



**SOVIET-AMERICAN
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**III. THE SOVIET-U.S.
CONFRONTATION
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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That the next important Soviet-American confrontation is already under way in southern Africa is by now a well-worn cliché. Three main points about it should be kept in mind. First, it is true. Second, southern Africa is the only area in the world where now and in the future the Soviets hold more cards than the Americans. However, third, southern Africa is not the major regional area of Soviet-American confrontation and will not become so: Europe, the Middle East, and Asia are much more important to Moscow and Washington.
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Some Historical Background

In the early 1960s the Soviet Union and the United States first became involved in Africa. They did so for three reasons: the power vacuum left there by the British, French, and Belgian withdrawal; Khrushchev's decision to combine Soviet-U.S. détente with a forward policy in the underdeveloped world, primarily in the Middle East and India, but also in Africa as well; and Kennedy's response to it

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This preliminary survey and analysis is primarily based upon discussions in Kenya, Zambia, Rhodesia, South Africa, and Southwest Africa in August 1976. I am grateful to The Reader's Digest, of which I am a moving editor, and to its editor-in-chief, Edward T. Thompson, for sponsoring my trip, and to the Earhart and Carthage Foundations for research support. The discussions which I had were so extensive and as to their participants and nature often so

Because for some time the black guerrillas seemed unsuccessful, Washington in 1971 incorrectly estimated that the white redoubt would hold out for a long time and therefore tilted U.S. policy in its favor. The main American miscalculation, however, was not about the black guerrilla movements but about the durability of Portuguese colonialism. The black guerrillas in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique won, as the FLN had in Algeria, by exhausting the will to fight of the metropolitan colonial power. Moreover, uniquely, some of the Portuguese officers in Africa were influenced by left-wing ideologies, including that of the black guerrillas. The 1974 coup d'etat in Lisbon, the watershed in recent southern African affairs, brought to power officers many of whom favored the leftist black guerrillas, notably the MPLA in Angola, and thereby contributed to the recent rise in Soviet influence there.

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The causes of the Soviet and Cuban victory in Angola are by now fairly clear. Moscow long gave financial and arms aid to the

² William E. Griffith, "Soviet Policy in Africa and Latin America--the Cuban Connection," in William E. Griffith, ed., The Soviet Empire: Expansion and Detente (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976.) pp. 337-341; John A. Marcum, "Lessons of Angola," Foreign Affairs, April 1976 and F. Stephen Larrabee, "Moscow, Angola and the Dialectics of Detente," The World Today, May 1976. For background, see John A. Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969). For background on Soviet-Cuban relations, see Jacques Lévesque, L'URSS et la révolution cubaine (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale

unsuccessful support of urban and rural guerrilla movement in Latin America would be somewhat counterbalanced by Cuban presence in Africa.

The Soviet and Cuban victory in the Angolan civil war was primarily due to their massive commitment of air and sea-lift capability and ground troops. They began it, probably, to counter Chinese aid to the FNLA and soon increased it to overcome the insufficient, covert U.S. aid to the FNLA and the later covert South African aid to Unita. Ford and Kissinger, as the Soviets may well have correctly calculated, underestimated three factors: the size and speed of the Soviet and Cuban commitment; Congressional opposition to U.S. involvement, particularly covert, in what seemed to many another open-ended Vietnam-type commitment; and the counterproductive results in black Africa and in Congress of appearing to be carrying on a parallel policy with South Africa. The Chinese, in contrast, realizing that they lacked the military capability to counter the Soviet and Cuban commitment, got out of Angola early.

The South African miscalculation in Angola was even greater, and Pretoria could so much less afford to miscalculate. For it seemed to black-ruled Angola and Mozambique, to the black guerrillas fighting the whites in Rhodesia and Southwest Africa, and to the black activists within South Africa, that Pretoria, hitherto seemingly so invincible, had been defeated and quit. This new black perception

of whites made the victory of the 6 million blacks over the roughly quarter of a million whites seem only a question of time.

