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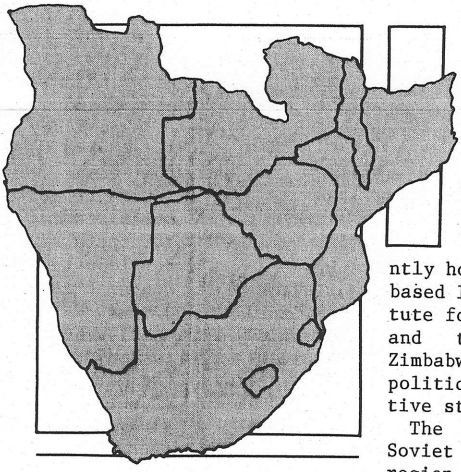
The South African government claims that the Soviet Union poses a military threat in Southern Africa. But Dr Victor Goncharov, a leading Soviet analyst on the region, argues that Southern Africa is of limited strategic importance to either his country, or the United States. HOWARD BARRELL interviewed Dr Goncharov, deputy director of the Institute of African Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences, on Soviet policy in Southern Africa.

SOVIET POLICY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

At the centre of the Soviet Union's view of the conflict in Southern Africa is the insistence that it must be seen as a 'logical process of struggle between the forces of national and social liberation, from the one side, and the forces of colonialism, racism and neo-colonialism, from the other'.



Apartheid, in the view of the Soviet Union (and that of the majority at the United Nations), is a crime against humanity 'in struggle against which any means are legitimate'.

Apartheid is also the central cause of the regional crisis. And for both moral reasons, and in terms of the Leninist view that anti-colonial national liberation struggles are an important stage in humanity's progress, the Soviet Union will render assistance, including military aid, to national liberation movements and democratic states in the region.

These basic Soviet positions on the region were recorded by a leading Soviet analyst on Africa, Dr Victor Goncharov, in a paper delivered at a recent Harare conference on Southern African regional security. The conference was jointly hosted by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies and the University of Zimbabwe's department of political and administrative studies.

The elaboration of Soviet policy in the region hinges on these four premises.

In his paper Dr Goncharov, deputy director of the Institute of African Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences, said the Soviet Union rejected the framework which holds that the regional conflict is another manifestation of super-power rivalry 'between East and West'.

Its presentation as an East-West conflict was 'actively propagandised by

supporters of the bankrupt policy of "constructive engagement" between the USA and RSA'.

'For some people in the USA it serves as a pretext for interference in the region, giving financial and military aid to bandit forces in Angola'.

In addition, this conception 'offers the Pretoria regime the possibility to shift responsibility for the unsettled conflict to the two super-powers and, thus, to extend its existence'.

THE MYTH OF A SOVIET MILITARY THREAT

'Both in Washington and in Pretoria they fan...the myth of a Soviet military threat to sea routes of the West around the Cape of Good Hope, and the "total expansion of communism" in Southern Africa in order to deny the West access to strategic minerals.. And all these measures are taken to declare that this region is the sphere of vital interests of the United States, and that Pretoria is its historical ally', Dr Goncharov said in his paper.

The reality is very different, argued Goncharov in a subsequent interview.

In fact, the United States and the Soviet Union have minimal interests in the region, and Southern Africa is of very limited strategic importance to either super-power.

This view was shared by American analysts at the Harare conference, one of whom stated that in terms of strictly military and economic strategic thinking the Southern African region ranked 'lowest' of all areas of the world for the United States. The wild factor for Americans was, however, that apartheid was a morally and politically evocative issue within American domestic politics.

Goncharov's view was that, for the Soviet Union, Southern Africa ranked alongside the Middle East as a strategic foreign policy issue - after 'the prevention of nuclear war, the socialist countries of Europe, the USA, China, and Western Europe'.

Goncharov added that the supposed military/strategic importance of the Cape sea route was another myth.

In his paper, Goncharov had remarked: 'Even people not possessing profound military knowledge realise that in the nuclear missile age, if the Third World War breaks out it will have a transient character. Its outcome will not be so much dependent on regular supplies of the needed mineral resources, as it was during previous world wars.

'In these conditions, the idea of interrupting goods traffic around the southern tip of the African continent, including oil supplies from the Middle East, has become out of date from the military point of view'.

THE ANC 'NOT AN ARM OF THE SOVIET UNION'

In the interview, Goncharov scorned the view that the ANC was the long arm of the Soviet Union, and that the USSR was engaged in an adventure in Southern Africa.

'Your forces of the national liberation struggle were born in South Africa before the Great October Socialist Revolution. The ANC was created in 1912. And the socialist revolution took place in Russia in 1917. So the seeds of the national liberation struggle were sewn even before the Soviet Union became the power it is'.

The Soviet Union had 'no "vital" interests' in the region, and no desire to 'interrupt those traditional ties between some countries of Southern Africa and some Western powers.

