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The Italian Foreign Ministry assesses the causes and consequences of the crisis (December 1962) [From a background paper prepared for the Italian Delegation at the December 1962 meeting of the North Atlantic Council]

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Summary:

An assessment by the Italian Foreign Ministry of the Cuban Missile Crisis - the international situation, the events that transpired and the lessons that can be learned from them.

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[...] Point 1. Analysis of the international situation.

□□□ Trends of Soviet policy

□□

The Cuban Crisis

□ The motivations that pushed the Soviet leaders to the Cuban adventure probably have their roots in the fact that by 1962 they had come to share the Western assessment of the strategic nuclear balance of power between the blocs: that is, that the balance is favorable to the West.

□ To re-balance the situation, the Russians had two options:

□□□ overcome the Americans in the production of ICBMs and SLBMs based on submarines: a slow and expensive way for which the Soviet economy has less resources than the American one

. To deploy IRBM launching pads next to the American territory.

□□

□ Cuba seemed to offer the conditions required to adopt the second option. If the initiative had succeeded, the Soviet opportunities for an initial atomic strike would have grown so much as to reduce considerably the American capacity to retaliate, and with it, the effectiveness of the "deterrent."

□ It is also possible that Khrushchev intended to use the bases in Cuba for a trade-off against Berlin in the next few months.

□ The critical mistake the Soviets made in their calculation was about the American reaction, which turned out to be much different and much sterner than they had foreseen.

□ The Russians realized immediately that an American air strike against the bases in Cuba, with the consequent loss of Soviet lives, or an American landing, with the overthrowing of Castro's regime, would have left them with no other choice between a nuclear war-which they are not willing to face-and accepting a defeat much worse than the withdrawal of the missiles.

□ By accepting the latter, the Russians have actually decided to cut their losses. (The Soviet attempt to obtain in return the removal of the Turkish bases was promptly withdrawn, thanks to the American firmness.)

□ The fact that the Soviets gave in, however, must be interpreted as a withdrawal but not as a weakening or a substantial change in their military posture or political intentions. (And even the withdrawal was skillfully used by the Russians, stressing its peaceful nature.)

□ Furthermore, if it is true that the Cuban crisis has confirmed the role attributed to conventional weapons by Atlantic strategy, as the timing of the American actions was clearly based on the possible use of these weapons, it is also true that in other areas a conventional balance of power might as well turn out to be more favorable to the Russians. Hence the need not to draw any general conclusions about the Soviet attitude.

□ The situation of Soviet inferiority in terms of strategic nuclear weapons, which was at the origin of the Cuban affair, has not been modified. In order to get out of this situation, therefore, we must expect the Russians to step up their defense program, which as a consequence will produce a worsening of the population's economic conditions. In the meantime, the Soviet government will probably continue to negotiate partial disarmament measures in order to gain time, but without searching

for a real and definitive détente in its relationship with the West.

□ The domestic consequences of the Cuban issue inside Russia seem to be rather modest, if there are any at all. Khrushchev seems to be in full control of the situation without the need to adopt any specific measure against old and new opponents. Even the position of the USSR as the leader of the satellite countries does not seem to have been shaken after Cuba, as demonstrated by Khrushchev's convocation of all the leaders of those countries in order to impose his own leadership and break any possible resistance (see the energetic purge in Bulgaria).

□ In the Sino-Soviet context, on the contrary, Khrushchev's redeployment in the Caribbean has reinvigorated the diatribes between the two countries, even if a break such as the one with Albania does not necessarily seem imminent.

□ In conclusion, the Cuban affair has demonstrated □□□ the audacity and the unscrupulousness of the Soviet Prime Minister, as well as his self-control and his exceptional speed in recovering

. The possibility that the Russians might drop their customary caution if the prize at stake seems to them a large one and if they overrate their chances of success

. That world peace and security are indivisible and that any crisis hotbed, even outside of the NATO area, has immediate repercussions in the area of Atlantic commitments: hence the necessity to strengthen the consultations inside NATO in order to focus on those potential hotbeds

. The necessity for the West to adopt a firm and united stand in time of an emergency

. The serious danger for peace at any time when one tries to alter the balance between the blocs: which confirms the validity of the Western position on a gradual and balanced disarmament.

□□

[...]