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Thomas Schwärzler: The Angolan Civil War – A Cold War Microcosm?

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The Angolan Civil War – A Cold War Microcosm?

Thomas Schwärzler¹

ABSTRACT:

Following the independence of Angola in 1975, the country descended into a decades-lasting civil war between three indigenous movements who previously had fought for independence from Portugal. The first period of the civil war from 1975 until 1988 was characterized by significant involvements from several international actors, including South Africa, Cuba, the United States and the Soviet Union. Especially the involvement of the two superpowers and the dominating nature of the Cold War in international politics in the second half of the 20th century, raises the question, whether the Angolan civil war was a proxy war of the Global Cold War. Particularly the involvement of South Africa casts doubt on this notion since the apartheid-regime directed vast resources towards preventing majority-ruled countries in southern Africa from consolidating their power to protect its domestic sociopolitical system.

By analyzing the actions and motives for the involvement of the international actors and their interactions with each other, this paper aims at finding out whether the Angolan civil war was a proxy war in the Cold War or if the conflict was driven by a different rationale, i.e. the struggle of majority-ruled countries against apartheid-South Africa.

The analysis concludes that the Angolan civil war was primarily a regional conflict during which South Africa tried to hinder an anti-apartheid government from assuming power in Angola while Cuba, out of revolutionary idealism, became South Africa's staunchest enemy. The two superpowers misinterpreted the conflict because of their Cold War-focused conduct of international politics. Yet, due to their involvement, the Cold War became a part of the regional conflict, however, it only had a catalyzing effect on the regional conflict and was not the primary reason for the escalation of the Angolan civil war.

KEYWORDS.

Africa, Angola, Apartheid, Civil War, Cold War, Cuba, FNLA, Linkage, Lusaka Accords, MPLA, Namibia, Proxy Wars, South Africa, South African Border War, Southern Africa, Soviet Union, UN-Resolution 435, UNITA, United States

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1 Introduction

On November 11, 1975, a symbolic act took place in the Angolan capital of Luanda. After waving over the country for more than 500 years, the Portuguese colors were hauled down for the final time as Lisbon handed its largest remaining colony over to the Angolan people. A thirteen years lasting war of independence had brought an end to the last European colonial empire in Africa. The ‘*wind of change*’² had arrived in southern Africa.

The war of independence had split the newborn nation into three warring factions. Three different movements – *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA), *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA), and *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), who each represented one of the major ethnic groups in Angola – not only fought for independence against Portugal, but also against each other over who would lead post-colonial Angola. Thus, when the war of independence ended, the three movements continued to fight each other – the war was gradually blending over into a civil.

Angolan independence was not only a decisive caesura in the country’s history, it also had significant regional and global ramifications. With the collapse of the Portuguese Empire, the *cordon sanitaire*³, which protected southern Africa’s minority-regimes from the majority-ruled countries of northern and central Africa, got its first large fissures. Majority-rule arrived in the immediate back-yard of South Africa, by then the most preponderant power in the region. With Portugal’s retreat from the region, South Africa became the last stronghold of white minority rule in southern Africa at the outset of the 1980s. Against this background, South Africa faced unprecedented adversary from its newly majority-ruled neighbors and the nation’s hitherto unquestioned domination over the region was no longer a guaranteed fact. Desperately trying to preserve its racist socio-political system, Pretoria embarked on an utmost aggressive foreign and domestic policy to prevent the new majority-ruled governments from consolidating their power. In turn, these countries responded by taking up arms against South Africa’s aggression and directly challenged Pretoria’s apartheid-regime.

This regional struggle emerged at a time when the Cold War dominated world politics. It did not take long for the Soviet Union and the United States to adapt their global strategy to the altered circumstances in southern Africa and they started to treat the region as a new theater in the global Cold War. The increasing involvement of the two superpowers inevitably intertwined the regional conflict between South Africa and the majority-ruled countries with the global Cold War, thus creating lethal mixture. This mixture poisoned the climate in southern Africa until the end of the Cold War and the beginning transition to majority-rule in South Africa in 1989/90. In this climate, a dynamic got unleashed which dragged the entire southern African region into a devastating conflict that lasted for fifteen years.⁴

The gravity of this southern African conflict affected the emerging Angolan civil war which got drawn into this regional struggle immediately. The tremendous influence of the Cold War on world politics at that time suggests that this entire dynamic, and with it the

² British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan delivered this speech in front of the South African Parliament in February 1960. In this historically significant speech Macmillan acknowledged the inevitability of decolonization on the African continent. Ever since the term ‘wind of change’ has become synonymous with the gradual decolonization of Africa (Richard Lamb: *The Macmillan Years, 1957–1963. The Emerging Truth*, London 1995, pp. 245–246).

³ This cordon sanitaire refers to the countries Angola, Mozambique (both former Portuguese colonies) and Zimbabwe (then called Rhodesia and ruled by the white minority) who constituted a “protective belt” around apartheid South Africa until these countries received their independence.

⁴ Next to South Africa and Angola, this conflict also effected Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Namibia.

Angolan civil war, was primarily driven by the Cold War. The increasing involvement of the superpowers in Angola seems to corroborate this assumption. However, as it is elaborated in more detail in this paper, this assumption proves to be problematic.

2 Internationalization of the Civil War, 1974–1976

Despite being labelled a civil war, the conflict in Angola was never confined to the borders of the newly independent state on Africa's western coast. From the beginning, several international actors involved themselves in the conflict by supporting one of the three liberation movements.

The MPLA, which is an abbreviation for *People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola*, portrayed itself as a Marxist-Leninist party and thus could secure vital economic and military support from the socialist world, with the Soviet Union and Cuba leading the way.⁵ With significant support from the Soviet Union, the MPLA got the upper hand in the civil war and – since it was in control of the capital by the time of independence – singlehandedly took over power in Angola in November 1975. While the MPLA was trying to reform the country, and consolidate its power following Angolan independence, it was immediately challenged by the *National Union for the Total Independence of Angola* (UNITA) and FNLA.⁶

The UNITA was created in 1966, after its leader Jonas Savimbi seceded from the FNLA due to irreconcilable differences with the movement's leadership.⁷ Located in the southern part of Angola, it was the only movement that had no foreign sponsor during its early years. It was only in 1975, when UNITA gained western attention. Since the movement was fighting against the MPLA, which was supported by the Soviet Union, UNITA automatically was classified as an anti-communist-movement. The fact that Savimbi himself used a strong Marxist-influenced rhetoric and began to fight a Soviet-backed Cuban-/MPLA-force out of national interests and not because of an anti-communist attitude was either overlooked or ignored by the West.⁸ Yet, western aid proved not to be enough to secure UNITA's survival during the turmoil of independence. Thus, when South Africa extended a hand to Savimbi, he gladly took it and entered an alliance with Pretoria, based on the common hostility towards the MPLA. Henceforth, Pretoria was the biggest sponsor and, at certain points, also the indispensable lifeline for Savimbi's UNITA.

The FNLA, which translates into *National Front for the Liberation of Angola* operated from the northeast of Angola. Unlike the other two movements, it failed in establishing a military force by its own means. It was to a large part military support from neighboring Zaire⁹ that equipped the FNLA in the early phase of the civil war from 1975–76.¹⁰ While Zaire was initially the biggest supporter of the FNLA, one of the first supporters had been the

⁵ Joachim Becker: Angola, Mosambik und Zimbabwe. Im Visier Südafrikas, Köln 1988, pp. 75–93.

⁶ W. Martin James: A Political History of the Civil War in Angola, 1974–1990, New Brunswick 2011, pp. 63–65.

⁷ James, Political History, pp. 50–51.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 144–145.

⁹ Although the country was named *Zaire* only from 1971–1997, this name will be used throughout this paper for the nation which today is known as the *Democratic Republic of Congo* to avoid confusion with its western neighbor and former French colony which today is known as the *Republic of Congo*. *Zaire* gained independence from Belgium in 1960 and was named *Republic of Congo* until 1965 (known as *Congo-Leopoldville* to distinguish it from its western neighbor *Congo-Brazzaville*, which, upon receiving independence, also gave itself the name *Republic of Congo*). From 1965 until 1971 it was named *DR-Congo*. Joseph Mobutu renamed the country into *Republic of Zaire* in 1971.

¹⁰ James, Political History, pp. 42–45.

United States. Holden Roberto, the FNLA's leader, had been on the CIA's payroll since the Kennedy-Administration. Although hardly a pro-Western capitalist but an opportunistic African nationalist, he became the United States' choice ally in the escalating Angolan conflict, despite strong criticism from the State Department's African Bureau.¹¹

Notwithstanding significant financial and military aid, the FNLA failed to capitalize on this support as the MPLA, in an alliance with the Soviet Union and Cuba, handed them one defeat after another.¹² By February 1976, only three months after Angola received its independence, the FNLA held only three minor towns located in northern Angola. Two years later the FNLA was de facto defeated and no longer a factor in the war. While internal mismanagement certainly contributed to the quick defeat of the FNLA, the major reasons lie within its international support network, which was not as reliable as that of the MPLA and UNITA.

First, due to growing domestic opposition in the United States towards Washington's increasing involvement in the Angolan war, the Ford-Administration was forced to sign the so-called *Clark-Amendment* into law, an act that made any involvement of the U.S.-Government in the Angolan conflict illegal. Thus, by 1976 the USA were forced to end their military and financial support for the FNLA, only one year after it had significantly increased its aid following Angolan independence and the prospect of a pro-Moscow government in Luanda.¹³

Second, two years after the United States forced themselves to relinquish their support, Zaire caught up with them and ended its support for the FNLA. Kinshasa was aspiring better relations with the MPLA-government in Luanda and figured that the eviction of one of the MPLA's enemies would give this endeavor a touch of seriousness. Henceforth the FNLA was de facto without any foreign aid and immediately broke apart.¹⁴ Additionally, while the United States was still allowed to do so, it failed to match the military aid to the threats the FNLA was facing. Crucial to this failed threat assessment was that the United States underestimated another international actor who involved itself in Angola around the time of independence – Cuba.

