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"The Soviet and Cuban involvement in the Horn of Africa"

by Mira Ivic

In this paper I aim to discuss Soviet involvement in the Horn of Africa, in terms of its interests and in terms of the complex political reality of the region—not so much in a sense of East-West rivalry. This approach will lead not only to an examination of Soviet relations with the two main belligerent countries (Ethiopia and Somalia), but also Moscow's response to the nature of internal and regional conflicts in the Horn.

The current debate, like similar debates of earlier years, has revolved around the question of whether Soviet foreign policy in Africa is motivated by a 'master plan' or by response to opportunities posed by local political conditions. Some western observers, who are occupied with East-West power relations, perceive the Soviet policy in Africa to reflect the grand design for the eventual victory of the world communism. But it is becoming increasingly clear that Soviet foreign policy, as Vernon Aspaturian stated: "amounts to something less than a master plan... yet it is something much more than a sequence of responses to the targets of opportunity".¹ As a superpower, the Soviet Union does indeed respond to opportunities in the Third World countries. This, however, is not to say that Moscow is incapable of creating some of its own openings and introduce policy de novo even where the openings appear to be limited or absent.

In the Horn of Africa, Soviet foreign policy is best described as reactive and pragmatic. It has been reactive in the sense that Moscow's

1. Aspaturian, V. "Soviet global power and the correlation of forces", Problem of Communism, 1980, vol. 29, p. 1.

initiatives have come in response to regional political instability. The pragmatic aspect of the Soviet policy, however, was demonstrated when Moscow tried to exploit the situation that presented itself but was careful to avoid avert challenges which might elicit unpredictable Western response.

After the disappointment which Soviet Union encountered in its early involvement in Africa in the 1960's, two major developments occurred which have been of great importance in triggering the Soviet actions in the Horn in the 1970's. Firstly, the coups d'etates in Somalia in 1969 and Ethiopia in 1974 provided Moscow with an opening to fill a power vacuum left by the downfall of ineffective regimes. Secondly, after 1974 the presence of Cuban troops in Africa enabled Soviet Union to intervene militarily without provoking serious opposition from African countries. Thus the use of a proxy state allowed Moscow to have a less perceptible military presence but a not less effective one - an important factor when considering African sensitivity to direct superpower involvement.

What, in fact, introduced the Soviet factor into the Horn was the struggle between Ethiopia and Somalia over the Ogaden region. Since independence in 1960, Mogadishu (Somalia's capital) maintained that the Ogaden (the desert which constitute one-quarter of Ethiopian territory but inhabited mainly by ethnic Somalis) formed a legitimate part of Somalia. The reason for the incorporation of ethnic Somalis with Ethiopia was the legacy of accommodations reached at the turn of the century between the European powers and Ethiopia. In the post-colonial era, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia's capital) was able to use its independence and legal interpretation of treaties to keep its claim to the Ogaden.

Consequently, the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) - and supported by Somalia-staged a sporadic guerilla war in the region. As a result of persuing the irredentist policy, Mogadishu required strong and well equipped armed forces.

Concerned with the substantial increase of American military aid to Ethiopia in the mid-1960's, Somalia turned to Moscow for its aid. At this point, Soviet Union has sought to take an advantage of the new opening and provided Somalia with sufficient military support to transform itself into a new significant regional power. In return for military aid, Moscow gained facilities at Berbera and was given access to Somalia's airfields for the purposes of naval reconnaissance. So by early 1970's Somalia has become Soviet Union's most loyal ally in Africa. This loyalty was expressed in signing a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with Moscow in 1974.

The fact that Soviet Union gained access to Berbera raised the question of Moscow's intentions and interests in the region. It became increasingly clear that Soviet actions in the Horn were not only motivated by opportunism but also by strategic and political interests. Most crucial strategic importance of the Horn was stressed by the Soviet authorities: "the importance of this region is determined by its geographical situation and the juncture of two continents - Asia and Africa, by the presence of first-class ports in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, and what is most important, by the fact that important sea-lanes, linking the oil producing countries with America and Europe, pass through the region".² A foothold in the Horn would thus enable Moscow to dominate

2. Tass, February 8, 1978

the oil life-lines which are vital to Western economies. This could be of great consequence in the major confrontation between Soviet Union and the West.

