

November 10, 1962

**M. Couve de Murville to French Diplomatic Posts,
Circular Telegram No. 96**

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Summary:

A circulating telegram to French diplomats outlining the origins and meaning of the Cuban crisis, the unfolding and events of the crisis, and the consequences of the crisis.

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Circular Telegram number 96[1]
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Very Secret

You will find below some remarks from the Department on the main aspects of the Cuban crisis.

I. Origins and meaning of the Crisis

Everyone admits that the Soviets miscalculated. It remains hard to define their real aim. Many facts are still unknown. We ignore whether the Soviet military reinforcement to Cuba was in response to a Cuban demand or a Soviet initiative. We do not know whether the works were kept hidden until early October and then hurriedly led into the open, or if they were always led without great precaution. We know nothing of the discussions that could have taken place in the USSR, the only hints being the changes in the Soviet high command in the spring of 1962.[2]

Considering these inevitable uncertainties and many others, we can put forward the following hypotheses.

The decision to install medium range missiles in Cuba cannot be solely explained by the desire to defend the island. A strong anti-aerial defense, and if need be a naval defense, would have been sufficient for that end.

These missiles, once installed, would have seriously improved the strategic position of the USSR. The United States could have, certainly, destroyed or neutralized them, but in order to do that, they would have needed to resort to force in a very dangerous context.

The Soviet installation in Cuba was not aiming, it seems, to capture an opportunity to launch a devastating war; the missiles did not sufficiently change the balance of power to allow the destruction of the opponent without any retaliation.

The Soviet bases in Cuba seemed to aim, first and foremost, to improve the political and military situation of the USSR, either in view of a great debate with the United States, or for a more precise objective, such as Berlin.

What remains striking is that this initiative, with such high stakes, was led in such a cavalier fashion. One cannot understand, in particular, why no potential maneuver was ever planned, a case where the United States reacted. One cannot understand why the very clear warnings of President Kennedy in September were ignored. One cannot understand why the experience of Berlin, especially during the air corridor affair of February-March 1962, was not put to good use.

If, despite all these uncertainties, we try to make a judgment, we can say that the Soviet leaders, through a complete psychological misreading of the situation, tried to gain a trump card for a policy of claims and movement, if not of expansion. That essential fact, hidden by the current amenable words of M. Khrushchev, inspires reflection. Ten years after the death of Stalin, the Soviet Union, while negotiating with the United States and claiming to pursue a policy of peace, took an enormous risk in order to weaken American positions, and with that those of the West as a whole, in view of pursuing a new initiative, either in Europe, the Americas, or elsewhere. To those who, for a long time, have claimed that the Soviet Union has traded its old military threats with political and economic challenges, the Cuban crisis provided a strong rebuke. The political-economic challenge complements the military threat. It is not a substitute.

II. The Unfolding of the Crisis

Some observations can be made already.

The decision of the American government to establish a blockade and to avoid, at least in the initial phase, a direct confrontation with the USSR through a surprise attack against the bases, is inspired by the strategic doctrine of flexible response. The blockade was merely the symbol of American will. Behind the blockade lay the threat of a bombing attack, which became more and more likely as days went by. The two key elements of deterrence were combined in the American attitude in Cuba, that is to say incrementalism and continuity. By taking calculated risks, the American leaders sent a clear 'message' to Moscow. No doubt the current administration will reach conclusions that reinforce its belief that the nuclear game is only possible with a minimum number of actors. Even though it is too early to draw all the lessons from this crisis, we can note in any case that in Cuba, the advantages were on the side of the government which, via a 'conventional' initiative (bombing attack or invasion), would have placed the opponent in a position of choosing between a nuclear response or a collapse. These considerations cannot be systematically applied to other situations or theaters.

The Soviet government clearly showed that, in a situation where the other camp has the initiative and events are moving fast, it loses some of its confidence. Soviet diplomatic action struggled to follow the train of events. So M. [Valerian] Zorin [Soviet permanent representative at the UN] was visibly surprised by the question of M. [Adlai] Stevenson during the Security Council debate. M. Khrushchev contradicted himself in his correspondence with M. Kennedy. He did not consult with Castro. He had not informed his communist allies.

More importantly, the Russians proved incapable of 'horse-trading' their withdrawal. The American promise not to invade, regardless of its value, is only a promise, while the missiles are already on the boats. At no time, with the exception of the unexplainable Turkish episode[3], did Moscow try to trade. Berlin was not mentioned. On the 11th of September, however, in the communique announcing the sending of weapons to Cuba, Berlin had been mentioned several times. It is at this moment that a delay of two months had been granted by M. Khrushchev. All of this indicates that between the 24 and 28 of October, the Soviet leaders improvised when facing the threat of nuclear war. The telegram number 4244 of M. [Geoffroy Chodron] de Courcel [French Ambassador in London], sent on 7th November, provides an interesting detail on this point.[4]

Vis-à-vis its allies, the United States government only kept us informed. As the crisis accelerated, it kept us in the loop. It remains that, if as was feared for a while, the USSR had created even minor difficulties in Berlin, the Alliance would have faced far greater strains than it did. It thus appears that political consultation among the fifteen [NATO] members is a tool that does not work well at all.

Vis-à-vis the United Nations, the United States government, while clearly stating that it would not be deterred from its actions, was careful not to hurt the pride either of the organization or of the non-aligned world. It clearly showed that it considered the acting Secretary General [U Thant] a useful tool for communication and dialogue, as long as his action took place within a clearly defined framework.

