New Soviet Priorities in Africa

by Leonid L. Fituni

For a succession of decades after 1957, when the Soviet Union entered the African political arena by establishing diplomatic relations with newly independent Ghana, the Kremlin leadership self-righteously blamed every Third World policy failure on the inability of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bureaucracy and its academic consultants to formulate and implement a "scientifically based strategy in Africa." Although it is true that a coherent set of strategic guidelines was never established for dealing with Africa, an old-fashioned brown strongbox in the Africa department of the Foreign Ministry contains a yellowing heap of "strategies" (at least five of which this author helped prepare) submitted by scholarly institutions over the years.

To understand why none of the proposed strategies were ever fully implemented, one must take into consideration the traditional Marxist-Leninist vision of the Third World's (and specifically Africa's) global role. African countries were seen as "a natural ally of the world Communist movement in the struggle against world imperialism." Ideology, much more than politics or economics, motivated Soviet support for African decolonization in the 1960s and Moscow's pursuit of diplomatic relations with newly independent states.

It took the Soviet Union almost 30 years to recognize that much of what was happening in Africa could not be fitted into the grand ideological design and to adopt pragmatic criteria (such as efficiency, profit, and mutual interest) for judging relationships with various African nations. (See "Four Soviet Views of Africa" by David E. Albright, CSIS Africa Notes no. 72, May 1987.)

The Impact of Perestroika

Interaction with Africa has been greatly altered in recent years by Moscow's "new thinking," which calls for the abandonment of confrontational politics, priority attention to the resolution of regional conflicts, a de-emphasis on ideology as a key factor shaping diplomatic relationships, and a search for compromises on potentially inflammatory issues.

In focusing on this agenda, the Soviet leadership has shown greater interest over the past half-decade in developing contacts with African states beyond those labeling themselves as "socialist." Dialogue has been initiated with Côte d'Ivoire and renewed with Senegal, countries condemned in the past as imperialist showcases. In the Horn of Africa, Moscow is trying to disengage from the Ethiopian civil war by supporting a cease-fire in Eritrea while still
acknowledging the importance of maintaining Ethiopia’s territorial integrity.

Relations with Nigeria became strained in the late 1980s over the issue of some $700 million owed for the construction undertaken beginning in the 1970s of the Ajaokuta steel complex, one of the largest Soviet economic ventures on the continent. (For other views of the history of the Ajaokuta steel complex, see “Soviet Technical Assistance and Nigeria’s Steel Complex” by Gbolahan Alli-Balogun in The Journal of Modern African Studies [no. 4, 1988] and “Ivan’s Adventure Along the River Niger” by Jerry Funk in The Red Orchestra, Volume II: The Case of Africa, Dennis L. Bark, ed. [Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1988].)

In a lengthy informal review of economic exposure conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1991, however, it was reported that Nigeria had caught up with debt payments at least partially and had indicated interest in exploring new projects. Indeed, the consensus among the participants in the January review was that relations with Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa should be top Soviet priorities on the continent in the decade ahead.

There is no doubt that southern Africa is now the main focus of interest in sub-Saharan African. Soviet diplomats worked hard to help secure Namibia’s independence and were especially supportive of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker’s mediation efforts during the final phase leading up to the December 1988 accords. The success of the Namibian negotiations encouraged greater interest in cooperative efforts to achieve peaceful solutions to other conflicts in the region, including the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique. In a striking departure from past policy, Moscow now takes the position that the civil wars in these two countries can be resolved only by political and not by military means.

In the case of Angola, Soviet officials welcomed the 1989 meeting at Gbadolite, where Zaire’s President Mobutu Sese Seko brought together Angola’s President José Eduardo dos Santos and UNITA’s Jonas Savimbi in a peacemaking attempt. After this initiative collapsed, Moscow continued to insist that there was no alternative to national reconciliation. As of 1991, the Soviet Union is working actively in support of the Portuguese-orchestrated talks toward this end. (See “A Soviet Analyst’s View of Angola’s Relevance in the 1990s” by Leonid L. Fituni, CSIS Africa Notes no. 116, September 1990.)