In addition to Soviet interests as indicated above, Moscow's primary objective is to secure access to air and naval base facilities in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. This goal has become important especially after Soviet setback in the Middle East in the 1970's. It seems as if the Kremlin officials tried to compensate for their losses in one region by seeking to expand influence in another. Through the use of air and sea facilities in the area Soviet Union could influence the events both in Africa and Middle East. Thus Moscow might not have a master plan in the Horn, but it does have a strategic vision of the region.

Moreover, Kremlin's decision to become involved in the Horn was not only motivated by the strategic benefits but also by the desire to undermine pro-Western influence and fill the power vacuum. For more than twenty years Washington enjoyed a reliable friendship with Haile Selassie. The American policy towards the region was affected by three major concerns. Firstly, to maintain access to Kagnew base near Asmara in Eritrea - this base was an important link in the world-wide network of United States' military communications. Secondly, opposing the Soviet presence in Somalia and the Red Sea; and thirdly, developing a policy towards Africa. On the basis of American major concern, Washington supplied Ethiopia over the period of twenty-five years with 278.6 million dollars in military aid and 350 million dollars in economic aid.³ By the mid-1970's it seems

3. "United States relations with Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa", Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 94th Congress, second session, p. 2.

that Moscow was rather concerned with American position in Ethiopia.

After 1974, the developments in the Horn presented Soviet Union with an opportunity to intervene and win the influence at the expense of the United States. The new Ethiopian regime, which came to power in 1975 following the military coup in 1974 and led by the Derg (Provisional Military Administrative Council), began to take a radical and anti-American position. At the same time, the Eritrean insurgent groups in the northern part of Ethiopia (traditionally supported by Moscow in its fight for independence from Addis Ababa) had taken advantage of the country's internal unrest by launching an attack on Asmara (the regional capital). Somalia, also taking advantage of Ethiopia's turmoil, pressed its claim in the Ogaden.

As Ethiopia faced the growing internal threat from the Eritrean nationalist movement and external threat from Somalia, the Derg looked to the Superpowers for military support. Moscow's initial reaction toward the Derg was one of caution. In the first instance, the Soviet Union only offered economic aid—presumably it still had doubts about the Derg and its proclaimed system of 'Scientif Socialism'. More important, the Kremlin officials' did not wish to antagonise Somalia. On the other hand, the United States, under the 1953 Military assistance agreement with Haile Selassie and despite its suspicion whether cordial relations could be maintained with the Derg, continued to supply arms to Ethiopia. During the 1975 the Derg received 135 million dollars in arms sale credit. In addition to this sum, the United States Congress authorised another 53 million dollars. In fact, the first concrete change in Ethiopian-American relations did not take place until 1976.

4. Steven, D., "Realignment in the Horn: The Soviet Advantage", International Security, Fall 1979, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 74.

Throughout that year a combination of factors pushed the emerging leader of the Derg, Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, to take an increasingly anti-Washington and pro-Moscow stance. As a self proclaimed Socialist and revolutionary, Mengistu found it rather embarrassing and politically dangerous to be so dependent upon the chief benefactor of the previous regime. He also hoped that tilting toward the Soviets would provide an opportunity of getting Moscow to restrain both Somalia and the Eritrean rebels. Furthermore, accusing the United States of withholding arms supply to Ethiopia, in the wake of Carter's concern of human rights issue, Mengistu travelled to Moscow in December 1976 to conclude a 385 million dollars arms agreement. At this point, the virtual United States arms monopoly in Ethiopia has ended. Nonetheless, Ethiopia's agreement with Moscow, though crucial, did not result in immediate breakdown in Washington-Addis Ababa relations.

The actual shifting alliances in the Horn did not become apparent until February 1977. Following the intense power struggle, within the Derg, Mengistu emerged as undisputed leader. He immediately proclaimed that in the future Ethiopia would turn to the Socialist bloc for arms. In response, the Carter administration announced that it was halving its Military Assistance Advisory Group and closing down the Kagnev base. Not to be outdone, in April Mengistu expelled American advisers and demanded for the evacuation of the Kagnev base. Without anticipating any serious damage to American interests, Washington cut off the military aid and programmes to Ethiopia completely.

Therefore, as the American-Ethiopian relations came to a halt, Soviet Union was presented with an opening to get actively involved in the

Horn. The most important challenge for Moscow was to solve the Ethiopian-Somali dispute over the Ogaden. At first, Soviet Union tried to persuade Somalia, by referring to their Friendship and Cooperation Treaty of 1974, to cease using force in pursuit of its irredentist claims in the Ogaden. The aim was to reconcile the differences between the two countries on the basis that both shared a similar ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism. Subsequently, Moscow proposed to embrace all Marxist States of the Red Sea (Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and possibly the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) in a federation. In this proposal the Eritrean question was to be solved within the framework of the confederation which would allow room for Eritrean autonomy.⁵ When such a solution proved politically impossible, the Soviet Union decided to stand behind Ethiopia on the Ogaden issue - yet hoping to maintain its relations with Somalia.

