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Prime Minister (2tils)

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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NO 2558 OF 5 SEPTEMBER

INFO PRIORITY CABINET OFFICE (FOR JIS), HAVANA, UKDEL NATO, MODUK (DS12), MOSCOW.

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[Signature]

MY IMMEDIATELY PRECEEDING TELEGRAM: SOVIET GROUND FORCES IN CUBA.

1. STATE DEPARTMENT CONTACTS GAVE US TODAY THE FOLLOWING AMPLIFICATION TO THE POINTS MADE BY VANCE AT HIS PRESS CONFERENCE.
2. UNTIL THIS YEAR US EVIDENCE OF THE SOVIET PRESENCE IN CUBA HAD BEEN FRAGMENTARY, ALTHOUGH THEY HAD KNOWN OF THE SOVIET ADVISERS FOR SOME TIME. IN THE FIRST WEEK OF JULY THEY BEGAN TO ESTABLISH THAT THE SOVIET FORCES WERE ORGANISED AS A COHERENT MILITARY UNIT OF THE SOVIET ARMY. ALTHOUGH FULL INFORMATION WAS STILL UNAVAILABLE, THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY HAD REACHED A CONSENSUS IN THE LAST WEEK OF JULY THAT THE FORCE WAS AN ORGANISED COMBAT UNIT COMMANDED BY RUSSIANS FOR RUSSIAN PURPOSES (WHICH REMAIN UNCLEAR). FURTHER INFORMATION WAS CONTINUING TO BE FITTED INTO THE JIGSAW, AND MORE AND MORE FACTS WERE BEING UNEARTHED FROM THE ARCHIVES WHICH THREW GREATER LIGHT ON THE HISTORY OF SOVIET PRESENCE. A QUOTE LUCKY INTELLIGENCE BREAK TWO WEEKS AGO UNQUOTE TAKEN ALONG WITH SATELLITE PHOTOGRAPHY AND OTHER SOURCES HAD FURTHER CLARIFIED THE PICTURE.
3. THE TIMING OF THE ADMINISTRATION'S ACTION IN REVEALING THE NEW APPRECIATION WAS DICTATED BY TWO MAJOR AND ONE MINOR FACTORS:
 - (A) THE NEWS THAT THE INFORMATION HAD BEEN LEAKED ALMOST IN ITS ENTIRETY TO THE WEEKLY U.S. MAGAZINE QUOTE AVIATION WEEK AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY UNQUOTE AND WOULD BE SHORTLY PUBLISHED (IN THE EDITION OF 10 SEPTEMBER, SINCE THEY JUST MISSED LAST WEEK'S DEADLINE).
 - (B) THE PRESSURE FROM SENATOR STONE WHO, IN ADDITION TO THE VANCE LETTER OF 27 JULY, HAD ALSO BEEN GIVEN A CLASSIFIED BRIEFING.
 - (C) AND THE ADMINISTRATION'S COMMITMENT TO OPEN GOVERNMENT.

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THEY BELIEVED THAT THE COMBINATION OF THE FIRST TWO FACTORS WOULD HAVE MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FURTHER TO DELAY REVEALING THE NEW ASSESSMENT. STATE DEPARTMENT CONTACTS HAVE EMPHASISED THAT ANY LINKAGE TO THE OPENING OF THE HAVANA SUMMIT WAS QUOTE FORTUITOUS AND CO-INCIDENTAL UNQUOTE.

4. STATE DEPARTMENT ACCEPT THAT THE DISCLOSURES WILL POSE DIFFICULTIES FOR THE SALT PROCESS BUT HOPE THEY WILL BE TEMPORARY. THEY SEE THE VERIFICATION ISSUE AS PROVIDING THE MAIN PROBLEM TO SURMOUNT (US FAILURES OVER CUBA CONTRASTED WITH ASSURANCES IN RESPECT OF SOVIET ADHERENCE TO THE TREATY). HOWEVER, THEY RECOGNISE THAT THEIR MAIN LEVERAGE TO PRODUCE A HELPFUL RESPONSE FROM THE RUSSIANS RESTS ON THE LATTER'S DESIRE TO SEE RATIFICATION PROCEED. IN PRIVATE DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RUSSIANS UNTIL NOW (WHICH BEGAN WITH THE MINISTER AT THE SOVIET EMBASSY A MONTH AGO) THE US HAVE NOT TAKEN AN UNDULY TOUGH LINE. BUT VANCE WILL BE ADDRESSING THE ISSUE WITH DOBRYNIN ON THE LATTER'S RETURN AND LOOKING FOR A MORE PRODUCTIVE RESPONSE.

