Russia’s Arms Sales to Africa: Past, Present, and Future

by Leonid L. Litun

With the end of the Cold War, and of ideologically motivated superpower associations with African governments, Russian arms sales to the continent have predictably dropped. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, African countries in 1990 imported (from all sources) major weapons priced at $1.316 billion—a sharp drop from the 1982 figure of $5.595 billion. The 1992 figure is expected to be lower still due to the recent arms embargo imposed on Libya, heretofore one of the continent’s major arms importers. This downward shift may only be a temporary phenomenon, however. There are largely unreported indications that Russia may be on its way to reestablishing itself as a significant arms exporter to Africa.

From the Czarist Era to the Cold War
The history of Russia’s military interaction with Africa predates the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. The Czarist regime supported the Afrikaners against the British during the 1899-1902 Boer War. Ethiopians received military support (including a Cossack expeditionary corps) in defending their country from the Italians in the 1880s. During World War II, Egypt and South Africa played supportive roles in Stalin’s military cooperation with the West.

It was only when the USSR emerged as a superpower in the 1950s, however, that Russian involvement with Africa became a foreign policy priority. The Soviet decision to become an important arms supplier to the continent was driven by three factors: (1) the resolution to establish a presence and influence on the continent appropriate to global-power status and to ensure that Africa did not revert to a purely Western sphere of influence; (2) ideological considerations that drew Moscow to national liberation movements; and (3) economic imperatives that impelled a search for new export markets for the mountains of weapons produced by the USSR’s military-industrial complex. (See Some Guidelines on Africa for the Next President by Helen Kitchen, CSIS Significant Issues Series, 1988, p. 1.)

By the mid-1970s, Soviet currency earnings from the arms trade exceeded income from all nonmilitary exports (including oil). In the decade
from 1981 to 1991, the return on each ruble invested in the arms trade was $2—at least a tenfold return in terms of the effective purchasing power of the two currencies. According to official Russian sources, the income in so-called domestic prices was 38.3 billion rubles annually.

Military cooperation with new African states that emerged with the end of the colonial era extended beyond the arms trade. Arrangements to use military facilities for naval and surveillance bases were worked out, and various kinds of Soviet assistance were negotiated to help create national armies and train military personnel. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, 5,000 to 7,000 Soviet military advisers were stationed on long-term contracts in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Congo, Libya, Tanzania, and some other countries. On many occasions Soviet officers planned and secured logistical support for host-country military operations (for example, in Angola and Ethiopia).

Although profitable, the Africa arms trade was not conducted in a businesslike manner. Ideological considerations shaped the majority of transactions in the Third World, including Africa, with the bulk of deliveries going to so-called countries of “socialist orientation” (see Table 1, page 3). Soviet arms manufacturers were paid for their products by the Soviet government, and it was the government that had the task of settling accounts with recipients. If relations with a given importing country were cordial, debt payments were often postponed indefinitely. Usually Moscow would begin to press for repayment only after a new regime came to power or the old changed its ideological orientation. Because the new or transformed regime often had much less interest than its predecessor in close ties with Moscow, or might not have been in power when the weapons were ordered, and indeed might have been fired upon by those very weapons while in opposition, Moscow’s belated requests for payment were usually ignored. Consequently a number of African countries have enormous military debts to Russia (see Table 2, page 5).

Countries that were at some point considered “of socialist orientation” (see “Four Soviet Views of Africa” by David E. Albright, CSIS Africa Notes no. 72, May 1987) on the African chessboard (e.g., Algeria, Angola, Benin, Cape Verde, Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique, São Tomé & Príncipe, Seychelles, Tanzania) tend to be the largest debtors. Only one country in this category (Cape Verde) owes no military debt to Russia. On the other hand, most of the staunchly capitalistic countries such as Morocco, Senegal, Cameroon, and Tunisia owe only civil debts to Russia.

Until now Moscow has had no real leverage to force African countries to comply with the agreements they signed. This may change if the IMF, of which Russia is now a full member, opts to support Moscow’s claims in order to help mobilize resources for President Yeltsin’s economic reforms.

**Arms Trade Trends Since 1990**

The arms trade continued relatively smoothly well into the 1980s despite the Kremlin leadership’s eloquent rhetoric about “new thinking.” Of Moscow’s allies of the 1960s and 1970s, only Mozambique reduced its imports, a move largely based on an inclination to diversify its arms sources. Ethiopia, Angola, and Libya remained major importers of Soviet arms during this period.

