principle of deterrence was that it rested on secure second-strike capability, or the so-called assured destruction mission of US forces. (In event of World War III, the Soviets would know with assurance that their cities would be destroyed). Since it was assumed that the Russians cared about their country most, the assured destruction mission targeted cities and industries, or targets whose destruction would make recovery from war slow or impossible. Because they were so vulnerable to the Soviet Union, these targets were called “countervalue targets.” It was the SLBMs that were mostly trained at these.

1.2 The No-Cities Doctrine

To limit damage to the US, McNamara pursued two strategies, one offensive and the other defensive. The offensive strategy was to destroy Soviet military in-
stallations (bomber bases, ICBM silos, etc.) and thus disable most of his forces before they could be used. This damage-limiting mission of US forces involved destroying counterforce targets which, although not as valuable as cities, were important in limiting the damage to the US. In June 1962, McNamara gave a speech at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he elaborated the counterforce strategy. He announced that the US would refrain from striking countervalue targets (cities) early in a nuclear war while retaining in reserve powerful assured destruction forces that could annihilate them should the Soviets fail to observe similar restraint. This no-cities policy was meant both to induce the Soviets to reciprocate by sparing American cities and secure bargaining advantage by not destroying their cities early on—and thus giving them something they might want to negotiate over in order to keep. In this speech there was also a hidden warning that stated that US missiles were now so precise that the US could choose their targets with great accuracy. Finally, by August 1962 the administration publicly revealed what it had known for over a year—the missile gap not only did not exist, but it never did, and moreover, it was in US’s favor.

The Soviets reacted angrily. Khrushchev stated that contrary to McNamara’s beliefs, cities would be the first to go in a nuclear war. In addition, he warned Kennedy not to engage “in sinister competition as to who will be the first to start a war.” However, Khrushchev revealed, perhaps inadvertently, that the US claim to missile superiority was valid—for the first time in 5 years Khrushchev emphasized bomber strength instead of ICBMs.

The second damage-limiting strategy McNamara pursued was defensive and involved defending the US from Soviet weapons that might escape a counterforce attack. The Americans began developing systems that could intercept and destroy incoming bombers and missiles. The bomber threat was relatively easy to reduce: Soviet planes were not too effective and even if they did manage to survive the counterforce strike, they could be shot down (at least most of them) before unloading their bombs.

The missiles were another matter. By the early 1960s, the Army had developed the Nike-Zeus system, in which its anti-aircraft Nike missiles were modified to shoot down incoming warheads. McNamara concluded it was not cost-effective: i.e., it was too expensive and would not work. The Army developed anti-ballistic missiles (or ABMs) of the next generation—the Nike-X, which consisted of large Spartan missiles that would destroy incoming warheads before they had entered the atmosphere and fast Spring missiles would finish off whatever the Spartans missed.

McNamara fought the large Nike-X ABM system for years arguing that the Soviets could overwhelm it by simply sending more missiles and since building more missiles was cheaper than protecting against them, this would eventually bankrupt the US. A smaller system called Sentinel almost made it but anti-war feelings stopped in under Johnson and Nixon scuttled it in favor of Safeguard, which was meant to protect only American ICBMs. The ABM issue was frozen when the US and the Soviet Union signed the SALT I treaty (we’ll talk about this
later) which limited the development and deployment of any ABM systems.

Can you think of reasons why it would be advantageous to keep both sides unprotected? It was the ABM treaty that Bush abrogated in 2001. What, do you think, was behind this decision? (Hint: he campaigned long and hard to secure support for this and made sure the Russians knew about it and were on board as much as possible.)

1.3 The Berlin Wall, 1961

Recall that on October 11, 1958, Khrushchev delivered his first 6-months ultimatum, and demanded that (i) Western troops evacuate West Berlin, (ii) the West recognize it as “free city,” and (iii) negotiate land access with East German communist government (not recognized by the West). The U.S. stood firm: Dulles threatened with NATO military response if East Germans took control of routes and refused access. The USSR responded with threatening World War III if NATO used military force. However, it soon became obvious that the Soviets would not risk war over Berlin, and they had to back down.

