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What Does the Case of Mozambique Tell Us About Soviet Ambivalence Toward Africa?

by Winrich Kühne

Developments in southern Africa since early 1984 have raised a range of new questions about Soviet policy and Soviet relevance in this region of the continent. In the military sphere, Soviet assistance has enabled neither Mozambique nor Angola to quell or even substantially diminish domestic guerrilla challenges that have blocked economic growth. There have also been growing doubts about the effectiveness in practical terms of orthodox state-centered Marxist-Leninist models of development—especially in agriculture, the most important socioeconomic sector of African states.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of Soviet analysts and strategists are questioning how much emphasis can or should be placed on ideology in cultivating relationships with Africa. Significantly, they categorize even the most pro-Soviet African governments as “of socialist orientation” rather than genuinely “socialist.” Even among East German academicians, who in the past have often been more ideologically orthodox in their writing on developing countries than their Soviet counterparts, a fierce debate is going on about the circumstances under which there is still hope for a successful implementation of true socialism.

Frustrations are not confined to the area of ideology. Eastern bloc economists have been forced into a far-reaching change of mind about the present global economy, and the risks of pursuing an uncompromising antagonistic policy against the world economic order and its main protagonists, the Western industrialized countries. In the southern African microcosm there are some intriguing signals that the East-West conflict, whose unbridled antagonism in the military sphere has already become outdated because of the mutual capacity for assured nuclear destruction, could move toward a *modus vivendi* in the Third World because of economic forces.

One indication of a Soviet policy shift—or, at least,

ambivalence—was Moscow’s subdued response to the signing on March 16, 1984 of a “nonaggression and good neighborliness” accord by the leaders of Mozambique and South Africa. Under the terms of the Nkomati Accord, Mozambique undertook to curb drastically the activities of the African National Congress (ANC), while South Africa promised to end assistance to the dissident *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (known as Renamo or the MNR).

Although there is no doubt that Nkomati was seen by the Soviets as a negative development, Moscow did not retaliate by cutting aid to the government of President Samora Machel or recalling advisors. On December 26, 1983, with Nkomati already an inevitable event, the Soviet ambassador in Maputo, Yuri Sepelev, publicly stated that it was essential to understand that Mozambique was a sovereign state and “nobody’s puppet.” The Soviet Union, he said, understood Mozambique’s desire to improve its relations “in all directions.” To prove that this was not just a rhetorical position, Sepelev announced that more shiploads of rice and oil would arrive and also drew attention to a recently signed \$300 million trade agreement. Only a few days after Nkomati was signed, Sepelev announced further Soviet loans, and the USSR was the first creditor to agree to reschedule Mozambique’s debt after a worldwide appeal by President Machel.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has made no real effort to impede another key development in Mozambique—a so-called “opening to the West” that has involved not only economics but also politics, ideology, and even military affairs.

Strictly speaking, the use of the term “opening to the West” in connection with recent developments in Mozambique is somewhat misleading, because Western influence has never been completely excluded

from the country. Since independence in 1975, the policy of the ruling party, the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO), toward nonsocialist countries has been marked by pragmatism. South Africa and the Western industrialized nations have remained major trading partners; in 1979 they purchased about 80 percent of Mozambique's exports. It is true that the Eastern bloc countries increased their share of Mozambique's trade after independence, but one should keep in mind that they started more or less from zero. In 1980, East Germany was Mozambique's most important Eastern European trading partner, providing 9.5 percent of imports and receiving 8.1 percent of exports.

Although Mozambique's economic relations with the West were based on "pragmatism" and "realism" from the outset, FRELIMO's rhetoric was pro-Soviet and anticapitalist. In 1977, FRELIMO's Third Congress codified the decision to commit the country to a rather orthodox kind of Marxism-Leninism. FRELIMO announced its own transformation from a national liberation movement into a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party (even though a proletarian working class, the supposedly indispensable political basis of any such party, hardly existed in Mozambique). While FRELIMO expressly repudiated the idea of a "third way" between Western capitalism and Eastern bloc communism, this did not prevent President Machel from remaining on good political terms with Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere, an old friend and Machel's main protector during the liberation struggle.

The governing party's formal adherence to an orthodox Marxist-Leninist line did not imply an acceptance by Mozambique of Soviet ideological or military hegemony. Indeed, the leadership has repeatedly asserted the country's "national" independence in no uncertain terms. In particular, Machel has consistently refused to grant Soviet warships basing rights in the country's harbors. Soviet military vessels are granted only restricted access to certain facilities on an occasional basis. To make the message very clear to everybody, the principle of not allowing any foreign military bases ("with no exception") is enshrined in the 1978 constitution.

