

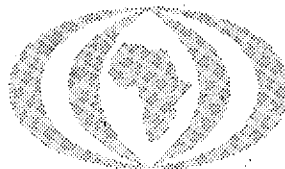
**THE TOTAL ONSLAUGHT:  
How Does it Look From Moscow?**

**John Killick**

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Sir John Killick, who entered the British diplomatic service in 1946, was Ambassador to the USSR from 1971 - 1973; Deputy Under Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, from 1973 - 1975; and Britain's Permanent Representative to NATO from 1975 - 1979. He has now retired and lives in George, South Africa.

The August/September, 1981 issue of Nato's 15 Nations featured an article by Sir John on "Turmoil in Southern Africa".

It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.

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**John Killick**

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## THE TOTAL ONSLAUGHT - HOW DOES IT LOOK FROM MOSCOW?

Consideration of the external threat to South Africa should not be a matter of party politics. One sometimes has the impression that talk of a "total onslaught" is regarded in some quarters as an exaggerated slogan used as a device for enhancing national unity and gaining support for the party in power. But, on the other hand, if public opinion is to be adequately informed and educated, there is more to it than simply playing on the spectre of "godless Marxism".

Obviously Soviet ambition and expansionism are not the only external threat with which South Africa is faced, but they are, potentially if not actually, surely its most disturbing and powerful component. It behoves us to assess it as carefully, dispassionately and comprehensively as we can. It is as undesirable to exaggerate it as to understate it. To cry "Wolf!" can be as damaging as to lull people into a state of false security. The Russians are not ten feet tall, but neither are they dwarfs.

Faced with the problem of striking the right balance - actual and potential - it is, I believe, helpful and indeed necessary to make some attempt to define how the situation looks from the other side of the hill. This was my belief and my experience during my time in Moscow and with NATO, and this paper is offered against that background. It is a purely personal contribution to current discussion, reflecting no official view. I have no access these days to privileged information or intelligence. And I make the usual disclaimer, as would anybody with any pretence to a degree of expertise about the Soviet Union, that nobody in the outside world knows anything for sure about the Kremlin's thinking and policies. One can never say categorically what they will do or what they will not do. So impenetrable is that closed system of government. Even the public utterances of its top people, civilian or military, are not necessarily to be taken at face value. Whether on military strategy or tactics or on foreign policy, they are too often designed to intimidate or mislead. If we react to them as though we are taking them seriously, we sometimes risk serving ulterior Soviet purposes.

For example, in the sphere of NATO, it is entirely possible, if not probable, that the Soviet military build-up, conventional and nuclear (the SS 20 in particular) is not so much to deter war, still less to fight it, but to achieve a situation of dominance and preponderance vis-à-vis Western Europe which is sometimes called "Finlandisation". In drawing attention continually to the build-up and to the areas of Soviet military superiority, as they must, Western leaders risk at the same time contributing to the very situation the Russians wish to create.

At all events, no attempt to put oneself into a seat in the Kremlin can be more than a "best estimate" or a semi-educated guess - but even so it is worth making. So far as the military threat is concerned, it involves, wherever it presents itself in the world, three elements. First, the observable and quantifiable facts of military capability in men, guns, planes, tanks, rockets and ships. Second, however, the inherently unquantifiable and opaque business of identifying true Soviet intentions - what is it all for? And thirdly the unknown and unknowable factor of Soviet opportunism - and they are highly opportunist, for all their claims to be pursuing a "scientific", Marxist external policy.

Perhaps this third element needs fuller explanation. What it means is that, as regards military hardware for instance, some entirely new capability may be developed without there necessarily being any specific immediate purpose in mind for it. But then as situations and opportunities happen to arise, the existence of the capability offers useful and usable options. The creation of the new Soviet Navy may well be an example of this; it is what the British Admiral Eberle has aptly called a "come in 'andy" navy, of the sort that Britain once had but which the Western world, because of economic pressures and the soaring cost of modern technology, can no longer afford. Undoubtedly the Soviet leaders must feel that their new instrument of power may "come in 'andy" somewhere round the world as situations develop. Meanwhile it already makes a political impact, and not only in unsophisticated countries.

