SOVIET POLICY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA SINCE NKOMATI

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

GELEENTHEIDSPUBLIKASIE

The South African Institute of International Affairs

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Instituut van Internasionale Aangeleenthede

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This paper is based on the talk he gave at the Institute on 23 April 1985.

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ISBN: 0-908371-38-1

The South African Institute of International Affairs
Jan Smuts House
PO Box 31596
BRAAMFONTEIN
2017
South Africa

August 1985

Let me begin by making a brief comment about the character of the topic that I have been asked to speak on, because I think this will provide a good introduction to the subject.

There is an implicit assumption in the title which is very commonly seen, heard and discussed here in South Africa, and perhaps, Southern Africa more generally, that Nkomati represented a watershed in terms of the situation in Southern Africa. From the Soviet perspective, that is not the case, and what I want to do first of all is to lay out my perception of the way in which the Soviets have approached Southern Africa in recent years, then come back and relate Nkomati to the Soviets' viewpoint, and finally talk a little about the prospects for the future.

First, current Soviet policy is composed of several different elements, with varying degrees of continuity with the past. There are certain elements of long term continuity to which I will refer before I talk about the more fluid elements, for I think it is important to recognise their existence. These are:

(1) The geopolitical priority the Soviet Union attaches to Southern Africa;
(2) The objectives the Soviet Union pursues in the area;
(3) The general strategy the Soviets have laid down to integrate those objectives into a single approach.

Let me begin with geopolitical priorities. I know this comes as a considerable shock to many people, but the truth is that Southern Africa has for the last twenty years been very low or relatively low on the Soviet list of geopolitical priorities. Since the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, Europe has clearly been at the top. Certainly, East Asia has been second - at the latest, since the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s - and, I would argue, as far back as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the 1930s. Third on that list since the mid 1960s have been what we call the southern rimlands of the USSR. These are the countries that form a broad arc around the USSR's southern borders, from south Asia through the Middle East around to North Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa, as a whole, lies somewhere below those three listings; its precise place in recent years has varied from time to time depending upon the extent of the opportunities that the Soviets had available to exploit elsewhere in the Third World. One more important point needs to be recognised. Within sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn clearly has been of higher concern for the Soviets than Southern Africa.

Let's turn to objectives. It ought to be clear to everybody that the Soviets very infrequently, if ever, lay out their explicit objectives for everybody to examine. These have to be deduced, as it were, from a combination of their words and deeds, but they are discernible. I see three, possibly four objectives (depending on whether you count the first as a two-part one), and these are what we will now discuss.

The Soviets have for the last twenty years been committed to sustaining their claims to global power status, by first of all winning acceptance on the part of the local peoples of the region for a Soviet political, economic and even military presence, and secondly demonstrating, in practical terms, that they do in fact have a voice in the affairs of the region. The Soviets are very much aware that global power status is not conferred on any state by the international community. It has to be self-achieved and self-sustained. The only way they can do that is to demonstrate their global reach and influence, and Southern Africa is a venue for the demonstration of these attributes.

The next objective is to undermine Western influence in the region. Please note my choice of the word "undermine". The Soviets have, since the 1960s, recognised that the USSR cannot serve as an alternative economic pole to the West in the foreseeable future. Even though they recognise the need for a long term Western economic presence, however, they still have set for themselves the objective of trying to reduce that influence to the maximum extent possible. It is important to recognise one aspect of this particular objective. You'll note that the character of it suggests that the Soviets still retain a concept that relations with the West in the region are a zero-sum game. There has, however, been, during the course of last year, the first crack in that particular perspective. Beginning last spring, the Soviets said, sometimes in print, although more often privately to American visitors to the Soviet Union and to American authorities on Soviet visits to the US, that neither superpower has vital interests in Southern Africa, but both have legitimate interests, thus implying that there are possibilities for avoiding military competition and for working jointly for the solution problems. I will come back to that in a different context later.