The South African Connection

Operating on the often-cited principle that nations can choose their friends but not their neighbors, Machel maintained a range of economic links with South Africa established while Mozambique was under Portuguese rule. After independence in 1975, South Africa quietly continued to help the FRELIMO government operate the port in Maputo and the country's railway. A formal cooperation agreement between the two countries (negotiated in secret and not mentioned in Mozambique's media) was signed on February 26, 1979.

Relations deteriorated sharply after 1980, however, as South Africa began a series of raids and other military actions into neighboring states in retaliation for ANC operations within the Republic believed to

have been launched from external bases in the region. By striking directly against what it claimed were ANC buildings in Matola (on the outskirts of Maputo) in January 1981, and by imposing a 10-day rail embargo against Mozambique in March 1981 for "technical reasons," Pretoria left no doubt that it was dead serious about ending Mozambique's support for anti-apartheid liberation fighters. Meanwhile, MNR sabotage had resulted (according to a February 3, 1984 broadcast by Maputo radio explaining the reasons for entering into the Nkomati Accord) in the destruction of much of the nation's fledgling infrastructure, including key bridges, railway sections, pipelines, electric power stations, 586 schools, and 900 rural shops.

Speaking at the 10th meeting of the FRELIMO Central Committee in 1982, Machel provided the first indication that the answer to the MNR problem might have to involve compromise with Pretoria. Asserting that "South Africa recruits and trains, finances and equips, arms and organizes . . . the mercenaries and armed bands that operate in Mozambique," he called for "developing a broad movement of people's militias, training and arming the millions of Mozambican workers" to assist the army in fighting the MNR. A few sentences later, however, Machel hinted that such a strategy might not be adequate to save Mozambique and that a retreat on the anti-apartheid front might be required to secure survival. He called for more "sophisticated weapons" to fight apartheid, but the kind of weapons he then proceeded to name—UNESCO conferences and protest concerts—camouflaged what he must clearly have had in mind: a scaling down of ANC activities. In fact, "sophistication" was another word for a retreat forced upon Machel by the geographical, historical, security, and economic circumstances his government faced. At about the same time, Mozambique signaled to the State Department in Washington that it would welcome U.S. assistance in reaching a fundamental accommodation with South Africa on questions of mutual security. These moves were the beginning of the process of negotiation that led in due course to the Nkomati Accord, which in effect recognized the political struggle in South Africa as a domestic issue.

The East's Contribution to Nkomati

It would be a mistake to conclude that Pretoria's destabilization policy was the pivotal factor in bringing about FRELIMO's rapprochement with the West. If one takes into account Mozambique's relations with the East, the picture becomes much more complicated. The change of mind toward the West was brought about not only by South Africa's stepped-up destabilization efforts in the early 1980s, but also by the rejection of Mozambique's endeavor during the same period to move from observer status to full membership in the Soviet-dominated Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA).

Why did Moscow rebuff Maputo on this issue? One reason was the financial burden already presented to

the CMEA by Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba. Another was the difficulty of integrating Mozambique's economy with those of the other members. In any event, the consequences for Mozambique of its exclusion from full membership were clear: the comprehensive socialist, Marxist-Leninist orientation of FRELIMO's current program had presupposed integration into the Eastern bloc economic system and could not be sustained if such integration were not to materialize. Thus, Machel had to seek new partners and a new outlook.

Ideological Shifts, 1982-84

By 1982, a process of rapid change was clearly evident in Mozambique's relations with the international community. In April of that year, Maputo signed a treaty of military cooperation with its former colonial oppressor, Portugal; there were also rumors of military cooperation with France and Britain. In August 1982, the Mozambican government for the first time recognized West Germany's claim to West Berlin in a food aid agreement with West Germany. This was an important symbolic step away from a longtime stance of "socialist solidarity" with East Germany (reportedly the only CMEA country to support Maputo's application for full membership). The previous Mozambican rejection of the "Berlin clause" had cut the country off from the flow of bilateral West German and multilateral EEC development aid. Short-

ly thereafter, Maputo announced its willingness to take part in the Lomé III negotiations, thereby beginning its formal reintegration into the Western economic system.

