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SOUTH AFRICA'S DILEMMA

South Africa's powerful disinformation machine has scored some notable hits recently. The big year-end offensive in Angola and subsequent withdrawal to previous positions was projected as a successful pre-emptive strike against SWAPO. The talks with Mozambique which began in Swaziland in December and continued in Pretoria and Maputo in January were presented as a diplomatic victory against an awkward neighbour, hitherto defiant, now compliant.

Both depictions tell more about the effectiveness of South African government influence over the international media than they do about events on the ground. In southern Angola, the South African military have occupied a salient of territory roughly equal in size to the home counties since August 1981. They had exploited this foothold during 1982 to promote Unita probes up the eastern flank of the country towards the north-east, and towards the central highlands. Some initial Unita successes forced the Angolan government to streamline the organisation of defence through the creation of regional military councils, and back it up with better logistics and stronger, better integrated local militia units. In the second half of 1983 the Angolan army, FAPLA, began to roll back the more advanced Unita units, breaking up many of them and regaining the initiative. The big South African push that began in early December 1983 — the fifth such offensive since 1975 — was an attempt to wrest back the initiative by extending the existing salient northwards some 100km deeper into Angolan territory. But the effort to take four key small towns foundered on fierce resistance and South Africans withdrew after taking heavier casualties than at any time since their first attempt to reach Luanda just after Angola's independence in 1975.

Pretoria's reverses on the battlefield have been paralleled by diplomatic setbacks over Namibia. Encouraged in its intransigence over Namibian independence by the Reagan administration's insistence on linking this issue with the presence of Cuban troops in Angola, Pretoria has dug in its heels and refused to implement UN Security Council resolution 435 which defines the transition to independence. The price for this sit-tight policy was paid when France precipitated the collapse of the 5-member Contact Group by suspending its participation, thus bringing to an

end seven years of Western diplomatic cover for Pretoria and of coordinated pressure on SWAPO and Angola to come to terms with South African demands. The Soviet Union, hitherto distanced from the diplomatic manoeuvring over Namibia by the existence of the Contact Group, chose this moment to step in and give South Africa a blunt warning that its aggression would meet a stiff rebuff. The follow-up in January, when a joint meeting of Soviet, Cuban and Angolan leaders decided on increased military aid to Angola, underlined the seriousness of the Soviet intervention, unprecedented in the nearly 18 years of Namibia's armed struggle against the South African occupation.

A Security Council vote in December demonstrated Pretoria's growing isolation: only the US abstained in a vote demanding South Africa's withdrawal from Angola and compliance with UN resolutions on Namibia. Attempts to reverse this trend followed in quick succession: a cease-fire

On its eastern flank, Pretoria's undeclared war against Mozambique suffered comparable reverses during 1983. The South African military's surrogate force, the MNR, originally conceived by Rhodesian intelligence, and forged out of the numerous terror squads created by the Portuguese in the last phase of the colonial war, had peaked in 1982. Rumours of an impending collapse had flooded the capital Maputo, and the Frelimo party had been forced to postpone its 5-yearly congress by a year. With the party springing to life with renewed vigour in the deep-going public discussions that led up to a highly successful fourth congress last April, the government prioritised defence and took the offensive. Military campaigns broke the back of MNR organisation in the southern provinces of Gaza (Dec/Jan 82/83) and Inhambane (Aug-Oct 83) leading to the capture or surrender of some 3,000 persons and the closure of all the key bases in these areas. In strategic terms, this set-back more



South African armoured column pauses near Evale, 55 miles inside Angola, after campaign against Black nationalist guerrillas.

offer (which turned out to be phoney since it was accompanied by a new military offensive and required SWAPO and the Cubans to suspend operations); a declaration of willingness to talk direct to SWAPO, and a dialogue with Angola conducted in Cape Verde through US mediation. None of this, however, could disguise the strains on the apartheid regime's Western alliance which the continuing impasse was generating. All the Reagan administration's feverish diplomatic activity throughout 1983 had produced was a more exposed profile for the crucial Pretoria-Washington nexus, and a growing realisation that the 'linkage' issue had sunk the Contact Group and isolated the US from France, West Germany, and to a lesser extent, even the Thatcher government in Britain.

than outweighed the gain of an easy entry by the MNR into the central province of Zambezia, using Malawi as the springboard.

