

The Angola Involvement

U.S., Soviets Caught in a Byzantine Conflict

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The United States and the Soviet Union are caught in the once-covert Angola war, a conflict that very few Americans, including members of Congress, understand.

The forces fighting in Angola are tiny by comparison with the war in Vietnam, a comparison that administration officials call "outrageously exaggerated" in terms of American stakes or American involvement.

But, the international maneuvering and intrigue that surround the Angolan war and the ideological and black-white struggles in the southern half of Africa strike many analysts as even more Byzantine than Vietnam.

The conflict has spun beyond the control of Africa. It also is no longer within the ability of either the United States or the Soviet Union to control it independently and perhaps even jointly.

While administration supporters of American military aid to anti-Communist factions in Angola still maintain that the decision to involve the United States was justified, at least some U. S. strategists now acknowledge several key miscalculations.

One was the totally unforeseen involvement of thousands of Cuban troops on the other side and the extent of Soviet military and financial investment in the civil war. Another was the degree to which the United States would be impaled publicly as "the collaborator" of racist South Africa when Pretoria's troops entered the conflict, even prior to Havana's.

Probably the greatest misjudgment, many administration officials ruefully concede, was the failure to foresee the overwhelming opposition in the Senate to the venture, when it escalated from a clandestine Central

Intelligence Agency operation into a global controversy.

The Senate's Dec. 19 vote to cut off further U. S. funds for Angola's anti-Communists, U. S. strategists bitterly complain, left the Soviet Union "almost risk-free options" to strengthen the Angola faction it supports.

"Risk-free," that is, except for the extent to which the Soviet Union is prepared to gamble on jeopardizing the fabric of U. S.-Soviet detente policy. This is the main bargaining card in the possession of the Ford administration. President Ford publicly played that card yesterday, more determinedly than ever.

Critics in Congress, and administration members who are critical in private, maintain that virtually every one of these consequences was predictable.

The United States, they say almost equally glumly, is now paying for the folly of a totally misguided entanglement.

The United States and the Soviet Union are now lobbying on the sidelines of the 46-nation Organization of African Unity which meets Thursday in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to ponder the fate of Angola.

At the same time, the two major powers are attempting to prevent the Angolan tangle from paralyzing their larger interests.

This week and next, while the divided African nations deliberate, the Ford administration must make a major decision in the deadlocked U. S. nuclear strategic arms limitation talks (SALT).

That choice will determine whether Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger will go to Moscow later this month, as planned, with

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a new American proposal aimed at breaking the prolonged stalemate in SALT.

Kissinger met at the State Department yesterday with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy F. Dobrynin to discuss the Angolan situation and, a State Department spokesman said guardedly, "a possible visit to Moscow."

Before they met, one U. S. official said that if the Soviet Union "tries to push us to the wall on Angola" it is bound to affect the attitude of Washington on other sensitive issues. SALT is the most sensitive subject of all.

From interviews conducted since the Senate voted 34 to 22 to forbid any further covert funds for U. S. operations in Angola, new information can now be pieced together on the sequence of American actions, the calculations and miscalculations.

This record is not complete, or totally certain on every segment, for even officials who will talk about it privately say they are not telling, or do not know, every detail.

Probably no single nation has a complete intelligence dossier on Angola. The region has been a cockpit of covert operations, involving not only the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba and South Africa, but also Zaire, Zambia, China, North Korea, France, and to a lesser degree, reportedly a half-dozen or more other nations.

President Ford has denied any American training of foreign mercenaries. But he did not deny that U. S. funds are being used for that purpose.

There are mercenaries on both sides in Angola, informed sources agree. Some are paid with funds supplied by the CIA, and by other Western nations' intelligence services.

About 4,000 former troops from the once-secessionist state of Katanga in the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) currently are fighting in Angola on the side of the Soviet-supported Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). To opponents they are mercenaries.

When mercenaries are fighting on the anti-Communist side, U. S. sources prefer to describe them as individual "soldiers of fortune."

Cuba, by U.S. estimate, has 5,000 to 7,500 troops in Angola, but these figures are just estimates, American intelligence sources concede.