In August 1982, Mozambique concluded its first trade agreement with China (with which FRELIMO had had amicable relations during the independence struggle), thereby revitalizing its connection with another important country opposed to the spread of Soviet influence in southern Africa. Meanwhile, U.S. food aid increased from 43,000 tons in 1982 to a projected 350,000 tons for the 1984 fiscal year, and in 1984 Mozambique received more U.S. emergency food aid than any other country. In 1984 Mozambique also joined the Lomé Convention, the IMF, and the World Bank (which approved a loan of \$45 million in June 1985).

In April 1983, FRELIMO's Fourth Congress reached a series of important decisions concerning the country's future political and economic orientation. Moving toward the example set by Afro-socialist one-party systems, it de-emphasized the importance of "proletarian class struggle" as the ideological justification for FRELIMO's leadership, while strengthening the dominant role of the party and the centralized leadership. The most important developments were the modification, or more precisely the correction, of orthodox Marxist-Leninist elements of Mozambique's economic policy. Economic planning and implementation were decentralized and agricultural development was redirected away from state farms with more support planned for small-scale family farming. (Soviet-style state farms had in most cases proved to be costly failures in terms of productivity.)

The Fourth Congress initiatives were followed by a new investment code that came into force on September 6, 1984. This new code not only facilitates joint ventures involving foreign and Mozambican state and private capital but allows for the establishment of wholly foreign-owned companies, which are offered safeguards with respect to nationalization and a guaranteed right to transfer their profits out of the country in hard currency.

The Failure of Soviet Military Aid

The steady deterioration of Mozambique's security during the pre-Nkomati period offered a classic situation of conflict and instability of the kind that (at least according to a widespread school of thought in the West) Moscow would not hesitate to use to its advantage. Why, then, was the Kremlin either unwilling or unable to exploit matters by increasing FRELIMO's dependence on Eastern bloc military assistance?

Article Four of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation concluded by the Soviet Union and Mozambique in March 1977 states: "In the interests of reinforcing the defense potentials of the High Contracting Parties, they will continue developing cooperation in the military sphere on the basis of appropriate agreements." Similar clauses about military cooperation appear in Mozambique's treaties with

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other Eastern bloc countries, including those with Cuba (October 1977) and East Germany (February 1979).

But, as was the case with economic cooperation, Machel and others in FRELIMO's leadership gradually became disenchanted about the utility of the close military alliance with the Eastern bloc countries. In February 1981, about two weeks after the attack by South African commandos on alleged ANC buildings in Matola, one cruiser and three smaller units of the Soviet Indian Ocean fleet visited Maputo and Beira. Valentin Vdovin, the Soviet ambassador in Maputo, told the press that these ships were meant to demonstrate Soviet solidarity with Mozambique against further attacks by South Africa. His public remarks created the impression that Moscow had decided to take a much tougher stand concerning South Africa's aggressiveness, but little happened in the following months apart from further regular visits by Soviet ships.

In May and June 1982, the increasingly precarious security situation within Mozambique triggered a flurry of visits to the Soviet Union and talks on security questions. In rapid sequence, Marcelino dos Santos, FRELIMO's second in command, and then Sebastião Marcos Mabote, deputy defense minister and chief of the Mozambican general staff, traveled to Moscow. In the first week of June, their visits were reciprocated by the arrival in Maputo of a high-ranking Soviet military delegation, led by the head of the main political directorate of the Soviet army and navy. This delegation stated in very general terms Soviet willingness to intensify military cooperation, but does not seem to have been very forthcoming in terms of promising a substantial increase in military assistance. Soviet arms deliveries do not appear to have increased significantly after this visit; indeed, their dollar value in 1982 and 1983 was less than in 1978, when Soviet deliveries reached their peak. The delegation reportedly expressed in strong terms Soviet displeasure over the April 1982 military cooperation agreement with Portugal, but the significance of this demarche is questionable since nothing substantial has so far come out of the Portugal agreement. Indeed, one may well wonder if it might have been concluded by Machel merely to push the Soviets toward more active military support.

In November 1982, Machel attended Leonid Brezhnev's funeral in Moscow. Machel and Mabote had at least one meeting with the Soviet defense minister and other leading Soviet military officials. The concrete results of these talks were not published. Only a few weeks later, however, South African Foreign Affairs Minister Roelof ("Pik") Botha felt compelled to issue a public warning to President Fidel Castro not to send Cuban troops to Mozambique, and U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Frank Wisner, who was in Maputo the same month, advised Machel not to internationalize the war. South African and U.S. intelligence apparently had come to the conclusion that the Soviet and

Cuban governments were considering strengthening Mozambique's defenses.

