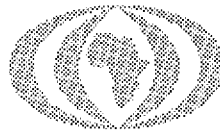


THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

National Headquarters:

JAN SMUTS HOUSE
P.O. Box 31596
Braamfontein
(Johannesburg)
2017 Transvaal



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CUBA, ANGOLA AND THE WEST

Address by Mr. David Willers to the SWA/Namibia Branch
of the SAIIA on Monday 27 November, 1978

Developments in Angola in the short to medium term are likely to have an important bearing, not only on South West Africa/Namibia, but also on changing foreign policy perceptions of both East and West towards Southern African problems generally.

Any discussion of present day Angola must take cognisance of the role played by Cuba, the changing attitude of the West towards Angola and the mutating nature of the revolution in Angola itself. There is a dynamic interaction between these three elements which has a great potential for resolving conflict in the immediate region, and Angola is increasingly being viewed as an important key to peaceful settlements in Rhodesia and South West Africa/Namibia.

Since achieving independence in November 1975, the Government of Aghostino Neto has relied heavily on Cubans to buttress his regime and protect it from within and without. The Cuban role has concentrated international attention on Angola far more than the Portuguese Revolution itself. It has evoked anxieties of all kinds, particularly in South Africa and amongst sections of Western opinion, and the fear has been repeatedly expressed that the Cuban presence in Africa is a visible expression of Soviet imperialist ambitions. In the United States it brought the disagreement between the "global strategists" and the "area specialists" into sharp focus. This disagreement - between those who hold that the United States should get involved in regions as an automatic reaction to Soviet participation on the one hand, and those who argue that local causes of the conflict are more important and should be settled locally - has not yet been settled.¹ It appears however that the views of the "area specialists" are on the ascendancy and Mr. Cyrus Vance, U.S. Secretary of State, is said to support this approach. There seems to be a growing view that America should not become entangled in the Third World disputes, even if the Soviets are involved, so long as the major issues at stake are local in nature, and not fundamental to basic U.S. interests.

In the case of Angola, part of the argument between the "area specialists" and the "globalists", is whether Cuba has a foreign policy of its own. One

¹For a wider discussion of this see: Bender, "Angola, the Cubans and American Anxieties", Foreign Policy, Summer 1978.

view is that the Cubans are simply puppets of the Soviet Union and for this reason the West should back "the other side" in countries where they are active. Another view is that Cuba has succeeded in cutting itself loose from Mother Russia and is in fact pursuing an independent and "non-aligned" foreign policy - and that Cuban activities abroad therefore pose no fundamental threat to Western interests. The truth of the matter probably lies somewhere in between.

Cuban Foreign Policy

The central concern of Cuba is survival of the Revolutionary Government. All other objectives, domestic and foreign, are subordinate to this primary objective. Many observers consider that it was the practical imperative of survival, rather than any ideological affinity, that is responsible for the strong Soviet connection.²

The early revolutionary Government needed foreign support to survive - the Soviet Union provided it. From the outset of the revolutionary relationship to the present day, Cuban foreign policy operates under the Soviet hegemonic umbrella. However, the degree of Cuban dependence and independence from Russia, has also dictated the permissible boundaries of Cuban foreign policy and, as we shall see, has led in many ways to a second Cuban "Prague Spring" as a result of Fidel Castro's Angola policy.

Cuba's first "Prague Spring", when Castro displayed an independence that was to prove too much for Soviet tolerance, occurred during the middle sixties. The reasons were two-fold; firstly, and mainly because of the American economic embargo, Cuba was forced to seek wider trade support than that which the Soviet Union alone could provide. Secondly, and because of this expanded focus, Cuba began to display a pragmatism that was sometimes at odds with its ideological posture. This led to the creation of a "new left" that relies more for its ideological formulations on the pragmatic speeches of Fidel Castro than it does on the orthodoxy of Karl Marx.