The point is that, for us in the Republic just as for NATO, it is not enough simply to tot up in terms of hardware and military capabilities the magnitude of the threat and draw conclusions about intentions from the resulting figures. The first part of the problem is a matter of the acquisition and assessment of military intelligence; the second is a matter of political judgement; and the third is a matter of deterrence, of preventing the Soviet leaders from perceiving opportunities of using their military toys, whether for military or political purposes.

For us, by comparison with NATO, the situation is further complicated by the fact that we are surrounded by what one might call "third party" states, of varying degrees of hostility and over whom the precise degree of Soviet influence or control is debatable. NATO is confronted by a formal military alliance under virtually monolithic Soviet command and control. Our neighbouring states are in many cases being provided with varying amounts of Soviet military hardware as well as Soviet and surrogate military advice and non-combat presence. So far, Cuban combat forces are confined to Angola, and it may prove possible to get them out in parallel with a SWA/Namibia settlement. The difficulty is that they are impaled on their own propaganda! They claim to be there in response to the threat from South Africa, so their *raison d'être* disappears if the SADF withdraws from Namibia; in reality their role is to prop up the MPLA régime and subdue Unita. They significantly played no role in Rhodesia and dark threats of their introduction into Mozambique seem so far not to have materialised.

The point is that whatever Soviet intentions may be, the intentions of the individual African states concerned are liable to be significantly different and may prevail - whether in the direction of greater rashness or greater caution. It is questionable whether, or how far, the Russians could, if they wished, effectively restrain them in the former case or spur them on in the latter. Full co-operation with or subservience to Soviet plans and intentions must be doubtful, even in Angola. (It is relevant here to recall Moscow experience. When I was there in 1973, the Soviet Union had provided Egypt with the equipment and training to cross the Canal and attack Israeli forces in Sinai. The indications were, however, that the Russians did not believe Egypt capable of doing so successfully - and in this they were ultimately proved right, for in the South a whole Egyptian army corps was cut off on the East of the Canal, while in the North the road to Cairo was open for an Israeli advance before the ceasefire supervened. But of course the Egyptians had thrown the Russians out and took their own decision to attack. The Russians either made no attempt, or were unable, to stop them).

Now it is not my business to assess the intentions of the hostile African states to the North of us. I dare say the consensus would be that although they are acquiring arms and training from the Soviet bloc, the arms are not of top quality, and that there is unlikely to be sufficient unity of purpose, organising ability or plain operating competence in and among those countries for them to take the offensive alone and unaided against us. Their motives for accepting what the Russians have to offer are probably, in various mixes, prestige, internal security and political control, and defence against strikes from the Republic. If they could achieve immunity against the latter, there would be less incentive for them to discourage the use of their territory for guerrilla operations against the Republic, but the threat from them would amount to no more than that, and even then the Russians can do nothing effective to lessen their differing degrees of economic dependence on South Africa.

If this is broadly correct, it is the possibility of more ambitious and extensive - and dangerous - Soviet intentions that really matters to us. (The Eastern Europeans involved will always do Soviet bidding, and even the Cubans are so dependent on Soviet military and economic support that they could not pursue an independent line against Moscow's wishes).

