In 1985 the Republic of Kiribati, a low-lying island nation in the central Pacific, entered into a fisheries access arrangement with the Soviet Union. Coming at the height of renewed Cold War tensions between the USSR and the West, this unprecedented manoeuvre provoked a significant international uproar and briefly placed Kiribati at the forefront of international geopolitics. Although the Cold War has long since passed, Kiribati’s Russian gambit remains a unique example of how confronting and impactful small state foreign policy can be, given the right circumstances. Drawing on media reports and academic writing of the day, as well as interviews conducted with relevant officials during 2017 fieldwork in the Pacific, this article offers an analysis of the Kiribati/Soviet fishing pact. It examines the issues – both at home and abroad – which motivated Kiribati to engage with the USSR; the international and domestic reactions to the Government of Kiribati’s actions; and what occurred in the aftermath of the agreement being signed. Finally, it considers the changing nature of foreign policy in the Pacific in the present day – and suggests that Kiribati’s 1985 actions provide an insight into what might be seen in Pacific international relations moving forward.
The United States and the Soviet Union relationship during the Arm’s Race period in the Cold War era was one of unpredictable possibility; brimming with hostility and tension. The two nations promoted opposing political and economic ideology and the two nations competed for international control. This aroused a geopolitical, ideological, and economic struggle, lasting from 1947 to the period leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. The intensified moment of the Cuban Missile Crisis was during the evening of Saturday, 27 October 1962, when the negotiations of the crisis, had disappeared. Soviet ships didn’t try to break the U.S naval blockade of Cuba, but, Soviet missile bases stayed on the island and were becoming operational and ready to fire.