

## **October 27, 1962**

### **Cable from Federal Republic of Germany Embassy, Washington (Knappstein)**

#### **Citation:**

"Cable from Federal Republic of Germany Embassy, Washington (Knappstein)", October 27, 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (AAPD) 1962: Band III: 1 September bis 31 Dezember 1962 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2010), Document 418. Translated for CWIHP by Bernd Schaefer. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/115396>

#### **Summary:**

A cable from the West German Embassy in Washington, D.C. discussing the threat to American security posed by an "offensive" Soviet base in Cuba, insights provided by recent intelligence, the purpose and the impact of the American blockade of Cuba, negotiations that have taken place at the United Nations, Soviet intentions during the Cuban crisis and, finally, a comparison of Cuba to the situation in Berlin.

#### **Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

#### **Original Language:**

German

#### **Contents:**

Translation - English

Ambassador Knappstein, Washington, to the Foreign Office

114-8739/62 secret

Telex Nr. 3226

Citissime

Sent: 27 October 1962, 01:10 hours

Received: 27 October 1962, 08:55 hours

#### I. Threat to American Security Through a Soviet Base on Cuba

Information we receive here about deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles and aircraft on Cuba are dispelling any potential misunderstandings about type, scope, and dangerousness of the threat.

1. In the context of Soviet intentions capabilities of the Cuban bases are correctly described as "offensive". This follows from:

- confirmed information regarding type and range of weapons: mobile MRBMs (1,100 miles), stationary IRBMs (2,200 miles, only "first-strike capability" [English in original - trans.]), and IL-28 aircraft;
- the scope of Soviet engagement: about 10 percent of their MRBM potential;
- the way the Soviets acted when building and equipping their base: swiftly, secretly, and deviously (see United Nations)
- the state of readiness: 23 launching pads "operational" with 33 MRBMs, "firing readiness" in five to eight hours.

2. The scope of the threat is "significant," since it is directed against the "soft underbelly" of the United States.

- The short flying time between launch and target does not allow for an effective warning.
- After the launch of a missile, there is no more defense available.

The Strategic Air Command (SAC) is within range of the missiles.

3. However, there is no exact proof that nuclear warheads were brought onto the island. For good reasons, though, it is considered as likely with regard to the "operational" missiles.

4. The deployment of Soviet missiles and nuclear weapons in Cuba is a new factor affecting the nuclear balance and Soviet strategy in a way which until now was viewed as unlikely.

- For the first time, Soviet nuclear missiles are stationed overseas and at considerable distance from the Soviet heartland.
- For the first time, the United States is vulnerable not only from Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), but also from medium-range missiles.
- A completion of Cuba's expansion into a Soviet nuclear base would mean a decisive move of the nuclear balance in direction of the Soviet Union. For the first time, the latter would acquire capabilities to launch a nuclear surprise attack simultaneously against Europe and the North American continent.

Until now, the strategic potential of the United States provided a nuclear umbrella for Europe, since the Soviet Union was incapable to launch such a simultaneous attack due to the time difference (distance, length of [missile] flight).

## Most Recent Intelligence Insights

At the ambassadorial meeting on 26 October, [Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs William R.] Tyler, [Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul H.] Nitze, and [Roger N.] Hilsman (Director of Intelligence and Research in the State Department) informed about the most recent intelligence on the state of expansion of the Soviet base in Cuba.

1. Ongoing aerial surveillance, in part from low heights, is proving an accelerated and continuous expansion of (stationary) ICBM positions. More deployment sites for nuclear warheads were completed. Large camouflage operations are going on at the missile sites (and the anti-aircraft defense sites). Construction of additional sites has not been discovered. IRBM missiles have not been located in the positions, though they are expected at a later stage of construction.

It is assumed that the Soviet ship "Poltava," which reversed course, had IRBMs on board; or that such missiles are already deployed on Cuba.

2. Mobile MRBMs were deployed "in an astonishingly short time" ("mushrooming from the ground"). The MRBMs are "operational." Additional MRBM sites have not been discovered.

3. The [American] public was informed that eight to ten missile sites were identified. The exact number is as follows: two IRBM and seven MRBM sites.

4. There exists certainty that nuclear warheads are already deployed on the island for those MRBMs that have been made operational already. Otherwise it would have made no sense to make those sites "operational."

5. Transition time from "operational readiness" to "firing readiness" is between five and eight hours. This time is needed to transport the warhead to the missile, to mount it, to move the missile into a launching position, fuel it, and launch it. Nuclear warheads are not mounted before the "countdown" starts. In other words: During the transition from "operational readiness" to "firing readiness," there is a certainty that the missile will actually be fired.

6. Camouflage will somewhat increase the time needed to achieve the missiles' firing readiness. This is viewed as an indication for caution on the Soviet side.

7. None of the American surveillance aircraft were fired at. Even an attempt of firing was not noticed. Soviet MIG aircraft also remained on the ground.

8. [French ambassador Herve] Alphand suggested to present convincing evidence for the threat emanating from the Soviet base on Cuba especially to the neutral and non-aligned countries. Respective understanding is still lacking on this side.

### III. Purpose and Current Impacts of the Cuba Blockade

1. At the same meeting, Nitze provided the following information about implementation and success of the blockade:

□ All ships suspected of carrying offensive weapons material have reversed course and are on the way back to their ports of departure.

□ Simple tankers continue their course towards Cuba and probably do not contain any banned load. Recently about 30 ships per month arrived in Cuba, this is 1 to 2 per day. Some ships turned around; so overall the number of objects affected by the blockade operation is very small. For instance, a Lebanese charter ship was searched and subsequently cleared for passage. The Soviet tanker ultimately allowed to pass was asked to identify its name, port of destination, and country. It was granted passage without further search, as there were additional reasons for assuming it carried just a load of fuel.