Mogadishu's response to the major shift in Soviet policy was immediate and intense. In an attempt to dissuade Moscow from 'leaning to one side', Somalia reminded Kremlin of the long period of friendship and cooperation.⁶ But one thing was clear: Moscow had made its choice.

Aware of the Soviet decision, Siad Barre (Somalia's President) embarked on a active search for support within the anti-communist Arab bloc.

In the meantime, Sudan, Egypt and Sudi Arabia made no secret of their concern over the growing flow of Soviet arms to Ethiopia. These

5. Novik, N. On the Shores of Bab Al-Mandab, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Pennsylvania, 1979, p. 31.

6. Ibid. p. 34

countries urged Siad Barre to start phasing out Soviet presence in Somalia and promised military assistance. Saudi Arabia offered 300 million dollars annually in aid, while Egypt and Sudan promised arms and ammunition. ⁷

As to the possible American arms transfer to Somalia, the Carter administration was reluctant to make firm commitment. In his news Conference on 29th July 1977, Secretary Vance declared: "we have indicated that 'in principle' we would be prepared to consider the furnishing of some military assistance for defensive arms...". ⁸ Mogadishu, however, interpreted this vague statement as a signal that Washington was prepared to supply aid.

Concerned with the rapid Soviet-supported arms build up in Ethiopia and hoping to receive assistance from the United States, Somalia embarked upon the military campaign in summer of 1977 to seal the faith of the Ogaden desert. During the early stages of the confrontation with Ethiopia, the WSLF, acting in conjunction with Somali army, achieved a de facto control of most parts of the region. For several months it looked as if Somalia would alter the Horn's geopolitical status quo in its favour.

It took the combined efforts of the freshly equipped Ethiopian army and militia backed by 16,000 Cuban forces to push back the Somali-WSLF troops and reoccupy the Ogaden. In the preparation for the final

7. Ibid. p. 36

8. Secretary Vance's News Conference of July 29, 1977, U.S. Department of State Bulletin, vol. 77, no. 1991, p. 222.

counter-offensive in November, the Soviet Union staged the most massive and sustained air and sea lift operation since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. An estimate 15% of total Soviet airlift capacity was used and 1 billion dollars worth of equipment was supplied to Ethiopia.⁹ The whole operation was allegedly directed by General Grigory Barislolov, the former head of the Soviet military mission to Somalia. By March 1978 Somalia was not only heavily defeated but suffered a great loss in military equipment.

In addition to the Ogaden conflict, Moscow committed itself to helping the Derg solve the secessionist rebellion in Eritrea. Failing to bring a political solution to the problem, the Soviet Union, with the help of Cuban instructors and advisers, tried to suppress the Eritreans by force.

Moscow's arms aid to Ethiopia during the Ogaden war enraged Somalia. In retaliation Siad Barre in November 1977 abrogated the Friendship and Cooperation Treaty of 1974, expelled Soviet advisers (the number of Soviet advisers in Somalia was a well kept secret, but estimates range between 1,500-4,000)¹⁰ and instructed Soviets to leave their bases in Somalia. At the same time Barre broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba. To all this, the Soviet Union replied by building up in Ethiopia the most massive base

9. Report of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Regional Conflict and Superpower Rivalry in the Horn of Africa, Australian government Publishing Service, Canberra, April 1984, pp. 76-7.

10. U.S. News and World Report, November 28, 1977, vol. 83, no. 28, p. 80.

in Africa. In 1978 Ethiopia and Soviet Union signed a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty. This event had put an end to the Soviet-Somalia flirtation which had been feature of politics in the Horn since the mid 1960's.

But why did Moscow give its support to politically unstable Ethiopia and risked the alliance with Somalia where it had made considerable investment over the years to obtain access to Berbera? What exactly did Soviet Union aim to achieve by shifting alliances? One thing is clear; Moscow did not wish to make a choice between Somalia and Ethiopia.

