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Things fall apart: South Africa and the collapse of the Portuguese Empire, 1973–74

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The April 1974 coup in Lisbon and the ensuing rapid decolonisation of Portugal’s colonies marked the birth of the Southern African theatre of the Cold War. It also heralded the steady decline of Pretoria’s apartheid regime. This paper seeks to illuminate why South Africa was so profoundly affected by the collapse of Lisbon’s authority and the upheaval of the regional status quo that occurred as a result. It argues that in contrast to its creative and formative foreign policy endeavours in Africa, by 1974 South Africa’s national security hinged fundamentally on a profound reliance on Lisbon to combat radical black nationalism and on Washington to provide diplomatic cover for their joint efforts. The primary impact of the coup, therefore, was to undermine South Africa’s entire security and thereby produce the sense of acute isolation that drove its shift towards the more radical security policies of the late 1970s and 1980s.

On 25 April 1974, the remnants of the Portuguese dictatorship, crippled by the costs of maintaining its five century old empire, suddenly collapsed. For over a decade, Lisbon had been battling concurrent insurgencies in Portuguese Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique, operations which consumed up to 45% of the government’s budget. Dissent in the armed forces, employed to wage a war with no clear political or military end in sight, eventually reached a critical mass. A group of broadly left-wing military
officers, the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), took power in a bloodless coup and moved immediately to dissolve Lisbon’s colonial authority throughout its empire, thereby creating a vast power vacuum in southern Africa overnight.

For South Africa’s white minority government, these developments were as momentous as they were unexpected. Either side of Ian Smith’s regime in Rhodesia, Pretoria saw Angola and Mozambique as the bookends of its cordon sanitaire of friendly white-ruled states protecting it from the seemingly inexorable advance of black nationalism and its political manifestation, majority rule. Behind this barrier, Pretoria had experienced a golden age of economic prosperity, political stability, and state security. Between 1960 and 1974, South Africa’s economy grew at an average of 5.5 per cent per year. And while wealth disparities between ethnic groups were vast, the combination of low unemployment, consistent economic growth, and steadily improving living standards for all was enough to quell any latent revolutionary sentiments and provide the regime with a sense of permanency and control. South Africa’s prickly and abrasive leaders defied international opprobrium over their racial policies, confident in the long-term viability of their separate development, or apartheid, programme, which from 1976 would see most of South Africa’s ethnic communities form separate political entities, or bantustans.

Events in Portugal, however, heralded a profound reversal of fortunes for the Republic. The attentions of Cold War powers were inevitably attracted to southern Africa, both by the power vacuum precipitated by the withdrawal of Portuguese authority and the overtly leftist credentials of many of the liberation movements and of a worrying number of the MFA charged with overseeing the decolonisation process. And due to a range of factors – including the history of Communist support for anti-colonial movements, the United States’ perceived neglect of African issues and leaders, and the West’s historical association with imperialism and continued economic ties with South Africa – the hands of Moscow and its allies, whose ideologies were anathema to Pretoria, were substantially stronger than that of Washington, whose approval and protection the South Africans had long craved. Chaos quickly spread from Angola and Mozambique to Rhodesia and South West Africa (SWA) as liberation movements regrouped and re-energised, inspired by each other’s successes and aided in their insurrections by increasingly porous borders. Arms, funds, and troops duly followed from a variety of Communist countries, introduced under the diplomatic cover of the principles of self-determination and anti-colonialism.

These developments gripped Pretoria with a sense of paralysis and encirclement all the more debilitating for the marked departure it signalled from the regime’s previously optimistic outlook. Within the space of just a few years, confidence succumbed to introspection, and self-assurance to chronic uncertainty. In the face of what Pretoria termed a ‘total onslaught’, the government of Prime Minister John Vorster (1966–78) soon succumbed to dysfunction well before it left office, becoming ‘virtually rudderless’. In its place, Vorster’s Defence Minister P. W. Botha (1978–89) would come to power advocating a drastically increased role for the military in policymaking across the board, an extensive rearmament campaign, and a renewed and uncompromising
willingness to engage black nationalist insurgents well beyond South Africa’s borders. In sum, the coup unleashed a spiralling dynamic of intense vulnerability and radicalised responses which, coupled with South Africa’s ability to project force much more readily and effectively than distant superpowers or inchoate liberation movements, provided the central engine driving the southern African theatre of the Cold War.

This much is axiomatic in the literature. Yet the scenario that unfolded was hardly unforeseen by South Africa’s leaders. As will be seen later, they were fully apprised prior to April 1974 of the real possibility of their region becoming a Cold War hotspot in much the way in which events transpired. Precisely why, then, did the coup itself have such a profound impact on Pretoria? Despite a recent and welcome spate of works focusing on South Africa’s foreign policy in the post-war period, no study has addressed this question directly or with reference to primary material. Yet it is a question that goes to the crux of both the origins and nature of the southern African theatre of the Cold War. Two implied theses can perhaps be discerned in the general literature. The first suggests that the effect of the coup was primarily psychological: Portugal’s departure left Pretoria feeling exposed. There is some justification to this, but it hardly provides the whole picture. For one thing, interviews with policymakers and archival research make it unmistakably clear that it was South Africa’s ‘abandonment’ by the Americans in Angola in 1975–6 – rather than the coup of April 1974 – that forced South Africans to come to terms with the extent of their isolation. The second thesis suggests that the importance of the coup lay largely in the significance of the aforementioned events which followed it. This is decidedly more problematic, as it obscures the impact of the coup itself with causally distinct subsequent events. Sure enough, most of the general literature uses the coup as little more than a starting point for a discussion of the regional turmoil that followed.