5. THE ADMINISTRATION ARE CLEARLY RIGHT TO BE CONCERNED THAT THIS NEW ISSUE WILL POSE FRESH PROBLEMS FOR SALT RATIFICATION. ALTHOUGH THE MIG 23 ISSUE EARLIER IN THE YEAR PASSED OFF WITHOUT CAUSING MAJOR DIFFICULTIES, THE PRESENCE OF SOVIET GROUND FORCES IN A COHERENT MILITARY UNIT NINETY MILES FROM US TERRITORY IS A PROBLEM OF A DIFFERENT ORDER. IT IS HARD TO DISMISS THE IDEA THAT THE ADMINISTRATION, ONCE RELEASE BECAME INEVITABLE, CHOSE THE DAY WITH AN EYE TO THE SALT DEBATE. DOING SO JUST BEFORE THE LABOR DAY WEEKEND AND PRIOR TO RESUMPTION OF THE SENATE HEARINGS, THEY MAY HAVE HOPED TO REDUCE PUBLIC EXCITEMENT AS FAR AS POSSIBLE. IF THIS WAS THEIR HOPE, IT IS UNLIKELY TO SUCCEED.

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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 2557 OF 5 SEPTEMBER

INFO PRIORITY CABINET OFFICE(FOR JIS), UKDEL NATO HAVANA
MODUK(DS12) MOSCOW

MY TELNO 2513 (NOT TO ALL): SOVIET GROUND FORCES IN CUBA

1. MOST OF VANCE'S PRESS CONFERENCE TODAY IN WASHINGTON WAS DEVOTED TO THE SOVIET/CUBAN ISSUE. TRANSCRIPT FOLLOWS BY BAG. IN A BRIEF OPENING STATEMENT HE CONFIRMED THAT THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY HAD RECENTLY CONCLUDED THAT A SOVIET COMBAT FORCE WAS STATIONED IN CUBA, ELEMENTS OF WHICH MIGHT HAVE BEEN THERE SINCE THE EARLY 1970S AND POSSIBLE EVEN EARLIER. THE FORCE CONSISTED OF TWO TO THREE THOUSAND PERSONNEL AND INCLUDED MOTORISED RIFLE BATTALIONS, TANK AND ARTILLERY BATTALIONS AND COMBAT AND SERVICE SUPPORT UNITS. ALL THESE WERE SEPARATE FROM SOVIET ADVISORY AND TECHNICAL PERSONNEL IN CUBA, ESTIMATED TO BE BETWEEN 1500 AND 2,000. THE SPECIFIC MISSION OF THE FORCE WAS UNCLEAR. THERE WAS NO AIR OR SEA LIFT CAPABILITY ASSOCIATED WITH IT, WHICH WOULD GIVE AN ASSAULT CAPABILITY. THE PRESENCE OF THE UNIT WAS NOT COVERED BY THE BILATERAL US UNDERSTANDINGS WITH THE RUSSIANS IN 1962 OR 1970. BUT THIS PRESENCE WAS A MATTER OF SERIOUS CONCERN, AFFECTING US RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION. VANCE WOULD BE PURSUING THE MATTER WITH THE RUSSIANS, AND DISCUSSING IT WITH THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE LATER IN THE DAY.

2. IN ANSWER TO QUESTIONS, VANCE MADE THE FOLLOWING ADDITIONAL POINTS

(A) IN THE DISCUSSIONS TO COME WITH THE RUSSIANS HE WOULD QUOTE NOT BE SATISFIED WITH MAINTENANCE OF THE STATUS QUO UNQUOTE. HE WOULD NOT BE DRAWN INTO DEFINING FURTHER THE LIMIT OF US REQUIREMENTS.

