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BRIEF REPORT NO. 19

THE ARUSHA CONFERENCE: MOVES TOWARD A NEW GROUPING OF STATES IN SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA

The Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference, which was held at Arusha, Tanzania, on 3 and 4 July, 1979, was designed to prepare the groundwork for a new grouping of states in Southern and Central Africa. Organised by the five Frontline states (Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia), the Conference set itself the ambitious task of drawing the black states of Southern Africa out of the South African orbit by developing, as a first step, a new transport and communications infrastructure not dependent on South Africa.

From politics to economics in the Frontline

The Frontline states form a loose political association without formal machinery - a Southern African variant of the nineteenth century Concert of Europe. The Arusha Conference indicates that the Frontline states intend giving new content to their grouping by making it an instrument for economic development. Underlying this is an important political motive, viz. to reduce the black states' dependence on South Africa. There are, of course, other considerations, too - specifically, the coordinating of foreign aid programmes and the promotion of industrial and trade co-operation between the black states. In Arusha parlance, the Conference aim was to create a new economic relationship in Southern (and Central) Africa.

The list of participants at the Arusha Conference is significant. Apart from Frontline leaders, there were representatives from Western aid donors, the European Economic Community, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. This was a clear acknowledgment by the Frontline states that, to realise their ideals, they depended on external, specifically Western, aid. The West's involvement in the creation of the envisaged new economic bloc points to Western interest in the matter. Indeed, "tis folly for one nation to look for disinterested favours from another", as George Washington once said. Western backing for a new economic alignment could, among other things, stem Soviet designs and serve to stabilise the region. It should be added that specific funds were neither requested by the Frontline states nor offered by Western representatives, but the Western nations viewed the scheme with sympathy and would probably contribute funds, perhaps through

a Southern African Development Bank. Whether Western generosity would, however, match the figure of R1 250 million suggested at the Conference, is open to serious doubt.

As a first step to reduce their dependence on the white south, the Frontline states have decided to set up a regional transport and communications commission charged with responsibility for developing a transport and communications network in Southern and Central Africa, which would not be dependent on South Africa. Apart from practical considerations, there is also symbolic significance in the decision to give precedence to transport and communications. A joint declaration by the Frontline states spelled it out:

The dominance of the Republic of South Africa has been reinforced and strengthened by its transport and communications system. Without the establishment of an adequate regional transport and communications system, our other areas of co-operation become impractical.

It was estimated by the conference that it would take a decade to develop the new network. This seems a rather over-optimistic assessment, given the scale, complexity and costliness of the plan.

It should also be borne in mind that, even if the new transport and communications system could be developed in ten or even twenty years, the success of its operation would require a number of further vital conditions, viz. political stability and security, and the efficient management of the system. This obviously cannot be guaranteed, and African states have, moreover, a very chequered record in meeting these conditions. The Benguela and Tazara railway lines bear this out.

Membership of the proposed new economic grouping would not simply be limited to the five Frontline states. The Conference decided that Zimbabwe Rhodesia, Namibia, Lesotho, Malawi and Swaziland could eventually join. In the case of Zimbabwe Rhodesia and Namibia, they would obviously only be admitted to the bloc once African states have accorded them formal recognition. Lesotho and Swaziland would probably be able to join without difficulty. Even if membership were to have little more than symbolic significance, this could be important to Lesotho in particular, which has in recent years been at pains to demonstrate its political independence from South Africa. As for Malawi, its admission to the new bloc would undoubtedly be seen by the Frontline states as a means to curtail, if not sever, Malawi's economic and also diplomatic ties with South Africa.

The Arusha Conference was not very clear on the exact nature of the envisaged new grouping. President Khama of Botswana, who delivered the keynote address, spoke of "the development of Southern Africa as an integrated region" and of the "integration" of the various economies, and he approvingly cited the example of the EEC. On the other hand, it was made clear at Arusha that monetary and institutional union was not contemplated and that national independence would not be dismantled in favour of a "super state". Given the fact that the Frontline grouping has until now been a political association, it can be assumed that the planned economic bloc would not be without an important political role. In fact, the existing political role could only be strengthened once it was backed up by some economic muscle.

An interesting comment which could be made with regard to the envisaged co-operation, is that inter-state integration usually starts with functional co-operation and then proceeds to the more contentious political sphere. In the Frontline case, however, the process has been the reverse: it started off as a loose political grouping and has now decided to "spill-over" into the functional sphere.

Some implications for South Africa

If the new economic relationship of black states materialised, it would be a serious setback to South Africa's proposed "constellation" of Southern African states. The Frontline grouping would detach members of the "South African bloc", viz. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, and eventually perhaps also Zimbabwe Rhodesia and Namibia. The "Arusha bloc" could in effect be considered as a counter to the "Pretoria bloc". It should, however, be added that a state can belong to two different groupings - or subsystems - at the same time.

The success of the "Arusha bloc" would further accentuate South Africa's isolation. The Republic could, moreover, for the first time be confronted with an opposing economic bloc in the region - and one which would carry considerable political clout.

Western backing for the proposed new grouping would give it added importance and respectability (not to mention viability) and thus make it an association which could not simply be brushed aside by South Africa. By supporting the "Arusha bloc" financially, the Western powers would be increasing their material stake in the region and hence their interest in peace and stability. This necessarily puts South Africa in a spot.

Finally, the history of regional integration in Africa is not an entirely encouraging one. To translate the ideals of Arusha into reality would require a great deal of political will - and funds.

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