Ethiopia was the first of the troika for which this ceased to be true. At the end of 1989, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze called on the international community to join with the USSR in exercising restraint in supplying arms to areas of conflict. The Kremlin, perhaps looking for an opportunity to prove its sincerity to the West, may have considered Ethiopia ideal for reinforcing this point. Mengistu’s government had long been dragging its feet on debt repayment, repeatedly asking for deferments. The Addis Ababa connection was also an impediment to ongoing efforts to improve Soviet-U.S. relations. In any case, Moscow decided to let the existing arms transfer agreement with Ethiopia expire in 1990 without renewing it. Mengistu’s regime was overthrown the next year. Between July 1989 and May 1990, in accordance with its obligations under the expiring agreement, 4,500 air bombs, 58,500 surface-to-air missiles, 150,500 artillery shells and other ammunition were delivered to Ethiopia. Moscow was never paid for these deliveries, estimated to be worth about $35 million.

The 1989 decision to refrain from exacerbating regional conflicts narrowed Moscow’s arms-sales opportunities. Matters were not improved by the lack of reciprocity on the part of other major arms suppliers. For the first time since 1984, the United States overtook the Soviet Union as the world’s largest exporter of major conventional weapons. Whereas the Soviet Union’s share in the world arms trade was only 29 percent in...
### Soviet Arms Transfers to Selected African Countries, 1986-1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Arms Imports ($ million)</th>
<th>Arms Imports from the USSR ($ million)</th>
<th>Soviet Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>3,592</td>
<td>3,475</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>98.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>2,247</td>
<td>1,947</td>
<td>86.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seychelles</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1990 (down by nearly one-half from the 50 percent or more attained during the most prosperous years of Brezhnev’s rule), the figure for the United States was 40 percent. France, concerned with protecting its military industries, has also tried to increase arms exports. China has been happy to take Russia’s place where possible, delivering similar armaments of its own manufacture.

The Soviet decision to conduct all foreign trade in hard currency beginning January 1, 1991 inflicted another blow on military sales abroad, because many African countries were accustomed to trading with Moscow on a soft-currency basis and had little hard currency to spare. By then, moreover, the dramatic changes of the perestroika years had undermined a key rationale for buying arms from the USSR—obtaining political support from a superpower.

As of 1990, Angola was the largest importer of Soviet military hardware in sub-Saharan Africa. It also had the largest contingent of graduates (including President dos Santos) from Soviet military training institutions. Its army was probably the best trained and equipped among black-governed states south of the equator. In the wake of the May 1991 settlement of the country’s 16-year civil war, however, the flow of arms to Angola has dried up. The peace agreement calls for the creation of a new 50,000-man army that will combine government troops and UNITA guerrillas. There are plenty of weapons in stock, although such items as aircraft, helicopters, and vehicle spare parts are in short supply. Repaying the military debt owed to Russia does not appear to be a high priority of the country’s leadership. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev raised the question during his February 1992 visit to Luanda, but the response was not encouraging.

Until recently Libya was Russia’s last major African client, paying for imported armaments largely with oil, which Russia reexported to the West for hard currency.

A January 14, 1988 Soviet Communist Party document recently reprinted in Izvestia includes a directive by Gorbachev to relevant Soviet state organizations to provide “military assistance to Libya, including repairs of military hardware, supplies of spare parts, and deliveries of new types of armaments.” Although this directive was still being implemented at the beginning of 1992, President Yeltsin stopped all deliveries to Tripoli and halted all military cooperation projects following the imposition of mandatory UN sanctions on April 15. In a matter of days, an estimated 2,600 advisers and technicians had been flown back to their home republics in the former Soviet Union on a series of charter flights. Although hailed by the West, Moscow’s unconditional support for the UN sanctions cost Russia an estimated $3 billion in overall losses.

This development galvanized Russia’s arms manufacturers to intensify the well-organized lobbying effort to restore legitimacy and presidential favor to the military-industrial complex launched at the beginning of the year.

**Past and Present Export Categories**

The exact number of African countries now buying Russian arms is hard to pin down, because relations with some of the continent’s traditional military-equipment importers are at a virtual standstill, both for political reasons and because the decay of the Russian infrastructure is making it physically difficult to implement deals.

