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A Soviet Analyst's View of Angola's Relevance in the 1990s

by Leonid L. Fituni

For the first time since Angola descended into civil war during the months preceding independence from Portuguese colonial rule in 1975, the political situation within the country is beginning to develop some degree of predictability. Although the attempt at setting a peace process in motion undertaken in mid-1989 by Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko (with the help of several other African countries) gradually foundered after the cease-fire agreement reached at Gbadolite broke down, the door opened by this initial meeting between President José Eduardo dos Santos of the MPLA government in Luanda and UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi has never been closed.

Among the factors contributing to the launching of a new series of confidential peace talks in Portugal beginning in late April 1990 were: (1) the apparent conclusion by both sides, following a brief intensification of the war in December 1989 (a major MPLA offensive in the southeastern part of the country, and stepped-up guerrilla activity by UNITA extending to the northern provinces), that a military solution is not possible; (2) a continuation of efforts by the leaders of Gabon, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Congo, Zambia, Zaire, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Côte d'Ivoire to encourage a return to the bargaining table; (3) the increasingly supportive, evenhanded, and low-key role played by Portugal; and (4) the reduction of Africa's strategic relevance in the foreign policy calculations of both the United States and the Soviet Union.

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.

Some analysts argue that the stockpiles of arms held by both sides in Angola are so large that the opposing militaries would be able to continue their war for some time without new deliveries. This argument, aside from being purely speculative as to the sizes of the respective stockpiles, does not take into consideration the fact that, under Angolan conditions, combat is not the major drain on arms inventories. In the case of the MPLA, two-thirds of sophisticated weapons become useless within two years after delivery due to neglect and poor maintenance.



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How the Soviet Connection Evolved

The Soviet Union has been closely associated with the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) since the late 1950s. During the anticolonial war against Portugal, Moscow was the MPLA's major benefactor, providing diplomatic, military, material, and medical support, and training cadres. Since independence, Soviet assistance has expanded to include not only a large-scale flow of military deliveries but also vast amounts of economic and other civilian aid. Large numbers of Soviet advisers, specialists, and technicians have worked in industry, agriculture, fisheries, construction, banking and finance, education, health care, and cultural areas. Credits were extended on very favorable terms; ample funds were given as outright grants.

All of these efforts did not turn Angola into a socialist showcase in Africa. Despite a wealth of natural resources, the country's economy (except for the offshore oil industry) has collapsed, and a crushing foreign debt has accumulated. According to recently released figures, Soviet claims on Angola as of January 1, 1990 stood at 1.831 million rubles (about \$3.1 billion at the official rate of exchange). Indeed, Angola is the third largest Soviet debtor (after Ethiopia and Algeria) in Africa, consuming about 15 percent of total lending to the continent. (See "Soviet Assistance to Africa: The New Realities" by Sergei Shatalov, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 112, May 1990.)

In the military sphere, Moscow's 15 years of support for the MPLA's Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola (FAPLA) helped bring about the creation of an African version of the Red Army. FAPLA has become an impressive but rather unwieldy force. Its main flaw has been its need for constant intellectual and material injections from outside. Angolans became accustomed to Soviet arsenals being always open for them and took it for granted that Soviet armament and equipment would either be given free or heavily subsidized and that arrears would be rolled over.

Since the mid-1980s, Soviet assistance to FAPLA has been counterbalanced to a limited extent by U.S. aid to UNITA. For various domestic political and procedural reasons (including the fact that both the executive and legislative branches of government are involved in the controversial decision-making process), the amount and character of U.S. aid to UNITA are categorized as "covert." Although some reports place the current level of funding per year at around \$80 million, informed Washington sources say it is no more than \$50 million. This is high relative to current U.S. security assistance to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, but far below the Soviet outlay. Another difference is that U.S. aid to UNITA has been focused on arms and matériel, not on-the-ground manpower.

By the time of the signature in December 1988 of the Angola-Cuba-South Africa accords that set in motion Namibia's transition to independence, the Soviet military presence in Angola was already being gradually cut. As the new political thinking gained ground in Moscow, new orders went out to the remaining military personnel in

Angola: the task is henceforth only to help build national armed forces and train personnel; the war is an Angolan affair; there should be no Soviet initiatives. Despite this guidance, the Soviet advisers participated in planning operation "Zebra" (the December 1989 offensive). Although not present on the front line, they were in the headquarters in Cuito Cuanavale. Dozens of Soviet officers under the leadership of Lieutenant General Valery Beliaev were leaning over Angolan maps, and provision of food for the MPLA's armed forces was organized by Colonel Alexander Moroz.

The Janelis Critique

Although *perestroika* and *glasnost* are five years old, only in 1990 has the cost of this huge commitment become a focus of open and severe criticism among Soviet parliamentarians and ordinary citizens.

