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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

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MEMORANDUM

SOVIET PENETRATION OF THE THIRD WORLD

SUMMARY

The Soviet Union employs a sophisticated mix of tactics in its efforts to penetrate Third World areas and influence events and organizations in ways that benefit Soviet political purposes. Moscow's most dramatic gains have come from its support of radical, non-Communist elements that ultimately became anti-Western ruling groups in such countries as Algeria, South Yemen, and Angola.

Where the USSR has no formal relations with the established governments being challenged by such groups, its support for the radicals tends to be open and large-scale, enhancing its credentials as a revolutionary power. In other areas, Moscow attempts to protect its relations with targeted governments by disguising and channeling its assistance to the subversive groups through third parties.

Moscow's most enduring Third World policies, however, have been in its relations with leftist, anti-US regimes which it frequently props up with military assistance. These regimes undertake a variety of actions, sometimes encouraged by Moscow and sometimes not, that tend to serve Soviet policy interests. The Soviets occasionally have come to the open military support of some governments, such as Nasir's Egypt, or facilitated large-scale military ventures by others, such as the Ethiopians and Vietnamese.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Office of Political Analysis at the request of the Director of Central Intelligence. Comments and questions should be addressed to the Chief, USSR-EE Division, Office of Political Analysis, [redacted]

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Moscow's substantial world-wide interests cause it constantly to weigh its equities and shift its policies between countries with which it wants to maintain good relations and their often subversive-minded neighbors. In these and other instances, the Soviets will frequently try to use local assets, including Communist parties, to affect events in the favored direction.

Direct Military Involvement

The Soviets have extended billions of dollars of military assistance and sent thousands of military advisors to the Third World in an attempt to foster dependence on them by the local regimes. They also have been willing to provide assistance to their clients directly, engaging in airlifts in times of crisis and even participating directly in military engagements. Some of the most dramatic provisions of military aid have been to:

- Egypt and Syria during the war with Israel in 1973.
- Ethiopia in 1978-79.
- Angola in 1975-76.
- North Yemen during the civil war of 1967-68.
- Vietnam during the Vietnam War and the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979-80.

Soviet personnel have been in combat in:

- Laos on behalf of neutrals and leftists in 1960-62.
- North Yemen in support of the republican government in 1967-68.
- Iraq against the Kurds in 1974-75.

Pilots as well as air-defense combat personnel were active in Egypt during the "war of attrition" with Israel in 1970, and air-defense personnel were active in Vietnam in 1965-66. Soviet transport aircraft and crews have been helping ferry men and material in Cambodia since 1980.

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The most direct and dramatic Soviet military intervention, of course, was the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This operation was designed to ensure the Communist, pro-Soviet orientation of this border nation. Since the invasion, the Soviets have maintained their forces in Afghanistan, using their own airborne and ground personnel to prop up the puppet regime.

Use of Surrogates

The Soviets have supported clients and allies bent on changing the status quo; they have backed Vietnam's efforts to establish its hegemony in Laos and Kampuchea and Libyan efforts to overthrow Sudanese President Numayri. They have also encouraged clients to help bolster regimes faced with severe challenges--for example, paying for Cuban military involvement in Angola and Ethiopia.

Soviet clients frequently act on their own without Soviet prompting. Much of the Cuban support for militants in Latin America falls into this category as do the Libyan ventures in Tunisia and Chad and Vietnam's decision to overrun all of Kampuchea in 1979. While the Soviets have not necessarily approved such actions in advance, they have generally supported them when they proved successful.

Non-Communist Militants

The Soviets have made their most dramatic gains by supporting radical, non-Communist elements. While such forces are not as susceptible to Soviet control as are Communist parties, their potential is greater because their roots are indigenous. They are attractive to the Soviets because their orientation is generally anti-Western. Assistance--even though meager--to ultimately successful movements in Algeria, South Yemen, Angola, and Mozambique gave the Soviets access to radical, strongly anti-US regimes.

