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The successes and setbacks of China and the Soviet Union in Somalia and Ethiopia, the changing partners routine, are examined in this article that untangles the relationships and discusses the resulting interests and advantages.

THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT:

THE HORN OF AFRICA,

NOVEMBER 1977 TO FEBRUARY 1979

by

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On 13 November 1977 the People's Democratic Republic of Somalia formally abrogated its Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union and expelled some 5 to 6 thousand Soviet advisors. As Somalia had been one of the more closely dominated and supported client states of the Soviet Union outside the bloc, this catastrophic breach in relations was remarkable. Even more noteworthy, however, was that this episode marked the beginning of a signal event in Sino-Soviet relations in which the Chinese would proclaim the Soviets their greatest enemy, with whom war is inevitable.

Background. The extraordinarily warm relations between the Soviet Union and Somalia that developed in the early 1970s had allowed the Soviets to establish naval and air facilities in Somalia unparalleled outside the Soviet Union. But in 1976 those relations cooled as the Soviets increasingly developed ties with Somalia's traditional rival in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia.

Despite bitter internecine strife over the future course of the country, the fledgling military government that had come to power in Ethiopia in 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), began to evolve in 1976 as a pro-Soviet, "revolutionary" movement bent on establishing "scientific socialism" in Ethiopia. In keeping with its new leaning, an arms deal with the Soviet Union reportedly worth \$100 million was signed in December 1976, capping a year of visibly warmer relations between the PMAC and Moscow.¹

While the Somali Government had tolerated Soviet flirtation with the clearly pro-Western regime of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, the new-found courtship between Somalia's heretofore ardent suitor and a rival "revolutionary" and much larger nation, the Ethiopia of the PMAC, was quite another matter. Thus alarmed, the Somali Government began to press its irredentist claims to the Ogaden region of southeastern Ethiopia, ostensibly to force Moscow into backing Somalia against Ethiopia as

the price for retaining the considerable military facilities the Soviets had established in Somalia.

To emphasize the seriousness of their intentions, in February 1977 the Somalis conducted a cross-border foray into the Ogaden with a 1,000-troop contingent.² The Soviets responded by proffering a Somali, Ethiopian, Djibouti federation that apparently would receive Soviet and Cuban backing and would reduce the likelihood of a territorial war. The proposal, made by Fidel Castro in a secret meeting in Aden, PDRY, in March 1977, was rejected by Somali President Siad Barre.³ Ethiopia was represented in the meeting by Mengistu Haile Mariam who had increasingly emerged as the predominant member of the PMAC throughout 1976. His response to the Soviet/Cuban proposal is unknown, but subsequent events suggest that that response found favor in Moscow.

Having failed with Castro's bid, the Soviets next dispatched President Podgorny to Mogadiscio in early April 1977 as part of an East African tour.⁴ That he was equally unsuccessful in dissuading the Somalis became apparent as within 2 weeks the Soviet arms contracted for during the previous December, including tanks, arrived in Addis Ababa⁵ and reports began to emerge that Cubans were training Ethiopian militiamen for duty in countering Ethiopia's longstanding insurgency in Eritrea.⁶ Additionally, in May the Soviets concluded a formal alliance with Ethiopia, which Mengistu signed in Moscow, for economic, technical and cultural ties between the two nations.⁷

Soviets Expelled. In June and July 1977 the Somalis continued military preparations in western Somalia as a significant upturn in the Eritrean insurgency increasingly tied down Ethiopian forces in the northern part of the country. Consequently, in July 1977 the Soviets withdrew a number of

advisors from Somalia "on leave," ostensibly to serve as a warning that Moscow's policy in the Horn would not be determined in Mogadiscio.⁸ But the Somalis were equally determined and in late July crossed the Ethiopian border in strength.⁹ Because the Ethiopians were so preoccupied in Eritrea, the Somali contest of wills with the Soviets took on the added prospect that they just might win the Ogaden.¹⁰

The Somalis did enjoy early successes in the campaign but at significant cost in men and materials. Thus, in September the Soviets were able to play their trump card in the contest of wills with the Somalis by embargoing resupply of Soviet military hardware.¹¹ Despite this drastic measure, a dispirited defense on the part of the demoralized Ethiopian Army and strife throughout the country allowed both the Somalis in the Ogaden and the insurgents in Eritrea to continue to force the central government into an ever narrower circle in central and western Ethiopia.