(B) THE HEARINGS ON SALT RATIFICATION SHOULD PROCEED QUOTE BECAUSE OF THEIR FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE UNQUOTE, BUT THE ADMINISTRATION WOULD KEEP IN CLOSE CONTACT AND DISCUSSION WITH THE SENATE AS THE DISCUSSIONS ON CUBA WITH THE RUSSIANS CONTINUED.

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(C) THERE WAS NO PARALLEL BETWEEN US FAILURE UNTIL NOW TO IDENTIFY THE SOVIET FORCES, AND SALT VERIFICATION CAPABILITY. THE FORMER WAS QUOTE MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO MONITOR UNQUOTE.

(D) AT THE TIME (27 JULY) OF HIS LETTER TO SENATOR STONE (D-FLORIDA) DENYING THAT THERE WAS A SOVIET BASE IN CUBA OR HAD BEEN A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE IN SOVIET FORCES THERE, IT WAS THE CONCLUSION OF THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY THAT THERE WAS NOT SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE TO CONFIRM A SOVIET COMBAT PRESENCE IN CUBA. SUBSEQUENTLY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION PRODUCED A CLEARER READING OF THE SITUATION AND THIS WAS MADE AVAILABLE TO STONE AND THE RELEVANT SENATE COMMITTEES.

(E) THE US DID NOT KNOW AT PRESENT WHETHER THE SOVIET PRESENCE CONSTITUTED A BASE. THE DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RUSSIANS WOULD SHED LIGHT ON THIS.

(F) GIVEN THE CONCLUSION THAT THE SOVIET FORCES HAD BEEN IN CUBA SINCE THE EARLY 1970S, IT WAS TRUE TO SAY THAT THE RUSSIANS HAD QUOTE NOT DONE ANYTHING SPECIAL IN THE LAST YEAR OR TWO UNQUOTE.

(G) AS A RESULT OF A CURRENT REVIEW, THE ADMINISTRATION HOPED TO BE ABLE TO PUBLISH AT LEAST A FULL SUMMARY OF THE 1962 AND 1970 AGREEMENTS WITH THE RUSSIANS.

(H) VANCE HAD ASKED DOBRYNIN TO RETURN TO WASHINGTON AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, AND HOPED FOR A REPLY LATER IN THE DAY. THE MEETING WITH DOBRYNIN WOULD PROVIDE QUOTE A SERIOUS CHANCE TO DISCUSS THIS ISSUE UNQUOTE. (BY IMPLICATION VANCE DISMISSED EARLIER SOVIET PRESS REACTION TO THE US DISCLOSURES).

3. A NUMBER OF PROMINENT POLITICIANS HAVE ALREADY INJECTED THEMSELVES INTO THE DEBATE. SENATORS CHURCH (D-IDAHO) AND STONE (D-FLORIDA) HAVE SPOKEN OUT STRONGLY AGAINST THE SOVIET PRESENCE (SEE OUR TELEGRAM UNDER REFERENCE), AND THE LATTER HAS URGED THAT IT SHOULD BECOME PART OF THE SALT RATIFICATION DEBATE. SENATORS DOLE (R-KANSAS) AND HARRY BYRD (I-VIRGINIA) HAVE CALLED FOR SUSPENSION OF THE DEBATE UNTIL THE SOVIET FORCES ARE REMOVED. SENATE MINORITY LEADER BAKER (R-TENNESSEE, AND A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE) TERMED THE RUSSIAN PRESENCE A PROVOCATION AND, WHILE RESERVING JUDGEMENT ON THE POSSIBLE

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IMPACT ON SALT, STATED QUOTE YOU CAN'T CONSIDER SALT IN ISOLATION UNQUOTE. SENATE MAJORITY LEADER ROBERT BYRD (D-WEST VIRGINIA) HAS ARGUED THAT THE TREATY SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE CONSIDERED ON ITS MERITS AND NOT LINKED WITH THE CUBAN PROBLEM. ANOTHER REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE (AND A FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE CIA), GEORGE BUSH HAS DEMANDED THE REMOVAL OF THE SOVIET FORCES AND ECHOED BAKER'S REMARKS ABOUT PROVOCATION.

4. SEE MIFT.

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