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Cuba: Likelihood of an Attempted Shutdown of a U-2

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Submitted by



DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

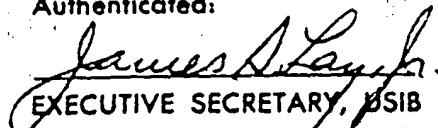
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CUBA: LIKELIHOOD OF AN ATTEMPTED SHOOTDOWN OF A U-2

CONCLUSION

We believe that the same basic considerations which have deterred the Castro government from attempting to shoot down U-2s overflying Cuba will remain operative in the foreseeable future. Sporadic harassment of U-2 missions may recur.

DISCUSSION

1. In 1964, after the surface-to-air missile (SAM) system had been transferred from Soviet to Cuban control, Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev engaged for some months in a campaign of speeches and diplomatic maneuvers designed to raise such political pressure as would compel the US to end U-2 overflights of Cuba. But the US repeatedly made clear its intention to continue the overflights, and, after Khrushchev's removal from power, Castro no longer pressed the issue. Indeed his public references to the overflights became infrequent and restrained. Until recently, moreover, the Cuban air defense system behaved passively in regard to the U-2 missions. Radar tracking was undertaken more often than not, but interception by aircraft was not attempted. SAM sites were not allowed to advance their condition of readiness, and any site in advanced condition because of training exercises was ordered to a lower stage before a U-2 approached.

Recent Reactions of Cuba's Air Defense

2. Since mid-March 1967, there have been 24 U-2 overflights of Cuba. Beginning on 21 March, Mig-21 fighter aircraft have five times been scrambled from San Antonio de los Banos Airbase, southwest of Havana, for the purpose of intercepting a U-2 flight. In the first case, it is not clear that Cuban air defense personnel realized that the overflying plane was a U-2; in the four subsequent cases—on 24 March and 1, 7, and 11 July—it is quite clear that they did. No order or instruction was communicated to a Mig-21 suggesting that it was to try to shoot down the U-2. And in no case, as far as we can determine, did a Mig-21 reach a high enough altitude to intercept the U-2.

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3. In only one case was an element of the SAM system ordered to improve its state of readiness. In connection with the U-2 overflight on 11 July, the Campo Florido SAM site was informed by its regional command that by order of those higher up it should proceed to a state of personnel readiness without turning on its equipment. It was further told that this order had nothing to do with a previously-scheduled training exercise, but rather with the U-2. Although this communication sounded ominous, it contained no specific indication of hostile intent. No attempt was actually made by this site to fire a missile at the U-2, nor even to track it with the Fan Song missile guidance radar.

4. All these recent Cuban reactions to U-2 overflights took place in Cuba's Western Air Defense Zone. U-2 missions in the Central and Eastern Zones have elicited no unusual Cuban response beyond a slight increase in radar reflections by the air surveillance system. And the U-2 missions flown in the Western Zone since 11 July have not provoked any unusual response.

The Possible Explanations

5. The reactions described above could simply reflect "live" training exercises in high-altitude fighter interception. This rather sophisticated type of activity would probably be carried out in the Western Zone: most of Cuba's Mig-21s are based at San Antonio de los Banos, the Air Defense Command is in that Zone, and the Cuban air defense personnel stationed there appear to be more proficient than in the other Zones. An additional possibility, consistent with this training explanation, is that the Cubans also want close visual reconnaissance and perhaps a photograph of the overflying aircraft.

6. It is also possible that the Cubans have sent up the Mig-21s—and, in the 11 July incident, even indulged in some mild chicanery at a SAM site—to harass the overflying U-2 and see if they could induce it to abort. In fact, the U-2 missions of 1 and 7 July were discontinued after the Mig-21s were scrambled. The flight on 11 July did press on to completion, and, possibly in consequence, the five missions that have flown over the Western Zone since then have evoked no unusual response.

7. We do not think these air defense reactions had the purpose of preventing photography of some secret or sensitive activity in the western part of Cuba. If this had been their serious purpose, we believe the effort would have been greater. Moreover, we cannot identify anything that would seem to require such protection. For example, we have not noted any ocean shipments of suspect cargo arriving at the port of Havana or at other ports in western Cuba at or about the dates indicated.

8. Finally, we do not believe that these departures from the usual behavior of Cuban air defense either represent preparatory moves to shoot down a U-2 or indicate an intention to do so. The SAM system is by far the Cubans' best weapon to effect a shootdown; yet had its use been intended, a number of sites would almost certainly have been brought to an increased state of readiness.

On the other hand, the Mig-21 is not a good weapon against the U-2: it has critical performance limitations at the U-2s' operating altitudes and can only reach such altitudes by a zoom climb maneuver—a very difficult tactic in conjunction with the successful launch of an air-to-air missile.

9. In addition to these considerations, the continuing absence of Cuban propaganda attention to U-2 overflights is striking. Castro has made no recent allusion to the subject, even in his vitriolic anti-US speech at the closing session of the Latin American Solidarity Organization. Yet he has, in recent weeks, tried to make propaganda capital over other matters involving US interests—including the Guantanamo base. Were Castro considering an effort to shoot down a U-2 aircraft, we think that he would probably first be agitating the issue publicly, if only to condition the Cuban people for the possible military consequences of such an action.

The Prospect

10. It is likely that from time to time Mig-21 aircraft will again be scrambled in response to U-2 overflights, and, since some of these aircraft are now based at Holguin, this may occur in the Eastern as well as the Western Zone. The Cubans may seek to harass the overflight to a greater degree in various ways. As an extreme example, they could order one or a number of SAM sites to assume full readiness, and activate the Fan Song missile guidance radar as the U-2 comes near. This might cause some U-2s to abort their flights, but it would greatly increase the risk that a site commander might go ahead and fire without authorization.

11. Whether or not the Cubans try further harassment of U-2 overflights, we believe that the same basic factors which in the past have deterred the Castro government from attempting an actual shutdown will remain operative in the foreseeable future. We think Fidel would still expect a strong military response on the part of the US to such an action, and we think he has become increasingly convinced that he could not count on effective Soviet support in these circumstances. In speeches in late July 1967, both Fidel and his brother Raul (Cuba's Minister of Armed Forces) told the Cuban people that they must be prepared to fight alone in the event of hostilities with the US.

12. The Cuban Government is presently reemphasizing its policy of stimulating and supporting violent revolution elsewhere, particularly in other Latin American countries. This policy has already led to friction in its relations with the Soviet Union. It obviously will also tend to add to the conflict between Cuban and US interests. At least for some time to come, Castro will probably prefer to confine his risky moves to this sphere of revolutionary support, avoiding a U-2 shutdown or other action which would involve a direct challenge to the US.

13. Clearly, the rational considerations which should dissuade Fidel Castro from a shutdown attempt are strong ones. We cannot, however, entirely rule out

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the possibility of an irrational act, particularly in some crisis situation. As we pointed out in our last estimate on Cuba,¹ Castro's emotional make up includes strong aggressive and vindictive tendencies, and he is more disposed than most men to alternating states of depression and exhilaration. While these mental attitudes almost certainly affect his administration of affairs, on the record so far he has typically shown himself cautious and calculating in major policy decisions. Thus, while dangerously irrational or impetuous actions on his part—such as the shutdown of a U-2—are not inconceivable, we do not think they are likely.

¹ NIE 85-87, "Key Issues and Prospects for Castro's Cuba," dated 2 March 1967, ~~SECRET~~.

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