

"When the threat from South Africa disappears, so will the Cubans"

The U.S. and Angola: Policy Choice

BY JOHN A. MARCUM

Contrary to popular perceptions, the governments of the United States and Angola share a core of compatible foreign policy objectives. Each government, for its own reasons, believes that its national interests may be best served by reducing border conflict and external intervention in highly flammable Southwest Africa. This congruence of interests became increasingly apparent and even led to a measure of bilateral cooperation during the last years of the Carter administration.

In 1978, responding in part to American diplomatic initiatives, Angola entered into negotiations with Zaire that resulted in an agreement to prevent armed incursions across their common border. This accord sharply reduced the likelihood of recurrent Angola-based raids into Zaire's copper and cobalt-rich Shaba province by exiled dissidents. In October, 1979, Angola signed non-aggression and economic cooperation pacts with both Zaire and Zambia, consummating a policy of rapprochement with previously hostile neighbors.

Responding concurrently to Western (United States, Canada, Britain, France, West Germany) efforts to promote a peaceful, United Nations-supervised transition from South African rule to independence in Namibia, Angola pressured Namibian nationalists (SWAPO) based on its territory to cooperate. They did. And Angola agreed that, in collaboration with the transition process, it would create a monitored demilitarized zone along the Namibian border.

If one assumes that Soviet and Cuban objectives are to promote instability and racial tension and thus help prepare the way for socialist revolution in mineral-rich Southern Africa, Angolan policy can only be seen as working against Soviet and Cuban aims. Nonetheless, Washington has consistently rebuffed Angolan invitations to establish diplomatic relations. Ever since the governing Popular Movement (MPLA) came to power in 1975-76 with the aid of Cuban troops and Soviet arms, the United States has demanded the withdrawal of some or all of the approximately twenty thousand Cuban soldiers stationed in Angola. It has made this withdrawal a precondition, rather than a goal, of diplo-

matic relations. Indeed, some policy-makers (e.g., Zbigniew Brzezinski in May, 1978) have advocated that the United States renew assistance to the still-active "anti-Communist" guerrillas of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) that lost out to the MPLA in competition for political power following the collapse of Portuguese rule in 1974-75. To do so would be to align the United States with South Africa. The South African Government has been supporting UNITA more or less openly since withdrawing its own forces from Angola in early 1976 in the face of a more massive Cuban and Soviet intervention. Ought the United States, sharing South Africa's desire to "teach the Cubans a lesson" and to raise the costs of Soviet military outreach, reverse field and seek advantage through military rather than diplomatic action? The answer to this question must be grounded in an understanding of what originally brought the Cubans to Angola, why they have remained, and what is most likely to motivate them to leave.

APARTHEID VS. COMMUNISM

Cuban troops, first as instructors and then as combat units, went to Angola in 1975 in response to an SOS from the MPLA, the Angolan independence movement that they and the Russians had been assisting for many years. The MPLA at that time faced the likely prospect of being eliminated as a contender for power by long-time political rivals newly backed by the United States. (Previously the United States had largely refrained from supporting Angolan nationalists in deference to the wishes of its NATO ally Portugal.) Preoccupied with the final trauma of failure in Vietnam, the American Government did not press for a political solution in Angola by mobilizing support for the short-lived coalition government established under Portuguese and African auspices. Nor did it warn the Soviet Union and Cuba against involving themselves in a zero-sum game for dominant influence. Instead, Washington stood by passively (some allege approvingly) as South African forces intervened in support of UNITA and of the National Liberation Front (FNLA), whose forces were pounding at the gates of the MPLA's principal stronghold, Luanda.

Simultaneously, Cuban forces began moving in to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of the coalition government and the withdrawal of Portuguese civil and military personnel. The dramatic success of South Afri-

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ca's intervention threatened a military outcome favorable to white dominance throughout Southern Africa and served to remove a crucial constraint on Cuban-Soviet action. Formative but cohesive African (OAU) opposition to Cuban-Soviet intervention collapsed as Nigeria and other African states, fearing apartheid more than communism, joined the Cubans and Russians in supporting the MPLA.

