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WAR IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

THE ISSUE

On July 23, 1977, the forces of the Somali Democratic Republic invaded the desert region of the Ogaden within the borders of Ethiopia. This invasion was based on long-standing Somali claims to the Ogaden made militarily possible by heavy Somali reliance on Soviet (and to some extent Cuban) arms and assistance. This eruption of war was serious enough, but coupled with the disruption of the 22-year alliance between Ethiopia and the United States in April and the rapid turn of the Ethiopian regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam to the U.S.S.R. and Cuba, the war in the Horn of Africa began to assume the proportions of a major international crisis. Initially, the Somali invasion, aiding pro-Somali insurgents in the Ogaden, was successful, but recent military aid to Ethiopia from various Communist states has begun to reverse this tide of victory. At the present time, the threat in the Horn of Africa is twofold: first, that Soviet assistance to Ethiopia will lead to the domination of this strategically situated nation by the Kremlin, and secondly, that a Soviet supported Ethiopian victory will lead to the invasion or destabilization of Somalia or of other neighboring states.

Concern over the war in the Horn of Africa and Soviet involvement has been expressed by both Congressional leaders and by the Administration. Congressmen Don Bonker of Washington and Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts made an extensive trip throughout the area in December, 1977, and expressed their views in a report to the House International Relations Committee on February 3, 1978.¹

1. War in the Horn of Africa: A Firsthand Report on the Challenges for United States Policy (Washington, D.C.: 95th Congress, 2nd Session, February 3, 1978) (hereinafter cited as "War in the Horn").

On February 8, 1978, Senator Thomas F. Eagleton of Missouri also expressed concern over Communist penetration of the Horn in a speech on the Senate floor.² On February 10, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance warned the Soviet Union that if Ethiopian troops cross the Somali border, the U.S. would have to reexamine its present policy of not supplying arms to the Somalis.³ Given this recent concern over and interest in the problems of the Horn of Africa, an examination of new diplomatic and military developments in the region and of possible policy options for the U.S. is in order.⁴

DIPLOMACY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

The current crisis in the Horn of Africa has developed from the destabilization that followed American cut-off of military aid to Ethiopia in February, 1977. The Carter Administration decided that Mengistu's regime had violated "human rights" and suspended military aid on February 24, ending a relationship that went back to 1945. Between 1945 and 1975, the U.S. gave \$618 million in military aid to Ethiopia. At this time, Somalia still enjoyed a close relationship to the Soviet Union and presented a serious threat to Ethiopia. Moreover, the Eritrean rebellion and rebellions in several other provinces of Ethiopia as well as violence and instability in the capital all meant that Mengistu's government was in serious need of arms. It was this cut-off of American aid to the oldest and strongest U.S. ally in Africa that virtually obliged Mengistu to turn to the Soviets and to adopt a more strident anti-American policy. In April, Mengistu closed down U.S. military and communications facilities at Kagnaw, and in June he expelled the consulates of the U.S. and of five other countries.

The Carter Administration, however, emitted confusing signals. The President informed Secretary Vance and Dr. Brzezinski that he wanted to tilt toward Somalia and made approaches through Dr. Kevin Cahill, the personal physician and friend of Somali President Siad Barre. Dr. Cahill, after meeting with Matthew Nemetz, a close associate of Vance, informed Siad Barre that Washington did not oppose guerrilla pressure in the Ogaden, but wanted Somalians to drop territorial demands in Kenya. Siad Barre then confirmed this message through his son-in-law and ambassador to the U.S., and also received offers of assistance from Saudi Arabia and six other nations. It was at this point that Siad Barre launched his invasion of the Ogaden, in the belief that he would receive military aid from the U.S. to replace

2. Thomas F. Eagleton, "The Horn of Africa," Congressional Record, February 8, 1978, p. S1470.

3. Washington Star, February 10, 1978.

4. For further background on the Horn of Africa prior to the outbreak of war in July, see "Conflict in the Horn of Africa," Heritage Foundation Background, No. 24, July 13, 1977, and the updated version of this paper in The Journal of Social and Political Studies, II, #3 (Fall, 1977), pp. 155-168.

Soviet aid. American diplomats, however, have denied that they encouraged the invasion of the Ogaden. By early October, the Administration had definitely decided against further military involvement in the Horn.⁵

Moderate Arab states, however, have been more encouraging to Siad Barre. In January, he received the assurance from the Shah that Iran would assist if the Ethiopians violated Somali borders. He made an extensive trip throughout the region at that time and received promises of assistance from Pakistan as well in the form of Chinese assault rifles. He met with Presidents Sadat of Egypt and Nimeiry of Sudan and received their promises of support in the event of an Ethiopian invasion. Their assistance is particularly important since both Sudan and Egypt have some remaining supplies of Soviet weapons in the use of which Somali troops have been trained. Sadat has given \$30 million in arms to Somalia but refused to occupy the former Soviet naval facilities at Berbera.⁶ Saudi Arabia has also sent aid to Siad Barre to the amount of \$300 million as of last summer.

