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Four Soviet Views of Africa

by David E. Albright

By the early 1980s, the disagreements within the Soviet hierarchy about how the USSR might best go about trying to accomplish its goals in Africa had crystallized into four distinct lines of argument, and these persist in the late 1980s. They reflect differing perceptions of the realities of the continent. In part, the differences stem from clashing assessments of specific conditions there; in part, they involve varying judgments about precisely which aspects of the African situation should be key policy considerations. Each of these four viewpoints has had advocates at or near the centers of power in the USSR. Moreover, the adherents of the diverse outlooks not only express their own positions openly but have sometimes even explicitly criticized the outlooks of other schools.

1. "Socialist-Orientation"

Members of this group favor a strategy that has the most in common with that which the USSR followed during the 1970s. They maintain, first of all, that Moscow should concentrate primarily on wooing states of "socialist orientation" in Africa and especially "revolutionary democracies" which have set up "vanguard parties of a new type." This "new" kind of "vanguard" party professes to base itself on Marxism-Leninism, and it seeks to employ Leninist principles of party organization. But in Soviet eyes its theory and practice of socialism fall short of the "genuine" article. That is, it does not qualify as a Communist party.

Underlying this emphasis on "socialist-oriented" countries, and particularly on "revolutionary democracies" that have established "vanguard" parties as instruments of rule, is a set of judgments about trends on the continent. Proponents of the line contend that a gradual process of radicalization is taking place in Africa; despite some zigs and zags, the continent is bypassing capitalism and wending its way directly toward socialism. According to these analysts, not only have the ranks of the "socialist-oriented" states been growing, but the emergence of "revolutionary-democratic" parties of a "vanguard" kind — such as the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola-Partido de Trabalho (MPLA-PT), the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), and the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) — testify to a deepening of the revolutionary process on the continent. As the revolutionary process continues to intensify, the estimate goes on, the number of "socialist-oriented" countries will increase still further, the circle of "vanguard" parties will expand, and some of these parties will carry out transitions to the status of full-fledged Communist parties, although a reversal of path cannot be ruled out in all instances.

The champions of this viewpoint, to be sure, have been much more willing in the 1980s than they were in the 1970s to acknowledge that existing "revolutionary-democratic" regimes with "vanguard" parties have deficiencies. They voice public regret at the failure of most of these regimes to implement steadfastly socialist measures; they even on occasion observe that the regimes have not yet advanced any further on the path to socialism than the Russian populists did in the mid-1800s. They also chastise these African governments for vacillation in foreign affairs. Nevertheless, the adherents of this school have not abandoned the premise that Africa is moving inexorably toward socialism and is going to bypass capitalism. To them, therefore, the present "socialist-oriented" governments, whatever their faults, represent the wave of the future and the best available allies for the USSR on the continent at the moment.

In keeping with the stress on Soviet ties with "revolutionary-democratic" regimes led by "vanguard" parties, proponents of the "socialist-orientation" outlook urge that the USSR try to build long-term structural relationships with the states over which these

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regimes preside. They appear to concede that the chances of working out an international economic division of labor between the USSR and the countries concerned are slim for the foreseeable future, but they argue that, with patience and perseverance, Moscow can fashion lasting links with these countries by helping the current governments put down firm roots in local soil.

As for means, those who subscribe to this viewpoint on desirable Soviet strategy in Africa do not contest the value of military instruments. On the contrary, they have approved of employment of military force to ensure the survival of "revolutionary-democratic" regimes led by "vanguard" parties, and they have highlighted the role that military assistance has played in enabling the USSR to forge close ties with such regimes. Yet their vision of a long-term structural relationship with these governments implicitly pushes them toward an emphasis on nonmilitary instruments, especially political ones.

