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OFF SECY OF DEFENSE

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July 21, 1961

Dear General Norstad:

I enjoyed reading your recent telegram regarding Berlin (ALO 565) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I agree thoroughly with you on the need for a position of great flexibility in preparing for a Berlin crisis. Your comment on the desirability of arranging our preparations so as to avoid stimulating counterproductive Soviet reactions seems to me very well taken. You can be sure that your suggestions will be taken fully into account in our preparations for a Berlin crisis.

I wanted, in this connection, to write you my views concerning the relation to that crisis of the military planning which NATO will be discussing and undertaking in the months ahead.

I am anxious that this discussion and planning be geared, insofar as feasible, to needs which will be particularly important in the light of the Berlin crisis -- recognizing that this crisis may last for a very considerable period, on an on-again off-again basis.

This would mean, I should think, focusing particularly on efforts (i) to fulfill approved (MC-70) NATO force goals, particularly on the Central Front; and (ii) to agree on the need to improve the mobility, equipment, training, and manning levels of these forces, as you have recommended in your 1966 goals -- beginning with units which are in existence or can be created fairly quickly.

I hope that the Alliance can concentrate on this in the months ahead and that allied agreement and action on these programs will not be delayed in an attempt to secure agreement on more long-term proposals, notably those for nuclear programs additional to MC-70.

I understand the military considerations that have prompted you to seek MRBM's as part of your 1966 force requirements, in order to fulfill the nuclear strike functions now performed by your strike aircraft. I also understand the long lead time necessarily involved in any such program.

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By MR/PJ Date 3/13/96

SecDef Cont. No. 1425

This proposal raises, however, troubling and sensitive political issues. It also raises questions of priority relative to other military tasks. There is, as a result, a substantial difference of opinion within the Alliance as to whether, and if so how, MRBM's should be deployed to NATO forces. Considerable time will be required to resolve that difference one way or another.

I hope that the Alliance can continue to discuss and consider this matter, including the proposal in my Ottawa speech for a truly multilateral sea-borne missile force. A Berlin crisis does not seem the best time, however, for the divisive debate that might be triggered by a crash attempt to resolve this issue quickly -- in time to link it with agreement and action on other NATO force goals. I hope that we can reach agreement on these other goals and press toward their fulfillment with all possible despatch. The MRBM issue should, in the view of this Government, be left for later resolution.

The possibility of a Berlin crisis should bring home to all of us the foresight and wisdom that you have shown in guiding the Alliance toward early force improvements. The Secretary of Defense will be discussing with you the actions that we propose to take, and ask our allies to take, to this end.

I want you to know that you have the full confidence of this Government in these continuing efforts to strengthen and unify the Alliance. I want particularly to commend the views which you expressed on July 7 to the French Chief of Staff, General Ollie; they coincide fully with my own. You were wholly right in indicating that the U. S. desire to accord priority to conventional forces should not cause any one to doubt the U. S. will to use nuclear weapons if need be.

I am writing you these views without in any way wanting to interject myself into the chain of command between you and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense, nor to set up a channel of communication outside that chain of command. I felt, however, that the Berlin crisis was of such over-riding importance that it would be useful to pass on my thoughts to you at this time.

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

General Lauris Norstad,
Supreme Allied Commander Europe,
Paris, France.