This article maintains that the impact of the coup was decidedly more tangible. It will argue that South Africa’s national security depended to a far greater degree than has been appreciated on a heavy reliance on Lisbon to contain Communist-backed black nationalism to the north, and on Washington to provide diplomatic cover for those efforts. Consequently, the disintegration of its ally stripped its national security strategy of its central military and diplomatic components overnight. The corollary is that the coup may not have had such a debilitating effect on South Africa if its reliance on Lisbon had been pursued as merely one part of a balanced and coherent strategy aimed at preserving Pretoria’s longevity in a hostile regional environment.

This article therefore aims to illuminate South Africa’s relationships with both Lisbon and Washington, but to do so within the context of regional developments, domestic politics, other strategies being advocated, and South Africa’s foreign policy as a whole. It draws upon a wealth of documents in both Afrikaans and English, including the private papers of several of South Africa’s leaders, defence force records of Pretoria’s military cooperation with Lisbon, assessments by South African diplomats of the situation in the Portuguese colonies, intelligence reports compiled by military intelligence and the Bureau of Security Services (BOSS), and despatches from
Pretoria’s Ambassador in Lisbon. American files fill out the picture. These rich holdings not only open the door to a much deeper and more textured understanding of the tumultuous creation of the southern African theatre of the Cold War, they also place front and centre the dynamics driving the actor with the most will and capability to shape events in that theatre: apartheid South Africa.

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Even as other European powers relinquished their colonial possessions following the Second World War, Portugal refused to submit to increasing international pressure and follow suit. Time and again, Portuguese officials reiterated the same message: Lisbon did not consider its territories in Africa to be colonies _per se_, but legally parts of Portugal itself. As such, they would be defended to the end. However, with much of the rest of Africa already decolonised, armed proto-national movements advocating self-determination appeared in each of Portugal’s African colonies, benefiting from safe havens provided by neighbouring states and assistance from external (usually Communist) powers, all keen to ride the wave of post-war self-determination for their own ends.

South Africa’s response to the winds of change was more nuanced. During the Hendrik Verwoerd era (1958–66), South Africa had watched the emergence of black-rulled states to its north with apprehension and vigilance. But by the mid-1960s, their concerns had substantially receded as the wave of majority rule came to a halt. Verwoerd’s successor, Vorster, decided to go on the offensive. In what would become known as his outward policy, Vorster launched a series of dramatic diplomatic approaches to moderate black African regimes as an audacious counterattack against the prospect of international isolation. South Africa would use its considerable economic means – in the greater southern African region, it accounted for no less than two-thirds of the total Gross Domestic Product, with an economy ten times as prolific as the next largest contributor – to convince African nations on a predominantly state-to-state basis that their material interests (that is, their desperate need for economic assistance and development) should trump the ideological opposition to apartheid that emanated from their anti-colonialism and pan-Africanism. If black African leaders stopped agitating for the upheaval of South African society, so the thinking went, then the anti-apartheid movement in the West would lose much of its momentum and Western governments would recalibrate their attitudes to South Africa accordingly. As Zaïrean government adviser Barthélémy Bisengimana told American Ambassador Walter L. Cutler:

> You Americans have been anti-South African only because you believe that to be otherwise will incur the wrath of black Africa. If we ourselves were to ally with South Africa – you cannot be more papist than the Pope.

In short, as political scientist Adrian Guelke put it, by establishing relationships with moderate black African states, Pretoria ultimately ‘hoped to demonstrate that apartheid was compatible with the post-colonial world and [that] there was no need for change.’
Yet outward policy was only part of South Africa’s dual-track foreign policy. At the same time as Pretoria registered numerous successes – albeit largely symbolic and usually fleeting – with moderate African regimes, it cooperated militarily with the white authorities to its north, which it saw as the first line of defence against majority rule and, more specifically, radical black nationalism. The fact of this cooperation was well-known at the time. However, the sheer extent of the relationship has remained entirely unilluminated.

Large-scale military cooperation between Portugal and South Africa grew out of the suppression of the Simba Rebellion in the Congo (Kinshasa) in 1964. As the Communist-backed Simba rebels overran the eastern half of the Congo, challenging the tenuous control of the pro-Western government of Moïse Tshombe, Portuguese officials became increasingly concerned about instability across Congo’s long border with Angola and sought out South African help. Having already acquiesced to Tshombe’s own requests for assistance, in August Verwoerd despatched one of his most experienced diplomats and a former consul in Luanda, Harold Taswell, to meet with Portuguese dictator António Salazar in Lisbon.

Over the course of two meetings totalling four and a half hours, Salazar made plain his concerns about the trouble brewing in the Congo. It remains unclear whether Salazar perceived a need to place the Congo crisis within the context of a broader threat to Southern Africa in order to secure Pretoria’s assistance, or whether he saw an opportunity to establish a longer-term relationship based on shared security fears. What is clear is that the spectre Salazar animated of Communist-backed black nationalists tessellated precisely with Pretoria’s view of the dangers of decolonisation in southern Africa:

> We have certain problems in “Southern Africa”… What will happen is that African states, after receiving their independence, will follow the experiences of Indo-China and Algeria, in other words, they will organise sabotage, terrorism, etc. The collapse of Southern Africa will spell the end of the work of civilisation… It is in the interests of Portugal and South Africa to therefore ensure that stability in Southern Africa is maintained.