Giving U Thant this both secondary and useful role, and the fact that the Third World delegates may have viewed the Burmese diplomat as their representative in the crisis, helped avoid the United States some embarrassing difficulties with the non-aligned powers.

Combined with China's invasion of India, the Soviet action in Cuba profoundly shocked the non-aligned world. Castro was treated as dispensable. The USSR revealed how it views smaller countries. These episodes will have profound consequences which do not seem to have been analyzed in Moscow.

III. Consequences

The agreement is not complete. The missiles are being sent back to the USSR, under American naval surveillance. Soviet ships going to Cuba are inspected by the Red Cross, acting under United Nations authority. This inspection will likely not last long. As to the installations in Cuba, the Cubans are opposed to their inspection, and we can imagine that M. [Anastas] Mikoyan is butting heads with Castro on this point. The United States will thus maintain their aerial surveillance and their 'quarantine.' New incidents can occur. As a whole, however, the affair is ending with a clear success for the United States; for the Russians, this is a setback; as for the Cubans, this leaves them in a precarious situation.

The Organization of the American States was strengthened, the Atlantic Alliance was reassured, American prestige has increased, even though the legal basis of the American action was greatly criticized at the beginning.

The 'socialist' camp, on the other hand, faces a new crisis. The dogmatic Chinese, the Albanians and others, are unhappy. The leaders of the European satellite states are relieved, but there again, some criticisms are emerging, especially in Bulgaria. These troubles do not visibly alter M. Khrushchev's position. In fact, he still seems to dispose of a great margin of action to withdraw. The way in which he caved to American will leads one to think that in other crises where the stakes are less high for both parties, M. Khrushchev will also dispose of a certain freedom of action.

Khrushchev's situation in the USSR does not seem weakened for the moment. We noted no signs of discord during the 7th November celebrations. It is true that in the USSR, internal crises only emerge slowly. Without more precise information, we can attribute little value to the explanations according to which Khrushchev became dragged into this adventure reluctantly, or even ignored part of its unfolding. These rumors are too much in the current interests of the First Secretary to be seen as credible. It seems more realistic to us to leave Khrushchev with his responsibilities in this affair and its outcome.

At the current time, the Soviet leaders do not seem to want to start a new crisis. On the 7th November, they spoke moderately on Berlin.[5] In India, they are trying to favor a compromise; there remains the disarmament domain. In the exchange of letters between M. Kennedy and M. Khrushchev[6], they mentioned not only an agreement on banning nuclear tests, but also 'a more general entente relating to other weapons categories,' 'the relations between NATO and the Warsaw Pact,' 'larger questions on European and global security,' 'the problem of disarmament on a global scale and in certain regions where the situation is critical,' and 'the proliferation of nuclear weapons on earth and in space.' M. Khrushchev has underlined that coexistence demanded 'reciprocated concessions.' The Soviet leaders seem to be moving towards new talks.

If we can make a first assessment of these events, we are inclined to think that the Western powers have an interest in not rushing to have these talks. Indeed, it seems that the Russians, during 1962, under-estimated the United States' capacity to retaliate. If, once the crisis is over, Moscow is offered vast options for negotiation, these illusions might resurface. We must, moreover, be conscious of the role that strategic considerations have played and play for the Soviet leaders. The current period should be used to draw common conclusions from this crisis. Future problems can then be considered, noticeably during the meetings in Paris in mid-December.[7]

[1] This circular telegram was sent by courier to the posts in Abidjan, Bangui, Brazzaville, Buenos-Aires, Cotonou, Fort-Lamy (now N'Djamena), Libreville, Luxembourg, New Delhi, Niamey, Nouakchott, Ouagadougou, Rio de Janeiro, Tananarive (now Antananarivo), Tokyo, Yaoundé, and to the French permanent

representative to NATO. It was also sent to the posts in Belgrade, Bern, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dakar, The Hague, London, Madrid, Moscow, New York, Oslo, Ottawa, Rabat, Rome, Tunis, Warsaw, Vienna, Washington.

[2] On 28th April, a decree from the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet promoted a certain number of high officers and created a title of admiral of the navy, awarded to Admiral Sergei Gorghkov. On 21st May, General Alexei Epichev was named as the head of the central political administration of the Soviet armed forces.

[3] Reference to the trade proposed by Khrushchev: the withdrawal of missiles in Turkey in exchange for the withdrawal of those in Cuba.

[4] With his telegram number 4244 on the 7th of November, the French Ambassador in London mentioned a meeting between Lord Alec Douglas-Home [British Foreign Secretary] and the Soviet charge d'affaires on the 25th October. The Foreign Secretary told his interlocutor that no proposal from Moscow was likely to be accepted in Washington as long as the decision had not been taken to stop the works in Cuba and to proceed with the dismantling of the installations that had already been set up. The Foreign Office believed that the Soviet diplomat had received instructions to convince the British government to act as a mediator and propose a meeting between Khrushchev and Kennedy. Faced with the attitudes of Douglas-Home, who had stuck to the question of the nuclear weapons in Cuba, his interlocutor had given up on fulfilling his instructions.

[5] On 7 November, during a reception in the Kremlin, Khrushchev declared in regard to the international situation: "We live on the basis of mutual concessions. If we want peace, we will have to base peaceful relations on the basis of acceptable mutual concessions." Mentioning the Cuban affair, he had acknowledged: "We were very close to a thermonuclear war." He did not believe that a summit conference was needed for the moment.

[6] On 28th October, the letters essentially addressed the Cuban affair.

[7] This is a reference to the NATO ministerial session, which is scheduled to take place in Paris on 13-15th December.