Before looking at Moscow's likely view of Southern Africa, some preliminary observations on Soviet global policy are called for. First, it is not wrong, but it is inadequate, to identify the ultimate objective as "world domination". Russian external behaviour has for centuries been expansionist, but almost without exception into contiguous areas. Marxist ideology points in the same direction, and preaches the ultimate triumph of "socialism", as well as the duty of the Soviet state to assist the inevitable historical process. But in this Soviet national interests still come first. Uncalculated risks are not taken, and "reculer pour mieux sauter" has always been the order of the day when unacceptable dangers or opposition are encountered. Policies are indeed "scientific" in so far as lines of action are only decided in the light of a careful and comprehensive calculation of both the global and the regional "correlation of forces". This covers not only military, but political, economic, and psychological factors as well as geo-political characteristics like distance, communications etc. The Russian bear is basically a land animal, unused to transoceanic leaps, although he is learning new circus tricks! Only if the correlation is judged favourable, on balance, do the Russians move forward; otherwise they bide their time, while doing all in their power, by fair means or foul, to change the correlation in their favour. They seize unexpected opportunities if they present themselves. They certainly study and prepare for the widest range of options. Thus although there is no doubt an ultimate aim, there is no cut-and-dried scenario, timescale or detailed plan of operations for achieving it. (For instance, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had a perfectly clear purpose in itself; it was not phase one of a Middle East takeover, but could yet provide the springboard for further adventures).

In the global correlation of forces as seen from Moscow at present, there is little reason to perceive an irresistible tide running for the triumph of "socialism". At great cost to the Soviet economy, Soviet military power has been built up to a level unprecedented in the whole of Russian history. It is more than enough to maintain, by force, the Russian Empire of the 20th Century on the European-Asian landmass. It now has global reach by air and sea - but by no means decisive superiority. It could not even, in the last resort, defend the "gains of socialism" in a place as far-flung as Cuba in the event of a full-scale confrontation with the United States (provided that American will did not collapse) in what is the latter's own backyard.

It has not even yet prevailed against Afghan guerrillas, despite the engagement of 120,000 Soviet first-line troops. It has achieved little in the Middle East, where Moscow's allies - most notably the erratic and unpredictable Colonel Quaddafi - are of questionable value and reliability. Its support for Cuban surrogates has not yet brought Angola under full control of the MPLA government nor prevailed in the Horn of Africa.

Consequently it remains an absolute must for Moscow to avoid any all-out confrontation with the United States. There is furthermore, a profound fear of China, and even though the defence of the Soviet Eastern frontier seems to be provided for independently of commitments elsewhere, it is safe to assume that Moscow will go to great lengths to avoid major war on two fronts. Sino-Soviet reconciliation is not in prospect - though, if it ever came, it would of course profoundly change the nature of the ballgame throughout the world.

Military strength is in fact the sole attribute which entitles the Soviet Union to super-power status. In other areas of the correlation of forces it is manifestly weak. Marxist ideology in the Moscow version (which involves recognition of the supremacy of Moscow in the world revolutionary movement - totally rejected by China) is not exactly spreading like wildfire, and is by no means the instrument of Soviet control and influence that it used to be. Economic failure at home is a matter of common knowledge, and deprives the Russians of the potential leverage of trade or economic aid on any significant scale.

Thus it is that military strength is the main arm of Soviet foreign policy, whether through intimidation, the extension of influence through arms supplies and training, or through the encouragement and fuelling of wars fought by others. It is indeed true to say that Moscow hopes to gain the fruits of war without fighting one; one might go further and say that it looks increasingly as though the hope is to reap the benefits of the shedding of Cuban or other blood - the blood of the "liberation movements" wherever possible! But never Russian blood except and unless in vital areas within or on the borders of the Soviet Empire itself.

Against this general background, here is how I, as a planner sitting in the Kremlin, would look at Southern Africa. I would perhaps start with some words of Stalin's, who was not notable for his contribution to Marxist ideology but was the arch-proponent, in 1939 and again in 1945, of Soviet strategic expansion. Stalin may be dead, but Stalinism, in this sense at least, is certainly not. He once said:

"If Europe and America may be called the front or the arena of the major battles between socialism and imperialism, the unequal nations and the colonies with their raw materials, fuel and vast store of manpower must be regarded as the rear, the reserve of imperialism. To win a war it is necessary to triumph not only at the front, but also to revolutionise the enemy's rear, his resources. Hence the victory of the world proletarian revolution may be regarded as assured only if the proletariat is able to combine its own revolutionary struggle with the liberation movement of the labouring masses of the unequal nations and the colonies against the role of the imperialists and for the dictatorship of the proletariat".