No additional Cuban advisors or combat troops showed up in Mozambique. Instead, Machel paid another visit to Moscow from February 28 to March 5, 1983. This time he was accompanied by Foreign Affairs Minister Joaquim Chissano instead of Mabote. They met with Yuri Andropov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov to inform the Soviet side about FRELIMO's preparations for its Fourth Congress and probably (although this was not made public) Mozambique's decision to seek an accommodation with South Africa given Maputo's lack of a military option. About two weeks later, Machel for the first time publicly acknowledged the existence of ongoing talks with South Africa seeking such an accommodation.

There is little official information available on why the Soviets and Mozambicans failed to agree on a level of military cooperation that might have saved them both from the embarrassment of Nkomati. The reluctance shown by the Soviets tends to confirm the view of many Western analysts that southern Africa is of only secondary concern to the Kremlin. And, in contrast to Angola, Mozambique lacked the hard currency to pay for modern and effective Soviet weapons. Moreover, the risk of a direct confrontation between Eastern bloc advisors and South African combat troops was much higher than in Angola. South Africa's threat to invade Mozambique in the event that Cuban troops were deployed there had to be taken seriously.

Mozambique had reasons of its own for not pushing the case for more Soviet military participation. Strong misgivings had developed about the suitability and effectiveness of the Soviet military assistance that had already been provided. As Allen Isaacman writes in the January-February 1985 issue of *Africa Report*, "Soviet weapons—with the exception of a handful of MIG-21s, MI-24 helicopter gunships, and SAM 7s—were out-of-date and costly, a fact not lost on the Mozambicans. Moreover, there was growing dissatisfaction with the quality of the conventional military training provided by Eastern bloc advisors, which proved ineffectual against the MNR guerrillas." Therefore Machel probably saw little reason to make far-reaching concessions to the Soviets on basing rights, the only way in which he might have motivated the Soviet leadership to transfer more weapons and advisors into Mozambique under acceptable terms of payment.

Some Unanswered Questions

To what extent is the legitimacy of the Soviet regime based on the pursuit of expansionist ideological goals? Is this dogma so deeply embedded in the Soviet system that it excludes any meaningful learning experiences concerning the limits of feasible ideological expansion? Western Sovietologists do not agree in their answers to this question, and on the Soviet side too there seems to be considerable controversy about

this point.

On the one hand, an increasing number of Soviet economists are responding to such inescapable realities as the rising importance of East-West trade and the disappointingly modest nature of CMEA participation in Third World commerce by questioning the traditional dictum that a socialist policy should above all seek the destruction of the existing, essentially capitalist, world economic order. Today, some Soviet academics talk of a "dialectic unity of opposites" and take the position that, despite all the differences and contradictions of the two world markets, there is definite mutual interaction deriving from a number of common regularities and common tendencies that operate in the world economy as a whole.

The failure of collective agriculture in Africa has also resulted in some adjustments in Soviet thinking. As A.P. Butenko, a departmental head in the Institute for the Economy of the Socialist World System, wrote in 1982: "Neither the collective organization of labor nor the application of technology—unavoidably very simple due to limited capacities—can compensate for a loss of interest on the part of the majority of producers . . . A reliable way of vitalizing the agricultural sector, and the economy as a whole, . . . consists in a policy which attributes top priority to the personal factors of production in this phase, i.e. in stimulating the individual work of the peasant and, by virtue of its close connection, that of the craftsman and the merchant." It is also noteworthy that a recent article by Lyudmila Alexandrovskaya and Vladimir Vigand in *Asia and Africa Today* did not once mention the Soviet Union or the other CMEA countries when asking "where do Africans place their hopes in this decade?"

