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THE SOVIET MILITARY BUILDUP IN CUBA

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the Soviet Union has been emplacing offensive weapons in Cuba. Based both in and around Cuba, on planes, ships, and missiles, these weapons are operated by members of the Soviet armed forces. Soviet warships conduct exercises in the Gulf of Mexico, their bombers fly reconnaissance missions along the Atlantic coast from airfields in Cuba, and their pilots operate "Cuban" fighter aircraft. The presence of these offensive strategic systems in Cuba threatens the basic foundation of U.S. security policy in the region.

The Soviets' quiet, slow, but steady, buildup of military forces in Cuba has coincided with the broader Marxist challenge throughout Central America. The precise nature of these actions by the Soviets necessitates a careful review of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis "agreement" and of whether continued compliance with this agreement by United States is still warranted. Clearly, if the Soviet Union has violated both the letter and spirit of mutual military restraint agreed to after the 1962 crisis, a prompt American response is necessary.

THE 1962 MISSILE CRISIS

Fidel Castro's seizure of power and the subsequent Cuban-American break in relations in 1959 created the first real opportunity for an outside power to penetrate the Western Hemisphere since the Spanish-American War. Although, in 1960, Moscow was not ready to challenge the United States in the Caribbean, Castro's rise to power provided an irresistible opportunity to expand Soviet influence in the area. When the United States cut off Cuban access to the American market, the USSR immediately moved in, though cautiously. The Bay of Pigs affair indicated to

Moscow that America would not take concrete action against Castro. Following the ill-fated invasion, the Soviets became bolder, even to the point of sending missiles to Cuba, ostensibly to defend Castro from invasion, but in fact to offset the global strategic superiority of the United States. Khrushchev's opportunism triggered the 1962 missile crisis, a direct challenge to the United States. It ended with a U.S. naval "quarantine" and the humiliating pullout of the missiles by the Soviets. This action may have removed the immediate danger, but it left intact the political-military presence of the Soviet Union.

The agreement between President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev was a personal understanding between the two leaders, never embodied in a public document. It was agreed that all offensive weapons, including missiles and IL-28 Beagle strike aircraft, would be removed. In return, the United States promised not to invade the island or support other groups attempting to do so. Implicit in this agreement was the further understanding that the USSR would not introduce offensive weapons into Cuba in the future. The understanding between Kennedy and Khrushchev dealt only with the immediate political problem of strategic offensive weapons. It did not address the question of whether the Soviets could operate with impunity in the Caribbean. Thus, while President Kennedy won a great personal victory, the United States accepted a long-term strategic defeat, the first in a series of reverses that would change the balance of power in the Caribbean.

CASTRO: "INDEPENDENT" REVOLUTIONARY

After the 1962 crisis, tension arose between Moscow and Havana, caused by both distrust and ideological differences. Castro felt betrayed by the USSR because Khrushchev had dealt directly with the United States without consulting him. Castro wanted to confront the United States and was incensed when Moscow backed away from the crisis. Disillusioned and angry, Castro sought to broaden his relations with the non-industrialized world in order to gain sources of support independent of the Soviet Union. He wished to spread his revolution throughout Latin America by violent means, a course in direct opposition to the official policy of "peaceful coexistence" followed by the Kremlin at the time. After the 1966 Tri-Continental Conference, where Castro broke openly with Moscow over the question of support for world revolution, relations between the USSR and Cuba reached an all-time low.

By 1968, Castro was in serious trouble. His revolutionary offensive in Latin America was a dismal failure and had cost him the life of his comrade and ideologist, Che Guevara. Cuba's economy had come to a complete standstill after a decade of "revolutionary development," and the support Castro sought from relations with the Third World did not materialize. Cuba's dependency on the USSR had grown, but Moscow refused to increase material or economic aid, and initiated a slowdown of oil delive-

ries to put pressure on Havana. These and other factors forced Castro to abandon his independent course and humbly accommodate himself to Soviet desires.

A new dependence emerged in 1968-69 between Moscow and Havana, including increased economic and military aid. Two events symbolized it: the statements made by Fidel Castro supporting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the visit of a Soviet naval squadron to Havana in July 1969.