Though the Carter Administration has recently voiced more alarm at the crisis in the Horn and has responded to the point of sending ships from the U.S. Sixth Fleet to cruise off the coast of the region, there has been no decisive response by the U.S. On January 21, the U.S. conferred with the representatives of Great Britain, France, West Germany, and Italy in Washington and agreed not to become involved in the Horn by direct military participation. They refused arms to both Ethiopia and Somalia, agreed to appeal to the Organization of African Unity for an "African Solution" and to the concerned governments for a negotiated settlement. West Germany, however, extended a loan to Siad Barre of \$12 million, probably in return for his cooperation with the German anti-terrorist strike, and Ethiopia responded by expelling the German ambassador.⁷

These diplomatic developments leave the Horn of Africa in a very lopsided situation. For the first time since the 1950's, the Soviet Union is heavily committed in the Horn and the U.S. finds itself excluded. The problem now is how the U.S. can restore a role for itself in the region without abetting Somali aggression and at the same time stabilize the conflict there and protect the legitimate interests of itself and of its allies.

THE WAR IN THE OGADEN

The Ogaden is a largely desert region of 246,000 square miles in area populated by nomadic tribesmen who have ethnic and linguistic

5. Newsweek, September 26, 1977, pp. 42-43; Richard Burt, in New York Times, October 3, 1977, p. 1; David B. Ottaway, Washington Post, November 18, 1977, p. A23.

6. The Economist, January 7, 1978, p. 50; War in the Horn, p. 40.

7. The Economist, February 4, 1978, p. 71.

ties to the Somalis. Somalia regards this region as well as the similarly populated area of neighboring Kenya known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD) as part of the Somali nation. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) has been the spearhead of Somali attacks in the Ogaden and has received arms and assistance from the regime in Mogadishu. Siad Barre has claimed that Somali forces are not involved in the Ogaden, though it has become fairly clear that this is not the case. Despite the efforts of Colonel Mengistu to mobilize a massive peasant army to repel the Somali invasion of the summer, Somali forces, relying heavily on Soviet military equipment, were dramatically successful. By early August, Ethiopia admitted that it had lost control of the Ogaden. The WSLF, led by Abdulahi Hassan Mohammud and claiming a strength of 30,000 guerrillas, extended its claims to all four of the southern provinces of Ethiopia. In August, after intense fighting, the Somalis captured the key city of Jijiga, a major Ethiopian tank base situated on the Karamarda Mountain range that forms a natural frontier for the Ethiopian interior. In other key cities, Direedawa and Harar, the Ethiopians held on tenuously until autumn rains immobilized the Somali advance.

Although Ethiopia began soliciting military aid from the Soviet Union in May, little of this had arrived by mid-summer. Ethiopian forces have relied heavily on American arms, and it is doubtful that they found the transition to Soviet equipment easy. By the early winter of 1977, however, Soviet aid began to arrive in massive shipments, as well as aid from other Communist states. Some detail on this material is called for.

COMMUNIST AID TO ETHIOPIA

Somalia has had a close relationship to the Soviet Union since 1963, and Siad Barre's regime has relied on Soviet military equipment for its forces, on KGB control of its intelligence service, and on Soviet economic and diplomatic support. The Ethiopian expulsion of the U.S. presence in April, however, led to a Soviet alliance with Mengistu. The Soviets were not favorable to the Somali invasion of the Ogaden and began to develop closer ties with Mengistu. Siad Barre, whom moderate Arab states began to pressure heavily, became suspicious of the Soviets. He began to explore the possibilities of receiving U.S. aid and to accept Saudi Arabian money and assistance. Soon after the West German rescue of Lufthansa Flight 181 at Mogadishu airport in November, Siad Barre reversed himself completely. He gave all Soviet advisers seven days to leave his country, terminated Soviet use of naval facilities at Berbera and Kismayu, and broke diplomatic relations with Cuba. Although as many as 6,000 Soviets may have been in Somalia, the strained relations between the two countries had caused a gradual reduction in their numbers to about 1,500 at the time of the expulsion on November 13.

