SOVIET-CUBAN INTERVENTION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: Impact and Lessons

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Developments in the Horn of Africa since the crisis of 1977–78 have stimulated a great deal of debate regarding Soviet intentions in the African continent and elsewhere.* Concern has been growing among U.S. policymakers that the Soviet ventures in Angola, Ethiopia, and lately Afghanistan may be setting a pattern for future involvements in other strategic areas of the Third World such as the Persian Gulf, Central America, and the Caribbean.

These developments, as they have affected East-West competition in the Horn, have been somewhat ironic. Somalia, which from the early 1970s until 1977 furnished naval and air facilities to the Soviets, was viewed as a staunch "Marxist" ally of the USSR. The Somali army was equipped entirely by the Soviets and trained by Soviet and Cuban advisors. In contrast, Ethiopia was regarded as a pro-Western country; the United States had maintained military communications facilities (whose importance has declined with improved satellite communications) at Asmara, and at the same time had trained and equipped the armed forces of that country. With the advent of Soviet and Cuban "fraternal aid" to Ethiopia in 1977–78 the situation was reversed: in Ethiopia, Cuban and Soviet advisors replaced the Americans, while Somalia, in the meantime, has sought alliance with the United States. The process of realignment in the Horn was completed in 1980, and, irony of ironies in the superpower rivalry, the United States may soon be using Soviet-built naval and air facilities at Berbera.

A brief analysis of the main factors in this process, as they elucidate Soviet policy in the area, is useful in trying to discern future trends in the region. The Soviets were initially hesitant to intervene militarily in the Horn; the decision-making process was a slow one, as the factors involved were complex. But what ultimately determined Soviet actions was the perception that they had been betrayed by a hitherto reliable friend, Somalia. Decisions on the future course of Soviet involvement in the Horn will undoubtedly

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be difficult as well, for the Soviet strategic foothold in Africa is not invulnerable, at the same time that the USSR will have to deal with a more complicated international situation and a U.S. now perhaps more willing to defend its interests abroad.

The Nature of the Conflict

It would be misleading to blame the Soviets for all the troubles in the Horn. The major cause of conflict there, as elsewhere in the Third World, has been the dramatic awakening of the people from their colonial pasts. The conflict in the Horn is not new, nor is it only of one dimension.[1] In addition to the political factors involved, there have been historical, geographical, ethnic-cultural and economic factors.

The first major source of conflict in the Horn lay in the struggle over the Ogaden, an Ethiopian province inhabited mainly by ethnic Somalis.[2] Somalia is one of the few ethnically homogeneous states in Africa; moreover, the Somalis see any land inhabited by Somalis as a part of greater Somalia to which they claim territorial right. This irredentist goal extends not only to the Ogaden in Ethiopia but also to Djibouti and the northern frontier district of Kenya. The various early stages of the conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia, which actually began in the 16th century, do not need to be rehearsed here. The conflict began in earnest in the 19th century when Ethiopia became a party to the colonial conquest of the Horn and encroached upon the Somali desert. The Italians exacerbated the conflict during the colonial wars of the 1890s and in the 1930s as did the British by fostering a "greater Somalia" concept for some time following World War II. The boundaries drawn up by the Italians, British, and Ethiopians at various times during these wars were arrived at arbitrarily, without recourse to geography and ethnicity, and have never been accepted by the Somalis as legitimate. Ethiopia and Somalia engaged in another brief border war in 1964. Thus current fighting in the Ogaden can be viewed as a new campaign in a very old war.

The province of Eritrea has been the second major source of conflict in the Horn. Like the dispute over the Ogaden, this conflict dates back to the Italian colonial empire of the late 19th century, when the Italians artificially established the Eritrean province as a Red Sea colony. After World War II Eritrea became a U.N. trust territory and only in 1962 did it become an integral part of Ethiopia. The population of Eritrea is evenly divided between Muslims and Christians. However, the Muslims have been numerically dominant in the secessionist movement of the last two decades. The Eritrean revolt, which has constituted one of the strongest and most sophisticated

1. For background on the conflict in the Horn see Colin Legum, *The Fall of Haile Selassie's Empire* (New York: African Publishing Company, 1975); Colin Legum and Bill Lee, *Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (New York: African Publishing Co., 1977); Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (New York: African Publishing Company, 1978); John Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1978); and Colin Legum and Bill Lee, *The Horn of Africa in Continuing Crisis* (New York: American Publishing Company, 1979).

2. See Saadiwa Touval, *Somali Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

national liberation movements in Black Africa, has been firmly resisted by the Ethiopian regime, partly because Eritrea is Ethiopia's only outlet to the Red Sea and partly because the secession of Eritrea would destabilize the rest of Ethiopia.[3]

Conflicting territorial claims, historical and ethnic differences, and political incompatibility existing between the regions have led to a seemingly never-ending situation of tension, violence and armed conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia over the contested Ogaden, and to the continuous struggle in Eritrea. The Ogaden conflict was at the heart of Somalia's and Ethiopia's decision to shift alliances with external powers.