Finally, in early November 1977, it had become apparent that Cubans were involved in fighting on the side of the Ethiopians in the Ogaden.¹² This fact, coupled with the shutoff of Soviet resupply, became the straws that broke the Somali camel's back. On 13 November Somalia formally denounced its treaty ties with the U.S.S.R. and expelled its Soviet advisors. Significantly, that same day Mengistu Haile Mariam had his arch rival in the PMAC, Atnafu Abate, executed by firing squad.¹³ As Atnafu had been the chief obstacle to Ethiopia's relations with Moscow, his demise opened the way for Mengistu to place his country firmly in the Soviet camp.

Chinese Reaction. Against this background Sino-Soviet relations began to unravel, slowly at first but then, as events unfolded, broadening into a seemingly irreparable tear. The initial reaction by the Chinese to the Somali/

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Soviet split was rather low key. The Somali move was "hailed" as a "just action against Soviet hegemonism" by the New China News Agency.¹⁴

Perhaps fortuitously, on the afternoon of 15 November 1977 a sports delegation led by Chinese Vice Minister of the State Physical Cultural and Sports Commission, Yu Pu-hsueh, dedicated a new stadium in Mogadiscio that had been built with Chinese financial and technical assistance. Construction of the stadium had begun in 1975, but fortuitously or not, its completion and dedication served as a timely device for the Chinese to proclaim friendship with the Somalis in the wake of the latter's break with Moscow. Accordingly, as elsewhere in ping-pong diplomacy, the Chinese were able to use a sporting event out of proportion to its significance to abet foreign policy.¹⁵

Soviet Response. The Soviets, on the other hand, revealed themselves to be even more blatantly opportunistic. In less than 2 weeks after the formal move by Mogadiscio to sever its Moscow cord, the Soviets began a major, 3-week long airlift of military supplies to the beleaguered Ethiopians. According to press and other reports the goods amounted to one billion dollars worth of military hardware including 600 armored vehicles, 60 MIG 21s, two squadrons of MIG 23s, numerous T-54 tanks and over 400 pieces of assorted artillery.¹⁶ Additionally, according to a U.S. State Department announcement, during this period the Soviets doubled their own presence in Ethiopia to over 500 Soviets and 800 Cubans.¹⁷ Unconfirmed reports, including the Chinese press, also indicated that Soviet Defense Minister D.F. Ustinov and Chief of the General Staff N.V. Ogarkov visited Ethiopia in January in connection with military preparations there.¹⁸

With the Ethiopians thus reinforced with new supplies, upgraded equipment and combat assistance from the Cubans

in using the more sophisticated weaponry, the events that ultimately so alarmed the Chinese began to unfold. The counterattack in the Ogaden against the Somalis began in mid-January 1978. The now ill-supplied Somalis proved no match for the reinvigorated Ethiopian and newly arrived Cuban combat troops. (The total number of Cuban troops and advisors involved in the Ogaden is not certain, but several reports place the total at 12,000 to 17,000.¹⁹) Particularly helpful were MIG-21 and MIG-23 airstrikes flown by Cubans against rear areas inside Somalia.²⁰ By early March the Somalis were in complete rout and by the end of the month the Ethiopians had claimed victory in the Ogaden.²¹ The United States feared that the Cuban/Ethiopian combat team would continue across the Somali border but the action stopped at the national boundary, possibly because of a U.S. naval presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Chinese Rejoinder. Having completed the Ogaden campaign, some Cuban forces began shifting to Eritrea in late March and early April. For several reasons this move obviously erased any doubts the Chinese may have had about Soviet intentions in the Horn. First, Ethiopia is strategically useless without Eritrea, as the latter province constitutes the entire Ethiopian Red Sea coastline. Second, a Soviet/Cuban move against a war of national liberation is ideologically inconsistent with the avowed open support for all such wars by the Soviets and Cubans. And, last, any pretense to legitimacy by the Soviet/Cuban actions in Ethiopia had ended with the cessation of Somali aggression in the Ogaden. Consequently, continued Soviet/Cuban actions in Ethiopia, in Eritrea in particular, could only mean the Soviets were willing to undertake highly significant diplomatic risks for a foothold in that country. Accordingly, in early April the Chinese