'When I say that we are not going to infringe on somebody's interests and that we are not going to interrupt international trade and economic relations, we are pursuing our own interests also. It is not only the capitalist world which suffers from an economic crisis. The socialist world also suffers.

'If we think in the framework of the so-called "new political thinking" (in the Soviet Union), we should take into account the global problems and the global consequences of our behaviour in every part of the world. I mean not only the Soviet Union but every country in the international community.

CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE SUPER-POWERS?

'In our very complicated world, the two super-powers should avoid confrontation, not only in South Africa, but in other parts of the world. If we take a

different approach, there will be no solution, not only in other parts of the world but in South Afica too', he said.

It was an important 'methodological point' to fight attempts to give an East-West character to the regional crisis.

'If we see this situation in the framework of confrontation between East and West, we will deprive the whole international community of their legal right to render assistance to national liberation struggles', he said in the interview.

'Nowadays, it is accepted in the United Nations that it is a process of national liberation, that the apartheid system is a crime against humanity, and in the struggle against this all means and ways are acceptable, including armed struggle. This approach justifies the rendering of assistance to national liberation forces in South Africa'.

The relative disinterest in the region on the part of the two super-powers meant the existence of conditions potentially enabling Soviet-American co-operation on resolving the crisis both in South Africa and the region. But, in the view of both Dr Goncharov and others at the conference, this would be a real possibility only after the replacement of Ronald Regan as US president by someone not pushing a xenophobic anti-communist international line.

This was perhaps the most important point to emerge at the Harare conference.

Goncharov said in the interview: 'We said at the conference that USA interests are minimal in the region, ours are even less in South Africa itself. That is why, from my point of view, there is a basis for co-operation for an acceptable settlement, acceptable to everybody, to each side.

'From my point of view the only possible solution to the conflict in Southern Africa will be with the participation of the whole international community, including the big powers. And that is why it is necessary to find common approaches, even for the Soviet Union and for the USA to settle this problem. Though I am of the opinion that they should not directly interfere (by sending in their own armed forces) in the affairs of the region. If the two powers interfere, there will be confrontation and even more serious aggravation in South Africa'.

He understood this was also the opinion of the Soviet government.

Attempts had already been made to develop a joint approach with the United States and Britain on Southern Africa.

'We have an annual consultation between the Soviet Union and the United States, between the head of the African Department and (US Assistant Secretary of State Dr Chester Crocker) or other US State Department representatives. And we have consultations on the Southern African problems. The last one was with Armacost from the State Department. He was in Moscow this spring.

'The US say they are for a peaceful solution in Southern Africa and so do we, but there are different approaches on how to settle it, on what conditions. They didn't change their position - it remained as it was.

'But these contacts may in future create a basis for a collective search for a settlement of this problem. At any rate, we have a mechanism for consultation, not only with the Americans but with the British also. (Assistant deputy secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) Anthony Reeve was head of the delegation which visited Moscow in May for consultations'.

ENDING DESTABILISATION IN THE REGION

Goncharov considered that the report of the American Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on South Africa, which reported to George Schultz earlier this year, could form 'the basis for discussions' between the super-powers on the regional crisis. But the strong anti-apartheid tenor of the report differed markedly from the attitude of the Reagan administration.

Goncharov said he believed the Soviet Union had 'done everything possible to make the solution of the conflict possible'.

'Don't take it as propaganda, but it is the United States which imposed so-called Cuban 'linkage' (the demand that Cuban troops first be withdrawn from Angola before settlement of Namibian independence), which has nothing to do with the solution of the conflict.

Goncharov considered that the two super-powers could start their co-operation in resolving the regional

crisis by joint efforts in ending South African destabilisation of the region. Mozambique could be the first arena of this co-operation.

In Mozambique 'there are, from my point of view, some spheres and fields of co-operation with the Americans', said Goncharov. And he pointed to Soviet-American co-operation in relieving the famine in Ethiopia as an example of the kind of start that could be made.

The famine in Mozambique, caused largely by Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) activity, is currently threatening millions of lives in the country.

Co-operation against South African destabilisation could logically lead to a settlement of Namibian independence.

'If we can find some common approach, the possibility may arise for a settlement of so-called Cuban "linkage". If the threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Angola diminishes, there will be possibilities of removing Cuban troops from Angola.

'But the (South African) regime has lost its credibility. Neither the Angolan government, nor the Cubans can make that decision without guarantees. And guarantees can be given only by the international community, by the Soviet Union and the United States.

'As far as the Namibian problem is concerned, the draft for the settlement of the Nambian problem has already been drawn up in the framework of the United Nations on the basis of Resolutions 385 and 435. Now it is necessary only to enforce with all possible means these resolutions'.

