

October 22, 1962

Meeting between General Charles de Gaulle and Dean Acheson, Elysee Palace, Paris

Citation:

"Meeting between General Charles de Gaulle and Dean Acheson, Elysee Palace, Paris", October 22, 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1962, Tome II (1er Juillet-31 Décembre), (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1999), pp. 315-19. Translation by Garret J. Martin.
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/115416>

Summary:

General Charles de Gaulle and Dean Acheson discuss installation of U.S. blockade around Cuiba and Soviet missiles, as well as the political goals of each.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

French

Contents:

Translation - English

Very Secret

M. Dean Acheson¹ hands General de Gaulle a letter on Cuba from the president of the United States, which the General reads.² He also hands over the first part of the speech (the only part that has yet reached the United States embassy) that President Kennedy will pronounce the same evening at midnight (Paris time). The rest of the speech will be sent to the Elysee once the embassy receives it.

Invited by General de Gaulle, in line with a passage from President Kennedy's letter, to provide further information, M. Acheson first indicated, in line with M. Kennedy's desires, the importance that the latter attaches to the final passage of his letter in regard to the close contacts that should be maintained between Washington and Paris, and the interest he attaches to General de Gaulle's viewpoints.

To sum up, the President will announce the following decision: starting immediately, subject to a grace period of twenty four hours expiring at midnight (Paris time) on the 23rd October, a naval blockade - and maybe even an aerial one (M. Acheson is not sure) - will be put in place around Cuba. This blockade will first affect all types of weapons; within a short delay, it will also include oil products, and if necessary, it could later on become a complete blockade.

It is likely that what has already arrived in Cuba will not be withdrawn; but it seems that the weapons systems being currently built are not finished. In particular, no nuclear warheads have been spotted on any photography. The aim is to prevent the delivery of those.

President Kennedy had first contemplated more draconian measures: relying on surprise, an attack by bombers could have destroyed all the missiles in place. The President had given up on the idea because the United States' European allies would have faced a high risk of reprisals; in addition, the high number of Soviet technicians that would have been killed in such a bombing attack could have led M. Khrushchev to react excessively. Responding to a question from General de Gaulle, M. Acheson explained that the mission would have involved bombers flying at low altitude, using conventional bombs, and targeting installations that are based far from cities, which would have helped to prevent civilian victims.

It is clear that the situation will become very tense once the blockade comes into force. Several scenarios are possible. Maybe the Russians will try to force the blockade with or without the use of submarines; in this case, the situation will rapidly escalate to a massive attack against Cuba.

It is more likely that the Russians will try to force the United States to fire the first shot, which would allow them to respond elsewhere: Berlin? Quemoy? South-East Asia? Korea? Or maybe all these locations at the same time.

Moreover, the Russians will not fail to launch a massive propaganda campaign, especially towards the neutral countries - Africans or Asians - in order to push their public opinions to call on their governments to pressure the United States.

It is with this perspective in mind that the Secretary of State will speak tomorrow to the Organization of American States, in view of guaranteeing Latin American moral support for the United States. Furthermore, the main Latin American governments have been warned about the risks that riots could break out in their countries, and they have been promised that American forces could be put at their disposal to put down these riots.

In addition, M. [Adlai E.] Stevenson will refer matters to the United Nations Security Council in order to pass a resolution condemning Soviet policy in Cuba. M. Acheson pointed out that in his mind this was a "prophylactic" step, whose sole outcome could be to prevent the Russians from taking the initiative.

In concrete terms, planning for a possible extension of the operations in Cuba, the American air forces are in a state of alert, the navy is mobilized to organize the blockade, and important army units are ready to intervene.

What goal is M. Khrushchev pursuing in Cuba? First, it is likely that he is trying to use this affair to force the United States to pay elsewhere for a favorable evolution of the situation in the Caribbean.

Second, we have to clearly admit that the direct Soviet threat against the United States has become seriously more acute with the installation in Cuba of maybe up to 36 M(edium) R(ange) B(allistic) M(issiles), with a range of 1,100 miles or more.