Because the American Government eventually managed to involve virtually the whole of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in its economic vendetta against Cuba, Fidel Castro felt justified in exporting revolution to the OAS, which was in keeping with its "international" objectives. But it would nevertheless be a mistake to assume that Cuba, in the days of Che Guevara's ill-fated attempts to revolutionise Bolivia, was prepared to forego the practical relations it had forged with some non-communist states for a unified revolutionary stance under Russian leadership - which is what the Soviet Union insisted its satellites adopt.

On the contrary, where Cuban interests were involved, Cuban tactics were deployed, even if they ran counter to Soviet interests. For instance the Cubans

²For a full discussion of Cuban revolutionary objectives see : "Jorge I Domingues Cuban Foreign Policy" in Foreign Affairs, January 1978. pp. 84-108.

attacked and eventually split the Soviet oriented Venezuelan Communist Party. The Bolivian Communist Party was also split up between the pro-Guevarists and the pro-Soviets, and the same thing happened in Guatemala.

Castro became bolder still, and openly criticized Soviet trade with the Military Governments of Brazil and Chile - countries which followed the American "no trade" policy with Cuba.

Cuba refused to take sides during the Sino-Soviet split, and when the 1963 sugar price rose, and Castro felt less dependent on Soviet financial support, trade with socialist countries was ditched in favour of trade with capitalist countries. Spain became a major trading partner, and more important in economic terms than East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

But the crisis in Cuban/Soviet relations really came to a head in 1968 when Russia, deeply concerned with Castro's "outward" policies, established secret links with an orthodox marxist wing of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) opposed to Castro's liberalism. Castro discovered the "plot" and destroyed the "microfaction" by expelling some of its members from the CCP and imprisoning others.

The Soviet Union reacted by imposing an immediate and highly successful oil embargo on Cuba. Fidel Castro looked around wildly for friends he did not have. The revolutions in Bolivia and elsewhere in South America had collapsed; relations with China had deteriorated sharply (because the Chinese tried to influence the Cuban military in the same way the Russians attempted to influence the CCP - when that plot was also discovered and Chinese advisors were booted out of Havana, China imposed an economic boycott on Cuba); and America was still unwilling to trade with Castro. Cuba, faced with the prospect of triple sanctions - from the USSR, America and China, chose the primary objective of survival of the revolution over all else. In August 1968 Castro signalled his capitulation by endorsing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and became a surrogate instrument in the hands of Soviet foreign policy makers once again.

The Soviet Union moved swiftly to put the Cuban economy back on its feet again after the collapse of 1968-1971. In time Cuba recovered and again began to exhibit an interest in foreign affairs. Now the emphasis was rather different, however, and while the policy became as global as before, Cuba's discretionary choices within the boundaries set by the Soviet Union appeared to have become more limited than during the sixties. The foreign successes though, because of Soviet support, have been greater.

The principle objective of Cuba in the seventies has been to gain acceptance in the "non-aligned club" by achieving diplomatic gains in the Third World ... "what was in the early years a rather desperate reaching for support to counter US pressures has evolved over the years into a centrepiece of Cuban foreign policy. In addition to its support for the economic demands of the non-aligned group,

Cuba has been vocal in supporting the themes of continued revolution, ending all vestiges of colonialism and white domination and combating "neo-Colonialism".³

This attitude accords with the objectives circumscribing Cuban foreign policy which are (in descending order) ■ Survival of the revolutionary Government, ■ Economic development ■ Influence over the left and ■ support of revolution.⁴

The Angola adventure offered Castro the possibility of harmonising several of these objectives at one fell swoop as well as creating a Soviet debt to Cuba for the first time in nearly a decade. Castro must have seen in Angola the same constellation of opportunities which Bolivia offered in the early sixties; the difference in Angola was that the Russians backed what was really originally a Che Guevara sponsored adventure - something which must have amused many of the old timers in Cuba, who probably recalled that Guevara had a profound distaste for Soviet orthodoxy.