While Havana's increasing involvement in Angola caught most of the involved parties of guard,¹⁵ the country's decision to intervene was not an action that came out of nowhere. Havana had already successfully supported Algeria in its war of independence against the French and, although unsuccessful, several revolutionary movements in Kinshasa and Brazzaville. While the successful Algeria campaign was bluntly overlooked by the West, Havana's unsuccessful intervention during the Congo Crisis in 1960 corroborated the West's false assumption that '*Moscow's proxy*'¹⁶, would not make a difference in Africa.

Due to the failed Congo-campaign, Havana's relation with the region in general and Luanda in particular cooled off during the early 1960s. Cuban President Fidel Castro had, according to MPLA-leader Agostinho Neto, lost much of his faith in the abilities of southern Africa's liberation movements. Thus, when Neto asked Castro for financial and technical aid

¹¹ Jussi M. Hanhimäki: *The Flawed Architect*. Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy, New York 2004, p. 404.

¹² James, *Political History*, p. 56.

¹³ Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect*, pp. 418–420.

¹⁴ Becker, *Angola, Mosambik und Zimbabwe*, pp. 140–141.

¹⁵ Henry Kissinger: *Years of Renewal*, New York 1999, p. 815; Piero Gleijeses: *Conflicting Missions*. Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976, Chapel Hill 2002, p. 8.

¹⁶ Throughout the Cold War, in the United States the notion prevailed that Cuba acted as a mere proxy of the Soviet Union in Africa (Kissinger, *Renewal*, p. 784 and 816). As elaborated in this article, this was, especially in Angola, not the case.

in 1974, Castro was reluctant, yet he did not categorically deny Neto's request. Only after some of Castro's closest advisors had toured Angola on an *exploratory mission* to get a firsthand impression of the situation in the country, he was willing to support the MPLA in the upcoming civil war.¹⁷

Given Castro's reluctance to assist Luanda, an attitude he had shown since the mid-1960s in several yet irregular exchanges with Luanda, the question arises why Neto turned to Havana in the first place, since it is thoroughly legitimate to conclude that Moscow would have been Neto's go-to ally. Ideologically speaking, the relationship between Moscow and the MPLA had never been an easy one. From the outset, the Kremlin did not place much faith in Neto's leadership abilities and had always looked with skepticism towards a Neto-led MPLA. During the early 1970s, tensions grew to such an extent that Moscow drastically cut back its aid and even considered to drop the MPLA in favor of another movement.¹⁸ Yet, Neto and his successor José Eduardo dos Santos successfully managed to sweet-talk Moscow and thus relations began to improve by the late 1970s, but they never became what would be described as '*cordial*'.¹⁹ Neto was both aware of the fragility of his country's alliance with Moscow and the fact that the MPLA could end up without any Soviet aid. As a logical consequence, he looked for a backup plan and turned to a country which also had a history of interventions in Africa.

After Castro had received the report from the *exploratory mission*, Cuba began to support the MPLA on a massive scale by sending financial aid, military equipment, and advisers to Angola in July 1975, four months prior to independence. Interestingly, however, despite the urgency of the situation (the U.S.-backed FNLA was gaining the upper hand in the war), Castro delayed the aid delivery for several months after he had approved it in early 1975. Yet, since most of the relevant documents in Havana are still classified, there can only be speculation as to what caused the delay. Castro might have been reluctant to get drawn into a far-away conflict whose duration, intensity and protagonists were more than vague at the time. Also, he might have been afraid of jeopardizing global détente which also had some positive ramifications on the relationship between Havana and Washington. And indeed, once Washington got wind of Cuba's involvement in Angola, it was beyond any doubt for the Ford-Administration that Castro was acting on Moscow's orders.²⁰

After Cuban aid was flowing to Angola, the MPLA's situation improved. Yet, the situation was tilted back to the FNLA's favor only one month later after the USA had once again increased their aid for the FNLA. Castro sent a letter to the Secretary General of the *Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (CPSU), Leonid Brezhnev, in which he stressed the necessity for increased support for the MPLA. So far, Cuba had only sent military equipment and advisers, but as Castro received intelligence that a major attack from UNITA and FNLA was imminent, he was pondering the deployment of regular Cuban troops. While his staff had

¹⁷ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 344–245.

¹⁸ Although Angola was declared a Marxist-Leninist country in 1977, Neto and José Eduardo dos Santos tried to keep the door to the western hemisphere open. Given their increasing economic and political interactions with western nations especially throughout the 1980, their plan seemed to have worked. When closely analyzed on how the MPLA interacted with Moscow, it becomes evident that the MPLA's relationship with the Soviet Union was not exclusively based on an ideological commitment to Marxist-Leninism but also largely on nationalistic opportunism. The public commitment to Marxist-Leninism was increasingly becoming mere lip service. Moscow skepticism towards the MPLA was therefore not unfounded, yet Moscow (and the United States for that matter) never fully understood or accepted the fact that Angola's independence movements acted primarily out of national motives.

¹⁹ Odd Arne Westad: *Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974–1976. A New Pattern of Intervention*, in: *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 1996–97, no. 8–9, pp. 21–37, p. 25.

²⁰ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, pp. 256–257; Kissinger, *Renewal*, p. 784 and 816.

already drafted a detailed plan for transportation and supply, he wanted Brezhnev to send transport assistance and Soviet staff officers both to Cuba and Angola to help planning the operations in Angola.²¹ Castro knew that it would be extremely difficult for his country to stem the logistics of such a massive troop deployment on his own. But the Kremlin was not convinced that the conflict in Angola had deteriorated to such an extent that the urgency for Castro's proposed reinforcement was justified and declined all his request.²² Additionally, Moscow was still skeptic of Neto and the MPLA and the Soviet leader did not want to jeopardize détente, which had reached a crucial phase at that time since Moscow and Washington were amid the SALT II-negotiations. A direct involvement of Moscow in Angola would certainly had upset superpower relations. With UNITA and FNLA getting stronger, Havana's so far limited endeavors in Angola got increasingly endangered. Paradoxically, it was the invasion of South Africa in October 1975 and thus a direct attack on the MPLA that changed the fortune of the MPLA and Cuba.

With growing concern, South Africa had closely monitored the developments in the emerging civil war in Angola since it was also affecting the apartheid regime's security concerns. Given the public adversity the MPLA had expressed towards South Africa an MPLA-ruled Angola was unacceptable for Pretoria.²³ After initial hesitation, South Africa thus started to provide limited support to Roberto's FNLA and Savimbi's UNITA, whom they considered a lesser evil than the MPLA since neither of them had openly condemned apartheid. When a report commissioned by South African Prime Minister John Vorster concluded that UNITA and FNLA might not prevail against the MPLA, Pretoria decided to take the matter into its own hands.²⁴

Initially, *Operation Savannah*, as South Africa's invasion of Angola in October 1975 was codenamed, advanced at full speed, gaining sixty to seventy kilometers per day.²⁵ Three armored *South African Defense Force* (SADF) columns were simultaneously advancing north, determined to accomplish the highly ambitious goal of capturing Luanda before Independence Day on November 11. By mid-November, FNLA/Zaire, attacking in the north, and SADF/UNITA, attacking from the south, had made their biggest advances. The MPLA was only in control of a 300-kilometer broad corridor stretching south of Luanda all the way to the Zairian/Zambian border.

The early success of *Savannah* had a catalyzing effect on the complex support network for both sides in the Angolan war. In Moscow, South Africa's invasion moved the Angolan issue way up on the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda. For them, South Africa's invasion was without a doubt orchestrated by the United States (which was not the case)²⁶, thus it became virtually obligatory for the USSR to rush to the aid of its Angolan ally.²⁷ The day following independence, first Soviet personnel arrived in Luanda from the Congo, while vast amounts of heavy military equipment including fighter-jets, SAM-units, anti-tank missiles, tanks and

²¹ Westad, Moscow, p. 25.

²² Westad, Moscow, pp. 25–26.

²³ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, p. 276.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ On the following pages, there will only be a very brief outline on the SADF's operation in Angola. For a more detailed account refer to chapter 14 and 15 in Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, or: Rodney Warwick: *Operation Savannah. A Measure of SADF Decline, Resourcefulness and Modernisation*, in: *Scientia Militaria. South African Journal of Military Studies*, vol. 40, 2013, no. 3, pp. 354–397.

²⁶ Kissinger, *Renewal*, p. 820; John Macrum: *United States Options in Angola*, in: *CSIS African Notes*, December 1985, no. 52, pp. 2–8, p. 2; Piero Gleijeses: *Cuba and the Independence of Namibia*, in: *Cold War History*, vol. 7, 2007, no. 2, pp. 285–303, p. 287.

²⁷ Westad, Moscow, p. 26.

hundreds of tons of other equipment arrived from the Soviets.²⁸ Doubtlessly, it was this Soviet material that made the MPLA/Cuban alliance in terms of arms sophistication equal to the SADF/UNITA coalition.

Most importantly, however, *Savannah* erased Brezhnev's reluctance towards Castro's plan of sending Cuban boots to Angola. Yet, by the time Brezhnev accepted the idea, the Cuban leader had already decided to act. Aware of the fact that his military advisers were hopelessly inferior to the SADF, he had to take immediate actions. This time, knowing that a response from Moscow would either be negative again or would take too much time, Castro did not even bother to consult Moscow. Only after Cuban troops had been well underway to Angola, he informed the Kremlin of his decision to send massive reinforcement to assist the MPLA. Castro might have thought that Brezhnev, confronted with the *fait accompli*, was more likely to support him. From November 1975 to April 1976, Havana dispatched 36,000 Cuban soldiers to Angola, an accomplishment that stunned the world. As it was later admitted by several people who were involved in this phase of the war, it was the Cubans who defeated both Zaire/FNLA and SADF/UNITA.²⁹ Until Havana's involvement, the MPLA had to retreat on all frontlines, desperately trying to hold Luanda until November 11. Only after Cuba took over the command and the handling of the heavy, sophisticated weaponry delivered by the Soviets, the MPLA gained the upper hand, defeated the FNLA, and drove back the South Africans.