And in Salazar’s Southern African domino theory, the battle should be fought in Eastern Congo. ‘If there is to be a war in Southern Africa,’ he reasoned, articulating the forward defence principle that would become the bedrock of South Africa’s defence policy through the 1970s and 1980s, ‘South Africa would prefer to see the war at a distance of 2000 km from its own borders rather than on its own territory.’

Attention quickly turned to specifics. Portugal would transport to Tshombe the arms, materiel, and transport aircraft it had in Angola, as well as several thousand armed ‘Katangan gendarmes’ and five thousand automatic weapons acquired through NATO. While Portugal discharged the logistical duties and provided the good offices, South Africa would bear the entirety of the financial burden. But it appears that there was more to the arrangement. Taswell’s subsequent communications to South Africa’s BOSS, or security police, indicate that through the French Intelligence and Counter-Espionage Services, 150–700 ex-French Foreign Legionnaires would be made available as mercenaries, as well as a further 6000–7000 for use in Mozambique. For their part, the French were only too
willing to act as the middle man. Paris had a keen interest in maintaining moderate black regimes like Tshombe’s that would help preserve Paris’ sphere of influence and investments in central Africa.\textsuperscript{28} As for Pretoria and Lisbon, the use of mercenaries suited them too, as both were wary of being found out in the Congo. As Taswell told Salazar:

We, more than any other nation, have to be especially discreet in our contacts with Tshombe. Active involvement from our side will not only bring [Tshombe] into disrepute in his relations with other African states, but also our enemies in the African-Asian group in the UN can use [our involvement] as an excuse to take action themselves in the Congo. They will also receive the fullest support from the Communists.\textsuperscript{29}

An arrangement was concluded and a relationship born. Through the end of the 1960s, South Africa increasingly underwrote Portugal’s efforts to maintain control in its overseas territories as a contribution to what it saw as a joint defence effort. In 1967, P. W. Botha visited Portugal and made it clear that South Africa would respond favourably to any requests for military equipment, including advanced items like aircraft.\textsuperscript{30} The following year, the South African Air Force began supporting Portuguese operations in eastern Angola out of bases in South West Africa – at great expense and with little success.\textsuperscript{31} In mid-1969, South Africa agreed to a 25 million rand military loan to Portugal, as well as the donation of 8.5 million rand in old military equipment.\textsuperscript{32} And in 1970, South Africa provided Portugal with 100.7 million rand earmarked for the purchase of war supplies and 35 million rand for the socio-economic development of Angola and Mozambique – sums equivalent to half South Africa’s entire defence budget.\textsuperscript{33} The 1970 agreement laid bare the basis of the bilateral relationship:

The purpose of the loan is to help Portugal eliminate insurgency in Angola and Mozambique, to regain control of and to re-establish good govt administration over the populations there. It is important for the security of Southern Africa generally and for the RSA particularly that these two Portuguese provinces be peaceful, politically stable, economically sound and developing and friendly towards the RSA. By helping them to realise these aims we will be making it less likely that they will become sanctuaries for the further spread of insurgency in Southern Africa or bases for the launching of more conventional enemy military action here.

The loan agreement also stipulated the inclusion of South African representatives on the Portuguese counter-insurgency councils, established that Lisbon would ‘make available to the [South African Defence Force] direct from Angola and Mozambique operational military intelligence information’, and mandated that the Portuguese achieve distinctly South African security goals; namely ensuring ‘the integrity of the borders of the RSA and SWA by the elimination of insurgents in the adjoining districts of Mozambique and Angola’.\textsuperscript{34} In sum, the relationship had quickly come to resemble a full – if covert – military alliance.\textsuperscript{35}

Into the 1970s Lisbon and Pretoria continued to cooperate closely behind the scenes.\textsuperscript{36} Publicly, however, the two regimes maintained a certain distance. This changed dramatically with the visit to South Africa of Rui Patricio, Portugal’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, in March 1973. Whereas previously, as South Africa’s Ambassador,
R. J. Montgomery, observed, Portugal had tried to ‘play down’ such official contacts, Patricio’s conversations with Vorster and other high-level South African politicians received extensive and favourable coverage in the tightly controlled Portuguese media.37 Far from maintaining a distance from the pariah Republic, Patricio told the press: ‘we shall continue to live and cooperate, with more and more intimacy, with the Republic of South Africa.’38 No country in the world was expressing anything like this open warmth towards the apartheid regime and it did not go unnoticed.

What the press did not know was that on the very eve of the coup Pretoria and Lisbon were in the process of deepening their security relationship yet further. In late 1973, P. W. Botha visited Portugal to conclude two separate military agreements. Under the first, a Permanent ALCORA Planning Organisation (PAPO), featuring high-ranking military representatives from Salisbury, Lisbon, and Pretoria, was established to co-ordinate the logistics of tripartite military operations in Southern Africa.39 Under the second, code-named Operation Cadiz, South Africa offered a new, five-year undertaking to bankroll Portugal’s counter-insurgencies in Angola and Mozambique to the tune of 150 million rand.40 This long-term commitment represented a marked departure from the much smaller year-by-year agreements that had existed previously and was offered in addition to the 20 million rand in basic assistance that South Africa provided on an annual basis.41 Accordingly, in March 1974 – just six weeks before the coup – the Portuguese Ministry of Defence wrote to Botha to inform him of over 100 million rand worth of military purchases that Lisbon was in the process of making with Pretoria’s money.42 A further memorandum sought to schedule a May meeting between Portugal’s top officers and their South African counterparts, including H. J. Professor Samuels, head of Krygskor, the South African government’s armaments production arm, to discuss how Pretoria might help Lisbon obtain the most suitable equipment.43 The meeting never took place.

