

February 15, 1983

**Letter from Lawrence S. Eagleburger to R. F. Botha,
Enclosing 'Soviets in Southern Africa'**

Citation:

"Letter from Lawrence S. Eagleburger to R. F. Botha, Enclosing 'Soviets in Southern Africa'", February 15, 1983, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Available at www.aluka.org. Included in "Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974," edited by Sue Onslow and Anna-Mark Van Wyk. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/118297>

Summary:

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger forwards to "Pik" Botha a US assessment of Soviet strategy and actions in Southern Africa. The assessment notes that by decreasing the security concerns of Angola and Mozambique, they would decrease their dependence on the Soviet Union, and that, because of this, overt military intervention should be avoided.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

[Forwarded to R.F. Botha under cover of Lawrence Eagleburger's letter of 15 February 1983]

SECRET

The Soviets in Southern Africa

-- As I know you are aware, it would be too easy for both of us to see the question of Soviet motivations in southern Africa as an either/or question. We believe it is unlikely that the Soviets are directly orchestrating Angolan and Mozambican contacts with South Africa or that these two countries are acting strictly at Moscow's behest. On the other hand, neither Dos Santos nor Machel is pursuing such contacts without careful reference to Soviet views and interests.

-- Our judgment is that the reasons for these developments lie between these two poles. We also believe that the new situation presents us both with major opportunities for dealing with all three parties in the months ahead.

The Soviets

-- An analysis of possible Soviet motivations in southern Africa is one important part of a view of their overall strategic objectives in this period of leadership transition.

-- Andropov has stressed continuity in Soviet foreign policy during his first months in office as a way of reassuring the military, the bureaucracy and Soviet allies that there will be no sudden shifts detrimental to their interests. At the same time, however, he has worked hard to demonstrate a new vigor and activism and to associate himself personally with important diplomatic initiatives.

-- The Soviets will try to achieve their objectives with the appearance of flexibility rather than real change in substance. We must prevent them from succeeding in this endeavor. If we can succeed in sustaining pressure and demanding real change, there is some reason to believe that other factors will work in this direction as well. Andropov's desires to consolidate his position, avoid the risk of highly visible foreign policy setbacks, and deal with domestic economic problems all argue for his trying to reduce external pressures. There is a precedent for such behavior in the 1953-56 leadership transition period when the Soviets agreed to a settlement on Austria's status and on the Korean peninsula.

-- In these first months, Andropov's energies have focused on several key areas of paramount importance to Soviet interests and in which Moscow sees opportunities for some immediate gains. One area is Europe, where the Soviets hope to prevent INF developments and to drive wedges between the U.S. and its allies. Another is East Asia, where the new leadership is moving to follow up the Brezhnev initiative towards China.

-- In both areas Moscow is trying to project an image of reasonableness and flexibility in order to quiet European and Chinese suspicions of Soviet motives.

-- A large part of this strategy is to mute regional conflicts and keep them in the background. In their propaganda and public relations efforts, therefore, the Soviets have tried to suggest a more forthcoming attitude toward a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Deployment of SA-5's to Syria is worrisome, but in general they have kept a surprisingly low profile in both the Mideast and Southeast Asia and have remained cautious on further commitments in Central America.

-- Furthermore, except in the case of China, the Soviets appear to prefer at this point to keep their Third World friends and allies -- Vietnam, Afghanistan, Cuba, Angola, and Mozambique -- in front in diplomatic discussions. If there is progress, they avoid the charge they were responding to pressure, if not, they avoid the blame for failure.

-- Recent Soviet assertions of support for Cuba and Vietnam, as well as the Syrian SA-5 deployment, indicate that Moscow intends to consolidate ties with its principal long-standing allies. But even in these relationships, it has moved carefully to avoid confrontations which could tarnish its "peace-loving" image in this "Year of the Missile" in Europe.

