

Moscow's African Gamble

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Jan. 14—The Carter Administration is now reviewing its relations with the Soviet Union in the light of several puzzling and even alarming developments:

¶According to United States intelligence reports, the Soviet Union is not only continuing its military airlift into Ethiopia, but now has about 1,000 troops in that country and has dispatched several armed frigates to the area.

¶These same official reports indicate that Cuba now has over 2,000 troops in Ethiopia, and that these combined forces seem to be moving from the role of "advisers" and "trainers," to that of "participants" in the fighting.

¶Meanwhile, the Soviets are reported to be building up their base of operations at Aden in South Yemen on the Gulf of Aden near the southern entrance to the Red Sea as a substitute for the base they lost when the Somalis closed their base at Berbera.

This raises some fundamental political and strategic questions. For if the Soviets and Cubans help Ethiopia to capture the coastline of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, they will be in a position to control the southern gate of the Red Sea, dominate the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia, and put extreme pressure on the Saudis, who are the main financial support of President Sadat of Egypt in his effort to negotiate a compromise settlement with Israel in the Middle East.

If the intelligence reports coming into the C.I.A. and the embassies here with agents in the area are correct, the Saudis have moved two divisions north of Aden to observe what the Soviets are doing there. The Israelis, the Egyptians, the French and the British are also fairly well-informed about the movement of Communist troops and arms, including heavy Russian tanks, into the area.

The first question under discussion in Washington is why the Communists are being so active and provocative not only in Ethiopia and Angola, but in the politics of Italy, France and Portugal. And the second question is, what should be done about it?

The guess in official quarters here on the first question is that the Soviets are doing what they usually do: taking advantage of opportunities in weak strategic areas. They now have enough oil to meet their needs, but by 1985 or 1987, according to the different estimates here, Moscow will have to get energy from abroad to meet its industrial and military requirements. Therefore, why not establish Soviet power when they can in areas where they may be able to secure the energy they

need at prices they can afford?

That is one view of the Soviet effort to gain influence around Saudi Arabia, which is the richest and weakest bank in the world. The more ominous view is that the nation that dominates or even influences the major source of petroleum in the world may even be able to decide the fate of the industrial nations of Europe and Japan.

The Pentagon has strong views on this subject. For as I understand it, the modern planners here now believe that the strategic problem of modern warfare is not to blockade thousands of miles of enemy coasts, but to control the source of the enemy's industrial power, which is oil.

All this is obviously highly speculative, but when the Soviet Union moves its big tanks, men and satellite soldiers into areas that may dominate the energy of the Middle East and the sea lanes around the African continent, Washington obviously has to decide how to react.

The Carter Administration is reacting three ways: It has raised next year's military budget from \$116 billion to \$126 billion—2 percent above the inflation of the last year. It has warned the Italian Government publicly against trying to share power with the Italian Communists, and in a

sources and its political influence on the Israeli-Arab dispute, and doing his best to influence the politics of Western Europe.

The narrow gate in the Gulf of Aden dominating the Red Sea may seem very far away, but it is a vital key to the world politics of the rest of the century. The Soviets know that power now comes, not out of the barrel of a gun, but out of the oil barrels in the Middle East, and they can read maps. Washington is beginning to understand that it had better do the same.

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variety of unpublicized ways, it has recently told the Soviet Government that "détente" or peaceful co-existence is a "global concept" and that Moscow cannot expect cooperation from the United States on strategic arms, scientific cooperation, space, trade, CTB's and MBFR's if it insists on trying to dominate the sources of power and the sea lanes around Africa.

The Soviets, in turn, have their own puzzles and grievances. President Carter, they say, is also intervening in the politics of the Middle East and Africa. He is going to Poland and promising to go elsewhere in Eastern Europe to proclaim the political philosophy of the United States, so why not Communist ideological penetration of Italy, France, Portugal and elsewhere?

So we are coming into another one of those tense periods between Moscow and Washington. Jimmy Carter is proclaiming liberty and human rights, and the Soviets are terrified of personal freedom. Leonid Brezhnev is talking about "human rights" at Belgrade as if they were a menace, and meanwhile offering to make strategic arms compromises with Washington. But meanwhile he is trying to surround Saudi Arabia with its oil re-