With regard to the precise posture that the USSR should assume toward the West on the continent, the supporters of this perspective appear to endorse the policy of the 1970s, but in a selective way. They show a readiness to risk confrontation with the West in instances involving ruling "revolutionary-democratic" parties of a "vanguard" type. For example, they have blessed large-scale Soviet aid to parties of this kind that have faced strong challenges from local opposition elements — no matter what backing the opposition elements have attracted from abroad. Yet the school of thought displays reticence about outright confrontation with the West in situations involving other African forces, although it seems to anticipate that Soviet relations with the West in such cases will be basically conflictual.

Among the most visible formulators and defenders of this general outlook has been Rostislav Ul'ianovskii, a deputy director of the International Department of the CPSU since the 1960s. He has received substantial assistance in these tasks from Anatolii Gromyko, director of the African Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences and son of Andrei Gromyko, now chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet and formerly USSR foreign minister. Both Grigorii Romanov, until 1985 a CPSU Politburo member and a leading rival of Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Ponomarev, until early 1986 a CPSU Secretary and head of its International Department as well as an alternate member of the Politburo, also openly associated themselves with the perspective before they departed from office, but neither ever figured as prominently in its elaboration as Ul'ianovskii and Anatolii Gromyko have.

2. "Pro-Military"

Exponents of this line of argument maintain that the USSR should devote its energies in Africa largely to military regimes — particularly those of a radical character. The continent, they note, has a high percentage of governments under military rule or at least dominated by military elements. Moreover, a substantial number of these governments evince a resolve to introduce major social transformations in their countries and a willingness to establish strong ties with the USSR.

The backers of this viewpoint admit that, in the abstract, a "vanguard" party might prove a more satisfactory vehicle for realizing social change and a more reliable ally for the USSR than the military does, but they point out that "vanguard" parties have not yet emerged in most African states controlled by militaries. Moreover, they see little prospect that this situation will alter in the years immediately ahead, for many militaries in authority on the continent regard "vanguard" parties as potential competitors for power. Even where militaries have tolerated the formation of "vanguard" parties, the proponents of this outlook continue, the armed forces remain the key institutions shaping the destinies of these countries. If the militaries decide to act in opposition to local "vanguard" parties or to dispense with them altogether, these parties lack the mass base and the access to the instruments of force that would enable them to meet such challenges effectively. Thus, adherents of the perspective conclude, links with African militaries, and especially radical militaries, afford the USSR the greatest opportunities available to encourage a deepening of the revolutionary process on the continent and to solidify its own position there.

A belief in the value of constructing long-term structural relations with states in which militaries, and particularly radical militaries, are preeminent flows naturally from the group's rationale for concentrating on such countries. The sort of structural ties that the group envisions differs, however, from the types anticipated in the strategy of the 1970s. The group discounts the possibility of creating an international economic division of labor between the USSR and these states, and it plays down the notion of assisting in the foundation and strengthening of nonmilitary institutions. Instead, it emphasizes the development of forms of military cooperation that will render the countries at issue dependent on the USSR in a military sense.

With respect to means to be employed and posture toward the West in Africa, this school of thought implicitly finds the policies of the 1970s fundamentally congenial. For instance, heavy reliance on military instruments would almost certainly result from efforts to court military-based regimes and especially from attempts to make these regimes highly dependent on the USSR militarily. Such a reliance, in turn, could well involve the USSR in military strife in Africa and lead to a clash with the West.

Champions of this outlook on strategy have come exclusively from military quarters in the 1980s, but such was not always the case. The school originated during the mid-1970s, and at that time it had endorsement from at least some lower-level civilians. This civilian backing vanished during the late 1970s. In fact, the line

of argument itself seemed to disappear entirely from Soviet thinking for several years. Since it resurfaced in 1982, it has not recovered any civilian endorsement. Among the specific advocates of this viewpoint in the 1980s has been Colonel E. Rybkin, long a leading figure in the shaping of Soviet military doctrine and strategy.