EARLY STAGES OF THE SOVIET MILITARY BUILDUP

The renewed presence of the Soviet military in Cuba in 1969 stands in sharp contrast to the adventurous policies of Khrushchev seven years earlier. Experience had taught the Kremlin that sudden, openly aggressive moves would only alert the United States to their activities and force a response. Therefore, a new policy was initiated using incremental means to build up the Soviet military capacity in Cuba. The Soviets began to pursue long-range goals rather than instant success. Each small step was a test, each minor success a precedent to build on. By combining patience, propaganda, and deceit, the Soviets set out to re-establish themselves in Cuba on a permanent basis.

The naval squadron which arrived on July 10, 1969, demonstrated the character of this new offensive. Included in the squadron was a Kynda class guided missile carrier, two guided missile destroyers, two Foxtrot class attack submarines, a November class nuclear attack submarine, and several support ships. The November class boat did not put into any Cuban ports, but several surface vessels visited Cienfuegos. The presence of these sophisticated, nuclear capable vessels in the Caribbean flew directly in the face of the 1962 agreement. However, there was no American response.

Encouraged by this success, the Soviets decided to include Cuba in their first global naval exercises, Okean '70. The Cuban role included providing landing bases for TU-95D "Bear" bombers, configured for reconnaissance, but capable of carrying nuclear bombs or launching nuclear missiles. This action set a new precedent whereby Bear bombers, or even Backfires, could fly to Cuba. This again was a clear challenge to the 1962 agreement, although the Soviets did not base the planes in Cuba. And again, there was no American response.

A second naval squadron visited Cuba in 1970, including a Kresta-I class guided missile cruiser, a Kanin class guided missile destroyer, two Foxtrot class submarines, and an Echo II class nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine equipped to carry nuclear warheads. The deliberate choice of a nuclear, but non-ballistic, missile-carrying submarine again illustrates the incremental Soviet approach. The Echo II boat was not a "strategic" platform, but so positioned in the Caribbean that it could

deliver nuclear devices against targets in the United States. Thus, the level of Soviet military presence was moved up another notch. Again this deployment violated the spirit and substance of the 1962 agreement, and again there was no significant American response. On this visit, the Russian ships conducted maneuvers and openly used Cuban ports for resupply, thus setting another precedent.

THE SUBMARINE BASE CONTROVERSY WITH THE U.S.

Prior to the second naval deployment to Cuba, Soviet planners had decided to build a submarine base at Cienfuegos to extend the range of their fleet. Indeed, the decision to build the base was made in November of 1969, less than a year after the first Russian submarine visited Cuban waters. By July 1970, when construction of the base drew considered attention among the top echelons of the American intelligence community, it was nearly completed. In September, submarine tenders arrived, including a barge to handle nuclear waste. The Soviets had established the capability to support nuclear and conventional submarines, thus advancing their presence yet another step. However, they had moved too rapidly, and their actions could not be ignored by the United States.

The matter reached the crisis stage in the fall of 1970. American congressional leaders called for action, and once again the Soviet leadership found itself in a confrontation with Washington over Cuba, a situation the incremental approach was intended to preclude. Quiet negotiations followed. In November, Washington announced that "an understanding" was reached and that Moscow had agreed that "No nuclear submarines would be serviced in or from Cuban ports." Once again the Soviets seemingly were forced to "back down" by the United States; yet within a month of the so-called understanding, a similar Soviet naval squadron arrived -- minus the nuclear submarine -- to reassert the right of the Soviet navy to operate in the Caribbean.

Less than three months after the 1970 "understanding," testing the U.S. reaction to the presence of Soviet weapons was again set in motion. Another nuclear-powered November class submarine visited Cuba in February 1971, accompanied by a Kresta-I guided missile cruiser and a submarine tender, but instead of remaining off the coast, the boat put into Cienfuegos and was serviced. There was no American response, or even public recognition of this blatant challenge. In May 1971, the Soviets tested the United States again, this time with another Echo II nuclear cruise missile submarine. The boat put into Cienfuegos openly, but still there was no American reaction.

DE-SENSITIZING AMERICAN VIGILANCE

After the precedent-setting visit in May, the Soviets bided their time before testing American sensitivities any further.