2. (As we heard from other sources: The first Cuba-bound Soviet ships most suspected to be affected by the blockade reversed course and returned already six hours before the President's speech on 22 October, this is following just the pre-announcement of the speech. It is considered likely that those ships carried nuclear warheads.)

3. (Nitze again:) Aircraft are not yet subject to the blockade operation, as it is evident from the 23 October proclamation.

The main reason behind this: One does not want to arrive at a situation where you are forced, for instance, to shoot down a passenger plane over high seas.

One must assume that nuclear warheads can arrive in Cuba by aircraft. Searches of planes flying to Cuba from Canada and Dakar did not yield any results. It is preferable, however, that no flights are coming in to Cuba at all, as it was promised to Canada and Conakry. Only in this way will severe incidents, undesired by anybody, be avoided.

Soviet planes can reach Cuba in direct flights only if they re-fuel in mid-air.

4. The purpose of the blockade has been achieved: Additional shipments of offensive materials to Cuba were stopped. Time has been won to provide the world public with evidence about Cuba's offensive threat.

The other main objective still stands out, namely the "removal" of offensive objects already on the island.

Negotiations about a deal on removal of the Cuban base in exchange for the removal of □an American overseas missile base are not the path to be chosen by the [US] government to reach its objective.

#### Situation of Negotiations in the United Nations

1. American information to the ambassadors' group and during meeting breaks revealed the following on this issue:

Currently [US Ambassador Adlai E.] Stevenson and [U.N. Secretary General] U Thant are negotiating about a two-stage approach. After the first stage of 48 hours, the following is supposed to happen:

- a) complete cessation of Soviet maritime imports,
- b) end of construction work at the missile sites on Cuba,
- c) "diffusion" of everything already installed.

During the second stage of about two to three weeks, negotiations will have to be held about how to remove the material from Cuba.

U Thant's idea, according to which the first stage should result in a "standstill," is unsatisfactory. There exists only a five-to-eight-hour timeframe to get the missiles

ready for a "countdown," i.e. for firing. An actual "standstill" would only exist, if the "operational" missiles are dismantled and its parts dislocated (in particular separating the missile from the launching pads). Furthermore, according to American opinion, on-site controls and inspections are needed in order to verify the "standstill."

2. The blockade would remain in force until the second main objective is achieved, this is, the removal of offensive potential already there. Blockade forces would remain on alert, without enforcing blockade measures ("standby order"), until effective control mechanisms of U.N. inspections are established to monitor the complete removal of offensive potential from Cuba.

Without on-site inspection and control, there is no guarantee that weapons would not become "operational" again.

3. Concerning further developments, there are currently two open questions (according to Nitze):

a) whether the procedural process with U Thant, as mentioned above, will produce results in due time;

b) whether Castro will tolerate inspections.

Ad a): Official information from inside the administration, and official press information since yesterday and especially over the last hours, bolster the impression that the time factor is of utmost importance.

Ad b): There is no indication for Castro being willing to accept on-site inspections. He has stated: "Only over my dead body." Tyler sarcastically called this remark prophetic.

The French side informed that the Canadian and Brazilian governments tried diplomacy to move Cuba towards an acceptance of inspections. However, they were rejected.

Alphand reiterated explicitly Nitze's statement that "another course of action will be chosen," if developments on a) and b) remain unsatisfactory.

## V. Discussion of Soviet intentions

1. None of the attendees at the meeting had any information according to which the Soviets are undertaking any special military preparations at any place in their global area of influence.

2. The Soviets deny the existence of medium- and long-range missiles in Cuba, its installation, and its further expansion ([Soviet ambassador Valerian] Zorin in the U.N. Security Council). The Soviet press defines the crisis as an American-Cuban, not an American-Soviet problem. By acting this way, Nitze thought, the Soviets want to maintain their flexibility. It cannot be excluded they will continue their denials, as they did before 22 October, in order to leave an exit door open and portray the United States as the one who acted aggressively. This way also the ridicule Zorin was subjected to in the [UN] Security Council [on 25 October] when he denied the evidence from aerial surveillance pictures could pay off. Though it also could be that the Soviets want to keep the nuclear warheads up their sleeves.

[Martin J.] Hillenbrand [director, State Department Office of German Affairs and Berlin Task Force] thought another explanation likely for Zorin's behavior: Moscow has still

not yet recovered from the surprising implementation of the blockade. It is telling that statements by Soviet diplomats in other places are characterized by insecurity and inconsistencies. You might surmise from this that Soviet embassies did not yet receive instructions from Moscow. Zorin might have been in a similar situation.

3. The French side reported, according to information from Paris, that Soviet diplomats there spread the rumor that a political trade-off between the Cuban base and [US] bases in Turkey is imminent. Nitze replied this is perhaps the solution the Soviets envisage. He again reiterated that there are negotiations only about the elimination of the threat from Cuba. Nitze emphasized this American position was made unmistakably clear.

#### VI. Cuban Crisis and Berlin Problem

In an information [report] directed to the NATO Council (see our telex 3208 from 25 October 1962 secret II.2), the Americans assessed today in another four-party meeting Soviet intentions as follows: The secret build-up of Cuba into a Soviet nuclear base serves as a preparation for another Soviet move against Berlin to be expected at the end of the year. The French and the British are waiting with their assessments of Soviet intentions until tomorrow's four-party meeting. There an instruction to [US Ambassador to NATO Thomas K.] Finletter will be discussed. Based on this instruction, he will have to inform the [North Atlantic] Council about "political contingency planning" and "reactions to a separate peace treaty." For now, I will hold back until after tomorrow's meeting with further reporting on American assessments of a linkage between the Cuban crisis and the Berlin problem.

[signed] Knapstein