

Can Pretoria Be Trusted?

As a classic French treatise warned in 1716, "Even the most dazzling diplomatic triumphs which have been gained by deception are based upon insecure foundations. They leave the defeated party with a sense of indignation, a desire to be revenged and a resentment that will always be a danger." In South Africa they have yet to learn that lesson.

In what seemed a dazzling triumph, the white regime in Pretoria broke its regional isolation in 1984 by signing a nonaggression pact with the Marxist leaders of its poor, black neighbor Mozambique. As brokered by the United States, the pact was a straightforward bargain: Mozambique would deny help to black exiles preparing attacks against South Africa, and South Africa would stop arming insurgents inside Mozambique.

Mozambique kept its word. South Africa did not. Besides encouraging the Mozambique rebellion (first instigated by Ian Smith's Rhodesia), the South African army has bombed and invaded Angola, another Marxist-led state whose territory it had promised to respect.

These aggressions are meant to express defiance of South Africa's foreign critics. Their real effect is to knock the last props from under President Reagan's claim that "constructive engagement" would moderate South Africa's conduct and racism. The main exhibits had been the pact with Mozambique and the cease-fire with Angola, through which Washington hoped to promote a still wider agreement for the independence of Namibia.

South Africa admits the Mozambique betrayal and no longer blames the rebel actions on "an international web of bankers." But Pretoria says its violations of the agreement are "technical" and that acts like clearing a landing strip constitute "humanitarian" aid. In the captured diary of one rebel, that aid was listed as 26 tons of munitions.

President Samora Machel has astutely turned South Africa's duplicity to his country's advantage. His Marxism recently proved no impediment to a cordial visit to President Reagan, who assured him of America's "distress." Expressing gratitude for U.S. aid, Mr. Machel urged Americans to come to Mozambique as "famine fighters" and investors.

This turning represents a real gain for the Reagan administration. Relations with Mozambique had been cool, even hostile, since its chaotic struggle for independence from Portugal a decade ago, during which it turned to Moscow for weapons and diplomatic support. But when drought struck Mozambique in 1984, it became the largest recipient of U.S. food aid. It has now joined the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and is overcoming a reflexive hostility to the West.

As for South Africa, it ought to reflect on the conclusion of that old French treatise: "The negotiator should recollect that he is likely for the rest of his life to be constantly engaged in diplomatic business, and that it is essential for him to establish a reputation for straight and honest dealing so that thereafter men may be ready to trust his word."

— THE NEW YORK TIMES.