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Current
Policy No. 85

Secretary of State Vance

Press Conference: Soviet Troops in Cuba

September 5, 1979



United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Following is the text of a press conference held by Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, September 5, 1979, in the Department of State, Washington, D.C. Principal subject discussed was Soviet troops in Cuba. Other topics touched on include:

Ambassador Young's Resignation

North Ireland and the Meeting of the Prime Ministers of Ireland and U.K.

Middle East

Korea

SECRETARY VANCE:

Let me begin with a few comments on the presence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba. We regard this as a very serious matter affecting our relations with the Soviet Union. The presence of this unit runs counter to long-held American policies. The identification of this unit as a combat force has recently been confirmed by our intelligence community. They have now concluded that this force has been in Cuba since at least the mid-1970's. Re-analysis of the older, fragmentary data in the light of more recently acquired information suggests that elements of a Soviet brigade may have been there since the early 1970's and possibly before that. The process of re-analyzing our earlier information continues.

The unit appears to consist of 2,000 to 3,000 personnel. It includes motorized rifle battalions, tank and artillery battalions, and combat and service support units. These figures are separate from the Soviet military advisory and technical military personnel in Cuba, which we now estimate to be between 1,500 and 2,000. The specific mission of the combat unit is unclear. There is no air or sea-lift capability associated with the brigade which would give it an assault capability, nor is the presence of this unit covered by our bilateral understandings with the Soviets in 1962 or 1970.

Nonetheless, the presence of a Soviet combat unit in Cuba is a matter of serious concern. I will be pursuing this matter with the Soviets in the coming days. I will be discussing this issue with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this afternoon and setting forth the approach which we plan to take with the Soviets. We will keep the press and the public informed to the fullest extent that we can as we proceed. I know you will understand that the interests of our country would not be served by my now going into the specific nature of our approach.

Q: Mr. Secretary, on that same question, do I understand you correctly to be saying that the 2,000 to 3,000-man brigade essentially was in place in Cuba before even this Administration took office?

SECRETARY VANCE: A force of approximately that size was, yes. That is the conclusion that has now been arrived at.

Q: So all that has happened in the last few weeks is that the intelligence community has now reached that conclusion. The Soviets haven't done anything special in the last year or two?

SECRETARY VANCE: That is correct.

Q: Mr. Secretary, is there any reason now why the 1962 agreement with the Russians at the time of the Cuban missile crisis could not be made public so that people would have a way of knowing whether the Russians are keeping that agreement or not?

SECRETARY VANCE: Well, the essence of the 1962 agreement is generally known to the public, and let me give you as much as I can about it. The 1962 agreement is not just a simple piece of paper. It consists of an exchange of letters between President Kennedy and Chairman Krushchev; it consists of discussions between Russian officials, including Minister Kuznetsov, Minister Mikoyan, and individuals in the United States and representatives of the U.S. Government. It includes discussions between officials of the United States and Ambassador Dobrynin. So that it is a series of both exchanges of letters and discussions that make up the total agreement.

Q: Why couldn't that whole package be made public now? What is the reason that it can't be made public? Seventeen years have passed.

SECRETARY VANCE: This is a matter which I think is a fair question to ask. We are reviewing the situation to determine whether or not we can at least put out a full summary of what the essence of that agreement and the agreement of 1970 is as well, and I hope that we may be able to do so.

Q: Mr. Secretary, are there any plans by the U.S. Government to reinforce ground forces and Air Force units in Guantanamo at this time?

SECRETARY VANCE: I don't want to go into any actions which we might take in the future. Let me say, however, that is not to be taken in any way as an indication that we are planning to do that.

Q: Mr. Secretary, did the re-analysis of the Cuban data follow the insurrection in Nicaragua by the Cuban-backed—

SECRETARY VANCE: It was not sparked in any way by that. This analysis was going on as a result of the reevaluation that we had been involved in; and as soon as we got the necessary information to arrive at the conclusions, we immediately released the conclusions.

Q: Do you have any comment on the thesis that this is essentially a handholding operation for the Cubans who have forces around the world?

SECRETARY VANCE: There are many different theories as to what the purpose of the maintenance of that battalion or brigade in Cuba is. At this point, we do not know which of these various hypotheses is correct. Obviously one of the issues which we will be discussing with the Soviets is the statement by the Soviets with respect to the purpose and intentions which relate to the brigade.

Q: In view of the fact that another U.S. ambassador had met several times with PLO officials, why was Ambassador Young singled out for holding a session

with that group's U.N. representative, particularly since Young's action could have been justified by the fact that he was then President of the Security Council?

SECRETARY VANCE: Insofar as the situation of Ambassador Young's resignation is concerned, let me say several things: First, the situation has been gone into at length. The situation has been reviewed time and again by the Spokesman for the Department, and I wish to make very clear that I stand behind the statements of the Spokesman with respect to this matter. I want to also make very clear that I stand fully behind the statement which I issued at the time that Andy's resignation was offered and accepted—namely, that Andy has made great contributions to the United States and to its foreign policy. I think that it would not do any good—it would be fruitless and indeed an unwise step—to rehash all of this ground again.

Q: Mr. Secretary, it has now been a full week since the Soviet Charge d' Affaires was called in to the State Department and informed of American concern over the Soviet troops in Cuba. During that time, the only public response from the Soviets has been a rather scoffing one in the press. I understand further that the Soviet Charge's response was similar. Do you consider at this time that the Soviet response has been timely and serious?

SECRETARY VANCE: I have asked Ambassador Dobrynin to return at the earliest possible moment, and I will then be meeting with him. I do not feel, until I have had a chance to meet with him, that we will have had a serious chance to discuss this issue.

Q: When do you expect that, sir?

SECRETARY VANCE: I don't know exactly. I will get a response, I hope, today to the message which I sent to him in regard to his return.