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Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-21

The Horn of Africa

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Partially Declassified/Released on 12-19-98
under provisions of E.O. 12958 (F83-136)
by N. Menan, National Security Council

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Purpose 1

II. Nature of the Problem 1

^a A. U.S. Interests 1

 B. Soviet Interests 3

 C. Ethiopian Interests 5

 D. Eritrean Question 7

 E. Somali Interests 7

 F. Djibouti 8

 G. Sudanese and Moderate Arab
 Interests 11

 H. Kenyan Interests 13

 I. Israeli Interests 14

 J. Chinese Interests 15

III. U.S. Options 16

 A. Option 1 16

 B. Option 2 19

 C. Option 3 21

 D. Option 4 23

IV. U.S. Policy in Other Countries in
 the Region 25

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I. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine policy options open to the U.S. to advance or protect our interests in the Horn of Africa/Red Sea area. Due to the rapid pace of developments in Ethiopia and the need for early decisions concerning that country, this study will focus primarily on Ethiopia and adjustments in U.S. policy suggested by developments there. The study alludes in general terms to the resultant implications for Sudan, Somalia and other countries in the area, but detailed study of these implications must await decisions on our Ethiopian policy and on our conventional arms transfer policy (PRM/NSC-12).

II. Nature of the Problem

The competition between the U.S. and the USSR for influence in Africa has been superimposed on the welter of ethnic, religious, ideological, and territorial incompatibilities existing between, among and within the African states of the Horn of Africa.

A. U.S. Interests:

Our interest in maintaining cooperative relations with and promoting stability among countries in any area of the world has acquired the added dimension in the Horn of Africa of big power competition. Moscow's efforts to displace the U.S. as the dominant foreign influence in Ethiopia are causing concern among moderate states in the region, notably Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and disenchantment toward the Soviets on the part of Somalia. We accordingly have an opportunity to advance U.S. influence in the region as a whole by consolidating our position in neighboring countries now friendly to us, e.g., Sudan and Kenya, and in advancing our position in Somalia.

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Given the unlikelihood that present leftward trends in Ethiopia can be arrested, we must accept over the short term a decreased U.S. influence in that country and adjust our programs accordingly. The instability of the present Ethiopian regime, however, raises the presently remote possibility of its replacement over the medium or longer term by a leadership more amenable to cooperative relations with the U.S. This prospect, plus the fact that Ethiopia is the second-most-populous country in Africa, gives us an interest in so tailoring our policies that we are in a position insofar as possible to capitalize on possible future developments favoring a resumption of closer Ethio-US ties. With that in mind, any improvement in our relations with Somalia and Sudan should stop short of activities perceived as hostile toward Ethiopia as a nation. The same consideration suggests that, while we have no present interest in obstructing Eritrean autonomy or independence, or in opposing dissidents within Ethiopia proper, we equally have no interest in becoming involved with groups in Eritrea or with opposition elements in Ethiopia in ways which would compromise our ability to have a cooperative relationship with a successor regime in Addis Ababa.

Militarily the Horn is not of great strategic importance to the U.S.* The psychological perceptions of area states aside, interdiction of Red Sea and Indian Ocean maritime routes is not likely short of a limited war situation, although an increased Soviet presence can limit our freedom of action. The Indian Ocean per se occupies a low priority in terms of the global strategic balance. Nonetheless, restriction of Soviet military access to the area would be in our interest as contributing to a reduction of major power military presence there. It could also complicate Soviet ability to use naval power to project political influence in the Indian Ocean littoral. We do have an interest in maximizing U.S. access to ports and airfields in the area.

*DOD disagrees on this point. It holds that U.S. interests in the Horn are chiefly strategic, reflecting the area's proximity to Middle East oil fields, the sea oil routes and the Red Sea passage to the Mediterranean. The DOD views with concern the continuing expansion of Soviet facilities and presence in Somalia and inroads elsewhere in the Horn. The U.S. seeks regional stability and evolutionary developments in an area environment congenial to U.S. goals.

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Our concern for human rights gives us an interest in preventing the U.S. from being implicated in human rights violations by recipients of our assistance, which is particularly pertinent in the case of Ethiopia. Our concern for the poor gives us a humanitarian interest in the area. We have an interest in the safety of Americans residing in the area whose welfare could be affected by developments there including actions of ours.

B. Soviet Interests:

For two years the Soviets hesitated to take advantage of the opportunity which was presented to them by the accession to power of a leftist government in Ethiopia. They had to weigh the risks to their position in Somalia of support for Ethiopia, which offers no military-strategic advantages for their Indian Ocean interests equal to those they derive from their Somali facilities. On the other hand, they had to consider the politico-strategic advantages of replacing the U.S. as the dominant foreign influence in Ethiopia. Hopeful that such a move would be generally perceived as representing a trend of Soviet gains in Africa at U.S. expense, the Soviets might also view it as placing them in a position to exert pressure on Sudan and Kenya. While Soviet pre-eminence in Ethiopia would not substantially enhance their ability to interdict the Red Sea maritime route beyond their Somalia-based capability, it could provide them with some leverage against countries reliant on that route, particularly oil suppliers and consumers.

The Soviet agreement in December 1976 to supply Ethiopia with substantial military equipment, and to encourage other European Communist countries to provide arms aid, presumably represented a Soviet conclusion that the risks to their position in Somalia were manageable. A token delivery of small arms took place in February, and additional deliveries are reported to have been made in March. However, until significant deliveries have taken place, the Soviets will presumably remain in a position to reverse their course.

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The Soviet ability to deploy naval and air units into the Indian Ocean for surveillance of U.S., French and other allied shipping, for projecting military influence along the Indian Ocean littoral, and for exerting some psychological pressure on tanker routes from the Persian Gulf is facilitated by the availability of Somali ports and airfields. These goals could be achieved without use of the Somali facilities, but at some expense. Undoubtedly, the Soviets are now watching the Somali reaction closely and will, in the light of that reaction, review the relative importance to them of Ethiopia and Somalia prior to any large-scale deliveries that commit them to the Ethiopian option and risk Somali imposition of restrictions on Soviet use of military facilities in Somalia.

In addition to their attempts to mollify the Somali reaction, efforts supported by Fidel Castro during his recent surprise visits to Mogadiscio and Addis Ababa, the Soviets are undoubtedly considering means to help ensure that, should they be forced to choose between Somalia and Ethiopia, the choice of the latter will not leave them committed to a disintegrating asset. East European arms offers to the EPMG and Cuban expressions of willingness to help arm and train the Peoples' Militia in Ethiopia and also to be of help in Eritrea are undoubtedly seen by the Soviets as supportive of that option.

Soviet and Cuban support for the EPMG, particularly in Eritrea, could be justified to most African states as an effort to defend the sacred OAU principle of preserving African territorial integrity. Having in mind that the dispatch of Cuban combat troops to Ethiopia could nonetheless cause an adverse reaction in some African and Arab states and in the U.S., could embroil Cuba in another Angola-type situation from which it would be difficult to extricate themselves, and might turn out to be a commitment to a losing cause, the Cubans would probably prefer to confine themselves to an advisory role. However, once involved, they could come under EPMG pressure, and possibly Soviet as well, to introduce combat troops as the only way to bolster sagging Ethiopian troop morale and prevent the excision of Eritrea from Ethiopia.