Soviet Interests in the Horn

In the judgment of this writer ideological interests did not comprise one of the main reasons for Soviet involvement in the Horn in the 1960s and 1970s. Nor did ideology play a crucial role in the recent realignment of forces there. True, the radical inclination of both regimes could not have been ignored by the Soviets, who have always been willing (not without a prolonged period of deliberation) to exploit opportunities in the area. Yet there is no evidence that the Marxist-Leninist convictions of either Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam or President Mohamed Siad Barre significantly impressed the Soviet leadership or caused it to favor one country over the other. Indeed, it would be misleading to assume that the Soviets chose to become deeply involved either in Somalia in the early 1970s or in Ethiopia in 1977 because of proclaimed "selfless" and "revolutionary" support for their respective regimes. There is no doubt that the Soviets—having had previous unpleasant experiences with radical African regimes in Ghana, Mali, Sudan and Egypt—view the Somalis and Ethiopians as neither truly socialist nor Marxist-Leninist. Thus most Soviet writers refer to the regimes in Mogadishu and Addis Ababa as being merely "progressive," embarking on "noncapitalist development," or at the most having a "socialist and anti-imperialist orientation."[4]

Instead, more important in motivating Soviet involvement in the area have been strategic and political interests. Soviet policies in the African continent, including the Horn, fit into Moscow's overall global strategy. Primary objectives of this strategy include securing assured access to modern air and naval facilities on a worldwide basis so as to more effectively project power and hence influence, while at the same time undermining the power and influence of the West—particularly the U.S. and her allies—and the People's Republic of China. The main significance of the Horn for the USSR lies in its having a

3. For an excellent treatment of Eritrean history, see G. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition: 1941-52* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

4. E. Sheer, "Somalia: Socialist Orientation," *International Affairs* (Moscow), 1974, No. 2, pp. 84-88; L. Dmitriyev, "Along the Road of Progress," *Sovetskaia Rossiia,* October 21, 1974; A. Gromyko, "The Mainstay of Neo-colonialism in Africa," *International Affairs* (Moscow), 1980, No. 10, p. 29; M. Barinov, "Socialist Ethiopia Moves Confidently Ahead," *International Affairs* (Moscow), 1980, No. 11, pp. 22-28. (Even in the last article socialism is described as "Ethiopian socialism"—a version of "socialist orientation" and "national democratic" revolution.)

geographic position strategic to both Africa and the Middle East. It would be a mistake to assume that the Soviets' actions in Africa, or elsewhere, are motivated only by opportunism and not by overall strategic concern. A Soviet stronghold in the Horn would enable the Soviets to counter Western naval power and protect and support client regimes adjacent to the petroleum sea-lanes. Soviet naval deployment in forward areas around the coast of Africa such as the Horn could also protect and provide navigational support for Soviet sea- and airlifts in future military operations. This indeed already happened during the Soviet-Cuban interventions in Angola in 1975-76 and in the Horn of Africa in 1977-78. Some Western analysts feel that the strategic value of the Horn has been much exaggerated.[5] The Soviets, however, seem to believe that the region is very important. As stressed by an authoritative Soviet source in 1978, "The importance of this region is determined by its geographical situation at the juncture of two continents – Asia and Africa, by the presence of first-class ports in the Gulf of Aden and in the Indian Ocean, and, *what is most important, by the fact that important sea-lanes, linking the oil producing countries with America and Europe, pass through the region.*"[6]

The importance of the Horn, even from the Soviet perspective, is not primarily in an Indian Ocean context or in the context of Soviet-U.S. naval competition in the area, as was thought to be the case when the Soviet navy was using the deep-water port facilities in Berbera prior to 1977. The Horn's real strategic value for the Soviets, both then and now, has been as a staging area for reconnaissance, a facility for repairs and storage of tactical surface-to-surface missiles and fuel, and as a long-range communications receiving station. In addition to building naval facilities at Berbera the Soviets built an air field capable of handling all kinds of Soviet aircraft, including the Backfire bomber, although it was originally intended to accommodate the long-range TU-95 Bear. Thus the Soviets, through the use of air and sea facilities in this area, could influence events in Africa and the Middle East.

Soviet hopes for developing a strategic foothold in Somalia go back to 1961, when the Soviets began to provide economic aid to that country. In 1963 they added military aid, which increased substantially in 1971, two years after the radical regime of Siad Barre came to power. Between 1963 and 1974 the Soviets' arms transfers to Somalia amounted to over 250 tanks, 100 combat aircraft, 350 armored personnel carriers and 14 patrol and torpedo boats. A major military agreement allowing the Soviets to build naval facilities at Berbera was signed in 1972, and Soviet military assistance to Somalia led to a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in July 1974. Then the Soviets gained independent operational control of naval and air facilities at Berbera. The Somalis, however, saw Soviet support as reinforcing their irredentist goals. Although the Soviets were

5. For a discussion see Tom J. Farer, *War Clouds on the Horn of Africa: The Widening Storm* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1979).
6. "The Horn of Africa in the Strategy of Imperialism," Moscow (Tass), February 8, 1978; and V. Sofinsky and A. Khazanov, "The Imperialist Design for the Horn of Africa," *New Times,* 1980, No. 7, pp. 2-7.

cautious in their support of Somalia, Soviet military aid made Somalia's armed forces among the most impressive in the African continent. The Soviets thereby exploited the Somalis' irredentism and, along with Cuba, supported the Eritrean liberation movement as long as Ethiopia maintained close ties with the United States.