3. "National-Capitalism"

Partisans of the "national-capitalism" vision of strategy identify a much more eclectic list of African entities as candidates for courtship than did the architects of the strategy of the 1970s. The eclecticism stems from some fairly complicated calculations. In the assessments of this group of Soviet observers, the vast majority of the states of Africa have now chosen the path of development that they are going to follow, and the bulk of them have opted for a capitalist, or at least a nonsocialist, path. Hence, most countries on the continent will probably pass through a capitalist or nonsocialist phase of development before embarking on a socialist course. This prospect, in turn, means that "socialist-oriented" countries will in all likelihood remain in the minority there for the indefinite future.

In addition, according to the subscribers to this outlook, the states that have adopted a "socialist orientation" have disturbing faults. Even the most advanced of these states — the "revolutionary democracies" with "vanguard" parties — have shown something less than a steadfast dedication to carrying out far-reaching social transformations internally, and they have revealed an inclination to vacillate in their foreign policies. As a consequence, they have substantial deficiencies as Soviet allies.

Under all of these circumstances, this school of thought maintains, the USSR should diversify its relationships in Africa. Diversification of ties is not only imperative, the adherents of the school go on, but also possible. The objective bases for it lie in "contradictions" between "capitalist-oriented" states and the West that the USSR can exploit. Perhaps the most important of these "contradictions," in the judgment of this group of Soviet analysts, have economic roots. The leaders of many of Africa's "capitalist-oriented" countries want to ensure the growth of a "nationalist" type of capitalism, while the "imperialist" Western powers seek to foster a "dependent" form of capitalism. Yet, the group suggests, "contradictions" of a strictly political and ideological nature exist as well. Tensions can arise, for instance, from the commitment to Islam and resistance to Westernization in some "capitalist-oriented" African states.

As the advocates of this viewpoint see things, the USSR has little chance of creating long-term structural links with the great bulk of the states that they promote as targets for wooing. Not only does it patently lack the capabilities to fashion an international economic division of labor with such a large number of countries, but the "capitalist orientation" of many of the countries essentially precludes heavy Soviet involvement in efforts to solidify their governments.

Consequently, the backers of this outlook accept the probability that there would be divergences of interests over time between the USSR and states that they want to single out for attention. But in their eyes the very eclecticism of their approach to defining potential allies would tend to reduce the impact that a setback in any one country could have on overall Soviet fortunes on the continent. The sheer volume of ties, in short, would provide insulation for the Soviet position.

The supporters of this vision of strategy give no signs of rejecting military instruments as tools for forging links with the diverse states that they deem worthy of courtship, but the kind of opportunities that they discern for building ties prompt them to emphasize other instruments. Economic means play a prominent role in their thinking; however, in light of the limited resources that the USSR has available at present to develop economic relations, the group places primary stress on political instruments.

In downplaying military means, this school appears to endorse a less confrontational stance toward the West in Africa than that which the strategy of the 1970s entailed. Nevertheless, its adherents still seem to favor a highly conflictual approach toward the West. The foundations on which they propose to construct links with a wide spectrum of African countries are different types of anti-Western sentiment, and they anticipate fashioning and/or strengthening ties by fanning such sentiment.

The front ranks of the shapers and articulators of this perspective on African strategy have included Karen Brutents, a deputy director of the International Department of the CPSU since the mid-1970s. Another key figure has been Evgenii Primakov, until early 1986 the head of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences and now director of the Academy's Institute of World Economy and International Relations.

4. "Economic-Interdependence"

Like the "national-capitalism" advocates, proponents of an "economic-interdependence" strategy have in mind a much more eclectic mix of candidates for courtship in Africa than was sanctioned in the 1970s. But the rationale for their position differs considerably from that of the "national-capitalism" school. Exponents of the "economic-interdependence" line begin by insisting that strong incentives have developed in "capitalist-oriented" as well as "socialist-oriented" states to strengthen relations with the USSR. These are largely economic in character. Most countries on the continent, it is noted, have to date chalked up poor records of economic performance. Not only have they been falling farther and farther behind the advanced industrial powers of the West, but they have even failed to bring about significant economic growth in absolute terms. Therefore, according to the analysis, leaders of a wide diversity of states are searching for ways to improve the economic situations in their domains, and they are prepared substantially to expand their dealings with the

USSR in pursuit of such an end.