The 1970 Cienfuegos incident was a dangerous mistake, but the error had proved instructive. Moscow had learned that, if it presented the appearance of backing down, it could carry on its strategy as soon as U.S. attention was diverted. Moscow waited nearly a year, therefore, before making another naval deployment, though flights of TU-95 bombers between Cuba and the Kola peninsula continued unabated. Carefully concealed beneath the rhetoric of detente, the process of desensitization persisted.

The visit of President Nixon to Moscow to sign the SALT I treaty in May 1972 provided the ideal situation for the Soviet Union's next test. The U.S. was anxious to maintain tranquility during the talks -- so much so that American naval commanders were advised to avoid confrontations with the Soviets at sea. Moscow chose the Golf II class diesel-powered ballistic missile submarine as the vehicle for this next initiative. Though not a modern boat, the Golf was a strategic platform and thus well suited to test American resolve. As an added precaution, the Golf met its tender at Bahia de Nipe, a quiet harbor on the opposite side of the island from Guantanamo. The submarine remained there for five days and then departed to join its escorts.

A mystery surrounds this particular episode, for outside the harbor were elements of U.S. destroyer Squadron 18, part of a unit assigned to monitor Soviet activities in Cuba. As the Russian submarine left the harbor, the American warships made sonar contact and were able to follow the submarine for three days. During this time the Golf made numerous attempts to escape, but guided by P-3 Orion aircraft based at Key West, Florida, the destroyers maintained contact. The American warships were involved in several encounters with Soviet warships attempting to aid the Golf's escape. No public mention was made by the Nixon Administration, however, concerning the presence of a Soviet ballistic missile submarine in the Caribbean, the use of Cuban facilities to service the vessel, or the confrontation between American and Soviet warships on the high seas.

The lack of a strong American response to this latest incursion again encouraged the Soviets. Less than two years after the 1970 crisis, the American position regarding the use of Cuba as a base for Soviet ballistic submarines had been completely circumvented. Steady, patient pursuit of limited objectives by the Soviets had yielded the desired results without arousing the United States. Soviet naval visits continued throughout the 1970s, including a joint Cuban-Soviet exercise during Okean '75. Vessels from the USSR now call frequently on Cuban ports, train with Cuban vessels, and patrol the southern and eastern coast of the United States after replenishment from Cuba. In addition, construction began in 1978 on a new Cuban naval base, and the facilities at Cienfuegos were expanded to include submarine piers and a handling area for nuclear warheads.

OTHER SOVIET VIOLATIONS OF THE 1962 AGREEMENT

Although naval forces have initiated the most visible Soviet activities in Cuba, there are other instances in which the 1962 agreement has been violated by the introduction of offensive weapons. The distinction between offensive and defensive weapons ultimately depends on how they are used. A tank or a plane is defensive so long as it remains within the borders of a nation, but when used for aggressive purposes, a weapon becomes offensive. There are certain weapons in Cuba which clearly pose offensive threats to the United States.

In 1978, two squadrons of MIG 23/27 fighter-bombers arrived in Cuba, flown by Soviet pilots. Both are far superior to the IL-28s President Kennedy had forced the Soviets to remove in 1962 and clearly give Cuba a significant offensive potential. The MIG-27 configuration is an effective attack aircraft capable of carrying nuclear or conventional payloads up to 1,500 miles, and since these planes are based in Cuba, they should be considered "strategic" weapons systems. Recent deliveries by the Soviet Union have brought the total Mig 23/27 force level to approximately 75 aircraft, with half of them the more advanced Mig 27. These aircraft are frequently flown by pilots from the Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact countries, and Soviet client states. Of even greater significance is the existence of at least three and as many as six airfields that can handle the Backfire strategic bomber. Certain American defense sources predict that the Soviets will eventually move a squadron of these sophisticated planes to Cuba. From Cuban bases, the Soviet Backfire could hit any target in North America and easily make it back to the Soviet Union.

THE CONTINUING SOVIET BUILDUP

In 1979, just prior to the uproar following Senator Church's disclosure of a Soviet "Combat Brigade" in Cuba, the Soviets sent twenty-four AN-26 transport planes to the island. These aircraft are capable of carrying troops anywhere in the Caribbean region. The public debate generated by the apparent prospect of Cuban and/or Soviet troops being used in Central America helped obscure the true purpose of the now infamous brigade. A 1979 article in The Washington Post identified this unit, which had been transferred from East Europe, as being configured to guard and handle tactical nuclear weapons. This implied that the unit's role was to protect the storage of such weapons as well as other sensitive Soviet installations on the island. For instance, the Soviets maintain a very large communications complex in Cuba, the largest in the world outside the Soviet Union, which is used both to relay transmissions to Soviet military units around the world and to monitor and collect American military transmissions.