Now the final objective is to curtail and, to whatever extent possible, reduce Chinese influence. After the Angolan civil war, the Soviets were not so concerned with this particular objective as they had been since the early 1960s, but in the 1980s once again the Soviets have seen the emergence of what they consider to be a rather significant Chinese challenge in the area.

This derives from two factors. First of all, Deng Xiaoping's revision of Mao's policies, particularly in the economic realm, by instituting a whole variety of market-orientated techniques, has from the Soviet perspective created an alternative communist model which may, given Africa's economic problems, have considerably more appeal than the Soviet model. The second factor is that the Chinese, in the last three years particularly, have made a concerted effort to re-assert a role for themselves in Southern Africa. This was evident at the time of Zimbabwe's independence when they quickly established relations and provided economic aid to the extent of something like 40 million dollars. The most revealing steps, however, have taken place with regard to Angola. Not only have the Chinese finally succeeded

finally in establishing diplomatic relations with Angola, but last year they sent their Minister of Foreign Trade to Luanda, and he discussed with Angolans a variety of measures for increased economic co-operation, particularly in the technical realm. The Soviets see that as a considerable challenge.

Before I leave the question of objectives, let me make clear that it is important to make distinctions between the interests that the Soviets perceive in the region, and their operational objectives, the objectives that they actually pursue. Clearly there are a variety of interests that the Soviets recognise, but not all of these have been operationalized as objectives at this particular juncture, because they are deemed to be in conflict with other objectives that the Soviets are pursuing in the region; the USSR lacks the capabilities to fulfill those interests, or these interests are in some way or another in competition with, and less important than, interests that the Soviets see in other regions of the world. I want to explicitly mention three perceived interests in this regard. The first of these is that clearly the Soviets see an interest in trying to deny the West access to the mineral resources of Southern Africa and to disrupt the sea lanes around the Cape but there is no evidence that they now consider these to be operational objectives, particularly because they lack the capabilities at the moment to accomplish such ends. Another perceived interest would be the radicalisation and eventually the establishment of socialist countries and governments in the region. It is important to recognise, however, that as a consequence of experiences that the Soviets had in the 1960s with countries such as Ghana and Mali, they have not accepted the Marxist credentials of countries such as Angola and Mozambique. They have instead talked about them as revolutionary democracies with vanguard parties. In contrast with traditional Marxist discussion, they have used 'vanguard parties' quite separately from 'communist parties'. No longer does 'vanguard party' simply mean 'communist party'. And finally the Soviets have seen utility in assuring access to the minerals of the region for their Comecon partners. Remember that the Soviet Union now provides most of the inputs of minerals and raw materials for the countries of Eastern Europe and has found increasing difficulties in doing so, particularly with respect to oil. It would appear that there are other minerals whose availability may also become problematic in the not too distant future. At the moment, however, this is not an active objective, simply because these European countries by and large have access to supplies, but it could become one in the future under certain imperatives.

To pursue their operational objectives, the Soviets have adopted a relatively simple and straightforward strategy to coalesce all of these together. Specifically, they have sought to present themselves as the prime supporters of what they call anti-imperialist and anti-racialist forces in the region. What they really mean is by and large to place themselves at the head of the black-ruled majority.

Now I said that these are long term continuities. There are other elements of Soviet policy, however, that are worth tracing. Keep in mind that, looking at the objectives I have set out and the strategy to implement them, there is not very much in the way of concrete guidance for any individual set of circumstances. The Soviets have placed high priority on adapting tactics to specific circumstances and opportunities that they perceive and on using the instruments that are deemed useful at any particular time. In both of those areas there have been important shifts in Soviet policy in the 1980s, but both of these shifts predated Nkomati. I want to use this as a basis for looking at Nkomati more directly.

The first of these shifts had to do with assessment of opportunities, which I will outline briefly. In the 1970s, the Soviets believed that they could best pursue their global interests and other objectives I have set forth, by concentrating on socialist oriented countries and what they thought to be the more radical, socialist-oriented national liberation movements. In practice, their primary position in the area rested on relationships with Angola and Mozambique, with ZAPU in Zimbabwe, with SWAPO and the ANC.