The first contacts with the MPLA were made by Guevara, as Castro's emissary, in 1963. In the same year Cuban troops saw action in Africa for the first time in Algeria in its fight against Morocco. In 1965 Cuba began its long association with the Congo (Brazzaville) and in 1966 started training MPLA guerillas seriously.

The MPLA provided an attractive opportunity for Cuba to co-operate with the Soviet Union in a revolutionary endeavour, something which it was not able to do in South America. However, it was only in 1974, when the prospects for independence increased dramatically after the Portuguese Revolution, that the scale of Cuban assistance was substantially stepped up. For the first time Castro, with a professionally trained reservist army at his disposal and with the Cuban economy ticking along fairly soundly, was in a position to extend his "foreign aid" programme substantially.

It should be noted here that the chief characteristic of all Cuban foreign aid programmes involves sending personnel rather than money or materials to recipient countries.⁵ In the case of Angola, therefore, Cuba decided to extend its

³Dominguez, Op Cit: pp. 92-94

⁴Dominguez, Op Cit: pp. 88

⁵Dominguez, Op Cit: pp. 95

Foreign Aid Programme by dispatching troops to Africa. The Soviet Union supplied the arms and the global security umbrella. A cartoon of the day summed up the relationship very aptly by showing a beaming Brezhnev and a glum looking Castro examining a map of Angola. Brezhnev is saying: "We'll supply the cannon and you supply the fodder".

However, as the war progressed, Castro was soon his old beaming self again as it rapidly became clear to all perceptive socialists that, because of the Cuban successes in Angola, the Soviet Union was getting into hock with Castro and not the other way round. Cuba had demonstrated that it could be a good ally to Mother Russia if need be, and could do much to further Soviet interests. At the same time, however, Castro was winning non-aligned friends and influencing non-aligned leaders through his support for the MPLA and was in sight of achieving his major goal of being accepted as a fully fledged member of the non-aligned community. This was clearly not in the Soviet Union's best interests and it was perhaps inevitable that something of a crisis in the relationship should arise sooner or later.

That crisis proved to be the attempted Luanda "Putsch".

Revolt Against Neto

The origins of the attack on President Neto's leadership on 27 May 1977 by the "fractionalists" in the MPLA led by the former minister of the Interior, Mr. Neto Alves, go back to May 1974, when the Soviet Union withdrew its support from Neto. The MPLA was divided into factions (one led by Neto Alves) and Russia preferred to hedge its bets until a clear leader arose. Soviet support for Neto was resumed after 1974, but the structural and ideological problems in the Movement surfaced again after independence. The reasons were apparently straightforward - Neto was accused of pursuing policies that were too moderate, pro-bourgeois, non-racial, non-aligned and insufficiently socialistic. His detractors followed a more orthodox marxist line with a racial emphasis on greater Black involvement in the revolution.

The MPLA central committee had set up a commission of inquiry into the activities of the Fractionalists at the beginning of 1977. Over the week-end of 20-21 May the central committee met to discuss the recommendations of the commission and decided to expel Neto Alves and his ally Jose van Duren from its ranks.

On the morning of 27 May, Neto Alves and his supporters made their bid for power. They released prisoners at the Sao Paulo prison and seized the radio station from whence they broadcast claims that the Government was either 'Maoist' (which meant somewhere beneath the scum of the earth) or 'social Democratic' which was considerably more revealing, as were the accusations that the Luanda Government was "completely Bourgeois".

In no time at all the MPLA military wing, assisted by the more important FAPLA Cuban units had put down the Putsch the support from the Luanda 'bairros' that Neto Alves had expected failed to materialise.

But it was the debris of the aftermath of the storm which really indicated which side Cuba had backed. Evidence collected by the MPLA showed that the "fractionalists" were in fact ultra-leftists who enjoyed active organisational support from pro-Moscow Portuguese Communist Party members who had fled to Angola in 1975 in order to escape reprisal in Lisbon for the role they played in the Portuguese Communist take-over bid.

