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The Soviet Union and the Horn

Moscow's early interest in the Horn was probably not part of a carefully conceived plan to expand Soviet influence in sub-Saharan Africa. Moscow was attracted to the Horn by its strategic location, particularly its proximity to the Middle East with its vast oil reserves and the Indian Ocean with its major trade routes. The Soviets moved into Somalia not only because it was an opportune target for Soviet influence, but also because it could serve as a counter to the US position in Ethiopia.

The Kremlin decided to increase the stakes when it began to perceive that its involvement in Somalia could further the USSR's claim to equality with the US as a power able to project its influence far beyond its borders. The deterioration of the Soviet position in the Middle East in the early 1970s contributed to Moscow's decision to increase its presence in Somalia, in part to repair the damage to Soviet prestige and influence caused by the Soviet-Egyptian rift. In African terms, Moscow saw Somalia as another lever to exert Soviet influence in sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps as a useful base from which to exploit any opportunities in Kenya following the death of Kenyatta. Finally, Moscow certainly found Somalia a vantage point for monitoring US activity in the Indian Ocean and expanding its own presence there.

The Tilt Toward Ethiopia

Complicating the effort to discern Soviet motives in the Horn was Moscow's decision to aid Ethiopia and later to back Ethiopia in its conflict with Somalia over the Ogaden. The decision in December 1976 to aid Ethiopia led to the expulsion of the Soviets from Somalia in November 1977. Why did Moscow risk its assets there?

In the first place, Moscow was certainly aware that Ethiopia's potential for becoming an important power in the Horn/Red Sea area and in Africa was greater than

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Somalia's. Ethiopia has a population of approximately 29 million, about eight times the size of Somalia and exceeded only by Egypt in the area. Although Ethiopia is a desperately poor country, most of its land is arable with sufficient rainfall to make it a major agricultural producer in the region; the extent of its mineral wealth is uncertain. Geographically, Ethiopia dominates the lower portion of the Red Sea and its coast offers harbors, which, while less desirable than Berbera, could be useful to the Soviets.

Another factor that influenced the Soviet decision was Moscow's perception of Mengistu as a more committed, orthodox Marxist than Siad. The Soviets were uncomfortable with Siad's brand of "scientific socialism" and looked askance at his attempt to reconcile "scientific socialism" and Islam. Once the opportunity to establish a Soviet presence in Ethiopia arose, however, Moscow was not prepared to write off its investment in Somalia. The evidence suggests that Moscow calculated that it could successfully replace the US in Ethiopia and still maintain its position in Somalia. Ethiopia, believing that this was a realistic possibility, began to court Moscow in fact because it hoped that the USSR could restrain the Somalis in the Ogaden.

Moscow apparently assumed that because of Somali dependence on the Soviet Union for military aid and spare parts, it would be able to restrain Siad. In retrospect, the Soviet and Ethiopian analysis was wrong. But the Soviets did successfully balance between the two until mid-November--four months after the outbreak of hostilities in the Ogaden--and they still maintain diplomatic ties with Somalia.

The Soviets in Ethiopia

With the loss of Somalia, Ethiopia is now Moscow's sole foothold in the area. Moscow's immediate concern is to prove the value of Soviet assistance to the Ethiopians. Moscow has sent large amounts of sophisticated military equipment and several hundred Soviet advisers to Ethiopia and underwritten the cost of a substantial Cuban presence in hopes of stabilizing the Ethiopian military position as soon as possible and, in the absence of a negotiated settlement, preparing the Ethiopians to retake the Ogaden.

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A prolonged conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia might allow the Soviets to entrench themselves deeply in Ethiopia, but Moscow probably does not relish a long war because of its impact on its other interests. From the African point of view Moscow is on the right side in the Ogaden conflict, but many African states are nonetheless suspicious of the Soviet Union and would be opposed to any deliberate effort by the Soviets to continue the war. A protracted conflict might also adversely affect Soviet relations with the Western powers.

A prolonged conflict in the Horn could also have a negative impact within the Soviet Union. Although there is no evidence of friction within the leadership over Soviet policy in the Horn, differences did develop over the Soviet involvement in the Angolan conflict in 1975 and early 1976. And Moscow's involvement in the protracted no-win situation in Egypt ultimately turned into a humiliating experience for Moscow that generated some dissatisfaction by elements of the Soviet military about Soviet policy in the Middle East.

Moscow and a Negotiated Settlement

In the longer run, the Soviets may have to seek a political solution to the conflict in order to establish permanent peace in the Horn. Moscow will want to play the decisive and indispensable role in any negotiations, but it is uncertain that Soviet leaders would favor serious talks before reversing the current military situation. Soviet suggestions thus far have been deliberately ambiguous and for the most part nonstarters. Moreover Siad is unwilling to negotiate while his forces are doing well on the battlefield and Mengistu refuses to while Somali troops are in the Ogaden.

Moscow would support a settlement that allowed it to retain its dominant position in Ethiopia and that denied Somalia a major foreign backer. In effect, this would leave Moscow the dominant foreign power in the region, since Somalia, without a major patron, could not hope to compete with a Soviet-backed Ethiopia in the Horn/Red Sea areas. The Soviets do not see this as an unreasonable goal. Moscow seems to have concluded that US ties to Kenya--against which Somalia also has made territorial claims--will preclude a major US military commitment to Somalia.