In December 1977 the Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia told the American Fact-Finding-Mission that Somalia's pursuit of the war in the Ogaden infuriated his government, and consequently Moscow backed Ethiopia.¹¹ This statement coincide with declaration issued in Moscow in January 1978: "despite the friendly warnings by the genuine friends of Somali people...the Soviet Union had, 'as always in such cases', sided with the victim....¹² Most likely the Soviet Union feared that continued support to Somalia was bound to put Moscow in an unfavourable position with African countries - most of whom respect the principle of territorial integrity according to established boundaries, illogical or arbitrary as it might seem.

11. The Report of the "Fact-Finding Mission to Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya", to a Committee on International Relations, House of Representative, 95th Congress, Second Session, p. 5.

12. Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 1978, vol. 24, p. 28991.

Furthermore, Siad Barre's wheeling and dealing with leaders of the Arab World, particularly with Saudi Arabia in early 1977, probably caused suspicion on the Soviet part. This is hardly surprising since Moscow has been aware of the power of the Petro-dollar diplomacy which helped to reverse the Superpower connection with Egypt in the mid 1970.

It seems as if Moscow has also seen certain advantages in being an ally with Ethiopia. The latter is the major regional power. It enjoys dominating geographic position in the Horn and large population. The lack of Ethiopia's Indian Ocean coastline was compensated not only by its more central position on the African continent, but also by proximity to areas of Soviet strategic concern across the Red Sea.¹³ Plus, Addis Ababa had a great deal of prestige in Africa. As a host to the headquarters to the Organization of African Unity (OAU), Ethiopia was seen as a strong base from which Soviet Union could influence African politics.

From the ideological point of view, the revolution in Ethiopia in 1974 was interpreted by the Soviet Union very much within the Marxist framework. Vasiliy Kuznetsov, the first vice president of the Soviet Union, declared that: "the Soviet Union regards the Ethiopian revolution as a component part of the world revolutionary process".¹⁴ What this really means is that Soviet role in Ethiopia is not confined only to supplying military aid, but its role is to promote and consolidate the world revolution.

13. Brind, H. "Soviet Policy in the Horn of Africa", International Affairs, Winter 1983/4, vol. 60, no. 1, p. 89.

14. Pravda, September 21, 1978. p. 4.

At this stage it is necessary to ask further questions: how did the United States react towards the events unfolding in the Horn after 1977? What can we say about the American mood that prevailed at the time? Reactions from Washington were wavering and irresolute. Much of its failure to respond came from the split in the Carter administration over whether the conflict in the Horn should be viewed primarily in the East-West terms or in the African context. In the end, the Carter administration felt that the territorial dispute in the Horn was an African problem and that African problems are best solved by Africans in an African context. Thus it is understandable why Washington was reluctant to send arms to Somalia during the Ogaden war. It feared that involvement in the Horn would transfer what is essentially local dispute to a confrontation with broader strategic implications. ¹⁵

On the other hand, one could argue that Washington's unwillingness to act was the result of unclear American interest in the region. The United States was initially interested in Ethiopia's potential as a communication centre, not in its strategic value. Only with the Soviet invasion of Afganisatan in December 1979 did Washington become seriously concerned with Moscow's intention in the Third World countries, and displayed an interest in the Horn of Africa - but even then with considerable hesitation. The actual decision to support Somalia militarily did not come until 1980. Funds for aid programme were not approved by Congress until a year later (in the final days of the Carter administration).

15. White House Transcript of President Carter's State of Union address as delivered to joint session of Congress on January 19, 1978. Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, vol. 36, no. 4, p. 215.

As to the American mood at the time, it was inclined to keep out of the Third World conflicts. The post-Vietnam feeling did not permit America to play a more active role. Thus the door was left open for Soviet penetration. Therefore, the Soviet success in Ethiopia was partially due to the lack of challenge on American part.

Despite the arguments above, it is safe to say that Washington had only limited room for manoeuvre - for it did not wish to go against the OAU's majority view. The majority of OAU members based their decision (favourable to the Soviets and Cubans) on the ground that Moscow was invited to intervene by the legitimate government (the Derg) to defend Ethiopia's boundaries from Somalia. Siad Barre's regime was identified as an aggressor which - contrary to the OAU charter - was seeking to alter the established border by force. Clearly, the weight of African opinion was in favour of Ethiopia rather than Somalia.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, one of the main reasons for successful Soviet intervention was the fact that it was facilitated by the introduction of Cuban troops. Why did Cuba intervene in the Horn? Was Cuba simply a proxy for the Soviet Union, or did Cuba pursue ultimately different goals and policy?