There is little doubt that these Portuguese Communists were in turn supported by the Soviet Union, and in the summer of 1976 Soviet backing for the "fractionalists" had become so obvious that Angola expelled a Soviet diplomat.⁶ Alves had been made "redundant" and lost his position as Minister of the Interior weeks earlier (in August) when the Ministry was abolished altogether.

Cuban support for Neto in this incident proved to the Angolan leader that Castro was not simply a fair weather friend, as the Soviets had been in 1974 and again in 1976/77. Cuban support for Neto had not wavered in the 12 years they had supported him which is a testimony to Che Guevara's perspicacity in backing an individual who would later prove to be a political "stayer".

The crisis- and Castro's handling of it - showed two other things: firstly that Cuba, less dependent on the Soviet Union than at any time since 1965, again felt sufficiently emboldened to oppose a pro-Soviet faction in a Socialist movement - in this case within the MPLA. Thus history was repeated, and the South American experiences relived. The only difference was that on

⁶Bender, Op Cit: pp. 25

this occasion Castro had won a small "victory" - there was no oil embargo forthcoming from the Soviet Union, and in a sense the second "Prague spring" had arrived. (Although it must be said that one swallow does not necessarily make a summer.)

The second thing the crisis showed, linked to the first, was that Cuba was well on its way to becoming accepted as a non-aligned nation. Support for Neto during the attempted "Putsch" won Castro many friends. It is true that he was criticised sharply at the Belgrade meeting of the non-aligned States in 1978 for keeping troops in Africa once colonial control had been ended. But this did not nevertheless prevent the conference from accepting Havana as the venue for the next non-aligned conference in 1979. It was thought that Cuba would be obliged to moderate its policies in the medium term if it genuinely sought membership of the non-aligned club and that the Soviet connection would grow weaker as a consequence. Cuban willingness to assist affirmatively in causes backed by the Soviet Union would thus be substantially affected.

The nature of the "Putsch" and the charges levelled against the Neto leadership raised interesting questions about the direction the revolution in Angola has taken since November 1975. There is no longer any doubt that the MPLA has moved significantly out of the orbit of Soviet influence (whether it has moved out of the Cuban orbit is another question entirely), although Neto went to great pains to assure the Soviet Union shortly before the attempted "Putsch" that he had nothing against Russia. He was reported as saying that "some comrades" had said he was against the Soviet Union and that the MPLA was anti-Soviet. That, he said, was a complete lie, but equally it was a complete lie to assert that Angola was under Soviet domination. On the contrary, and in the same breath he claimed: "As long as the political leadership of the MPLA is directing the country, we will always defend our independence and our non-alignment". Mention was significantly made in the next sentence of the support which "Cuban comrades" had given him.

On the domestic front, meanwhile, the MPLA was taking certain steps to constitute itself into a "vanguard party". The MPLA is not yet a "party" in the sense of the word, but rather a "movement" and Neto felt, particularly after the "second war of liberation" (against the South African, FNLA, UNITA,

⁷ Dominquez, Op Cit: p. 013, see also Chester Crocker, "Making Africa safe for the Cubans" in Foreign Policy, Summer 1978. p.32 for criticism of this assumption

Mercenary forces, etc.) that the MPLA would have to be more formally structured. The steps the central committee took and the recommendations they made proved extremely upsetting to the hard-line pro-Soviet MPLA faction.

Firstly, it was proposed that the MPLA would not become a party immediately e.g. there would be no Angola Communist Party, but rather a formal "vanguard" organisation.⁸ Secondly, it was recognised that thousands of MPLA supporters had not had much contact with historical materialism and dialectical materialism - "their adherence to scientific socialism is empirical and relies much on the trust they place in the MPLA and in the guidance of comrade President Aghostino Neto". The trend which demanded that anyone who was admitted to the MPLA Party (when constituted) should already be a committed Marxist-Leninist was rejected. To be a convinced Marxist-Leninist one had to know a minimum about the scientific theory of the proletariat, it was decided, and the MPLA could not be so demanding of its members. It was certainly the duty of members to study Marxism-Leninism, however.

