

Naval War College Review

Volume 33
Number 5 *September-October*

Article 5

1980

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Recommended Citation

Garrity, Patrick J. (1980) "South African Strategy: The Strategy of an International Pariah," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 33 : No. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol33/iss5/5>

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South Africa's apartheid policy has lost her a relationship with the West, particularly the United States, that might otherwise exist and has required that she develop new and imaginative solutions to her strategic problems. Those problems and solutions are of importance to the West because, despite her pariah character, South Africa's resources, location, and political outlook significantly influence Western capabilities and strategy.

SOUTH AFRICAN STRATEGY: THE STRATEGY OF AN INTERNATIONAL PARIAH

by
Patrick J. Garrity

In March 1979, South African Prime Minister Pieter W. Botha warned that "pressure is being applied in various fields against South Africa by Marxist forces, and the Western countries have no counterstrategy to oppose it."¹ Shortly thereafter, a Johannesburg radio commentator complained that events in Namibia, Angola, and Zimbabwe-Rhodesia added "yet more weight to the scales of South Africa's disillusionment with its traditional ally [the United States] and it moves the country toward its new foreign policy objective...[to be] committed, with its great resources, neither to East nor West."²

The white government of the Republic of South Africa has faced enormous pressures during the 1970s, both internally and internationally. It has managed to survive in a hostile military, economic, and political environment, which has included the

opposition of the Soviet Union, China, and often the United States. South Africa's strategy for survival, especially since 1976, is an interesting lesson in the realities of international relations. Can Pretoria, in fact, successfully steer a course between East and West? The answer to this question will have an effect felt beyond southern Africa.

Threat and Response: Sub-Saharan Africa. The development of Marxist regimes in the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique and continuous guerrilla activity in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia and Namibia (Southwest Africa) have combined to present a serious regional threat to South African security. The situation provides immediate opportunities for increased guerrilla and terrorist activity against the Pretoria Government. In addition, the Chief of the South African

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defense force (General Malan) has recently argued that the possibility of hostile conventional military action in the near future cannot be ruled out.³

South Africa's small but efficient armed forces are more than capable of meeting any local threat. The active involvement of a superpower in the area, however, has rendered that military advantage uncertain. The Soviet Union has supported both major guerrilla organizations in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia: Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), and ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union), led by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe. An estimated 20,000 Cuban troops are still stationed in Angola, where the Soviets have continued to increase their own personnel and military equipment. The anti-Soviet Africa guerrilla organization in Namibia, SWAPO (Southwest African People's Organization), also receives Soviet aid and has bases in Angola. On the other flank, Mozambique has likewise developed increasingly friendly relations with the U.S.S.R. and reportedly provides sanctuary for the pro-Soviet African National Congress (ANC).⁴

Successful conventional military action against South Africa seems unlikely at the present time. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the Soviet-bloc presence in the area cannot be taken lightly by the South Africans. For example, a 1,500-man East German paratroop regiment, which was reported to have been stationed in southern Angola in October 1978, might form the core of a Cuban/SWAPO offensive into Namibia. In any event, its mere deployment in the area acts as a deterrent to South African commando operations against SWAPO's Angolan base camp.⁵

Forward Defense. The South African Government is convinced that the nation's own survival would immediately be threatened if it tolerates

unfriendly regimes along its borders. South African diplomatic, economic, and military strategy is therefore based on a concept of "forward defense." This policy, as outlined in 1978, includes these major aspects:

1. The direct involvement of foreign troops in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia would be viewed by South Africa as a direct threat, and South Africa would commit troops accordingly in the defense of its northern neighbor. Botha acknowledged in December 1979 that his security forces had been operating "for some time" inside Zimbabwe-Rhodesia to protect such South African interests as railway lines and bridges. Press reports noted that at least one battalion operated under its own command headquarters at Fort Victoria in south-central Rhodesia. In addition, South African military officers were reportedly allowed to serve in the Salisbury forces for extended periods without loss of seniority or rank when they returned to the South African defense forces. Infantrymen have also been asked to volunteer for short duties with Zimbabwe-Rhodesian troops, and South African helicopter pilots allegedly flew missions in support of antiguerrilla operations.⁶

In light of the London Conference on Zimbabwe, and subsequent events, the Botha government may be forced to make major adjustments in its northern commitments.

2. The South Africans reportedly continue to support covertly the anti-Soviet UNITA (Union for the Total Independence of Angola) movement in southern Africa. This is considered a key element in the forward defense of Namibia, as UNITA opposes SWAPO guerrillas based in Angola, as well as the Cubans and forces of Angola's MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) government.