A June 6, 1990 article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* by Vladislav Janelis, a Soviet commentator on relations with Africa, not only questioned (for the first time in a major Soviet publication during the 15 years of the relationship with independent Angola) the extent and questionable efficiency of the military assistance provided, but also raised an issue of principle: "Why are we at all concerned with that war in the other hemisphere? Why did we allow our officers to fall under the bullets of warring factions? Are we sure that we were supporting the right cause when we took the side of Agostinho Neto? Were all those killed by 'Stalin's organs' in the unknown Angolan province of Cuando-Cubango bad people, so that other Angolans could be happy only after they were killed?"

The article disclosed that the Soviet military mission in Angola has consistently included at least several hundred (and sometimes more than 1,000) experienced officers, categorized as military advisers or military specialists, but

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paid far less than similarly skilled Western specialists serving with other foreign governments. Angola provides funds only for the specialists' salaries; the Soviet military mission extracts a percentage of these salaries to pass on to the advisers. Even so, the Soviet officers prefer the hard-currency payments they receive in Angola to the inconvertible rubles they would receive at home.

Soviet specialists are credited by Janelis as having shared with their Angolan colleagues everything they knew—how to operate Soviet antiaircraft missile complexes, planes and tanks, armored personnel carriers, and howitzers. Even senior officers were observed willingly repairing the engine of an armored personnel carrier with their own hands, or changing lubricating oil in hubs—things they would never do at home.

Concern was also expressed in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* article about what is happening to the 600 tanks, 60 fighter planes, 30 short- and long-range antiaircraft missile complexes, 1,000 artillery guns and systems, 800 mortars, several dozen helicopters, 200 armored personnel carriers (APCs), numerous trucks, hundreds of thousands of light arms, radio transmitters, and many other types of military hardware delivered to Angola in the last few years—most on a grant basis, the rest grossly underpriced. By mid-1990, it was charged, half of all Soviet helicopters delivered were damaged, not in action but because of negligence by pilots and technicians and poor maintenance. Also reported as inoperative were some 30 percent of the tanks and half of the APCs.

In sum, Janelis believes that the Soviet Union became a hostage of its own military donor policy in Angola. What will happen, he asks, when all of the Soviet technicians still working in Angola leave? Will all of this sophisticated military equipment deteriorate into a pile of scrap metal?

Concern About Waste

Political controversy regarding the billions dispensed in military aid to Angola is not yet evident in the USSR on a scale comparable, for example, to the rethinking of assistance to Cuba. But the drain on the budget is hardly explicable in commonsense terms when it becomes known, for instance, that an estimated \$40 million was spent on the construction of the late President Agostinho Neto's mausoleum and that another costly Soviet gift (a 127-meter-high monument dedicated to Soviet-Angolan friendship, under construction since 1982) still remains unfinished.

Another case in point is the large truck cemetery located not far from the center of Luanda, where hundreds of almost-new vehicles contributed by the Soviet Union are routinely left to rust and be picked over by looters because there are no technicians to repair them. Meanwhile, thousands of citizens throughout the USSR cannot find a lorry to buy and must pay enormous sums for old automobiles that require major renovation.

There is a growing body of opinion that all the Soviet gifts—machines, cars, military equipment—are needed at home, in whatever condition. Even damaged tanks, missile complexes, and other military hardware could be

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sold as scrap metal to the West in exchange for currency, food, and consumer goods badly needed by the Soviet population.

Looking Ahead

In Luanda, expectations are mounting that there will be a workable agreement with UNITA by January 1991. If a peacefully negotiated and implemented settlement is reached in the months ahead, whatever kind of government is in power in Angola will shift priorities to the economy. Even today, the nominally Marxist MPLA

regime stands ready to implement drastic economic reforms, including wide liberalization and creation of strong incentives for private enterprise. It has always been open to cooperation with foreign capital, as evidenced by the fact that Angola's investment code offers one of the most favorable climates in sub-Saharan Africa for investors. This is why one encounters the irony that, even though domestic political factors have precluded establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and the MPLA government, the United States is Angola's main trading partner and Angola is second only to Nigeria among U.S. trading partners on the African continent. And that is also why the EEC countries are putting so much effort into securing a place for themselves before the big rush comes.

It is obvious that the only direction of future overseas cooperation for Angola is toward the West. Even if the Soviet Union undertakes to maintain the present level of economic assistance to Angola (which is doubtful), meeting the increased demands of the postwar government of that country for new investments is beyond Soviet capability. From the point of view of Angola's economic and diplomatic strategies, it will make little difference whether the future government is single- or multiparty.

Is there a future for the Soviet-Angolan relationship in the 1990s? The present leaderships in Moscow and Luanda repeatedly stress that the level of cooperation

between the two countries will not be curtailed. Indeed, the status quo can serve as a starting point for genuinely mutually beneficial cooperation—if the interaction becomes efficient. But there exists only one sure way to make it so: to base cooperation on truly nonideological, commercial principles.

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