South African pressure on Smith and Henry Kissinger's mediation made Smith give in. (London, which had often failed to settle the Rhodesian crisis, played only a secondary role.) As the late 1975 unsuccessful Victoria Falls negotiations had shown, South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, and Botswana (but not Angola, Mozambique, and the Soviet Union) share a common interest: moderate, stable black rule rather than pro-Soviet guerrilla victory in Rhodesia. The United States, galvanized by the MPLA victory in Angola and the U.S. blunders which preceded it, had a pressing reason to press toward the same objective. Vorster knew, even if Smith at first did not, that Smith's game was up. He wanted to encourage U.S. negotiations with South Africa in order to break through Pretoria's isolation, hold open the possibility of U.S. support later on, and end the Rhodesia guerrilla struggle before the Soviets gained too much from it and it gave further impetus to the black demonstrations in South Africa. The Soviets, conversely, did what little they could to prevent the success of Kissinger's negotiations.

As of this writing (late October 1976) it is too early to tell what the results will be. Smith had backed out of the agreements

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For the Soviet attitude, see, e.g., V. Kudryavtsev, "Conspiracy against Africa," Izvestiya, Aug. 14, 1976 (FBIS/SOV/Aug. 18, 1976 B5-8.)

It was not surprising, therefore, that the five confrontation states plus Nkomo and Mugabe initially rejected some parts of the agreement. The alternative would presumably have been a split and therefore the radical least common denominator was chosen. But this was probably essentially a counter-proposal (i.e. to impose immediate black rule on Smith) and the resultant negotiations will likely be long and frustrating. Even so, black rule now seems almost inevitable, and soon.

Thereafter, however, the black splits in and outside of Zimbabwe and the continuing Soviet efforts to gain influence there make the future unpredictable. It could range anywhere from stability to an Angolan-type war. For a time it seems probable that black-ruled Zimbabwe will be absorbed by its own problems--unless its leaders try to distract attention from them by supporting guerrilla action against South Africa sooner than they otherwise might.

Namibia/Southwest Africa

After Smith's acceptance of black rule in Salisbury, black rule seems likely soon to come to Namibia as well. But like Zimbabwe, an independent Namibia may suffer from considerable and prolonged instability.

The only significant guerrilla movement in Namibia, SWAPO, long armed and financed by Moscow, has not been involved in the so-called

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This analysis is primarily based on my visit to Windhoek in August 1976. Cf. Marion Gräfin Dönhoff from Windhoek, "Nach Angola: Sturmzeichen in Südwest," Die Zeit, June 4, 1976 and John Barratt, "Southern Africa," Foreign Affairs, October 1976.

South Africa, the United States, Zambia, Tanzania, and Botswana share the same common interest in Namibia that they do in Zimbabwe: a rapid transition to moderate, stable black rule rather than prolonged guerrilla struggle and eventual victory of a radicalized, pro-Soviet guerrilla movement. So far the stumbling block has been the extent of SWAPO participation in a black government. How and when this issue can be settled remains to be seen. Some agreement, however, seems likely, since Vorster can hardly have much interest in obstructing it after his agreement in principle to black rule in Zimbabwe, and Kaunda and Nyerere may be able to help persuade SWAPO to compromise as well. Yet SWAPO operates out of Angola as well as Zambia, and Angola (and Mozambique) may obstruct a settlement. Moscow, which has some influence over SWAPO, will try to do the same. A settlement for Rhodesia will not be easy to implement. It may well be that the possible future pattern in Zimbabwe--tribally-based rivalry made worse by clashing external powers abroad--will be repeated in an independent, black-ruled Namibia.

South Africa

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The situation in South Africa today is in some respects similar to those in Rhodesia and Southwest Africa, notably in that the black

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What follows is based primarily on conversations in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, East London, and Umtata in August 1976. See the excellent analysis by John de St. Jorre, "Inside the Laager: White Power in South Africa," Foreign Affairs, October 1976 and, for

of southern Africa: a black youth and student revolt which has spread throughout the country and to the coloureds as well. It is a nationalistic, social revolutionary and generational revolt. It rejects all authority, black, coloured, white, and any dialogue with whites, or often any with its own parents. Its ideology and some of its leaders come from the Black Consciousness movement and black university students. In Soweto the black secondary schools elected their own representatives, with whom the government refused to deal and whom it is arresting. Its demonstrations and burning down of buildings there have been consciously directed against the main instruments of white authority: black police informers, black officials, governmental offices and government-run beer halls (which to many of the students also symbolize their fathers' alcoholism.)