There is also a political goal: weakening the morale of the Western hemisphere. Finally, diplomatically, M. Khrushchev has given himself the option to say: "let us talk about removing all military bases on foreign territories."

M. Acheson added that the clues on this growing offensive potential on Cuba are barely a week old: the first worrying pictures were taken on 12 October, and the following pictures two days later. Many pictures have been taken since then, and in the last three or four days, we have the feeling of seeing the situation as it is.

General de Gaulle carefully read President Kennedy's letter and what he was showed of his speech; he listened to what M. Acheson said with the same attention. It seems that for the first time, the United States are directly threatened, since the missiles that were spotted can only be targeting the United States. President Kennedy wants to react immediately. France cannot object, since it is normal for a country to defend itself, even with preventive measures, once it is threatened and it has the means to defend itself.

The planned measure is a blockade. How effective will it be? It is hard to say: will it be unbearable enough to push the Cubans to remove the missiles that are already installed? In any case, it should prevent any new weapons from arriving.

General de Gaulle cannot appreciate the result of a presentation in front of the Organization of American States: how will these states react? It is normal in any case that the United States consult them.

As for the Security Council, a referral is in line with American policy. For his part, the General sees no practical value as there will be debates, discussions, and nothing else. The only positive fact remains the blockade.

If there is a blockade - and once again France is not objecting as the United States are threatened - the Soviets will react. Maybe they will react in Cuba, more likely they will do so elsewhere and in particular in Berlin.

If they blockade Berlin, the three responsible powers will have to take the needed measures. Counter-measures have been planned. They will have to be implemented. It is possible that there is also among the Soviets - and maybe even in the United States - a desire to relax the situation in order to clarify it through talks, and quite likely high level talks between M. Khrushchev and M. Kennedy. Those could focus on Cuba and Berlin. Khrushchev is surely thinking about this, maybe M. Kennedy as well.

As for France, if a crisis breaks out in Berlin, it will act in concert with its partners, especially if there is a war. General de Gaulle does not think there will be a war, but there could be difficult moments with threats and counter-threats, which is a pity, because this will increase tension.

He appreciates M. Kennedy's message, even though it is a notification and not a consultation, since the decision has already been taken. He will respond. It seems essential to maintain a close contact in Washington through [French Ambassador in Washington] M. [Herve] Alphand, whom he trusts completely, and soon in Paris where [the new US Ambassador] M. [Charles] Bohlen is expected.³

Two CIA representatives were then brought in. They showed the General maps and photographs that highlighted on the one hand the installation, spotted since early August, of defensive equipment (including some MiG 21s), and on the other hand, the transport and then the installation of the Ilyushin 28, capable of carrying nuclear missiles, and especially MRBMs with a range of 1,100 to 2,200 miles. Four and maybe eight of these missiles seem ready to be launched; the activation of the others will take place by the end of the year, when 36 missiles would be ready to be fired, with each ramp having the possibility of a second launch four to six hours later.

Based on the studies that claim that the USSR has 70 I(nter) C(ontinental) B(allistic) M(issiles) [that] are operational [and can reach] the United States, the installation in Cuba could improve by 50% the arsenal aimed towards the United States.

This last point is underlined by M. Acheson when the meeting resumes.

General de Gaulle believes that M. Khrushchev has planned a vast maneuver around Cuba that could allow for talks on military bases as well as Berlin, that could lead to direct Russo-American talks and which could impress the Latin American states. This is a serious affair, since the United States had guaranteed Europe's defense to prevent Europe from becoming an anti-American base, and now such a base exists in America.

After hearing that the only three governments which received such notice were the French, British and [West] German governments, General de Gaulle asked M. Acheson, who is returning to Washington tomorrow, to transmit his regards to the President of the United States.

[1] Dean Acheson was sent by President Kennedy on a secret mission to inform General de Gaulle in advance of the measures that the United States was planning to take towards Cuba

[2] In this letter, President Kennedy explained that the Americans had evidence that the Soviets had built military bases for offensive rockets and added: "I do not need to draw your attention to the possible consequences that this dangerous Soviet initiative ... could have on the situation in Berlin."

[3] Bohlen was about to succeed General James M. Gavin as the American Ambassador in Paris.