For South Africa, *Operation Savannah* was a shot in the foot. Its own invasion triggered off a chain of events that eventually left Pretoria completely isolated and internationally condemned. SADF's attack prompted Castro to send combat troops into Angola and Moscow to step up its aid deliveries. To halt the reinforced MPLA, Pretoria would have needed the assistance from Washington, yet, the Ford-Administration was no longer able to provide this aid, for both Congress and the public considered any further involvement with Pretoria regarding Angola as unacceptable. Left alone, the SADF's only option was to beat a humiliating retreat, leaving behind a weakened UNITA that was now deprived of any international assistance. The MPLA in turn, thanks to a lifesaving support from Havana and later from Moscow, had prevailed over the preponderant nemesis from the south. Yet, all parties realized that the MPLA had just won the battle, the war itself was far from being over. *Savannah* thus only brought an end to the first phase of the civil war in Angola.

3 Cold War Intervention, 1976–1984

3.1 Washington, Pretoria and UNITA

Operation Savannah was nothing more than a caesura in the Angolan civil war. Despite the operation's debacle, neither South Africa, UNITA nor the United States completely disengaged from the conflict, a fact Havana, Luanda and Moscow were well aware of. The second phase of the civil war, which lasted until the signing of the *Lusaka Accords* in 1984, was thus characterized by a complex process of reshaping and strengthening the alliances on both sides of the frontline, while the violence persisted to rage with all its devastation.

The reassessment of Washington's Africa policy occurred amid several significant international changes. Coinciding with Jimmy Carter assuming office as new president in

²⁸ Westad, *Moscow*, pp. 27–29.

²⁹ Piero Gleijeses: *Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa, 1975–1988*, in: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2006, no. 2, pp. 3–51, pp. 31–32.

1977 renewed Cold War tensions arose. First, SALT-II-negotiations came to a standstill, effectively marking the beginning end of détente. Second, the Ogaden-War at the Horn of Africa and the 1977/78 Katanga-crisis made perfectly clear that the Cold War had finally arrived on the entire African continent. More importantly, however, as Westad argues, did the essence of the Cold War itself change. Several global developments, including the rise of political Islam, contributed to the fact that the Cold War was no longer a zero-sum game anymore. A strategic, geopolitical or diplomatic loss for Washington no longer equaled a win for Moscow or vice-versa. It had never been more apparent than in 1980, and this is crucial for understanding the conflict in Angola, that the world was no longer entirely bipolar.³⁰ The incoming Reagan-Administration would have been in the position to adapt its foreign policy accordingly, yet, at least throughout the first tenure, it chose to ignore this fact completely. The hardline president and his administration almost exclusively looked at international politics through bipolar glasses. The Soviet Union was an *evil empire* and it was the United States' and its allies' job to eradicate this evilness. It seems self-evident that this renewed hardline stance also had a tremendous impact on the administration's Africa policy. In Reagan's view, the Western world's highest priority regarding Africa should be to get the Soviets, and their Cuban proxy, out of Africa.

With Reagan's inauguration, Chester Crocker took over the African Bureau in the State Department and, henceforth, it was he who decisively designed Washington's approach towards southern Africa. The new Assistant Secretary of State was aware of the complex situation he inherited. The fact that Washington's means to influence the developments in the region were, due to the *Clark-Amendment*, almost entirely limited to diplomacy, further complicated the matter. For Crocker, it was as clear as it was for Reagan that the Cubans had to leave Angola. Yet, he knew that neither Luanda nor Havana would agree to such a withdrawal as long as there was no guarantee that Angola was secured from any further South African aggression. This guarantee was not given as long as South Africa used Namibia as springboard for continuous assaults on Angola. In other words, as long as South Africa refused to withdraw from Namibia and grant independence to the country, Cuba was not going to leave Angola. By the early 1980s, however, all diplomatic efforts to get South Africa to withdraw from Namibia and grant independence to the country had reached a deadlock. Crocker was certainly not the first top-level diplomat who realized that the Namibian deadlock influenced the situation in Angola. Yet, he tried to tackle the problem from an entirely different angle.

To achieve the enormously arduous task of getting the South Africans to withdraw from Namibia and the Cubans from Angola, Crocker, together with Secretary of State Alexander Haig, broke new ground by introducing a policy that became known as *Linkage*. This policy foresaw the simultaneous withdrawal of Cuba from Angola and South Africa from Namibia, followed by the implementation of *UN-Resolution 435*, which foresaw the independence of Namibia.³¹ *Linkage* perfectly reflects the overall understanding Crocker had of the region's conflict. In his eyes, the United States did not have enough leverage to persuade South Africa and Cuba to withdraw from Namibia and Angola respectively. However, by linking these two issues together, he saw an opportunity to increase

³⁰ Odd Arne Westad: *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge/New York 2005, p. 336; Piero Gleijeses: *Visions of Freedom. Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991*, Chapel Hill 2013, pp. 164–165.

³¹ *UN-Resolution 435* was passed in 1978 and stated that SADF would gradually withdraw from Namibia while SWAPO would simultaneously retreat to previously defined bases inside Namibia. Meanwhile a constitutional assembly should prepare general elections in the country.

Washington's leverage decisively.³² During the early 1980s, Crocker, therefore, focused his entire attention on getting Pretoria and Luanda to accept *Linkage*. With cautious but smart diplomacy, he managed to get Pretoria to accept the basic terms of the concept and to bring Luanda to the negotiating table.³³

While Washington's hardliners were quick to mark *Linkage* a failure, the *Linkage*-approach was not entirely fruitless as it contributed to the accomplishment of the *Lusaka Accords* in 1984. In February 1984, Pretoria and Luanda signed the *Lusaka Accords*, an agreement that foresaw the withdrawal of all SADF-units from Angola by March 1984 in exchange for a Cuban commitment not to allow *South West Africa People's Organisation* (SWAPO)³⁴ and Cuban forces to operate in areas vacated by Pretoria (i. e. Namibia). Following said withdrawal, officials from the USA, South Africa and Angola should establish a joint commission to oversee the disengagement in the region. Yet, the treaty had several crucial flaws, one being that neither UNITA nor SWAPO were signatories. Moreover, by March 1984, South Africa had withdrawn only one half of its troops and Pretoria accused SWAPO and Luanda UNITA of breaking the agreement. Pieter Willem Botha, who ousted John Vorster as prime minister in 1978, continued to make a Cuban departure from Angola a prerequisite for South African withdrawal from Angola and Namibia, terms which were continuously rejected by Luanda.³⁵ Despite this stalemate, the United States, led by Chester Crocker, continued to work on the implementation throughout the next year.

For South Africa, the *Savannah*-debacle had shown that, as long as Cuba functioned as a protective shield, UNITA would never be strong enough to evict the MPLA from Luanda, take over power itself and deny SWAPO refuge into Angola. Crocker's idea of *Linkage* was therefore a welcomed alternative for Pretoria's moderate policy makers. Yet, for the SADF's generals, the hardliners in Pretoria, *Linkage* was no viable option. Their plan foresaw that Cuba had to leave prior to any withdrawal of South Africa from Namibia. This should be achieved by a further escalation of the conflict so that the stakes would become too high for Cuba and Castro would pull out. UNITA would then be able to assume power and, together with SADF, defeat SWAPO. Only then could Pretoria be sure that SWAPO would not assume power in Windhoek and could safely withdraw from Namibia. Both the United States and the South African Foreign Ministry, however, dismissed this plan as being not feasible because the SADF, in their view, placed too much faith in Savimbi and his political and military capabilities. Since the hardliner's influence in Pretoria was not that dominant during the early 1980s, Botha went with the moderate wing of his cabinet and accepted *Linkage*.

However, Pretoria was never as fully committed to *Linkage* as it would appear at a first glance, which is shown by its renewed massive aggression in late 1980. Reinvigorated by the improved relations with Washington and the prospect of the much friendlier incoming Reagan-Administration, it felt confident enough to escalate the *South African Border War* and launched massive full-scale military attacks deep into Angola. Operation *Protea*, launched in August 1981, was the first operation since 1975 that was not only directed against SWAPO. It

³² Zachary Kagan-Guthrie: Chester Crocker and the South African Border War, 1981–1989. A Reappraisal of *Linkage*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 35, 2009, no. 1, pp. 65–80, pp. 68–69.

³³ Gerda Kuhn: Die Politik der Reagan-Regierung im Südlichen Afrika. Zur Aussenpolitik der USA unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung Innenpolitischer Faktoren, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1995, pp. 139–140; Thomas Meier, Die Reagan-Doktrin. Die Feindbilder, die Freundbilder: Afghanistan, Angola, Kambodscha, Nicaragua, Bern 1998, p. 196.

³⁴ SWAPO was the independence movement in Namibia and operated largely out of Angola where it was granted refuge by the MPLA.

³⁵ Christopher C. Saunders/Sue Onslow: The Cold War and Southern Africa, 1976–1990, in: Melvyn P. Leffler/Odd Arne Westad (Eds.): *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Volume III: Endings*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 222–243, p. 237.

also should destroy vital elements of Angola's economy, repel MPLA and Cuban forces and apply the Israeli policy of *defensive occupation* to support UNITA and 'protect' Namibia from SWAPO.³⁶ While the United Nations tried to condemn the renewed aggression, the United States applied its veto and tacitly approved South Africa's attacks. This is insofar of great significance, since the United States was at this point in the middle of the process of bringing Luanda and Pretoria together at one table to discuss *Linkage*. Yet, as Crocker later explained, he initially was in favor of the attacks for he thought that '*breaking some diplomatic china*'³⁷ would increase pressure on Angola to enter the negotiations. Since Angola did partake and the talks continued despite numerous SADF-attacks, it can be concluded that the pressure on Angola must indeed have had increased dramatically through the attacks. This assumption is underpinned by the fact that the SADF enjoyed complete air superiority in southern Angola and was in all aspects superior to the MPLA/Cuban alliance.³⁸ Only after the United States had succeeded in bringing Luanda to the table (although it still refused to accept *Linkage*) they began to pressure Pretoria, not publicly though, to end its aggressions, fearing it could hamper the negotiations. Yet again, Pretoria's regime was immune to Washington's request and continued its attacks.

