

The Namibian Settlement Process: Obstacles and Regional Implications (U)

Key Judgments

The pace of the Namibian talks has quickened recently, largely as a result of South Africa's initiative in presenting an accelerated timetable for a settlement and its new flexibility on a number of Namibian issues. But Pretoria's demand that a settlement be linked to withdrawal of Cubans from Angola poses a formidable obstacle.

Although important details on the cease-fire and other aspects of the UN plan still need to be worked out, we believe that the remaining differences over strictly Namibian issues are not insurmountable. Any one of the unresolved issues, however, provides ample opportunity for either side to procrastinate or even to break off talks. Unexpected military developments could also derail the settlement talks.

The prospects for agreement on the withdrawal of Cubans are far less certain. The critical issue is whether the Angolan regime is willing or able to send a sufficient number of Cubans home and in a manner that satisfies Pretoria's demand that Cuban forces be withdrawn. South Africa appears uncompromising in its current demand for the verified withdrawal of all Cuban troops. It may eventually settle for less—although we believe it will insist upon the departure of considerably more than half of the 20,000 to 25,000 Cuban troops that we estimate are in Angola.

Pretoria recognizes that the political strength of the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) has not been diminished by South Africa's military operations during the past year, and this, in our view, underlies South Africa's linking of a Namibian settlement to withdrawal of Cubans from Angola. The Botha government probably believes that it needs the political ammunition of a Cuban withdrawal to defuse a domestic rightwing reaction to a probable SWAPO electoral victory in Namibia.

Although the issue of Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) has remained largely on the periphery of the negotiations, calculations about UNITA's strength relative to that of the Angolan regime heavily influence the thinking of the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) about the Cuban issue.

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We believe that Luanda could not afford to lose more than 5,000 to 7,500 members of the total Cuban military force without suffering appreciable territorial losses to UNITA.

Luanda probably has neither the desire nor the ability to reach a reconciliation with Savimbi at this time. Moreover, the Frontline States for the most part support Angola's view that Savimbi is a "traitor" and a South African "puppet" and are unlikely to press reconciliation on Luanda. South Africa, on the other hand, views UNITA as a valuable source of leverage that costs very little. Consequently, we expect the UNITA issue to remain in the background as negotiations continue on Namibia and Cuban withdrawal.

The manner in which the Cubans would withdraw is also important to both Luanda and Pretoria. Angola, with strong support from its African and Communist backers, has repeatedly rejected any explicit linkage between a Namibian settlement and Cuban withdrawal, insisting that the Cuban issue is an internal Angolan matter and that the Cuban troops would leave as a natural consequence of a settlement. In view of repeated South African public statements, however, we expect the South Africans will insist that they be allowed to state publicly that the Cubans will withdraw before beginning implementation of a Namibian settlement.

A Namibian settlement that included the withdrawal of substantial numbers of Cuban troops would be widely viewed as a major success for US policy toward southern Africa. For such a settlement to occur, however, we believe that the United States is likely to be pressed to make several formal and informal commitments to the various parties—promises which could have long-term consequences for US interests. The Angolans probably would demand assurances about Western economic assistance and future South African behavior. The South Africans, in return for concessions on the Cuban issue or on policies toward their neighbors, might insist on improved relations with the United States. For example, in addition to wanting greater US tolerance for the pace of racial reform in South Africa, they have expressed interest in closer cooperation on nuclear matters and a relaxation of US restraints on trade in items that could be used for military purposes.

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If the Cuban issue proves intractable and the settlement talks collapse, we believe the South Africans, disclaiming responsibility for the failure, will proceed with an "internal" settlement—that is, holding elections next year that exclude SWAPO and the UN—with the expectation of some degree of support from the West. The South Africans might decide to conduct military operations of unprecedented scale in southern Angola. Such operations would be aimed at inflicting a humiliating defeat on SWAPO and punishing its Angolan and Cuban backers. The South Africans may also decide to increase their support to Savimbi's insurgency.

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