The establishment of a strategic foothold was probably also the motivation behind Soviet interest in Ethiopia in the 1970s; an opportunity to obtain such a foothold came after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie. But the Soviets were pursuing political as well as strategic goals there. From their point of view there was a need to counter U.S.-supported Saudi Arabian policies in the Red Sea area which, by supporting the secessionists in Eritrea (whom the USSR now opposed) and in 1977 Somali guerrillas in the Ogaden, were undermining the new Mengistu regime. The main objective of U.S.-backed Saudi Arabian policy, according to one Soviet official, was to turn the Red Sea into a "closed Arab lake."[7]

Another Soviet objective in the Horn was to win influence at the expense of Soviet rivals in the area: the United States and to a lesser degree China. The Soviets had been fairly successful in doing this in Somalia and probably hoped for a repeat of their success in Ethiopia. The new Ethiopian regime, which came to power in 1975, began to take an increasingly radical, anti-American position. The decline of U.S. influence in Ethiopia reached a peak in early 1977 when Mengistu, chairman of Ethiopia's ruling body, the Dergue, ordered U.S. military personnel out of the country. The Soviet decision to become involved in Ethiopia in 1977 was thus motivated by the desire to undermine pro-Western influences and fill a power vacuum. The arrival of Soviet arms in January 1977 meant the end of an era lasting more than two decades during which the U.S. was the main supplier of arms to Ethiopia. Originally this shift was probably viewed by the Politburo as a new political gain in Soviet policy in Africa.

The perceived "Chinese threat," so important in Angola, may have been reflected (though to a lesser degree) in Soviet calculations related to the Horn. Sino-Soviet competition in the Horn is not a new phenomenon. It began in the early 1960s during the so-called "second scramble" for Africa. It seems that the Chinese interest in Somalia in the 1960s helped to stimulate Soviet interest in the region. Soviet arms transfers at that time were due largely to efforts at upstaging the West but perhaps also to interest in countering the Chinese, who in 1963 provided the new Somali regime with substantial economic aid. The development of Sino-Somali ties, however, was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution when China temporarily suspended most of its aid to Africa. The Chinese interest in Somalia was revived in the early 1970s, as economic aid was resumed and even a road project agreement was signed between the two countries. Thus it is possible that large-scale Soviet support for Somalia in 1972–73 was also intended to counter what the Soviets perceived as growing Chinese influence.

7. An interview with First Deputy Chairman of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee Aleksander Dzasokhov, *New Times,* No. 9 (February 1978), pp. 10–11.

Economic calculations, on the other hand, played a subordinate role in Soviet involvement in the Horn. At least one Soviet source, probably referring to oil and gas explorations by a U.S. firm in the Ogaden in the early 1970s, has claimed that this area has oil resources.[8] However, such reports were probably not very influential in Soviet calculations.

Along with the benefits the Soviets hoped to obtain by a realignment in the Horn, there were also costs. A Soviet decision to become involved in Ethiopia, even on an initially limited scale, would be quite a daring move, as such involvement would appear to the Somalis to be a threat. The Soviet leadership, perhaps taking this into consideration, might have briefly thought in the spring and summer of 1977 that the traditional animosity existing between Somalia and Ethiopia could be overcome through political mediation. One solution proposed by Soviet and Cuban officials at that time was a confederation of Somalia and Ethiopia and, possibly, of South Yemen and Djibouti (with the Ogaden remaining autonomous within this confederation) under a common revolutionary, anti-Western orientation which would transcend linguistic and ethnic differences. The success of such a "progressive" federation would have allowed the Politburo to "have its cake and eat it too," i.e., to take over the United States' role as arms supplier of Ethiopia, while preserving a strategic position in Somalia and avoiding a showdown with Siad Barre's regime. Yet Somalia rejected this proposal. Thus until July, when the conflict over the Ogaden escalated, the Soviets were for a time supplying both countries with weapons. Meanwhile, there was vacillation and there may have been some disagreement within the Soviet bureaucracies over the course of Soviet policies in the Horn.

Soviet Decisionmaking

Despite Soviet pressure to halt the fighting and Soviet-Cuban attempts at mediation, the war continued and even escalated when the guerrillas of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), reinforced by regular Somali units, attacked the Ogaden. Moreover, by late August 1977, after Siad Barre's visit to Moscow, it became obvious that the Soviets had miscalculated Somalia's reaction to their becoming Ethiopia's principal arms supplier (through the May agreement), and that they would have to make the difficult choice between the two countries. It is not improbable that high Soviet navy officials for some time were not too enthusiastic about a shift toward Ethiopia, which could and did lead to the loss of the facilities at Berbera in exchange for uncertain strategic payoffs in Ethiopia. This view may have been shared by senior Soviet military officials responsible for arms transfers to the Somalis and concerned with the training of the Somali armed forces. Sixty percent of the Somali officer corps was trained in the USSR; and with Soviet assistance the Somali armed forces had become the most mechanized in Black Africa.