culminated a press campaign that had become increasingly vociferous throughout the Ogaden war with three highly significant articles.

The first of these articles was published on 4 April 1978 in the Chinese Communist Party theoretical journal, *Red Flag*. The piece, entitled "From Angola to the Horn of Africa," called on the whole world to unite against a common Soviet enemy. Its key paragraphs stated:

Soviet social imperialism is following the same path that led to the downfall of fascism: the path that begins with local wars and ends with world war. The policy of appeasement only accelerates the approach of war. This has already been proved by facts.

Events in Angola, as with events in the Horn of Africa, clearly reveal the growing danger of a new world war. To delay this war, the entire world must unite into the broadest possible international united front against hegemonism, strengthen its forces, intensify preparations, counter the policy of appeasement, and wage a relentless struggle against Soviet social imperialism.²²

While this article somewhat echoed previous calls from the Chinese press for world unity against Soviet "hegemonism," its special significance lay in its official nature, its call to the West to join the PRC against the Soviets, and the fact that it referred only to delaying a war with the Soviets that appeared to be inevitable to the Chinese.

The second highly significant article that appeared in Chinese literature was published 7 April in the *Peking Review*. Reportedly written by a Hsinhua correspondent on 2 April, the article dealt with "Why the Soviet 'Foreign Legion' Hangs on in Africa," or why the Cubans remained in Ethiopia after defeating the Somalis. The article answers: (because)

"The Soviet 'foreign legion' is nothing

but a tool of the Kremlin for world hegemony."²³ The key feature, however, was reserved for the conclusion. Referring to the world contest between the old imperialists (viz., the United States) and the new social imperialists, the article states:

The change taking place in the last sixteen years reflects the decline of an old-time imperialist power and the meteoric rise of a social imperialist upstart. Today, the Soviet Union has become the most dangerous source of war. (emphasis added)²⁴

Again, as had the *Red Flag* article, this piece somewhat echoed previous Chinese press commentary on Soviet activity in Africa. Its special significance was in its timing at the onset of Soviet/Cuban activity in Eritrea and in its unequivocal language regarding the war threatening character of the Soviet Union.

The third of these articles also appeared in the *Peking Review* in the 21 April 1978 issue. Purporting to be a reprint of the piece printed in *Red Flag* earlier in the month, this article was entitled "From Angola to the Horn of Africa" as was its predecessor.²⁵ The *Review* "reprint" had been slightly reworded, however, to make the thrust of the article more condemnatory of the Soviets. Whereas *Red Flag* had implied that the Soviets intended to start a world war, the *Review* unequivocally stated:

That the Soviet Union is seizing one strategic position after another in these local wars is an important part of its stepped-up preparations for a new world war. Its purpose is to gradually build up a network of military bases to complete its global strategic deployment before it launches a global war.²⁶

Expanding Soviet Foothold. In spite of the obvious ferocity of the Chinese

position on Soviet activity in the Horn of Africa, the Soviets pressed ahead with aid to Ethiopia in its renewed Eritrean campaign. The two insurgent groups involved in that conflict had availed themselves of opportunities presented by Ethiopian involvement in the Ogaden to consolidate their collective hold on the Eritrean province. Consequently, the task of reestablishing central government control of the territory was nearly as arduous for the Ethiopians and Soviet/Cuban advisors as had been the Ogaden campaign.