In the opinion of the "economic interdependence" school, the USSR has the wherewithal to capitalize on this opportunity. To be sure, the advocates of this strategy implicitly concede, the USSR has economic problems of its own, and it does not possess the resources to solve the economic woes of Africa and other Third World countries. But, they argue, the quantity of Soviet economic assistance is not the issue. What matters is that the only way of overcoming the economic difficulties confronting African and other Third World states is through the working out of a coherent world system of economic interdependence. Within such a system, the USSR could play a key role that would enable it to build up ties with a broad spectrum of countries.

The system that the "economic-interdependence" partisans envisage has several aspects. First, the industrialized states of the West would produce goods of high technological sophistication for export to the USSR and other countries of the Soviet bloc. The USSR and its allies in turn would manufacture items of lower technological sophistication for sale to African and other Third World states. Finally, Third World countries would devote their energies, at least at the outset, to producing minerals and raw materials for export to both the Western powers and the Soviet bloc. By specializing in output of such types, African states would acquire the requisite skills and surpluses to diversify their economies, commencing with labor-intensive food and processing industries. This projected system, it should be underscored, entails no meaningful distinctions between "capitalist-oriented" and "socialist-oriented" countries in Africa.

Supporters of this vision of strategy urge the construction of a long-term structural relationship with the states that they designate as worthwhile targets for wooing, but their conception of such a relationship differs significantly from both of those which influenced the strategy of the 1970s. The notion of a desirable structural relationship that gained predominant backing in the late 1970s stressed mutual cooperation with regimes of specified countries in establishing and/or bolstering their institutions of control, whereas the new version of this kind of relationship focuses on economic ties. Unlike the earlier idea of fashioning an international economic division of labor, however, the 1980s conception envisions economic links that solidify in a multilateral context. The notion of an international economic division of labor posited an essentially bilateral arrangement. That is, the USSR would help with the construction of projects that would then produce for the Soviet market. The new version of the relationship anticipates that economic ties would flourish in a broader setting in which a range of other actors would have major functions to perform.

Clearly, this school has a different set of priorities with respect to instruments than the strategy of the 1970s reflected. Although its exponents do not reject the use of military instruments out of hand, the nature of the opportunities that they perceive for the USSR in Africa dictates a heavy stress on economic means. Even political instruments become decidedly secondary in such a light. This downplaying of political means again distinguishes the "economic-interdependence" advocates from the "national-capitalism" enthusiasts.

Proponents of the "economic-interdependence" perspective also adopt a much less conflictual posture toward the West in Africa than the strategy of the 1970s involved or than any of the other current schools of thought endorse. These Soviet analysts seem to assume that competition between the USSR and the Western powers will persist on the continent, but they do not appear to believe that this competition will necessarily result in political strife and/or military clashes. On the contrary, they entertain the possibility of Soviet-Western cooperation in certain instances. For example, they see merit in close Soviet trade ties with the West, and they contemplate that both the Western powers and the USSR and its allies will purchase the minerals and raw materials that African states will produce in the process of developing economically.

Although no prominent political figures have visibly had a key hand in formulating this line of argument, several have publicly associated themselves with it. Among these have been Vadim Zagladin, until 1986 the only first deputy head of the International Department of the CPSU and still one of the first deputy chiefs of that body; N.N. Inozemtsev, until his death in 1982 the director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the USSR Academy of Sciences as well as a member of the CPSU Central Committee; and Georgii Arbatov, director of the Institute for the Study of the United States and Canada of the USSR Academy of Sciences and also a member of the CPSU Central Committee.

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