Because the percentage breakdown by weapon category of arms exports is reported not to have changed significantly, estimates can be made of recent deliveries to Africa despite the absence of concrete figures (numbers for periods before December 1991 are for the whole Soviet Union). Aircraft (especially MiGs, Sukhois, Yakovlevs, and helicopters) and related equipment...
account for slightly under one-half the total value of arms exports both to Africa and to all countries. The second most important export category is anti-aircraft defense systems, including radars. Among air defense guns, heavy caliber machine-guns such as the ZPU-1, ZPU-2, and ZPU-3 are popular; they are reportedly used by as many as 30 African countries. The smaller-caliber ZU-23 is used by 16 countries. Egypt manufactures ZU-23.2 twin AA guns, based on the Russian design.

Soviet radars can be found in Algeria, Benin, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, often in support of Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Angola is considered to have the most varied collection of Soviet defense radars in Africa, ranging from the P-14 (which has a range of up to 600 kilometers) to the P-15 and P-15M (used to carry out search operations and target acquisition for SAM units). Libya was the second major buyer of Soviet radars (many of which were deployed in the south on the border with Chad), but had more diversified sources.

These two export categories are followed by conventional major ground weapons—tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery systems, antitank missiles, and light weapons for infantry and guerrilla warfare. The fourth category (least important in terms of sales to Africa) is that of naval weapons and vessels.

According to existing estimates, the number of Soviet tanks in Africa during the Cold War exceeded that from any other supplier. More than 6,500 main battle tanks were delivered to the continent since the 1950s. The T-54/55 series, of which more than 3,000 are still listed in service (basic models in Libya, Tanzania, Uganda, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and elsewhere), were designed in the 1950s and modernized in the 1960s. They proved to be effective in counterinsurgency campaigns, providing direct support to infantry in Angola and Mozambique, and were used by the Tanzanian army in its controversial 1979 military move into Uganda to assist in the unseating of Idi Amin.

Later modifications, the T-62 and T-72, effectively employed by the armed forces of Egypt and Algeria, proved less attractive to sub-Saharan countries, reportedly because the sophistication of these models required additional training expenditures on the part of the purchaser. On the whole, however, Soviet armor, which was reliable and relatively easy to operate, proved to be a good choice for African conditions, especially south of the Sahara.

As of 1992, Russian-made antitank missiles (which have been marketed in Africa for more than a quarter century) remain popular in both government militaries and armed opposition movements. Though these weapons can be expensive ($10,000-$20,000 per round on the world market) and training operators entails further costs, they are capable of destroying enemy vehicles that cost 50 to 75 times as much. Older-generation systems (PTUR-64s, known in the West as AT-3 Sagger) still are in high demand. These missiles won the African market overnight in early October 1973, when Egypt reportedly used them in the Sinai to destroy half of an Israeli armored brigade in minutes. Four years later they were employed by Egypt against Libya and by Ethiopia in the Ogaden. Even today Soviet-made missiles can be found in the arsenals of Algeria, Angola, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, and Zambia. SWAPO in preindependence Namibia, the Polisario of Western Sahara, UNITA in Angola, and many of Ethiopia's anti-Mengistu groups are also said to have employed them. The more modern types of antitank missiles (such as the medium-range AT-4 Spigot and AT-5 Spandrel and the long-range AT-6 Spiral) were supplied almost exclusively to Algeria, Ethiopia, and Libya and on a much smaller scale to Angola.

The single best-known Soviet weapon in Africa and elsewhere is the Kalashnikov submachine gun, which combines the roles of the rifle and the traditional submachine gun. The new 5.45 mm AK-74 series is already being fielded in Africa, including the super-short AKSU-74, carried by helicopter and armored fighting vehicle crews, divers, and special forces. The Kalashnikov can be found in almost all African countries and is the main infantry light weapon in a majority of the former "socialist-orientation" states.

The Current Sales Structure

Unlike the old Soviet Union, which used arms transfers to "socialist-oriented" allies and proxies as a Cold War tool, democratic Russia has no official doctrine on how or with whom to trade in arms. This conceptual vacuum goes hand in hand with administrative chaos. In Moscow today, nobody can definitely say who has decision-making authority or what the formal procedures should be for conducting arms transactions. Many enterprises that manufacture different types of armaments, ranging from light conventional weapons to sophisticated high-technology defense systems, sign contracts with foreign buyers on their own initiative; sometimes they receive "special permission" from some high-ranking Russian official (not necessarily one whose area of responsibility covers arms exports).

