

'Understanding' Bars Cuba Base

Part 11/18/70

The State Department officially confirmed yesterday that a U.S.-Soviet "understanding" was reached in private talks that is designed to bar the use of Cuba as a Soviet nuclear submarine base.

This "understanding," the Nixon administration believes, also precludes the Soviet Union from helping

Cuba to construct a base that the Russians might use for "offensive weapons," said State Department spokesman Robert J. McCloskey.

In return, the United States has assured the Soviet Union that it has no intention to "invade or intervene" in Cuba, McCloskey said.

Soviet vessels still in the Cuban harbor of Cienfuegos will continue to be "surveyed carefully" by U.S. reconnaissance, said McCloskey. These vessels, other officials have said, include a submarine tender and tug and two barges that could repair and service nuclear submarines.

When asked if these Soviet vessels' presence constitutes "a violation of the understanding," McCloskey replied: "My judgment would be that it does not, but it requires careful and close scrutiny, which it is getting."

These statements provided the first on-the-record official account of any details of the current "understanding" between the Nixon administration and the Soviet Union on Cuba.

It remains to be seen whether the Soviet Union agrees with the U.S. public interpretation of the "understanding," which expands upon a previous "understanding" dating from the 1962 crisis during the Kennedy administration over Soviet land-based missiles in Cuba.

On Sept. 25 the White House sounded a public alarm about the possible establishment of a forward base for Soviet nuclear missile submarines in Cuba. The administration originally had hoped the problem would be resolved with the issuance of a statement by the Soviet news agency, Tass,

on Oct. 13, after secret U.S.-Soviet talks.

In that statement, Tass said that "the Soviet Union has not built and is not building its military base on Cuba and is not doing anything that would contradict the understanding reached between the governments of the U.S.S.R. and the United States in 1962."

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But Tass emphasized Soviet right under international law for Russians vessels to "enter ports of foreign states, including ports of the Republic of Cuba, on official visits and business calls . . ."

Some skeptics, inside and outside the government, questioned the actual scope of the disavowal, however, noting the Soviet reference to "its" base and Soviet reiteration that there are no "Soviet" military bases overseas anywhere.

One reason for yesterday's statement was to assert, as McCloskey put it, that "There is no difference of view within the administration on this subject." But it also appeared that a larger purpose was to pin down the "understanding" on the public record, and help enforce compliance with it.

McCloskey said, "This administration is confident that in light of public statements that have been made and which have been referred to, there is an understanding between the two governments."

He acknowledged that "there is no document of record in writing, affirming this statement," but said "there have

been contacts on this subject in the present context." When asked if there were five secret exchanges, as reported by the Los Angeles Times, McCloskey replied: "I can't confirm or deny reports of that number of meetings."

State Department officials said the United States received what can be described as assurances in these private exchanges.

Asked to define the "understandings," McCloskey replied, "Well, if the question is, 'Does this mean that the United States will not invade or intervene in Cuba' the answer is we have no plans for invading Cuba."

"On the other leg of it," he continued, "Does this mean that the Soviet cannot introduce offensive weapons and construct bases for such weapons?" The answer is yes."

When asked if it is the U.S. "belief" that the understanding "precludes Soviet help to the Cuban government in establishing a base which the Soviets might be able to use for offensive weapons" McCloskey also replied "yes."

Until last Friday, it had been the State Department's official position, since 1962, that there was no "understanding" binding on the United States from the Cuban missile crisis of that year, because the Soviet Union, and Cuba, never

complied with the U.S. call for "on-site" inspection of Soviet land missiles removed from Cuba. In fact, the United States had abided by the "understanding" anyhow, by discouraging attempts to mount a Cuban invasion from this country.

McCloskey acknowledged yesterday that the U.S. on-site inspection requirement for fulfillment of the original "understanding" became, in effect, a dead issue because the removal of the Soviet missiles was observed at sea. McCloskey said "we do that now (inspect) and have done it since then by our own surveillance."

He also said that Cuba was not a participant in the recent private meetings between the United States and the Soviet Union.