The peak of the aggression was reached with the launch of operation *Askari* in December 1983, when for the first time since 1976 SADF and Cuban troops directly fought each other. The staunch resistance the South Africans were now encountering led not only to heavy casualties among its own forces but also caused Pretoria to reconsider to embark a serious approach towards a diplomatic solution to end the violence. Now, with both Angola and South Africa fully committed to a ceasefire, the negotiation quickly culminated in the *Lusaka Accords*.³⁹

The alliance forged between UNITA and South Africa prior to the Savannah debacle proved to be crucial in the years following the SADF's first defeat. Immediately after the last SADF-soldier had retreated into Namibia, Pretoria began to support UNITA.⁴⁰

By mid-1976, UNITA had regrouped and, with South African equipment, began a hit-and-run campaign against the vital infrastructure in Angola. These attacks would gradually increase in intensity and severity until they reached the characteristics of an all-out war against the MPLA by the mid-1980s.⁴¹ South Africa's recurring invasions deep into Angolan territory then successfully established the attempted *buffer-zone*. This zone along the Namibian/Angolan border did not only provide a safe haven for UNITA within Angola, but also significantly improved the opportunities of how the movement could plan and conduct its operations and be resupplied by its steadily growing number of allies. By early 1983, with profound South African assistance, UNITA was therefore able to expand its operational territory deep into the north-eastern provinces of Angola. Although these were the sparsely populated areas of Angola, they were the backdoor to the diamond-rich provinces in the most north-eastern parts of Angola. Especially during the last years of the civil war in the late 1990s and early 2000s, UNITA financed large parts of its operations by selling so-called

³⁶ James, Political History, p. 153.

³⁷ Gleijeses, Visions, p. 230.

³⁸ James, Political History, p. 192.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 157–158.

⁴⁰ Gleijeses, Visions, p. 67.

⁴¹ James, Political History, p. 146.

blood diamonds. It is estimated that between 1992 and 1997, UNITA sold diamonds worth more than US\$ 3 billion, financing the lion's share of its military operations.⁴²

By the mid-1980s, SADF had established eleven training camps in northern Namibia and southern Angola where hundreds of UNITA-soldiers were trained. In combination with the invasions of the SADF, Angola was trembling both in military and economic terms. By late 1983, the CIA remarked that the raids conducted by UNITA were '*devastating the economy*'.⁴³

For the pro-Savimbi side, three important conclusions can be drawn from the second phase of the civil war. First, if it had not been for the massive assistance from abroad, UNITA would not have been able to remain a decisive factor in the ongoing conflict. Second, the Reagan-Administration's overall understanding of world-politics and its correlating approach to the southern African conflict as well as Crocker's introduction of *Linkage* inevitably intertwined Cold War politics with the regional struggle in southern Africa. Third, *Askari* had shown that a military victory for South Africa, if possible at all, would entail excessive costs in human lives and material. For Pretoria, it became increasingly obvious that the military situation of both sides would reach an impasse and that a diplomatic solution would be the only key to solve the conflict. Lusaka raised hopes that the involved parties came to that conclusion, whereas the immediate months following the signing of the treaty would prove that this was, at least in certain areas of the decision-making process, not (yet) the case.

3.2 Moscow, Havana and MPLA

After a brief period of celebration following the victory over the *Savannah*-troops, disenchantment set in quickly in Moscow. A few months after *Savannah* in July 1976, the Soviet Union sent numerous advisers to Luanda, to help Neto establish a Marxist-Leninist state in Angola. It is a remarkable detail that these advisers were instructed to '*[a]dvise, but not [to] impose*',⁴⁴ still the advisers should make clear which attitude the Kremlin preferred and expected from Luanda. Neto gladly accepted this directive since this was precisely what he wanted to hear. Decades of colonial oppression by a staunchly anti-communist regime had left their mark on the local population of Angola, who looked at communism with strong prejudices. Neto therefore was reluctant to label the entire MPLA a communist party, even though its leadership's orientation was undoubtedly Marxist-Leninist. Although this was a mere terminological dispute, it only increased Moscow's suspicion of Neto. During the limited rapprochement between Luanda and Washington under the Carter-Administration, Moscow was almost paranoid about the possibility that Neto could tilt towards Washington (which was a more than absurd scenario, since Washington had not even recognized the MPLA and was covertly supporting UNITA).⁴⁵ This episode exemplifies one of Moscow's biggest foreign policy flaws throughout the Cold War – its inability to approach various situations in a pragmatic, Realpolitik-like fashion. Instead, the Kremlin was fixated on

⁴² Christian Dietrich: Blood Diamonds, in: *African Security Review*, vol. 10, 2001, no. 3, pp. 99–114, p. 107. In this article, Dietrich provides a detailed account on the impact the trade with blood diamonds had on the Angola civil and on Zaire. For reasons of scope, the issue of blood diamonds cannot be picked up in more detail here.

⁴³ Gleijeses, *Visions*, p. 213.

⁴⁴ Vladimir Shubin: *The Hot "Cold War". The USSR in Southern Africa*, London/Scottsville 2008, p. 67.

⁴⁵ Gleijeses, *Visions*, p. 70.

irrelevant ideological issues that only increased the tensions between the two socialist countries.⁴⁶

The crisis between Luanda and Moscow peaked in May 1977, when, allegedly Soviet-sponsored, putschists tried to overthrow Neto. While it is still unclear what part Moscow really played in this coup, it was cracked down only due to the quick and fierce response of the Cubans stationed in Luanda. Neto remained atop the MPLA, yet relations with Moscow would not recover until his death in Moscow in 1979.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, the Soviet Union's support for Angola increased dramatically during the 1980s. But severe mismanagement among the MPLA-leadership (both on the political and military level) caused increasing worries among the Soviets and the Cubans. By mid-1982, they realized that the MPLA-troops needed to be reorganized into a conventional army, given the increased involvement of the SADF and UNITA (which also began to increasingly operate in a conventional way). As the overall situation of the MPLA-troops did not improve fast enough, the Soviet and Cuban commander began to leave out their MPLA-counterparts from planning military operations. Additionally, in mid-1983, Soviet equipment was transferred directly to the Cuban forces and not, as previously, to the MPLA which then had distributed it to the various battlefields.⁴⁸

Tensions existed not only between Moscow and Luanda, also the relationship between the Soviet Union and Havana was not exactly straightforward. After Khrushchev had backstabbed Castro at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it took several years until the two countries were on friendly terms again. The lesson that Castro had learned is that in times of urgency, his country could hardly count on its *older brother*. This became apparent again in 1982, when Castro, who got increasingly worried of Reagan's aggressive rhetoric against Havana, wanted certain guarantees from the Kremlin. For this purpose, the Cuban leader sent his brother Raul to meet Yuri Andropov, the CPSU's new General Secretary. During a lengthy meeting Raul Castro brought forward the point that it was absolutely crucial for his country that '*the Soviet Union tell[s] the United States in a clear and categorical manner that they [the USSR] will not tolerate any military aggression against Cuba.*'⁴⁹ In a long monologue Andropov turned down Castro's request based on the argumentation that Cuba was too far away from Moscow and that they had nothing to back their threat up with, since Washington knew well enough that Moscow would not risk a nuclear war over a Caribbean island.⁵⁰ Having been rejected by the Soviets again, Castro's policy towards Angola was thus characterized by the double constraint of a possible U.S.-invasion of Havana and the fragility of the Soviet shield.⁵¹

Castro's initial plan foresaw a withdrawal of all Cuban forces after *Operation Savannah* was over. Yet, South Africa's continuous aggressive behavior reversed his decision and so he began to reinforce the contingent as of 1978. By 1983, the Cuban presence numbered a total of 30,000.⁵²

⁴⁶ Vladislav Zubok: Soviet Foreign Policy from Détente to Gorbachev, 1975–1985, in: Melvyn P. Leffler/Odd Arne Westad (Eds.): The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Volume III: Endings, Cambridge 2010, pp. 89–111.

⁴⁷ Gleijeses, Proxy, p. 32; Shubin, "Cold War", p. 69 and p. 71.

⁴⁸ Shubin, "Cold War", pp. 80–93.

⁴⁹ Quoted in: Gleijeses, Visions, p. 217.

⁵⁰ Gleijeses, Visions, p. 218.

⁵¹ Gleijeses, Proxy, p. 25.

⁵² Quoted in: Gleijeses, Visions, p. 215.

Regarding military operations, there was a clear division of labor between Havana and Moscow. Succinctly put, the latter supplied the material while the former took it to the field and operated it. However, in the upper echelons of the command structure, this division of labor caused more than a few problems. Castro had made it clear from the beginning that the Cuban troops would directly fight any South African soldier who invaded Angola. The MPLA's fight against UNITA, however, was a purely inner-Angolan struggle and thus not something the Cubans should get involved with. Thus, 'only' 3,000 Cubans served among the MPLA-troops who fought UNITA, while the vast majority was pulled together in central Angola, ready-to-go if South Africa attacked. The Soviets on the other side wanted the MPLA to fight both the SADF and UNITA, supported by the Cubans. Additionally, Moscow preferred a conventional warfare against UNITA, while Cuba wanted to apply classic guerilla-tactics.

In the midst of these quarrels fell *Operation Askari* and while the SADF advanced rapidly, the Cubans, Soviets, and Angolans failed to come up with a coherent strategy.⁵³ This was yet another reason for Luanda to consider the time being ripe to engage, unknown to Moscow and Havana, into serious ceasefire talks with Pretoria.

By the time *Savannah* was over, the MPLA had been recognized by every major Western government as the legitimate representative of the Angolan people, with the United States being the sole exception.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Luanda's closest ties were exclusively with countries from the Eastern bloc. Neto was aware of the implications an exclusive alignment towards the Eastern bloc could bring about. Fueled by the mutual skepticism between Luanda and Moscow, he was in search of an equilibrium between the two political hemispheres. To a certain extent he had already made some success in this regard by achieving widespread Western recognition. After Neto died in 1979 and dos Santos was unanimously elected as his successor, the new president continued with his predecessor's policy of seeking Western integration. For Crocker, this was a welcomed endeavor because this gave him at least some leverage to get Luanda's acceptance for *Linkage*. And indeed, initially Luanda was, to a certain extent, inclined towards Crocker's concept. South Africa's continuous aggression, however, made it increasingly difficult for Crocker to keep Luanda upbeat about *Linkage*. By mid-1982, enough was enough, and Angola rejected any further negotiations over *Linkage*.