A Cuban rationale is that its forces entered the battle to counter the entry of South Africans. American sources say there are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 South Africans in Angola, with thousands behind them manning supply lines.

Zaire is reported to have 1,000 to 2,000 troops in Angola, perhaps more, for its troops are almost indistinguishable from Roberto's national front troops.

The Soviet Union, U.S. officials say, has about 400 personnel in Angola, including military advisers. The United States acknowledges no military advisers in Angola, but officials privately say CIA agents numbering "eight at the most" go "in and out" of Angola "to check on the delivery of equipment."

Tass, the Soviet news agency, charged yesterday that "bands of American and West German mercenaries" reinforce South African units in Angola.

The starting point of the current U. S. adventure in Angola, in early 1975, already has been disclosed in the press, but without many of the reasons behind it.

According to the U. S. version, the Soviet Union in 1957 began supporting the MPLA, led by Dr. Antonio Agostinho Neto, a gynecologist, revolutionary poet and Marxist, who later unsuccessfully sought American support.

The American client in Angola, selected by the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s, was Holden Alvaro Roberto, whose National Front for the Liberation of Angola, or FNLA, began fighting against Portugal in 1961.

The third main figure, and the youngest, at 42, is Jonas Savimbi, originally a lieutenant of Roberto, who broke with him and in 1966 formed the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, or UNITA.

They were competitors for power, who had solicited around the world for support. Neto had long-standing Soviet backing, but in 1971 he also went to Peking to request aid but received none, because of his Soviet alignment.

China received Savimbi in 1968 and later gave him some support, but it was Roberto, who visited Peking in 1973 who was the most successful. At that time the United States was far more interested in supporting its North Atlantic alliance ally, the Portuguese dictatorship, especially because Portugal supplied the United States with air base facilities in the Azores—which proved critical to resupplying Israel in the 1973 Mideast war.

In 1973, China sent at least 119 military instructors in guerrilla warfare, and equipment, to help train Roberto's National Front army at its main base in Zaire, across the border from Angola.

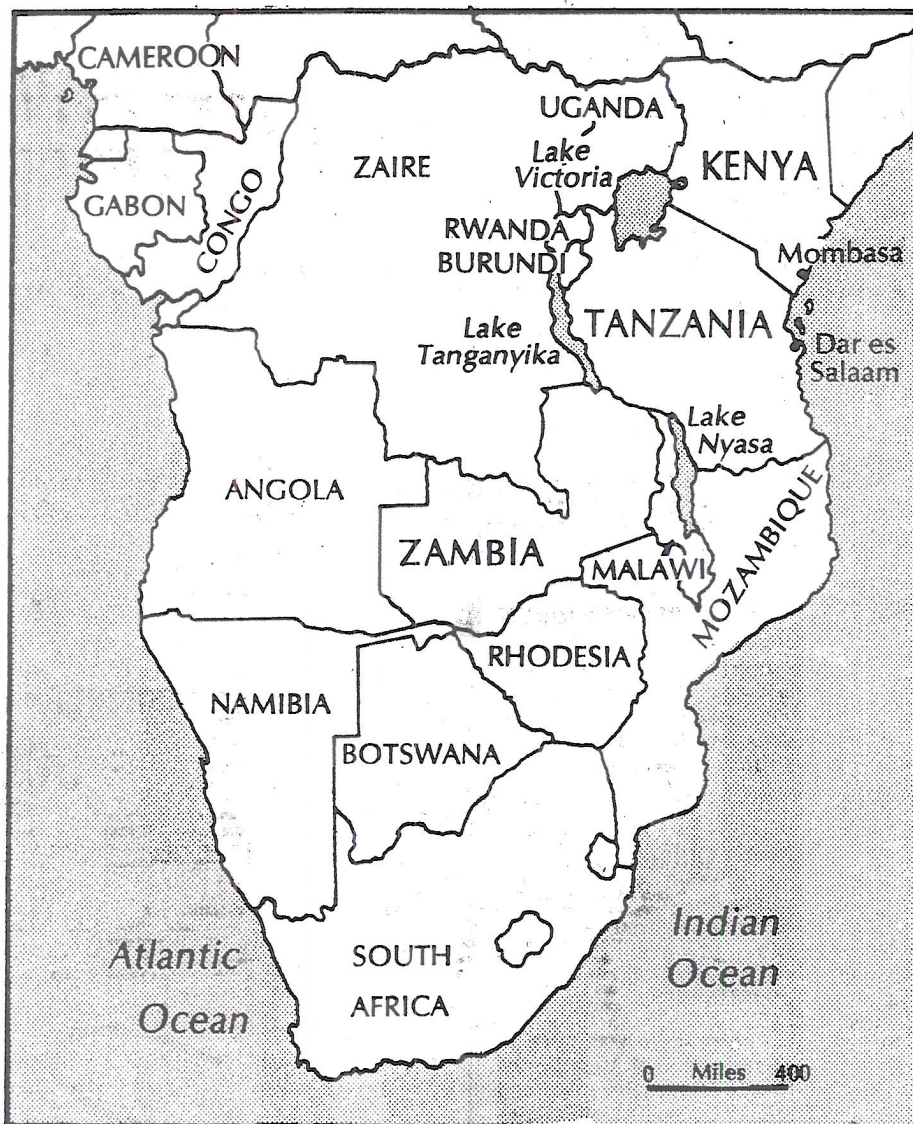
President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire is Roberto's brother-in-law and principal African protector.