3. Pretoria has sought to guarantee the security of the territory of Southwest Africa (Namibia) both on

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the diplomatic and military fronts. In negotiations with the United Nations and the West over the independence of Namibia, it has steadfastly maneuvered to avoid a situation in which a potentially hostile government would take power. To further this aim the South Africans have resisted any further escalation of the SWAPO terrorist campaign. In the past this has included raids against SWAPO base camps inside Angola.

4. The Botha government is also concerned with the increase of Soviet-bloc personnel and supplies to Mozambique. While this assistance has generally been used to support the FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front) government of Samora Machel, or ZANU forces deployed against Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, Pretoria might strongly respond if the Soviets presented a direct threat to South Africa. It is also possible that the South Africans have provided some assistance to anti-FRELIMO forces fighting inside Mozambique.⁷

5. Whether or not the South Africans did test a nuclear device in September 1979, the possibility that Pretoria has joined the nuclear club could act as a deterrent to the frontline African states. It also provides some leverage over the superpowers, especially the United States. When the South Africans expelled three Americans in April 1979 for allegedly using a spy plane to conduct a systematic espionage campaign, they may have intended to protect the integrity of their nuclear test site in the Kalahari desert. (As was noted at the time, the airplane was especially useful for the United States inasmuch as most U.S. intelligence satellites were programmed for the northern hemisphere.) Allegations of a possible test are therefore difficult to confirm, but the ambiguity is favorable to the South African position.⁸

Economic Self-Sufficiency. South

to withstand external economic sanctions and embargoes. It is self-sufficient in food and could grow even more; its mineral resources are immense, and the country has the economic and technological structure to take advantage of that fact.⁹

"We have the ability to produce our own arms. We have advanced very far in this direction.... I am sure we can produce everything we need for, say, potential war in South Africa."¹⁰ This boast of Botha is not an idle one: South Africa has developed a considerable armaments industry that can supply small arms and other infantry weapons, military vehicles, ammunition, and wireless equipment. *Mirage* jet fighters and the Panhard armored car are assembled under license near Johannesburg.¹¹

The Achilles heel of South African self-sufficiency, however, is petroleum. Before the fall of the Shah, South Africa received up to 90 percent of its oil from Iran. Despite the recent loss of these supplies, there is no imminent danger because of Pretoria's farsighted energy policy. In the eastern Transvaal, unused coal mines have been pumped full of enough oil for an estimated 2 to 7 years consumption. Large storage tanks have been constructed along South Africa's west coast and camouflaged under piles of sand.

South Africa is also one of the world's leaders in the technology of coal liquefaction. Sasol I, the world's most successful coal liquefaction plant, produced an estimated 7 percent of the country's gasoline, diesel, and other oil products in 1977. Sasol II, which is larger and more technologically advanced, is scheduled to be completed in 1980. Another project (Sasol III) is scheduled to begin production in 1982.

Other energy options for South Africa include the production of ethanol (ethyl alcohol) from sugarcane grown in Zululand, and nuclear power. Pretoria's nuclear industry is being constructed

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largely with Western assistance, especially French and West German, but it hopes to be building most of its own reactors within 10 or 15 years.¹²

Constellation of States. Botha's anger at what he regards as the West's betrayal of his regime has led him to speak of an association of southern African states against the "communist onslaught" of black revolutionary guerrilla movements. The South African Prime Minister has referred to a "constellation of states," or even a "confederation" including Namibia, Zimbabwe, the former British protectorates of Swaziland, Lesotho, and Botswana, the Bantustans (South African tribal homelands), and Malawi. Some government spokesmen have gone so far as to include Zambia in such a coprosperity sphere.¹³

The formation of an economically oriented buffer zone centered around South Africa is not as farfetched as it might at first seem. Many of the frontline African states, as well as those outlined in the proposed confederation, are economically tied to South Africa—Marxist Mozambique, for example, retains surprisingly good relations with Pretoria. In the words of a South African railways official after the signing of a new agreement with Maputo, "politics played no role in the successful management of railways administration."¹⁴ Whether or not that principle can be applied to other circumstances remains to be seen.

Threat and Response: The World. During the past decade, opposition to South Africa increased dramatically throughout the world. In early 1976 the United States opposed Pretoria's intervention in the Angolan civil war only months after Washington had encouraged then Prime Minister John Vorster to take action. Later that year the United Nations General Assembly for the first time directly endorsed armed struggle as a legitimate weapon

in the hands of what is termed "the oppressed people of South Africa." Newly elected President Jimmy Carter attempted to increase the pressure in 1977 by arranging an embargo of military equipment against South Africa—a plan that involved persuading Saudi Arabia to purchase more French arms, and thus encourage France to abandon its large military sales to the South Africans. U.S.-South African relations were so strained in January 1980 that an American cruiser was "shadowed" by South African destroyers as it sailed around the Cape en route to the Arabian Sea task force.¹⁵

Despite South Africa's drive for self-sufficiency, its increasing isolation during the 1970s necessitated a search for new allies. Vorster's much heralded détente policy with moderate black African states in the middle of the decade apparently failed,¹⁶ but other efforts were more successful—especially as Washington reduced its overseas commitments in the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict.