Against this backdrop, it is quite a surprising fact that Luanda was still willing to enter the *Lusaka-Talks* without letting its Cuban and Soviet allies know about the new diplomatic initiative, not to mention without consulting them.⁵⁵ Yet, if dos Santos' situation at that time is taken into consideration, his way of conduct appears to be more comprehensible. During one of the numerous meetings between Fidel Castro and the Angolan delegation, the Cuban leader expressed his reluctance towards negotiations with the United States and/or South Africa. He believed that the MPLA should wait another twelve to eighteen months until its military position had significantly improved, which would have an impact on Angola's position in the negotiations.⁵⁶ Knowing that Castro would therefore object his intentions, dos Santos might have concluded that it would be better to confront Havana with the fait accompli. Additionally, with the increasing differences between Havana and Moscow concerning which strategy to pursue against the SADF/UNITA-aggression and the accompanying military setbacks, dos Santos' doubts increased whether such a military improvement was even possible. Finally, dos Santos might have thought that accepting a diplomatic solution brokered by the West would bolster Luanda's image in the respective

⁵³ Shubin, "Cold War", p. 95.

⁵⁴ James, Political History, pp. 189–193.

⁵⁵ Gleijeses, Proxy, pp. 27–28.

⁵⁶ James, Political History, p. 98.

countries, just as it was the case in Mozambique after President Samora Machel accepted the *Nkomati Accord*, a treaty brokered, among others, by the United States.

The fact that Luanda informed Havana and Moscow not until a few days after it had come to terms with Pretoria, caused serious irritation among both allies. During a meeting with dos Santos Castro complained one month later:

*'We are faced with a fait accompli. I don't think this is right. The final decision was yours, not ours, but at least we could have talked about it beforehand, and we, as well as the Soviets, could have expressed our disagreement beforehand. Who is going to question Angola's independence when Angola is so independent that it feels free to mistreat its best allies?'*⁵⁷

Luanda's behavior around the Lusaka negotiations had shown that Havana's and Moscow's control over Luanda was limited. That dealing with the MPLA was a rather challenging task is furthermore indicated by the movement's internal grievances. Once dos Santos took over the MPLA-leadership, the tight and disciplinary style that characterized Neto's ruling got replaced by corruption and nepotism while the incompetence in all governmental areas took an increasingly dramatic scale.⁵⁸ Above all, Luanda's economy was in ruins. The few remaining areas that had not been destroyed by foreign interventions and the civil war were paralyzed by mismanagement. At the latest by the mid-1980s, Luanda's reform programs came to a standstill, while the ongoing conflict devoured 60% to 80% of Angola's annual budget. If it had not been for an economic agreement with the Soviet Union and continued oil revenues (paradoxically primarily from the United States), the MPLA-government would have collapsed by 1985.⁵⁹

The triangle relationship Havana-Luanda-Moscow certainly was a strained one. The mere fact that all three countries were opposing UNITA and South Africa, was not enough to generate a pragmatic, mutually reinforcing alliance. Even more significant, Moscow and Havana hardly ever acted in concert. Without a doubt, both Havana's and Moscow's contributions were crucial for the MPLA to have a chance against the UNITA/Pretoria alliance in the civil war. Yet, Moscow's continuous hesitations whether and how to act had put Castro's patience to the test. That Castro then began to present Moscow with a fait accompli was not well received by the Soviet leadership. The resulting tensions between the two had their impacts not only on everyday decisions that had to be made in Angola but also on most crucial strategic and tactical military decisions. The Kremlin's distrust for Neto was certainly a benefiting factor for its hesitations, something the Angolan leader was certainly aware of. Nonetheless, he continued to disgruntle the Soviets by seeking Western integration and engaging in secret back-channel diplomacy with its Western adversaries.

The persistence with which Cuba and the Soviet Union assisted the MPLA thus seems even more remarkable. Obviously, neither Havana's nor Moscow's motives were purely altruistic, yet, Castro certainly had some genuine interest in the overall situation of Angola. This is reflected by the fact that substantial amounts of aid were non-military related, but rather aimed at improving Luanda's healthcare and education system.⁶⁰ Cuba's non-military accomplishments in Angola were put in a nutshell by the British ambassador in Luanda, Marrack Goulding: *'As far as I was concerned they [the Cubans in Angola] were a good thing. They had done wonders for Angola's education and health services and were*

⁵⁷ Quoted in: Gleijeses, Proxy, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Gleijeses, Visions, p. 229–230.

⁵⁹ James, Political History, p. 212.

⁶⁰ Gleijeses, Proxy, pp. 3–4; Gleijeses, Visions, pp. 215–229.

preventing the South African army from running wild all over southern Angola.⁶¹ Castro was aware of the ramifications his involvement in Africa could bring for Cuba, yet he stuck to his course even without enjoying the protection of the Soviets. For Moscow on the other side, Angola was first and foremost yet another tool for the power-play in the global struggle against Washington, while all decisions were carefully balanced against possible Cold War repercussions.

Yet, despite both countries' increasing involvement, the overall military situation as well as the *Lusaka Accords* had pointed out that the MPLA was neither in secure Cuban/Soviet hands nor securely established in Angola itself. Despite a brief optimism following the signing of Lusaka, Angola's immediate future looked anything but peaceful.

4 Failures, Escalations, and Realizations – The Late 1980s

4.1 Failures

The *Lusaka Accords* were a dead-born child. Too many mistakes were made during the negotiations and their implementation as that the agreements could have ever led to lasting peace. Since neither SWAPO nor UNITA were made signatories, the movements never felt compelled to oblige to the agreement. In the wake of the treaty, SWAPO incursions into Namibia continued and were tolerated by the MPLA-government despite the promise to prevent such actions.⁶² On the other side, the SADF stalled its withdrawal from the beginning on, continuously bringing up new demands to proceed with the withdrawal. By mid-1984, it had become clear to everyone that Pretoria would never withdraw its forces from Angola unless UNITA was securely in power in Luanda and SWAPO deprived of its ability to win possible elections in Windhoek.

In terms of the Cubans, however, Pretoria was caught in a dilemma. On the one side, it needed the Cubans gone, otherwise UNITA would never seize power. On the other side, Pretoria's grand strategy for preserving apartheid – which was still the main motive for its aggressive foreign policy – dictated that the Cubans need to stay in Angola, for this was the only way that continued military and diplomatic backup from Washington would be assured. This contradiction in USA and South African goals (for the USA getting the Cubans out of Africa was the number one priority) were to become a major obstacle for the better part of the late 1980s.⁶³

The situation was further aggravated when the little trust Crocker had managed to build between Washington and Luanda was shattered by the revocation of the *Clark-Amendment* through the U.S.-Congress in June 1985. The full-circle turn made by Congress to finally lift the *Clark-Amendment* was evoked by the postulation of the *Reagan-Doctrine* which stated that the U.S.-Government would support any movement that attempted to overthrow left-wing governments all around the world.⁶⁴ This new notion of how U.S.-Foreign Policy should be executed, eliminated the biggest concern of the legislative branch that so far had prevented them from lifting the amendment: the fear of getting its armed forces drawn into yet another Vietnam-like disaster. The *Reagan-Doctrine* severely upset Luanda,

⁶¹ Quoted in: Gleijeses, Proxy, p. 31.

⁶² Christopher C. Saunders: The South Africa-Angola Talks, 1976–1984: A Little-Known Cold War Thread, in: *Kronos*, vol. 37, 2011, no. 1, pp. 104–119, p. 116.

⁶³ Gleijeses, Visions, pp. 242–252.

⁶⁴ Westad, The Global Cold War, p. 331.

which, after condemning Crocker of playing a double-game⁶⁵, terminated its negotiations with Washington in March 1986, after Reagan had approved the first aid delivery to UNITA.

For Savimbi, with the lift of the amendment, the overall situation improved significantly. By the questionable definition of Washington, he entirely fulfilled the criteria of a *freedom-fighter* in the spirit of the *Reagan-Doctrine*.⁶⁶ By early 1986, Washington approved the first of many aid deliveries of state-of-the-art weaponry for UNITA. Among them were high-tech communication systems, anti-tank missiles and, most crucially, the highly-advanced heat-guided Stinger-missiles. Additionally, numerous CIA-field agents were brought to Angola to train UNITA in handling the equipment.⁶⁷

Following the diplomatic breakdown on all levels in mid-1985, South Africa had relaunched its raids deep into Angolan territory on a regular basis. In combination with the fact that UNITA, thanks to support from the United States and South Africa, had increased its strength significantly, it would have been more important than ever for the Havana-Moscow-MPLA coalition to come up with a common strategy to counter the renewed SADF/UNITA advance. Yet, the coalition continued to disagree over a common strategy and could not decide on who should attack whom when and where. The disastrous consequences of these disagreements were illuminated by a military operation which Moscow launched on the strategically important town of Mavinga in the southeast of Angola despite severe objections from Havana. Havana correctly assumed that South Africa had too many strategic advantages (including complete air superiority) as that the operation could be successful. When the Soviets launched the operation nonetheless, Cuba therefore refused to participate.⁶⁸ The offensive began in August 1985 and initially progressed well. UNITA was not able to slow down the rapid advance of the MPLA which soon reached Mavinga. The situation changed in September when the SADF intervened and struck with air attacks and heavy artillery fire. The MPLA, without a sufficient air defense, was decisively defeated, the entire operation an utter failure.⁶⁹ The outcome of the operation did little to ease the tensions between the Soviets and the Cubans. When a Cuban delegation arrived in Moscow in January 1986, Jorge Risquet, Castro's go-to man for everything that was even remotely related to Angola, brought up the issue of SADF's air superiority. Risquet stressed that '*our greatest weakness is that South Africa has air superiority over southern Angola. We must eliminate this.*'⁷⁰ What the Cubans wanted was more sophisticated anti-aircraft systems and fighter-jets from the Soviets to elevate their chances against the SADF. Yet, Moscow gave only vague concessions, which led a Cuban delegate to conclude: '*We believe that the Soviet response is inadequate.*'⁷¹ Why the Soviets did not do more is unclear. Perhaps, the superpower had reached the maximum of its abilities and simply was overextended. More likely, however, was that Gorbachev, who was busily mending relations with Washington, simply did not trust Cuba that it would use the equipment only for defensive purposes but might invade Namibia, an event that most

⁶⁵ Crocker initially favored a repeal of the *Clark-Amendment* to increase his leverage over the MPLA to get it to the negotiating table in the early 1980s. After he had accomplished the goal, however, he became a staunch advocate of the amendment. Following the repeal, Luanda had some serious doubt whether Crocker had double-crossed them, yet these allegations were at no point substantial.

