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17 June 1969
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Effect of the Cuban Missile Crisis
on Soviet Strategic Force Planning

1. In October 1962 the leaders of the USSR were faced by a substantial US superiority in operational intercontinental strategic strike force and the prospect that the margin of superiority probably would continue to grow for at least another two or three years.
2. Earlier--perhaps a year or more before--the Soviet political and military leaders had probably come to the view that the limited capabilities of their intercontinental strategic forces compared with those of the US would, if not redressed, provide the US with a potential first strike capability. Soviet defense planners in making a prudent assessment of the strategic balance had probably concluded that, although the considerable Soviet strategic forces targetted against western Europe provided some measure of deterrence, the USSR would have no assured retaliatory capability with respect to the US until about 1966. By the fall of 1962, the Soviet leaders were also aware that US intelligence collection capabilities ruled out reliance on bluff and bluster.
3. These factors probably caused deep concern in the Kremlin. From the Soviet point of view, the US strategic posture not only posed a serious potential threat to the national security of the USSR, but also severely circumscribed Soviet foreign policy options throughout the world. Khrushchev probably viewed the emplacement in Cuba of strategic systems capable of reaching the US as the quickest way of redressing at least partially the strategic imbalance. Successfully carried out, it could have other immediate political returns as well. Khrushchev's Berlin objectives were probably closely intertwined with the over-all strategic goals.

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4. The confrontation with US strategic power in the Cuban crisis probably confirmed the Soviet belief that anything less than a rough strategic equality with the US would leave them vulnerable both politically and militarily. Apparently the experience also persuaded the Soviet leaders that in order to avoid another period of strategic inferiority they would have to react more rapidly to future US plans for force improvements.

5. The failure of Khrushchev's gamble in Cuba probably did not alter the Soviet goal of achieving and maintaining a credible deterrent, but it may well have been an important factor in determining the pace, timing, and dimensions of the Soviet effort to build a strong strategic offensive capability. The Cuban experience undoubtedly provided strong support for those in the Kremlin who advocated large scale deployments of the SS-9, SS-11 and new SLBM strategic systems then under development in the USSR.

6. At the time of the Cuban crisis the US had an overwhelming strategic superiority over the USSR. The US had an 8-to-1 advantage in intercontinental bombers. Each nation had about 100 submarine launched ballistic missiles but the US Polaris missiles had a range of 1500 miles and were deployed in nuclear submarines where the Soviet missiles had a range of only 350 miles and all but three were deployed in diesel submarines. The US had some 125 Atlas and Titan ICBMs--most of them deployed in hardened silos--and 105 Thor and Jupiter medium range missiles deployed within striking range of the USSR. The Soviets had only 50 ICBMs, all of which were deployed in relatively vulnerable soft sites.

7. Probably of even greater concern to the Soviets was the fact that from their point of view their relative position would continue to worsen for about another three years. By the beginning of 1966, when the first SS-9 and SS-11 ICBMs would become operational, the US was scheduled to have more than 1100 operational ICBM launchers, all deployed in hard silos, while the Soviet deployment would only be about 225 launchers, most of which would be located in soft complexes. Moreover, because

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[REDACTED] The US superiority in SLBMs on nuclear submarines would increase to 400 for the US and 15 for the USSR. US bomber forces were scheduled to decline with the phaseout of the B-47, but would still outnumber the Soviet bomber force by nearly 4 to 1.

8. The comparisons of forces outlined above illustrate the vastly inferior strategic position of the USSR which probably provided the major motivation for Khrushchev's decision to place nuclear strike forces in Cuba in 1962. It seems likely that the Soviets decided not to deploy their second generation ICBM systems--the SS-7 and SS-8--on a large scale not only because of the shortcomings of these systems, but also because a crash program probably would have delayed the deployment of their third generation ICBM systems--the SS-9 and SS-11. Thus, it appears that Khrushchev decided to deploy existing medium range systems in Cuba as a stop-gap measure which would quickly and cheaply improve the relative strategic position of the USSR.

9. The attempt to convert Cuba into a Soviet strategic nuclear base can be interpreted as an admission of the inadequacy of the Soviet strategic deterrent and as a measure of the Soviet concern about the possible military and political consequences of this inadequacy. By 1961 the USSR probably was aware of the growing US capability to detect and monitor Soviet strategic force deployments and knew that it could no longer represent its strategic capability as being much greater than it actually was.

10. In addition to causing genuine apprehensions about the security of the USSR, the US superiority probably was viewed by Khrushchev as a restriction on his political flexibility in international relations--e.g., in resolving the Berlin question. The failure of his bold move probably reinforced the Soviet conviction that the USSR could not afford the military risks and political penalties of not competing with the US in a strategic arms race.

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11. A review of military programs and expenditures indicates that there was no abrupt redirection of Soviet effort immediately following the Cuban missile crisis. The relative stability in expenditures for strategic and general purpose force programs (excluding research and development expenditures) during the 1963-1965 period suggests that the Soviets decided to wait until the advanced systems then in development--e.g., the SS-9, the SS-11, and Y-class SLBM systems--would be available for large scale deployment to redress the strategic imbalance. The general size of the deployment for these systems probably was determined during this period. Continuation of the rapid rise in expenditures for research and development programs--which began in the 1950's--is an indication of the Soviet determination to pay the price of running a strategic arms race with the US. The large R&D programs undoubtedly were designed to provide the Soviet leadership with sufficient flexibility to fulfill their requirements for strategic forces under any foreseeable contingencies.

12. The Cuban missile crisis may have provided the USSR with an important lesson on the nature of a strategic arms race. The US reacted to the "missile gap" of the late 1950's with plans for major strategic programs, principally Minuteman and Polaris. The USSR, however, did not immediately respond to the US force improvement plans so that by the fall of 1962 it found itself in a worsening strategic position. Since the Cuban crisis, it appears that the USSR has attempted to anticipate the deployment of new US weapons systems and moved to offset them.

13. The expressed Soviet interest in discussing strategic arms limitation is probably prompted at least in part by their desire to preserve their current strategic position in the face of US improvements in strategic capabilities planned for the Seventies. Extension of SS-9 and SS-11 deployment and continued Soviet ABM testing may represent other Soviet responses to US plans for the deployment of MIRVs and an ABM system.

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