The nature and extent of Soviet assistance to such forces has varied greatly. Open, large-scale support has gone only to groups that have broad regional support and in situations where the USSR had virtually no relationship with the existing government. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), South-West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), the African National Congress (ANC), and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) fall into this category. Although military supplies have been funnelled through their regional protectors, Moscow has openly proclaimed its support, believing this enhances its credibility as a revolutionary power.

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Often, however, Moscow seeks to disguise its involvement with radical militants in order to protect its formal relations with the target government and avoid stirring regional or international antagonism. Soviet assistance to El Salvadoran insurgents, for example, has been delivered clandestinely through surrogates; aid to the National Democratic Front (NDF)--a group targeted against North Yemen--is channelled through South Yemen. The Soviets provide some support to the Somali Salvation Front (SSF) through Ethiopia and are apparently considering support of the Shaba (Katangan) rebels through Angola.

The Soviets also maintain contacts with many ethnic nationality groups, mostly along their southern border. They have links to Al Zulfikar, the Pakistani anti-Zia terrorist group based in Afghanistan, as well as with Kurdish, Armenian, Baluch, Azeri and other such elements in Iran and Turkey. The extent of their actual assistance is not clear, but they have probably provided limited aid to some of them from time to time. The purpose of these contacts ranges from the gathering of information and development of assets to the pressuring of neighboring governments and ensuring future access to potentially successful radical movements.

Communist Parties

Moscow has consistently backed pro-Soviet Communist parties in the Third World. Moscow often sees this support as an important element in its claims to leadership in the world Communist movement and its competition with China rather than as a viable tool for gaining political influence. In some cases, however, links to local Communist parties give Moscow a degree of leverage over the ruling regime and provide access to the political system.

Soviet guidance to local Communist parties depends on the nature of the USSR's relationship with the ruling regime and the party's chances of success. In South American countries where the USSR is seeking economic ties to existing governments, the parties are told to maintain low-key political activity. In Central America, however, where the Soviets have few bilateral equities and where they see a chance of success, they are urging the Communist parties to shift from political activity to participation in armed struggle.

Soviet-backed Communist parties in the Third World have had little success gaining power internally since the Chinese Communist takeover in 1949. A major exception was the Communist coup in Afghanistan in April 1978; although the extent of Moscow's knowledge of the coup remains unclear, its subsequent commitment to defend the regime has proven substantial. In Cuba, an originally broad leftist grouping

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developed into a pro-Soviet Communist party after it gained power, but this case has proved to be the exception in spite of Soviet efforts elsewhere to encourage nationalistic leftist regimes to adopt Communist ideology and structure.

Political Contacts

Moscow's most effective policy in the Third World has been the straightforward development of bilateral relations with existing leftist, anti-US regimes. Combining political support with their ability to supply large quantities of arms on favorable terms, the Soviets have developed close relations with such important and diverse states as India, Ethiopia, Syria, Libya, Iraq, and the Congo. Some of their favorite tactics include cooperation agreements in areas such as party-to-party relations, intelligence, and security. The Soviets then seek to exploit these relationships to cultivate and recruit key government members.

The Soviets support individual pro-Soviet government members as well as legal opposition parties in some Third World states such as Mauritius. They also engage in large-scale cultivation of members of student, labor and professional organizations, hoping that their contacts will eventually gain positions of power and prove sympathetic to Soviet interests.

Conclusion

The willingness of the Soviets to employ both overt and covert tactics and even to pursue seemingly contradictory policies gives them considerable flexibility in Third World states. It also creates dilemmas; their natural inclination to support the Polisario guerrilla movement in the Western Sahara, for example, is tempered by their desire to protect their economic relationship with Morocco. Similarly, their support for the Iraqi Communist Party over the years has created severe strains in their relations with the ruling Iraqi Baath Party. Generally, however, this flexibility gives the Soviets considerable leeway in their persistent and patient probing for opportunities and in selecting the most promising targets and courses of action.

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