South Africa's readiness to talk to Mozambique by the end of 1983 can therefore be seen as a switch in tactics — attempting to achieve by diplomatic pressure and economic leverage what destabilisation via the MNR had not yet produced, principally abandonment of support for the ANC and a softer line on apartheid. But President Machel specifically reaffirmed Mozambique's commitment to the ANC, showed no inclination to meet Prime Minister Botha, eschewed the US's and Portugal's attempts to act as intermediaries, and signalled his distrust by announcing on the eve of the January

meetings a major political and organisational strengthening of Mozambique's armed forces.

Frelimo's military thrust was accompanied by a no less successful diplomatic push, aimed at consolidating relations with the socialist countries, winning friends and influencing governments in Western Europe, and thawing relations with the United States which had fallen near zero after Mozambique's expulsion of CIA agents in March 1981. Although not rewarded by significant new investment commitments except from France, or food aid appropriate to the needs created by the severe drought, this diplomatic campaign served to raise awareness of the dangers of South African aggression against the front line states. When Foreign Minister Pik Botha followed President Machel to Western Europe he was disconcerted to find a cooler attitude towards his government, and little tangible political benefit to be gained from the much-publicised constitutional reforms, or the predictable support for them in the whites-only referendum.

Ironically, the reform operation, always essentially cosmetic and masking a consolidation of white power under a new presidential-type system, has backfired on the apartheid regime. Designed with divide-and-rule motives, it has actually exacerbated the slow-burning crisis of white rule by uniting the extra-parliamentary opposition to a degree virtually unknown in the long history of liberation struggle in South Africa, at any rate since at least the late 1950s. The birth of the UDF (United Democratic Front) in 1983 signified the drawing together, on the basis of open support or tacit sympathy for the ideas of the ANC's programme, the Freedom Charter, of the four main strands in the popular resistance to white domination in the period since the 1976 Soweto uprising: the churches and religious groupings, community and urban civic political groups, the youth and student militants, and the independent trade union movement. Although problems remain as regards the latter, both as to its internal cohesion and as to its integration into a united front of action against the government's reforms, the fact is that the regime has never before faced, at one and the same time, such a battery of pressures, ranging over the open mass campaign spearheaded by the UDF, the increasing organisational strength and defiance of the black working class, more widespread and effective sabotage and armed resistance than hitherto, and an extraordinarily

determined local revolt in the East London/Ciskei area sustained in the teeth of savage repression. This situation has also promoted the isolation of those in the Indian and Coloured communities, and those like Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, who have effectively aligned themselves with Pretoria while proclaiming the sincerity of their anti-apartheid convictions.

It is primarily the intensity of this internal conflict, unremitting and potentially explosive, that generates the ferocity of South Africa's undeclared war against its neighbours. Unable to resolve the fundamental problem of the very existence of the apartheid system, the regime turns outward bent on making Southern Africa safe for white South Africa. Combining diplomatic, economic and military pressures, and using blackmail and bludgeon rather than the 'carrot and stick' so glibly invoked in many a press commentary, South Africa risks a generalised war in the region, and seems actively to wish to internationalise still further the regional confrontation. Whether Pretoria succeeds in dragging the major Western powers into this cauldron, despite domestic counter-pressures and at the risk of jeopardising influence in the rest of Africa and the Third World, remains to be seen. But so long as sanctions stay off the agenda for South Africa's trading and financial partners, and so long as there is a Reagan administration committed to 'constructive engagement', so long will people in Mozambique and Angola and possibly also in Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, have to stand to arms and endure the protracted death pangs of their over-bearing neighbour.

Meanwhile, Mrs Thatcher's government masks its total opposition to economic sanctions and its refusal to close loopholes in the UN embargo on arms to South Africa with condemnation of rugby administrators who refuse to toe the boycott line. With more export promotion trips to South Africa scheduled for this year than ever before, the trade and investment links developed over past decades tie British policy into the apartheid state to a degree that can give little comfort to the leaders of the front line states.

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