Concern about the wisdom of a policy risking the "loss" of Somalia might have been shared by

8. B. Zhavorenkov, "The Blazing Ogaden and its Locality," *Sovetskaia Belorussia* (Minsk), February 17, 1978.

such Politburo members as Nikolai Podgorny, who was intimately involved in making Soviet alliance policies with Somalia, and who was said to have developed a close working relationship with President Siad Barre, this being highlighted during his visit to Somalia in 1974 when he signed the treaty of Friendship and Cooperation there. Podgorny also visited Somalia briefly in the spring of 1977 (and avoided Ethiopia on that occasion) and it is possible that during the visit he tried to ease the tension between the two countries. But shortly after his African trip Podgorny was dropped from the Politburo. This was undoubtedly due mainly to his old rivalry with Brezhnev, and to rumored disagreement over the new constitution, but his dismissal also might have been linked to disagreement over the new Soviet policies in the Horn.[9]

A survey of Soviet public pronouncements and actions in the Horn in the spring and summer of 1977 indicates some vacillation and hesitation, ultimately culminating an overall tilt toward Ethiopia. After the Ogaden invasion in July the USSR temporarily suspended arms supplies to Somalia but then resumed them again for some time. Though the Soviet media were gradually tending to favor Ethiopia, they refrained until August 1977 from directly attacking Somalia.

To be sure, the Soviet leaders had discovered some compelling reasons for supporting Ethiopia. Not the least important was the fact that Ethiopian territory was being invaded by an aggressor using Soviet weapons. The continued support of Somalia was bound to place the Soviets in an awkward position vis-à-vis other African countries, most of whom respected above all else the territorial integrity of all countries according to present boundaries, illogical and arbitrary as they seemed to be.

Another reason for Soviet support of Ethiopia—not the most important factor, but still one worth consideration—was the historical ties between both countries. The Russians have had historical contacts with Ethiopia primarily because Ethiopia, ever since the days of Peter the Great, had been the only Orthodox Christian, independent state in Africa. The Slavophile Russian officials under Alexander III looked upon Ethiopia as a logical outpost of the Tsar's empire and of Orthodox Christianity in Africa. In the 1880s Russia and Ethiopia had exchanged ambassadors and Russian military officers served as the military advisors of Ethiopian emperors, almost one hundred years before their Soviet counterparts.[10]

But again, the historical factor was certainly not as important in Soviet calculations as was the factor of Ethiopia's present prestige in Africa. Ethiopia is almost twice as large as Somalia and has 30 million inhabitants, making it almost nine times as populous as Somalia. Because of its size and population, Ethiopia has greater potential than

9. See the interesting report in *An Nahav,* Vol. 1, No. 18, August 22, 1977; see also a paper written by Capt. Gary McGraw, USA, "Soviet-Cuban Intervention in Ethiopia," and the thesis of LCDR William Nurthen, USN, "Soviet Strategy in the Red Sea Basin," Monterey, California, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, March 1980.

10. For a further elaboration of this idea, see Edward T. Wilson, "Russia's Historic Stake in Black Africa," in David E. Albright, ed., *Communism in Africa* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 67–92.

Somalia for economic growth and development. It could offer the Soviets not only a greater market for its products but also more natural resources than could Somalia. Moreover, Ethiopia has long been a political force in the Horn and elsewhere in Africa. It possesses a proud tradition as the first independent black African state and hosts the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity. Soviet support for Ethiopia, in spite of the costs—e.g., the likely loss of facilities at Berbera and loss of the proposed Indian Ocean Naval Limitation Talks (NALT) agreement—would seem to guarantee more promising future dividends than would support of Somalia.

On the other hand, Somali leader Siad Barre's wheeling and dealing with the leaders of the Arab countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia (in early 1977) and with the United States, probably caused the Soviets to mistrust the Somali leader. The Soviets felt that in 1975–77 Saudi Arabian politics and "petrodollars" helped to reverse the superpowers' connections with Egypt, the Sudan and North Yemen. With Saudi help, as the Soviets believed, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat initiated his 1977 rapprochement with Israel. Future targets of American-Arab strategy appeared to be South Yemen and Somalia. In the Soviet view further hesitation and vacillation in taking sides with Ethiopia was bound to have grave repercussions in that country.