In the 1980s the Soviets have concluded that that particular approach had great disadvantages on two counts. First, they have become convinced that the so-called socialist oriented countries, particularly the more radical ones, not only have limited capabilities to carry out internal social transformation, but are vacillating in foreign policy. Secondly, they have concluded that their assumption about socialist-orientation as the wave of the future, with gradually increasing numbers of such countries, was in error. In fact, they now insist that most countries in Africa and certainly in Southern Africa have opted for a capitalist-oriented path - though they may speak in socialist terms - and that they will go through a period of capitalist development.

What is left is an approach with two components. First, the Soviets have become much more eclectic in the character of forces that they have supported in the area. For example, since 1980 the Soviets have become, at least in value terms, the prime military supplier of Zambia. They provided a small amount of military aid to Botswana. In Zimbabwe, they signed an impressive but humiliating document in order to establish diplomatic relations. In it they agreed that they would have no relationships with ZAPU outside the governmental framework. Last year they finally managed to enter into their first trade agreement. In the case of Lesotho, they now have a permanent ambassador, and the two countries have exchanged high level visits. There are even plans in progress for economic and technical co-operation. In short, in these countries that they had virtually ignored, they made more effort. This is also true (and I want to underline this) with regard to their approach to South Africa. During the course of the last year particularly, the Soviets have become much more sophisticated in terms of looking at the diversity of forces in South Africa. A piece appeared in Izvestia last year that came as close to being what I would

describe as an accurate picture of not just the spectrum of opinion within the black community but within the white community as well. More importantly than that, the Soviets have learned a lesson from Zimbabwe, where in effect they wound up backing the wrong horse. They feared that could happen again, so they began in subtle ways to make contacts with other forces besides the ANC. After 1976 they made some not very successful efforts to establish contact with those black-consciousness people who had left South Africa. Most interestingly, in 1982, when Gatsha Buthelezi was in the United States the Russians had conversations with him. In April of this year, the Soviets began suggesting in Zulu broadcasts to South Africa that a non-violent approach to the elimination of apartheid was a legitimate way of going about the process. This eclecticism, then, is growing.

The other aspect that emerged from this reassessment dealt with the expectation that there are not likely to be any long-range permanent relationships with countries in the region - that is, the character of the opportunities is likely to be one of short-term alliances. There may be divergences of interests, and the Soviets, in order to maintain a position across the long term, need relations with as many states as possible. Then if interests diverge in one or two instances, they are not shut out entirely.

Regarding military instruments, let me not deceive you: the Soviets still continue to place primary emphasis on military instruments. But what is most fascinating is the extent to which they have now endeavoured to reduce the weight of military instruments in their overall approach to the region.

Let me give you some statistics that will help document that and then talk about why. In 1975-79 the Soviets put in $720 million of arms into the states of the region plus some unknown figure to national liberation movements. Only $20 million of economic aid went into the region during that same period. In the 1980s military aid has gone up to about $1.5 billion dollars, but economic aid in that same period is up to over $600 million.

Another illustration (and here I come back to the point I made with respect to what the Soviets have been discussing with America recently): the Soviets are actually backing away in many respects from a confrontation with SA and UNITA. In late 1983-84 they took the step, for the first time, of communicating directly with the South African Government in order to push the confrontation into a diplomatic sphere rather than to leave it straightforwardly in the military sphere. Subsequently, they have been saying that both superpowers have legitimate interests but neither has vital interests in the area. This formulation suggests that diplomacy is a way of handling the conflicts in the area and that they are prepared to co-operate much more than they certainly were in earlier years.

What all this comes down to is that the Soviets have been forced to recognise that military instruments may be very useful in establishing a presence and a position within the area, but of little use beyond that. Even though they are not particularly well equipped in the economic realm they find themselves in a position where they have no alternative but to set out to meet that particular challenge.