Remarkably, in mid-1976 – after the debacle in Angola, and long after the independence of Mozambique – South Africa sought with some success to reacquire from the new government in Portugal what remained of the equipment that it had earlier supplied to the previous regime to fight its now repudiated colonial wars. One high-ranking SADF officer involved in Operation Tower noted in retrospect:

The decision to support Portugal in her war against the terrorists in Mozambique and Angola, was a political one… no conditions whatsoever were laid down as to the return of any of the equipment or stores by Portugal for whatever reasons. It was accepted that equipment so supplied became the property of the recipient… such equipment was supplied on a basis of “permanent loan.”44

Pretoria did try to protect its investment in other ways, such as forming the ALCORA institutions to give it a direct role in the use of its equipment and funds. But the bottom line was that Pretoria gave Lisbon an immense amount of military equipment and cash to fight as its proxy against radical black nationalism. The problem was that by the time of the coup, South Africa’s reliance on Portugal had become overwhelming. Between 1966 and 1973, the proportion of South Africa’s budget devoted to defence decreased dramatically, from 21% to just 12%.45 Consequently, as a proportion of the resources
allocated to national defence, the steady increase in assistance given to Portugal – from 25 million rand in 1969 to 150 million rand in 1973 - was actually even more dramatic than the sums themselves suggest. In the context of South Africa’s entire defence policy, the alliance with Portugal had come to occupy a pivotal position.

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Although the extent of this relationship was unknown – and has remained so until now – the fact of its existence was an open secret. This left both partners open to vehement criticism from the anti-imperial coalition formed by the Afro-Asian and Communist blocs. By the early 1970s, South Africa already attracted significant obloquy on the international stage, while as the last colonial power left in Africa, Portugal was scarcely more popular. The diplomatic protection for their joint military efforts had to come from somewhere else.

Both the Kennedy (1961–63) and Johnson administrations (1963–69) were torn between two mutually exclusive courses. Kennedy and many of his closest advisors appreciated that by encouraging self-determination and supporting African nationalism, the United States could promote its position in post-colonial Africa and potentially pre-empt any expansion in Communist influence there. More hard-headed advisers argued instead that the white regimes could be counted upon to virulently oppose radicals in the region, while undermining them might actually help create a fluid situation ripe for Communist penetration. With the increasing maelstrom in Vietnam pushing Africa to the very periphery of Washington’s foreign policy priorities, the US increasingly opted for the latter course, more conservative in character and requiring a minimal effort or resources. By the end of the Johnson administration, American policy consisted of rhetoric championing self-determination in southern Africa, but without the support of any concrete initiatives, political capital, or diplomatic resources to actually encourage a transfer of power.

From the outset, the Nixon Administration’s policy – enshrined in the adoption of Option Two in the infamous National Security Study Memorandum 39 of 1969 – amplified this trend, positioning the US squarely behind the white regimes in Lisbon and Pretoria. In theory, the Nixon policy committed the US to encouraging incremental reforms by working through the white regimes:

The Whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come about is through them. There is no hope for the blacks to gain the political rights they seek through violence, which will only lead to chaos and increased opportunities for the Communists. We can, by selective relaxation of our stance toward the white regimes, encourage some modification of their current racial and colonial policies.

Yet while Washington continued to denounce apartheid, the Nixon administration never devoted the resources, effort, or leverage required to seriously encourage reform. Instead, American policy essentially amounted in practice to a relaxation of even the token pressures applied by the previous Administrations, accompanied by a visible rapprochement with the regimes that conferred a measure of much-needed
legitimacy.\textsuperscript{51} Washington repeatedly rallied its Western allies to help blunt UN resolutions introduced by non-aligned or Communist countries criticising Pretoria, winning itself few friends in the process. Equally symbolically, the Nixon White House did nothing to stop the passage of the Byrd Amendment allowing imports of Rhodesian chrome, thus placing the United States in the company of Portugal and South Africa as the only nations to openly flaunt the mandatory UN embargo on trade with the Smith regime in Salisbury. The reality was that while Washington deliberately kept both Lisbon and (especially) Pretoria at arm’s length, both were given a relatively free hand to maintain control and prevent change in southern Africa in whatever manner they saw fit.\textsuperscript{52}

This policy was not only somewhat cynical and contradictory, it was also decidedly open to misinterpretation. Pretoria, for one, was deeply reassured by the Nixon administration’s position.\textsuperscript{53} However, South Africa’s leaders failed to fully appreciate that the decisive reasoning underpinning Nixon’s policy was in essence the same as for Johnson’s: the white regimes could be relied upon to perform a holding operation in the Cold War, resisting communism with a minimum of US involvement, attention, expense, and effort. At its most fundamental, the policy was simply a means of outsourcing the effecting of Washington’s geopolitical aims to conservative regional powers – as the Nixon administration was wont to do – in an area of the world in which it had almost no interest.\textsuperscript{54} For Nixon and Kissinger, there was little more to the relationship than that. Washington still saw South Africa’s racial policies as repugnant and its long-term programme for their resolution, separate development, as unfeasible. In 1972, when South Africa was more stable and prosperous than at any time until the demise of the apartheid regime two decades later, a major CIA National Intelligence Estimate noted in no uncertain terms: ‘The program of separate development of white and non-white communities is not working and almost certainly will not work.’\textsuperscript{55} Not only did the Nixon administration make its views clear in public, where they might have been dismissed as posturing, it also made them forcefully in private to South African officials.\textsuperscript{56}

