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A COMMENTARY**

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**STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE
US ARMY WAR COLLEGE
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania**

⑥ **GAUGING SOVIET SUCCESS
IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST:
A COMMENTARY,**

⑨ *Research memo,*
by

⑩ **David E. Albright**

⑪ 15 Apr 1980

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Composition of this memorandum was accomplished by Ms. Crystal A. Miller.

FOREWORD

This memorandum evolved from the Military Policy Symposium on "The Soviet Union in the Third World: Success and Failure," which was hosted by the Strategic Studies Institute in the Fall of 1979. During the Symposium, academic and government experts discussed a number of issues concerning this area which will have a continuing impact on US strategy. This memorandum considers one of these issues.

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**GAUGING SOVIET SUCCESS
IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST:
A COMMENTARY**

The purpose of this commentary is to offer a brief synthetic overview of Soviet successes and failures in Africa and the Middle East. At the outset, I should note that such an undertaking is complicated by two factors. First, we are dealing in this section with two specific areas, rather than one. Although the USSR's experiences in the two areas have many commonalities, they are not totally identical. Perhaps most important, heavy Soviet involvement began far earlier in the Middle East than it did in Africa. As a consequence, there has been a much longer time frame in which Moscow has had a chance to suffer major setbacks in the former than in the latter. Second, as the contributions to this symposium amply illustrate, criteria for evaluation of the success or failure of Soviet ventures can vary widely. Some observers, for example, see the growth of Soviet presence as the key gauge of the USSR's success; others hold that presence does not equate with influence and that any effort to assess Soviet successes and failures ought to focus on influence.

To cope with these problems, I have opted to structure my remarks in a particular way. Since Moscow has had relatively fewer opportunities to encounter severe reverses in Africa, this area

tends to reflect the upper limits of Soviet accomplishments to date; therefore, I will concentrate on Africa and use the Middle East as a comparative referent. I hasten to add, however, that the broad thrust of my observations applies to both regions. As for criteria for appraising Soviet success or failure, I propose to advance a set of my own. It seems to me that the criteria implicit or explicit in the papers covering Africa and the Middle East are not totally adequate to probe the topic in all its complexity. Others may, of course, disagree with this judgment, but at least the basis for my own analysis will be clear.

With these points in mind, let us turn, then, to the fundamental topic at hand. I would submit that any attempt to weigh the success or failure of the USSR in Africa and the Middle East must consider two distinct dimensions of the question. For convenience's sake, one might label these the subjective and objective dimensions. The first takes Moscow's perspective as its central concern. That is, it views success or failure in terms of essentially Soviet standards. The second adopts third-party standards as measures of success or failure. Such standards may not be wholly free of adversary overtones, but they are "objective" in the sense that they are not tied to the outlooks of either the USSR or the states of Africa and the Middle East.

In approaching the subjective aspect of the issue, it is essential to remember that the key to the Soviet leadership's conclusions about success or failure lies in the degree to which the USSR has achieved its goals. But since Moscow rarely, if ever, states its ends openly, its purposes by and large have to be inferred from the USSR's behavior, and arriving at such inferences is far from a simple, straightforward job. Indeed, Soviet policy at any given time or in any given instance may prove an inadequate guide to Soviet objectives, for some crucial variables stand between these objectives and actual policy outcomes.

Whatever Moscow's goals may be, for example, it must pursue these in the context of the opportunities available. Out of the interaction between goals and opportunities emerges a policy that the Soviet leadership wants to carry out. The policy outcomes that one can see, however, also depend upon how effectively the USSR implements the chosen policy. Selection of inappropriate means or poor follow-through can result in policy outcomes quite different from the intended ones.

Despite this analytical difficulty, I believe that it is possible to discern four ends to which the USSR has had long-standing commitment in Africa. These include establishing a lasting presence on the continent; gaining a voice in African affairs; undermining Western influence on the continent; and, preventing China from expanding its influence in Africa and reducing that influence whenever possible.

During the 1970's, the USSR has made significant strides toward the attainment of these goals, and Moscow has clearly recognized that fact. At the same time, its feelings of success have been tempered by a combination of factors. To begin with, it looks at its recent advances against the backdrop of its rather consistent pattern of failure in the past. Perhaps the best indication of its acute awareness of this pattern of failure has been the shifting Soviet emphasis with regard to means over the last three decades.¹

From the earliest days of Soviet interest in Africa in the 1920's until the mid-1950's, Moscow sought to build up ties with the continent and conversely to diminish the roles of other outside powers there through ideological means. That is, it attempted to identify the USSR with the rising tide of African nationalism and to convince Africans that they and the Soviets were engaged in a common struggle against Western imperialism. It also encouraged Africans to establish organizations patterned on the Soviet party to wage this struggle.

By the mid-1950's, when the floodgates of African independence began to open, however, Moscow had remarkably few links to the continent to show for these efforts. As a consequence, it adopted during the period from the mid-1950's to the mid-1960's a new approach to furthering its purposes in Africa. While Soviet commentators continued to talk a lot about ideology, they did so largely in a "relativistic" sense, endeavoring to adapt their ideological perspectives to fit reality. The main basis upon which the USSR tried to find common ground with African states was a combination of aid (chiefly economic, although there was often a military component as well) and the Soviet model of development. Moscow argued that the only way that African countries could achieve genuine independence lay in freeing themselves from the economic fetters that still bound them to the imperialist world, and it claimed that embrace of the Soviet model of development and acceptance of the "disinterested" aid of the Soviet bloc (which by the early 1960's, in the Soviet leadership's eyes, no longer included

China) offered the sole viable method of accomplishing this end.