The central committee felt that, ^amore important criterion for membership to the ranks of "militant" or "aspirant" (movement "ranks") rather than ideological purity, would be the attitude to productive work - (the candidate) should be an exemplary worker in carrying out work schedules and helping to solve problems at his work place".

Thus we see a revolutionary party emerging with all options open - ideologically speaking - and with less immediate emphasis on the attainments of marxist insight for its members than might have been supposed.

All this indicates that the MPLA is pursuing a policy of severe realism, that they recognise an absolute need for a unity of theory and practice; and that only policies which arise from the "living reality" of Angola will really work. Again there are indications, in this approach, of considerable pragmatism within a socialist framework as is evidenced in the economic field by continued capitalist practices, private ownership of many businesses and the on-going operations of large multi-national corporations such as Gulf Oil (whose installations are reported as being guarded by Cubans), the Angolan Diamond Corporation (Diamang) - a subsidiary of de Beers, the 90% British owned (and partly Angolan operated) Benguella railway and the Miniera de Benguella

⁸ MPLA Congress documents 1977

with West German interests, which mines iron ore at Cassinga where South African troops were engaged in combat with SWAPO guerrillas earlier this year. These developments in Angola and the changing perceptions of the Cuban role in Africa, and particularly Angola, have caused the West to look with new eyes at President Neto.

The Western Sutor

The Western interest is really two converging interests - those of the United States on the one hand and Western Europe on the other. The United States focus is more of a strategic and economic one while that of the Europeans is more intimately bound up with their broader relations with black Africa within the context of the Lome Convention (the largest free trade and assistance agreement in the world which involves more than 55 countries), and their historical links.

Both parties also have a deep interest in resolving the Namibian and Rhodesian conflicts and the current wooing of Angola must be seen in this context as well. (It is rather akin to marrying a woman you don't love who has halitosis, and whose language you don't speak, for a moderate dowry.)

Just before his election President Jimmy Carter said he thought that the United States' position in Angola should be one which admitted that the opportunity had been missed to be a positive and creative force for good in Angola during the years the US supported Portuguese colonization. The United States should also realise, he said, that the Russian and Cuban presence in Angola, while regrettable and counterproductive of peace, need not constitute a threat to United States' interests and nor did that presence mean the existence of a Communist satellite on the continent.⁹

This is the basic posture of the US today and it is quite evident from remarks made by Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, as long ago as July 1977 that, to return to the remarks at the beginning of the paper, the "area specialists" are those shaping US policy towards Angola. Vance pointed out that the most effective policies towards Africa were "affirmative policies". A negative reactive American policy that sought only to oppose Soviet or Cuban involvement in Africa would be futile, he said, and the best course was to help resolve the problems which created opportunities for external intervention.

United States policy towards Africa is complicated by its rather ambiguous approach to the Cubans, and the fact that the United States has little leverage over Cuba. In the view of Dominguez¹⁰, this is the result of retaining obsolete policies after they have outlived their usefulness. The United States,

⁹ Interview with Africa Magazine

¹⁰ Dominguez op. cit. page 105

he says, "failed to offer Cuba credible alternatives to full dependence on the Soviet Union in the late 1960's and early 1970's."

He argues that because of the static nature of US/Cuban relations, part of the US response to Cuban foreign policy will have to be aimed at other targets, will require a workable African policy and will require negotiation with the Soviet Union.