-- Allowing a certain degree of flexibility in southern Africa would fit this pattern -- and this sense of priorities -- perfectly. In addition, the Soviets may have specific reasons, relating to the recent history of their involvement in the region, for exercising caution. Among these considerations are the diplomatic defeat they suffered for backing the wrong side in Zimbabwe, the increasing costs of sustaining pro-Soviet regimes in Maputo and Luanda and the special place their interventions in Africa have in causing the collapse of détente with the U.S. The Soviets have good reason to maintain this publicly cautious attitude as long as they are not threatened with public humiliation or faced with a direct challenge to their fundamental interests which they must answer.

-- Notwithstanding all of the above, there has not been a change in the Soviets' strategic objectives. They remain determined and formidable adversaries and we will have to watch carefully whether ex-KGB chief Andropov engages in higher levels of covert action, deception, and military support of clients at the same time he is showing diplomatic flexibility. Indeed raising the ante in political action and arms supplies could go hand-in-hand with new flexibility. At the very least, we can expect the Soviets to protect their existing position through these means as the diplomatic game becomes more complex.

The Africans:

-- Such a Soviet approach to regional conflicts in general and such to southern Africa in particular creates a situation in which Moscow's African clients, despite their great dependence on the USSR, have probably acquired some room for maneuver on their own. Certainly, the regimes in Luanda and Maputo have enough reasons to take the opportunity to use this freedom of action.

-- Both regimes face a stubborn domestic insurgency and a deteriorating regional environment which threaten their long-term chances for survival. They also may have noticed that Soviet priorities lie elsewhere and therefore come to doubt the staying power and strength of the Soviet commitment to their security.

-- In any event, both regimes appear to be taking initiatives, domestically and diplomatically, to improve their prospects by creating more options for resolving the various difficulties they face.

-- On the diplomatic front, in both cases, there has been an effort to diversify relations, which has included not only contacts with South Africa but also an improved dialogue with the West and other important nations outside the Soviet bloc. Both Angola and Mozambique have sought to sustain a dialogue with us and both have moved recently to renew long-dormant ties with China.

The Western Response:

-- The Soviets and the Africans cannot know, of course, where the new diplomatic movement in southern Africa will lead. Neither can we. But it is definitely in our interest to use this period of some diplomatic flexibility to try to shape events in southern Africa to our liking.

-- In order for the United States and South Africa to succeed, we will have to walk a careful line between firmness and flexibility. Our handling of the diplomatic opportunities before us must be resourceful and subtle. The Soviets have not given up on their long-term objectives or their desire to disrupt any negotiations which threaten to reduce their influence in the area. On the other hand, they have apparently decided not to make southern Africa a major priority in their overall strategy for the time being and have thus left their position open to gradual erosion through our diplomatic efforts.

-- Our opportunity, therefore, is to move ahead vigorously in our separate bilateral contacts with Angola and Mozambique, using these newest channels of communication to reinforce and complement the Contact Group effort to achieve a broader regional settlement.

-- If we can move forward in these diplomatic negotiations to reduce Angolan and Mozambican security concerns, and thereby their dependence on the Soviets, we may be able to create a new situation in the region which Moscow will find it difficult to reverse. At that point, given other priorities and commitments, the Soviets may find they do not have the capability to reverse a significant shift in regional relationships even if the new configuration is inimical to their interests.

-- We could lose this opportunity, however, through a sharp military confrontation in the region. This development would drive the Angolans and Mozambicans back into the Soviet orbit and could lead the Soviets themselves to a re-evaluation of the risk to their basic position in the area, resulting in an escalation of their commitment to southern Africa. This could completely polarize the nations of southern Africa and relinquish our current diplomatic advantage.

-- It is obviously in the West's advantage to maximize the room for diplomacy in the region. Through diplomacy we can create an alternative for black nations to continued or increased dependency on Soviet arms and Cuban soldiers -- an alternative which holds the promise of peace and economic development that the Soviets are unable to provide.

-- In the months ahead, therefore, in our view, our interests clearly lie in dampening the possibilities of a military flare-up and making the most of the promising diplomatic opportunities which have been placed before us.

DECL: OADR