Suggestions that this unit is stationed in Cuba to back up Castro against internal opposition are simply not credible. The security of sensitive listening and intelligence-gathering instal-

lations on the island and tight Soviet control of the nuclear weapons possibly stored there must surely be of far greater importance to Moscow than Castro's stability. Elements of the "combat brigade" came from East Germany and Czechoslovakia, where they guarded nuclear weapons depots and mobile missile launchers. They are now stationed around the Punta Movidia complex, a Soviet built facility linked by rail to Cienfuegos, which is now off limits to the Cuban population in the area. Intelligence reports indicate that this facility is being used to service nuclear weapons from Soviet submarines, but weapons for the MIG-27 could also be stored there. The Carter Administration should have been aware of these developments in 1979, but no public announcement was made.

Another aspect of the increasing Soviet offensive capability in Cuba surfaced in 1979 when batteries of modified SA-2 anti-aircraft missiles were identified by air reconnaissance in Cuba. These large missiles, often equipped with nuclear weapons, can be employed quickly in a surface-to-surface mode by the simple addition of a booster. They have an operational range in excess of 150 miles and could be used against ground targets in Florida.

Overall during 1981 the Soviets exported more weapons to Cuba than in any year since 1962, at least triple the level of just two years earlier, rising to 66,000 tons.

In testimony before a Senate committee in January 1982, Secretary of State Haig pointed out that with the increasing flow of arms into Cuba, "All of the countries in the Caribbean are confronted by a growing threat from Cuba and its new-found ally Nicaragua."¹ In the first five months of 1982 the same expanded level of military shipments to Cuba has continued unabated.

THE AMERICAN FAILURE IN CUBA

Since 1973, the Soviets have deployed various naval and air units in Cuba, but the presence of nuclear-capable surface vessels, particularly Kresta II class guided missile cruisers, has raised the level of force currently tolerated by the United States to an alarming degree. Naval formations made up of ships armed with surface-to-surface missiles could easily strike the Gulf coast of the United States or Mexico's oilfields. Such an open display of power may be ignored in Washington, but it is highly visible to many smaller nations in this hemisphere, who are justifiably concerned over American irresolution.

During this period, the U.S. has become unilaterally attached to the illusion of "stability" in the triangular American-Soviet-

¹ "Second Unit of MiG-23s Identified in Cuban Hands," Aviation Week and Space Technology, February 8, 1982, p. 17.

Cuban relationship, while the Soviets have steadily subverted the status quo and overturned all bilateral "understandings." The United States has meanwhile failed to recognize that the Soviets understand and respect deeds, not words, and that they measure resolve by willingness to act.

The central point regarding the Soviet presence in Cuba is that Moscow has always operated under the assumption that it could advance only as far as the U.S. allowed it to. Since experience has proved that American sensitivity to their military activities is not great, the Kremlin assumes that America will not act unless suddenly provoked and that they may pursue any course of action provided it progresses slowly. The U.S. position in the Caribbean has gone from an active to a passive posture, precisely the state of mind most desired by Castro and the Soviets.

A POSSIBLE RESOLUTION

The United States must first acknowledge the threat posed by the present situation and demand the immediate removal of all nuclear and potentially nuclear Soviet weapons systems from Cuba. Only a direct demand could have a powerful impact on Soviet thinking. Such an approach by the U.S. to the Soviets in Cuba should follow two tracks: diplomacy and preparation for potential actions.

Diplomatic efforts should make it clear that the United States is aware of the scope of Soviet activities in Cuba and will no longer tolerate the present level of Soviet involvement. Privately at first, the new American stance concerning Cuba would be communicated to the Kremlin. Diplomacy would not only spell out the U.S. position concerning the weapons systems in Cuba, but more important, give the Soviets an alternative to confrontation. Past experience suggests that Moscow would reject American demands that it alter its position in Cuba. Therefore, the United States should make active preparations to remove the weapons by force while continuing the dialogue.