Israel. South Africa's most reliable foreign partner is another medium power disenchanting with its Western allies. Israel's longstanding opposition to the apartheid Pretoria regime abruptly changed in 1973, and the two have developed increasingly friendly relations. According to the South Africans, this alliance is not as incongruous as it might appear on the surface. Both nations have a growing affinity as international outcasts; each regards itself as a bastion of European civilization surrounded by culturally and politically hostile neighbors. South Africa and Israel face adversaries with overwhelming numerical superiority, and both perceive themselves as targets of Soviet expansionism—a fact the West continues to ignore.¹⁷

The terms of the informal alliance have generally centered around the exchange of South African energy and raw materials for Israeli military

technology. Israel is in the process of completing delivery of the last of six *Reshef*-class fast warships ordered by South Africa. These ships are fitted with a highly advanced model of the *Gabriel* surface-to-surface missile, automatic 76mm guns, antisubmarine torpedoes, submarine detection systems, and antimissile electronic equipment. Their South African crews received training at Israeli naval bases.

Pretoria has reportedly reciprocated by funding the next generation of Israeli warships. This new and larger version of the *Reshef* will have a range of 6,000-7,000 sea miles, and will again carry the *Gabriel* missile. Each will act as a miniature aircraft carrier, able to carry a helicopter apiece, as well as being armed with submarine detection devices and antisubmarine missiles. South Africa is expected to receive the first four or five new models, and forty of its engineers and technicians have been involved in the construction at the Haifa shipyards.¹⁸

The two countries have also cooperated in the field of military electronics. Israeli corporations have sold South Africa items ranging from complete radar stations to electronic fences, antiguerrilla infiltration alarm systems, and computers. The erection of a "South African wall" of electronic sensors, command posts, and sensitive electronic surveillance devices along the border was the product of Israeli engineers who had developed similar systems in the Jordan Valley and along the Lebanese border. Foreign press reports indicate that Israel has equipped South African helicopter squadrons with sophisticated night-visibility devices. Pretoria has also received shipments of 105mm self-propelled howitzers, air-to-air rockets, and antitank missiles for the infantry.

In 1976 Vorster offered Israel a rare type of steel that the Israelis had desperately wanted to sheath their *Chariot* tanks. Vorster also provided

advanced South African technology in steel manufacture, which permitted the renovation of the antiquated Israeli steel industry. In return, Israel modernized 150 South African *Centurion* tanks and made available the armorplate that has been fitted to South African armored vehicles.¹⁹

In the field of energy, Pretoria signed a long-term agreement with the Begin government in 1979 to export approximately one million tons of steam coal each year (worth an estimated 23 million U.S. dollars) for the new coal-fired generator of the Israeli Electric Corporation. A similar pact in 1977 reportedly provided for the use of joint South African-Israeli naval forces to escort coal shipments in the time of war.

The two countries have allegedly collaborated in their respective nuclear programs (including an agreement by South Africa to supply Israel with uranium), and Pretoria may also have provided information about its coal liquefaction process.²⁰

The presence of Israeli military personnel in South Africa has been strenuously denied by both governments. Officials do admit that about 5,000 Israelis have emigrated to South Africa in recent years, including some presumably skilled in Israeli-manufactured technology. This low-level assistance in the Namibian anti-SWAPO campaign is doubtless appreciated, as Israel is the acknowledged world leader in counterinsurgent desert warfare.²¹

Iran. The South Africa-Israeli connection was originally to be a triangular alliance that included Iran. This new grouping of nations, as proposed by Vorster in the wake of the Angolan debacle, was to oppose communist expansion in Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf. Iran's contribution was to be its growing military force, and its great international leverage because of oil. Vorster

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argued that the three states were capable of commanding the strategic oil routes through the Indian Ocean.²²

The fall of the Shah has obviously destroyed this project, at least as it was originally constituted. As was previously noted, Iran provided a large percentage of South Africa's oil, and the Iranian Oil Company owned a 12 percent share in the South African state oil refinery (NATREF). Iran was also one of the largest purchasers of South African steel.²³

In addition to its more prominent friends, Pretoria has maintained economic and diplomatic relations with a number of right wing governments in Latin America, including Paraguay and Uruguay. The large influx of Argentine tourists to South Africa since 1977 may reflect an increasingly close relationship between the two south Atlantic powers.²⁴ Unconfirmed rumors in 1979 also suggested that the South Africans might attempt to reconstitute their basic alignment with Israel by forming closer ties with South Korea and Taiwan.