The embattled regime of Mengistu was almost crippled by August-September 1977. The situation was in some respects similar to that of October 1975 in Angola where the regime of Agostinho Neto was on the defensive and holding only a relatively small territory. There was the serious possibility that Mengistu would completely lose control over the Ogaden region, which had been overrun by Somali troops, and over Eritrea as well, where rebels had seized most of the province, trapping 6,000 Ethiopian troops in the port of Massawa. The July-September Somali offensive in the Ogaden led to de facto Somali control of almost one-third of Ethiopia's territory and cut off the important Ethiopian railway line to Djibouti. In addition to these conflicts in the Ogaden and Eritrea, Ethiopia had to deal with at least four other major organized revolts in other parts of the country. Had the Somalis conquered the Ogaden and the Eritreans set up an independent state, the rest of Ethiopia would have become a land-locked chunk of territory reduced to half its original size. Mengistu's regime would almost inevitably have been discredited and perhaps overthrown by pro-Western forces. As in Angola, the fear of the collapse of a more important client regime in a strategically important region and the subsequent weakening of the credibility of the USSR as a global superpower and "reliable friend"[11] also played an important role in the Soviet shift from Somalia to Ethiopia. A defeat in Ethiopia would mean the final liquidation of the Soviets' investment in the Horn of Africa and victory for the United States and "petroleum diplomacy." Any reservations Soviet military leaders might have had about the loss of Berbera were probably overcome by the promises of a payoff for the Soviet navy in the form of compensating facilities in Ethiopia.

As in Angola, the stakes were high and the risks

11. For a discussion of this point see *Sovetskaia Latvia,* January 31, 1978.

were low. The Soviets concluded that the U.S. would not get militarily involved in the Horn primarily because of Somalia's aggression in the Ogaden; that despite President Carter's rhetoric, the U.S. was still caught up in its post-Vietnam, post-Watergate mood and would not contest Soviet-Cuban military intervention. Carter's vacillation and uncertainty further encouraged this conclusion. While the Soviets appeared to believe (as they later explained) that the United States acted in conspiracy with the Somalis,[12] they also knew that the United States refused to permit U.S. weapons to be delivered to Somalia via a third partner such as Saudi Arabia. Neither were U.S. attempts to link developments in the Horn to SALT taken very seriously by the Soviets. While they may have recognized a tie between a NALT agreement and any moves into Ethiopia, they found the linkage between SALT and events in the Horn to be "artificial," "dangerous," and definitely "unacceptable."

On the whole, assistance to Ethiopia was viewed by the Soviets as well worth the costs and risks of military involvement.

In many respects the situation in Ethiopia provided a convenient opportunity for the USSR to strike back at the United States for the latter's 1975-77 success in reducing Soviet influence in Egypt and the Sudan. The Soviet leaders might have also believed that successful intervention in the Ogaden, with the defeat of the Somali army, would sooner or later topple Siad Barre. Indeed, as a result of the unrest in the Somali army following the Ogaden debacle, there was an unsuccessful coup attempt in Somalia on April 9, 1978.[13] Furthermore, by helping to fend off Somali irredentism in the Ogaden, the Soviets might have hoped to improve relations with pro-Western Kenya, which faced the same threat from Somalia as did Ethiopia.

In October of 1977 the USSR finally decided to side with Ethiopia, very likely realizing, of course, that the Somalis would retaliate. And the subsequent embargo of Soviet weapons to Somalia did indeed bring about the expected retaliation—expulsion of Soviet and Cuban advisors and loss of the facilities at Berbera.

The Cuban Factor

As in Angola, the Soviet intervention into Ethiopia was facilitated by the introduction of Cuban combat troops. Cuba's involvement in the Horn in 1977-78 differed from the Angolan case, however, over the issue of "international revolutionary solidarity." Like the Soviets, the Cubans found themselves with the dilemma of having to support either Ethiopia, on the one hand, or Somalia and the Eritrean guerrillas, all of them "progressive," revolutionary forces. The choice was especially difficult with regard to Eritrea, since it meant having to turn against the Eritrean guerrillas who since 1967 had been trained by the Cubans.

The USSR's African policy depended on the willingness of Fidel Castro and his colleagues to provide ground forces for the Soviets' enterprises in Africa. In Angola and Ethiopia (unlike later in Afghanistan), the Soviets were cautious about committing their own troops in direct military fashion. The use of Soviet combat units might

12. *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Moscow), March 8, 1978.
13. *Christian Science Monitor,* March 11, 1978.

have elicited a firmer response from the United States with resulting detrimental consequences for the USSR. On the other hand, the presence of a substantial number of Cuban blacks and mulattos, who would be less likely to offend Black African sensitivities, was another factor favoring the use of Cuban troops.

