When President Reagan took office in 1981, it was generally assumed that his administration would adopt a conservative globalist approach to African issues. For a complex mix of reasons, it did not. Instead, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker won the support of the White House and Secretary of State Alexander Haig for a strategy toward southern Africa and the rest of the continent that, although conservative in disposition, was still more regionalist than globalist.

It was not until 1985 that a somewhat disparate assemblage of politicians, officials, and opinion leaders coalesced in support of a more aggressive, ideological, and interventionist posture toward radical socialist regimes in the Third World. The most controversial of the African manifestations of this new drive from the right has been the buildup of pressure for direct U.S. assistance to Jonas Savimbi and his UNITA guerrillas in Angola (see "United States Options in Angola" by John A. Marcum in CSIS Africa Notes no. 52, December 20, 1985). Ironically, this new wave of-globalism is cresting just as it is becoming clear that many of the special relationships that Moscow seemed to have cemented in Africa between the 1950s and the mid-1970s have proven to be illusory and ephemeral.

False Analogies
On the basis of false analogies with the rise of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, globalists are inclined to explain decisions by Third World states to align with the Soviet Union in terms of Soviet “penetration” and “subversion.” Such theories cannot be reconciled with actual events in any African country. From Egypt and Guinea in the 1950s to Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia in the 1970s, every African country that has become an ally of the Soviet Union has done so as a result of a conscious and unforced decision. Before the decision by national leaders to seek Moscow’s support, the Soviet presence in most of these countries was minimal at most. To explain why independent African leaders, many of whom lacked a prior ideological affinity with the Soviet Union, chose to associate with the communist camp requires an understanding of the so-called “natural ally” thesis.

Repeatedly invoked by Soviet officials, the natural ally thesis holds that the Soviet Union and radical socialist states in the Third World share a common project (building socialism) and a common enemy (capitalist imperialism). For example, Karen Brutents, an influential official in the international department of the CPSU Central Committee, wrote in 1979:

It is certain that in future, support from the Soviet Union, the socialist countries, and the international working-class movement will continue as always to be vital to the national liberation struggle. Without this support it is impossible to ultimately defeat neocolonialism and advance along the road of social progress. Without this support it would be impossible to ensure that the developing countries’ growing international authority is a stable process.

The positive strand of this thesis — the claim that the Soviet Union and radical socialist states share a commitment to building socialism — has only a limited and fading appeal for most Third World leaders. Far more important is the negative strand which holds that the Soviet Union is the only reliable source of protection against capitalist imperialism, regional aggression, and internal subversion.

In their own explications of the natural ally thesis, Third World leaders invariably stress its defensive strand. In 1979, for example, Mozambique’s President Samora Machel referred to the socialist countries as “a reliable rearguard for the victory of our liberation struggle,” calling them the “natural ally for the defense of our political and economic independence.” According
to a 1978 party document, FRELIMO's “political alliance with the socialist countries constitutes an important strategic factor for dissuasion of the aggressive plans of imperialism.”

A necessary corollary of the natural ally thesis is the argument that a “natural antagonism” exists between the United States and radical socialist governments in the Third World. The assumption that the United States is fundamentally opposed to regimes that embrace socialism has been a prime consideration in the decision of many such regimes to tilt toward the Eastern bloc. In a world dominated by two superpowers, the perception that one of the superpowers is fundamentally hostile will, in accordance with the familiar principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” inevitably cause states to seek the support of the other superpower.

In the mid-1970s, many if not most radical socialist Third World leaders perceived the United States as a potential adversary. From their vantage point, U.S. interventions in Iran, Guatemala, Lebanon, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Zaire, Southeast Asia, and Chile provided ample grounds for such an assessment. In Africa, the governments that took power in newly independent Angola and Mozambique had more immediate reasons for concern. In the wake of the Ford administration’s abortive intervention in the Angolan civil war in 1975, they were understandably fearful that the United States would work in concert with South Africa to subvert their governments. This fear has since ebbed in much of Africa, replaced by pragmatic interest in economic and security connections with the West, and Soviet fortunes in the continent have stagnated. (See, for example, “Benin Joins the Pragmatists” by L. Gray Cowan in CSIS Africa Notes no. 54, February 28, 1986.)

The Treaty Scorecard
During the 1970s the Soviet Union entered into treaty relationships with five African countries: Egypt (May 1971), Somalia (July 1974), Angola (October 1976), Mozambique (March 1977), and Ethiopia (November 1978). Egypt and Somalia abrogated their treaties with Moscow in 1976 and 1977 respectively, and are now counted among Moscow’s strongest foes on the continent. Since 1978 only one additional African country — Congo — has signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Moscow, and that treaty did not contain a military clause. Moreover, the decisions of Mozambique’s President Machel to seek military assistance from the West and sign a nonaggression pact (the Nkomati Accord) with South Africa in March 1984 have rendered its treaty with Moscow relatively meaningless.