Mobutu also has been a prime U. S. supporter in Africa, with an unusually diverse range of international relationships. In addition to ties with China, Zaire has had a North Korean military mission on its territory training a Zaire division.

The coup that toppled Portugal's dictatorship in April, 1974, changed many nations' perceptions of Angola. Angola, rich in oil and minerals, with strategic ports on the Atlantic, became a target of opportunity.

In an attempt to establish a transitional regime, on Jan. 15, 1975, Portugal and the three rival liberation forces in Angola agreed to share in a four-way government, with Angola's independence set for Nov. 11, 1975.

That is when the U. S. National Security Council's "Forty Committee" on covert intelligence operations, headed by Kissinger,



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very soon afterward, in January, agreed to a CIA request to allot \$300,000 to Roberto's faction.

One U. S. source last week described this as "a token, to have some capital in the bank with one of the leaders of a government that was going to control a fairly sizable country."

A CIA request for about \$100,000 for Savimbi was turned down.

The money for Roberto was "parceled out over months," it was said, for "political organization" purposes.

When this \$300,000 subsidy was first disclosed last month it raised questions about whether it was the United States, rather than the Soviet Union as Kissinger and other officials insisted, that first expanded outside involvement in Angola last year.

Senior U. S. officials scoff at that. The \$300,000 "was peanuts," a high CIA source said last week. But it was 30 times larger than any U. S. annual sum ever given Roberto. Other officials said Soviet arms aid to Neto's MPLA began in 1957 and intensified in October, 1974, long predating any significant American activity.

Nevertheless, it is an open question, other sources concede, whether Soviet intelligence construed the U. S. subsidy to Roberto as the modest "political aid" that American officials claimed it was, or a significant escalation of U. S. involvement.

President Ford is now reported to be blocking a report by the House intelligence committee which questions U. S. motives in the \$300,000 payment.

Administration officials maintain that they seriously expect the four-way transitional regime in Angola to work out, and simply wanted to help sustain the Roberto faction's role in it to counterbalance the Neto faction backed by the Soviet Union.

If true, that was naive, one specialist on Angola said last week; the four-sided coalition, he said, was certain to fail because of the long enmity between Roberto and Neto.

The official U. S. version is that between January and July, the MPLA, reinforced by "massive Soviet weapons and supplies" that began to arrive in March and April, "usurped the provisional government" and forced the anti-Communist factions of Roberto and Savimbi out of Luanda, Angola's capital.

In April, it is said the United States "began to get appeals from various African governments" that a Soviet-backed takeover of Angola was under way, with appeals for U. S. help to prevent it.

"The secretary (Kissinger) got interested about this time," one official said.

It was a private appeal sounded on a Washington visit by Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda to Kissinger and President Ford on April 19 and 20 that seized their attention, it is now claimed.