A Department of Foreign Affairs paper written in early 1974 acknowledged that:

\begin{quote}
As far as the rejection of apartheid is concerned, the Americans . . . believe that we do not envisage any political role for non-whites. The US views the whites as a minority group and believes that ultimately through political and economic circumstances we will be forced to accept integration within a majority rule government.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Nevertheless, South Africa’s leaders wilfully misunderstood the nature of American support, putting Washington’s criticisms down to a simple failure to understand South Africa’s unique racial situation.\textsuperscript{58} In early 1971, for instance, Foreign Minister Hilgard Muller, displaying the misguided optimism characteristic of Pretoria’s thinking at this time, scrawled on a letter from his Secretary Brand Fourie:

\begin{quote}
Most [foreign observers] fail to see that the position in SA is changing – not as a result of pressure from without, not in the form of concessions for favours (eg. Respectability) – not as a quid pro quo – not as a result of fear or eagerness to win friends – but as a result
\end{quote}
of the implementation of the policies of the Govt, re the various non-white peoples. Policies consistently declared & maintained and implemented with increasing speed – policies to assist – to achieve selfdetermination.59

South Africa’s leaders envisaged that with the successful implementation of separate development – which would provide self-determination to South Africa’s various ethnic communities – well-disposed leaders like Nixon could be brought around to their thinking. Over time, the central impediment to bilateral relations would evaporate, enabling a closer relationship between Pretoria and Washington and a concomitant escape from international isolation.

Every aspect of this thinking was delusional. Quite apart from the increasing resonance of apartheid as a domestic political issue in the US, very few outside of the Republic saw the forced exile of non-whites to bantustans economically (and to a large extent also politically) beholden to Pretoria as a viable or acceptable solution to South Africa’s racial issues. And so it would prove. Pithily reflecting on the results of separate development, David Welsh, one of South Africa’s best historians, recently wrote: ‘Corrupt, authoritarian, and prone to coups d’etats, the bantustans were classic banana republics, in which Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness met Evelyn Waugh’s Black Mischief.’60 To its credit, even the Nixon Administration envisaged things similarly, if less colourfully.

Thus, right up until the eve of the coup, South Africa’s national security stood on two fundamentally unstable pillars. First, Pretoria relied heavily on Lisbon to keep Communist-backed insurgents well away from South African territory. Yet in resisting decolonisation, Lisbon stood virtually alone against the most universal of post-war forces. That Portugal would have to decolonise precisely as other powers had may not have been inevitable, but that it would have to cede power to local black populations in some form surely was. Second, Pretoria depended on the US for diplomatic protection. Yet this protection was grudging, limited, subject to changes of government, and greatly complicated by South Africa’s racial policies, all of which made Washington an unreliable ally.61 In fact, Washington’s support, such as it was, was entirely contingent on South Africa’s ability to prevent the region becoming a target for large-scale Communist intervention – a function Pretoria actually relied upon Lisbon to discharge. Consequently, Pretoria had left itself particularly open to any weakening of Lisbon’s ability or resolve to maintain control of its colonies, positioning South Africa’s entire national security on geopolitical fault lines.

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Through this all there was one figure who took a more pessimistic view of South Africa’s national security situation. Like Vorster, Defence Minister P. W. Botha believed wholeheartedly in the National Party shibboleth of separate development as the route to both internal order and international rehabilitation. However, where Vorster saw South Africa’s stability and prosperity as an ideal platform to boldly reach out to black Africa, Botha was fixated on what he saw as a Soviet-orchestrated ‘total onslaught’ against the nation, and advocated vigilance and rearmament in place of what he saw as
complacency and naivety. In a rousing speech at Boksburg in late 1973, for instance, he launched into the brand of alarmist anti-Communist language that would become all too familiar over the ensuing years:

There are forces trying to bring about revolutionary conditions in South Africa. A revolution in this country can perhaps – if it succeeds – hurt and wound white South Africa – but it will eventually lead to the enslavement of the coloured as well as Indians under a Communist controlled dictatorship – which will bring no freedom to the black masses. We are witnessing today how through Chinese efforts a strong grip is being applied by Communist forces on Tanzania and Zambia. They are not being liberated, but gradually enslaved under the false pretences and slogans of the liberation of Southern Africa... We must stay prepared... We must have the capacity to fight back purposefully and decisively.

Many of the same themes were revisited in March 1974 - just prior to the Portuguese coup. In a section of his speech entitled 'Threat', Botha expanded on the dangers posed by black nationalist groups:

Let there be no doubt in our minds – behind these agencies of subversion and terrorism there exist strong forces of militarist imperialism in Moscow, Peking and their satellites... [who] make the Free World believe that they want peace, that we are in a period of "détente". But in the meantime, they continue to build up their own military strength... Terrorism in Southern Africa will have no success unless it is supported from outside by those forces from Moscow and Peking who, although they have their own quarrels, are determined to overthrow the stability in Southern Africa and destroy this bastion against Communism. This whole threat against Southern Africa is part of a global strategy against America, Europe and the Free World.

As a key figure in the Pretoria-Lisbon alliance, Botha was hardly calling for its abandonment. Rather, the Minister for Defence was advocating the expansion of the military in size and responsibilities in addition to the alliance. He wanted South Africa to be more self-reliant and effective in the military sphere, meaning more funding, better weapons, and an unapologetically more aggressive military posture.