JFK met with Khrushchev in Vienna on June 3-4, 1961, where he was brow-beaten by the Soviet Premier who was probably encouraged by the youth of the President, his inexperience, and the recent US debacle and humiliation with the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Khrushchev reimposed the 6 months notice about Berlin. The Soviets were genuinely worried that West Germany was growing militarily, was bound to the West, was attracting experts from the East; that the East German communist regime was weak; that West Berlin was an ideal espionage and propaganda center deep in the communist bloc; that Eastern Europeans and the Soviets were getting scared by West German power, and, finally, that since their ICBM empty posturing was publicly revealed, they needed some quick strategic victory.

JFK proved tough. On Acheson’s advice, he decided to call Khrushchev’s bluff over Berlin. On July 25, 1961, Kennedy placed the National Reserve troops on active duty and increased the size of American forces by 25%. Berlin was not going to be treated as an isolated problem but as a test of US resolve in global terms.

When Khrushchev realized that JFK would not back down, he took a surprising course of action. On August 13, 1961, the Soviets suddenly built a wall, complete with barbed wire and guards, that separated East from West Berlin. This sealed the Eastern bloc from Western influences and stopped the exodus of talented people. The US was caught off-guard—Khrushchev had pulled a dramatic fait accompli and now refused to budge in the face of US protests. The US protested but was unprepared to use force to get rid of the wall. The Wall stood. The Soviets had scored a small “consolation” victory in Europe. Neither they nor the Americans were willing to challenge the fragile status quo thereby being the first to use force. Soon, the Soviets would attempt another, much more dangerous, adventure using similar tactics. This time, however, they would be caught in the act, before they were able to complete their plans.
The Berlin Crisis of 1961 was the one time the Soviets got the upper hand over the city, and it had much to do with pursuing strategies similar to the ones that had proven so effective when used by the West. The Wall was a tactic that relinquished the initiative to the Americans. This was not the first time the Russians had attempted this. As you should recall, they blocked access to the city in 1948-49 in an attempt to compel the West to abandon it. Then the tactic failed because the West found a way to shift the choice for war back onto the Russians with the air-bridge.

What, then, was different in 1961? For one, the Soviets had accepted the division and they were not really hoping to unite Germany into a neutral and disarmed state. Their problem now was not evicting the West from West Berlin, but rather stopping the flight of Germans from the East. Almost as soon as the barbed wire went up, the Russians were at pains to tell the West that their people could go in and out of Berlin as they wished, just like before. The separation was not meant for them. In effect, the Russians were enforcing the status quo.

However, unpalatable this was, the Americans could not go to war or attempt to tear down the wall with force. After all, the Russians had shown that they would not let a satellite escape their grip. Now they were trying to deter the U.S. from infiltrating the Eastern bloc. This was their own version of containment: they set up their literal “trip-wire” and could then sit back and wait for the U.S. to make the first aggressive move. Predictably, what worked against the Russians worked against the Americans as well. As Kennedy said, better a wall than a war.

The last episode ended with the Russians enjoying a dubious foreign policy advantage—they had the Berlin Wall which both significance success and defiance of the status quo (and indeed, it became the new status quo) but at the same time it showed the entire world how pathetic and impotent the regime was. A country that surrounds itself with a fence to protect itself from foreign invaders is prudently guarding its national security. A country that needs to build a fence to keep its own citizens from leaving is a disgrace—it can never last long.

In fact, its longevity depends entirely on the willingness of its leaders to use their tanks to maul any opposition, however mild it may be. In 1956, the Soviets had proven themselves willing and able to impose their rule in what they considered their own sphere of influence and in countries they thought vital to their security. They would do so again in 1968, and again under a doctrine that claimed that once a country had gone socialist, there was no turning back. The Soviet Union, as any concentration camp, finally imploded when the camp supervisor refused to shoot the prisoners.

But, this was still the distant future... in 1961, the Soviets had just successfully challenged the West; they appeared to have solved their problems with West Berlin, at least temporarily. However, since the Kennedy administration had also publicly revealed that Soviet boasts of ICBM superiority were a sham, Khrushchev was looking for some other, more substantial, foreign policy tri-
umph to restore the somewhat shaky prestige of the Soviet Union. It would, of course, also be helpful if that triumph could also redress somewhat the severe imbalance of military power that favored the US. The opportunity presented itself in 1962, when the Russians undertook a risky gamble barely off the coast of the US—in Cuba. We deal with the crisis separately. Now we turn to a bigger event.