A crucial element of American strategy to remove the Soviet weapons is the status to be assigned to Cuba. Cuba is a subcontractor of the Soviet Union, and the U.S. must deal directly with the Soviets. Thus, at no time should Havana be consulted or recognized in the negotiations. The United States is concerned about Soviet weapons, Soviet personnel, and the use of Cuba as a staging base for Soviet operations.

Removing that influence from Cuba will be a risky and dangerous task, primarily because the Soviets do not believe that the U.S. and its leaders are willing to do what is required. To eliminate the Soviet presence from Cuba, the United States must first convince Moscow that it is fully aware of what is occurring, and that this country is serious about altering the "correlation of forces" vis-a-vis Cuba. The most important step toward this

goal is for the U.S. government to educate the American public concerning past Soviet violations of the 1962 agreement and, at the proper moment, to confront Moscow publicly concerning their present involvement in Cuba and the Caribbean region. Because of the refusal of four American administrations to deal with the problem of Soviet activities in Cuba, and the secrecy with which they are treated by Washington, both American and Soviet perceptions would be shocked by such a reversal.

PUBLIC OPINION AND CUBA

A recent public opinion poll conducted on behalf of The Heritage Foundation revealed that the American people already are profoundly disturbed over the threat to U.S. interests posed by Cuba. Over two-thirds of those polled, 68 percent, considered the Castro government to be threat to the security of the United States. Less than half that number (30.9 percent) perceived no such threat.

An even larger percentage, over three-fourths of the sample, believed "that the Castro regime in Cuba is attempting to export revolution in this hemisphere." Only 17 percent denied this proposition.

Finally, by a margin of nearly two to one, Americans want the United States to pursue tougher policies toward Cuba. Specifically 60.3 percent believed that United States policy toward Cuba is "too soft." A miniscule .6 percent believed the U.S. was being too tough on Cuba while 35.9 percent endorsed the status quo.

Thus, a popular foundation exists for the Reagan Administration to deal much more decisively with the threat posed by Cuba to the U.S. directly and the Western hemisphere in general.

The results of the poll are:

Polling Dates: February 25 through March 24, 1982

Do you consider the Castro government a threat to the security of the United States?

- | | |
|---------------|-------|
| 1. Yes | 68.0% |
| 2. No | 30.9% |
| 3. Don't Know | 1.1% |

Do you believe that the Castro regime in Cuba is attempting to export revolution in this hemisphere?

- | | |
|---------------|-------|
| 1. Yes | 78.4% |
| 2. No | 17.3% |
| 3. Don't Know | 4.3% |

How do you evaluate United States policy toward Cuba?

- | | |
|-----------------|-------|
| 1. Too tough | .6% |
| 2. Satisfactory | 35.9% |
| 3. Too soft | 60.3% |
| 4. Don't Know | 3.2% |

CONCLUSION

Despite their formidable military buildup, the Soviets are no more willing today than they were in 1962 to engage in thermo-nuclear war against the U.S. over Cuba. The Soviet military presence in Cuba is a strategic asset for Moscow, but the island is not essential to their overall global position. Fidel Castro is a costly and unpredictable client, who is at present useful to Soviet designs. Because Moscow recognizes that Cuba is ultimately in America's sphere of influence, the Soviets have never formalized by treaty any obligation to defend the island. Cuba has asked, but has not been invited, to join the Warsaw Pact. The Soviets will exploit their opportunities in Cuba as long as possible, but if confronted by genuine American resolve, the Soviets quite likely will abandon Cuba as they tentatively began to do twenty years ago. And, in the absence of continued massive Soviet support, the Castro regime would quickly collapse.

The strategic lesson of the 1962 missile crisis remains valid today: we can deal with the Soviet presence in Cuba only from a position of visible, overwhelming strength. President Kennedy was able to compel the Soviets to withdraw their weapons only because he was willing to confront them with a great sense of urgency and determination. The same principle applies today, but the situation has changed. Cuba is now a forward base for Soviet military operations and therefore poses a military threat to the countries in the region and potentially the United States. For over a decade, U.S. political leaders have ignored the gradually escalating Soviet presence in Cuba until it has become a deadly threat. The U.S. will change this situation only when its leaders recognize the Soviet activities for what they are: a clear and present danger to U.S. security and regional stability.

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