II. Carter's Muddled Priorities

Hung Up on the Horn of Africa

Linkage reasserted itself strongly in our relations with the Carter administration in 1978 under the influence of the president's moralistic views on human rights and Brzezinski's insistence on opposing communism wherever he found it. It represented a major effort by the United States to strengthen the restraints on the Soviet Union and thus on the scope of detente. Soviet conduct, at home and abroad, was thus held hostage to Moscow's hopes of a summit and the general pace of our negotiations on SALT, as ever the barometer of our relations. They fell to a low point during the first half of 1978 before recovering, although to nowhere near the level of the Nixon-Kissinger detente. But the principle of a controlled and selective detente did remain the governing force in holding the threat of a nuclear war at bay. Local conflicts were exploited by both sides at a much lower level of danger, but at a level of considerable diplomatic and political discord.

Conflict in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia and Somalia was the focus of Soviet-American rivalry by early 1978. Somalia had long claimed Ogaden, an Ethiopian province populated by about two million Somali nomads. In 1974 the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown by a military coup in Addis Ababa. After several years of internal struggle and maneuvers, Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged in February of 1977 not only as the leader but as a professed Marxist-Leninist. Somalia, to which the Soviet Union had supplied arms, meanwhile took advantage of Ethiopia's domestic instability and occupied Ogaden province.

Initially Moscow had maintained friendly relations with Somalia, signing the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1974; we supplied arms and they permitted Soviet vessels to use the port of Berbera on the Gulf of Aden and the southern approaches to the Red Sea. The United States had been Ethiopia's traditional ally until the overthrow of the emperor.

Fidel Castro and the Soviet president, Nikolai Podgorny, visited the region and tried to organize a progressive front or a federation incorporating Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Yemen, which faced the two nations across the Gulf of Aden. But the attempt failed because Somalia stubbornly refused to return the occupied Ogaden province. A further advance of Somalian troops into Ethiopia was halted with Soviet and Cuban support for Colonel Mengistu's regime in Ethiopia. All of this led to a paradoxical reversal in the positions of the superpowers; in effect they exchanged clients.

As the Soviet Union shifted its support toward Ethiopia, the United States, in its turn, accelerated the process by stopping its military assistance and accusing Mengistu's new Ethiopian government of human rights violations. (The real reason, of course, was the overthrow of the emperor and a clear left-wing takeover.) Washington then turned its attention to Somalia, the more so because Somalia canceled its treaty with the Soviet Union at the end of 1977 after Moscow had refused to provide more arms. The Soviet Union then signed a similar treaty with Ethiopia. By the end of 1977 about two thousand Cuban troops and one thousand Soviet military advisers were sent to Addis Ababa. Somali troops were forced to retreat in Ogaden province but still held a considerable part of it.

From the long-term geopolitical point of view, the developments in that part of Africa were unmistakably of local importance, and the political leadership in Moscow regarded them as such. Nevertheless, the Soviet and Cuban interference and the deployment of a Cuban task force in yet another African country just two years after they had gone into Angola, plus Soviet transports and other logistic support, caused an uproar in the West, especially the United States. Suspicions were aroused that the Soviet Union had adopted a new strategy of challenging and outflanking the West in the Third World. This quickly became a priority in relations between the Carter administration and Moscow for much of the year, further complicating our relations and provoking serious discord within the administration itself. The most aggressive member in pressing his suspicions was Brzezinski, and his principal opponent was Vance. In his memoirs Vance explained that he did not see Soviet activity in Africa as part of some huge scheme but simply an attempt to take advantage of a local opportunity—but domestic political pressure to counter Soviet and Cuban intervention prevented the administration from dealing with them as local conflicts.

Linkage nevertheless demanded slowing down the SALT and other disarmament talks and imposing restrictions on trade and high-level visits. Vance opposed it as counterproductive, but linkage was constantly increased.

In my capacity as ambassador I was fairly familiar with the sentiments of the Kremlin leadership concerning the developments in that part of Africa. I can say with confidence that Vance was right in the sense that the Kremlin had no far-reaching global plans in that region. But having suffered no major international complications because of its interference in Angola,
Moscow had no scruples about escalating its activities in other countries, first Ethiopia, then Yemen, a number of African and Middle Eastern states, and, to crown it all, in Afghanistan.

Each of these situations of course had its own local peculiarities. But underlying them all was a simple but primitive idea of international solidarity, which meant doing our duty in the anti-imperialist struggle. It made no difference that often it had nothing to do with genuine national liberation movements but amounted to interference on an ideological basis into the internal affairs of countries where domestic factions were struggling for power. Some in the Kremlin were flattered at our country's involvement in faraway conflicts because they believed it put the Soviet Union on an equal footing with the United States as a superpower. But that was a hare-brained thought.

In order to understand our sometimes bizarre policy in the Third World, it is important to know how the decision-making mechanism in foreign affairs operated in the Kremlin. On a day-to-day basis it was the Foreign Ministry which gave recommendations for dealing with current problems. In practice that mainly meant Gromyko himself, and as a rule all his suggestions were accepted. He was a recognized authority, especially in dealing with the West and the United States in particular, and he stubbornly defended his position in this field during Politburo meetings. Overall he was a cautious man who opposed any serious confrontation with the United States if the vital interests of the Soviet Union were not involved.