2 The Six Days War, 1967

After the Suez War of 1956, the Soviets had rebuilt the Egyptian Army and the US had steadily turned Israel into a formidable military power. As the Egyptian military improved, preparations began for a war on Israel. The Arab world still refused to recognize the tiny country’s right to exist. Arab-Israeli treaties were signed and it became obvious that Egypt, Syria and Jordan strongly supported by the Arab regimes of Saudi Arabia and Iraq, were going to invade Israel in 1967—their mostly Soviet supported armies began moving into striking positions in the spring of that year.
Israel tried to get them to back down through the UN but failed. When Israeli intelligence showed that Arab attack was imminent, there was no choice left: on June 5, 1967, Israel preemptively struck all three of its powerful neighbors. In a Six Day War, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) obliterated the Egyptian air force, then turned and did the same to the Jordanians and the Syrians. In modern war, whoever controls the air wins the ground. Using superior and highly sophisticated tactics, the Israelis drove the Egyptian armies across the Suez, the Jordanians across the Jordan River, and threw the Syrians off the strategically important Golan Heights. They also managed to capture Jerusalem.

The Israeli victory stunned the world, it was so quick that neither the US nor the Soviet Union had time to intervene. Very soon, however, both superpowers resumed their game in the region. Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) placed US foreign policy on the Three Pillars: Israeli power, Iran’s oil and military, and Saudi Arabia’s oil and bases. The Soviets moved to establish port bases in Egypt and, having realized the Egyptian army must be modernized it were ever to erase the disgrace of 1967, they started supplying it with better equipment. Although the Soviets consistently refused to send offensive weapons to Egypt (for it was clear that the moment the Arabs felt sufficiently strong they would again go after Israel), their military assistance and numerous advisors greatly improved Egyptian tactics and capabilities.

3 The Prague Spring, 1968

Recall that as the situation in Vietnam escalated, LBJ sought to deescalate conflict with the Soviets. However, the Russians were willing to talk just about anything except Vietnam, as they were benefiting from the war there. But since the Soviets were having economic problems, they needed a deal. LBJ had some success with slowing down the nuclear race and in 1968, the United States and Soviet Union reached an agreement to halt distribution of nuclear weapons. Ominously, China, France, and India—among others—refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Détente, seemingly off to an auspicious start, then stalled when the Tet Offensive (February 1968) showed how badly the US was doing in Vietnam, was further strained by ghetto riots, political assassinations, and mass unrest at home, and finally was temporarily knocked off in August 1968 by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The roots of that conflict lay in the mid 1960s, when the ailing economically Eastern Bloc tried experimenting with more liberal economic policies. The Eastern Europeans tried loosening some of the political controls in order to invigorate the economy, the Czechs even went so far as to discuss loosening of the one-party system in favor of some pluralism. The West encouraged the Czech reforms by opening trade channels—the goods from the West were the best proof of the superiority of the capitalist system. The Prague Spring, as the reforms came to be called, seemed promising.

The liberal political line of the Czechs ran into a solid wall in Moscow for
the Soviet regime, led unimaginatively by Brezhnev, moved to refurbish some of the old Stalinist system. Heavy military and industrial investment displaced production of consumer goods once again, and the Russians began paying once again for the ambition of their rulers to preside over a superpower. All dissent was quelled—intellectuals were arrested, deported, or declared insane and then “treated” in state loony-bins. The ideological war continued with new strength at the very time when Brezhnev was accepting the relaxation of military and political tensions with the West.

To Moscow, the Prague Spring presented a dilemma. Some did not want to intervene because they correctly feared that this would endanger détente, the more serious process. However, the hardliners who were afraid that the Czech liberal virus might infect the rest of the bloc gained the upper hand and prevailed over Brezhnev to order a military intervention in Czechoslovakia.

Brezhnev issued his very own Brezhnev Doctrine, that justified Soviet intervention on the grounds that one socialist nation had the right to save another from “world imperialism” and thus preserve the “indivisible” socialist system. In effect, the Doctrine stated that once a country had gone socialist, there was no turning back, even if it had to be dragged kicking and screaming by Soviet tanks back into the friendly fraternal fold of socialist states. This was the mirror image of the Johnson Doctrine for Latin America. Neither superpower was prepared to tolerate ideological challenges in its own backyard. As a result, in August 1968, Soviet tanks moved in and destroyed all Czech resistance. Czechoslovakia slipped back into the darkness behind the iron curtain to become one of the most reactionary and stolid communist states.