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*Roger Hilsman*

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Secretary  
THROUGH: S/S  
FROM: INR - Roger Hilsman

SUBJECT: Soviet/Cuban Reactions to US Retaliation  
for Attack on US Reconnaissance Aircraft

We have examined likely Soviet and Cuban reactions to possible actions undertaken in retaliation for a Communist attack upon a US reconnaissance aircraft over Cuba. Bearing in mind Castro's November 15 threat (in his letter to U Thant) to take violent countermeasures against intruding US aircraft, we conclude the following:

- 1) Attack on US reconnaissance aircraft under present circumstances unlikely in view of the high degree of Soviet control over the Cuban defense system;
- 2) Soviet SAM attack against U-2's is improbable;
- 3) Independent Cuban attack against low-flying aircraft is possible;
- 4) Probable uncertainty as to responsibility for any attack and

exploitable differences between the Soviets and Cubans suggest the desirability of tailoring US assertions of responsibility to the circumstances of the incident.

Who Operates the Cuban Air Defense System?

There is strong evidence that overall control of the Cuban air defense system is in Soviet hands and that the SAM sites (most effective against high-flying aircraft) are Soviet manned. Anti-aircraft artillery (effective against aircraft at lower altitudes) could be in either Cuban or Soviet hands

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but we believe the bulk of such weapons are Cuban operated.

Cuban or Soviet Responsibility?

If we are correct in believing the main Cuban air defense system to be under Soviet control, any attack launched by that system might logically be considered as Soviet instigated. In any case, it was clearly the Soviets who provided the weapons and created the situation in which reconnaissance was necessary and thus subject to interdiction. In the actual case of an attack (particularly a successful attack) on a US reconnaissance aircraft, however, responsibility may be less than clear.

If a U-2 were shot down from high altitude, we could assume that a Soviet-manned SAM was responsible, but we might not be able to exclude the possibility that a Cuban-piloted MIG-21 had zoomed upward and downed the aircraft. Who had manned conventional anti-aircraft artillery which downed a lower flying aircraft would be equally ambiguous, but the weight of presumption would rest with Cuban responsibility. Another possibility would be the accidental crash in Cuba of a US aircraft with the US unable to determine whether accident or enemy action was the cause.

In sum, uncertainty may well characterize our assessment of who or what was responsible for the loss of a US reconnaissance plane over Cuba. It is, therefore, not unlikely that we may, in justifying retaliation, have considerable freedom of choice in selecting the responsible party--the Cubans, the Russians, or both.

Are the Cubans and Soviets in Agreement?

Castro's assertion that intruding US reconnaissance aircraft will

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risk destruction does not have explicit Soviet endorsement. While there is ample reason for the Cubans to be annoyed by continued US surveillance and for the Soviets to wish to support the Cubans in efforts to stop it, we believe it on the whole unlikely that Moscow would wish to face the risks of deterioration in the Cuban situation which would ensue from violent measures to end such surveillance. In his statement, in fact, Castro even suggests the unilateral nature of his threat by tying it to intruding aircraft "within the reach of our anti-aircraft," which suggests he was not including SAMs. It thus seems likely that for the time being, at least, the Cubans and the Soviets are not in agreement on the desirability of firing on US reconnaissance aircraft. This implies that Cuban words may not foreshadow Cuban actions, particularly in view of the probable high degree of Soviet control over the Cuban air defense system. Maverick Cuban action against low flying aircraft cannot, of course, be excluded.

#### Reaction to US Retaliation

For the purpose of analysis we assume that the US accepts the principle of limited retaliation appropriate to the offense (e.g., elimination of a SAM site in response to destruction of a US aircraft by a SAM). We further assume that the USSR will be willing to run even fewer risks in defense of its present military installations in Cuba than it was willing to face over its surface-to-surface missile sites. We, therefore, do not believe there is any great risk of triggering a Soviet military reaction, within or without

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the Cuban context, even if Soviet personnel are killed in our retaliatory action.