We come to Nkomati. How did Nkomati affect Soviet perceptions and policy? In the first place, it confirmed some of the perceptions and trends that were already in existence. If anything it certainly demonstrated to the Soviets that Mozambique was vacillating in foreign policy and simply was not a very reliable base on which to make long range calculations. Secondly, it also showed the Soviet Union the efficacy of establishing as wide a net of relationships as possible in the region, because in many ways that was their response.

But the most interesting aspect of Nkomati is that for the first time the Soviets really began to have some sense of what costs were going to be entailed to maintain a position in Southern Africa. In the 1970s they thought they were going to have a free ride. They saw themselves riding the crest of a revolutionary wave that would eventually sweep over the whole of Southern Africa. They would not have to do very much. They were automatically associated with the right side and so forth. Increasingly that has been a difficult position for them to sustain and Nkomati drove home that lesson. The consequence has been ironical. At a time when the Soviets perceived that their position was under challenge, the last year has witnessed probably the most extraordinary increase in Soviet activity - and not necessarily military activity - in Mozambique and Angola that we have seen thus far. It took me - when I was doing a piece for African Contemporary Record on Soviet activities in 1984 - twice as many pages this year as last year.

These wide-ranging activities include the Soviet ambassadors' efforts to lay to rest complaints that the Soviets do not provide enough economic aid, by explicitly saying that this is all a problem of Portuguese colonialists and relations with the South Africans; following up on that with little gifts such as ten thousand tons of fish that had been caught outside Mozambican waters for drought relief - an infinite variety of new activities in fact. The underlying motivation and calculation is not that the Soviets are now riding the crest of the wave but that maintaining a position in the area will cost a lot more than they thought.

Let me conclude by talking about the prospects ahead. It is pretty clear, when one comes to talk about geopolitical priorities, objectives and strategies, that the continuities of the last twenty years mean there is little likelihood of any major shift in Soviet

approach. That is not necessarily true with regard to tactics.

There are two kind of scenarios which might cause the Soviets to change their positions or to change their approach. First, and by far the most likely in Soviet perspective, has to do with the collapse of the Nkomati and Lusaka agreements. The Soviets have positioned themselves in a way that tries to lay the groundwork for exploiting such a situation. What they have said is: "We understand why Mozambique and Angola have signed these agreements. They are free countries and they can do what they choose - but we think they are wrong. We do not believe it is possible to co-exist with South Africa." What the Soviets have done in essence is to set up a situation in which if things go wrong, they can say not only to Mozambique and Angola but also to other Frontline States: "We told you so - the only real way of dealing with South Africa is to increase confrontation".

The second possibility concerns South Africa. In recent years, the Soviets have emphasised their perception of the South African situation as a protracted and long-term issue. They have been changing tactics, not really knowing how that issue might develop but trying to preserve all of their options. If it became clear that a genuinely revolutionary situation did exist (and this is the criterion they have tended to use in other situations), it is conceivable they might hop on the scales hoping to tilt the balance in favour of their candidate - probably the ANC but that is not clear either. A lot would depend on the precise circumstances.

Some additional comments in the discussion period:

QUESTION: You have indicated an increasing sophistication on the part of the Soviet Union's understanding of the complex situation in South Africa and the formulation of opposition to the White government. I wonder if you could tell us a little about the people who are making the Soviets' decisions on their African policy south of the Sahara? A more general question about economic leverage - what sort of economic leverage could the Soviets have on Southern Africa? What could they offer South Africa that the United States can't offer much better, or even for that matter what methods of economic leverage - through what means could the Soviet Union offer it to us?

ANSWER: Let me deal with the last question first. Mostly what it could offer would be to trade, but there is just such a total lack of congruity between what the Soviet Union has to offer to trade and what most countries in the region are interested in. Moreover, the Soviet Union has ample mineral resources and so forth of the kind that exist in the area, so there is just not a very good fit in this regard either. Thus, what we come down to would tend to be more in the nature of economic credits and perhaps technical assistance as well. These are not areas in which the USSR enjoys

advantages over the US. I have just completed a major study of the second subject, so I will try to condense my thoughts. Africa policy fits into the larger framework of Soviet policy towards the Third World. As happens in most decision-making apparatus, top people can only look at a certain number of issues, and those they can't examine have less importance as core concerns of Soviet foreign policy. Basically, that is what happens in the Soviet Union. People at the International Department of CPSU level, at the level of Directors of the institutes in the Academy of Sciences and so forth have a substantial amount of influence on policy toward the Third World.