Top level American visits to Angola in recent months underscored by the visit of Mr. Richard Moose last week, would appear to indicate that this strategy is being considered. Western policies are increasingly becoming those of reconciliation rather than division, inducements rather than coercion. The principal American objective in Angola now can probably be summarised as follows : The United States would like to stabilise the region as part of wider efforts to seek peace in Southern Africa generally. The Cuban presence is no longer seen to be the destabilising element that it was once thought to be, although a primary American concern, particularly at the Congressional level, is still to create conditions that would encourage the Cubans to get out of Angola and elsewhere in Africa. The American position is that a settlement in SWA/Namibia and the reconciliation between Zaire and Angola would remove the immediate perceived foreign threat to President Neto from across his borders. The hope is that the Angolans would then recognize that they no longer needed the Cubans for security purposes and tell them to go home.

With regard to SWA/Namibia, Western diplomats have sometimes held the view that a settlement in the territory which got South African troops out of SWA/Namibia would reduce President Neto's feelings of vulnerability - the Angola leader is said to fear South African military support for UNITA.

But as the Luanda "putsch" showed, Neto also has to worry about challenges within the territory, and even though the "foreign" threat may be neutralised he is likely to lean on the Cubans as long as there is an "internal" threat to his regime. The Cubans too, so long as they continue to operate a 'foreign aid programme' in Angola - which, as mentioned earlier, involved sending men and not materials to the country - will stay put. There is no sign that Castro intends stopping this "aid" and he has already made it clear to the United States that the Cuban presence in Angola is not negotiable as a pre-condition for improved relations with the West.

The changing American and European attitude to the Cubans in Africa may be a response to criticism of past attitudes to the presence of Cubans in Africa. The Nigerians have criticised the American attitude and Paulo Jorge, the Angolan Foreign Minister, is on record as saying: "How does the United States distinguish between the type of foreign aid Cuba is providing Angola and that provided by the United States to other Third World countries? You have more military instructors in Saudi Arabia and Iran than we have Cubans and Soviets combined. We don't

criticise Iran's or Saudi Arabia's right to choose their helpers, nor do we criticise your country's right to provide that assistance... We frankly have a hard time understanding the standards of international diplomacy the United States applies to judge us... It appears - that your country is being extremely hypocritical, if not punitive, in its attitude towards us." ¹¹

It particularly riles the Angolans that the United States has yet to establish formal diplomatic relations with a country whose co-operative attitude has to some extent facilitated the Namibia discussion. However, the other side of the story, (which is possibly one reason that the U.S. has remained hesitant to recognize the Luanda government) is that despite signs of moderation the MPLA still appears to have a militant intention to see that decolonisation along Socialist lines continues throughout the length and breadth of Africa. The diplomatic initiatives of the MPLA should not necessarily therefore be read as a softening of the MPLA's position on national and international objectives.

Angola's internationalist objectives are also to some extent aligned with Cuba's foreign policy objectives, in the sense that the Socialist themes of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, continued revolution, etc. are everpresent. It is as much for this reason as for its desire to curry favour with the black African states generally that the MPLA supports SWAPO. Continued Angolan pressure on SWAPO to accept the Western settlement proposals therefore must always be seen as conditional upon the Western strategy being in Angolan (and ultimately Cuban) interests.

Yet, Angola is nevertheless being seduced by the West. The most striking illustration of this are the tentative feelers that President Neto is waving in the direction of Lome. Angola and Mocambique are virtually alone among the independent countries of Africa in not having acceded to the convention. This is no fault of theirs of course (since the convention only came into force in 1975), but it is currently being re-negotiated and interest in Maputo and Luanda runs high. In September this year the Belgian Foreign Minister, Mr Henri Simonet, visited Luanda to, among other things, discuss the benefits Lome can offer to developing countries.

¹¹ Bender op. cit. page 29

If Angola does accede to Lome, President Neto will have put his country solidly in the Western trading camp. The implications of such a step for MPLA policy could be enormous and would be interpreted as a serious set-back for Soviet ambitions in Southern Africa.

This brings me to my concluding point, which is that recent developments in Angola are being interpreted as positive plusses for the West. There is considerable optimism that the trends that are emerging will continue to develop and that Angola will soon be an active supporter of the Western sponsored strategy to achieve peace in Southern Africa.