Military Assistance
Military assistance trends provide a second indicator that the Soviet gains of the mid-1970s have not caused a significant shift in the strategic orientation of most African states. Between 1976 and 1980, roughly one-third of Africa’s 51 independent states received the bulk of their military supplies from the Soviet Union and its allies. In percentage terms, this constituted a small increase over preceding periods. Most of that increase, however, can be accounted for by the emergence of radical socialist governments in the five Portuguese-speaking territories that gained their independence in 1974-75.

Since 1980 the number of African states dependent primarily on the Soviet Union for military support has declined; and the number of arms transfer agreements between the Soviet Union and African states as a percentage of total agreements signed by African states has also declined slightly. The countries that have signed major arms purchase agreements with Moscow in the 1980s are Angola, Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Algeria, and Libya. Tanzania’s arms purchases from the Soviet Union have never translated into close military links between the two countries. Moreover, Tanzania’s appetite for arms decreased sharply in the early 1980s following the end of its intervention in Uganda to assist in the overthrow of the Idi Amin regime. Since 1982 three countries previously dependent on Moscow (Congo, Mozambique, and Algeria) have turned to the West for military assistance. As of 1985 only Angola and Ethiopia (and, in a very different sense, Libya) could be counted as significant military dependencies of the Soviet Union. (For a summary of recent developments in the Soviet-Libyan relationship, see “Africa: Year of Ironies” by Helen Kitchen in the February 1986 “America and the World 1985” issue of Foreign Affairs, pp. 566-567.)

In 1986 more African countries — a total of 41 — will receive military training assistance from the United States than ever before. (For background, see “Some Observations on U.S. Security Interests in Africa” by Noel C. Koch in CSIS Africa Notes no. 49, November 19, 1985.) Included on the list of countries that the Reagan administration proposed to aid were Algeria, Benin, Congo, Madagascar, and all of the former Portuguese territories except Angola. (A proposed package of military training and nonlethal supplies for Mozambique was blocked by Congress in July 1985.) A decade earlier, most globalists would have considered all of the radical socialist regimes in these countries to be firmly in the Soviet camp.

The UN Vote Criterion
Another frequently used (and usually misused) indicator of alignment is voting behavior in the United Nations. An examination of how African countries have voted on three issues that the Soviet Union regards as “key” — Afghanistan, Kampuchea, and illegal use of chemical and biological weapons — provides another demonstration of the limits of Soviet influence. No more than nine African countries have ever voted with the Soviet Union on any of these issues, while at least 23 countries have voted against the Soviets on all three issues in each of the past five years. The number of countries voting with the Soviets on any of these issues has declined from nine in 1980 to six in 1984. In 1984 only Libya voted with the Soviet Union on all three of these key issues. (See “The UN: A Not So Dangerous Place?” by Michael Clough in CSIS Africa Notes no. 45, July 24, 1985.)
The Zimbabwe Watershed

A major symbolic watershed in Soviet relations with Africa occurred in April 1980 when Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) won an overwhelming victory in Zimbabwe's first independence election. A radical socialist government coming to power through an election following a negotiated settlement brokered by a conservative British government represented a sharp contrast to the transitions to independence that had occurred in Angola and Mozambique.

Mugabe pointedly declined to invite East Germany, Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia to participate in Zimbabwe's April 1980 independence celebrations, and reportedly cold-shouldered an attempt by Moscow to trade Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's presence for an agreement to issue a joint communique cementing Soviet-Zimbabwean ties. The USSR was represented instead by a low-level Politburo member, and Zimbabwe delayed until February 1981 before allowing Moscow to open an embassy in Harare. In contrast, Prime Minister Mugabe made a triumphant visit to Washington in 1980.

Of more consequence substantively was the fact that Mugabe turned over the task of integrating and training the Zimbabwean military (including the recent retraining of an army brigade initially placed under North Korean tutelage) to the British; chose to rely on Western support for protection against pressure from South Africa; and charted a moderate economic course. (See "Whither Zimbabwe?" by Michael Clough in CSIS Africa Notes no. 20, November 15, 1983.)

Why did Mugabe decide to snub the Soviet Union and tilt westward? Most analysts point to the fact that Moscow had consistently favored Joshua Nkomo and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), ZANU-PF's historic rival within the nationalist movement, during the liberation struggle. In this view, Mugabe's post-independence posture was motivated by bitterness over Soviet failure to aid ZANU in the past and suspicion that the Kremlin might still harbor hopes of seeing Nkomo emerge on top in an independent Zimbabwe.

