

# THE EARNESTNESS OF BEING UNIMPORTANT

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Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's new team of foreign policy experts has brought important changes to the once sterile, Brezhnev-style approach to southern Africa. This view is now shared even by South African sceptics who, until the visit by Bavarian Minister President Franz Joseph Strauss, questioned the sincerity of what Gorbachev calls his "new political thinking in foreign affairs".

However, less agreement exists about the extent and implications of these changes. On the one hand, analysts both here and abroad have raised the possibility of a Soviet South African secret deal and a realignment of South Africa's foreign policy. Feverish imaginations, desperately looking for means through which to reverse South Africa's isolation, have eagerly, if unrealistically, embraced such dreams.

At the other end of the spectrum, some students of Soviet politics have cautioned against over-emphasising the extent of the perceived changes in the Soviet approach. It is highly unlikely, they argue, that the Soviet Union will effect a *volte face* on the issue of apartheid and "strike a deal with the South African government". Furthermore, they continue, evidence concerning a change in the Soviet approach is predominantly of a nonofficial nature, ie it can be ascribed more to "glasnost", which allows academics and journalists freedom to raise controversial issues, than to an official reassessment of policy. In fact, they conclude, actual Soviet policy during the past three years has shown little signs of a reversal, and has actually led to an even closer alliance between Moscow and the ANC.

As far as the latter position effectively challenges the first, it is worth subscribing to. Yet, as I hope to show, there is evidence of a changed Soviet approach.

This evidence comes in three general categories. Firstly, Soviet academic papers, books and journalistic pieces have suggested recently that some Soviet writers are having second thoughts about their traditional view of South Africa. In general, four themes

have been of importance: Soviet authors are now much more sceptical about the prospects for a socialist revolution in South Africa; in promoting the chances of a negotiated settlement, Soviet authors have encouraged the liberation movement to take white interests seriously; notable Soviet specialists on South Africa have been attempting to break down some of the stereotypes their Soviet readers have about South Africa, its government and its problems; and Soviet academics have suggested that the USSR and the US should work out a joint approach to the issue.

Not all of these ideas are completely novel. Soviet sensitivity about white interests dates back to the Twenties when the then Communist Party of South Africa had a large white membership. In addition, during the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, Soviet authors wrote about white interests and the divisions in the white community. The re-thinking about socialism is new, as are the conscious attempts to break down stereotypes and the cultivation of a *modus vivendi* with the US concerning South Africa.

Refreshing as these writings may be for a readership which has been brought up on stale, ritualistic and dogmatic Soviet reports about South Africa, this category of evidence, if taken alone, does not constitute a Soviet policy change as such. The old totalitarian view of Soviet society which saw every public utterance as the official view, no longer applies. Sceptics who argue that much of this evidence should be viewed as the private opinions of journalists and academics revelling in the freedom of glasnost allows them are correct, but only to a point.

Yes, glasnost does complicate the task of the scholar who tries to deduce policy from Soviet publications. Yet, despite their freedom, journalists and academics in the Soviet Union still cover their backs by making sure that at least someone in authority will protect them if they write controversial pieces. It is safe to argue, therefore, that some of the ideas find support in official circles or that someone in authority

has an interest in allowing such ideas to surface. Finally, today's new ideas will be tomorrow's conventional wisdom. One cannot, therefore, rule out the potential future official endorsement of these views and the style of reasoning accompanying them.

With the second category of evidence, analysts are on safer ground, though it may not be as easy to interpret this evidence as is sometimes believed. On the official level, a few statements were made by, among others, Gorbachev himself, while a pattern is developing in Soviet actions concerning South Africa. On the declaratory level, Soviet leaders and officials have emphasised the need to restore stability in the region, that they do not revel in the prospect of racial war inside South Africa, that they would prefer to see a negotiated settlement, and that the USSR is prepared to work out a joint approach with the US (and other Western countries).