After several years of frustrating attempts to diversify the republic's currency earnings and decrease its dependence on arms sales, the Russian leadership decided in early 1992 that it had no choice but to focus on the active promotion of arms sales rather than its initial priority of converting weapons factories to civilian purposes. "Today, trading in arms is a necessity for us," President Yeltsin said in an interview published in the February 22, 1992 issue of Investiga. Having cut military expenditures, Yeltsin argued, the Russian government had to continue arms sales in order to cushion the difficult transition of the military-industrial complex to market relations and to prevent mass social unrest in this sector, which employs the majority of the country's industrial labor force. He noted that the arms trade was no longer ideologically determined, would be conducted openly at
the state level, and would comply with the trade principles for conventional arms adopted by major arms exporters in London in October 1991.

In May 1992, President Yeltsin signed a decree setting rules for Russia's military-industrial cooperation with foreign countries. A commission on military and technical cooperation was created under the leadership of Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar to "systematize and control" the arms trade. It includes the heads of six state bodies: the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, the External Intelligence Service, the Ministry of Economics, and the Ministry of Industry. Lists (intended to comply with UN recommendations) are being drawn up of countries with which arms deals will be allowed or banned. The work is scheduled to be completed by the end of 1992.

The old Soviet structures (GIU MVES and GTU MVES) that exported armaments to Africa have been reorganized into joint-stock companies called "Oboronexport" and "Spetzvneshtechnika" respectively. The main arms-manufacturing factories and design enterprises are stockholders of the new companies. The rationale behind this reorganization is to involve the defense industry in market relations and to press the producers to focus on economic efficiency.

Despite the efforts to bring some order into the Russian arms trade, the opponents of centralization seem at least temporarily to be in the ascendency. Admiral Sergei Krasnov, who favored the creation of a single state holding company to handle arms exports, has been pushed into retirement. The structures governing arms exports are in the hands of people (Minister of [civilian] Foreign Economic Relations Peter Aven, Spetzvneshtechnika head Valery Brailovsky, and Oboronexport head Sergei Karaoglanov) without expertise in the arms trade.

As noted earlier, some enterprises have been allowed to do their own marketing. For example, V. Bunkin, a top weapons designer, markets his C-300 missile complexes, although the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations retains the right to "control" the prices (and charges a 10 to 15 percent commission for its "services").

Michael Valdenberg, another designer, has founded the "MiG-Service" company, whose shares are owned by various research-and-development enterprises, manufacturing plants, and Ministry of Defense repair units. The company has established several service centers in Europe and one in Syria and is looking into the possibility of converting the Soviet-built repair workshops that already exist in some Third World countries (including Angola and Libya) into regional service centers.

Although the majority of arms deals are still processed through the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, other ministries are seeking a share of the market. Minister of Industry Alexander Titkin is said to have in hand $12 billion in orders for weapons. The Ministry of Defense announced on August 26 that it is establishing its own foreign trading company, which will probably be headed by Lieutenant General Anatoly Funtikov, with Admiral Krasnov as his chief economic consultant.

### Future Priorities
Russia is serious about returning to the world weapons market as a major force. The growing sentiment in favor
of pursuing profit through weapons sales reflects the republic's dire need for hard currency and the dismal state of its vast military-industrial complex. A related priority is the search for new buyers, especially creditworthy ones. As for its traditional Third World arms clients, Russia has tightened its terms of credit. Debts must now be repaid in 5 to 7 years rather than the 15 to 20 years that was the rule during the Brezhnev era. Interest is charged at the current world rate for commercial credit, rather than the 2 to 3 percent of a decade ago.

Because of the relationships developed over the past several decades, Africa will be an area of special interest. In the coming two to three years a significant increase in Russian arms exports to the region is likely, but the geography of the trade will probably shift. In contrast to the East-West chessboard era, Russian exporters now target the continent's Western-oriented countries, because they are in a relatively good position to pay and are familiar with commercial arms transfer practices. In another departure from Cold War norms, Russian arms manufacturers now attach special importance to expanding relations with South African industrialists, not only for sales but also for the prospect of conducting joint research. One cannot exclude the possibility that this cooperation will involve some aspects of nuclear research or the production of medium-range missiles. The recent opening of full diplomatic relations with Pretoria could facilitate the envisaged interaction.

The long-term possibilities for expanding Russian arms exports to Africa on commercial terms are limited, however, because even the better-off African countries do not have the kind of currency resources for which Russia's government and arms manufacturers are looking. The devastating drought spreading through much of the sub-Saharan region, as well as other economic problems, does not make Africa a likely place to look for spare money.

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