Of course much has since changed, and the "colonies" no longer exist. But, *mutatis mutandis*, the line of strategic thought is as clear and as valid as ever.

So Southern Africa, and South Africa par excellence, must be regarded as a glittering prize in the continuing struggle between socialism and capitalism - perhaps decisive in its importance as a source of gold, diamonds and industrial minerals, not to mention its strategic position astride major sea routes.

But - there are many buts:

- (a) Southern Africa is not vital to the security of the Soviet Union in the way that contiguous areas such as Afghanistan are. The importance of Afghanistan justifies the direct employment of Soviet forces. In certain circumstances, so might the Middle East, provided direct confrontation with the United States could be avoided. (We have, after all, in the past occupied Northern Turkey and Persian Azerbaijan). But with such priority tasks already on our plate, the Soviet military leadership will be strongly opposed to any direct involvement in a combat role at such a great distance from the home base, given that our direct vital interests or survival are not at stake.
- (b) We cannot rely on statements made by people such as Edward Heath or Robert McNamara (who speak for nobody but themselves) that the West, and the U.S. in particular, will stand aloof from any Soviet involvement, especially direct combat involvement, in an assault on South Africa. Their object in speaking thus was to put pressure on the South African Government, not to give us a green light. We cannot risk bringing the Americans in (as might well happen under a Reagan Administration) with the consequent risk of escalation and broadening of the conflict, for we would surely then have to pull back, with considerable damage to our standing throughout Africa and the Third World, which the Chinese would be quick to exploit.
- (c) We might get away with it if we could gain a quick and decisive victory. But could we take on the incalculable consequences and cost of prolonged occupation, internal security and successful economic exploitation of the country in what would probably be "scorched earth" conditions? In fact, we could not expect a quick victory. We assess the quality of the SADF as comparable with that of Israel in the Middle East context. The SADF is small but would be operating on interior lines and would be backed by effective territorial forces. In prolonged fighting, we would take heavy casualties and the likelihood of American support for or intervention in South Africa would grow. We recall that we decided not to intervene directly, even through the Cubans, in support of our man in Rhodesia because of our assessment that even the Rhodesian forces would not be a pushover. (Perhaps, in the light of subsequent developments, we were wrong, but the SADF is in any case a very different prospect).



- (d) Southern Africa and South Africa itself are not essential to the Soviet economy. It is true that we have great technological and climatic difficulties in developing further our own vast mineral resources, but our economic problems are fundamentally of a managerial nature, and we do not need Southern African minerals for ourselves. Thus it is not really true to say that we are in a "resource war", in the full sense. We are not concerned to acquire resources for our own use, but seeking to deny them to the West. For us, the most critical resource area is oil, and that involves the Middle East. In both these areas, however, it is clear that Western dependence on supplies is a more critical factor for them than our interest in denial is for us. Thus the stakes are higher for them than for us, and this fact seems latterly to have dawned much more clearly on the Western countries. Finally, under the economic heading, it must be observed that there is really nothing effective we can do to lessen the present economic dependence on South Africa of some of the black states.
- (e) A further negative factor in the regional correlation of forces is the political situation. Our assessment is that a truly revolutionary situation does not yet exist in South Africa itself. One of the most important lessons we learned from the Allende episode in Chile was that a revolution cannot succeed unless the armed forces and the forces of law and order can be undermined and when necessary brought under the control of the revolution. There is no foreseeable prospect of this. As regards the black states to the North of the Republic, as has too often been our experience elsewhere in Africa, we find they present a very mixed and highly doubtful picture in terms of the effective extension of our interest. Both in terms of relationships with us and amongst themselves, as well as stability and efficiency, the black states of Africa do not appear to offer as fruitful a prospect for the expansion of "socialism" as we define it as, for example, Latin America or South-East Asia, where we have firmer bases in the area in Cuba and Vietnam. Africa must have a lower priority than the Middle East for the extension of our influence. Indeed, the Politburo has at times considered writing off Black Africa as a bad bet for the foreseeable future, but of course we cannot afford to leave China a free hand there.
- (f) Finally, considerations of cost cannot be left out of account. To push things to the point of conventional war in Southern Africa would be extremely and incalculably expensive, even if conducted solely through surrogates in the combat role. The African states are quite incapable of it alone. In the Middle East the Syrians,