By late April 1978 the Soviets and Cubans reportedly were significantly involved in planning Eritrean operations and in providing logistic support for the campaign. The Cubans were somewhat more restrained in ground combat involvement but actively engaged in the air campaign, providing both interdiction and close air support.²⁷ Moreover, at least according to Chinese press reports, the Soviets provided naval gunfire and troop movement assistance from Soviet naval ships operating in the Red Sea.²⁸ In support less directly related but still germane to the Eritrean conflict, in the first 6 months of 1978 Soviet aid included 61,000 tons of military equipment and supplies and the construction of airfields from which missions were flown against the Eritreans.²⁹

With the increased Soviet and Cuban aid the Ethiopians recaptured Asmara, the provincial capital of Eritrea, by July 1978 and in November began their campaign to wrest the last guerrilla stronghold from the insurgents, the northern Eritrean town of Keren.³⁰ The control of this town had long been a symbol of insurgent strength in the province. With the completion of the Keren campaign in early December 1978, the insurgents were forced to revert to low-level guerrilla tactics much as had been their custom during Haile Selassie's reign over the territory.

Ideological Paradox The delicacy with which the Soviets viewed any contemplated assistance to Ethiopia in putting down the rebellion in Eritrea was clearly revealed by the spate of visits probably related to this decision. In March 1978 the Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmeira Peoli visited Addis Ababa as part of a ten-nation tour of Africa.³¹ In April he journeyed to Moscow,³² as did Mengistu Haile Mariam, in what was termed a "working visit."³³ Mengistu also traveled to Havana that same month. While the purposes of these visits have not been revealed, Soviet/Cuban assistance in Eritrea was undoubtedly high on the respective agendas. Additionally, a visit to Havana by Fleet Admiral Gorshkov in December 1977 and of Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro to Moscow in February 1978 may also have been related to Eritrea.³⁴

Equally, Soviet sensitivity to the ideological inconsistencies in actions both contemplated and taken in Eritrea was clearly revealed in the Soviet press. As pointed out by Daniel Papp, a research professor at the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, Soviet notice to the problem was first given in an article appearing in *Nedelia* in January 1978. Entitled "Dark Spots on the Globe," its author almost casually mentioned that now that Ethiopia was experiencing a "national-democratic revolution," America was only interested in encouraging "counterrevolutionaries" and "separatists of all types."³⁵ A *Pravda* article in March strengthened the Soviet case for support of Ethiopia by questioning the legitimacy of the Eritrean movement and by echoing the January theme that imperialist powers were using Ethiopia's "multinational character" to "dis-member the country."³⁶

Continued Soviet sensitivity on the issue was still evident a year later. In February of this year, an article in *Novoye Vremya* contained a lengthy

dissertation that attempted to justify Soviet actions in Eritrea on the basis of doctrine!³⁷ In that same month a Moscow Radio broadcast in the Ethiopian principal language, Amharic, attempted to provide ideologically sound justification for Soviet actions in Eritrea by claiming that the liberation movement there had become "secessionist," "narrowly nationalist" and that it had degenerated to banditry.³⁸ Interestingly, no such propaganda has been aimed at the West nor at China. Despite this sensitivity, the gamble in Eritrea paid off from the Soviet perspective as on 20 November 1978 Mengistu signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in Moscow, just one year and a week after the Somalis had abrogated their similar treaty with the U.S.S.R.