But the Third World was not his prime domain. He believed that events there could not in the final analysis decisively influence our fundamental relations with the United States; that turned out to be a factor which he definitely underestimated. More than that, our Foreign Ministry traditionally was not really involved with the leaders of the liberation movements in the Third World, who were dealt with through the International Department of the party, headed by Secretary Boris Ponomarev. He despised Gromyko; the feeling was mutual.

All this work in the Third World, especially with liberation movements, was coordinated by the very influential second man in the Politburo, Mikhail Suslov, who for many years was in charge of the party's ideological work and its international activity. He was convinced that all struggle in the Third World had an ideological basis: imperialism against communism and socialism. Under the slogan of solidarity, he and his zealous followers in the party managed to involve the Politburo in many Third World adventures. The KGB supported him in this because many of the party contacts in that area were handled through their agents. The military were prepared to send arms and advisers but not Soviet troops.

Many professional Soviet diplomats opposed our deep involvement in
Our embassy warned Moscow that Washington saw such things in global terms even when not justified, and that events in the Horn of Africa were beginning to look like those in Angola in 1975, “providing all kinds of opponents of our good relations with ammunition to keep these relations under fire.” The report also pointed out that Cuban investment in the region remained a very troubling aspect for the Americans. The embassy recommended that Moscow try to view Africa through the prism of its potential to damage Soviet-American relations. But Moscow continued to dismiss American reaction as just another series of propaganda attacks in the framework of the continuous “natural” ideological struggle between us.

This different approach became especially evident during an important conversation I held with Vance on January 31. He said nervously that some Soviet combat and landing ships were concentrated in the Red Sea, and that undermined his own arguments for maintaining good relations with Moscow. He added: “Let me tell you straight that there are people close to the president telling him that the latest Soviet actions are a direct personal challenge to the president, a test of his firmness, and he should show the Russians he is not to be trifled with.”

I understood that Vance’s sense of alarm about public opinion in the United States was well-founded. But the only thing I could honestly do was to explain to him that Moscow was not out to test the president’s will. During 1977 the Politburo tried several times to mediate unilaterally between Ethiopia and Somalia but failed. It was clear that our countries were involved in a real conflict in the area, and maybe our mutual involvement could be used to help obtain a settlement. But how should we go about it?

One attempt was made by Moscow. In January of 1978 Gromyko officially proposed joint U.S.-Soviet mediation for the Horn of Africa. But the Carter administration dismissed this proposal because, as Brzezinski explained in his memoirs, it would have “legitimized the Soviet presence” there and “pointed to a condominium” between the U.S. and USSR. Here he sounds very much like Henry Kissinger who used the same slogan against Soviet participation in a Middle East settlement. The Carter administration also turned down another Soviet suggestion to resume our suspended talks on limiting arms in the Indian Ocean area. More missed opportunities to act together in cooperation in the Third World.

A month after meeting with Vance I discussed African problems with Brzezinski. All his pronouncements were focused on just one thing, Carter’s growing concern. He repeatedly stressed that Soviet and Cuban military presence in Ethiopia posed a threat to the interests of the West and endangered the safety of the transport links for oil between the Middle East and the United States and Western Europe. He said they could be “cut off.”

I asked him how he thought the Soviet Union could actually cut the oil routes. Would it attack and sink American tankers? That would constitute a direct act of war. Did the White House really have such absurd ideas? Brzezinski admitted that the White House did not give much credence to such a scenario, but such oversimplified concepts were widespread in the Congress and the American media. But he made it clear anyway that our presence in that area was not welcomed.

Overall anxiety was mounting. At a press conference on March 24, Vance said Soviet-American relations had “entered a stage of instability.” Carter decided to try to get in touch with Fidel Castro secretly. Paul Austin of Coca-Cola confided to me that he had flown to Cuba on a secret mission for Carter to meet the Cuban leader and tell him in the name of the president that Cuban activity abroad prevented the United States from continuing the process of normalization between Washington and Havana, which Carter insisted was one of his goals. Carter’s message was that the main stumbling block to normalization was Cuban military activity in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia. Castro had asked him to tell President Carter that not a single Cuban soldier would cross the Somali border. But at the same time Fidel had refused to make any promises in general about Africa to the Americans, declaring he would support revolutions and national liberation movements everywhere.

In retrospect, I cannot help being surprised at the amount of energy and effort spent almost entirely in vain by Moscow and Washington on these so-called African affairs. Twenty years later no one (except historians) could as much as remember them. Even when American marines were sent to Somalia in 1992 by George Bush to join United Nations forces to help feed the starving there, no one in the U.S. government and only a very few in the press remarked that the seeds of the anarchy then prevailing in Somalia had most probably been planted by the great powers’ engagement there fifteen years before. Somalia was only one of a number of countries whose local quarrels became enmeshed in the Cold War—Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, among them, and all of them worse off for their involvement with the two superpowers.

We made a serious mistake in involving ourselves in the conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia and in the war in Angola. Our supply of military equipment to these areas, the activities there of Cuban troops, and especially our airlift to get them there, persuaded Americans that Moscow had undertaken a broad offensive against them for control over Africa. Although that was not really the case, these events strongly affected detente.