Communist China. One of the most intriguing possibilities of foreign support for South Africa comes from the People's Republic of China. No longer in the good graces of the West but still confronted with a growing Soviet presence in the region, South Africans might consider Communist China to be a powerful anti-U.S.S.R. ally. After all, Beijing (Peking) did support FLNA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola) against the pro-Soviet MPLA during the Angolan civil war, much as Pretoria supported UNITA.

There has been little direct evidence of such a connection, however. The South Africans have occasionally sent up trial balloons, such as qualifying routine denunciations of communism by referring to Moscow, and not Beijing. In 1977, during the Zaire crisis, a commentator on Radio South Africa

found it "fascinating" that "China discerns accurately what is at stake in Southern Africa while the West does not."²⁵

For their part, the Chinese have shown little interest although their own routine denunciations of racist South Africa often contain thinly veiled warnings against the Soviet Union. According to PRC Vice Premier Li Xiannian during a visit to Mozambique in January 1979:

The Chinese government has always supported the idea of ending the South African and Rhodesian racist domination. Zimbabwe and Namibia must achieve their true national independence without foreign interference... Racial discrimination and the South African system of apartheid must be eliminated. All forms of foreign intervention must be fought.²⁶

The Soviets, of course, have a different perspective:

Life has thus conclusively shown that despite the official pronouncements of the Chinese leaders, there exists between China and South African racists an unholy alliance directed against the interests of the African national liberation movement and of all progressives everywhere.

Hegemonistic ambitions, a striving to subordinate the African countries to its diktat, are the determining factor of Peking's policy on the continent. Under the cover of anti-Soviet slogans, Peking is betraying the interests of the African peoples.²⁷

It may be that China does not dare risk its relationship with revolutionary movements by seeking short-term benefits from ties with reactionary South Africa. In any event, Beijing has no naval means to make its weight felt in the Indian Ocean.²⁸ However, the

PRC's failure in Angola, and the lessening of its influence with FRELIMO in Mozambique and ZANU in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, may well be regarded as Soviet successes in its campaign to isolate China. The recent military intervention of the U.S.S.R. in Afghanistan further threatens Chinese interests in central Asia, perhaps necessitating greater activity by Beijing in southern Africa to offset the growing Russian domination of the Indian Ocean basin. A friendly regime in Pretoria, however constituted, would be a valuable asset for future Chinese freedom of action.

Conclusion and Prospects. South African foreign and military policy in the decade of the 1970s is a fascinating study in the strategy of an international pariah. (Critics argue that had the South Africans put as much imagination and determination into political reform at home, there would have been no need to face worldwide isolation.) It may also provide a model for understanding the behavior of other anticommunist governments disillusioned with their deteriorating relationship with the United States.

The question of the survival of a friendly South Africa is not an academic one for Washington and its NATO allies. In terms of production, South Africa supplies a very large percentage of the noncommunist world's essential strategic raw materials: 77 percent of its gold, 87 percent of its platinum, 32 percent of its manganese and diamonds (including stones for industrial use), 36 percent of asbestos, and 48 percent of its chrome ore. Experts disagree on the degree of vulnerability that this creates for the West, but one recent study has concluded that the noncommunist world is more vulnerable to a boycott of chrome than any other material—including oil. Rhodesian and South African chrome ore account for an

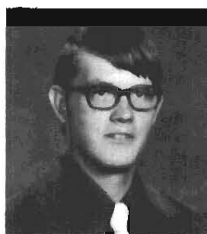
estimated 98 percent of the entire noncommunist world's supplies.²⁹

In terms of shipping, an estimated 18 million barrels of oil passed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1976, compared with 800,000 barrels daily in 1965. One-quarter of Europe's food and 70 percent of the raw materials necessary for NATO security are shipped on the same route. With the Soviets now capable of using bases in Guinea, Mozambique, and Angola, South Africa takes on a position of considerable strategic importance for the West.³⁰

U.S. foreign and military policies since the Vietnam war have redefined American's overseas interests to exclude many of its former allies accused of human rights violations. This is particularly true of South Africa, whose policy of apartheid is an especially offensive reminder of America's own civil rights turmoil. Such laudable sentiments cannot change the realities of international relations, nor the strategic importance of these anticommunist nations. The South Africans contend that they are the targets of Soviet expansionism, whether the United States supports them or not, and their policies in the past decade have been designed to meet that threat.

Pretoria has survived, and as a result appears to be in a relatively strong

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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position—for the time being. The formation of a loose coalition of anticommunist states, disenchanted with American leadership and seeking to become medium-scale military powers, is an imaginative solution to the strategic dilemma in which these nations find themselves. The fall of the Shah of Iran, however, indicates that it

is not a perfect one. The South Africans themselves maintain that the Soviet Union has a clear target in Africa—the United States—and it is therefore impossible for South Africa to avoid the great power conflict. South Africa and the West cannot afford to ignore one another, as the Iranian imbroglio clearly shows.

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