Kaunda publicly criticized U. S. policy in Vietnam, to the great irritation of the President and Kissinger. Nevertheless, Marxist takeover of Angola, Kaunda warned privately, could deprive his land-locked nation of access to the Atlantic Ocean via the Benguela railroad across Angola, one of the last outlets for Zambia's vital copper exports.

The United States, he said, must awaken to the pleas of the liberation forces throughout Africa and the danger of Soviet inroads in Mozambique, Angola and other newly independent nations.

That was hardly a time when Kissinger or anyone else in Washington was bold enough, or undistracted enough, to envision any new U. S. involvement.

In Vietnam, the final chapter was being played out; Saigon's last crisis was under way that weekend, with but 10 days to go before the collapse of more than a decade of American investment in blood and money.

Not until July, when Kissinger believed the Vietnam tumult in the United States had subsided enough to risk it, did the Ford administration agree to make its first major

arms and money had come into the battle covertly, with the French intelligence service, the SDECE, the counterpart of the CIA, cooperating with that agency and with Zaire President Mobutu to channel aid to Roberto's National Front. Belgian, British and West German aid also reportedly has gone to the anti-Communists in Angola.

"What we had set out to do in July," one U.S. official said last week, "we had seen accomplished by Angola's Independence Day"—Nov. 11, preventing the Soviet-supported MPLA from dominating Angola. American covert military aid was increased from \$14 million to \$25 million and \$7 million was added, for a total of \$32 million.

Then Senate critics balked at a secret request for \$28 million more and the clash reached the press and the public.

Criticism hit the Ford administration from all directions, including from members of congressional committees that had been briefed in private about the Angolan operation.

The administration was accused of stumbling into a "another Vietnam."

Administration officials are indignant about these accusations. One senior intelligence planner last week labeled them "the far-end of hysteria."

But critics in the Senate charge that administration officials were less candid than they say they were about the origins of the involvement.

Several senators claim the officials "gave us conflicting information" and different rationales for the whole venture at various stages, notably, switching the rationale from a focus on the black-white conflict in Africa to a "test of will" with the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, some supporters of the venture concede that the Ford administration grievously misjudged the congressional climate.

Yet, they maintain, as one high official said, "My God, we thought we did everything possible to brief all the designated eight committees of Congress in private about what we were doing...As stupid as we may be, we ought to be given credit for having learned something ourselves from Vietnam.

"We busted our ass with the briefings," he said; "admittedly there was no wild enthusiasm, but there was no great bitching either."

Yet Sen. Dick Clark (D-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Africa, who was briefed, said it soon became apparent to him that in Angola the United States was "backing the only sure loser."

China apparently reached the same conclusion, but earlier. In the late summer of 1975 it took its training mission out of Zaire.

However, if the Senate "had not walked out on us," one senior official maintained, "this could have been sustained effectively, at minimum cost."

Kissinger, late last year, pressed the U.S. intelligence bureaucracy to produce an estimate of the cost of Soviet equipment in Angola. The CIA came up with a figure of \$80 million as of October, an admittedly rough estimate.

One U.S. official said last week, "I would conservatively say it has cost the Soviet Union \$250 million in Angola, getting on to 10 times what we've put in there."

investment in arms aid and supplies for the Roberto and Savimbi factions in Angola.

It was this secret decision, to channel \$14 million in aid to the anti-Communist forces in Angola through Zaire, in two stages of \$6 million and \$8 million, that aroused deep dissent inside the Ford administration.

The decision was opposed by most, but not all, of the senior officials in the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, including then Assistant Secretary of State Nathaniel Davis. His disagreement with the decision on Angola brought his resignation.

The initial equipment sent to Angola was non-American, mainly from CIA stocks of foreign weapons around the world, to conceal the U. S. hand. First shipments began arriving in August.

At about the same time, South African troops crossed the Angolan border, secretly, in what initially was said to be an operation only to secure the safety of a hydroelectric project serving South African-controlled Namibia.

In mid-October, South African armored forces, by then racing through South Central Angola against light opposition, ran into the first Cuban troops in battle support of the MPLA.

The war was widening swiftly, but in small-scale conflicts of a few hundred men. French