Pingpong Fails. Meanwhile, Chinese political activity throughout this period had been largely ineffective when contrasted to grandiose airlifts and the high-level dignitary globehopping show put on by the Soviets and Cubans. After using its sports stadium grand opening in Mogadiscio in November 1977 to bolster its interests in Somalia, the Chinese attempted a similar ploy in Ethiopia in an attempt to keep their foot in the door of that nation. In February 1978 a happenstance change of command for a Chinese medical team, which had been providing medical training in Addis Ababa for some time, was noted in the Chinese press as a token of warm relations between the Chinese and Ethiopian people.³⁹ Likewise, the dedication of a Chinese-built power plant in the Bonga Kaffa region of Ethiopia was hailed in the Chinese press as a significant symbol of Sino-Ethiopian friendship despite the fact that the facility was number four in a series of eight power plants stemming from a 1973 agreement.⁴⁰ Unlike Chinese economic overtures in Somalia that hailed past accomplishments, a new if low-level initiative was undertaken in

Ethiopia; an agreement was concluded in February 1978 for the Chinese to provide technical and financial assistance in constructing a sports stadium in Addis Ababa. The event received outsized laudatory praise as a benchmark of warm relations between Ethiopia and China in the latter's press.⁴¹ Perhaps indicative of the failure of this Chinese "initiative" to woo the Ethiopians away from Soviet clutches, the inauguration of weekly flight services between Addis Ababa, Karachi and Peking appeared only on the back cover of the 24 March 1978 issue of the *Peking Review* without further fanfare.⁴²

By April the Chinese had recognized their failure in Ethiopia and consequently devoted their attentions to Somalia. Somali President Siad Barre and his Vice President Ismail Ali Abucar paid a 5-day visit to China. Highlighting the importance of the visit, the Chinese press stressed that the Somalis were met at the airport by Chairman Hua Kuo-feng and his two Vice Premiers.⁴³ In late July and early August Chinese Vice Premier Chen Mu-hua paid a week-long visit to Somalia as part of a three-nation African tour. During the visit the Chinese dignitary was guest of honor at a ceremony marking the opening of a 603-mile highway linking the southern agricultural plains of Somalia with northern pasture lands. Construction on the Belet Wyen-Burao highway, built with Chinese financial and technical assistance, had begun in 1975. Significantly, the hard surfaced road circumvents the Ethiopian portion of the Ogaden desert and would prove militarily useful to Somalia in any future conflict over the territory.

Continued Chinese Comment. While Chinese political moves in the Horn of Africa during this period proved of marginal benefit, the concomitant press campaign was arguably much more successful. From the initial breakdown in Somali/Soviet relations, through the

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remarkable declaration that the Soviet Union was China's number one enemy, to the present, the Chinese anti-Soviet press campaign has taken three basic tacks: (1) Soviet moves in the Horn of Africa and in Angola are designed to outflank western Europe by securing sea lines of communication through the Red Sea and around the Cape of Good Hope and by securing the Arabian Peninsula/Persian Gulf source of oil itself; (2) Soviet designs on all of Africa to secure their prime objective; and (3) owing to setbacks in Egypt, Sudan and Somalia the Soviets need a victory in the Horn of Africa.

The Chinese press campaign regarding Soviet flanking moves in Africa began on a low level after Soviet/Cuban incursions in Angola and Zaire in 1976 and 1977. After the Soviet shift to Ethiopia in late 1977, however, the campaign picked up considerable steam and led to its most forceful declaration in the 21 April 1978 *Peking Review* "reprint" of the *Red Flag* article:

Because Europe is the focus of its contention for world hegemony with the United States, the Middle East and Africa, an important flank of Europe, has caught Soviet attention. It intends to seize the oil and other strategic natural resources in the Middle East and Africa which the West, particularly Western Europe, cannot do without, and to control the West's two supply lines, one running from the Indian Ocean to Western Europe via the Red Sea and the other from the Indian Ocean, round the Cape of Good Hope and across the Atlantic to Western Europe and America. This would put a stranglehold on Western Europe and isolate the United States. The flames of war it ignited in Angola, Zaire and the Horn of Africa are in fact all peripheral wars in its contention with the United States for

hegemony over Europe and the world as a whole.⁴⁴

This theme subsequently has been repeated numerous times in the Chinese press and, indeed, was virtually a theme song of Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-ping) during his February 1979 visit to the United States.