⁶⁶ Gleijeses, *Visions*, p. 304.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 307–308.

⁶⁸ Gleijeses, *Proxy*, pp. 32–34.

⁶⁹ James, *Political History*, pp. 210–211.

⁷⁰ Quoted in: Gleijeses, *Proxy*, p. 34.

⁷¹ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 34 and p. 35.

certainly would have resulted in a heavy setback in East-West-relations.⁷² Once again, Moscow failed to be on the same page with its most important ally in southern Africa.

4.2 Escalations

1986 began in the same way as the previous year had ended, with a lot of broken military and diplomatic china. Havana and Moscow were still arguing over a common strategy to pursue. Nonetheless, the fight against UNITA was marked by at least some success, as a major assault by UNITA on Cuito Cuanavale, the MPLA's southernmost base, could be repelled with relative ease. UNITA launched the assault without any support from South Africa, a factor that points out Savimbi's utter dependence on the apartheid regime.⁷³

The MPLA's military situation gave reason for cautious optimism among Angola's leadership, yet the economic situation deteriorated continuously. With war fatigue reaching a new level, Luanda once again regarded new rounds of negotiations as the only escape route out of the crisis. In this notion, it was joined by an increasing number of white South Africans. According to a survey conducted in 1986, 52%⁷⁴ of the Afrikaners believed that President⁷⁵ Botha should start direct negotiations with SWAPO and the MPLA to end the war. Crocker was ready to seize the opportunity.

What followed were several rounds of talks during which Crocker alternately met with Pretoria and Luanda to find out the lie of the land; basically, there were bilateral talks about future multilateral talks. The first round between Luanda and Washington, held in Brazzaville, was a false start.⁷⁶ It was followed by another round in Luanda in July. A week earlier, dos Santos had travelled to Havana where he hammered out a negotiating strategy with Castro. The Cuban leader stressed that Angola should not accept anything from the Americans unless they can guarantee that all external support for UNITA would be terminated and *Resolution 435* in its current form would be implemented. Castro was optimistic that the Botha-regime was now weaker than ever and thus willing to grant major concession regarding the withdrawal of the Cuban troops. But Pretoria still refused to negotiate seriously. It still refused to withdraw and hold general elections in Namibia and still believed that Savimbi could be brought to power in Luanda. Washington had some issues with these notions, for it knew that they were unacceptable for Luanda. Regarding the Cuban troop withdrawal, both Pretoria and Washington agreed that Cuba had to call all its troops which were stationed south of the 13th parallel (which is approximately the lower third of Angola) back to Havana. Yet, the United States wanted a simultaneous withdrawal of the SADF from Namibia and the Cubans from Angola (i. e. *Linkage*), while Pretoria wanted the Cubans gone first. While Castro told dos Santos that he was willing to negotiate a *simultaneous* withdrawal from the south of Angola and Namibia, South Africa's refusal to implement *Resolution 435* could not be accepted. For Luanda, the entire negotiation process was immensely complicated by the fact that the United States continued to refuse to let Cuba participate, although one of the most crucial issues (i. e. the Cuban withdrawal) directly affected Havana. Luanda had bowed to the pressure (which was coming from the Reaganites, not from Crocker, who deemed it essential), and it was only in mid-1987 that Luanda for the first time insisted on Havana's partaking in the talks.

⁷² Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 34 and p. 35.

⁷³ Gleijeses, *Visions*, pp. 373–374.

⁷⁴ Kagan-Guthrie, Crocker, p. 75.

⁷⁵ In 1984, a new constitution came into effect in South Africa that transformed the office of Prime Minister into that of a president with drastically enhanced power of the executive branch.

⁷⁶ Gleijeses, *Visions*, pp. 380–410.

While Crocker and Angolan Foreign Minister M'Binda skirmished over Cuban participation at the diplomatic table, the war in Angola raged on. Moscow was once again pressing to launch another assault on Mavinga which Havana continued to refuse to participate for the same reason as two years earlier. Regardless, the Soviets launched the second assault on Mavinga, again without a Cuban participation. While the assault proved promising at the beginning, it ended again in a disaster for Angola. On the Angolan side, history had repeated itself as the SADF dealt a heavy blow to the MPLA's forces. The South Africans, however, had learned their lessons from the 1985 battle. Contrary to their first encounter near Mavinga, the SADF now pursued the retreating MPLA, a decision that raised red flags in Havana.

Castro concluded that Pretoria finally had opted for an all-out war and was prepared to attack the Cuban defensive line, a heavily fortified line 250 kilometers north of the Namibian border, ranging from the Atlantic all the way to the Zambian border. Despite the large number of troops that had already been sent to Angola, Castro knew that they would not have a chance against a massive attack from South Africa. Something had to be done. After more than ten hours of a heated debate among Castro's innermost circle, the Cuban leader decided to send the best military equipment and personnel Cuba had to Angola. He intended to do much more than to save Cuito Cuanavale which was about to get besieged by the SADF. He wanted to deal the SADF the final blow and evict them once and for all from Angola. Aware of the challenges this task would bring about, he said: '*By going there [Cuito Cuanavale], we placed ourselves into the lion's jaws.*'⁷⁷

Castro was encouraged to make the daring decision of massively increasing the stakes in Angola by significant global developments. He had longed for more than two years to finally expel South Africa from Angola, yet his efforts were stymied by Moscow's refusal to deliver the necessary weaponry. Therefore, the only option Castro had was to send its own elite troops to Angola, something he did not dare for he still considered a U.S.-attack on Cuba a possibility. By the end of 1987, however, the situation had changed. Détente between Washington and Moscow had reached a new peak which convinced Castro that: '*the possibility of war there [in Angola] is twenty times greater than here in Cuba. For us the greater danger is in Angola. The war is there, not here.*'⁷⁸

The one condition Castro imposed was that henceforth Cuba would have the supreme command over all military activities in Angola. He told dos Santos that: '*it is essential to have the closest cooperation and understanding. When Soviets, Angolans and Cubans disagree, everything becomes paralyzed, and then wrongheaded decisions are made. The majority of our troops are in the south, we are responsible for these men, and we will not allow anyone to dictate a strategy that is wrong or foolhardy.*'⁷⁹ Above all, this last sentence was directed at the Soviet Union.

Moscow had never been consulted about *Maniobra*, as the Cuban mission was named. But as it was in 1975, Moscow's irritation, once it received word of *Maniobra* eventually yielded to acceptance. Ultimately, Castro's fait accompli had left the Soviet Union with few alternatives. Cuba had made it plain clear that they would continue their operation in Angola even without Soviet support and a Soviet refusal would only have endangered the Cubans and Angolans which eventually would have led to confrontations with Castro. And as a Soviet

⁷⁷ Quoted in: Gleijeses, Proxy, p. 37.

⁷⁸ Quoted in: Gleijeses, Visions, p. 409.

⁷⁹ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 410.

official had pointed out: ‘*it was dangerous to push Fidel into a corner.*’⁸⁰ After all, Havana was an important, yet difficult ally for Moscow.

Castro’s boldness and Gorbachev’s recollection of the importance of the alliance with Havana, led Gorbachev not only to accept the Cuban escalation but also to provide most of the weapons the Cubans had requested from the Soviets to restock their arsenals both at home and in Angola. Moscow had, however, one remaining concern, namely that Cuba wanted the sole command over all military operations in the Angolan theater. To the Soviet statement that the once close coordination between Havana and Moscow in Angola had been lost, a Cuban commander only replied: ‘*I agree with you. It ended in 1985 with the offensive against Mavinga.*’⁸¹ The Soviets conceded the point and accepted the fact that henceforth it was Cuba’s campaign; Moscow would be informed, but not consulted. Castro’s boldness had made the Soviet superpower the alliance’s junior partner.

The immediate task of *Maniobra* was to relief Cuito Cuanavale which succeeded within two months as the SADF/UNITA-forces were decisively defeated. When Nelson Mandela received word of the events, he said that: ‘*Cuito Cuanavale destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor [and] inspired the fighting masses of South Africa...Cuito Cuanavale was the turning point for the liberation of our continent.*’⁸²

Defending Cuito Cuanavale was the primary, but not the largest objective of *Maniobra*. The lion’s share of the *Maniobra*-reinforcement, which were more than 20,000 of Cuba’s best soldiers, was ordered to carry out Castro’s ultimate plan – to drive the South Africans out of Angola. To do so, Castro’s final plan foresaw a broad massive offensive in southwestern Angola against the bulk of the remaining SADF in Angola. By January 1988, Cuban soldiers numbered more than 55,000, equipped with the most sophisticated weaponry the Cuban army had. Additionally, for the first time, two thousand SWAPO-soldiers joined the Cubans and MPLA in their steady advance south to the Namibian border, slowly pushing the South Africans out of Angola.⁸³

4.3 Realizations

With the pro-Luanda coalition increasingly gaining the upper hand in the military conflict, South Africa got gradually deprived of its biggest advantage in the reemerging negotiations. Pretoria could no longer use its armed forces as an unrestricted threatening gesture. Cuito Cuanavale and the Cuban-led offensive in the southwest clearly pointed out SADF’s limits. Cuito Cuanavale showed that UNITA, which was of no help during the siege of Cuito Cuanavale, was no match in a conventional warfare, which the Angolan war certainly had become by then. Any beliefs that UNITA could still seize power in Luanda were therefore purely illusory.⁸⁴

In turn, Angola’s position got strengthened. In January 1988, Luanda could thus make the participation of Cuba in the negotiations a *sine qua non*. By the end of January, Washington gave the green light and Cuba was allowed to join the negotiations. Yet, before the talks could start, an agenda had to be defined.

