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Cuba Stresses US Aggression in Conference

by LADB Staff

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Participants in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis met in Havana Oct. 11-13 to review the decision-making process and consider newly declassified government documents. The conference covered the period from the April 1961 Bay of Pigs (Playa Giron) invasion to the weeks after the resolution of the crisis in late October 1962. The conference, observing the 40th anniversary of the crisis prompted by the installation of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, was organized by the Cuban government and the Washington-based National Security Archive (NSA), along with Brown University's Watson Institute. This is the sixth time officials and historians from Cuba, the former Soviet Union (USSR), and the US have met to discuss the missile crisis.

The Cuban government used the occasion to release declassified documents from the US, the USSR, Poland, Hungary, Mexico, and other countries. The NSA has periodically released declassified US documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Guests from the US included several former members of President John F. Kennedy's administration: Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense; Theodore Sorensen, speechwriter; Kennedy aides and advisors Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Gen. William Y. Smith; State Department official Richard Goodwin; and CIA analyst Dino Brugioni. Also participating were Wayne Smith, US Embassy political officer in Havana from 1958 to 1961, as well as officers involved in naval operations during the crisis.

The Russian delegation included Dmitry Yazov, former defense minister; Georgy Kornienko, former deputy foreign minister; Nikolai Leonov, former KGB officer; Georgy Markovich Kornienko, former attache at the Soviet Embassy in Washington; former Soviet military personnel on the ground in Cuba; and naval personnel on board a Soviet submarine in the quarantine zone Kennedy established around the island.

President Fidel Castro and Jose Ramon Fernandez, vice president of the Cuban Council of Ministers, led the Cuban delegation.

The conference was closed to the media, but the participants and organizers said during news conferences that much of the discussion centered on the process of decision-making and the likelihood of a nuclear exchange during the crisis. In one of the declassified documents, then Soviet Ambassador to the US Anatoly Dobrynin says US Attorney General Robert Kennedy told him, "A real war will begin in which millions of Americans and Russians will die." This remark was against the background of recommendations by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, who wanted an air strike on the missile sites, and a Soviet military directive mandating "the use of all available air defense forces," in case of such an attack. US planned covert actions on eve of crisis US documents declassified last year shed new light on Operation Mongoose, President Kennedy's high-priority covert-action campaign against Castro's revolutionary government.

The operation, headed by Attorney General Kennedy, took shape after the defeat of the 1961 US-sponsored invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The president had ordered his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board to mount "highly sensitive covert operations relating to political action, propaganda, economic warfare, sabotage, escape and evasion, and subversion against hostile states." These actions were to be conducted in such a way as to provide the government with plausible deniability. The operations planned against Cuba included sabotage of electric-generating plants, mining harbors, assassinating Castro, and overthrowing the revolutionary government. Operation Mongoose was still functioning while the Soviets were installing missiles in Cuba.

Among the declassified documents are the minutes of an Oct. 4, 1962, meeting of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. The minutes show that President Kennedy was urging planners to give more priority "to trying to mount sabotage operations." An analysis of Operation Mongoose published in Cuba's official government newspaper Granma says the US began planning a second invasion of Cuba in early 1962 to be carried out in October. Declassified documents disclosed that in January 1962, at the time President Kennedy was telling Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's son-in-law Alexei Adzhubei that the US would not "meddle with Cuba," his administration was planning to arrange a pretext for a US invasion of the island.

According to Granma, the US had placed counterrevolutionary groups throughout the island, while attacks were planned from a base in Florida and from the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay in southeastern Cuba. During the first eight months of 1962, the report said, 5,000 acts of sabotage and terrorism were carried out, some to destroy sugar-cane crops as well as rural stores and schools. Several US officials later said in their writings about Operation Mongoose that it was ineptly conceived and not seriously implemented.

US participants at the conference said there were no plans for a US invasion in 1962. But McNamara said in 1989, "If I had been a Cuban leader, I think I might have expected a US invasion. Why? Because the US had carried out what I have referred to publicly as a debacle the Bay of Pigs invasion....Secondly, there were covert operations. The Cubans knew that. There were covert operations extending over a long period of time."

Four months after the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuban state security forces from the Departamento de Seguridad del Estado (DSE) gave then President Osvaldo Dorticos a report on Operation Patty Candela. According to the report, CIA agents with support from the Guantanamo Naval Base were to assassinate Defense Minister Raul Castro in Santiago de Cuba in conjunction with various acts of sabotage. The operation also contemplated a fabricated attack on the base that would serve as justification to send US marines into Cuba proper.

Much of the Cuban information on US attacks and subversion emerged during a 1999 civil trial in Havana, which heard testimony concerning acts against Cuba carried out by the US since the early 1960s. As a result of the trial, Cuba demanded US\$181.1 billion in compensation from the US for property damage and injury and death suffered by some 5,500 Cubans attributed to acts of US sabotage and terrorism.

Cuba wanted public disclosure of missiles

Many analysts of the missile crisis have suggested that Khrushchev placed missiles in Cuba at Castro's request because of his fears of a second US invasion a view supported by statements Khrushchev made in his memoirs. Castro has dismissed that interpretation, saying he would have preferred a US invasion to nuclear holocaust. The Cuban view is that Cuba wanted its formal military alliance with the USSR and the missile deployment made public in advance. Castro wanted Khrushchev to inform Kennedy of the plans and sent Ernesto "Che" Guevarra to Moscow to discuss the proposed strategy with the Soviet premier.

A Cuban military official told the media during the conference that the secret placement of the missiles was a mistake because it allowed Kennedy to portray Khrushchev as deceptive and to take the moral high ground. Sorensen said that a public announcement "would have tied our hands," because Khrushchev could have presented the missile deployment as a justifiable response to the US placement of missiles in Turkey. Though Castro's preference for a public announcement may appear the more rational strategy, at the time of the crisis, Khrushchev considered Castro "irrational" and feared he would draw the USSR and the US into war. Cuba, he said in a November 1962 document, "wants practically to drag us behind it with a leash, and wants to pull us into a war with America by its actions."

Cuba blames US, USSR

The US and USSR tended to regard the missile crisis as an event in the Cold War and to focus on arcane weapons strategies and bureaucratic crisis management. Roger Hilsman, an intelligence official at the State Department in 1962, wrote in his 1996 book *The Cuban Missile Crisis* that Khrushchev placed the missiles in Cuba to offset the US advantage in long-range missiles. Hilsman dismissed Khrushchev's later claim that his motive was to protect Cuba from a US invasion. From the Cuban perspective, the crisis began long before the missile deployment and was an incident in a US low-intensity war against the revolutionary government that stretched back to President Dwight Eisenhower's administration in the early 1960s.

Cuban Vice President Fernandez said at the conference, "It would be completely erroneous to see the October 1962 crisis as an isolated event, unfolding a few weeks before and attributed to the installation of Soviet missiles on the island." Cuba was not to blame for the crisis, he said, and placed the onus on the US policy of trying to destroy the revolution. The Cuban thesis is that Khrushchev took advantage of Cuba's call for a military alliance and material support to make a strategic move useful to the Soviets, and then negotiated their removal without consulting Cuba. "In reality, it was the responsibility of the two great powers," Fernandez said. "The US, with its permanent aggressiveness against Cuba and the USSR for the way it handled the situation."

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