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PROBABLE REACTIONS TO U.S.
RECONNAISSANCE SATELLITE PROGRAMS

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

incurred in by the

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 9 August 1960. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, the Assistant Chiefs of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy, the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, the Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations, and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation abstained. The subject matter is outside of their jurisdiction.

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PROBABLE REACTIONS TO U.S. RECONNAISSANCE SATELLITE PROGRAMS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Soviet reactions to US launchings of earth satellites with military reconnaissance capabilities,¹ and other world reactions to these launchings.²

THE ESTIMATE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Man's excursion into outer space presents many new problems, and adds a new dimension to some old ones. The possibility of military reconnaissance conducted from orbiting space vehicles is one of these problems, which is now coming to the fore because the US has an urgent requirement for photographic [] reconnaissance of the Soviet Union and other denied areas.

2. The Soviets are aware of this requirement from the U-2 case and other US air reconnaissance. They have been cognizant of official American interest in reconnaissance satellite systems since 1948, and have noted recent US disclosures of active developmental programs leading toward operational reconnaissance satellites within a few years. They probably realize that satellite systems are not likely in the near term to produce the quality of information that can be obtained by other means. However, they almost certainly do assume that satellite reconnaissance has considerable potential for intelligence collection.

¹ This estimate is concerned primarily with photographic reconnaissance systems, although under certain circumstances it would also apply to [] particularly if the US were to announce that such satellites were engaged in reconnaissance activity.

² It is emphasized that this estimate deals only with foreign reactions to US launching of reconnaissance satellites; it does not consider various other implications of such a program.

II. PROBABLE SOVIET COURSES OF ACTION

3. There is no doubt that the Soviets do not want the US to orbit military reconnaissance vehicles over the USSR. The Soviet press and radio have already branded as reconnaissance activity the launching of various US weather and communications satellites. Clearly, the Soviets prize secrecy as a strategic asset, and want to prevent the US from observing key military and military-industrial installations and preparations. Beyond this, they would regard any publicly avowed US reconnaissance activity as a challenge to their prestige.

4. Notwithstanding these considerations, the Soviet leaders may not choose to react immediately to a US reconnaissance program. The Soviets have made no formal protest about the Tiros weather photographic satellites. They are unlikely to believe that reconnaissance satellites offer much threat to their secrecy for the next year or so, but during the period of developmental testing of the Samos they will have to weigh the consequences of permitting the establishment of a precedent for unchallenged reconnaissance. Moreover, as capabilities of US reconnaissance vehicles grow they will have to review their policy.

5. At present and for some time to come, the Soviets are likely to have only a marginal capability under most favorable conditions for interference with US satellites. Even detection and tracking in the early orbits of any

satellite will be difficult. It might take two weeks to discover an unannounced vehicle designed to minimize detection, after which the track could probably be determined in a few days. It will also be quite difficult to identify the function of a new satellite. During the period of US test operations, roughly 1960 through 1962, the Soviets will probably seek to devise and perfect measures for rapidly detecting, identifying, and tracking satellite vehicles and means for jamming or otherwise disrupting the transmission of data from them. They will probably avoid premature disclosure of methods for which the US could develop countermeasures, but they will prepare for later actions to destroy or to neutralize operational US reconnaissance satellites. In the course of its program to develop an antimissile missile system, the USSR could obtain a limited capability to destroy such vehicles after they have made a number of orbits. This capability might be theoretically achievable about in the period 1963-1966, soon after the presently programmed introduction of a US reconnaissance satellite system. However, the capability for a system for destruction of satellites on their first orbit does not appear achievable until the latter part of the decade.

6. Since the technical-military possibilities for destroying the vehicle or neutralizing its transmission will be limited for some time, the Soviets will probably conclude that only two courses are open to them in the next few years: (a) a campaign of pressure to generate political support in the world, particularly through stimulating tensions, for a cessation of such reconnaissance activity, or (b) not to bring the issue to a diplomatic climax or even to public view before they could destroy the vehicle. The Soviet decision on what to do about US reconnaissance satellites and when to do it will be affected not only by their judgment about the effectiveness of the program, but even more by the extent and nature of publicity attending the future course of the program.

7. There has already been a great deal of unofficial and semiofficial publicity about the US reconnaissance satellite program, and

there will probably be more in years to come. However, if the US Government refrained from officially avowing and attempting to justify a reconnaissance program, and perhaps explained the launching of new satellites on other grounds such as scientific research, we believe that the chances are better than even that the Soviets would not press the issue until they were able either to destroy a vehicle, or to establish its mission by authoritative US acknowledgment or other convincing proof.³ It is possible that the Soviets would act early in the US development test program, in order to agitate the issue and if possible to inhibit US plans, as well as to lay the foundation for later direct physical action against US reconnaissance vehicles. But we believe that they would probably estimate that all available courses of action—political as well as military-technical—would be of doubtful effectiveness in compelling the US to end the program, and that there was little advantage in forcing the issue, especially during the developmental phase of the program.