The Cuban delegation, headed by Jorge Risquet, quickly made a professional impression. Castro kept them on a tight leash and carefully hammered out Havana’s

⁸⁰ Quoted in: Gleijeses, *Visions*, p. 419.

⁸¹ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 420.

⁸² Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 426.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 421–431.

⁸⁴ Jeremy Grest: *The South African Defense Force in Angola*, in: Jacklyn Cock/Laurie Nathan (Eds.): *War and Society. The Militarisation of South Africa*, Cape Town/Johannesburg 1989, pp. 116–133, pp. 129–132.

negotiation strategy with Risquet prior to each round. After two months and a continuous Cuban advancement towards the Namibian border, Pretoria finally informed Crocker on April 13 that it was willing to resume the negotiations over the implementation of *Resolution 435* and the Cuban withdrawal from Angola. The parties had reached the starting line, quadripartite negotiations between South Africa, Cuba, Angola and the United States could begin.⁸⁵

The first round of quadripartite negotiations started in London in May 1988. Yet, Havana's and Pretoria's demands were diametrically opposed. While South Africa demanded *Resolution 435* to be adapted, Cuba stated that unless South Africa accepted *Resolution 435* 'in letter and spirit'⁸⁶, there can be no progress. As it turned out, Pretoria's willingness to resume the talks did not imply its willingness to give up its unacceptable demands. The South Africans used the London talks simply to sound out their opponents' positions.

Castro was not impressed. He still believed that the further his troops would advance south, the more would South Africa get nervous. He was also aware that with each mile his troops advanced, their risk of being attacked by the SADF grew. Since the offensive had started, the SADF had been continuously retreating, a major battle had not occurred. Apart from numerous bloody skirmishes, South Africa pulled back, knowing their odds were rising the closer they got towards 'home turf'.⁸⁷

For both the United States and South Africa the key question of the whole offensive was, whether the Cubans would halt their advance at the Cunene River, which marked the western part of the Namibian-Angolan border. Castro had never intended to cross the border, for it would be a clear breach of international law and would trigger off incalculable repercussions. Yet, not a single member of the Cuban delegation provided an answer to this question, for it gave the Cubans a big advantage in the negotiations if Pretoria and Washington were left in the dark.⁸⁸

By June 1988, the Cuban/MPLA/SWAPO army, now numbering close to 50,000 soldiers, had advanced within 50–125 miles of the Cunene River. While the South Africa's military commanders appeared, at least on the outside, to be unimpressed by this proximity, domestic concerns grew. In combination with the boiling domestic tensions, even the staunchest proponents of the Botha-regime grew worried about the developing events. Now even the press loyal to the regime wrote articles which seriously doubted that the SADF would be able to halt the Cuban army.

The only factor that was, according to the South African press, playing in favor for them was the Soviet Union's rush towards implosion. Gorbachev was eager to leave all regional conflicts behind. In 1986, he had already realized that the war in Afghanistan was lost and the Soviet resources were drained to such an extent that continuing international involvement became impossible.⁸⁹ This also explains the fact that Moscow never even asked to join the quadripartite negotiations. From the very moment Cuba was allowed to join, the Soviet Union was also benched on the diplomatic front. Without protest, the Kremlin had folded its cards in Angola.

South Africa concluded that these developments would make the MPLA vulnerable, since, in their view, it implied that the movement could no longer rely on Soviet assistance, a notion that also caused fear in Luanda. Castro remained upbeat and once again reassured

⁸⁵ Gleijeses, *Visions*, pp. 432–441.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 445–446 and 451–453.

⁸⁷ Saunders/Onslow, *Southern Africa*, p. 240.

⁸⁸ Gleijeses, *Proxy*, pp. 41–42.

⁸⁹ Gleijeses, *Visions*, p. 456.

Luanda that his troops had continuously proven that they could do well even without Soviet support. And indeed, the crumbling Soviet Union and the beginning disintegration of the Eastern bloc should have caused worries, not reassurance within South Africa's regime. The Soviet withdrawal was definite proof that Moscow was not and never had orchestrated a *total onslaught*.⁹⁰ Reagan came to the realization that the MPLA, SWAPO and the *African National Congress* (ANC) were primarily indigenous movements, driven by national interests and not by a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideology.⁹¹ As the rapprochement between East and West continued, the Cold War card, hitherto the ace in Pretoria's deck, increasingly lost its value in the poker game of negotiations.

By the time the next round of quadripartite talks in Cairo was approaching, South Africa had realized that their situation was worsening and that they needed to make concessions. In a meeting with the Americans, South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha admitted that his government was worried about the Cuban advance. Asked for an assessment of the situation, the Americans had to answer that they did not have more information than the South Africans had. They simply did not know whether the Cuban troops would stop at the border. When the Cairo conference opened, Risquet went into the offensive. He said that:

*[...] the South Africans must understand that they will not win at this table what they have failed to win on the battlefield. They cannot act like victors when they are in fact an army of aggressors that is battered and in retreat. The South Africans want to know the exact number of Cuban troops in Angola and where they are stationed. This is not information one gives to the enemy. Let them try to get it on the battlefield.*⁹²

Cuba's fierce behavior worked as it seemed to have intimidated Pretoria's delegation. South Africa suggested to discuss a ten-point document the Cubans had presented. Pretoria finally admitted that its demands were unrealistic.

When the next round of negotiations opened in New York on July 12, 1988, Pretoria no longer demanded national reconciliation between UNITA and the MPLA and it no longer spoke of a unilateral Cuban withdrawal. Before the parties departed, they agreed on a statement of basic principles that included a pledge to establish a date for the implementation of *Resolution 435* and reaffirmed the principle of '*a staged and total*' withdrawal of the Cuban troops from Angola – but no dates were set for either. The statement also stipulated that the parties supported '*noninterference in the internal affairs of states*.'⁹³ This meant that if a final agreement was reached, South Africa would stop helping UNITA and Angola would stop assisting the ANC. On July 22, the Cubans accepted a ceasefire in exchange for a SADF withdrawal from Angola by September 1, 1988.

On August 2, the parties met in Geneva to set up a timetable for the issues that were agreed upon in New York. In Geneva, South Africa made one last effort to reshuffle the deck, once again demanding a unilateral Cuban withdrawal. Cuba, having gained the upper hand on all fronts, turned down the new proposal and imposed its own version. The talks ended with the drafting of the *Geneva Protocol*. The protocol foresaw a complete SADF-withdrawal by September 1, 1988, and the implementation of *Resolution 435* was to begin on November 1,

⁹⁰ With the drastic implications following the collapse of the Portuguese Empire and the fact that several of the newly independent neighbors of South Africa proclaimed themselves Marxist-Leninist states, Pretoria regarded itself as more vulnerable than ever to any kind of threats from abroad. Succinctly put, total onslaught described the threat that the *swart gevaar*, now substantially backed by the *red peril* radiating from Moscow, would launch a full-scale attack on South Africa to overthrow its current socio-political order.

⁹¹ Saunders/Onslow, *Southern Africa*, pp. 240–241.

⁹² Quoted in: Gleijeses, *Visions*, p. 466.

⁹³ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 472.

1988. Havana and Luanda agreed to set up a timetable for a complete Cuban withdrawal, yet it was not further specified as to how this timetable might look like. South Africa was left with no other option but to accept the protocol teeth-grindingly.⁹⁴

This left one remaining issue open for discussion, a tenacious bargaining over the timetable and tempo of the Cuban withdrawal. Finally, after several more rounds of negotiations, South Africa, Angola and Cuba agreed on a timetable of 27 months with two thirds of the Cuban forces leaving during the first year. It was further consented that this agreement, as well as the *Geneva Protocol*, should be signed by Angola, Cuba and South Africa during a ceremony held in New York on December 22, 1988.

By then, the SADF had long left Angola. The last soldiers had crossed the border on August 30. Defense Minister Magnus Malan, who was present when the last troops returned to Namibia, acknowledged: '*We are no longer the strongest armed force in Africa.*'⁹⁵ For the second time within a bit more than a decade, Cuba, a Third World country more than 10,000 kilometers away, had defeated the mighty apartheid-regime in its very own backyard.

The *New York Accords* brought an end to the international phase of the Angolan civil war, but they didn't bring reconciliation between the MPLA and UNITA. Soon after the international actors had withdrawn from the country, the hostilities between UNITA and MPLA continued. It would take another 14 years and the death of UNITA-leader Savimbi until the guns fell silent in Angola in April 2002, 40 years after the armed struggle against Portugal had begun.

5 A Hot Theater of the Cold War?

With South Africa gone and a timetable for the Cuban withdrawal set, major steps towards the end of the Angolan conflict had been made. Throughout the thirteen years of war, the prospects for peace had never been better than they were in 1989. But what was the Angolan conflict? Was it a civil war between the MPLA and UNITA on who would govern in Luanda? Was it a regional conflict in which black majority rule challenged white minority rule? Or was it part of the global ideological struggle between East and West?

In its core, it certainly was a civil war. The Portuguese left a power vacuum after their withdrawal in 1975, which the FNLA, MPLA and UNITA were trying to fill. Immediately, their struggle for power turned into an armed conflict that caused the country to descend into further chaos.

Yet, at the latest when South Africa invaded in October 1975 and Cuba rushed to the MPLA's rescue the following November, the war blended over into a regional conflict whose objectives went beyond the issue of who would take control of a poor, war-damaged Third World country in southern Africa. For South Africa, an MPLA-ruled Angola was a serious threat as it was an obstacle on its way to solidify its role as the hegemonic power in the region and a direct threat to its besieged apartheid-regime. South Africa's intentions of overthrowing the MPLA then got Castro's attention, who, always true to his revolutionary cause, took extraordinary measures to thwart Pretoria's plans.

