

NATO FLIRTS WITH SOUTH AFRICA

PATRICK L. SMITH

Recent so-called Anglo-American initiatives in southern Africa and the mild diplomatic pressures that both Washington and London claim to have applied in Pretoria over the past year or so belie a very pressing strategic commitment on the part of the West. The issue at stake involves questions that some segments of the Western defense establishment have been wrestling with at least since the early 1970s, when the first official studies began to appear in print: what should be the nature and extent of the West's strategic commitment to southern Africa's colonial and white-minority regimes, and how can the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as the West's multi-lateral defense body, secure an alliance with the entrenched Nationalist Party in South Africa? What would such an alliance look like in practice?

These questions apply to the entire south Atlantic and Indian Ocean areas, but South Africa is the key to them. An understanding of their importance goes a long way toward explaining Washington's continuing reluctance to criticize South Africa with any real rigor. For considerably more than a decade the survival of the apartheid regime has been viewed in some military circles as an essential link in a global defense policy designed to place greater dependence on well-equipped and politically reliable regional partners. This view is intimately connected with former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's well-known decision early in 1970 to opt for covert support of the Portuguese colonies, Rhodesia, South Africa and the South African occupation of Namibia (South-West Africa). As military, political and diplomatic factors, such views are still active in the determination of U.S. policy toward the regime.

The protection of Western interests in southern Africa by fostering "peaceful change" and "stability"—still the stated policy—has inevitably led to a desire for closer military relations between the West and South Africa, the subcontinent's strongest white regime. With its technological capability and its economic resources, South Africa in particular was ready-made for the Nixon administration's policy of regional military dependence—except that an open alliance with the stubborn proponents of apartheid would of course have to be avoided.

In countries such as Iran, for instance, the lack of a well-developed industrial economy has been an obstacle to the creation of regional partnerships. South Africa's great attraction—aside from its geopolitical position and its economic value to the West—has been that an alliance there would pose no such problem. According to a 1970 group research project headed by Navy Lt. Comdr. Beth F. Coye, published as "An Evaluation of U.S. Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean" in the *Naval*

War College Review, "The Republic of South Africa, isolated from the rest of the outside world because of its apartheid policy, possesses the infrastructure for a naval establishment which could contest control of the waters around the strategic Cape of Good Hope." South Africa now has what is easily the most powerful military force in Africa, and it is largely supplied by the West.

The problem, however, was how to justify the desired close relationship with a regime that imposed on its people a system of racial discrimination so bitterly condemned by world opinion. Defense strategists could not argue plausibly for military support for South Africa in order to preserve a valuable ally from the effects of majority rule. Behind a diplomatic screen, therefore, theories were being developed to make military ties with South Africa acceptable.

Coye's lead paragraph, with its assumption of the need to "contest control," hints at much of what has come to be known as "the Cape route theory." At the time of the theory's formulation—through such projects as Coye's—the United States was beginning to implement its decision to offer covert support to the minority regimes of southern Africa in the interest of regional "stability." Other NATO countries had already embarked on similar policies. The value of the Cape route theory was that it would permit closer military association with South Africa and other states without calling for support for the white regimes against the growing "instability" caused by African liberation movements.

Rather, the theory relied on a supposed power vacuum in the Indian Ocean, on the importance of routes by which the West receives much of its oil and other commodities, and on a supposed increase of Soviet "blue-water" capability in the Indian Ocean. The theory argues that these factors combine to present the West with a dangerous threat to some of its strategic supply lines.

But at bottom the Cape route argument is no more than an elaborate justification for an increased U.S. naval presence in the Indian Ocean and eventually an overt military alliance between South Africa and NATO. A NATO presence in South Africa could be a considerable factor in an armed confrontation between the country's minority regime and forces of national liberation. The United States, Britain and France already have elaborate air, naval and communications facilities that stretch from Masirah, off the Omani coast in the Arabian Sea, south to Réunion, off the coast of Madagascar. In addition, South Africa maintains a large naval base and its Silvermine communications center at Simonstown, on the Cape of Good Hope—facilities intended in part to act as lures on the West.

NATO and South African facilities in the south Atlantic and Indian Ocean areas far outweigh Soviet naval capabilities in the region. That much has been made

Patrick Smith is a journalist and editor now studying international affairs at Columbia University.

plain by at least two well-placed sources. One is former CIA Director William Colby, who has testified before a Senate Armed Services subcommittee that the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean is "relatively small and inactive." The other source is retired Rear Adm. Gene LaRocque. As director of the Center for Defense Information in Washington, LaRocque has stated that defense analysts "exaggerate the Soviet naval threat in the Indian Ocean." These estimates of actual Soviet strength in the region, moreover, were advanced before the current U.S. attempt to realign Somalia through military-aid packages. With a strategic position on the Horn of Africa and a Soviet missile-storage facility in Berbera, Somalia has served as an important argument for the Cape route theory—so important, in fact, that Kissinger, when he was Secretary of State, ignored an opportunity to win Somalian favor through arms supplies, with Saudi Arabia acting as an intermediary.