8. On the other hand, if and when publicity about the US reconnaissance operation reached a point at which the Soviets thought that their prestige was being threatened, we believe that they would stage a strong campaign of protest. They would probably consider it necessary to oppose vigorously by political and propaganda means any avowed and politically defended US program to penetrate their secrecy, about which they are extraordinarily sensitive. Their reaction would not be less vigorous because of uncertainty over the effectiveness of such a campaign in getting the US to cease the program.

³ The Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, considers it unrealistic to suggest that the US refrain from avowing a program that is obviously a government activity whose nature, magnitude and even locus is already known to the world at large. He would revise this sentence to read: "However, unless the US Government deliberately provokes sharp Soviet reaction by giving the intelligence implications of the program undue stress in its publicity, we believe that the chances are better than even that the USSR would not press the issue until it was able to destroy or interfere with the effective operation of US reconnaissance vehicles."

9. The basis for protests, propaganda, and possible UN action would probably be the allegedly illegal and hostile nature of the intelligence activities of such satellites, and not Soviet claims to sovereignty in outer space itself. They could introduce the issue into the UN, either in terms of a demand on the US to cease, or in terms of a general measure to outlaw any military satellite or space vehicles, including those for reconnaissance. They would probably attempt to raise tensions and to make the issue appear to have dangerous consequences for world peace.

10. They will, in any case, probably exert all efforts to neutralize the transmission of data from vehicles which might be providing useful intelligence. Whenever the USSR does acquire a capability, it will probably seek to destroy US reconnaissance satellite vehicles. Such action might be accompanied by attempts to use heightened anxiety over war for a diplomatic offensive, and also to persuade the world that the USSR had a successful defense against ballistic missiles.

III. NONCOMMUNIST WORLD REACTIONS

11. World reactions to the US reconnaissance satellite program will vary significantly and will be influenced by the international political climate at the time, by the manner in which the US handles the program, and by the Soviet reaction. Unless the USSR stirs up the issue, world opinion will probably be largely indifferent. But if the Soviets stimulate tension—for example by threatening countries which cooperate in a US "spy" program by furnishing facilities for tracking stations—and try to make the issue appear to have dangerous consequences for world peace, the US would have to contend with adverse reactions in neutralist countries and among some segments of opinion in Allied countries from those who would view the US action as provocative and risky.

12. The governments of the principal countries of the Free World, as well as military, official, and some other segments of opinion in these countries, are well aware of the requirement for effective intelligence on the USSR to support the US deterrent posture, and would

not object to the reconnaissance satellite program. Many governments would be favorably impressed by evidence that the US could in fact penetrate Soviet secrecy. Favorable reactions in Allied countries might be enhanced by joint Allied association with the program. Nevertheless, in the event of violent Soviet reaction to the program, Free World governments would still have to contend with considerable popular anxiety over heightened international tension. However, most Allied governments would probably support the US program and would endeavor to persuade their people to accept it, and some other governments would also probably acquiesce.⁴

⁴The Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, considers that paragraph 12, as written, over-emphasizes the unfavorable reaction of neutralist elements in the Free World. He believes that restrained, well timed publicity could stimulate both governmental and popular support for a US reconnaissance program and that the governments and informed peoples of the Free World would draw encouragement from the knowledge that the US was able to penetrate Soviet secrecy. This would do much to offset the effects of a violent Soviet denouncement. He would, therefore, substitute the following for paragraph 12:

"12. The governments of the principal countries of the Free World, as well as military, official, and some other segments of opinion in these countries, are well aware of the requirement for effective intelligence on the USSR to maintain Free World security, and would support the US reconnaissance satellite program. Such support could be broadened and reinforced and the impact of violent Soviet denouncements and threats reduced by a restrained, well timed information program. Such a program could have some effect in converting neutralist opposition to acquiescence. Many governments and peoples of the Free World would be favorably impressed and encouraged by evidence that the US could in fact penetrate Soviet secrecy; by the same token they would be discouraged and disappointed if they were given reason to believe that the US was unable to achieve such penetration. Favorable reactions in Allied countries might be enhanced by joint Allied association with the program, though not all objections would be overcome. Even in the event of violent Soviet denouncements and threats, the US program would have substantial popular acceptance as well as the support of most Allied governments."

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