

The Next Cuba Crisis: 1981

By Walter Pincus

IF HISTORY is any guide, the next attempt by the Soviet Union to expand its military operations in Cuba will take place in 1981, when the U.S. presidential election is over and the victorious candidate sworn into office.

The recent mini-crisis over the so-called Soviet combat brigade blurred what actually has been taking place in Cuba over the past 10 years. Having failed in 1962 to turn Cuba instantly into a nuclear missile base, the Soviets in 1969 began slowly and with great patience to build Castro's island into the type of military asset — 90 miles off the U.S. coast — that their military men have always wanted.

For a model, these Soviet marshals had only to look at the ring of American military bases and facilities that for more than 20 years have encircled Russia. Located in more than a half-dozen countries near or on the Soviet border, these so-called forward bases gave the Pentagon advantages in intelligence collection and nuclear submarine servicing capabilities as well as providing a home for short-range aircraft that sit on runways only a few hundred miles from Soviet targets, loaded with U.S. nuclear bombs.

Castro's takeover of Cuba in 1959, Soviet leaders have said, provided the opportunity for the Kremlin to give us a taste of our own military medicine.

Moscow also may have used it as a means to test American leaders, for the key moves to build up Cuba as a Soviet forward base were all set in motion shortly after the inauguration of new American presidents — John F. Kennedy in 1961, Richard M. Nixon in 1969 and Jimmy Carter in 1977.

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Days after Kennedy took office, the Central Intelligence Agency brought him reports that Soviet military equipment, including Mig jet fighters, were being sent to Castro. It was fear of a buildup of such equipment in Cuba that led the CIA to press Kennedy for quick approval of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, plans which had been drawn up and approved in the Eisenhower administration.

The 1962 missile crisis brought the superpowers to the brink of war. In the aftermath, the Soviets refrained for several years from any activity that appeared to violate the understanding that they would not introduce offensive nuclear weapons into Cuba.

At the same time, however, they began at home a long-term buildup of ships and strategic arms, including submarines to launch nuclear missiles, that guaranteed that some time in the future Cuba would be valuable for them as a forward base.

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It was only months after Nixon had taken office in 1969 that the first Soviet Navy fleet called in Cuba and maneuvered in the Gulf of Mexico. Less than a year later, Soviet long-range TU95 Bear bombers equipped for reconnaissance missions flew into Havana after surveillance of the U.S. East Coast.

In the fall of 1970, the Soviets attempted to establish a nuclear submarine base in Cienfuegos Bay on Cuba's southern coast. The need was simple. North America was a long way from the Soviet submarine home bases; if Cuba could be used as a forward base, the Soviet Navy could keep more submarines on patrol off our East Coast.

At the same time, the United States had sub bases at Holy Loch, Scotland, and Rota, Spain, which enabled us to keep our Polaris missile subs on station. Why couldn't the Soviets do the same?

The Nixon administration correctly diagnosed what was going on and, after private negotiations, forced a halt in the base building on the ground that it violated the 1962 agreement barring introduction of offensive weapons.

The Soviets, however, came out with something. Though they couldn't build a base or service their subs from Cuba, an understanding permitted their warships and submarines to make "port calls" in Cuba.

Though they achieved much less

than they had sought, the Soviets pushed their ship visiting rights as far as they could. After 1970, their warships twice a year carried on maneuvers in the Caribbean and put into Cuban ports. Each year they remained a little longer. By 1978, they were in the area over 80 days and at anchor off Cienfuegos for 65.

Between 1970 and 1974, several types of submarines made visits to Havana or rendezvoused with tenders in other Cuban harbors. None were of the long-range ballistic missile Yankee type that since 1969 cruised in pairs along the U.S. East Coast off Bermuda. But they did include a nuclear-powered cruise missile sub and a diesel short-range ballistic missile sub.

Those missile sub visits in 1972 and 1974 drew no public protest from the Nixon administration and no political clamor was raised in Congress.

There is still a question as to

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whether these submarines carried nuclear missiles. In his new book, Henry Kissinger has written that Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin "was prepared on behalf of his government to affirm that ballistic missile submarines would never call there in an operational capacity." In recent Senate testimony, Chief of Naval Operations Thomas Hayward said it was his understanding that ships or subs carrying nuclear missiles could not call in Cuba. And other sources said U.S. intelligence sensors can determine from the air whether a nuclear device is aboard such vessels.

Supplementing the TU95 aerial reconnaissance program, the Soviets during the Nixon years built an electronic intelligence collection facility in Cuba that could intercept radio and microwaved open-air telephone transmissions from the southeastern part of the U.S.

Russian trawlers, outfitted with sophisticated electronic gear, began to appear off the U.S. Navy's Charleston submarine base and in the waters near Cape Canaveral during U.S. missile test flights. These shipboard intelligence collectors

began to use Cuban ports for servicing, thereby extending the time they could be away from their home ports in Russia.

Thus by the time President Carter took office, Cuba had become a key forward base for Soviet intelligence collection operations and a calling port for warships. But there remained a desire among the Soviet military to make more use of Castro's island.

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In 1977, after the new American president declared — as a good will gesture — that he would stop spy plane overflights of Cuba, construction of navy facilities at Cienfuegos began anew.

This base was not to be the same as the one halted in 1970. It was to be a base for Cuban ships and submarines — and to prove the point it was disclosed in 1978 that the Soviets planned to give Castro at least one aged diesel attack submarine.

Along with the submarine, the Soviets also sent Castro Mig23 aircraft to modernize his fighter-interceptor and fighter-bomber force. The new aircraft caused a flurry of protest within the United States, particularly from critics of the SALT II agreement, because a model of the Mig23 used by Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries carries nuclear bombs.

Sensitized by such outbursts, the Soviets apparently decided to cut back on their more visible Cuba-related operations during 1979 while SALT II was an issue.

This year, for example, TU95 flights have been less than half what they were in 1978 and the one Soviet fleet that entered the Caribbean left without even stopping in Cuba.

The Cienfuegos facility, with a new long pier and other buildings, has been completed and to most intelligence analysts appears larger than necessary for the handling of the one Cuban submarine and training sub now there.

The Soviets are too shrewd, however, to engage in any new Cuba ventures with SALT II still hanging fire and a U.S. presidential election on the horizon. The Carter overreaction to the so-called combat brigade would be only a whimper compared to what could be expected from the president and his political opponents should the Soviets introduce a serious new weapons system to Castro's island.

But once the election is over and a new president sworn in, something is bound to happen.