and in the past the Egyptians, have proved broken reeds and the Africans do not approach even their level of competence. The build-up of sufficient arms and war stocks, or emergency resupply during hostilities, would call for an effort several orders of magnitude greater than present levels and would have to be at our expense. Not to mention the enormously difficult logistic problem (even if we were opposed only by the SADF). The burden of our support to Cuba is already heavy enough (at present about \$ US 10 million per day) - and she is already fully extended, if not over-extended, in Africa and Central America. Against the background of the Polish situation and other difficulties in Eastern Europe we cannot think, politically or economically, of using Eastern Europeans.

In the light of this analysis, my conclusions for the Politburo would have to be the following:

- (a) There can for the foreseeable future be no significant qualitative escalation in our Southern African campaign. Its priority in our external policies must rate lower than consolidation in Eastern Europe and on our borders; than our security situation vis-a-vis the U.S. and NATO; than situations elsewhere closer to us such as the Middle East; and than the "protection of the gains of socialism" already made elsewhere, above all in and relating to Cuba.
- (b) There is still a great deal we can do at low cost. Our onslaught must remain well short of "total" in the sense of "all-out", but it can be "total" in the sense that we must continue to use all the weapons and instruments at our disposal within the correlation of forces.
- (c) Militarily, we should continue the supply of hardware and training in return for whatever form of payment we can get. We can, if necessary consider the provision of strictly defensive systems operated by our own people, for air defence, for instance, as we have done in Syria and in the past in Egypt. There is no point in providing sophisticated new technology - our main purposes are to strengthen the internal security of régimes friendly to us and to decrease their vulnerability to South African destabilisation and counter-strike. This in turn will facilitate the continuation and intensification of infiltration by guerrilla freedom fighters across borders into the Republic. And in the longer run, the presence of men and matériel on the ground may "come in 'andy" for other purposes as opportunities present themselves. Finally of course, we must pursue and develop the acquisition of naval and air facilities with the object of enhancing our global strategic position.

- (d) In our efforts to destabilise South Africa and thus eventually change the existing correlation of forces in our favour, we can do a great deal more in the way of internal subversion and above all urban terrorism. We should not neglect the rural areas, and above all the black homelands, but the SADF evidently has plans, owing a good deal to Israeli experience, for the arming, training and organisation of farmers in the border areas. This is liable to make cross-border operations of the type used by SWAPO in Namibia more costly and less effective (not that we need be concerned at casualties among guerrilla fighters). But it is less clear - and the Northern Ireland experience is relevant - that S.A. security forces will be able to cope with carefully planned and organised urban terrorism, whose destabilising effect can in any case be much greater. In this we have the help of our comrades in the S.A. Communist Party in the necessary work. Even so, it is not yet clear that black sabotage teams can be trained to the necessary pitch of efficiency, nor what the effect on the black population of a terror campaign will be. But urban terror is for us a low cost/no cost option.
- (e) Finally, we must continue to exploit the exceptionally favourable climate for propaganda/psychological warfare. It goes without saying that our sole concern remains the advancement of the interests of the USSR. This does not, in Southern Africa so far from the motherland, involve the expansion of our territorial sovereignty. The interests and well-being of black Africans are of no more concern to us than those of the Afghans. But we score points all the time by posing as champions of the liberation movements (as we define them; it goes without saying that the Afghan guerrillas are, for us, "terrorists", incited by the imperialists and their nefarious anti-Soviet intelligence services). Peaceful evolutionary change in South Africa, and the current American policy of "constructive engagement" are anathema to us, because they offer an alternative to destabilisation and violent revolution, so we must pull out all the propaganda stops in condemning them. We must exploit to the full the unbelievable foolishness of those in the West who urge economic sanctions against South Africa, since such action can only serve to further our own aim of destabilisation of the Republic - perhaps even more effectively than we can ourselves.