Yet his warnings went unheeded for a number of reasons. First, although Minister of Defence, Botha at the time remained outside the corridors of real power in Vorster’s government. He owed his position to his political clout, namely his role as head of the powerful Cape faction of the federally structured National Party, rather than his loyalty to Vorster or his policies. It was only really after the coup that Botha and his securocrats obtained a prominent role in policy-making. Defence spending rose by over 400% between 1974 and 1980 in response to the renewed sense of vulnerability – and Botha’s star and influence rose with it. Second, Botha’s alarmist rhetoric found a somewhat unreceptive audience. In the early 1970s, South Africa appeared to be flourishing, awash with prosperity. Tirades delivered at the opening of a provincial farm show, like the second speech cited above, must have seemed a touch hysterical. Finally, and most importantly, there were very few concrete indications that the scenario Botha was portraying was about to materialise in the immediate future.
This requires some clarification. It was not that Botha’s brand of virulent anti-communism did not resonate in South African society: quite the opposite. South African governments had always been deeply anti-Communist, both ideologically and geopolitically. Ideologically, individual Communists were persecuted, while the South African Communist Party was a banned organisation. Geopolitically, South Africa saw itself as an integral part of the West, even if the West disagreed. All of the regimes responsive to outward policy, from Ivory Coast and Liberia to Gabon and Malawi, were decidedly moderate and pro-Western, while South Africa’s most vehement detractors on the continent were either radical or openly Communist. Indeed, the only way to reconcile South Africa’s dual-track foreign policy – one cultivating moderate black regimes, the other cooperating with white regimes – was that both were targeted against communism, rather than black majority rule per se. The reality was that by 1974 South Africa’s leaders – or at least the dominant verligte, or (relatively) ‘enlightened’ wing, which Vorster led – were increasingly comfortable with dealing with moderate black leaders and relatively unfazed by largely ineffective black liberation movements. Instead, it was the corrupting of either group by Communist influence, arms, funds, or ideas that animated their most deep-seated fears of the eradication of white civilisation from the Cape. The 1972 CIA National Intelligence Estimate cited earlier concluded:

Many whites, including South Africa’s leaders, believe that the current social and political ferment throughout the continent is Communist-inspired and managed; that it would be no problem without Communist instigation. They point to materiel and training provided by Communist countries to insurgency groups operating against white minority governments in southern Africa. They see foreign-based black liberation groups operating against the Portuguese, Rhodesians, and South Africans as the spearhead of a Communist thrust into southern Africa.

Thus, Botha was hardly on his own in South African society in articulating the dangers posed by international communism. However, while still seeing Moscow and Beijing as potentially or theoretically dangerous, the sense of imminence and urgency in Botha’s worldview was not shared at the time by any of the threat assessments emanating from the bureaucracies managed by Vorster’s political allies. Unlike the Department of Defence’s threat assessments from this time, which reflected Botha’s views, reports from both Hendrik van den Bergh’s BOSS and Muller’s Department of Foreign Affairs downplayed the extent of actual Communist penetration in southern Africa, (accurately) emphasising a demise in Moscow and Peking’s interest in the region by 1973–4. One BOSS report on Peking’s approach to East Africa commented: ‘China’s policy in Africa constitutes an inseparable part of her universal policy ie. Her effort to consolidate her position as a leading power within the “Third World” and the undermining by any means of Western and Soviet influences.’ However, when surveying the actual extent of Chinese penetration, the report concluded that Chinese influence was limited to a small number of countries that remained more wary of Peking than welcoming. Similarly, a BOSS assessment of Soviet interests in Southern Africa noted that the Soviet Union could be expected to ‘take what opportunities
occur to further their aims, which are in general to build up their influence; to demonstrate their position as a super-power; to enlist African countries as clients or at least “non-aligned” sympathisers; and to counter Western and Chinese influence.’ However, in practice, the report found, ‘Soviet policy towards Africa south of the Sahara has been and can be expected to continue to be cautious and opportunist; during the last three years Soviet penetration of Africa has been slow and uneven. The Russians do not give Africa a high priority.’

Yet Botha’s clarion call did not fall entirely on deaf ears. Even before the coup, defence spending was increased. However, in the absence of a consensus on an impending danger, his case was not persuasive enough to bring about a wholesale reappraisal of South Africa’s national security strategy. Some indication of problems within the existing relationship with Lisbon might have altered the calculus. But Pretoria was receiving very few indications that Portugal was on the verge of losing control in Angola and Mozambique. DFA reports played down the impact of General António Spinola’s landmark critique of Portugal’s colonial policies, which would prove the catalyst for the coup. Similarly, despatches from Montgomery in Lisbon gave very little indication that the regime was close to collapse. Others were similarly taken by surprise. The American Ambassador, Stuart Scott, was not even in Portugal at the time (though unlike Montgomery, Scott had outlined the domestic turmoil that Spinola’s book had unleashed). Closer to home, Pretoria was receiving a steady stream of accurate information indicating that Portugal’s efforts at suppressing the insurgencies – at least in Angola and Mozambique, if not in Portuguese Guinea – were progressing well, and certainly far better during 1973 and the first half of 1974 than they had been just a few years earlier. From Angola, the reports of experienced Consul Mike Malone, soon doyen of the diplomatic corps there, and those of BOSS and military intelligence were unanimous that the situation on the battlefield was improving rapidly in favour of the Portuguese. Of more concern perhaps was Mozambique. In August 1973, Montgomery visited both territories and sent back a detailed and lengthy report focusing on the latter. ‘Where armed terrorism is in Angola an incidental nuisance and even then is limited to certain regions,’ he related, ‘one is soon made aware that it constitutes the crux of the problems in Mozambique… In contrast to Angola, I believe things are moving in a somewhat negative direction.’ Yet even in Montgomery’s largely pessimistic analysis, there were numerous suggestions that the situation was manageable and certainly not in danger of imminent collapse. Moreover, South African assessments did not differ markedly from their counterparts. In January 1974, the experienced American Consul-General in Lourenço Marques, Hendrik Van Oss, wrote in a lengthy report on US policy towards the Portuguese colonies:

Even after ten years of armed struggle, FRELIMO still does not control significant portions of country or command substantial support among populace. Portuguese seem strong enough to hang on indefinitely, barring unforeseen developments, and present military [stalemate] could continue for long time… Barring unforeseen developments within Portugal, or drastic increase in Frelimo strength due to
acquisition of more powerful weapons or active participation by outside elements, [the] Portuguese, even with their antiquated military equipment, appear able to hang on indefinitely.79

Yet it was precisely such unforeseen developments within Portugal that would bring both the Portuguese regime and South Africa’s security framework crashing down.

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By April 1974, John Vorster had begun shepherding a number of fundamental changes in the apartheid state. At home, he was opening up South Africa to black diplomats and mixed race sport to signal a shift away from the old ways of unabashed white dominance, or baasskap, and towards a unique multi-national society of separate ethnically-based polities. Abroad, he was building bridges from this foundation to black África, seeking to construct pragmatic and productive relationships with ardent opponents of his government and its philosophy. At every turn, he had to placate the hostile right wing of his own party, convincing it that South Africa was simultaneously threatened enough by external pressure to require the reforms, but strong enough to implement them and emerge safe and secure on the other side.80 It was a delicate and perhaps impossible balancing act, but to effect these changes and make South Africa more palatable to the world, Vorster needed time and stability.

The coup in Lisbon deprived him of both – permanently. But the full extent of its impact was surely avoidable. Despite P. W. Botha’s calls for self-sufficiency, rearmament, and vigilance, by April 1974 South Africa possessed a defence policy whose one-dimensional nature contrasted sharply with the conceptual audacity and tactical dexterity of the outward policy. South Africa’s leaders agreed that the major long-term threat to white rule in the Cape comprised black liberation movements backed by Communist funds, arms, ideas, and troops. Yet instead of cultivating moderate black leaders in Angola and Mozambique, or diverting South Africa’s wealth to the building of a strong and self-sufficient national defence force – policies which would be vigorously pursued after April 1974 – Pretoria instead largely outsourced the maintenance of regional security to Lisbon. Exacerbating the asymmetry of their defence policy, South Africa’s leaders allowed themselves to be lulled into a false sense of security by Washington’s diplomatic protection. Consequently, when the Portuguese coup occurred, South Africa’s entire national security policy essentially collapsed overnight, creating a vacuum for the radical cocktail of assertiveness, defiance, and weaponry championed by Botha.

But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of South Africa’s reliance on Lisbon was that it significantly undercut the effectiveness of the much-valued outward policy, its lifeline to international rehabilitation. Vorster’s efforts to rehabilitate South Africa internationally hinged on the acceptance by black African leaders that through separate development South Africa was moving away from apartheid towards a sui generis multi-national society that they could associate with. This in itself required quite some convincing, and not a little financial persuasion. But by relying overtly upon those most identified with colonialism and neo-colonialism, in Lisbon and
Salisbury, Pretoria utterly undermined its own efforts to convince black Africa to transcend the entrenched dynamics of race-based attitudes to Southern Africa bequeathed by colonialism. On a separate level, outward policy depended upon the general acknowledgement that South Africa’s stability rendered it an inevitable part of black Africa’s environment, that the whites were indeed here to stay and black Africa ‘might as well make the best of it.’81 Yet by outsourcing the achievement of its national security goals to Lisbon, South Africa ensured that its security was intertwined with Portugal’s fate. Consequently, the coup in Portugal dealt a heavy blow to the outward policy, and ushered in an era of ever more acute isolation for apartheid South Africa.82

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Tom Young, Sue Onslow, Christian Ostermann, Hermann Giliomee, Bernard Porter, Penelope Gardiner, and Salim Yaqub for their comments on this article, as well as the convenors of and participants in the International Graduate Conference on the Cold War for their insights and assistance. I would also like to thank Neels Muller, Steve d’Agrela, Esta Jones, and Lieutenant Colonel Erika Strydom for their help at various South African archives.


[3] See the relaxed, even bullish tone of South African assessments of the Caetano regime’s strength prior to the coup, such as in South African Department of Foreign Affairs Archives, 1/14/10, 1, Portugal’s African Territories, R. J. Montgomery, Ambassador, Lisbon, to Brand Fourie, Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, ‘Die Toestand in Portugal: Dr Caetano se Familie-Praatjie’, 3 April 1974; or SADFAA, 1/22/1 OS, 16, Angola: Political Situation and Developments, E. M. Malone, Consul-General, Luanda, to Fourie, ‘Angola: The Progress of the War’, 4 February 1974.


[14] All translations are the author’s. The language of the document titles in the footnotes will indicate that of the original.


[22] It should be noted that South Africa did provide Portugal with some unspecified aid to counter the initial uprisings in Angola prior to 1964: Correira and Verhoef, ‘Portugal and South Africa: Close Allies or Unwilling Partners in Southern Africa During the Cold War?’, 58–9.

