

January 16, 1978
British Foreign Office, 'Soviet Role in the Horn of Africa'

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Summary:

Drawing upon British concerns with respect to their possible reaction to Moscow's support for Ethiopia against Somalia's aggression, the Foreign Office Planning Staff looks into the wider international implications of the conflict in the Horn.

Original Language:

English

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Transcript - English

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I think there is much sense in this.
Can we discuss please?

CONFIDENTIAL

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Mr Mansfield

cc Private Secretary
PS/Mr Rowlands
PS/Lord Goronwy-Roberts
PS/PUS
Mr Graham
Mr Hibbert
Mr Sutherland
Mr Munro (EAD)
Mr Scott (EESD)

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WORK OFFICE	

SOVIET ROLE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

I am slightly concerned about the posture we may be in danger of taking up with the Russians over their involvement in the Ethiopian/Somali dispute. I think we need to consider carefully what the implications are of, for example, taking the line which (according to Paris telegram No 38 of 11 January) President Giscard advocated to President Carter, namely "that what the Russians were doing was incompatible with détente and that the only way of stopping them would be a strong warning to Moscow from the US President." The implication of taking a strong stand or issuing strong warnings is that some counteraction would be taken if the warnings were not heeded. What do we have in mind, if anything? The danger of being caught out crying wolf seems to me a real one, with possible consequences in the short term both for Western credibility and in the longer term for the Soviet view of the West as a paper tiger.

2. It seems to me important that, when we use the concept of the indivisibility of détente, we should do so in a way which shows it to have meaning, not as a mere slogan. This is easier said than done because many situations are ambiguous and the development of Soviet influence in a country (in this case Ethiopia) is something on which in itself it is difficult for the West to take a strong stand. The sensitivities and freedom of action of the countries concerned must be respected or the West will be on weak ground. Finally the Western posture must be credible. Agreement among Western countries to take military action, break off major negotiations which are a Western as well as Soviet interest or threaten economic relations by restricting trade with the Soviet Union are not credible except in extreme situations.

3. Against this background, except in such extreme situations, the indivisibility of détente can be made effective only through the generalised effect which undesirable Soviet activities in the Third World would have on the East-West political climate and on public confidence in détente. The Russians secured a success (for

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whatever it was worth) in Angola, but they have realised that there were costs to them in important dealings with the West, especially the Americans, through eg the effect on Congressional opinion which is probably not played out even yet.

4. Is the Horn of Africa a situation in which this might occur? There is no easy analogy with Angola. In Ethiopia the Russians are helping a government recognised by the West and a member of the UN to beat back an invasion and maintain its own integrity. It is in a way and on a much larger scale a mirror of the Shaba affair, arguably in a stabilising rather than a destabilising way. Soviet help to the Ethiopians may be seen in the West and in some African and Arab countries as cynical, but it is not illegitimate and it is difficult credibly to make a public policy issue of it. This is not a conclusive argument against warning the Russians against what they are now doing. But it weakens our public posture and is likely to be credible only if, despite this, Congressional hostility to the Soviet Union looked as if it might be increased and affect (eg) SALT II prospects. I do not know if Congress will be swayed by what happens on Ethiopian territory, but unless it is, we shall be on weak ground if we take our stand on current Soviet actions.

5. The Soviet action which we could argue with greater credibility was a threat to détente was a Soviet abetted invasion of Somalia. If this is right the Western approach to the Russians, conducted initially by the Americans but with British, French and German support, would be on the lines that we did not like what the Russians were doing in Ethiopia, but we accepted that Mengistu had a right to defend himself against an illegal invasion. The Somali invasion was a regional conflict which we believed was best resolved on a regional basis, although we were always on the look-out for opportunities to promote solutions, eg through the OAU. But an invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia with Soviet and Cuban assistance would be not just an escalation in regional terms but also in global terms, which could hardly fail to have serious international consequences. It could bring East and West close to confrontation in that the pressure on us to supply arms and other assistance to Siad Barré to defend his territory would be very strong. It was not in the Soviet interest that this should happen since it would indisputably affect détente.

6. It is for consideration whether the opportunity should not be taken to try and develop the code of conduct between East and West which now applies in Europe to other areas of the world. The better the degree of understanding reached between East and West, the less likely it is that détente will be threatened by events outside Europe. We can expect Third World countries in difficulty to appeal to one or other of the major powers for help.

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Each time they get involved on opposite sides, détente will come under strain. The line the West could develop with the Russians might be that spheres of political interest outside Europe are a threat to détente. The massive Soviet presence in Ethiopia will inevitably create a reaction in the West and in the US Congress which will affect important issues like SALT II. Such situations are likely to recur in Africa and elsewhere. Unless East and West can agree on how to handle them, important aspects of their relations are bound to suffer. Instead of seeking to build up positions in client states whose loyalty even in the short term is doubtful, East and West should together seek at times of crisis or conflict to compel the antagonists to submit to mediation/arbitration in the UN or regionally.

B L Crowe
Planning Staff

13 January 1978

Mr Crowe

1. We have also been concerned by your first point, namely that there is a danger in issuing warnings to the Russians which are not followed up. The US have now issued two warnings to the Russians over their interference in the Horn of Africa and there is no sign that either of them has been heeded. Indeed what evidence we have suggests that the Russians are determined to make their present policy in the Horn of Africa succeed. (I was struck by a recent Secret report describing the membership of the senior military committee in Addis Ababa responsible for directing the war on which the Ethiopians are in a minority except for Mengistu's special votes.) We therefore pressed Mr Moose on this aspect this morning. The answer seemed to be that Mr Vance did indeed envisage carrying the warning to the Russians into more potentially effective form. But the Americans are clearly reluctant to involve their bilateral relationship with the Soviet Union at this stage over the Horn and they hope to find other methods of proceeding which will let them off the hook; hence their eagerness for quadripartite talks in New York on 19 January.

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2. You put your finger on the most awkward aspect of the Ethiopia/Somalia conflict. The Russians are in a sense in the right and it is difficult for African countries to criticise them so long as they are helping Ethiopia to resist Somali aggression. We therefore need to lean on the Somalis as much as we can, ~~via~~ ^{and} indirectly through the Arabs, to make a genuine effort to reach a negotiated settlement. This would have to involve withdrawal from the Ogaden whatever concessions they demand in return. If the Somalis were prepared to do this we would have the basis for a dialogue with the Russians to restore peace in the Horn; at present we do not have this basis.

3. On the wider question which you pose in your paragraph 6, there is undoubtedly a need to try and develop a code of conduct between East and West applicable to areas outside Europe. But so far as Africa is concerned, timing will be very important and I do not see how we can make much progress until we have a basis for defusing the present conflict in the Horn.

PRAMansfield
P R A Mansfield

16 January 1978

cc PS
PS/Mr Rowlands
PS/Lord Goronwy-Roberts
PS/PUS
Mr Graham
Mr Hibbert
Mr Sutherland
Mr Munro
Mr Scott ✓

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Mr Mansfield

SOVIET ROLE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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