It was apparently after this expulsion that the Soviets decided to support Ethiopia on a massive level. Previously, they seem to have hoped to moderate the hostility of Ethiopia and Somalia and to settle the Eritrean rebellion. In December, 1976, Mengistu purchased

\$100 million worth of arms from the Soviets through talks in Moscow with President Podgorny and Foreign Minister Gromyko. In April, Fidel Castro made a tour of Ethiopia, praised Mengistu's revolutionary efforts and promised to send advisers.

This aid, however, was only the beginning. In late November and December, 1977, U.S. intelligence sources in the area began to detect evidence of a massive Soviet airlift to Ethiopia. About fifty flights originated in the Soviet cities of Georgiyevsk near the Black Sea and Tashkent in Central Asia. The planes refueled at Aden in the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen, where the Soviets maintain military facilities, and then flew on to Addis Ababa. Other Soviet planes violated the air space of various mid-eastern countries. The Soviets have also stockpiled fuel at Aden and at Maputo in Mozambique and are believed to have the capacity to transport as many as three full divisions to Libya in one day. As many as 225 transport planes or 15 percent of the Soviet military transport fleet may be involved. This airlift of arms included ammunition, field guns, Stalin Organ rocket launchers, and MiG-21's, MiG-23's, and SU-7's. The airlift, however, was not all. The port of Aseb in Eritrea, still held by the Ethiopian forces, was blocked by a massive in-flow of similar materials transported by sea from the Black Sea through the Suez Canal and down the Red Sea.⁸

Soviet personnel have also been deployed in Ethiopia. In early January, Western intelligence sources reported a conference in Addis Ababa of high-ranking Soviet officers, including at least five senior Soviet generals, and several East German officers. General Koliyakov, Soviet chief-of-staff in Libya and in charge of Soviet operations throughout Africa, was also present, as was Raul Castro, brother of the Cuban dictator. Dmitri Ustinov, the Soviet Defense Minister, was reported by Somali intelligence to be present but this was not confirmed. Castro, however, did continue on to Moscow, after touring the front lines, where he conferred with Premier Brezhnev and Mr. Ustinov.⁹ Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski stated on February 24 that General Vasily I. Petrov of the Soviet Army is in direct command of Ethiopian forces, though earlier reports from Somalia had indicated that Gen. G. G. Barisov was the Soviet commander.¹⁰ Western intelligence sources recently estimated that there are 1,000 Russians, 3,000 Cubans, about 1,000 South Yemeni troops, and about 2,000 troops from Eastern Europe.¹¹ In an advance made by Ethiopian troops against Somali positions in and around Harar in early February, in which Somali forces were forced to retreat, Soviet T-54 tanks appeared in the vanguard, and the Ethiopians received expert air support from both American F-5's

8. Newsweek, "Airlift to Ethiopia," January 23, 1978, p. 35-36; Drew Middleton, New York Times, February 9, 1978, p. A6.

9. The Economist Foreign Report, No. 1519, January 18, 1978, p. 1.

10. The Washington Post, February 25, 1978, p. A1; The Times (London), February 11, 1978, p. 1.

11. Time, February 20, 1978, p. 28.

and MiG-21's, the latter probably piloted by Cubans or Russians.¹² MiG's have also been used in attacks on Eritrean rebel positions and night attacks may be flown by North Korean pilots.¹³

The Cuban role in Ethiopia has expanded immensely from last summer, when there were only about fifty advisers there. Secretary Vance has stated that 2,000 Cubans are involved in a combat role in Ethiopia and that more are on the way, and on February 24, Dr. Brzezinski and the State Department asserted that there are now over 10,000 Cubans there.¹⁴ The Cubans have established an anti-personnel carrier training school at Aseb in Eritrea, a tank school in Awash, and a militia training school in Addis Ababa, and Cuban and Soviet advisers had been observed in at least fourteen battle sites as of last January.¹⁵

STRATEGIC VALUE OF THE HORN OF AFRICA

1. The Indian Ocean: The most obvious strategic linkage of the Horn is with the balance of power in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ Soviet bases at Berbera and Kismayu were invaluable for giving the Soviets access to this area, which is linked to Southern Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Though the loss of these facilities was a setback for the Soviets, they retain bases in Aden and may construct one or more on the Eritrean coast (possibly at Aseb) which would give them access to the Indian Ocean as well as control of the Red Sea route to the Ocean. The U.S. and the Soviets have been engaged in negotiations for demilitarization of the Ocean, or as the Soviets like to say, to transform the region into a "Zone of Peace," but on February 8, the U.S. announced that due to its concern over the Soviet involvement in the war in the Horn, a quick agreement on the Indian Ocean was not expected.¹⁷

2. Oil Routes: A primary concern of the oil-producing states of the region is that Soviet control of the Red Sea through Ethiopia would allow the interdiction of oil routes to Europe, the U.S., and Japan. Such interdiction could lead to serious economic dislocations in these areas, to impairment of their military machines, and to economic and political chaos in them and in the Middle East itself.

