February 21, 1962

Research Memorandum RSB-58 from Roger Hilsman to the Secretary, 'Probable Soviet Reaction to Establishment of Multilateral NATO-Controlled MRBM Force'

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Summary:

As discussion of a NATO multilateral force (MLF) unfolded, unfolded, one question which had to be addressed was how the Soviet Union would respond to the creation of such a NATO force. Because a NATO force would increase Western military capabilities, Soviet opposition was assumed.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

Research Memorandum
RSB-58, February 21, 1962

TO : The Secretary
THROUGH: S/S
FROM : INR - Roger Hilsman

SUBJECT: Probable Soviet Reaction to Establishment of Multilateral NATO-Controlled MRBM Force

In response to a request from Under Secretary McGhee's office, we have prepared a brief estimate of probable Soviet reactions to the establishment of a multilateral, NATO-controlled MRBM force. Our findings are based on the assumptions noted below.

I. ASSUMPTIONS

For purposes of this paper, it is assumed the force would be entirely seaborne, of Polaris and/or surface vessels; that the Soviet Union becomes aware of moves looking to establishment of the force gradually; and that these moves include the US allowing greater NATO participation in decisions about the deployment of US nuclear forces, a decision to commit some US external forces to NATO, and NATO progress toward a multilaterally controlled, and owned, force.

II. DISCUSSION

Propaganda

Soviet propaganda treatment of the series of announcements and news stories in the course of the negotiation and implementation of the agreement are likely to follow traditional lines. Bloc propagandists will doubtless picture each step in the process as a move to increase tension which is detrimental to the prospects for disarmament and better East-West relations. The bloc can be expected to repeat charges that the NATO nuclear force is a device to provide nuclear weapons to West German "militarists" and "revanchists," renewing its catalogue of charges about former Nazis in high places and playing upon lingering anti-German sentiment in Europe.

Political Moves

A number of Soviet political actions may be pursued with greater vigor in response to the process of creating a NATO nuclear force. The USSR is already pressing disarmament proposals for a ban on transfer of nuclear weapons not only to individual nations but also to "alliances," for creation of atom-free zones, and for an agreement banning the use (or the first use) of nuclear weapons. There are currently hints that the Soviet Union may be preparing a disarmament package combining European security proposals with proposals on transfer or use of nuclear weapons, and a broad-ranging proposal for a general European settlement -- whether it is or is not intended to serve as the basis for an agreement, it might play a role in Soviet efforts to inhibit the creation of a NATO nuclear force.

In addition the Soviets can be expected to use or step up pressures and threats in various areas. For example, stepped up threats can be expected against countries where bases for the nuclear surface or submarine fleet are located. Local communists will certainly take advantage of opportunities for pacificist demonstrations against the bases.

Moreover, the Soviet Union will probably intensify its efforts at splitting the Western alliance, and demarches such as the December 27, 1961, memorandum to the Federal Republic are likely to be more frequent.

Military

The creation of a Polaris or surface seaborne MRBM force is not likely to lead the Soviets to believe that the West is preparing to initiate a strategic attack. The Soviets presumably base their views of Western military intentions on several indicators rather than merely on the deployment of one weapons system. Moreover, in this case, the buildup is likely to be gradual and well-known to the Soviets (through intelligence and the publicity attendant upon the building, commissioning, etc. of the vessels).

In more general military terms, Soviet planners are no doubt attempting, as best they can, to anticipate the appearance of increasing numbers of US Polaris submarines. In calculations of purely military capabilities it will make no difference to them whether these weapons systems appear as a unilateral US force or as a NATO one; the destructive capacity possessed by the systems will be the same either way.

However, the impact upon Soviet military thinking may be enhanced if the deployment of the force is specifically committed to the defense of Europe (even though such a commitment might in practice even lessen the flexibility of the force). Traditionally, Soviet military planning and the structure of the Soviet military establishment has emphasized a possible war

on the European continent; this has remained true despite the advent and political exploitation of Soviet intercontinental strike capability. A NATO force, to a greater extent than a purely US one, would underscore the fact that the Soviet concept of Western Europe as a "hostage" would have diminished validity.

But whether the force is NATO or US, its net effect would be to add materially to Western strength, and unless the Soviet Union can offset this effect, it will find the credibility of its military threats reduced.

A Comparable Warsaw Pact Force?

One possible Soviet reaction to the creation of the NATO MRBM force might be the creation of a counterpart in the framework of the Warsaw Pact. However, it is unlikely that the Soviet Union would in fact give Warsaw Pact members a veto over the use of Soviet missiles, and the Soviet Union would doubtless refrain from giving any of them the right to fire missiles on their own initiative. Hence, if a Warsaw Pact MRBM force is created, it will be largely a formality (some measure of joint planning and training might be carried out). A Warsaw Pact force would serve as a bargaining counter for possible proposals of the mutual abolition of both NATO and Warsaw-Pact forces.

NATO vs. West German Control

Soviet fear of West Germany, though exaggerated for propaganda purposes, appears to be genuine. Once the USSR accepts the fact of an extensive MRBM force committed to the defense of Europe, it will probably prefer NATO control (with a US veto) to independent national forces. While this consideration is not likely to prevent the Soviet Union from doing all that it can to prevent the creation of a NATO force, it probably will facilitate Soviet acceptance of the arrangement once it is created as the better of two undesirable alternatives.

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