To sum up, as in the Middle East, what suits us best for the foreseeable future in Southern Africa is "no peace, no war". We should foster the maximum instability in those parts of the region friendly to the West. But we should refrain from actions liable to escalate the situation into general, conventional war, in which we could come under pressure, as a matter of our political credibility, to become more deeply involved in support of the black states and in which we might risk American intervention. (We must not forget how nearly things went wrong in Angola, where we could have been forced to call off our installation by force of the MPLA government had not the U.S. Congress forced the Americans out of the game).

It must be underlined that the foregoing is no more than a hypothesis, lacking hard evidence to support it. But I believe it is plausible. It has been my theory for some time, though not put on paper in this form, and it thus antedates recent statements about the possibility of the Republic having to face conventional war. In their treatment of those statements I think the media may have given a somewhat false impression. Now we have the timely and most valuable paper by the Chief of the SADF on the subject. It is a terse, military-style study, differently structured from my own, but I am struck by the remarkably close coincidence in conclusions.

Like General Viljoen, I cannot absolutely rule out escalation to conventional war, and fully agree that Soviet activities in Southern Africa provide a foundation for future action drawing on a wider range of options. The priorities he lists, as laid down by the Coordinating Committee for Southern Africa in Moscow, are entirely consistent with my hypothetical analysis and do not involve deliberate escalation to conventional war.

Where, with great respect, I have serious doubt about his study is in its use of rather crude graphs to illustrate the virtual tripling of the military power of the Republic's hostile neighbours over the past six years. As he himself argues, other factors than hardware condition intentions. The simple accretion of more tanks or guns or planes is a far from decisive indicator. The crude statistics need closer analysis. From what baseline is the 300% increase calculated (bearing in mind that six years ago the Zimbabwe of today did not exist)? Which countries are defined as neighbouring states? What is the quality and operability of the equipment supplied to them - particularly as compared with the capabilities of the SADF? What is its state of maintenance and operational readiness? What is the availability of trained crews? Above all, as General Viljoen emphasises, none of this would be of great significance without a well-developed military infrastructure covering command and control, logistics, training (above all, I would say, as a combined force) which does not exist; not to mention economic strength and internal stability.

These comments are in no way intended to belittle the importance of the statistics of military build-up as an indicator which needs constant monitoring and analysis. This must be a continuing exercise in which trends are as important as absolute figures. Within it, so far as indications of preparation for conventional war are concerned, it is the build-up of adequate stocks of munitions and fuel, and the call-up of reservists which are the bottom line.

At all events, General Viljoen is not saying that conventional war is just around the corner. He concludes that at present "the African countries pose no real offensive military threat to the RSA". But he is right to point out that their military build-up is, whether they realise it or not, linked to Soviet strategy and that, insofar as it confers on them an enhanced capability, if not immunity, against South African counter-strike, it materially influences the conduct of South African operations against organisations such as ANC, PAC and SWAPO operating from their territories. And in the last analysis Soviet intentions may change, as their perception of opportunities and shifts in their favour in the correlation of forces changes.

A conventional war must surely be the last thing the Republic wants. Just as Moscow cannot be sure that the United States and the West would not intervene, so Pretoria cannot be sure that they would. So deterrence is the name of the game, and that is the point in General Viljoen's paper which merits the strongest emphasis and support.

"The Conventional Threat to the RSA and SWA" by General C.L. Viljoen  
ISSUP Strategic Review, June, 1983.