As Cuban willingness to deploy regular troops and advisors in Africa became more important to Soviet policies in Africa, Cuba gained the status of a privileged ally and was able to insist on adjustments in Soviet-Cuban economic and political relations. In the aftermath of the invasion of Angola in 1975 and again after the intervention in Ethiopia in 1978, the Cubans were able to negotiate favorable agreements with the USSR, for example, ensuring continuation into the early 1980s of Soviet subsidies of Cuban sugar and nickel production and for petroleum consumption. The Soviets also provided for the modernization of Cuba's armed forces with sophisticated Soviet weaponry. Furthermore, Soviet policy decisions regarding the Third World and particularly Africa began to reflect, at least marginally, Cuba's convictions about the necessity of undertaking military operations there. Castro, as current president of the nonaligned movement, has exercised considerable indirect influence on the USSR by serving as a broker between Soviet and Third World leaders. Thus Cuban involvement in Africa cannot be viewed as benefitting only the Soviet Union.[14]

The alliance between the Soviets and the Cubans was much tighter during the intervention in Ethiopia in 1977 than during the Angolan intervention. Castro, in cooperation with Soviet officials, acted as a mediator between Somalia and Ethiopia and attempted to negotiate the aforementioned "socialist federation" of the two countries along with Djibouti and South Yemen. Throughout the operation there seemed to be a more careful coordination of Soviet and Cuban policies than in Angola. In Ethiopia, the Soviets were vigorously involved from the very beginning. During the initial stage of the operation in Angola, Cuba temporarily functioned as an autonomous actor. But during the Ogaden conflict, however, Cuba generally assumed a more subordinate role, if not indeed acting as a Soviet proxy.

Soviet-Cuban Intervention and Beyond

Signs that the Soviet leadership had decided to intervene militarily in the Horn came in October 1977 when Soviet deliveries to Somalia came to a halt and arms and war materiel began flowing into Ethiopia. The subsequent Soviet airlift, in preparation for a counteroffensive aimed at recapturing the Ogaden, began on November 29. The airlift soon became one of the Soviets' most massive and sustained operations since the Cuban missile crisis. As in Angola, the airlift was conducted primarily by Soviet air transport (VTA), utilizing mainly AN-12, AN-22, and Aeroflot IL-62 air transports. Up to 225 Soviet planes, which is about 15 percent of VTA, are said to have been deployed.

14. See my "Soviet-Cuban Alliance in Africa and Central America," *The World Today,* February 1981, pp. 45–53. For an official Cuban history of the Ethiopian revolution and the Cuban role in Ethiopia, see Raúl Valdés Vivó, *Ethiopia's Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1978).

The Soviets used several routes for airlifting military hardware to Ethiopia in an arc from Yugoslavia to Afghanistan. Some Soviet pilots were said to have misled air-traffic controllers along these routes with false reports to cover the real nature of their mission. This large operation was supervised by four Soviet generals under the overall command of Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Soviet Ground Forces General Vasily Petrov and included some participation by Cuban generals and senior East German and South Yemeni personnel. The Soviets were said to have launched a new military satellite (Cosmos 964) which is believed to have played a key role in controlling the operation.[15]

As in Angola, the airlift was accompanied by an impressive Soviet sealift to Aden. Both sealift and airlift were protected and supported by a Soviet Indian Ocean squadron which was augmented by 50 percent and positioned in adjacent waters — off the shore of Eritrea in the Red Sea and the ports of Massawa and Assab, just inside the strait of Bab-el Mandeb. Two Alligator-class Soviet naval ships operated off Massawa in February of 1978,[16] loading or unloading materiel on the beach. A large portion of the Soviets' Indian Ocean Squadron was concentrated in the Red Sea. Overall the air- and sealift delivered an estimated $1 billion worth of military hardware (including T-54 tanks, heavy mortars, and SAM-7 light missiles), and involved 1500 Soviet advisors and 13,000 Cuban combat troops. By December Soviet arms were pouring into Ethiopia at such a rate that the Addis Ababa airport was described as being swamped with Soviet military aircraft.

The offensive in the Ogaden, spearheaded by three Cuban armor and motor-rifle brigades, began in early February. In March, in a major battle against the Somalis, Soviet-backed Cuban and Ethiopian forces captured the strategic town of Jijiga. The Cuban government was believed to have called up additional reserves for the war, including men over 40 years of age. While over 100 Cuban pilots were flying air strikes against Somalia in the Ogaden, Soviet pilots were taking part in Cuba's air defense.[17] After the completion of the Ogaden campaign in the spring and summer of 1978, the Soviets reluctantly joined the Ethiopian offensive in Eritrea and helped drive the Eritrean guerrillas into the mountains. Unlike in the Ogaden, where the Cubans fought alongside the Ethiopians, the Cuban role in Eritrea was limited mainly to training the Ethiopians, while the Soviets appeared to exercise command and control functions.

The other Communist state actively involved in these operations in the Horn was East Germany. Bulgaria and Hungary also participated, as did (to a lesser degree) Poland and Czechoslovakia. According to Western intelligence reports, about 2000 advisors and technicians from other East European countries, particularly East Germany,

15. *Newsweek,* January 23, 1978, pp. 35-36; *Washington Post,* January 20, 1978; *Sunday Telegraph* (London), January 15, 1978.
16. *Time,* February 20, 1978. There was an unconfirmed report that at least one of the Soviet vessels was involved in shelling the Eritrean rebels. *Manchester Guardian,* January 19, 1978.
17. *New York Times,* February 15, 1978; *Christian Science Monitor,* February 17, 1978.

were involved. Whereas the Cubans participated in the actual fighting (in the Ogaden), the East Germans saw to the military and ideological training of the police, militia, regular armed forces and youth groups. The East Germans reportedly also helped with security and police work in neighboring South Yemen, serving as a kind of Praetorian guard to that "progressive" regime in addition to running training camps there for military units fighting in the Ogaden. Albeit on a limited scale, East Germany's military and security involvement in Ethiopia (as well as in other African countries) helped this Warsaw Pact ally to obtain, as had Cuba, greater international prestige, recognition, influence and economic rewards from the USSR in exchange for a show of "internationalism."