12. Ibid.

13. The Economist Foreign Report, No. 1521, February 1, 1978, p. 6.

14. Washington Post, February 10, 1978, p. A1; and February 25, 1978, p. A1.

15. Newsweek, op. cit.

16. For background on the power balance and strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, see "The Indian Ocean: Its Significance for U.S. Foreign Policy," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, No. 14, June 14, 1977.

17. New York Times, February 10, 1978, p. A8.

This possibility is an almost obsessive concern with Middle East leaders. Anwar Sadat, Siad Barre, and President Nimeiry of Sudan, who have all had extensive dealings with the Soviets, have stated that Soviet officials have told them that the ability to interdict oil routes was a Soviet goal in the area.¹⁸ During the Shah's visit to Washington in the autumn, he placed before President Carter a dossier of Iranian intelligence reports that detailed Soviet aid to Iraq with the same intentions: specifically, the arming of terrorist groups with missiles, and chemical and biological weapons capable of sinking tankers in the Straits of Hormuz and thus blocking passage. This could mean blockage of the Straits for weeks and lead to severe economic chaos in the West.¹⁹

3. The Middle East: Both Israel and Egypt are affected by the possibility of Soviet domination in Ethiopia. Recent Israeli insistence on the security of its access to Sharm-el-Sheikh on the tip of the Sinai peninsula indicates why it is concerned. Oil and other imports and exports must pass through the Red Sea if Israel is to have access to the Indian Ocean and other non-Mediterranean sea routes. Soviet control of the Red Sea would block this access.

Israel has maintained military advisers in Ethiopia until recently. These instructors are credited with the training of a 400-man elite force that acts as the personal bodyguard of Colonel Mengistu and also with the training of 75 Ethiopian instructors who in turn trained the Flame Brigade, described as "the most savage in our armed forces." Israel has also provided spare parts for American planes in Ethiopia and has sold Mengistu captured Soviet arms.²⁰ However, according to President Sadat, Mr. Begin shares his concern at the new Soviet role in Ethiopia, and Israel has reportedly curtailed its military assistance.²¹

Egypt is also worried by the possibility of Soviet control of the Red Sea. But Anwar Sadat has expressed another concern also. On February 7, 1978, he met with a group of U.S. Senators in Washington and explained, "Half the water of the Nile comes from Ethiopia. Naturally, I am alarmed with the Soviets' controlling half my water."²² President Sadat also expressed concern that after the Soviets dealt

18. War in the Horn of Africa, pp. 22 and 30; Newsweek, February 13, 1978, p. 47.

19. The Economist Foreign Report, No. 1518, January 11, 1978, p. 2.

20. Dan Connell, Washington Post, October 1, 1977, p. A12.

21. War in the Horn, p. 39; Newsweek, February 13, 1978, p. 47.

22. Quoted by Senator Eagleton, Congressional Record, February 8, 1978, p. S1470.

concern that after the Soviets dealt with Somalia, they would turn on Egypt and Sudan, making use of Libya which has profound disputes with both, to sandwich them between Kaddafi's regime and Ethiopia.

4. Central Africa: The Soviet-Cuban aid to Ethiopia recalls the similar (and still present) assistance to Angola and Mozambique, which has resulted in threats to the security of Rhodesia, South Africa, and Zaire. Parallel threats exist in northeastern Africa. Kenya, under the rule of aging Jomo Kenyatta, has seriously strained relations with Somalia and with Uganda, which also receives Soviet and Cuban aid. Chad also has strained relations with Sudan which is threatened by Libya. Many of these conflicts are based on tribal, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences and can easily be exploited by propagandists and used to create full-scale wars. Should the Soviets find this course attractive, they would find considerable opportunity to gain political advantages for themselves in Africa.²³

