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THE S.A. INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Background and Outlook

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For nations of the world involved in commerce or maritime affairs and interested in the strategic particulars of the Indian Ocean, Africa and the Middle East, the significance of the Horn of Africa lies in its geography and its geopolitical potential.

Within the vicinity of the Horn may be found the entrance to the Red Sea, the mouth of the Persian Gulf and one of the major air corridors from Western Europe to southern and central Africa. Currently comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, South and North Yemen and Oman, this region has, since ancient times, served as a communications route for powers concerned with the extension of their influence into any one or all three of the geostrategic regions - The Indian Ocean, Africa and the Middle East.

In geopolitically interrelated areas there frequently predominates one power which feels entitled to claim paramountcy or a leadership role, either due to the fact that it stands above its neighbours with its central geographic location, or the size of its territory or population, or its politico-economic military strength. In the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia would appear to be the state historically favoured to emerge with such a status.

Ethiopia and the Horn

Due to its history, its central geographic position and the leadership tradition of its elite, Ethiopia held such a status through much of its history until the advance of the European colonial powers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Ethiopia comprises an area of 472 000 square miles. Its population is estimated to be in excess of 27 millions, 45%/50% being Muslims and 35%/40% being Christians with the remainder either pagan or animist.

Rulers of Ethiopia in this century have attempted to consolidate the peoples of the central highlands (Tigreans, Amharas and some Oromo) while simultaneously retaining control of the outlying regions originally conquered by Menelik and his Imperial successor, Haile Selassie. These incorporate Oromo areas to the east, inhabited also by Somali nomads, and the semi-Muslim Province of Eritrea, annexed by the Emperor in 1962, subsequent to its federation with Ethiopia by the UN in 1952.

The Emperor tenuously held his Empire together with feudal bonds that ruptured with his deposition by the ruling Marxist military junta in 1974. Nationalization, peasant mobilization and perpetual unrest has characterized the revolution. Previously the fringe areas had been retained partially

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by force and skilled external diplomacy. The Eritrean Liberation Front (initially Soviet-supported) and other secessionist movements, which were a reaction to the Emperor's forceful annexation in 1962, had been restrained by those Arab states on the Red Sea such as Egypt, the Sudan and Saudi Arabia, whose support was essential for the guerillas.

Arab Interests

Saudi Arabia is emerging as an important regional power with large financial resources, and the Arab states of the Red Sea (with exceptions such as Marxist orientated South Yemen) are concerned over the kind of independent Eritrean state which might result: a state requiring subsidization, constantly embattled with Ethiopia and portending another Angola-type campaign. The precedent set by Eritrean secession could prove disastrous for other states in the area, such as Sudan, which has potential secessionists in the south and the west. It is also significant that secession would constitute a violation of one of the fundamental tenets of the OAU - that territorial boundaries, as inherited from the colonial powers, should not be altered.

Initially, however, Ethiopia ignored the moderate overtures from Saudi Arabia and Sudan, and increasingly the latter have been giving support to the Eritrean movements against the Ethiopian Government, in spite of the above concern about secession. Moreover, Addis Ababa perhaps realized too late that Eritrean secession movements might encourage other secessionist groups, e.g. in the Ogaden.

The Ogaden

The Ogaden is a desolate region located in the eastern third of Ethiopia, populated by nomads of Somali origin who had little respect for national boundaries. Except for limited oil reserves, the Ogaden is of little strategic value, apart from vast expanses of inhospitable territory. However, it has been the source of much historical dispute, and when Somalia gained independence in 1960, it pressed claims to the land lost through colonial division.

Somalia

Arising from the unification of former Italian and British Somaliland, this state, with a population of 3 millions, is considerably more homogenous ethnically and religiously, than Ethiopia. However, until the 1969 military intervention under Major-General Mohammed Siad Barre, the country was split between a pro-Arab trend aimed at the unification of the Somali-inhabited territories and a pro-African group inclined to consolidate the new state.

Siad Barre's socialist domestic policies gave rise to close foreign ties with the USSR, to the extent that combined Soviet naval and air facilities were built in Somalia. Soviet reconnaissance aircraft operating from Somalia, for instance, monitored the main Western shipping routes during Operation Vesna/Okean 75 in 1975 and Soviet naval craft rehearsed the interdiction of Western merchant vessels on the Cape sea route and en route to Japan.

Somalia also claimed that Ethiopia had 'colonized' Western Somalia (Ogaden). Indeed, the five pointed star on the Somali flag serves as a constant reminder of the Somali desire to reclaim its 'lost' territories - the northern third of Kenya, the Ogaden where the Western Somali Liberation Front was active, and the newly independent state of Djibouti.

