

October 30, 1962
**Telegram from Soviet Ambassador to the US
Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry**

Citation:

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Summary:

Dobrynin discusses a meeting with Robert Kennedy, where Robert Kennedy sends back Khrushchev's letter to John F. Kennedy, stating that a confidential and oral exchange is better regarding the subject of Turkey, rather than a confidential and written exchange.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Today Robert Kennedy invited me to meet with him. He said that he would like to talk about N.S. Khrushchev's letter to the President yesterday.¹

The President, Robert Kennedy said, confirms the understanding [dogovorion-nost] with N.S. Khrushchev on the elimination of the American missile bases in Turkey (Robert Kennedy confirmed that one speaks of an understanding). Corresponding measures will be taken towards fulfilling this understanding within the period of time indicated earlier, in confidential observance of NATO guidelines, but of course without any mention that this is connected to the Cuban events.

We, however, said Robert Kennedy, are not prepared to formulate such an understanding in the form of letters, even the most confidential letters, between the President and the head of the Soviet government when it concerns such a highly delicate issue. Speaking in all candor, I myself, for example, do not want to risk getting involved in the transmission of this sort of letter, since who knows where and when such letters can surface or be somehow published--not now, but in the future--and any changes in the course of events are possible. The appearance of such a document could cause irreparable harm to my political career in the future. This is why we request that you take this letter back.

It is possible, Robert Kennedy continued, that you do not believe us and through letters you want to put the understanding in writing. The issue of Soviet missile bases in Cuba has unfortunately introduced a real element of uncertainty and suspicion even into confidential channels of contact. We will however live up to our promise, even if it is given in this oral form. As you know, it was in precisely the same oral form that the President made his promise to N.S. Khrushchev regarding the removal of a certain number of American soldiers from Thailand.² That promise was kept. So too will this promise be kept.

As a guarantee, Robert Kennedy added, I can only give you my word. Moreover I can tell you that two other people besides the President know about the existing understanding: they are [Secretary of State Dean] Rusk and [advisor on Soviet affairs Llewellyn] Thompson. If you do not believe me, discuss it with them, and they will tell you the same thing. But it is better not to transfer this understanding into a formal, albeit confidential, exchange of letters (as can be noted, the greatest suspicion in the two Kennedy brothers was elicited by the part of Khrushchev's letter which speaks directly of a link between the Cuban events and the bases in Turkey). We hope that N.S. Khrushchev will understand us correctly. In regard to this Robert Kennedy insistently asked to take the letter back without delay.

I told Robert Kennedy that everything said above I would report to N.S. Khrushchev, emphasizing in doing so that even the President and he, Robert Kennedy, could be sure of the fact that the Soviet government is regarding the understanding that has been reached as strictly secret and not for publication. At the same time, in order to confirm Robert Kennedy's statement about the understanding, I asked him again about whether the President really confirms the understanding with N.S. Khrushchev on the elimination of American missile bases in Turkey. Robert Kennedy said once again that he confirmed it, and again that he hoped that their motivations would be properly understood in Moscow. Taking what they explained into account, I believed it conditionally possible--before receiving any instructions from Moscow--to take this letter [back], since a categorical refusal to do so would, in my opinion, only weaken Robert Kennedy's firm statements on the understanding that has been reached. Moreover, leaving the letter with him, after he had clearly expressed the President's desire not to exchange letters, could scarcely be in the interests of doing business [in the future].

In conclusion Robert Kennedy said that, in his opinion, the events connected with the Cuban issue have been developing quite favorably, and that he hoped that

everything would eventually be settled. He added that, on the Turkish issue and other highly confidential issues he was prepared to maintain a direct contact with me as earlier, emphasizing in doing so that the point was the possible oral considerations of the President and the head of the Soviet government N.S. Khrushchev on the exchange of letters on such delicate issues as missile bases in Turkey, or issues which need to be handled more by the State Department than by him personally, taking into account the delicacy of his situation as the President's brother and as Attorney General of the United States. I do not want, Robert Kennedy added, to claim for myself the function of the State Department, but my "solitary diplomacy" may be needed several more times, and we will meeting with each other periodically.

I answered to Robert Kennedy that I was prepared to maintain contact with him on highly important issues in the future, passing over the heads, as he himself suggested, of all intermediaries. Robert Kennedy confirmed this. From what Robert Kennedy said it was clear that the President is trying now to avoid exchanging any documents on issues of a highly delicate nature like Turkey which could leave a trace anywhere, but that he favors the continuation of a confidential exchange of opinions between the heads of the two governments.

We believe it expedient to visit Robert Kennedy once again and to issue a statement, in referring to our mission, that the Soviet government and N.S. Khrushchev personally are prepared to take into account the President's desire for maintaining the secrecy of the oral understanding on the removal of the American missile bases from Turkey. It is also expedient to tell of our willingness, if the President is also prepared for this, to continue the confidential exchange of opinions between the heads of the governments on many important unresolved issues, on whose resolution the lessing of international tension, and of the tension between our two countries in particular, is to a very great degree dependent.

I request instructions.

30.X.62 A.DOBRYNIN

1. For an English translation of the letter, which emerged publicly only three decades later when it was released by Soviet officials, see Problems of Communism--Special Edition (Spring 1992), 60-62; also U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, vol. VI: Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), 189-90.

2. A reference to Kennedy's agreement to withdraw the approximately 5,000 U.S. troops sent to Thailand in May 1962 in response to an attack by the pro-communist Pathet Lao in Laos. Kennedy's decision followed a private appeal in Khrushchev's name conveyed through Robert Kennedy in mid-June by Bolshakov. See Memorandum from Attorney General Kennedy to President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), 11 July 1962 (regarding meetings apparently held on 18 and 19 June 1962), in U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, vol. XXIII: Southeast Asia (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994), 950.

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