Although all references to Marxism-Leninism and the class struggle were omitted from a new document adopted by Mozambique’s ruling party at its fifth congress in 1989, Moscow has manifested its support of President Joaquim Chissano’s policy of negotiations with the rebel Renamo movement. The 46-member Joint Verification Commission established in December 1990 to monitor what is hoped will be a cease-fire includes representatives of 10 countries—Italy (coordinating), Zimbabwe, Congo, France, Britain, Kenya, Portugal, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Zambia—in addition to members from the Mozambican government and Renamo. (See “Conflict Resolution in Mozambique: A Status Report” by Witney W. Schneidman, CSIS Africa Notes no. 121, February 1991.)

One of the more remarkable recent developments in Soviet-African relations is the growing interaction with South Africa at both official and unofficial levels. Although the official Soviet view is that the process of change in South Africa is not yet irreversible and that the international community must continue to apply pressure on Pretoria, then-Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze took concrete steps during his visit to Namibia for the March 1990 independence celebrations to encourage the process of change under way. He met with both President F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela in Windhoek and later expressed his belief that both parties were ready to try to put a stop to domestic violence.

The subsequent opening of prenegotiation talks conducted by the African National Congress and Pretoria provided sufficient diplomatic cover to permit Moscow to begin establishing (previously practically nonexistent) contacts with Pretoria. Considerable pains were taken to keep the interaction within the limits established by the existing international sanctions—e.g., contacts of an economic nature were limited to charitable activities or dealings with formally non-South African companies (that is, companies controlled by South African capital but registered somewhere else). In a major 1991 development, there is talk of opening quasi-diplomatic relations with Pretoria at the “interests office” level.

The Sinecure Factor

After a sharp decline in the attention given to Africa in the first years following the start of perestroika, the pendulum began to swing back in early 1990. Africa’s renewed salience is due in part to Moscow’s recognition of the important role Africa plays in such international...
organizations as the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations. But it is also indirectly related to the Soviet Union's deteriorating domestic situation.

Even during the relatively prosperous Brezhnev years, work overseas for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could offer a standard of living unattainable at home. And though a posting in Africa may not provide access to cultural or creature comforts comparable to those available in Europe or North America, the continent is not the worst place to be. A posting there often involves better pay, less work, less supervision, and more freedom than a Soviet bureaucrat could hope for in the context of an assignment to the West. In addition, the staffs of embassies in Africa have an unusually high proportion of self-made employees as opposed to those holding jobs because they happen to be related to members of the nomenklatura.

As budgetary problems deepen and members of the Soviet parliament persistently call for reduced foreign commitments, the prospect of personnel reductions in overstaffed Soviet outposts in Africa is becoming quite real. (See "Soviet Assistance to Africa: The New Realities" by Sergei I. Shatalov, CSIS Africa Notes no. 112, May 1990.) Plans to close some embassies in "less important countries" are under consideration. New personnel are no longer being sent to Africa, and in-country staff are increasingly inclined to skip yearly home leave to avoid the risk that their jobs might be canceled in their absence. Some officials, mainly non-diplomats, seek and finally find alternative jobs in the countries where they are assigned. According to unconfirmed reports, several members of the embassy staff in Lagos have given up their posts in recent years for well-paid positions in Soviet-Nigerian joint ventures or as advisers to Nigerian firms dealing with the Soviet Union.

The possibility of being recalled to their troubled homeland has also spurred Africa-based Soviet diplomats to intensify efforts to deepen relations with host countries and thereby safeguard their jobs. Dozens of new ideas and proposals are flooding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Few will ever be translated into reality, however, because the central diplomatic bureaucracy at home has long since shifted the bulk of its resources and efforts to North America, Europe, and the Middle East.