Under these circumstances Soviet and Cuban reactions to possible US retaliation can be described as follows:

1. Reaction to verbal protest against unsuccessful attack on US reconnaissance aircraft.

A warning to the Soviets and to the Cubans that we would, if another effort were made to shoot down a US reconnaissance aircraft, retaliate immediately would give both of them cause to reconsider their courses of action. If we are correct in believing that the Soviets would not at this time wish to exacerbate the Cuban crisis and, therefore, would not endorse or carry out the attack, it is likely that Moscow would exert what pressure it could on the Cubans to resist from any further such actions. Whether or not we asserted Soviet as opposed to Cuban responsibility would not in this case basically affect the Soviet response although ambiguity on our part or assertion of Cuban responsibility could enable Moscow to avoid more gracefully a rise in US-Soviet tensions. As far as the Cubans are concerned, the protest and warning might induce some slightly greater degree of caution in their behavior although the original decision to attack would already have demonstrated some disregard for risk. Castro might calculate that a heightening of US-Soviet tension over the surveillance issue might work to his advantage in terms of ultimate arrangements between Cuba and the USSR as well as between the Communist side and the US. He would probably be eager to claim "credit" for the attack.

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The Soviets would be faced with the distasteful necessity of creating Soviet-Cuban ill-will to the extent they criticized the Cuban action.

2. Reaction to Specific Retaliation as a Result of Destruction of a Low-Flying US Reconnaissance Aircraft.

We assume that the specific action of retaliation would involve destruction of a Cuban anti-aircraft artillery complex or of hostile aircraft. Such action might or might not be accompanied by warnings to both Moscow and Havana against repetition of the incident. In turn the warnings might or might not specify responsibility for the original attack despite our belief the Cubans would most probably be responsible.

If our analysis is correct, it is likely that the object destroyed in Cuba would be Cuban-manned, although the possibility that some Soviets might also be done away with cannot be excluded. In this case the Soviets would protest violently against the "piratical US action," but at the same time would be likely to use their influence with the Cubans to prevent a further incident even if we kept flying.

As in the case of an unsuccessful attack, a US warning to Moscow and Havana against repetition of the attack would provide Moscow with greater flexibility of action and would be more likely adversely to affect Soviet-Cuban relations if Cuban responsibility were asserted. The Cubans would hope for Moscow's full support and would be annoyed to the extent they failed to get it or were pressured by the Soviets to cease their attacks.

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A US failure to specify responsibility in the warning would achieve about the same results in terms of Soviet-Cuban relations and, at the same time, would imply some Soviet responsibility. In this sense, ambiguity might usefully offer greater inducement to the Kremlin to exert pressure on Castro despite whatever ill effects this might have on Soviet-Cuban relations.

A US retaliatory action unaccompanied by warnings to Moscow and Havana might have much the same practical effect but would obviously be less controllable in terms of interpretation by either the Soviets or the Cubans.

3. Reaction to Specific Retaliation as a Result of Destruction of a US Surveillance Aircraft by a SAM.

Destruction of the offending SAM site would almost certainly be the most critical retaliatory action (short of invasion) we might take if we are correct in believing the SAM sites are Soviet manned. The original attack on a US aircraft almost certainly would have been ordered by Moscow and would represent a Soviet decision to increase deliberately the degree of US-Soviet confrontation.

At the same time the lack of Soviet desire to engage in strategically unfavorable escalation in the Cuban area (clearly demonstrated by Khrushchev's decision to withdraw his missiles) makes it probable that any such Soviet decision would have very limited objectives. Moscow might feel that shooting down one US aircraft over Cuba would, despite an expected but

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limited US retaliation, serve to underline the dangerous nature of US insistence on overflying "sovereign" Cuba and thus to build political pressures in the UN and elsewhere which might force cessation of surveillance. Such an incident might also seem to the Kremlin to be persuasive to Castro as a demonstration of continuing Soviet support.

Under these circumstances a US warning to the Communists against repetition of the act which placed responsibility on the Cubans would probably be helpful to Moscow in attaining its ends. Castro would not be loath to accept responsibility and would presumably believe he had a high degree of Soviet support. On the other hand, a US warning which stated Soviet responsibility (or even joint Soviet-Cuban responsibility) would be less useful from Moscow's point of view. The Soviets would probably believe that their limited political objectives (inducing the US to stop surveillance) were hampered to the extent that the US successfully described retaliation as something other than US aggression against a small neighbor.

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In the unlikely event that a Soviet decision to interdict US reconnaissance was intended to protect some new Soviet attempt to build up an offensive capability in Cuba, the probability of Moscow's running greater risks of escalating incidents would obviously increase.

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