That the demonstrations have been primarily the work of "outside agitators," as Pretoria claims, is most unlikely. Indeed, this claim only underlines the inability of most Afrikaners to understand them. Their causes should be sought, rather, in the urbanization, modernization, education, and therefore nationalism of black and coloured youth, the irrelevance and oppression of apartheid to the urban Africans and coloureds, and the demonstration effect of their relative deprivation. For while their living standard is higher than that of most black Africans to the north, it is humiliatingly lower than that of the affluent whites for whom they work and under whose

tions under sufficient control so that white rule will not soon be menaced. But a generation of urban blacks and coloureds has been politically mobilized. The transition to black rule in Rhodesia and Southwest Africa and the probable eventual guerrilla warfare against South Africa makes their reoccurrence all the more likely.

Moreover, the South African economy is in increasing trouble. The fall in the price of gold has brought budgetary deficits and large-scale unemployment. (The government is therefore less able, even if it were willing, to spend more money on economic aid to the blacks and coloureds.) Some capital flight is under way, despite regulations intended to prevent it. Foreign investment is off. How soon, and how much, investment confidence can be restored is unclear.

The white South African response to this challenge will in my view likely be little and too late. That part of the English-speaking intelligentsia which is disaffected from the Nationalist government is small and politically impotent. Most English-speaking South Africans are as determined as the Afrikaners to maintain white rule. An English-speaking minority centered in the Progressive Reform Party still hopes for a qualified multiracial franchise and thus gradual transition to majority rule, but one of the main characteristics of the recent demonstrations has been their rejection of any dialogue with any

and that the same will probably occur in Namibia, Pretoria may with reason eventually hope to resume its detente policy, particularly with its moderate neighboring African states. Vorster can also hope that Zimbabwe's and Namibia's problems after independence will give him a respite before black guerrilla attacks begin against South Africa itself. Finally, the initial black African rejection of the Kissinger-sponsored settlement in Rhodesia may give him hope for the success of his strategy of establishing ties with Washington, preventing Washington from total alignment with the black states, and convincing Washington that Moscow is the main common enemy and South Africa a necessary ally. One cannot judge how successful these policies will be, although the last one seems unlikely to succeed but what else can Pretoria do?

None of them, however, nor all of them together seems likely to prevent indefinitely some black guerrilla attacks on South Africa. Nor--and this is the more important point--do they face up to the rising rebelliousness of the urban blacks and coloureds in South Africa. Vorster has so far managed to avoid both major concessions, which his electorate would reject, and massive, bloody repression, which would gravely imperil his contacts with Washington. Long-range South African policy thus is not yet clear.

One may, however, make two tentative points about its future course. If and when the Afrikaner elite is forced to choose between

and the Simonstown naval base there. But at worst this would require more and more regular U.S. naval deployment in the area, for actual Soviet interference with western merchant shipping surrounding the Cape is very unlikely because it would rapidly precipitate armed conflict. As to minerals, including such strategic ones as chrome, and to a much lesser extent, manganese, vanadium and platinum, South Africa and the Soviet Union do produce most of the world's supply.¹² In theory, therefore, if Moscow got predominant influence in South Africa it could set up an OPEC-type near-monopoly on these minerals which would certainly cause the West and the U.S. serious problems.

However, the U.S. does not have access to the Simonstown naval base now, for domestic U.S. reasons, and is not likely to get it. A U.S. policy favoring white control indefinitely in South Africa would antagonize Nigeria, a major second foreign source of petroleum for the U.S. As to South African minerals, the problem for the U.S. is potentially more serious. Both contingencies, Soviet control

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Raymond F. Mikesell, Nonfuel Minerals: U.S. Investment Policies Abroad, The Washington Papers, no. 23 (Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 1975); Charles River Associates, "Cartelization in the World Chromite Market: Economic Analysis and Policy Implications (mimeo., 1976); Nancy Cardwell, "Southern Africa Holds Key to Minerals Vital to Industry and Technology in U.S.," Wall Street Journal, Oct. 28, 1976. I am grateful to Profs. Michael Bever and Joel Clark of the M.I.T. Material Sciences Department for conversations on this subject.

Africa is limited. (Washington is unlikely to use its gold purchases leverage.) The blacks and Moscow will not soon overcome the white Afrikaners. If Moscow were seriously to menace vital U.S. security interests in southern Africa, Washington has other means of pressure-- grain, technology, relations with China--which it could use to moderate Soviet policy.

Finally, the United States should keep southern Africa in perspective. U.S. gains in the Middle East and their maintenance are far more important than Soviet gains in southern Africa, which will remain a peripheral area for American as for Soviet policy.