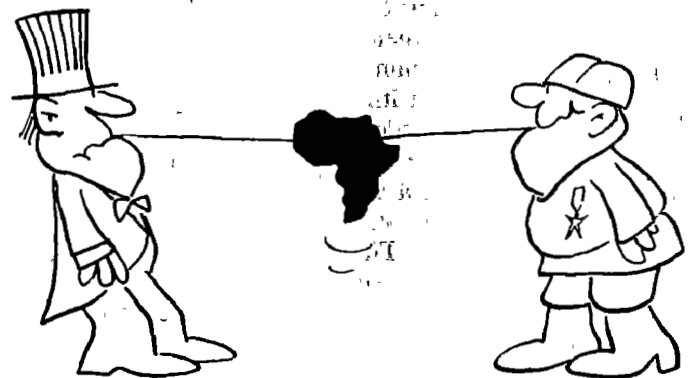
Much of what Coye's research project termed "the continued Soviet naval presence" in the region can be attributed to the Soviet maritime fleet, not its Navy. And it could be argued that the Soviets' chief competitor in Africa just now is not the West but China, with which it has been vying for influence in central and southern African nations. Short of a world war, a former U.N. consultant has pointed out, there is little possibility that the Soviets would take any steps to cut routes as important to the West as those around the Cape. Indeed, the most recent National Security Council study to be released on comparative naval strength, made public in March by Rep. Les Aspin (D., Wis.), shows that the United States and its allies have almost three times the tonnage—8.1 million—and twice the number of surface combat vessels of the combined Soviet-bloc Navies.

Despite its flaws, however, some NATO strategists have made considerable use of the Cape route theory in the years since its formulation. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, arguments ran both for and against the extension of NATO south of the Tropic of Cancer, with little action being taken to implement any new policy. But in 1972 the debate on "the Soviet Maritime Threat" reached the North Atlantic Assembly, a NATO advisory body. In November of that year NATO's Military Committee issued a report in Bonn on the need to extend NATO's influence south of the Tropic. The report also noted the need to cooperate with South Africa in any such venture. Then in June 1973, NATO's Supreme Atlantic Command (SACLANT), with headquarters in Norfolk, Va., was authorized to begin contingency planning for the protection of the Cape sea route. This was the first project ever undertaken by NATO outside its acknowledged field of operations. The strategic threat to the Indian Ocean and south Atlantic sea routes was its justification.

Although the 1973 study remained secret for some time, a group of scholars working for the U.N.'s Special Committee on the Ending of Colonialism learned of the SACLANT project in the spring of 1974. They sounded a warning against the potential for military ties with

South Africa in the context of an analysis of the direction of Western defense policy as a whole. "NATO has not yet formally extended the area of its activities," they wrote. "But it has begun to concern itself with events to the south of the Tropic of Cancer. . . . A NATO command is now actively engaged in contingency planning for operations in the Southern Hemisphere. And the supporters of defense cooperation with the white regimes [in southern Africa] have strengthened their position within the system of NATO institutions. This means—it means now—involvement with the white regimes of southern Africa."

The authors also declared that these new developments within NATO were intended to preserve the status quo in the minority states of Africa, not to protect sea routes from a supposed Soviet threat. "If the white regimes begin to lose control of important areas of the subcontinent," they said, "the major Western powers will want to provide military aid on a much larger scale. . . . The effort to extend NATO would thus appear to be part of the contingency planning in the broad strategy of preventive intervention." This thesis was subsequently acknowledged in private interviews with NATO officials.



Bas, Tachydromos (Greece)

The 250-page report produced for the decolonization committee was subsequently suppressed at the U.N., largely, one of its authors said recently, by pressure from the U.S. mission and other Western representatives. But the suppression itself was a significant indication of the conscious direction some Western strategists were taking in southern Africa. The U.N. study did become public in Europe, where political storms quickly developed in several NATO countries. The SACLANT project was finally acknowledged by NATO officials in Brussels in May 1974.

NATO's apparent response to the exposure of the SACLANT study was to recommend the development of bilateral ties between NATO countries and South Africa in lieu of a single, multilateral alliance, formal or informal. The purpose to be served, though, was the same: to familiarize Western Navies with South African facilities, and to work directly with South African naval units. The same year the SACLANT study was exposed France staged a large naval maneuver off the Cape of Good Hope, and Britain held naval exercises with South Africa in August and October of 1974. These latter consisted of "weapons training," as *The Times* (of London) noted at the time, training that would benefit "both

sides." Later that year it was also reported that Britain had been secretly planning to negotiate with South Africa on the use of Simonstown as a NATO naval base.

