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

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Summary:

An analysis of American decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the economic blockade, as well as of American perceptions of Soviet intentions during that time period, by the West German Ambassador to the United States.

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Ambassador [Karl-Heinrich] Knappstein, Washington, to the Foreign Office

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The current situation is characterized by the Cuba blockade imposed by the American government. For now, I want to provide the following assessment of the situation:

I. According to American opinion, a first exchange of analyses conducted in the military sub-committee (chaired by [Paul H.] Nitze) about Soviet intentions in deploying offensive strategic arms on Cuba brought about these results:

1) Expanding Cuba to a base with offensive potential is a "quantum leap" in crisis development of East-West relations. This way the United States is supposed to be forced into either accepting the deployment of these weapons next to the coast of the American continent, or into giving in to Soviet demands concerning disarmament and Berlin. The dangerousness of this "big gamble" and "extreme move" is taken extremely seriously.

2) Far-reaching Soviet intentions aim at:

- implementing Soviet disarmament demands
- concerning American bases overseas;
- the withdrawal of American forces from Europe;
- the retreat of Western troops from Berlin.

3) Short-term intentions according to Nitze:

- pressure on "Western" alliances, especially on NATO;
- dividing the Western world ("fissures").

Lord [Viscount Samuel] Hood [Minister, British Embassy in Washington] thought the Soviets want to test American resolve. In case the first offensive expansion of the Cuban base is accepted, Moscow will step up further. If America reacts [firmly], Moscow will retreat. In any case, the Soviets want to figure out how far they can go. They will possibly try to trade in the giving up of the Cuban base for "something different."

II. In the same meeting [of the Nitze group] there existed agreement that a Soviet reaction could also affect Berlin. None of the participants present indulged into speculations which Soviet measures might be considered likely with regard to Berlin.

Nitze negated the question whether the Soviets might have intentions to push the Berlin problem to the backburner.

Nitze almost categorically rejected another question from the German side whether the new situation might limit freedom of action with regard to implementing Western plans for countermeasures in case of a conflict over Berlin. He stated that the finalization of these plans, decisiveness, and unity are more important than ever.

III. According to first impressions, the American decision must be viewed in this context:

1) In the National Security Council, the news about Soviet shipments of offensive weapons (reaching the North American continent) led a week ago to the military's demand to act. Especially the facilities in Cape Canaveral are considered potentially vulnerable.

2) In light of its nuclear superiority to last for some more years (reliably confirmed by U 2 [reconnaissance planes] and satellites, of which the Soviets are said to be aware), the [American] government believes to [be able or willing to] run an increased risk. Yet the window for freedom of action is said to be not unlimited.

3) An aggravation of the Berlin crisis in late November this year would also have provided Kennedy with the desired opportunity to act against the build-up of Cuba as a base for Soviet offensive weapons.

Khrushchev's talk with [US Ambassador Foy D.] Kohler [in Moscow on 16 October 1962] and Gromyko's talks in Washington [with President John F. Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk on 18 October], however, have raised doubts whether the Soviets are actually eager to stage a Berlin crisis at the end of the year (new indications for expanding the time factor, emphasis on ongoing readiness to talk). This renders moot the prospect that Soviet action on a separate [peace] treaty [with the GDR], or on Berlin, might soon provide a "pretext" to act against Cuba.

4) Since on one hand the government no longer wants to passively watch the offensive threat, and on the other hand Soviet policy on Berlin does not seem to provoke an immediate aggravation of the Berlin crisis, the question about the timing of the Cuba action poses itself in a different way.

a) In addition, the current timing is certainly influenced by the upcoming elections where significant losses for the Democrats are predicted. The Republican party leadership recently decided to turn the Cuba question into the main election issue. I have no doubts, however, that domestic consideration merely influenced decisions on timing. The actual political reasons are the Cuban threat and Soviet policy on Berlin.

b) Maybe the timing also seemed favorable in context of problems Moscow is facing with the Sino-Indian [border] conflict.

5) In retrospect, those developments throw a limelight on the so far unconvincingly explained over-dramatization of the Berlin crisis by the American political leadership, and the increasing number of public hints according to which the United States is ready to go it alone if it has to do so.

[signed]

Knapstein