The Significance of Djibouti

Ethiopian-Somali relations deteriorated with the independence of this tiny littoral state, comprising approximately 240 000 inhabitants who would conceivably choose union with Somalia, were Djibouti not so economically dependent on Ethiopia. Here is the terminus for the Addis Ababa railway and Ethiopia's principal port for imports and exports. (See DJIBOUTI INDEPENDENCE, Brief Report, 28 June, 1977).

Super Power Involvement : East vs. West

In early 1975 Somalia assisted in the formation of the Western Somali Liberation Front, dedicated to incorporating the Ogaden into Somalia. In April Ethiopia expelled the US military assistance group and by the time the US advisers left she was already receiving Soviet equipment. At the same time the representation of Oromo people in the Addis Ababa government gradually became weaker after Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam had seized complete power in February, deposing the Oromo Brigadier, Teferi Benti. The changes made Ethiopia more vulnerable to a greater and more co-ordinated attack from Somalia than had previously seemed possible - first by support for insurgency and later by intervention of regulars.

While Soviet sponsorship for Ethiopia meant the loss of Somali facilities, the USSR presumably intended to retain control of Somalia's military machine, and thus limit the Ogaden offensive and ultimately create a Soviet sponsored federation of allied Marxist states across the Horn of Africa, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and the already Marxist South Yemen. But Somalia expelled Soviet personnel in Oct./Nov. 1977.

The War

The well-planned Somali campaign began in June 1977, when the Addis Ababa-Djibouti rail-link was cut, hampering supplies both to the capital and to defenders of the region. (This link has continued to be vulnerable to sabotage.) According to Ethiopian claims regular Somali troops, tanks and aircraft became involved from July 23 onwards. The Ethiopian outposts in the southern Ogaden were swiftly captured and Somali forces quickly advanced to within a few miles of Jijiga and Harar, while the Western Somali Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front penetrated far into the provinces of Bale and Sidamo and pushed forward units into the Ethiopian hinterland.

Even the Ethiopian position based on Jijiga, Harar and Dire Dawa fell to Somali infiltration of the highlands between Dire Dawa and the other two towns. With the fall of Dire Dawa and Gode, deep in the Ogaden, the Ethiopians lost their only remaining concrete runway in the operational area.

With intense fighting and heavy casualties on both sides it is significant that the Ethiopian recovery has been no less impressive than the speed of the Somali assault. The US-equipped Ethiopian airforce seems to have outflown its Soviet-equipped Somali opposition. The influx of Soviet equipment and Cuban advisers into Ethiopia, together with the abandonment of their former proxies in the region, such as Somalia and the Eritrean Liberation Front, clearly indicates that this is a conflict which the USSR intends Ethiopia should win.

The People's Republic of China

It is also significant that China, conspicuously passive in Africa since the Angolan debacle, has offered aid and assistance to Somalia, in conjunction

with the British and American expressions of concern (although Western aid has, as yet, to materialise, apart from recent West German loans).

Five years ago the Chinese were widely prevalent in the continent and particularly in southern Africa - Tanzania, Zaire, Zambia, Angola and Mocambique - but after Angola the Chinese realized their inability to compete with the USSR both in terms of logistical supply over long distances and the acquisition of base facilities in Africa. It is notable that China's foreign policy in Africa is now actively pursued only in those spheres where she is also confident of Western diplomatic support and possible military involvement.

The Outlook

The Ethiopian Government's approach effectively rules out compromise with the Eritreans on secession. Although it may be relevant that the Marxist ELF has not been publicly condemned among Ethiopia's enemies of late, the overwhelming impression is that, though there may be considerable casualties, both resulting from the actual battle and concomitant starvation due to the disruption of supplies, neither the Ethiopian Government, nor its Soviet sponsor, with its considerable talent for survival, is willing to compromise either the revolutionary principles involved or the inherited boundaries of Imperial Ethiopia.

In 1974 an American adviser to Ethiopia predicted that, in a war between Ethiopia and Somalia, the latter would make initial gains, followed by a protracted but devastating defeat, carrying Ethiopian forces to Somalia's very coastline. Such a projection is now a considered possibility within three months of writing. Should the USSR and their Cuban proxies (now estimated at some 2 000 in Ethiopia) have this aim (not simply of giving assistance to defend Ethiopia's own borders) and be allowed to succeed by a reluctant West - as happened in the somewhat different Angola case - the ramifications for the rest of Africa, and indeed for Western oil supplies, could prove extremely serious.

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