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Review by **Bernard J. Firestone, Hofstra University**

In their article, "Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis," A. Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk attempt to fill a lacuna in the histories written about the Cuban missile crisis. The authors argue that U Thant, the then acting secretary general of the United Nations, played a key, if not decisive role in pulling the United States and Soviet Union away from the brink of nuclear war. While Thant's contributions were widely appreciated at the time of the Cuban crisis, subsequent memoirs, most written by members of the Kennedy administration, gave scant attention to the acting secretary general's role. Drawing on United Nations and United States archival material, and particularly transcripts of ExCom meetings published by Ernest May and Philip Zelikow in 1997,¹ Dorn and Pauk make a convincing case for a reevaluation of Thant's contribution to resolving the crisis.

It is clear that Thant was initially an afterthought to the Kennedy administration's deliberations about how to respond to the Soviet emplacement of missiles in Cuba. Thant was first informed by General Indarjit Rikhye, his military adviser, of American intentions to impose a quarantine on October 22, 1962, the day of the president's announcement of the blockade. On October 24, at the urging of the non-aligned members of the UN, Thant issued a call, in separate but identical communiqués to Kennedy and Khrushchev, for a moratorium on the shipping of arms to Cuba in return for a suspension of the U.S. quarantine. The acting secretary general's initiative, undertaken in the absence of prior consultation with the United States and sent over American objections, irritated Kennedy, because it did not call for the dismantlement of bases and

¹ Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes; Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1997).

missiles already under construction. Having witnessed the acting secretary general inject himself into the diplomatic process, however, and with no other diplomatic activity in progress, Kennedy began to see value in having Thant communicate messages initiated by the United States but appearing to have originated with the acting secretary general, presumably a neutral figure. Early on October 25, Kennedy, concerned that Soviet ships were rapidly approaching the quarantine line, called upon Thant, through American Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, to send messages to both sides requesting that the Soviets refrain from testing the blockade while urging restraint on the United States pending UN-sponsored negotiations. The acceptance by both governments of this proposal resolved for the moment the prospect of a catastrophic confrontation at sea.

On October 26, with missile construction proceeding, Thant met with Stevenson and restated a proposal that he had made in a Security Council meeting of October 24; i.e., in return for the removal of the missiles the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba. Thant's initiative coincided with a proposal communicated to American journalist John Scali by KGB agent Alexander Fomin and led Kennedy to believe that the Soviets might be searching for an acceptable resolution. On the same day, Kennedy received a long cable from Khrushchev proposing the missiles for non-invasion exchange as a basis for resolving the conflict. On Saturday, October 27, however, a new cable from Khrushchev proposed that the missiles in Cuba be traded for U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey. In a decision widely hailed by administration memoirists as being responsible for resolving the crisis, Kennedy chose to respond to Khrushchev's first letter and to ignore the trade proposed in the letter of the 27th. On October 28, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles in return for a non-invasion pledge. Shortly thereafter, Thant, who had in several messages during the crisis also urged restraint upon Cuban leader Fidel Castro, visited Cuba. While he returned to New York with Soviet assurances that the missile sites were being dismantled, he was unable to prevail upon Castro to permit UN inspection of the sites. Back in New York, Thant presided for the next several weeks over negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, but the situation essentially resolved itself without a formal agreement.

Graham Allison, in *Essence of Decision*, his important 1971 study of the missile crisis, lists a variety of channels through which Kennedy and Khrushchev communicated during the crisis. Thant's name is not included on this list, unless his participation is to be considered a case of "public and private letters to third parties."² In fact, there are only two brief references to Thant in the entire book. Allison accords greater importance to the private communications between Robert F. Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and the Scali-Fomin back channel. Dorn and Pauk demonstrate, however, that Thant was a player. Relying on UN archival material, they show, for example, how U.S. Ambassador Stevenson provided Thant with typewritten instructions on crafting the

² Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971) 216-17.

memos of October 25.³ The Kennedy transcripts demonstrate that Thant's diplomatic efforts were frequently cited by the president as a reason not to rush into precipitate military action. In a phone conversation with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan late on October 26, Kennedy reported on a meeting earlier in the day between Stevenson and Thant and expressed hope that the Thant channel would produce results.⁴ Macmillan suggested that Thant visit Cuba with UN inspection teams to supervise the suspension of missile construction during the period of direct talks, as the United States was demanding. The transcripts were not available to Allison when he wrote *Essence of Decision*; instead, he relied heavily on memoirs. Pauk and Dorn show the importance of the transcripts in filling out the historical record.