Last year Gorbachev told President Joachim Chissano of Mozambique that "(concerning South Africa) we do not subscribe to the thesis 'the worse the better'. There is no doubt that an elimination of the racist system by way of a political settlement would be in the interests of all South Africans – both black and white. One should look for and find the road to such a settlement. It is time at long last for Pretoria to understand this as well. New ideas, a fresh approach and collective efforts are needed."

However, Gorbachev's endorsement of a settlement does not imply any endorsement of the South African government and its actions. In fact, one can argue that the Soviet desire to work out a joint approach with the US is partly induced by a Soviet belief that this will increase the pressure on the South African government to enter into negotiations with "the liberation movement". Officially, Soviet condemnation of apartheid has not diminished. Furthermore, Soviet endorsement of the ANC has increased during the past three years. For one thing Gorbachev is the first General Secretary of the CPSU to meet an ANC representative. For another the ANC opened a mission in Moscow in late 1987.

At the same time, though, it is evident that the Soviet leadership is unhappy with the performance of the ANC. Yet in the absence of any other credible liberation movement and in the face of the ANC's growing international popularity, Moscow has no choice but to endorse the ANC. This does not prevent them, however, from calling the ANC to task in the back room. ANC officials have revealed that Soviet pressure to get them to the negotiation table is even stronger than that applied by the West. To date the ANC could counter the pressure by arguing that they have no one to negotiate with since Pretoria is not interested in making concessions.

Little need be said about the third category of evidence. This consists of press reports about meetings between South African diplomats and their Soviet counterparts. Not being privy to the information which can verify or falsify these reports, I can only limit my comments to the likelihood of such meetings. Given the evident Soviet desire to revitalise

and expand its diplomacy, one cannot rule out low-level exploratory meetings between South African and Soviet officials. The on-going negotiations concerning Angola and Namibia provide ample opportunity and incentives for such meetings. There is also no reason to suggest that the Soviets are, in principle, opposed to this sort of contact. In fact, they may argue that it could result in a more "responsible" South African policy in the region. Similar reasoning was probably behind the Soviet decision to veto (with the US) a Nigerian-backed attempt to have South Africa expelled from the International Atomic Energy Agency in September 1987.

Soviet willingness to open channels of communication with diverse groups and institutions in South Africa, including government, does not imply, however, that the USSR is preparing to "strike a deal" with South Africa, nor that Soviet decision makers will even consider such a suggestion. The Soviet Union has no desire to become involved in anti-American alliances with rogue states at a time when its own relationship with the US is improving. Aligning itself against apartheid is still the cheapest means the Soviet leadership has of establishing its credentials in the Third World and among the Western public who increasingly condemns apartheid. South Africa is just too unimportant as a potential ally for the USSR to risk both these considerations.

Thus, there are interesting conceptual changes taking place in Soviet assessments of South Africa, and there is reason to believe that diplomatic and other contacts with the Soviet Union is now more likely than three years ago. Yet, none of this implies that South Africa has an opportunity to break out of its isolation by aligning itself with the Soviet bloc. There are diplomatic opportunities in all this, but isolation will only go the day apartheid goes.

In the end, the relatively fruitless debate about the possibilities of a Soviet South African entente is not addressing the most important issue: an unambiguous change in Soviet policy. The Soviet Union has shown a greater willingness than before to find a joint approach with the US towards South Africa. Regular meetings between Soviet and American specialists have already led to a wide-ranging understanding between the two superpowers on this issue. Of major importance is the Soviet suggestion that the UN plays a bigger role.

Such a development should be welcomed because it will contribute to a more responsible and guarded role by both superpowers in the region. It is clearly not in southern Africa's interests to have the superpowers trying to outbid each other in a dangerous game of influence. At the same time, the prospect of a jointly sponsored superpower resolution in the UN Security Council to institute mandatory sanctions against South Africa should be disconcerting to some people in Pretoria, and rightly so.



MR. VASSILI DOZHDALEV (Consular Agent of the Soviet Union in Cape Town) said to-day when questioned about the closing of the Russian Consulate in the Union: 'It was so unexpected — I thought we were getting on fine — what else can I say? Let us talk about the weather.'