

Soviet bear-shrug for Africa

A few ties are kept as Moscow slouches towards "new realism"

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The virtually unnoticed swing through seven African countries last month by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was the first trip to Africa by a top-ranking Soviet official since 1977, when the then-Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny visited Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique and Somalia. Podgorny's tour, less than two years after the MPLA's Soviet-assisted victory in Angola, attracted intense media attention, with western reporters hanging on his every word. In contrast, Shevardnadze's visit to Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania and Nigeria was hurried and distinctly low-key, rating only minor news coverage.

In the 1990s, world interest is focussed on what the Soviet Union does rather than on what it says, and routine diplomatic visits, even if they are still rare, have been downgraded to their proper significance. Nevertheless, as the Soviet economic and political model is abandoned even by formerly Marxist African states, and as Moscow assumes an increasingly low profile politically, many questions about Soviet policy remain unanswered.

A major preoccupation is the future of the Angolan army (FAPLA), which is one of Moscow's few success stories, and is still heavily dependent on Soviet arms and logistics systems. US sources claim that the Soviet Union furnished US\$1.2 billion worth of war materiel to FAPLA just before their offensive against the Washing-

ton-backed Unita rebels, described as the biggest operation ever mounted by Luanda. For many, such a massive commitment is seen as a signal that the USSR will not simply abandon its long-term allies.

A similar question-mark hangs over the future of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, and like FAPLA, heavily dependent on Soviet aid and training. In Lusaka last month, the Soviet

said in a speech in Maputo. "We call for the immediate granting of the inalienable rights of the southern African peoples to self-determination; for the liquidation of apartheid and racism in the Republic of South Africa; for the latter's immediate withdrawal from Namibia; and for the unconditional and full transfer of power to the people of Zimbabwe."

Thirteen years later, Shevardnadze has delivered a quite different, much subtler

message, and more worrying to many. In the past, he said in a statement issued in Harare, the Soviet Union viewed relations with African countries from a "strong ideological aspect," and had tried to "squeeze those relations into a certain theoretical framework. Reality, however, has proved far more complicated than any formulas. Having eventually admitted this, we have started overcoming ideological stereotypes and asserting new criteria in our relations with African nations."

Reflecting this "new realism", Shevardnadze went on to say that his

country no longer felt it had the right to "lecture anyone" nor that it had the sole right to the truth. Apart from other considerations, the Soviet foreign policy-making process itself has changed, with new ideas of accountability. In October 1989, for the first time since Lenin's death, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented a report on foreign policy to the Supreme Soviet, or Parliament, in which it stated that in South Africa "a political settlement of the conflict would be the most acceptable."

The Soviet Foreign Minister was accompanied on his African trip by a large delegation of about 30, which included the influential former Soviet ambassador to Lesotho, Boris Asoyan, as well as other academics and experts in both African and

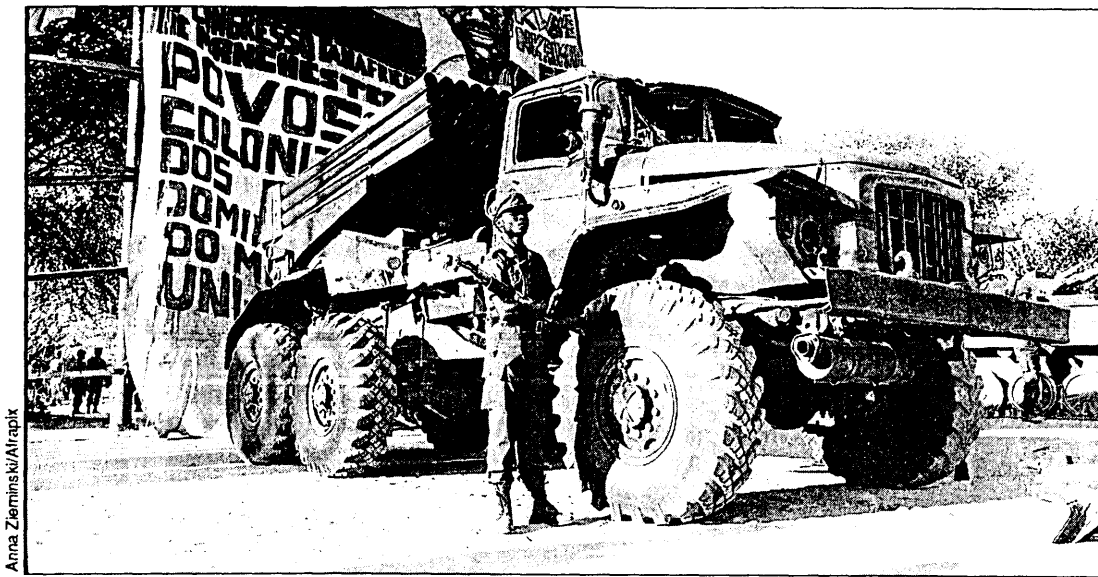


Margaret Waller

Shevardnadze (with Zimbabwe Foreign Minister N. Shamuyarira): low key visit

minister met members of the ANC's National Executive Committee, including ANC secretary-general Alfred Nzo, deputy treasurer Henry Makgothi, SACP secretary-general Joe Slovo, and international relations director Thabo Mbeki. However, little information was available after the talks, which were described only as "pleasant and successful."

