Crisis and Leadership

As long as political science has been studied, the question of whether the systems or the individual leaders have the greater effect on relations between countries has been explored. In general, historians have placed strong emphasis on individuals, while political theorists have focused on the systems that constrain those individuals. While historians are concerned with explaining and documenting the past, political scientists must satisfy an additional burden of applying past events to create theories which can predict future ones. Acknowledging that the random factors associated with individual personalities play a role in international relations compromises the ability to meet this burden.

Rather than divining which analysis levels are most important in all situations, it is more productive to determine the situations which emphasize certain levels, deemphasizing others. By gaining a better understanding of when individual factors will have a strong influence, one include a margin of error in their theoretical predictions based on the systems and situations involved.
This paper will explore two incidents, and how the individual roles of leaders interacted with the larger domestic/international factors. The first incident that we will address is the Japanese decision to begin war with the United States on December 7th, 1941.

In August of 1941, the US Foreign Funds Committee began a complete embargo of petroleum product exports to Japan, in protest of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (Sagan 336). As the US was Japan's sole source of oil, this left Japan with the prospect of having no oil for military purposes within two years (Ike 238). Japan was in a long-term crisis, one that needed to be resolved, but that several months of planning and negotiations would not result in de-facto defeat.

I will argue that given the diplomatic relationship between the US and Japan: Japan's insistence on maintaining its military presence in China, and the US's resolve to make them pull out, the situation propelled Japan into war, rather than Japan being pushed in by the individual leaders.

When the Liaison Committee, the body responsible for diplomacy with the US, met on on October 30th to address the possibility of war, they considered three options:

1. Peace at any price (withdrawal from China)

2. Immediate war

3. Preparation for war with continued negotiations until a deadline (Ike 196).
There was very little or no discussion of the first option, although the Prime Minister expressed an opinion that if Japan capitulated to American demands that it could still result in a favorable outcome for Japan. As described by the Secretary of the Navy's minute-taker, this “gave everyone a strange feeling.” The other members of the committee took the opinion that if Japan caved in to Western demands, it would be relegated to a “third-rate country” (Ike 198).

Earlier in the negotiation process Saito Yoshie, an advisor to the Foreign Minister rebutted the US demands that Japan withdraw from China, stating “If we withdraw our troops unconditionally, the Chinese Communists, the Nationalists ... would fight, causing great disorder.” Also, by withdrawing from China, Saito argues that Japan would be transferring control of China to the United States, rather than returning it to self-rule (Ike 96). Again, it is clear that Japan had a longstanding commitment to military involvement in China. This was likely related to the Japanese fear of slipping to a “third-rate country”, relegated to the bargain basement of national identities.

After 17 hours of discussion, the committee approved the third option, that they would pursue continued diplomatic negotiations with the US until midnight on November 30th, and that if those did not yield a favorable conclusion by that date they would declare war against the US (Ike 200).
As history has shown, Japan and the US were not able to come to an amicable agreement, despite intense negotiations. On December 1st, 2004 the Liaison Committee formally acknowledged that negotiations had failed, and gave their approval for the war to begin. The Navy immediately began implementing their operational plans, and on December 7th, they struck Pearl Harbor, beginning a new era for the US and Japan (Shiugenori 195).

As an exercise in thought, suppose that the US were placing an embargo on air, as opposed to oil, and that the facility which could restrict air to Japan was located in Hawaii. The effects of such an embargo would be devastating within five minutes of an attack, and an air embargo would effect the entire population of Japanese.

Japan would have a rapid-response available to them in the event of the first word that an air embargo was coming. They would have listening stations outside of each American port, with messengers who report every whisper directly to the prime minister. The Japanese would have an attack force constantly ready to attack Pearl Harbor at any minute, should they get early warning of an embargo.

The Japanese command structure would need be consolidated, giving the prime minister or another leader dictatorial control over any retaliatory force. The diplomatic negotiations would be structured for fast response, rather than thorough discussion. The prime minister may have a phone connected directly to the US president’s office, or one
diplomat may be designated as the primary contact. The Liaison Committee took 17 hours to decide on a course of action, after months of discussion. If the effects of an embargo were compressed to five minutes, such an institution would be rendered obsolete.