The second and third issues in China's triad press campaign, viz. that the Soviets intend to take over the entire continent of Africa to underpin its flanking maneuver against Europe and to bolster its position after defeats in Sudan, Egypt and Somalia, were given prominence throughout 1978.⁴⁵ A noticeable gambit was to quote African leaders warning of the perils of Soviet hegemony. In this vein, the theme of Sudanese President Jafar Numeri that the Soviets intend to take over Africa "bit by bit" received prominent play.⁴⁶ A second favorite tactic was to point to the experiences of Egypt, Sudan and Somalia as the high cost of accepting Soviet aid.⁴⁷

The Chinese rationale behind the latter two points became obvious during the course of the year. That is, they hoped to deter other Third World nations from acquiescing to Soviet gambits for influence. While they never defamed the Ethiopian Government, the Chinese did vigorously question Cuba's nonaligned credentials, possibly as a warning to all Third Worlders that excessive cooperation with the Soviets could become very restrictive.⁴⁸

It became equally clear that China hoped to spur the West into resisting the Soviets in the Horn. First, the Chinese focused on the anti-European, anti-U.S. nature of the Soviet campaign in Africa. The Chinese went so far as to call the Soviet airlift to Ethiopia in November-December 1976 a rehearsal to test its strategic airlift capabilities (probably true).⁴⁹ Second, both the Chinese press and official pronouncements dealing with the entire matter were remarkably

free of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and thus were obviously aimed at the West. Finally, the Chinese proclamation that the Soviet Union had become their arch enemy in place of the United States represented a signal page in history.

Chinese Interests. China's vital interest in the Horn of Africa lies in the fact that the area is strategically important to the West. Should the Soviets manage to strangle the West's access to Arabian Peninsula/Persian Gulf oil, the probable resultant decline of Europe, Japan and the United States would free much of the Soviet military apparatus now committed against them to reinforce the Chinese border. That the Chinese do not have the industrial capacity, strategic lift or political clout to match the Soviets in contests for influence in the Third World was woefully apparent in their Horn of Africa episode. Thus, the Chinese were forced to rely on an ability to spur a sluggish West to defend its own interests as well as those of the Chinese.

The hallmark of Peking's success in this endeavor came in mid to late 1978 when the Soviet press became increasingly anti-Chinese.⁵⁰ Up until then Soviet press comment on the Horn issue had been directed largely at the West with only occasional jibes thrown at the Chinese in response to Peking's barbs at the Soviets.

Soviet Gains. Notwithstanding Chinese and Western barbs, and despite the costs in the loss of military facilities in Somalia and loss of revolutionary credibility in the Eritrean campaign, the Soviets have moved decisively to entrench themselves firmly in Ethiopia. In attempting to pressure the Soviets into choosing between Addis Ababa and Mogadiscio, the Somalis probably have presented a golden opportunity for the Soviets to gain a military foothold in Ethiopia that might not have developed for years. And Ethiopia is the logical

choice if a choice must be made between the two nations. First, it sits astride the Bab-al-Mandeb entrance to the Red Sea. Secondly, its population of 29 million versus 3.5 million in Somalia makes it a choice for eventually dominating its neighbor regardless of Somali military strength. And finally, if the Soviets had to back a side in a military contest between Ethiopia and Somalia, the disparity in the sizes of the two armed forces made Ethiopia the logical choice (eventually, Ethiopia could have retaken the Ogaden with or without Soviet help because of Somalia's inability to garrison the area).

Although the Soviets have lost considerable military facilities in Somalia, relations with Ethiopia have developed remarkably quickly: The final chapter in those relations has not been written and China and the West may yet see Soviet military privileges in Ethiopia on the order of those they enjoyed in Somalia. Such facilities, in the strategically better placed Ethiopia, would significantly improve the Soviet position in the Horn. Therefore, the intense Chinese press campaign over Soviet "hegemonism" in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere is highly likely to continue.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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