While Dorn and Pauk demonstrate conclusively that Thant played an active role in the missile crisis, their characterization of that role is less persuasive. By giving Thant credit for advancing the missiles for non-invasion agreement, which he discussed openly in the Security Council and in a meeting with Stevenson, the authors accord him the role of "mediator," a term they use frequently in their concluding assessment. As they write, "He [Thant] influenced their thinking, negotiating positions, stance toward the use of force, and proclivity to accept a proposal, including the noninvasion deal that he publicly and privately pressed for."⁵ The authors continue, "Thant single-mindedly advanced the noninvasion proposal that became the centerpiece of the final settlement."⁶ But the same proposal was communicated by Fomin and, more importantly, by Khrushchev in his long memo of October 26. In mentioning it to Stevenson, and in a separate phone call to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Thant was simply repeating what the Cuban ambassador to the UN had publicly stated several weeks before in a speech to the General Assembly. It may, therefore, overstate Thant's role to refer to him as a "mediator," who, according to one scholar of international law, "is expected to offer concrete proposals for settling substantive questions instead of merely contenting himself with making negotiation possible."⁷ It may be more appropriate to describe Thant as offering his "good offices" to open lines of communication between Kennedy and Khrushchev. The profferer of "good offices" may "act as a go-between, transmitting messages and suggestions in an effort to soothe the feelings of the aggrieved states and to restore an atmosphere in which the parties finally agree to negotiate with one another."⁸ This distinction in types of third party intervention is of more than semantic interest, since Dorn and Pauk's use of the term "mediator" accords with their view that Thant's role was material in resolving the crisis. In fact, apart from his initial entry into the diplomatic process, which Khrushchev welcomed but Kennedy rebuffed, Thant found himself most useful in communicating

³ A. Walter Dorn and Robert Pauk, "Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2009), 271.

⁴ May and Zelikow, eds, *The Kennedy Tapes*, 480-81.

⁵ Dorn and Pauk, "Unsung Mediator...", 289.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁷ Gerhard von Glahn, *Law Among Nations: An Introduction to Public International Law* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 497.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 496.

messages almost exactly as instructed by Washington, and, perhaps in the case of the missiles for non-invasion exchange, at the direction of Khrushchev. Kennedy came to understand that the most effective use of Thant's good offices involved giving the acting secretary general the appearance of a mediator. It was important for Kennedy not simply to propose solutions for Khrushchev's consideration but to have Thant convey them as his own. In this way, Khrushchev could appear to be facilitating the peace-making efforts of the acting secretary general rather than conceding to American military power.

In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, the principal players, Khrushchev and Kennedy, were looking for a way out. Khrushchev seized on Thant's first initiative and sent signals through a variety of sources that a formula existed for resolving the dispute. The transcripts demonstrate Kennedy's impatience at those pressing for a military solution and, despite the mythology that developed around the missile crisis, show him unwilling to achieve a decisive political victory at any cost. The authors cite the now well-known story of Kennedy's plan to use Thant to propose a trade of missiles in Cuba for Jupiter missiles in Turkey – a tactic made unnecessary by Khrushchev's agreement to the missiles for non-invasion trade. The lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is that Thant was useful because the United States and Soviet Union were looking for a diplomatic solution to their dispute.

Further contributing to Thant's ability to involve himself in the Cuban missile crisis was the perception that he was even-handed, despite his own belief that the United States had behaved recklessly by raising the issue to a military confrontation without first exhausting diplomatic avenues.⁹ At this time in his tenure as acting secretary general, Thant enjoyed a good working relationship with the United States. He closely coordinated ongoing peace-keeping operations in the Congo with the Kennedy administration and also cooperated with the United States in brokering a diplomatic solution to the conflict between the Netherlands and Indonesia in West Irian (West New Guinea). Over the next year, the administration and Thant would work together to resolve conflicts in Malaysia and Yemen as well. The Soviets, who had boycotted Thant's predecessor, Dag Hammarskjold, and attempted to replace the position of secretary general with a leadership structure known as the *troika* nonetheless found Thant to be an honest broker in the Cuban crisis and withdrew the *troika* proposal from active consideration shortly after the crisis was resolved. Soon after, the United States and Soviet Union joined in securing Thant a full term as secretary general. It is interesting to speculate how Khrushchev would have acted with Hammarskjold in the position of secretary general. It is more than likely, in light of the severe deterioration in relations between the Soviet Union and the secretary general, that Hammarskjold would have been unable to play the role that Thant did.

As a child of colonialism and UN ambassador from Burma, a part of the non-aligned bloc of nations, Thant did not have a side in the East-West conflict. While he recognized the

⁹ U Thant, *View from the UN* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1978), 156.

Cold War's importance, he saw the United Nations as a place where the interests of the non-aligned would eventually take precedence. With singular prescience, he predicted that the Cold War would eventually recede into history. Far from being neutral, he was a vocal spokesman for the interests of the non-aligned, and he took strong and public positions on issues such as colonialism and the disparities in wealth between North and South. His public position against the Vietnam War, a war he saw through the prism of colonialism, eventually damaged his relationship with the United States, a factor in his inability to play an equivalent diplomatic role in ending that war. In injecting himself into the Cuban crisis, Thant was responding to his natural constituency, the non-aligned bloc, who encouraged him to become involved. His initiative was consistent with the view, inherited from Hammarskjold, that Article 99 of the Charter gave the secretary general authority to act in cases of threats to the peace without having to wait for a specific grant of authority from the Security Council or General Assembly. While Thant was less inclined than his predecessor to engage in personal diplomacy (Thant preferred emissaries), in the Cuban case Thant met regularly with U.S. and Soviet officials and, in a departure from normal routine, traveled to Cuba. Although his subsequent reputation in history suffered in comparison to Hammarskjold's, who relished personal diplomacy, and never recovered from his decision to remove UNEF from the Egyptian-Israeli border in 1967, Thant was, in fact, an activist secretary general. While it is impossible to assess what his activity contributed to resolving the Cuban crisis, and my judgment is that the authors somewhat exaggerate his contribution, Dorn and Pauk offer a necessary corrective to the historical record by documenting the role Thant played.

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