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While Moscow would welcome the opportunity to regain its former status and facilities in Somalia, it is unlikely that it would sacrifice a viable, united Ethiopia to achieve this. Berbera and other Soviet facilities in Somalia were valuable and useful to the Soviets in the Indian Ocean context but are not irreplaceable. Recent Soviet activity suggests that Moscow believes that Aden and possibly one or more Ethiopian ports would be acceptable substitutes.

Moreover, Moscow probably calculates that the possibility of a return to a position of influence in Mogadiscio in the near term is remote. Even in the unlikely event that Ethiopian success in the Ogaden resulted in Siad's political demise, Moscow would probably not find it easy to return to Somalia. Even before they began to support Ethiopia, the Soviets were unpopular, and the war in the Ogaden has broad support from the Somali people.

Consequences of an Ethiopian Victory

Moscow is aware that a political solution to the Ethiopian-Somali conflict is the only way to a lasting peace in the area, but it also realizes that in the short term its Ethiopian client needs a military breakthrough. Moscow has pumped military equipment into Ethiopia faster than the Ethiopians can absorb it and in quantities in excess of what Ethiopia needs to retake Ogaden. The scale of the Soviet buildup has caused concern in some areas that Moscow might back an Ethiopian drive to overrun Somalia.

The Soviets have occasionally played on this concern, alleging that now they have given Mengistu what he needs to win and that they are not sure they can prevent his forces from crossing into Somalia. When this threat has been used, it was clearly part of an effort to get the Somalis to the negotiating table; so far the Soviet warning has not impressed the Somalis enough to bring this about.

Moscow almost certainly does not believe that its interests would be served by a large-scale Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, and the Soviets are likely to try to prevent such a move. A massive invasion of Somalia would virtually eliminate any prospect the Soviets might have

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to regain influence in Mogadiscio and would alienate many already suspicious African states. Moscow might, however, condone a tactical move to gain Somali territory for use as a bargaining chip in negotiations. Although even a move of this type would risk a negative response from African states, Moscow might calculate that the failure of the African states and the OAU to act decisively after the Somali move into the Ogaden would mute any criticism of a clearly tactical Ethiopian move into Somalia. Moscow probably also believes that it can successfully portray a limited move into Somalia as part of a determined effort to get both sides to withdraw from occupied territory and reach a negotiated settlement. If they can bring about a negotiated settlement, the Soviets no doubt believe that any loss in status stemming from their involvement could be quickly restored.

The US Connection

The Soviets cannot be confident about the level of tolerance the US will display in the future regarding Soviet activities in the Horn, but at this stage they apparently gauge the political risks as tolerable and the military risks as negligible. The USSR has not shown any sign of being intimidated by US opposition to Soviet actions, and, if the Kremlin does have reservations about possible reactions from Washington, it gives the impression that they need not be addressed until they become a reality.

Whatever their estimate of US reaction, Moscow's behavior in Ethiopia suggests that it is prepared to assume greater risks there. The Soviets probably expect that future US reactions would be graduated in rough correlation to their actions. Initially Moscow would anticipate suasion and vague threats from the US, and if Soviet involvement grows they may expect the US to support joint regional efforts in a variety of ways.

Only in the event that the level of Soviet actions continued to rise would the Soviets probably fear US reactions outside the region that would impinge directly on other areas of the bilateral relationship. They probably judge that the US would be reluctant to "link" SALT or other important bilateral issues to Soviet performance in Africa. But they are also sensitive to the possibility

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that domestic US pressures on the administration to do just that will grow if they continue or increase their heavy involvement.

On balance, they would not expect the US to seek to penalize them in SALT or probably most other arms control forums. But they may believe that some lesser actions in the bilateral field, such as holding up an export license or canceling some planned visit, might be taken by Washington. Conceivably, moreover, they would not be surprised if the US announced suspension of such bilateral negotiations as the Indian Ocean arms restraint talks in retaliation for Soviet noncooperation and troublemaking in the Horn.

If things get worse, the Soviets would probably recognize that some further souring on detente would come to characterize US attitudes. However, although they are quite aware that even a general, atmospheric worsening could adversely affect specific bilateral dealings, they may already have concluded that the tangible benefits of detente with the US have become so devalued that the costs of further deterioration are bearable. In the past, Moscow has shown a willingness to devalue such costs if a specific Soviet foreign policy goal, such as improving the "objective" basis of Soviet influence in an important area, stands to be gained. SALT would be the most likely exception to this reasoning.

In the interim, Moscow's major worry as far as the US is concerned is that at some point the Ethiopians themselves might ask Washington to play the role of mediator in their struggle with Somalia. Presumably the recent Soviet effort to get Addis Ababa to break relations with the US was designed in part to foreclose such a possibility.
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MEMORANDUM FOR: Bill Miller
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The attached article might interest you as a partial response to your request at Tuesday's briefing for a longer-term look at the Horn. The article is from an informal NFAC publication, USSR Weekly Review, and represents the views of one analyst.



Roger Cobby
NFAC Congressional Support
Staff

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