

October 26, 1962

Soviet Intentions and Reactions in the Cuban Situation

038979

Information available to us gives no grounds for putting in question American intelligence about the build-up of Soviet missile sites in Cuba with a significant offensive potential directed against the Western Hemisphere. President Kennedy is therefore correct in speaking of a serious threat to the national security of the U.S.A. This paper will attempt to analyze the possible Soviet intentions in setting up MRBM and IRBM sites in Cuba; their reactions to date to the American action in imposing a quarantine and calling for the dismantlement of offensive weapons sites; and possible Soviet courses of action.

2. We can assume that the Soviet Union knew that their build-up in Cuba would be discovered quickly by the U.S.A., though they may have hoped to get close to completion of the build-up before having the facts exposed by the U.S.A. This would have presented the U.S.A. and the world in general with a fait accompli which would have raised tensions but would in the end be accepted, as American foreign bases are accepted.

3. There are, in broad terms, two possible reasons for the Soviet action, each with variants.

(a) The strategic reason. The U.S.S.R. suffers from a deficiency in long-range strike capability against the U.S.A. in relation to the American strike capability, both long-range and from peripheral bases, against the U.S.S.R. The U.S.S.R. seems to have yielded to the temptation of taking a short-cut towards reducing the imbalance. The net effect of the installation of medium - and intermediate - range strike capacity up close to the U.S.A. is to increase the Soviet nuclear strike capability against North America and to circumvent the North American early warning network. The U.S.S.R. can now inflict approximately double the damage it could inflict before, but the U.S.A. still has superiority over the U.S.S.R. in strategic striking power. Increased production of Soviet-based ICBM's will in time increase the Soviet strategic striking force but, barring an unforeseen technical break-through by the Russians, the Minuteman missiles will cancel out this increase and prolong the present imbalance of military power favouring the U.S.A. Nevertheless, the Cuban bases have added considerably to the credibility of Soviet ability to launch a nuclear attack on U.S. targets.

(b) The political reason. The Soviet Union may have intended to build up an offensive potential in Cuba

(i) as proof of its determination to back Castro to the hilt and maintain its Cuban beachhead in Latin America though of course the installation of offensive missile sites has increased the temptation on the U.S.A. to knock out the Soviet beachhead in Cuba and Castro at one and the same time;

- (ii) as an extra form of pressure which could be used after four years of frustrating postponements since their original ultimatum of November 1958 in order to force Western abandonment of its stand on Berlin;
 - (iii) as a means of creating disunity in the Western alliance and of isolating the U.S.A. from its allies, and from the other countries of the free world in general;
-
- (iv) as a lever to mount propaganda attacks on American bases around the periphery of the U.S.S.R. and in the disarmament context, to press for non-dissemination of nuclear weapons and elimination of foreign bases in return for Soviet abandonment of the Cuban base;
 - (v) as a means of forcing a Kennedy-Khrushchev meeting in order to attempt to resolve a clearly critical situation, and at the same time, probably, to attempt a broader solution on Germany-Berlin and possibly on nuclear tests.

These two general reasons are not mutually exclusive, and the Soviet purpose may have been a combination of the several strategic and political variants.

4. From the hesitation and the relative moderation evident in the initial Soviet reaction to President Kennedy's statement, it would appear that the U.S. action probably did not come at the time nor in the way expected by the U.S.S.R. The Soviet Union may have expected, at one extreme, a new U.S. armed attack on Cuba or at least a total blockade; or at the other extreme they may have expected that the U.S.A. would either raise the matter in private discussion with the Soviet leaders or refer it to the U.N. before taking any other unilateral action. Armed attack or total blockade would have incurred heavy opprobrium for the U.S.A., regardless of the degree of provocation for the action. A straight reference to the U.N. would have given the Russians more time to complete their installations and would have allowed them to work on anti-Western and anti-U.S. sentiments in the U.N. (The latter they will no doubt still pursue). Simultaneous reference to the U.N. and the quarantine have probably caught the Russians off-stride, for a quarantine designed to prevent only offensive military equipment reaching Cuba is per se less objectionable than a total blockade; and the demand for dismantling of bases already prepared can be fitted into the fairly widespread desire to avoid further proliferation of nuclear weapons sites.

5. The Soviet reaction to President Kennedy's announcement has, on the whole and, given the extent of the challenge to Soviet prestige, demonstrated comparative moderation and an evident desire to buy time rather than precipitate a more severe crisis immediately.

- (a) The Soviet Union has said that it will not allow its ships to be subject to American search, but a number of Soviet ships en route to Cuba have been turned back while one has been intercepted and allowed to proceed. In the Security Council, the Soviet delegate has predictably called for a "cease and desist" order on the American quarantine action, but has avoided any such belligerent statement as a Soviet intention to shoot its way through the American naval cordon. It has emphasized the "piratical" rather than the "belligerent" nature of the quarantine and has harped on the illegal nature of this interference with the freedom of the seas.
- (b) The Soviet Union has maintained that equipment delivered to the Cubans is of a defensive nature and has insisted that it will not take the initiative in a nuclear conflict; but it has not explicitly denied that MRBM and IRBM sites are being installed, thereby perhaps hiding behind a semantic veil of what is "defensive" and what is "offensive" and also of what has been actually delivered to the Cubans and what has been retained in Soviet hands.
- (c) The Soviet Union has predictably used the tu quoque argument of U.S. bases surrounding the U.S.S.R., but has not attempted to link the Berlin situation with the Cuban crisis in any way, despite what it could have considered a provocation by Kennedy in this regard.
- (d) Khrushchev has, in his message to Lord Russell, expressed willingness to consider a meeting at the highest level to attempt to resolve the crisis and has said the Soviet Union will avoid any reckless action, thereby attempting to give the impression that he is moderate and reasonable in contrast with a hasty, belligerent and unreasonable Kennedy.
- (e) Khrushchev has agreed to U Thant's proposal for a temporary halt to the quarantine and a temporary halt to Soviet shipments to Cuba, but presumably in the knowledge that the U.S.A. would reject it and also in the knowledge that agreement did not prevent the continued construction of the missile bases. He has also agreed, as has Kennedy, to preliminary talks among U Thant, Stevenson and Zorin.

From these first Soviet reactions, it would appear that the Soviet Union is anxious to avoid a further heightening of tensions and presumably, therefore, while buying time and attempting to get world public opinion on its side, wants at least to look at the possibility of a compromise solution. It has been singularly imprecise in stating what it is going to do in response to the American challenge.

6. From this brief analysis of possible Soviet motivations and of Soviet reactions to date, we may conclude the following:

- (a) The strategic reason is not sufficient in itself to explain the Soviet action, for the short-cut of establishing MRBM and IRBM sites in Cuba, while it reduces the imbalance in strategic striking force, nevertheless leaves the balance still strongly in the American favour. Therefore there must have been political considerations as well.
- (b) The major political consideration was probably to improve the Soviet Union's bargaining capacity in future talks with the U.S.A., particularly with respect to Berlin but also perhaps, in the disarmament context, with respect to non-dissemination of nuclear weapons and elimination of foreign bases.
- (c) The ancillary political considerations, or the side-benefits, were probably to create disunity in the Western alliance, to attempt to isolate the U.S.A. from its allies and from the neutrals and to provide the basis for propaganda attacks on American bases around the periphery of the U.S.S.R.
- (d) The Soviet Union has acted daringly and provocatively in setting up missile-launching sites in Cuba; but in reaction to a vigorous American response it has displayed comparative moderation and has been anxious to give the public impression of a willingness to talk and negotiate, even though it has not yet indicated a line of possible compromise.