Goncharov thought the South African government might choose Namibia as its first line of retreat - 'first of all to meet the demands of the international community, maybe to stop disinvestment or in order to get new investment, or they could give independence to Namibia in order to save their position inside South Africa itself and calm the population of South Africa'.

SOVIET SUPPORT FOR THE ANC

On South Africa itself, Goncharov said the Soviet Union's 'principle line and position remains the same', namely giving military and other support to the ANC.

But Soviet military support to the ANC, like any other national liberation movement, depended on the prospects of such an armed struggle.

'If we think that it is useless, we won't give anything', Goncharov said. Asked if the Soviet Union was considering such a withdrawal of military support for the ANC, he said it was not.

The Soviet Union did not see it as its task to dictate to the ANC on its strategy, tactics or the basis on which it should enter negotiations, if the chance for peace talks arose.

'But, in principle of course, we can give a piece of advice to our comrades in the ANC. But it depends on the concrete situtation: I mean reasonable advice'.

In the course of the interview, it became clear that a controversial paper delivered last year by another member of the Soviet Institute of African Studies, Gleb Starushenko, did not reflect either the views of the Institute or those of the Soviet government. The fact that the Institute is headed by Anatoly Gromyko, son of the Soviet Union's president, was among the factors which prompted a belief in some quarters that Starushenko was telegraphing a switch in Soviet regional policy.

Starushenko had strongly argued at a conference last year that the ANC should give the white population collective guarantees and group rights. Starushenko proposed the creation of two chambers of parliament in a post-apartheid society. In the second chamber coloureds, Indians, whites and Africans should each have a veto as a group. Starushenko was, in fact, reflecting only his personal views.

Goncharov said the Soviets upheld the view that rights should be guaranteed on an individual basis.

But the 'new thinking' in the Soviet Union, which is often personalised around Communist Party General Secretay Mikhail Gorbachev, meant that research into possible solutions to the conflict was being conducted in a less 'dogmatic' way and in closer 'accordance with present-day realities', according to Goncharov.

'I wouldn't say there will be profound changes. Our principle line and position remains the same. (But) there may be changes and differences in approach to these problems. Changes to behave more realistically, more flexibly, with every

side participating in the (resolution of the) conflict - South Africa itself, the forces of national libration, United States, Angola, Britain, etc; not to reject whoever at once, but to take everything into account and find the right solutions acceptable to everybody'.

But the two main parties in any negotiated settlement would have to be the South African government and the 'forces of national liberation'. The real compromise would have to be achieved between these two.

And the Soviet Union would like to see more 'flexibility' and 'objectivity' from the ANC, less use of 'dogmatic formulations'.

Asked if Soviet-American hosting of a settlement would not result in each super-power being expected to 'deliver' either the South African government or the ANC to the negotiating table with certain compromises already decided (such as the issue of group rights), Goncharov responded: 'That is what they (the United States) are saying now: "Tell your ANC friends to give guarantees and we shall settle this thing". But we are not going to do it. First of all because we don't want to dictate, and because we know the ANC is against it, against group guarantees'.

NATIONAL LIBERATION AND SOCIALISM

The Soviet Union endorsed the ANC's theoretical framework for South Africa, 'colonialism of a special type'.

Goncharov was, however, disturbed at what he detected as an attempt by some ANC members to 'put before the national liberation movement now the tasks of the socialist revolution'.

This will come as a surprise to many ANC members as well as the ANC's left critics.

'Firstly it is necessary to settle the problems of the liberation struggle, and then to come to the next stage of the social revolution in South Africa. If they will insist on putting forward the ideas and principles of the socialist revolution before the settlement of the problems of national liberation, they will lose their allies in the population, they will lose potential allies', said Goncharev.

'I cannot give concrete examples, but, from my point of view I have such an impression from discussions with them. It is a so-called disease in the revolutionary struggle. Lenin called it an "infantile disorder"'.

Goncharov agreed with the formulation that the 'seeds of the socialist revolution can be planted in the national democratic phase.

'I don't say they should stop socialist propaganda, not at all. But at this stage, the stress should be on problems of the national liberation struggle. At the same time, they should prepare to sow the seeds of the socialist revolution. If the ANC stops socialist propaganda, it will not achieve anything. It will be the same organisation as Inkatha or somebody else - there will be no difference between the ANC and other national liberation organisations'.

He saw the most pressing immediate task before the ANC as being 'organisation, organisation of its cadres inside South Africa, political organisation, strong and stable political organisation in every part of South African society - first of all in the trade unions, among workers who are not part of the trade unions, and peasants'.

He foresaw that the struggle inside South Africa would escalate despite state attempts to smash resistance. But an ANC victory 'will take years and hard work'.

'The emotion of the past three years has given birth to hopes of a quick victory, but it will not be very quick', said Goncharov. 'Maybe ten years, I say not less than ten years. Yes, I believe that in the end South Africa will become socialist, maybe not in 25 years but in a century... I am an optimist'.