With the complexity of the situation growing, it demanded increasing attention from the superpowers to secure their interests in the region which both of them saw at stake. To overcome a paralyzing deadlock, Crocker, in his relentless efforts to find a solution for the complex conflict in southern Africa, introduced the concept of *Linkage*. Washington became

⁹⁴ Gleijeses, *Visions*, pp. 478–480.

⁹⁵ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 447.

the chief mediator, succumbing to the temptation of putting its own interests high up on the agenda. The Cuban presence was henceforth primarily treated as a Cold War issue, thus linking the regional conflict closely to Cold War.

Yet, this detailed analysis of the Angolan civil war and the involvement of several international actors offers several reasons, why the Angolan civil war was not a typical proxy war of the Cold War.

First, there was South Africa's approach to the conflict. If it had been Pretoria's primary objective to act as Washington's proxy in the region to enforce containment and, after Reagan came to power, rollback, it certainly failed in accomplishing this task. At first, its continuous aggression against Angola provoked a steadily growing involvement of Cuba in the region. While it can be argued that South Africa was not aware that Castro would respond in such a fast, large and ultimately successful way during the SADF's first invasion in 1975/76, Pretoria should have known better by 1985. Yet, Pretoria deliberately violated the *Lusaka Accords*. The motives for this violation were not Cold War-related but aimed at ensuring South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia by eliminating the threat coming from SWAPO. That Pretoria continued its war against SWAPO despite knowing that it would trigger off increased Cuban involvement, only emphasizes the fact that the Cold War was not the number one priority for Pretoria.

This notion is further supported by how Pretoria approached the negotiations with Angola, and later with Cuba. Again, if the Cold War had been on the forefront of Pretoria's thinking, it would have made the Cuban withdrawal the clear number one priority in the negotiations and would have accepted *Linkage* without further questions. Yet, in fact, Pretoria did not. By continuously introducing demands concerning the situation in Namibia, it undermined *Linkage* and thus delayed the Cuban withdrawal.

In fact, South Africa, to a certain extent, even needed the Cubans in southern Africa. For Pretoria, their presence was the ultimate proof that a *total onslaught* was happening. As elaborated in detail in *Adapt or Die*⁹⁶, Pretoria's grand strategy needed such a total onslaught to function. Only thus was Pretoria able to ensure Western and, in particular, American support by portraying itself as the West's last stronghold in southern Africa. South Africa's military as well as its diplomatic strategy thus ran counter to that of Washington, as it prolonged the Cuban involvement in Angola, which in turn made UNITA's struggle for power way more difficult, a factor the enforcers of the Reagan Doctrine certainly did not appreciate.

Second, the argumentation that Pretoria had truly acted as Washington's proxy in the region is further based on the premise that the Cuban involvement was a Cold War matter, implying that Havana acted on Moscow's orders. Yet, as it is pointed out, Cuba had not. Havana acted solely on the orders of its leader Fidel Castro whose motives for the intervention in Angola were not determined by the struggle of capitalism versus socialism or the Eastern hemisphere against the Western. He rightfully understood the Angolan conflict as a struggle of a new black majority ruled country against a powerful white minority regime. Given the strong cultural and historical ties the Cuban leaders felt to have with the African continent, it is therefore more than likely that Castro would have intervened on the MPLA's behalf against South Africa even if the Cold War had not been the dominating issue of global foreign policy at that time.

Not only did Castro act independently, he also acted contrary to Moscow's plans. He continuously defied his most powerful and important ally while humiliating the other

⁹⁶ Thomas Schwärzler: *Adapt or Die. Southern Africa's Struggle for Survival in the Face of Cold War and Apartheid, 1975–1990*, Diploma Thesis, Innsbruck 2016, pp. 23–89.

superpower. He was willing to place his own political agenda above that of superpower-relations, thus risking possible negative ramifications for détente not only between Washington and Moscow but also between Havana and Washington. While his engagement in Angola hardly affected rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union (another indication that the Cold War was not the dominant issue in Angola) it certainly had its negative impacts on the relation with Washington, at least during Reagan's first tenure. Therefore, like South Africa, Cuba's involvement in Angola was driven primarily by regional motives and not global Cold War thinking.

So, if the war was a regional conflict, why then did the two superpowers, with their Cold War-focused agenda got involved in the first place?

As far as the United States are concerned, they misinterpreted the conflict. For Reagan and his followers, it was out of question that Cuba's involvement was an issue of the Cold War. Some of the staunchest Reaganites, despite countless evidence stating the opposite, even stuck to the theory that Cuba was acting as Moscow's proxy. Reagan and much of his followers failed to recognize the manifold facets of the conflict, since they looked upon it with a dualistic Cold War mentality that was so typical for the better part of this administration. That Castro in Angola was promoting his revolutionary idealism and not socialism made by Moscow, never crossed the minds of the most influential decision makers in Washington. Thus, the number one priority had to be to get the Cubans out of Angola and not to deal with Pretoria's outrageous domestic and foreign behavior. The same applies for the MPLA. The question whether the MPLA was truly a Marxist-Leninist movement was never raised, even though Luanda held strong economic ties with Washington and repeatedly sought Western recognition and integration. It was only in 1988 that Reagan recognized that the MPLA was driven primarily by national interests and not by communist motives.

The Soviet Union, on the other side, felt obliged to assist the MPLA in its Angolan struggle. Regarding itself as the source of world revolution, it was beyond the question of a doubt that a fellow Marxist-Leninist oriented movement needed to be supported. But as did the United States, so did the Soviet Union overemphasize the MPLA's commitment to the Soviet model of socialism. Moscow failed to realize that the MPLA sided so closely with the Soviet Union primarily out of opportunistic reasons and not out of ideological conviction. Once Moscow had come to that realization, it was Cuba that kept it from withdrawing completely. Moscow's reluctance to remain involved in the Angolan conflict grew with every year, yet it was Havana's relentless pressure that forced Moscow to continue and even increase its support for the MPLA. If anything, especially in the final years of the 1980s, Moscow acted on Havana's orders and not vice-versa.

Finally, if the Angolan war had primarily been a proxy war in the Cold War, superpower relations would have been directly reflected in the Angolan conflict. In fact, however, the opposite was the case, as the renewed détente between Washington and Moscow escalated the war. Castro no longer had to fear US retaliation and could therefore launch an all-out offensive against SADF which was eventually driven out of Angola. During the Cold War crisis of 1983 and 1984, however, the Angolan conflict came to a temporary halt when the *Lusaka Accords* were signed. It was only in the most final stages of the conflict that détente had a direct impact. This is reflected in the last rounds of negotiations, when only *regional* matters (i. e. the SADF's presence in Angola and Pretoria's illegal occupation of Namibia) were discussed. The alleged *Cold War issue* (i. e. the Cuban presence) was no longer of significance and was settled after the *regional issues* had already been solved.

Based on this analysis it can therefore be concluded that the Angolan conflict between 1975 until 1988/89 was a conflict driven by regional motives. The role played by the superpowers was nonetheless crucial, as their diplomatic and military actions significantly

prolonged the conflict. Without Washington's veto in the UN, international pressure on South Africa would have been too high to bear while Cuba and the MPLA on the other side would never have been able to win the upper hand in the war against the SADF if it had not been for the Soviet weaponry. In other words, while the conflict was driven by regional factors, the Cold War had a catalyzing effect.

In any case, the consequences that thirteen years of war had brought to Angola were catastrophic. While the author was unable to come across specific numbers regarding civilian deaths, Odd Arne Westad provides one number regarding people injured by landmines up until 1991. Citing a *Human Rights Watch*-report, he states that 70,000 people were disabled by landmines, one of the highest rates of landmine injuries in the world.⁹⁷ Against the background that Angola had a bit over 10 million inhabitants in 1990⁹⁸ this is a horrifyingly high number. Specific numbers are available only for Cuban casualties. Between 1975 and 1991, when the last troops left, 2,103 Cuban soldiers died in Angola. Relative to the respective populations, this death toll is comparable to the 58,000 American soldiers that died in Vietnam.⁹⁹

Apart from the human toll, the economic destruction was matched only by that in Mozambique. Fourteen years of anti-colonial war which had gradually blended over into decades of civil war prevented the nation from rebuilding a strong, reliable economy. The damages between 1975 and 1987 are estimated at US\$ 12 billion.¹⁰⁰ Especially the southern part of Angola was hit hard since vast areas were subjected to the SADF's scorched earth campaign conducted during its retreat in 1976. Furthermore, most of the fighting took place in the south. The fact that the civil war would go on for another decade aggravates this situation even further. Thousands of landmines had been laid out by both sides, some of them remaining today. As it was with Mozambique, the apartheid-regime's thrive for self-preservation had managed to completely destroy another country in the southern African region.

Yet, in some regards the conflict was impressive. There is no other instance in modern history where an underdeveloped, small, Third World-country has changed the course of events in a region in the far distance. Never (and so far, after) had an *underdeveloped* country committed itself to a campaign of technical assistance of such a scope and selflessness. Cuba's contribution was more than helping the MPLA to remain in power. It significantly influenced what Castro has called '*the most beautiful cause*'¹⁰¹, the struggle against apartheid. The Cuban victory over the SADF destroyed the myth of Pretoria's invincibility and helped setting in motion the final act of apartheid South Africa.

⁹⁷ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 392.

⁹⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: *World Population Prospects*, New York, 2015, from: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Graphs/>, retrieved on 20. 11. 2015.

⁹⁹ Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, p. 517 and 521.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald F. Dreyer, *Namibia and Southern Africa. Regional Dynamics of Decolonization, 1945–90*, London/New York 1994, p. 167.

¹⁰¹ Piero Gleijeses, *Cuba and the Cold War, 1959–1980*, in: Melvyn P. Leffler/Odd Arne Westad (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Volume II: Crisis and Detente*, Cambridge 2010¹, pp. 327–348, here pp. 347–348.

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