At a NATO summit meeting in Ottawa in May 1974, Kissinger assured NATO leaders that the United States "holds the view that events in troubled areas in many parts of the world can influence security." The extension of NATO's field of operations was the subject of the discussion. A year after Kissinger's remarks in Canada, then-Secretary of Defense Schlesinger proposed to NATO's Defense Planning Committee that the alliance integrate South Africa's Simonstown facility with the NATO codification system. And a report in the South African *Financial Gazette* at about the same time noted that "West Germany, easily the most powerful of the European NATO partners, is 'leaning' heavily on the British to take a more realistic approach to Simonstown," a reference to the Labour Government's opposition to British attempts to negotiate for the port's use. The information was attributed to "West German defense sources."

All of these instances indicate the degree of momentum that has been gained over the years by Western policy-makers concerned with the southern oceans, a momentum that current administrations have shown no substantial signs of deflecting.

The April 1974 collapse of the Caetano dictatorship in Portugal was a major setback to military strategists concerned with developing a Western presence in the south Atlantic and Indian Ocean areas. It meant the loss of favored administrations in Angola and Mozambique, regimes that had been supported for years, and where armed pro-Western fronts had been receiving covert U.S. aid since the early days of the Kennedy administration. It meant that South Africa was now the only feasible partner left for a Western policy of regional military dependence. And for South Africa itself, the collapse of Portuguese colonialism left a gaping hole in its regional defense structure.

Scarcely two weeks after the April 25th coup, South Africa's chief of staff, Adm. Hugo Biermann, was in Washington on a tourist visa. According to reports published at the time, Biermann conferred with the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, with conservative members of Congress, and with the Acting Secretary of the Navy at the time, J. William Middendorf II. Given the climate of developing closeness between Atlantic alliance members and South Africa, it is not difficult to imagine the subject of their conversations. More recently, NATO Comdr. Alexander Haig was present during Kissinger's second round of talks with South African Prime Minister John Vorster. Again, it seems unlikely that Haig quietly turned up in Zurich last year for the "personal visits" then cited.

South Africa has also seen a positive side to events since 1974. Its military men were clearly overjoyed by Soviet and Cuban involvement in the conflict in Angola that followed the colony's independence in November 1975. In keeping with the arguments of the Cape route theory, much has since been made of the deep-water

capacity of such ports as Luanda, Beira and Maputo—although neither Angola nor Mozambique possesses ports or facilities with anywhere near the capacity of those in South Africa. Nor has either country shown any sign of offering the Soviet Navy the use of what resources it has.


Attracting the West into an alliance, though, has been part of South Africa's military and political strategy for some time. A 1969 South African defense study described the country's ports and communications facilities as "indispensable to allied naval forces in the south Atlantic and Indian Ocean areas." And Soviet and Cuban assistance in Angola has been, in that sense, an opportunity to argue openly for alliances that South Africa has obviously not missed. It is no wonder that a *New York Times* report from Simonstown in December 1975, at the height of the Angolan war, described South African military officials there as reflecting "a barely concealed joy that because of neighboring Angola the Western powers may have to accept South Africa as a full-fledged partner."

Western allies have meanwhile pressed efforts to avoid direct contact with South Africa on the military level, while still achieving sought-after support for a presence in the region. One such possibility may lie in the Republic of Transkei. South Africa launched its first Bantustan as an independent republic in October 1976, but the Transkei has since failed to gain any significant degree of international recognition. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has rejected its claims to sovereignty.

Even before independence was announced, there was talk of establishing a U.S. naval facility in Port St. Johns, Transkei's deep-water port on the Indian Ocean. A July 1976 article in the Army's *Military Review* detailed the proposal. Its author, Maj. Wesley Groesbeck of Army intelligence, argued that because of continued U.S. arms embargoes against South Africa, a facility in the Transkei would solve the problems of establishing a base in the Indian Ocean.

The official U.S. position on the Transkei—that it will follow any position taken by the OAU—should preclude such a base, but several months after the appearance of Groesbeck's article, when Kissinger was conducting his shuttle diplomacy in Africa, London-based *African Development* quoted "high level officials [who] admitted that Transkei recognition was 'under consideration.'"

Since the Transkei's independence is a subterfuge in the continued drive to preserve apartheid for the bulk of South Africa, any NATO association with that alleged state would be a big step toward the inclusion of South Africa among the nations of the Western military alliance. □



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