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CIA MEMORANDUM

13 July 1959

U. S. Negotiating Position on Berlin - 1959-62

1. The Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum states a US view of the probable alteration of the balance of military power between the present and 1961/62. The West's ability to maintain its position in Berlin after a moratorium would depend on many nonmilitary factors and also upon interim developments which cannot now be foreseen. Among these will be the view the Soviets will then take of their over-all power position vis-a-vis the West, since this will determine the degree of pressure they will think it feasible to apply. They may, for example, take a different view of the military trends discussed above. Likewise, the view taken generally in the West of the relative power position will bear heavily on the outcome of a new trial of strength over the city.

2. In our view, the probable course of developments between now and 1961/62 will lead both the Soviets and the West to conclude that the relative power position of the USSR has substantially improved, and that the position of the West in Berlin is more untenable than it is now. The most important and the most predictable of these is the Soviets' relative gain in nuclear delivery capabilities referred to above. Their increased ability to inflict catastrophic damage on the West, and particularly on the US, is likely to convince them that they can apply still greater pressure on positions like Berlin without assuming increased risks. Awareness of these Soviet gains may reduce the inclination in the West to take a firm and united stand for an exposed position like Berlin. In Western Europe in particular, realization that the US has become more vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack may sap the conviction that the USSR would in a showdown really be deterred by US retaliatory capability. Any decline of confidence in US power would also have some erosive effect on the firmness of the resistance spirit in West Berlin.

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3. Other developments over the next few years are likely to reinforce an impression in both the Bloc and the West that the Bloc is growing stronger relative to the West. The outlook is for a period of political stability within the Bloc under the firm leadership of Khrushchev. Bloc economic growth is likely to continue at a rate more rapid than that of the West. New Soviet scientific achievements are likely to further enhance Soviet world prestige. At the same time, NATO seems likely to be in for a rough passage, in part over issues unrelated to the confrontation with the USSR, and this will probably add to an impression of declining strength in the West relative to the USSR.

4. A number of developments are possible by 1961/62 which may counterbalance the impression that the USSR is in a stronger position to contest an issue like Berlin. It is possible, for example, that Khrushchev will no longer be on hand to give Soviet policy its present quality of exuberant and confident brinkmanship. After his departure from the scene other Soviet leaders, especially in the early succession phase, might play a more cautious game. There may be political or economic difficulties and setbacks within some Bloc states, or in relations between members of the Bloc, which would diminish the impression of growing Soviet power. Depending on wholly unpredictable political developments in the principal Western states, the West may react to the sense of a growing Soviet threat by increasing its unity and determination.

5. Taken together, all the above considerations point in the direction of making the Berlin position more difficult to defend at a later date. Nevertheless, the tendency is not in our view so highly probable or so weighty that we must take this as a foregone conclusion. The importance of factors which cannot now be foreseen is likely to be as great as those which can now be tentatively estimated. It is also possible that the Soviets will estimate that their over-all world position in 1961/62 offers such favorable prospects of important gains without serious risks that they will not wish to provoke a sharp new crisis over Berlin which would jeopardize such gains. Moreover, the West has open to it actions and policies which could have the effect of improving the outlook.

3.

6. Even if the relative Soviet power position improves in fact and in the world's view of it, we believe that the USSR will still be under considerable constraint, in 1961/62, in seeking to enforce its will on a key issue like Berlin. The Soviets' relative gain in nuclear capabilities will not enable them to conclude that they can surely defeat the West in a general nuclear war at a cost that they would regard as acceptable, except in the highly unlikely event that they were able to achieve complete strategic surprise. They will still be deterred from bringing maximum pressure to bear because they will still wish to avoid nuclear war and they will still be uncertain that the West would allow itself to be expelled from Berlin without going to war. The fact that there will continue to be a considerable degree of deterrence imposed on Soviet actions will mean that, in 1961/62 as at present, they will be led to seek their aims by negotiation. Their negotiating position will probably be stronger but it will not be so decisively strong as to compel the West to accept their demands.

7. All of these imponderables bearing on the situation following a moratorium period would be profoundly affected by the actual terms of the moratorium. Most damaging to the strength of the Western position in 1961/62 would be any implication in those terms that at the end of the moratorium a fundamental change in the status of the city was a foregone conclusion. On the other hand, if the West agreed merely to resume negotiations later, without prejudice to its present rights and clearly with the intention to continue to uphold them and with them the freedom of the city, this fact would offset other factors acting to weaken the Western position. The terms of the moratorium would probably be the singly most important factor affecting the attitude of the population and political leadership of West Berlin in particular. Likewise any so-called peripheral concessions attending the moratorium, in particular any reduction of Western troop strength in Berlin, could seriously weaken the will of the city to maintain resistance. Without this, as the Soviets clearly recognize by their attempts to obtain drastic peripheral concessions, the position in West Berlin would in fact become indefensible.