One way of strengthening relations may be to facilitate contacts between African countries and the emerging Soviet private sector (which is usually more efficient than the public one, but lacks experience and infrastructure abroad). Africa is today one of a handful of regions whose level of technological development is sufficiently low to permit the Soviet Union to increase its industrial exports there. Many African countries are willing to buy cheap, unsophisticated, and long-lasting Soviet manufactured goods.

The problem is that suppliers cannot usually expect hard currency in return. The alternative of accepting commodities is unattractive to (usually small) Soviet private firms. Reselling such goods at home or abroad involves additional expenses that Soviet businessmen are not prepared to bear, at least for the time being. In

“Gradually, in the years 1985-1988, the unexpected happened. The Cold War ended in Africa, and with it the relevance of the ideological and strategic compasses that had been standard issue to the officials and opinion leaders who had served as foot soldiers in the Cold War’s many skirmishes. Both the East and West now face the challenge of developing new ways of understanding the continent and new means of addressing its problems.”
—Michael Clough, “Africa in the 1990s,” CSIS Africa Notes no. 107, January 1990

“Whatever the outcome of the negotiations now under way, it is clear that the war in Angola has outlived the logic of its early years. Above all, the superpowers no longer have any strategic reasons for kindling or feeding fires in southern Africa. One of them is obviously trying to disengage itself from all costly foreign commitments, and the Angolan war has been a very costly commitment. The other superpower is now concentrating its military might, manpower, and aid on the confrontation with Iraq.”

“Due to acute budget concerns in most OECD and Eastern European nations, feelings of ‘aid fatigue’ are already being translated into action. The amount allocated to aid in the 1990 Soviet budget is 30 percent below the 1989 figure. Yet Africa needs more aid, not less. One of the few options available to reverse the decline in aid flows is to enhance coordination among donors.

“The reorganized Soviet aid strategy places an emphasis on agricultural and especially food production projects. It has also undertaken a shift from megaprojects to smaller ones, which can be more easily be absorbed by the recipient economy. These priorities provide a common ground for multidonor coordination and joint financing of development projects.”
addition, the unstable domestic situation encourages a belief that the future is unpredictable, so that if profits are not collected now, tomorrow could be too late.

**Near-Term Prospects**

What effect, if any, will Shevardnadze’s December 1990 resignation have on Soviet policy toward Africa? The new foreign minister, Aleksandr Bessmertnykh, seems to share his predecessor’s interest in dealing with Americans. Therefore, cooperation in conflict resolution will probably continue. But Bessmertnykh is a career diplomat, and his style is likely to be different.

Some observers make much of the fact that Bessmertnykh is not a member of the Communist Party’s Politburo, but this is in reality rather unimportant because the ultimate decision-making power now resides with the Presidential Council, where Bessmertnykh’s word has considerable weight. The shaping of foreign policy, including Africa policy, is changing rapidly. Whereas the pre-perestroika decision-making process moved downward from the Politburo through the party Central Committee to the upper echelons of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and thence to the ministry’s Africa department, a de facto 1991 table of organization would show a direct line from the Presidential Council to the ministry, with side inputs at the senior ministerial level from party and legislative bodies.

The situation has been further complicated by the emergence of “independent” foreign policies on the part of constituent Soviet republics. Russia, for example, is timidly but insistently wooing South Africa, hoping to establish direct economic ties with local companies. Tiny, landlocked Moldavia has signed an intergovernmental agreement on trade and shipping with landlocked Rwanda. Private agencies in the three Baltic republics are recruiting volunteers to work in the South African police and security forces. Azerbaijan and the Muslim republics of Central Asia are developing relations with Libya, Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco.

Another change is the recent departure from Gorbachev’s team of a number of key designers of the “new political thinking,” including Shevardnadze, who has since created his own Foreign Policy Association (an organization somewhat analogous to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations). Bessmertnykh now shares many of the responsibilities formerly borne by the departed officials with (among others) Professor Yevgeni Primakov, a colleague on the “inner circle” Council for National Security that was created by Gorbachev. Primakov is primarily a specialist on the Third World, and his new prominence gives some hope that Africa policy may soon get more attention than it has received in recent years.