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OPINION

Mozambique: the issues for US policy

By Robert S. Jaster

THE recent White House meeting between President Reagan and Mozambican President Machel points up a dilemma for US policy that transcends the immediate issue of Mozambique. Are there circumstances in which the United States should support a Marxist regime? Or should it always support the opponents of such a regime, whoever they are?

The Reagan policy is to encourage Mr. Machel to lessen Mozambique's dependence on the communist bloc and to move his country toward the West. Critics say the US has no business supporting an avowedly Marxist regime that has a history of close political, economic, and military aid links to the Soviet Union. Which view better reflects the political realities in Mozambique? What is the current situation there?

In the past couple of years the Machel government, disillusioned with the results of prior efforts to link Mozambique to the communist states, and with the abject failure of socialist economic policies at home, has turned back toward Africa and the Western democracies. It has joined the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. It is playing a major role in a long-range regional-development program which is backed by the West but shunned by the communist states.

Internally Mozambique is breaking up its East-bloc-managed state farms and parceling them out to private farmers. A new investment code seeks to attract Western capital. Mozambique's 1984 mutual-security accord with South Africa led to commercial and economic agreements that will further link the two economies and bring in substantial private capital.

In other ways, too, Machel has shown growing independence of the USSR. He has sought Western military instructors for the Army, and has called on neighboring Zimbabwe for troops to guard Mozambique's far-flung transport lines from guerrilla attack. The USSR opposed Machel's non-aggression pact with Pretoria. So, apparently, did three hard-line Marxist Cabinet members who were dismissed after the accord. And despite the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Olympics — a boycott in which the communist states joined — Mozambique fielded a team of athletes at Los Angeles.

Mozambique, like Yugoslavia, Algeria, and other states that were once close to Moscow but no longer are, is charting its own independent course. The regime's

steps to move away from the Soviet camp, and to increase economic, political, and security ties to the West, are clearly in the interests of the US.

What about Machel's foes, the Mozambican National Resistance (MNR, or Renamo)? First of all, it is not a legitimate national movement. Renamo has no political base or deep roots among the people. It has yet to offer a coherent political program. In fact the MNR was created by the Rhodesian intelligence service in 1976 from a group of Mozambican refugees, mostly ex-mercenaries from the Portuguese colonial forces, who had fled Mozambique as the Portuguese pulled out. Armed and trained by the Rhodesians, the MNR was sent into Mozambique to harass Robert Mugabe's guerrillas, who were infiltrating Rhodesia from Mozambican camps. When Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in 1980, Renamo's forces fled to South Africa. There they came under a new paymaster: the Directorate of Military Intelligence, which directed and supported their activities until at least the spring of 1984, when South Africa and Mozambique signed a mutual non-aggression pact. Recently, however, South Africa acknowledged that it has continued to assist the MNR, in violation of that accord.

MNR saboteurs and guerrilla groups operate in every province of Mozambique. Until the government's recent military successes, Renamo had virtually isolated the capital from the rest of the country. Yet the regime has survived not only the MNR's depredations, but several years of disastrous drought and economic mismanagement. The MNR appears no closer to toppling the government now than it was a few years ago.

For the US the options seem clear. It can join South Africa in arming and financing the MNR "contras," thereby aborting Machel's moves toward the West, assuring the USSR of growing influence and involving the US with a group that has no claim to legitimacy in Mozambique. A second option is to do nothing, leaving the field open to heavy-handed competition between the Russians and South Africans. Or the US can continue to encourage Machel's recent efforts to link Mozambique more closely to the Western community of nations.

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