

Soviet 'new realism' marginalizing Africa

By JOSÉ MANUEL

HARARE, Zimbabwe—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.

In that earlier journey 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. 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, which is one of Moscow's few success stories and is still heavily dependent on Soviet arms and logistics systems. U.S. sources claim that the Soviet Union furnished \$1.2 billion worth of war materiel to FAPLA just before their offensive against the Washington-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 Soviet Union 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 African National Congress, and like the Angolan army, heavily dependent on Soviet aid and training. In Lusaka, Zambia, last month, the Soviet minister met members of the ANC's National Executive Committee, including ANC Secretary-General Alfred Nzo, Deputy Treasurer Henry Makgothi, South African Communist Party 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 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 one 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," he added. "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 this country no longer felt it had the right to "lecture anyone" nor that it had the sole lock on 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 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 U.S. affairs.

While he was in Windhoek, Shevardnadze spent nearly four hours with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. After the independence celebrations, apparently forgetful of the South West Africa People's Organization'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 cooperate."

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 then-upcoming U.S.-Soviet summit.

Soviet representatives have said that Moscow intends to preserve special relations with the governments of Angola and Mozambique, among others. Nonetheless, some conservative South African analysts have recently been speculating hopefully that the longstanding alliance between the ANC and its Soviet ally may be under pres-

sure.

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 South African Communist Party is less content. He further argues that the new perspectives in Moscow may reshape the nature of relations between the ANC and the South African Communists.

Nel maintains that present Soviet policy is based on three planks: the 1986 commitment to resolve Third World conflicts by diplomatic means; a willingness to cooperate with the West to achieve this; and the dropping of class analysis as a basis for international relations.

In this context, Nel 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 with Nel's analysis. 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 Soviets thus see the alliance with the ANC as a trump card, making it unlikely that the movement will lose Soviet support now that the negotiations process is nearly underway. So, even though Moscow is ad-

vocating a peaceful transition, it has not asked the ANC to give up the armed struggle, claims Barratt. Normalization of diplomatic and political relations between Pretoria and Moscow, says Barratt, "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 interstate relations. The rush toward German unification, for instance, has serious implications for Mozambique, which has around 30,000 apprentices in East German factories, learning trades and earning substantially higher wages than they could at home. Mozambican economists are also worried by an anticipated switch of International Monetary Fund and World Bank attention and funds away from Southern Africa toward 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. This was the first such visit by a top South African official to a Warsaw Pact country. Both countries indicated that they were considering establishing diplomatic relations, and would be investigating trade links, while encouraging skilled migrants to head for South Africa.

COZYING UP TO PRETORIA

This visit, to a country that has been a member of the U.N. Special Committee on Apartheid for many years, drew furious protests from African states, and outrage from the ANC. Nevertheless, Eastern 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 cooperation in such areas as mining technology and computer systems.

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

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