For SA assistance to Tshombe see USNA, Central Foreign Policy Files, Record Group 59, Records of the State Department, Records of the Bureau of African Affairs, 1958–1966, Box 51, Def-19 Military Assistance (SA-Congo) 1964, Peter Hooper, Deputy Director, Office of Southern African Affairs, Bureau of African Affairs, State Department, to Governor Mennen Williams, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, 'Tshombe Request for South African Assistance', 11 August 1964. The other documents in this folder make it clear that Pretoria had also allowed numerous mercenaries to head to the Congo to assist Tshombe. See also Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, NC; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 126. Taswell was then South Africa's Special Emissary to Southern Rhodesia, and had previously been the High Commissioner in Salisbury (1959–61), Consul in Luanda (1956–59), and Consul in Elizabethville (1946–56). He would later become South Africa's Ambassador in Washington and its Permanent Representative at the UN.

SADFAA, 1/14/3, 1, Portugal Relations With SA, Full Report, 'Onderhoud Met Dr. Salazar', H. L. T. Taswell, 14 and 19 August 1964. See also the testimony of General Constand Viljoen, Chief of the South African Defence Force (1980–85), Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Armed Forces Hearing, Cape Town, 8 October 1997, 14: 'we had a strategy of keeping the attacking forces as far away from the home or the heartlands of our territory as possible.'


Correia and Verhoef, 'Portugal and South Africa: Close Allies or Unwilling Partners in Southern Africa During the Cold War?', 59–60.


SADFAA, 1/14/3, 1, Portugal Relations With SA, unknown official, to J. E. De Meneses Rosa, Ambassador of Portugal, 'R25 Million Military Loan to Portugal', 16 July 1969. See also SADFAA, 1/14/3, 1, Portugal Relations With SA, Loan Agreement Between the South African Reserve Bank and the Govt of the Republic of Portugal, 12 February 1970.
Deduced from tables in Price, *The Apartheid State in Crisis: Political Transformation in South Africa, 1975–1990*, 44. It is difficult to gauge from these piecemeal agreements the total amount of assistance South Africa gave to Portugal. What is clear is that the sums involved – as further illustrated later – represented a huge outlay in terms of South Africa’s overall defence budget.


The relationship between the two countries was evidently very close, but this did not mean that both sides did not have their complaints, Portugal about the limited aid offered by South Africa, and South Africa about the Portuguese inability to achieve results or allow their direct involvement: Correia and Verhoef, ‘Portugal and South Africa: Close Allies or Unwilling Partners in Southern Africa During the Cold War?’

See the far-reaching discussions between Foreign Minister Hilgard Muller and Patricio in SADFAA, 1/14/3, 1, Portugal Relations With SA, ‘Discussion Between the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr The Hon. H. Muller and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Portugal, His Excellency Dr Rui D’Espiney Patricio’, Pretoria, 23–24 June 1971; and SADFAA, 1/14/3, 5, Portugal Relations With South Africa, Montgomery, Lisbon, to Fourie, Pretoria, ‘Note Pursuant to Meeting Between Dr Rui Patricio, Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Dr Muller, South African Minister for Foreign Affairs, on 13 September 1972’, 14 September 1972.


SADFAA, 1/14/6, 15, Portugal Colonial Policy, Speech by Rui Patricio, Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lourenco Marques, 11 March 1973.


SANDFA, Group 1- VBR/VBK (DSC), Box 3, VBK Notules 1-21, Chief of Staff Logistics to Chief of Staff Operations, ‘Op Tower: Return of Equipment and Stores by Portugal’, 18 August 1976, attached to ‘Minutes of the 20th Meeting of the DPC 23 August 76’, 23 August 1976.


Portugal was at least a member of NATO, which afforded it some protection.


For more on the formation of NSSM 69, see Schneidman, *Engaging Africa: Washington and the Fall of Portugal’s Colonial Empire*, 112–121.


[58] SADFAA, 1/33/3, Volume 18, United States of America Relations With South Africa, Vorster to Nixon, March 1971.

[59] Archive for Contemporary Affairs, PV 528, MB 10/1/2, Hilgard Muller, Korrespondensie, Fourie to A. M. Mogwe, Permanent Secretary to the President, 24 February 1971. See handwritten note on page 11.


[61] Sure enough, the Carter Administration swiftly abandoned any semblance of support for Pretoria soon after Inauguration Day: DDRS, Special Coordination Committee Meeting on South Africa and Rhodesia, 8 February 1977.


[66] For insightful accounts of Botha’s and the military’s rise during the 1970s, see Gavin Cawthra, Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine (London: International Defence & Aid Fund for


[68] In fact, that prosperity was a temporary and artificial boom, soon brought to a grinding halt by deep contradictions between the demands of South Africa’s industrialising economy and the social strictures of apartheid: ———, *The Apartheid State in Crisis: Political Transformation in South Africa, 1975–1990*, 28–38.


[76] Schneidman, *Engaging Africa: Washington and the Fall of Portugal’s Colonial Empire*, 141. USNA, AAD, Central Foreign Policy Files, Record Group 59, Records of State Department, Scott to State Department, ‘Portugal: Political/Economic Trends First Quarter 1974’, 30 March 1974: Spinola’s book ‘has shaken Portuguese political life out of its previous apparently immutable stability… We wish to emphasize, however, that the present Portuguese political scene is strewn with tinder and that sources of possible sparks are ever-present. Barring an explosion, we expect that Caetano will gradually emerge from his present weakened position.’


References