These considerations were undoubtedly a factor in Mugabe's thinking. They were not, however, the only or even the most important determinants of his decision to rely so heavily on London and Washington.

Given the nature of the economic and regional security problems facing his government at independence and his favorable experiences with the Thatcher government and the Carter administration during the transition period, Mugabe had good reason to conclude that maintaining his country's historic ties with the West would pay higher dividends in areas of primary importance. Moscow lacked the economic wherewithal of the United States and Britain. Just as important, a close relationship with London and Washington seemed a better bet to deter South African intervention than did Soviet arms. These factors would not have been sufficient had the Mugabe government not also believed it could trust the West. Here the Carter administration's steadfast refusal to support the short-lived internal settlement and the Thatcher government's impartial performance during and after the April 1980 elections had to weigh strongly and positively in Mugabe's calculations. If the West had lacked either the resources or willingness to support his government, Mugabe would have eventually had little choice but to cut a deal with the Kremlin.

The argument that the historic differences between ZANU-PF and the Soviet Union prevented the Mugabe government from aligning with the East also overlooks the critical role played in Zimbabwean developments by President Machel of Mozambique. If Mugabe had desired a rapprochement with Moscow, Machel undoubtedly could have served as a go-between. Instead, however, Machel, influenced by his own government's experiences, appears to have encouraged Mugabe to chart a moderate course and develop close ties with the United States and Britain. (See "What Does the Case of Mozambique Tell Us About Soviet Ambivalence Toward Africa?" by Winrich Kühne in CSIS Africa Notes no. 46, August 30, 1985.)

If the above analysis is correct, the setback the Soviets suffered in Zimbabwe was far more fundamental and far-reaching than is implied by arguments that focus on unique historical antagonisms between ZANU and Moscow. That setback evidenced a structural weakness in the Soviet position in Africa, one that can be eased marginally by better intelligence and tactical decision making by Soviet leaders, but not eliminated.

Why Stagnation?

What accounts for Moscow's flagging fortunes in Africa?

Three factors have been most important: (1) The Soviet Union proved to be a poor patron. As most Soviet analysts now acknowledge, the Soviets lack the skills, capital, and markets necessary to compete effectively with international agencies, multinational corporations, and Western governments in the economic realm. In addition, while Soviet military assistance has ensured the short-term survival of the regimes in Angola, Ethiopia, and, to a lesser extent, Mozambique, it has failed to provide security and stability. (2) By 1978 the easy opportunities for Soviet gains afforded by the collapse of Portuguese colonialism and the fall of Ethiopia's Haile Selassie had been exhausted. (3) Since 1976, the United States has pursued a more active and regionally sensitive policy. U.S. policymakers have endeavored, with surprising and largely unremarked success, to convince African leaders that diplomatically and economically it is the West, and not the Soviet bloc, which is relevant to solving Africa's basic problems. In short, in the latter 1970s and early 1980s the regional and international environment became, as many skeptical regionalists predicted it would, much less conducive to growing Soviet influence in Africa.

Soviet Priorities and Imperatives

The mere fact that Moscow has experienced some setbacks in Africa does not mean that its leadership would fail to act to ensure that the extension of the Reagan doctrine to the continent would be neither cheap nor quickly successful. Africa is not near the top of

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Moscow's list of global priorities, nor do Soviet leaders seem inclined to commit significant resources to achieve new successes on the continent. They cannot afford, however, to allow either the MPLA in Angola or the Dergue in Ethiopia to be defeated by Western-backed insurgents. This is the message that Soviet officials, publicists, and academics have consistently sought to communicate to the United States since at least 1983.

In late 1983, for example, Soviet officials at the United Nations met with South African officials to warn them that Moscow would not allow the MPLA to be defeated militarily by UNITA. "In view of the friendly nature of Soviet-Angolan relations," one Soviet official commented in June 1984, the Soviet Union "cannot be indifferent to the problem of Angola's security." More recently, an influential Soviet commentator declared in reference to the Reagan doctrine, "the United States has no right to arm and train murderers and bandits or to interfere in the affairs of sovereign states. Attempts to arrogate that right to itself, to don the uniform of international gendarme, can only meet with resolute opposition from the Soviet Union." The marked increase in the level and sophistication of Soviet support for the MPLA since Moscow warned Pretoria provides good reason to take these statements seriously.

Conservative globalists ought to understand better than most Americans why Soviet leaders are unlikely to back down in Angola and Ethiopia. Moscow's fears concerning the possible global repercussions of defeats in these two symbolically important countries derive from the same concerns about credibility that underlay the "domino theory" used by U.S. officials in the 1960s to rationalize an escalating U.S. commitment to defend South Vietnam.

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