In 1977, Podgorny, whose role as Soviet president was largely ceremonial, had taken simple and direct political positions on southern African questions. "The USSR's attitude on southern Africa is plain," he



Anna Zieminski/Afrapix

substantially higher wages than they could at home. Mozambican economists are also worried by an anticipated switch of IMF and World Bank attention — and funds — away from southern Africa towards Eastern Europe.

But the Soviet withdrawal from East Europe had its most dramatic effect in January, when South African foreign minister Pik Botha made his official visit to Hungary, the first such trip to a Warsaw Pact country. Both countries indicated that they were considering establishing diplomatic relations, and would be investigating trading links, while encouraging

skilled migrants to head for South Africa.

This visit, to a country which has been a member of the UN Special Committee on Apartheid for many years, drew furious protests from African states, and outrage from the ANC. Nevertheless, East Europe's new non-communist regimes are increasingly abandoning old positions and looking to South Africa with their own self-interest in mind. Apart from the migration deals, they are looking at trade and co-operation in such areas as mining technology and computer systems.

The way things are going, with centre-right victories in both the East German and the Hungarian elections, it seems unlikely that the ANC, entering the negotiations process around mid-year, will be able to rely on continued support from any of its allies — except, perhaps, from Moscow.

Socialist-oriented regimes in Africa are not likely to be impressed by the East European tendency to toss out the socialist baby along with the communist bathwater. But the Soviet Union's closest allies in Africa do seem already to be working their way to their own versions of glasnost. It remains to be seen whether the changes indicated, or announced, in Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Benin will lead to genuinely democratic systems. While there are obvious dangers inherent in simply equating democracy with the free market, or dictatorship with socialism — as the western powers would like — it still seems to many people in Africa that the form of pluralist democracy, even without the content, is the best bet. ■

US affairs. While he was in Windhoek, Shevardnadze spent nearly four hours with US Secretary of State James Baker. After the independence celebrations, apparently forgetful of Swapo's 24-year-long armed struggle against South African occupying forces, Baker claimed with Shevardnadze's concurrence that Namibian independence was "a good example of what can happen when the Soviet Union and the United States co-operate." Although the two officials spent time on southern African issues, including South Africa and Angola, they also talked about Lithuanian independence, German unification, and preparations for the coming US-Soviet summit.

Despite assurances from Soviet representatives that Moscow intends to pursue special relations with the governments of Angola and Mozambique among others, some conservative South African analysts have recently been speculating hopefully that the long-standing alliance between the ANC and its Soviet ally may be under pressure. Philip Nel, head of Stellenbosch University's Institute for Soviet Studies and doyen of South African "Kremlinologists," believes that while the ANC itself is happy to accept Moscow's support for a negotiated settlement in South Africa, the SACP is less content, and that the new perspectives in Moscow may reshape the nature of relations between the ANC and the SACP.

Nel argues that present Soviet policy is based on three planks: the 1986 commitment to resolve Third World conflicts by diplomatic means; a willingness to coop-

■ Captured Soviet weaponry in Angola: continued support?

erate with the West to achieve this; and the dropping of class analysis as a basis for international relations. In this context, he detected signs late last year that Moscow may have been losing patience with what it saw at the time as ANC intransigence vis-a-vis negotiations.

John Barratt, director of the South African Institute of International Affairs, disagrees. He argues that the Soviet Union is convinced that the ANC has majority support inside the country and a firm base of international support as well. The alliance with the ANC is, therefore, seen by Moscow as a trump card, which makes it unlikely that the ANC will lose Soviet support now that the negotiations process is nearly underway. So, even though the USSR is advocating a peaceful transition, it has not asked the ANC to give up the armed struggle, claims Barratt.

Nevertheless, the normalisation of diplomatic and political relations between Pretoria and Moscow, Barratt says, "will not be possible while apartheid, the hard remnant of the racially-based political and economic system, remains unchanged."

But Moscow's "new realism", even in Europe, has had a much wider impact than merely changing the basis of inter-state relations. The rush towards German unification, for instance, has serious implications for Mozambique, which has around 30,000 apprentices in East German factories, learning their trades and earning