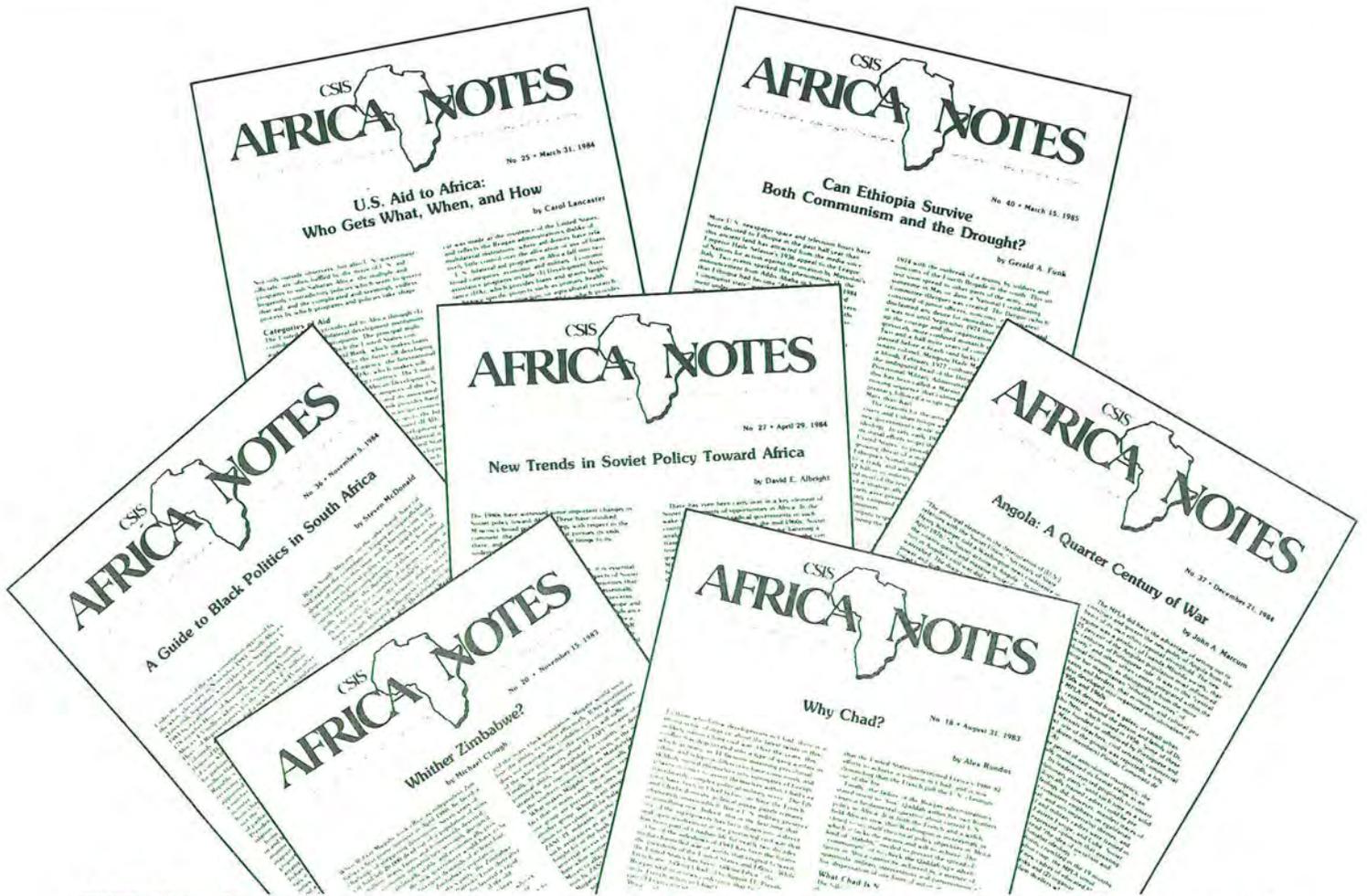
But others (for example, N. Kapchenko, deputy editor in chief of *International Affairs*) still consider ideology to be of paramount importance. According to Kapchenko, "the growing scale and intensity of the ideological battle in the international arena make it imperative to step up the efforts of the socialist countries and all revolutionary forces of modern times in exposing and checking the political and ideological subversion of imperialism . . ." Kapchenko argues

from the standpoint of an ideological generalist—or "globalist" as one would say in Western terminology—rather than from that of a Third World specialist.

And there are, of course, strong tendencies in the Soviet Union, especially in the military, not to give up positions easily, because the credibility of Moscow as a superpower is seen as being at stake. This aspect of Soviet policy in the Third World is more salient in the context of relations with Ethiopia and Angola than it is in connection with Mozambique. But there is little doubt that, by and large, Soviet relations with Ethiopia and Angola suffer from the same deep structural weaknesses that have led to Mozambique's rapprochement with the West.

The Soviet system is not about to abandon its dogma of world revolutionary expansion of Marxism-Leninism, but the extent to which that goal is being put into question as a realistic option by Soviet specialists on the Third World is remarkable. By referring to Lenin's New Economic Policy (which from 1921 to 1928 permitted the existence of a limited capitalist system in the Soviet Union) as a model for today's problem-ridden socialist-oriented countries, Soviet ideologues have found a way to discuss openly and frankly all kinds of fundamental problems that Marxism-Leninism has run into, and not only in developing countries.

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