Fidel Castro defended Cuba's role in Africa on the basis that his soldiers were fighting for 'just cause'.¹⁶ The 'just cause', being, of course, the survival of the revolution and the regimes which Cuba considered revolutionary. In many ways, therefore, this would mean that

16. Granma, September 5, 1980.

Havana has legitimate interests around the world. And consequently one could argue that Cuba's role not only in the Horn but also in Africa is largely determined by ideological significance. Furthermore, Cuba's creation of political alliances with radical African regimes demonstrates the assertion of the Castro's leadership over much of the Third World.

As to the Soviet-Cuban relationship in the Horn, it is extremely complex. The simplistic interpretation which places Cubans in a subordinate role dismisses the real point. Moscow and Havana largely depend on one another. For instance, in crushing the Somali incursion into Ethiopia's Ogaden, Moscow has provided logistics support while Cuba supplied troops. This arrangement promoted not only Soviet and Cuban interests, but also greatly enhanced Cuba's value as a strategic ally to the Soviet Union.

In fact, there are instances where Fidel Castro have tried to take initiatives independent of Moscow. Firstly, he tried to persuade Somalia to embrace the idea of a federation of Marxist-Leninist States. Secondly, Castro refused to allow Cuban troops to fight against the Eritreans - for he maintained that Eritrean campaign is an internal matter rather than the case of external aggression. All this amounts to the fact that Cuba does and can make its own international assessment and often took action that preceded Soviet commitment in the Horn.

On the whole, the Soviet involvement in the Horn of Africa is a clear example that Moscow has the 'will' and 'capacity' to use military presence in the Third World countries to affect a political change in its favour. The sea and air lift operation during the Ogaden war was a

dramatic illustration of the emergence of the Soviet Union as a global power. Quite clearly, Moscow has demonstrated to have the ability to airlift several divisions with heavy equipment not only in the Horn, but that it could also extend this operation to Middle East if necessary.

The Horn has been a curious mixture of success and failure, of caution and assertiveness for the Soviet Union. At first, Moscow pledged its support to both Somalia and Ethiopia - trusting the force of Socialist aspiration to control historic rivalry and ambition in the region. Later, the Soviet Union was desperately aiming to perform the role of mediator between the two socialist neighbours. Thus the Kremlin failed to understand that the question of Nationalism and territorial boundaries is the most important aspect of African politics. Consequently, Moscow has ended by losing its position in Somalia and vastly enlarging its place in Ethiopia.

The rift between Somalia and Soviet Union, and subsequent shift in alliances led to an escalation of arms race in the Horn. Between 1977 - 17
1980 Ethiopia's armed forces grew from 50,800 to 229,500 men under arm.
Today Ethiopia has about 250,000 men under arm, and it introduced National conscription. In contrast, Somalia's military grew from 25,000 to 61,500 men. ¹⁸ The military expenditure also skyrocketed. In Ethiopia it more than doubled and in Somalia it tripled.

At the moment there is an intense competition between the Superpowers to make sure that its respective clients are adequately armed. Moscow is

17. International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 1976-77, p. 42; 1980-81 p. 52.

18. Ibid. 1976-77, p. 43; 1980-81, p. 54.

the biggest military spender in the Horn. During 1977-1984, Soviet Union has supplied Ethiopia with 4 billion dollars worth of military aid.¹⁹ The United States, on the other hand, is aiming to meet any future Soviet-sponsored threat to its new clients in the region (Somalia, Kenya and Sudan) and introduced a massive economic and military aid. Thus the Reagan administration is determined to observe the Soviets behaviour in the Horn - especially in relation towards their intention in the Middle East and Indian Ocean.

But the Soviet future in the Horn is rather uncertain. Indeed, Ethiopia is a fragile ally. It is a faction-ridden country where there is continuous fighting. The Ogaden and Eritrean conflicts remain unresolved. Somali insurgency is still active in the Ogaden despite the continued deployment in the area of more than 5,000 Cuban combat troops. For more than a year, however, Havana, due to its growing economic crisis, is seriously considering to withdraw Cuban forces from Ethiopia.

What sort of developments are likely to occur should Cuba pull out its troops from the Horn, and whether Ethiopia will create a 'vanguard party' (as insisted by Moscow in order to institutionalise socialism and promised by the Derg to do so by the end of September 1984) - is yet to be seen. In the meantime, Moscow has all its cards on the Derg.

19. Keller, E.J. "The Ethiopian Revolution at the Cross Roads", Current History, vol 83, no. 491, p. 120.