At this particular juncture, Soviet views on what policy should be pursued to enhance Soviet global power status are probably more diverse and diffuse than they have been at any time at the past. You can distinguish four very significant schools of thought and a couple of these have important variants.

The first school of thought argues that the Soviet Union should focus its attention on military regimes, particularly in Africa. This particular school of thought is also inclined to be more willing to endorse limited Soviet military involvement in Third World countries and in particular in Africa than any of the other groups. Although this group had some civilian support in the early 1970s, it now has its basis of support within elements of the Soviet military.

The second group is a group which argues that the Soviets should concentrate on socialist-oriented groups on the continent. While it is less inclined to use military instruments, it nevertheless is willing to use them, particularly in support of radical socialist-oriented regimes - Ethiopia, for instance. This particular group has its major institutional base in the African Institute, but there are also a substantial number of influential people elsewhere that one can identify with it. Anatolu Gromyko, the Director of the Institute and the son of Andrei Gromyko, belongs to the school; one also can identify Rostislav Ulianovsky, who is deputy director of the International Department. Boris Ponamarev in some respects can be put in this school. Even Grigory Romanov, in his speech at the Ethiopian party congress last year, fell into this category.

The third school of thought begins with the premise that most of the countries of the Third World, and certainly most of the countries of Africa, have chosen the capitalist path and will pass through a period of capitalist development. Its proponents see the possibility of working even with such countries against the West because they perceive 'contradictions' between them and the West. They make a distinction between national capitalism and dependent capitalism, national capitalism being demonstrated in countries such as Nigeria, who do not wish to follow IMF guidelines. In much more opportunistic, short-range sense, they even argue that in certain respects Islamic fundamentalism has a positive connotation to be

exploited. This particular group is led by Karen Brutents, who is a Deputy Director of the CPSU International Department. There are, however, other identifiable individuals, such as Evgeny Primakov, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, where this policy position has most adherents.

The fourth group is very interesting. It begins with the premise that the Third World is very unstable. The consequence of that instability is, first, to provide a lot of opportunity for confrontation between the superpowers and, secondly, because instability is so intertwined with economic policies - to raise the spectre of a long term continuous and heavy drain on Soviet resources.

Thus, this school predicates one should look upon certain problems as being overriding and global, requiring the attention and the co-operation of all the major powers in order to try to deal with it. This particular group includes Vadim Zagladin, who is currently the first Deputy Director of the International Department. It included N.N. Inosemtsev, the Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations until he died in 1982. Just two months ago, in March 1985, I heard George Arbatov, Director of the Institute for the USA and Canada, deliver a speech which was almost word for word along this particular line. In short, there is a situation in which there are very important elements within the Soviet hierarchy that support each of these particular positions. What this has done for Soviet policy is to create an unprecedented situation. Whether this will last is still an open question.

In previous years there were divisions of opinion within the Soviet Union about what policy should be. But the division of opinion tended to be a two-line struggle, and as a consequence policy embraced the one line or the other.

Now we have a situation in which there are four groups. None of them is predominant in influence. Possibly the third group predominates, but policy has wound up being an amalgamation of the various schools of thought. In certain respects it's a form of lowest common denominator - the ultimate bottom line.

To come back to Southern Africa: the first indicator I have seen that the fourth group is beginning to have some sort of real influence on Soviet policy is in the determination of vital versus legitimate interests. It is very difficult to assess how these will evolve in the long term: that is why Soviet policy towards Southern Africa is probably the most difficult aspect of their foreign policy to project at this juncture, because of the competition amongst the various groups for dominance.