There is little reason to believe that Nigeria, a major American oil supplier, and other key African states would act differently should American encouragement lead South Africa once again to escalate its support of UNITA into a major challenge to MPLA authority and the Cuban presence in Angola. Though such a policy would exact from both Cuba and Angola a high price in lives and economic distress, it would also create circumstances in which Cuban withdrawal would entail certain political humiliation. It would leave Cuba with no "honorable" way out.

But why are Cubans—those twenty thousand soldiers and several thousand technicians and teachers—still in Angola? The Angolan Government's answer is that the Cubans are essential to its national security. They will remain so as long as South Africa parries and avoids a commitment to an international settlement in Namibia, mounts air and land assaults against SWAPO encampments in Angola, and provides logistical and material support to the antigovernment forces of UNITA. Asked by Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times* whether a settlement in Namibia might create the necessary conditions for a Cuban withdrawal, Angola's foreign minister replied: "Of course. We have said this very clearly to the Americans. When the threat from South Africa disappears—and we believe it will with the independence of Namibia—then we won't need the Cuban presence here" (January 23, 1981).

Is this to argue that UNITA, shorn of South African assistance, will not in and of itself pose a threat sufficient to justify continued Cuban help? It seems probable that the Angolan army is now strong enough to contain and gradually reduce UNITA insurgency. But for the MPLA to escape the debilitating burden of governance by coercion, it will need to commit itself to a generous policy of national reconciliation. It will need to reach out to achieve an understanding with the leadership of Angola's largest ethnic community, the Ovimbundu, among whom UNITA has enjoyed strong support. For his part, Jonas Savimbi, the charismatic and ideologically supple leader of UNITA who has over time sought Western, Soviet, Chinese, and South African assistance, would most likely settle for inclusion within a coalition government. Given the MPLA's reconciliation with another past enemy, President Mobutu Sésé-Séko of Zaire, such a settlement is just conceivable. More likely is an MPLA move to accommodate less controversial UNITA leadership within the government.

POSSIBILITIES

A settlement in Namibia would deprive UNITA of its hope that South Africa (and the United States) will yet support it in a military campaign to overthrow the MPLA government and oust the Cubans. Understandably, UNITA does not favor a settlement that might

bring SWAPO, a former ally turned bitter enemy, to power in Namibia. However, an American ambassador ensconced in Luanda as a result of a Namibian settlement would be in a position to argue the wisdom of MPLA-initiated peace talks with UNITA.

Establishing diplomatic relations would also afford the American Government an opportunity to promote increased American corporate investment and technical assistance—and thus *influence*—in Angola. Such private sector involvement is being solicited by the Angolans. Positive relations with Gulf Oil, Boeing, Texaco, and other American corporations now working in Angola suggest a potential for greatly expanded commercial relations. An executive of the General Tire Company of Ohio, citing prompt payment of fees and salaries to American technicians and the "incredible buying power" of a fledgling, oil-fueled economy in need of "every product on earth," recently described as a "tragic mistake" American failure to recognize Angola. But the United States has remained locked into the circular logic of a position that rules out recognition and diplomatic influence until the Cubans have begun, if not completed, their withdrawal.

This brings us to the central question: What might motivate the Cubans to leave? They are in Angola at the behest of the Angolan Government. The government has made it clear that when a Namibian settlement renders the troops redundant, they will be thanked and honorably dismissed. Thus it behooves the United States to make every effort, including discreet diplomatic cooperation with Angola, to achieve an international-ly sanctioned settlement in Namibia.

Such an effort offers the best prospect for curtailing Soviet influence in the area. Soviet ambitions would be best served by a tough-it-out South African defiance of Western and United Nations peace initiatives, abandoning Angola, Namibia, and adjoining areas to a fate of protracted instability and violence. Soviet ambitions would also be better served by an American policy that involved the United States in an attempted military solution to the problems of the area, alienating Africans, offending allies, and dividing Americans along racial lines.

American policy should be firmly grounded on the assumption that American and Angolan interests lie in political accommodation and demilitarization. The United States should commit all its diplomatic energy, intelligence, and powers of moral and material suasion to the quest for an international settlement in Namibia. In so doing, it will be making the right policy choice in Angola. **WV**

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