The less conspicuous involvement of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and (perhaps reluctantly) Poland and Hungary consisted in overseeing the arrival of large quantities of weapons for the Ethiopian armed forces. On the other hand, there was no reported involvement of Yugoslavs and Romanians, as had been the case in Angola. The Romanians, while declaring support for the Ethiopian revolution, took a neutral stand and expressed reservations about the invasion. The Soviet-Cuban invasion was publicly denounced by the Chinese.[18]

Returning to the issue of Soviet-Cuban involvement in the Horn, it is worth investigating the strategic and regional ramifications of the intervention of 1977-78, and its effect on overall Soviet strategic objectives and relations with the countries in the Horn of Africa. The Soviets did lose the valuable facilities in Berbera and any hope of reaching a NALT agreement. In light of new Soviet facilities in Ethiopia, however, it is unlikely that the losses will have much long-term effect on Soviet naval operations in the region. Since the invasion the Soviet navy has moved a floating drydock from Aden to Dahlak Island near Massawa.[19] The Soviet Indian Ocean squadron uses the Dahlak Islands as its principal repair facility; they are at least as important as the port of Aden to the Soviet navy. In 1979 the USSR also signed a maritime agreement with Ethiopia.

Within Africa as a whole, Soviet and Cuban activities have achieved significant short-term political objectives. Having saved a "progressive" regime from certain defeat and having shown support for the most important principle of the Organization of African Unity — the inviolability of borders — Soviet and Cuban prestige rose considerably in Africa. Although the Soviets had once armed the Somalis, by later combating Somali irredentism in 1977-78 they may have ingratiated themselves into the favor of the most pro-Western state in the region, Kenya.

In Ethiopia the USSR and Cuba undertook a concerted military operation which overall was very impressive. Obviously the intervention demonstrated the Soviet ability to sustain, with allied support from Cuba, East Germany, and other East European countries, a major military operation in the Third World to effect a political change in their favor. Although this ability had already been demonstrated in Angola, the

18. *Time,* February 20, 1978; *Washington Post,* February 17, 1978.
19. *Baltimore Sun,* December 11, 1980.

increased scope and sophistication of the Ethiopian operation gave the Soviets more experience in overseas military operations. It was good training for future operations abroad.

As in Angola and (later) Afghanistan, the Soviets sought to consolidate relations with Ethiopia by concluding a Friendship and Cooperation treaty. The treaty, signed November 20, 1978, was similar to those signed by the Soviets with India, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mozambique, Angola, Vietnam, Egypt, and Somalia (the latter two eventually abrogating their treaties). Among other things, the treaty with Ethiopia called for continued cooperation in the military field and provided for close consultation and coordination of Soviet and Ethiopian policies in the case of a threat to or breach of international peace.[20] The treaty also called for consistent policies opposing U.S. expansionism, thereby having clearly anti-Somali overtones.

Cuban gains in Ethiopia seemed to have been more fragile than those of the Soviets. Thus because Castro was reluctant to help Mengistu crush the Eritrean rebels, while the Cubans then tried to get involved in Ethiopian politics by injecting their own favorites into the power struggle, the Cuban ambassador to Addis Ababa was expelled in July 1978. Since then, the Cubans have withdrawn about 2-3000 of their troops.[21] But the Cubans and Ethiopians have now patched up their differences, and the Cubans are still deployed in Ethiopia where they guard the results of the 1978 victory.

Outlook for the 1980s

Obviously, future Soviet relations with the countries of the Horn will be influenced by a number of external and internal variables, whose impact can hardly be measured at this time. In general, this writer senses that Soviet-Cuban ascendancy in Africa in the 1980s is likely to be somewhat less spectacular than it was in the 1970s.

First, new developments on the international scene—the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and continued military involvement in that country, and preoccupation with the ongoing crisis in Poland and the Iran-Iraq war—could impose some hard choices on the Soviet leadership with regard to its overall "anti-imperialist strategy" in the Third World. In the wake of Afghanistan, many Third World countries have become less willing to accept the Soviets in their role as defender of "progressive" regimes in the Third World, and are also less willing to accept Castro as leader of the nonaligned movement.