SOVIET INTENTIONS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Although Russia in the nineteenth century revealed an interest in Ethiopia, never before have they committed themselves on such a massive military scale. This involvement seems to go beyond a desire to see the Somali conflict contained, and several commentators, from Siad Barre to Senator Eagleton, have indicated the serious possibility of a Soviet-sponsored invasion of Somalia. Although Berbera is not irreplaceable in function, such an invasion could be useful to the Soviets in demonstrating the value of their aid to their friends, the error of expelling the Soviets for their enemies, and (if the U.S. is not involved), the unreliability of American foreign policy. President Sadat, however, has pointed out that the port of Berbera is more useful to the Soviets than their similar facilities at Aden because Aden is within firing range of Egyptian guns whereas Berbera is on higher ground. Siad Barre insists that the Soviets and Cubans plan to drop paratroopers behind Somali lines and to invade Somalia by sea and that recent test launches of this plan have already been made.²⁴ Mengistu and Soviet officials have denied that they will invade Somalia, but Siad Barre has pointed out that Ethiopian bombing of northern Somalia already constitutes a violation of Somalia territory.²⁵ It is significant that the Ethiopians attacked the interior of Somalia

23. On the Soviet and Cuban presence in Africa generally, see Larry Heinzerling, "Cuba Seeks to Lead Third World Nations" in Chicago Tribune, February 13, 1978, p. 11, and David K. Willis, "Soviets Seek Mideast Openings," Christian Science Monitor, January 30, 1978, p. 1.

24. War in the Horn of Africa, p. 40; Newsweek, February 13, 1978, p. 48.

25. Interview with Siad Barre in Newsweek, February 13, 1978, p. 47.

before they had expelled the Somalis from the Ogaden or crushed the rebellion there or in Eritrea.

A second problem has to do with how stable the Soviet presence in Ethiopia is likely to be. The Soviets were expelled from Egypt in 1972, and from Sudan in 1973. In Somalia and reportedly also in Mozambique, the Russians have found it difficult to get along with the black population, though they are still present in the latter country. This Soviet failure to "win friends" in other African or Moslem countries may be used as a rationalization for the U.S. not to become involved in the Horn of Africa. Soon after the Somali expulsion of the Soviets, some American journalists remarked that Soviet policy in the Horn had failed.²⁶

It may be that Ethiopia will in time expell the Soviets as Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia have. However, some consideration should be given to the differences in the situation. First, Mengistu's regime is much more unstable than those of the other three countries and needs the coercive support of foreign arms more than they did. Secondly, there were critical incidents or dissatisfactions in the other three countries that led to the Soviet expulsion. In Egypt the death of Nasser, the rise of Sadat, and the failure of the Soviet connection to win Egyptian aims from Israel or the U.S. led to Sadat's disenchantment with the Soviets and their expulsion. In Sudan, a plot by indigenous Communists with the backing of the Soviets to assassinate Nimeiry, as well as the example of Sadat, led to their expulsion and Nimeiry's turn to the West. In Somalia the precipitating event was the failure of the Soviets to allow Siad Barre the full measure of his expansionist dreams and the possibility of U.S. aid to replace that of the Soviets. Such incidents may occur in Ethiopia and lead to a similar rejection of the Soviets, but there is no reason to assume so or for the U.S. to rely on Soviet errors for the protection of its own interests. Finally, it should be recalled that Marxist ideology is taken more seriously by Mengistu, by his army, and even by his internal enemies than it was in Egypt, Sudan, or Somalia. This ideological factor should be considered when measuring the degree to which the present regime or its possible successors will feel comfortable with a Soviet and Cuban presence.

CONCLUSION

Whatever policies the U.S. adopts in the Horn of Africa must take three factors into account. First, the Organization of African Unity in 1964 adopted a resolution that legitimated the existing boundaries of all African states. The Somali invasion of Ethiopia is in violation of this resolution, as would be an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. U.S. aid to either state must consider whether such aid and support would destroy this principle. Abandonment of the OAU principle of territorial integrity could lead to a general conflagration in Africa, as few states are satisfied with their existing

26. See David K. Shipler, "Moscow's Setback..." New York Times, November 14, 1977, p. 1; letter of A.H.I. Aden in New York Times, November 28, 1977, p. 30; "Who Lost Somalia?" editorial in Washington Post, November 17, 1977, p. A22.

frontiers. This development could lead to Soviet gains as well as to continental war.

Secondly, it must be realized that the Somali armed forces since 1963 have been armed and trained with Soviet weapons and equipment. It is unlikely that they could quickly adapt to new, U.S. weapons, though American resupply of Egyptian and Sudanese forces in return for the shipment of their Soviet arms to Somalia would be helpful to some extent. This policy, however, would create problems with Israel which would not want Egypt to receive new U.S. arms. Thirdly, the U.S. must understand that Ethiopia is not yet irretrievably lost to it. The long-standing alliance might still be restored if the U.S. does not alienate Ethiopia by siding with its enemies and if, at the same time, the Soviets and Cubans are not permitted to use Ethiopia as a base for their own ambitions.

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