

This incident, I think, has to be understood in the context of what was going on--or was supposed to have been going on--under United Nations auspices since October 24. On that day, Acting U.N. Secretary General U Thant had called for the suspension of arms shipments to Cuba and the suspension of the quarantine for a two or three week period; during this time, negotiations for a peaceful solution to the problem would take place.¹ The American government was annoyed by this proposal, since it in effect would allow work on the missile sites to continue, and the proposal was not accepted. But President Kennedy, in his reply, did state that the United States was willing to take part in preliminary talks to see if "satisfactory arrangements" could be worked out.²

When Ambassador Stevenson transmitted President Kennedy's response, he also turned over to U Thant an outline for a proposal the Secretary General should make to both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.³ This was a proposal that both nations "for a limited time" should avoid a confrontation at sea: if the Soviet ships stayed away from the interception area--which, by the way, was only formally defined for the U.N. on October 27⁴--then the U.S. would also take measures to avoid a naval incident. The idea was to avoid an incident that might sabotage talks that could serve as a "prelude to a political settlement." U Thant's actual letters, sent to Kennedy and Khrushchev later that same day, followed the Stevenson outline fairly closely; and the proposal was quickly accepted by both sides.⁵

What President Kennedy wanted at this time was a two-stage negotiation: first a quick standstill agreement--a freeze on construction at the missile sites--to be followed by a broader negotiation whose goal was to get the Soviets

to withdraw all of their "offensive weapons" from Cuba. To bring all this about was a fundamental aim of American diplomacy, and the plan was discussed at length at the ExCom meeting on October 25. The standstill agreement was what the "preliminary" discussion was supposed to achieve, but it would have to do it quickly. The talks at the U.N., Rusk said, had to be "limited to a very few days" because the weapons in Cuba were rapidly becoming operational. America's immediate goal, the Secretary of State said, was to "stop the missile buildup in Cuba." McNamara agreed that these talks in New York could not go on very long; if they did, "a kind of plateau will have been reached which would make the decision to take new actions very difficult." The President himself, while willing to put off certain decisions on the blockade for a day or so until he saw what the Soviet attitude on these preliminary negotiations was, also agreed that we could not delay too much longer: "He said we must act soon because work on the missile sites is still going on and we must back up very soon the firmness we have displayed up to now."⁶

There is little doubt, from the minutes of the ExCom meeting held the next day--that is, Friday, October 26--that by "negotiation" the President meant talks that would eventually result in a trade involving the Jupiters in Turkey. When U.N. ambassador Stevenson predicted that the Soviets in the longer-term talks would ask for "the dismantlement of U.S. strategic missiles in Turkey," and CIA Director McCone objected to Stevenson's "linking of Soviet missiles in Cuba to U.S. missiles in Turkey," President Kennedy "said we will get the Soviet strategic missiles out of Cuba only by invading Cuba or by trading."⁷ In other words, if the political track being followed in New York were successful, it would ultimately come down to a trade involving the Jupiters.

What exactly happened to the whole proposal for a standstill agreement? It

seems that not much was done to work out an arrangement of this sort. A very sharp dispatch was sent off to U Thant late on October 27: "A number of proposals have been made to you and to the United States in the last thirty-six hours. I would appreciate your urgently ascertaining whether the Soviet Union is willing immediately to cease work on these bases in Cuba and render the weapons inoperable under UN verification so that various solutions can be discussed."⁸ U Thant's response, contained in a brief note to Ambassador Stevenson dated that same day, was unbelievable: "In reply I would like to state that, as I mentioned to you yesterday, I took up the matter of suspension of the construction work on the bases in Cuba with the Prime Minister of Cuba," and he was appending Castro's answer.⁹ With time at a premium, and with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, he had approached the Cubans with the American proposal for a standstill agreement. What seems incredible is that the Soviets, America's real adversary in the crisis, might not have been informed of this basic proposal.

It would in fact be very odd if the Soviets at this time turned down the standstill proposal, with its prospect of real follow-on negotiations, if they had understood that an offer of this sort had actually been made. The reason is that at about this same time they seemed to give into more extreme American demands: on October 26, in the proposals first transmitted via Fomin at 1:30 and then in the famous "first" Khrushchev letter received at 6:00 p.m., they expressed their willingness to withdraw their missiles from Cuba without the quid pro quo of a withdrawal of the American Jupiter missiles from Turkey. It is not clear what new signal they had gotten from the Americans, if any, that had led to this shift in position. It is certainly not clear why they should make these concessions at this point if they were aware that negotiations were still possible via the standstill agreement.

Finally, although this may sound a little far-fetched, you really have to wonder whether the later toughening of the Soviet line--especially the new Khrushchev letter, with its call for an arrangement involving the missiles in Turkey--had anything to do with their finally getting wind of what President Kennedy's real attitude actually was. Perhaps something had been hinted at in informal talks between Soviet and American diplomats at the U.N., the significance of which was realized at the top level of Soviet policy-making only after the first Khrushchev letter had been sent.

For present purposes, the basic point to be made about all of this is that the idea of a trade, negotiated under U.N. auspices, was no last minute departure from existing policy; it had been implicit in the policy Kennedy had tried to pursue during the final days of the crisis, but which, for reasons which remain unclear, had not been carried out.

1. Andrew W. Cordier and Max Harrelson, eds., Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations, [PPSG] vol. VI, U. Thant: 1961-1964 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 238.

2. Stevenson to U Thant, October 25, 1962, DAG-1/5.2.2.6.2-1, U.N. Archives, New York.

3. The outline, not formally titled or signed, but marked "handed to A/SG by Stevenson 25 Oct. '62 - 10.30 am," is in DAG-1/5.2.2.6.2-1, U.N. Archives, New York.

4. Stevenson to U Thant, October 27, 1962, DAG-1/5.2.2.6.2-1, U.N. Archives. The interception area was defined by two circles each with a radius of 500 nautical miles, with centers at Havana and Cape Maysi.

5. PPSG, VI, 240-243

6. Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 5, October 25, 1962, 5:00 PM, National Security Files, Box 315, Kennedy Library.

7. Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 6, October 26, 1962, 10:00 AM, National Security Files, Box 316, Kennedy Library.

8. NSC Executive Committee Record of Action, October 27, 1962, 4:00 PM, Meeting No. 8, National Security Files, Box 316, Kennedy Library.

9. U Thant to Stevenson, October 27, 1962, DAG-1/5.2.2.6.1-2, U.N. Archives,
New York.