In the strategic and political realms, the considerable worsening of Soviet-American relations and the election of Ronald Reagan introduce new and as yet unknown variables. One of the most important factors in the prediction of Soviet commitments in the Third World is the future course of U.S. policy vis-à-vis the USSR and Cuba. In 1975 in Angola and in 1977 in Ethiopia the USSR and Cuba did not seem to be much constrained by the United States, where public and congressional opinion did not favor a forceful response to assertive Soviet behavior. However, the mood in

20. *Pravda,* November 21, 1978; and Brezhnev's speech, *Pravda,* November 18, 1978.
21. *New York Times,* August 4, 1979.

the United States now seems to be changing. This was demonstrated to some degree by the election of Ronald Reagan, who earlier in 1980 suggested a naval blockade of Cuba in response to the discovery of the "Soviet brigade" in that country. Soviet and Cuban leaders themselves have indicated that they view seriously the emerging shift of outlook in the U.S. Thus Castro in October 1980 released all Americans who were serving prison terms in Cuban jails. This and other intriguing gestures made prior to the U.S. presidential elections – such as his sending back to the United States recent Cuban refugees who hijacked U.S. jets to Cuba – were indications he was seeking to aid and placate President Carter whom he considered less dangerous than Ronald Reagan.

There are other internal constraints which can mitigate against assertive Soviet and Cuban policies in the Horn. First, the Cuban economic situation is in its worst condition in decades, despite massive Soviet economic support. The Soviet Union is also approaching a very difficult economic period, along with an uncertain period of leadership succession. Moreover, the Soviets, with various extensive commitments in the Third World – in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Cuba and South Yemen, to name only a few – may be overextending themselves. However, the Cuban economic situation may be the most critical factor. The economic malaise, to which the costly adventures in Angola and the Horn certainly have contributed, has caught up with the traditional export industries of sugar and tobacco. This situation led to a radical reorganization of the Cuban government in early 1980 and the rationing of essentials and has contributed to public resentment because of the soaring cost of living. The situation culminated in open dissent in the spring of 1980, when over 100,000 Cuban dissidents sought asylum in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana and subsequently emigrated to the United States.

So far, however, Soviet and Cuban political and economic difficulties have failed to elicit any kind of major domestic anti-war movement or, for that matter, any visible opposition, or even serious political debate. However, they have raised the important issue of the vulnerability of the Soviet strategic foothold in Africa, particularly in Angola and Ethiopia, both of which are dependent to some extent on the willingness of Fidel Castro and his colleagues to provide ground forces for these Soviet enterprises. The Soviets must be aware that this dependency, in the long run, may increase the vulnerability of Soviet policies in the Horn. Indeed, Ethiopia is a fragile ally. It is a faction-ridden country where there is continued fighting. Although the Ethiopians are on the offensive, the conflict remains unresolved in both the Ogaden and Eritrea. The number of Soviet advisors and the levels of Soviet military aid and Cuban troops have remained constant in Ethiopia. The Soviets, however, have become bogged down in a quagmire much like the one in Afghanistan. The continuing Soviet presence will not in any final way resolve the conflict. The future of strategically situated, newly-independent Djibouti, squeezed between Somalia and Ethiopia, is far from being decided, although the Soviets will not likely make attempts to significantly increase their influence there in the foreseeable future.

The extent of future Soviet involvement in the

Horn in the 1980s will also depend on the course of future U.S. policy in that region. A sharp increase in U.S. economic aid to Ethiopia could be helpful in furthering the process of stabilizing Mengistu's regime, and as such it would probably be welcomed by the Soviets. On the other hand, implementation of the August 1980 U.S.-Somali agreement—by which Somalia would be provided with $40 million in U.S. weapons in return for the use by U.S. armed forces of facilities in Berbera, only 150 miles from the Ethiopian border—is viewed by the Soviets with concern and alarm. The Soviets fear (as do American critics of the agreement) that its implementation could lead to U.S. engagement in the war in the disputed Ogaden region. U.S. military ties with Somalia could provide an incentive for the Soviets to encourage Ethiopian adventurism toward Somalia. Indeed, since the signing of the U.S.-Somali agreement Ethiopia has reportedly considerably increased its military deployment in the Ogaden, committing ten thousand new troops along the Somali border. The Somalis believed that this action was designed to destabilize the Somali regime of Siad Barre, who in November 1980 declared a state of emergency, and that it may have taken place with Soviet consent if not encouragement. Ethiopia has also warned the United States that it is prepared to take defensive military measures in response to the threat which would be posed by the proposed U.S. military installation in Somalia.

Yet it is questionable whether the Soviets would support an outright Ethiopian invasion of Somalia as a means of retaliation against the U.S.-Somali collusion. As mentioned earlier, because of the continuous resistance of Muslim rebels in Afghanistan, and because of ongoing preoccupation with the Polish crisis and the war between Iran and Iraq, Soviet interests, at least in the early 1980s, may be centered on Eastern Europe and the Northern tier of the strategic "arc of instability." Indeed, it is also questionable whether in the foreseeable future the Soviets would wish a confrontation in the Horn with the United States, particularly if there is a strong U.S. presence in Somalia. It is likewise doubtful that the Soviets will make a comeback in Mogadishu in the near future, certainly not as long as the U.S. dialogue with Somalia about future cooperation continues. The few remaining Soviet diplomats in that city are isolated, as were U.S. diplomats only a few years ago. Pictures scrawled on the walls show Somalis sticking bayonets into dogs labelled "Russians," reminding those Soviets who do remain of the limits of Soviet power.