At the Brink

How nuclear threats shaped Cold War defense

USH.C.6.3.F "Explain how the concept of brinkmanship and the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) affected defense strategies."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two U.S. decisions that show how brinkmanship shaped military action. Circle two defense measures shaped by mutually assured destruction (MAD).

The Edge of Nuclear War

1 In October 1962, U.S. officials learned that the Soviet Union was placing nuclear missiles in Cuba, close to the United States. President John F. Kennedy ordered a naval quarantine to stop more offensive weapons from reaching the island. This was brinkmanship: pressing a dangerous confrontation toward the edge of war to make an opponent back down. The quarantine showed resolve without immediately bombing the missile sites, an action that might have triggered a larger war. U.S. forces also raised their alert level. That readiness strengthened the warning, but each move increased the chance that a mistake could spark fighting.

2 A deeper fear shaped both sides' plans: mutually assured destruction, or MAD. If each superpower could launch a devastating nuclear counterattack after being hit, neither could expect to survive a nuclear first strike. To preserve that ability, defense planners spread weapons among land-based missiles, bombers, and submarines that were hard to find at sea. They also kept forces ready to respond quickly. These choices aimed to deter an attack rather than win a nuclear war. Yet maintaining so many weapons and rapid-response systems created another danger: a false warning or accident might cause a catastrophic decision.

3 The Cuban missile crisis ended when the Soviet Union agreed to remove its missiles from Cuba and the United States pledged not to invade Cuba. The United States also secretly agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey. The crisis showed how brinkmanship could force negotiation while risking disaster if either side misread the other's moves. MAD made that risk especially grave because a clash could escalate to nuclear exchange. Afterward, Washington and Moscow established a direct communication link and later pursued nuclear arms agreements. These measures did not replace deterrence; they tried to reduce the chance that deterrence would fail.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Kennedy's choice of a naval quarantine reflect brinkmanship while avoiding one immediate danger?

2. How did MAD affect where defense planners placed nuclear weapons, and why?

3. Why did MAD make the risks of brinkmanship especially serious during the Cuban missile crisis?

4. How did the danger revealed by the crisis shape later U.S. and Soviet measures without ending deterrence?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Two nuclear-armed rivals dispute access to a narrow sea. One sends warships toward the other's coastal base, but neither has fired. In three to four sentences, propose one brinkmanship move and one MAD-informed defense measure, then explain one risk and one way to limit it.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two U.S. decisions that show how brinkmanship shaped military action. Circle two defense measures shaped by mutually assured destruction (MAD). Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Kennedy's choice of a naval quarantine reflect brinkmanship while avoiding one immediate danger?	**The quarantine pressured the Soviet Union to back down without immediately bombing the missile sites, which might have triggered a larger war.**
2	How did MAD affect where defense planners placed nuclear weapons, and why?	**Planners spread weapons among land-based missiles, bombers, and submarines so an enemy could not destroy every weapon in a first strike. That preserved the ability to counterattack.**
3	Why did MAD make the risks of brinkmanship especially serious during the Cuban missile crisis?	**If either side misread a move and fighting began, the clash could escalate to a devastating nuclear exchange.**
4	How did the danger revealed by the crisis shape later U.S. and Soviet measures without ending deterrence?	**The governments established a direct communication link and later pursued nuclear arms agreements to reduce the chance of misreading a move or escalating a crisis. They continued to rely on deterrence.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The country defending its base could position ships near the disputed route to pressure its rival to turn back without firing. It could also keep its nuclear submarines dispersed so a first strike could not erase its ability to respond. The ships might collide or be mistaken for an attack, raising the chance of nuclear escalation. A direct call between the governments could clarify their intentions and lower that risk.

Accept other plausible pressure tactics and ways to preserve a retaliatory capability if the response explains how each affects defense strategy. The risk and proposed safeguard should fit the student's choices.