For a time, the USSR did register some gains in states like Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Algeria, and the United Arab Republic, but by the mid-1960's military coups, local conservative trends, or Soviet diplomatic clumsiness had wiped out many of these gains. Moreover, with the mounting signs of troubles in the Soviet economy, the Soviet model of development had decreasing appeal for Africans. Therefore, Moscow again felt compelled to alter the primary means it employed for pursuing its objectives. From the mid-1960's into the early 1970's, the USSR attempted to insulate itself from the buffeting of rapid political change in Africa by creating an international division of labor with at least some nations on the continent. Such a mutually beneficial relationship, Soviet leaders believed, would provide an incentive for long-term cooperation and thus prevent the USSR from suffering adversities whenever a friendly government fell or whenever a capricious ruler decided to shift either his domestic or his international course.

Yet, by the mid-1970's this method of promoting Soviet goals had lost a good deal of its original merit from Moscow's standpoint, for it had become increasingly apparent that the creation of a meaningful division of labor with most African countries would probably require decades, in light of the nature of their existing economies. Hence, the West was likely to retain a predominant economic position on the continent for some time to come. Confronted with this reality, the Soviet leadership came to look with high favor on military means for advancing its ends—especially since the rising level of conflict on the continent was sending African forces of all hues in search of military support. While Moscow has in the intervening years stressed military assistance rather than direct military involvement, it has not precluded the latter, as its behavior in the 1975-76 Angolan civil war and the 1977-78 Ethiopian crisis demonstrated.

In addition to being conscious of its past failures, Moscow appears to entertain the possibility that its recent advances in Africa may turn out to be fleeting in character. Soviet analysts, for instance, maintain that "even in the progressive states, the working class is but a rather small proportion of the population and their national leadership has to be formed of representatives of the revolutionary-minded petty bourgeoisie, which is typical of predominantly peasant countries." They go on to argue that while the "bourgeois nationalism" of such leaders can have a "positive

role," it can also lose its "democratic ambitions" and "play into the hands of imperialism." By way of illustration, they cite the case of Somalia.² From their commentaries, however, it is also clear that they have not forgotten the reverses that they encountered in the 1960's in African countries such as Ghana and Mali. Nor are they unmindful of the ups and downs in their position in the Middle East over the last quarter century. Indeed, they rail particularly at developments in Egypt since the death of Gamal Abdel Nassar in 1970.

In short, then, the Soviets tend to look at their record in Africa with quite mixed judgments. While they view their gains on the continent in the 1970's with satisfaction and hope, they know that they have experienced losses in the past, and they seem to fear that the same thing could happen again. Indeed, as long as the continent remains in the state of flux which has prevailed in the two decades of independence, that uneasiness is likely to endure.

When we come to the "objective" aspects of the question, it appears that there are two defensible measures that one can employ, but these two lead to somewhat different judgments about Soviet successes or failures. The first measure is influence. Using this yardstick, one would have to say that while Moscow has managed to reinforce the willingness of African states and liberation movements to do things that they were already inclined to do, it has been singularly ineffective in persuading them to do things which they have had no disposition to do. Somalia affords a classic case in point. The Mogadiscio government was perfectly prepared to grant the USSR access to naval facilities at Berbera and to air facilities at several places in the country in return for Soviet arms and military advisors, but it balked completely when Moscow tried to get it to abandon its claims to the Ogaden and form a Marxist federation with Ethiopia.

The second standard is the effectiveness of coalition building. This yardstick assumes two things: (1) there is rarely, if ever, a complete identity of interests and outlooks among states; and, (2) the name of the game is to identify convergences of interest and to form alliances, however temporary, based on these interests in order to further one's own ends. If we look at Soviet activities in Africa in such a light, these activities seem fairly successful. Although the USSR's relations with individual countries have waxed and waned as interests have converged and diverged, the Soviet role on the continent has by and large increased over the

years. Perhaps even more significant, Moscow has managed to find substantial support for a wide range of its own foreign policy positions. This backing has proved of some consequence in forums such as the UN General Assembly and has added to Soviet confidence in the global arena.

The merits of these two criteria vary, I would contend, depending upon the overall context of world politics. "Influence" may be more relevant when a high degree of bipolarity characterizes global politics, for an examination of influence can provide insights into the extent to which the USSR has managed to make other states dependent upon itself. "Coalition building," in contrast, may be more meaningful in periods when multipolarity prevails in world politics. In such cases, the major powers may sometimes seek to create forms of dependency, but the dominant fashion in which they advance their causes is by pinpointing common interests with other nations and working out alliances, however fleeting, to pursue these mutual interests. Hence, the degree to which the USSR has been able to build coalitions of some sort with other states may constitute the most important gauge of its success or failure.

What I have attempted to suggest, in sum, is that any serious effort to evaluate the USSR's success or failure in Africa and the Middle East is, perforce, a complex undertaking. It does not yield simple, either/or conclusions. Moreover, the precise mix of success and failure may differ according to the particular perspective from which one approaches the assessment.

ENDNOTES

1. For more detailed discussion, see my "The Soviet Role in Africa from Moscow's Perspective," in *The Communist State and Africa*, ed. by David E. Albright and Jiri Valenta, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, forthcoming.

2. The quotations come specifically from V. Kudryavtsev, "Africa Fights for Its Future," *International Affairs* (Moscow), No. 5, May 1978, p. 30.

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