THE SOVIET-SOMALI “ARMS FOR ACCESS” RELATIONSHIP

The Soviet quest for access to overseas naval support facilities is one of the most dimly understood aspects of Moscow's foreign policy. From a political perspective controversy has centered on two key questions: how are the bargains for access struck, and just how important has access been in the conduct of Soviet foreign policy? Regarding the first issue, many believe that the Soviets gain access to naval facilities, particularly those in the Third World, as a result of a quid pro quo for military aid. On the second issue, some observers see the quest for access as a major reason for the activist bent in Soviet policy toward the Third World in recent years. However, a detailed examination by the author of five Mediterranean cases of Soviet access challenged these views.1 This study indicated that though conditions varied, each access donor had a direct interest in supporting the Soviet navy. In most cases (e.g., Egypt, Syria, and Albania) the host's security needs were served by a local Soviet naval presence; in some cases (e.g., Yugoslavia), economic considerations played a prominent role. Moreover, the quest for access did not appear to distort Soviet foreign policy. In the conduct of Soviet policy toward the states concerned, access remained subordinate to more traditional political objectives.

However, this study is based only on a small proportion of the growing numbers of cases of Soviet naval access worldwide. Therefore, its conclusions can be generalized only to a limited extent. There are other cases of access that do not fit the study's typologies.

Somalia, which provided most of the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron's land-based support until the 1977 Ogaden War, stands as a prominent exception. There the Soviets did in fact gain access in exchange for their military aid. What may be accurately called the Soviet-Somali “arms for access” arrangement was a classic quid pro quo relationship whereby the commodities exchanged were highly valuable to the recipient, were unavailable elsewhere, and involved significant political costs for the respective donors. Consequently, bargaining over arms and access was generally intense.

In this article Soviet-Somali bargaining over access is examined during the period of their close alignment, from late 1971, when the first major Soviet aid agreement with Somalia’s then two-year-old military government was signed, until November, 1977, when, at the height of the Ogaden War, Somalia abrogated its three-year-old friendship treaty with Moscow, expelled all Soviet advisors, and cancelled Soviet naval access privileges. By defining the benefits and costs involved for each country overall, first in arming Somalia and second in supporting the Soviet navy, we shall attempt first to demonstrate that the Soviet-Somali connection was based upon an exchange of commodities. To be sure the values of the commodities exchanged as well as of the conditions that affected the bargaining changed over time. To account for these changes, in the second part of the article we shall examine three specific bargaining situations, at the beginning (1971-72), middle (1974), and end (1977) of the relationship.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOVIET-SOMALI “ARMS FOR ACCESS” RELATIONSHIP

Arming Somalia

Because of Somalia’s irredentist claims to territories of neighboring states, Western countries were willing to furnish the new Somali Republic with only token military assistance. In 1963—three years after Somalia gained its independence on the basis of a union between Italian and British Somalilands—the Soviets outbid a Western military aid offer to become the Somali army’s principal supplier of arms. The Soviets undoubtedly saw this as an easy opportunity to gain influence in a newly independent African state, particularly one situated in a strategic location astride the shortest sea route open year round between Soviet European and Far Eastern ports. Given the speed with which they acted to outbid the Western military aid offer, the Soviets likely paid scant attention to the longer-range implications of such a commitment. This was characteristic of the impulsive bent of a Soviet foreign policy under Khrushchev. It is worth adding that at the time (i.e., prior to

2. These territories, populated predominantly by Somalis, are the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, the northeastern frontier region of Kenya, and Djibouti (a French colony until 1977).

3. The limited $18 million military aid offer from a Western consortium, including the United States, West Germany and Italy, reflected Western concerns for Ethiopia and Kenya’s territorial integrity. From the outset of independence in 1960, the Somali Republic made clear its intention to unify all territories inhabited by Somalis.

4. Khrushchev’s evidently spur-of-the-moment decision to endorse India’s claim to Kashmir during his 1955 visit is an analogous example. For further detail, see the author’s Soviet Scholars and Soviet Foreign Policy (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1975), pp. 18-21.