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OPINION

S. Africa: militant roots

By Robert S. Jaster

IN recent weeks South African combat troops were once again hunting down SWAPO guerrillas inside Angola: the first such cross-border strikes since Pretoria withdrew its occupying forces from southern Angola in April. This latest action was only one of several aggressive moves by the Botha government recently. In mid-June, South African commandos attacked suspected African National Congress targets in Botswana's capital, Gaborone. A few weeks earlier a South African demolition team was caught attempting to blow up a US-owned oil installation in Angola's far northern province, 800 miles above the Namibian border.

These actions are a slap at the Reagan administration, which has been trying to prod Mr. Botha into a less belligerent stance toward its neighbors. Coming at a time of growing US congressional clamor for sanctions against Pretoria, South Africa's latest salvos leave the policy of "constructive engagement" dead in the water. Why antagonize the United States? Why now?

The resurgence of South African militancy reflects concerns far more vital than the state of relations with the US. The driving issues are rooted in South African domestic politics. Most important, the government must demonstrate that it is tough in the face of outside provocation, particularly guerrilla activities. Neutralizing the guerrilla threat commands the highest priority of the Botha administration. Its strategy must be seen to be working. This becomes even more important in times of internal political upheaval, like that which has been going on in South Africa's black townships for almost a year. President Botha has come under continuing fire from right-wing parties for his political reforms at home; he cannot afford to be seen as "soft" toward black opposition at home or guerrilla attacks from outside.

South African whites held high hopes that the 1984 security accord with Mozambique would put an end to ANC sabotage inside South Africa, and that the cease-fire with Angola last year would cripple South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) operations in Namibia. Yet attacks by both have continued. The longer they go unchecked, the greater the impact on white morale, and the louder the message to South African blacks that guerrilla warfare offers an effective weapon against the apartheid regime. The government does not want to see this proposition win broad acceptance.

Hence the launching of highly visible strikes against suspected guerrillas in neighboring states: proof the government is "doing something" about the guerrilla attacks. South Africa has also struck at the economic and political infrastructure of nearby states, thereby raising the costs of playing host to guerrillas. And if this means sacrificing the goodwill of the Reagan administration, it is a price that must be paid. In any event, Botha probably feels he has gained about all he can from constructive engagement: His string has run out, along with US patience.

Bureaucratic politics, too, has played a role, as cleavages between the military and the Foreign Office have spilled over into South Africa's regional policy. Confident of its capabilities and eager to demonstrate its prowess, the military has consistently pursued a hard policy line. It has opposed concessions on Namibia, and has urged hard-hitting strikes against guerrilla sanctuary states. Its leaders have promoted the image of South Africa as a regional superpower that must not be afraid to use its military muscle. In this it has usually won the support of President Botha (described by his own staff as a "superhawk") over Foreign Office reservations.

The Nkomati nonaggression pact with Mozambique was thus a victory for the Foreign Office, which has long favored détente with neighbor states under a loose constellation grouped around South Africa. But the military had trained and directed Renamo, a group of Mozambican "contras," for five years. It was reluctant to cut them loose, and was opposed to the peace accord. The military later turned a blind eye when elements within the defense force continued to support Renamo operations against Mozambique in the months after the Nkomati pact.

The most recent acts of aggression are thus no fluke, no momentary lapse into militancy.

Rather, they represent a return to the pattern of the past six years: a pattern of direct and heavy military response to actions by SWAPO and the ANC. That pattern was suspended for a time in hopes the accords with Angola and Mozambique — to which South Africa agreed under US prodding — would relieve guerrilla attacks. Since they have failed to do so, the military option has resumed, and the chances for regional détente dimmed.

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