In such a system, the onus of responsible decision making is placed on the leader, rather than decisions being left to the leader. While the pure destructive power of such a system encourages caution, the vastly shortened timetable also leads to decisions made with the random chance of a personality, rather than the predicable outcomes of an oiled system.

It should be noted that the Prime Minister Tojo spoke in several Liaison Committee Meetings in favor of peace. Maybe if he had complete control of the situation he would have negotiated a settlement without a conflict, or maybe without the obligation to take a high road, he would have been much more hawkish, launching a preemptive strike against Pearl Harbor. Whatever the outcome, in such a world the leader would be in control of the results, as opposed to the system.

In October of 1962, 21 years after pearl harbor, a scenario not dissimilar to the one portrayed above played itself out. Fortunately for all, the leaders involved managed to avert a substantial military conflict.
On October 16th, President Kennedy was briefed that aerial reconnaissance pictures taken of Cuba had revealed the construction of soviet surface-surface nuclear missile sites throughout Cuba, just 70 miles away from Florida (Brugioni 232).

In response to the Cuba situation, the president formed an Executive Committee (EXCOM) to advise him on a proper responses. At their first meeting, the various groups almost immediately aligned themselves. Some believed that there needed to be airstrikes, to remove the missiles, and others thought it better to take a diplomacy-based approach. The hawks responded that by attempting to use diplomatic pressure, they were tipping their hand about their knowledge of the nuclear sites, and compromising the effectiveness of future military missions.

The next day, the preliminary results from reconnaissance flights the previous day were available, and the EXCOM met again to discuss future options. Three possible courses of action were presented to remove the missiles from Cuba:

A. To take political action followed by air strikes if the desired results aren’t achieved.

B. A surprise military strike.

C. Political action followed by a quarantine of ships carrying weapons to Cuba (Brugioni 258).
An unstated fourth option was to accept the missile installations in Cuba as a logical progression of Russia's deterrent system. A memo from General Taylor, generally a hawk, admitted that “It is generally agreed that these missiles do not significantly alter the balance of power” and that the threat of missiles in Cuba was primarily psychological (Brugioni 254).

Robert Kennedy heavily played the doveish side, questioning whether a military strike would be successful, and whether a surprise attack would polarize the world against the US, ending his argument saying that he would not like his brother to become the American Tojo (Brugioni 242).

Among the camp pushing for an immediate air-strike was Dean Acheson, a veteran cold war adviser. He argued that missiles in Cuba were an unacceptable threat, and that the only way to remove them would be through decisive military action, including a ground invasion if it proved necessary (Brugioni 257).

The EXCOM meetings were more like debate sessions than organized information dissemination. Dean Acheson described the committee as a “leaderless uninhibited group” (Brugioni 242). Since the intelligence information was relatively simple, political ideology of individual committee members was the main thing left to discuss.

On October 20th, the EXCOM plus several other invitees met in the oval office to discuss options and come up with a plan. After he was presented with the latest
intelligence, the president almost immediately made his opinion clear that he favored the blockade approach.

Adlai Stevenson, the ambassador to the UN, was opposed to this course of action. He believed that the authority of the UN and OAS should be brought upon Cuba and Russia, forcing them to back down through diplomatic means. He advocated appealing to the UN to send observers, who would ensure that soviet weapons are removed from Cuba. Theilene McCone, of the CIA, shot back that Stevenson was advocating for another Munich. (Brugioni 318).

As history has shown, the President's preferred blockade option was adopted, although rechristened as a “quarantine” to prevent the US from having to declare war against Cuba. Under intense pressure, and some private US concessions, Russia backed down and removed their missiles.

The important lesson of the missile crisis is that there is no granite political theory predetermined the results of the crisis. Had Adlai Stevenson won his bid for president, it is likely that the crisis would have unfolded completely differently, or if Dean Acheson were in control of military policy, the US would have likely taken a much more aggressive stand.
In a military crisis, the more urgent the crisis, the more likely that a leader will have a high level of influence over the events that transpire, as the situation doesn't leave time for oversight.

Works Cited

