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Cuba Unit Studied to See If Soviets Established Base

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U.S. intelligence and national security officials are examining evidence that suggests that the Soviet Union may have established a military base in Cuba.

Such bases have been opposed by U.S. policy statements going back to the Monroe Doctrine.

While U.S. intelligence analysts have convinced the State Department that there is proof that 2,000 to 3,000 Soviet combat troops have been operating as a unit in Cuba "since at least the mid-1970s," any U.S. response may hinge upon knowledge of the mission of the unit, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance said at a press conference yesterday.

"There are many different theories as to what the purpose of the maintenance of that brigade is. At the present we do not know which of these hypotheses are correct," said Vance.

He added that the presence of the unit is not covered by current understandings with the Soviets and

that it "runs counter to long-held American policies."

Vance said he has asked Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to return from vacation to Washington "at the earliest moment" to shed more light on the purpose on the combat unit.

Although Vance and other State Department analysts referred to the unit as a "brigade," there is nothing in the standard U.S. or Soviet Army structures that exactly resembles the Russian force in Cuba, which Vance said includes motorized rifle battalions, tank and artillery battalions and combat and service support elements.

The Soviet Army has no brigades as such, the closest size combat force being a motorized rifle regiment consisting of 2,000 to 2,400 men. The U.S. Army uses the term brigade to mean a command structure that could focus most of the resources of a combat division in a given battle.

Although U.S. brigades average around 6,500 men, some government

analysts described the Russian force as resembling a light U.S. brigade because it includes artillery, logistical and management support that allow it to be self-sustaining. Vance said the unit appeared to have no ships or aircraft assigned to it that would give it "an assault capability."

In this sense it could be used as a nucleus or support base for larger combat units; at least that was one of the theories circulating in Washington after Vance's statement.

A second theory, being advanced at the State Department, was that the Soviet unit was sent as a "psychological prop" to Cuba to make up for the 30,000 to 40,000 Cuban troops, including mainline Cuban infantry units, sent to Africa and the Middle East.

A third theory was that the unit was sent to demonstrate Soviet military hardware and military doctrine to the Cuban army — which uses substantial quantities of Soviet equipment — and to train insurgent groups being sent from Cuba to other Central and South American countries.

One of the mysteries remaining after Vance's statement was how such a unit, maneuvering with tanks and artillery, could have escaped U.S. scrutiny for so long.

Vance said that last month's analysis of pictures from satellite and U-2 flights, combined with "contributory evidence of a different kind than we had before," revealed the combat unit was in addition to the 2,000 military advisers known to be in Cuba.

"We do not know at the present time whether it constitutes a base," Vance said.

Just what constitutes a military base may depend upon still-secret "understandings" reached between Soviet and U.S. officials during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the 1970 flap between the two governments over rumors that the U.S.S.R. was about to use Cuba as a submarine base.

Vance explained that the understandings are not "just a simple piece of paper" but are contained in exchanges of letters and notes of several discussions between Soviet and U.S. officials, many of which are classified. Vance said the State Department is "reviewing the situation" to see whether these documents could soon be made public.

Sen. Richard Stone, D-Fla., first raised the issue publicly on July 17 with a series of questions about the

Russian combat force to witnesses appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Shortly after that Stone received a letter from Vance assuring him that "there is no evidence of any substantial increase of the Soviet military presence in Cuba over the past several years or of the presence of a Soviet military base."

Yesterday Stone emerged from a closed briefing on Cuba given to the committee by CIA Director Stansfield Turner to tell reporters that he has seen evidence that the Soviet Union may be secretly strengthening the Cuban naval base at Cienfuegos so it can function as a naval base for Soviet military vessels.

Stone said that he hopes that a new understanding can be reached with the Soviets that expands upon the 1962 and 1970 understandings.