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The Ogaden War and the Demise of Détente

By
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The failure of détente has been a popular theme among historians of American foreign policy, with opinions divided as to where the responsibility for this failure lies. A commonality among all points of view, however, is the importance of events in the third world, particularly in the "Arc of Crisis." One such event—the Ogaden War between Ethiopia and Somalia—prompted Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security advisor, to comment that détente was "buried" in the Ogaden. His point was that Carter's new approach to the cold war was put to the test during the Ogaden War, and there the policy's untenability was proven. The policy's failure, in turn, encouraged Soviet adventurism, which further alienated the American public from Carter's attempt to fight the cold war. Carter's policy eventually led to the withdrawal of the SALT II (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) Treaty and, as Brzezinski claimed, the collapse of détente. This article discusses Carter's foreign policy toward the Ogaden War, considers the accuracy of Brzezinski's claim, and reaches conclusions regarding the role of the Carter administration in the demise of détente.

Keywords: Carter; détente; Ethiopia; Somalia; Ogaden; Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT)

In 1980, the Carter administration, which had been engaging in debates for two years over the direction and implementation of foreign policy, halted its equivocation. Jimmy Carter's reorientation, from a foreign policy that emphasized regionalism and human rights to one that emphasized more traditional cold war themes such as globalism and containment, seemed, to some historians, to signal the demise of détente and the onset of a second cold war.

The failure of détente has been a popular theme among historians of recent American

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foreign policy. As with the beginning of the cold war in the 1940s, academic opinion is divided over the reasons for the hardening of relations in the late 1970s. Some historians argue that one of the superpowers was overly aggressive, thus betraying the spirit of détente. Fred Halliday, for example, claims that the American determination to rebuild its position of strength, damaged by the experience of Vietnam in particular, was ultimately responsible (Halliday 1986). An alternative perspective, as put forward by analysts including Raymond Garthoff, Jussi Hanhimaki, and Odd Arne Westad, divides the responsibility between both superpowers. In general, this historiographical viewpoint argues that both the United States and the Soviet Union made the same mistake; they each had a different definition for détente, and this "fatal difference" was ultimately the reason for its demise (Garthoff 1985, 1068). For the Soviets, détente denoted the American acceptance of global parity, while the Americans saw détente as a way of maintaining global superiority in an era when American military and financial powers were relatively limited. Each perceived the other's actions as a betrayal of its own definition of détente, thereby leading to the policy's failure (see Garthoff 1985; Hanhimaki 2000; Westad 1997).

Regardless of their conclusions, a common point of discussion in all these works is the importance of events in the third world, particularly in the swathe of countries that stretched from the Indian subcontinent through the Middle East to the Horn of Africa—a region collectively dubbed the "Arc of Crisis" (Brzezinski 1978, quoted in Halliday 1981, 19). Indeed, an event involving two of these countries featured in perhaps the most famous comment on the failure of détente: in his memoirs, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security advisor, stated that détente was "buried in the sands of the Ogaden" (Brzezinski 1983, 189). His point was that Carter's new approach to the cold war was put seriously to the test during the Ogaden War between Ethiopia and Somalia, and there its weaknesses were proven. Such proof then encouraged Soviet adventurism, which further alienated the American public from Carter's attempt to fight the cold war by deemphasizing military power, leading to the withdrawal of the SALT II (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) Treaty and the collapse of détente.

The purpose of this article is therefore twofold. Although Brzezinski's quote is famous, an in-depth analysis of policy toward the Ogaden War is substantially lacking. For example, Kenneth Morris's biography of Carter makes no mention of the Ogaden; indeed, in their memoirs, although Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance devoted a few pages to events in the Horn, Carter made only passing reference to Africa as a whole (Morris 1996; Schraeder 1994, 13; Brzezinski 1983; Vance 1983; Carter 1982). This article attempts not only to redress this deficiency but also to contribute to the historiographical debate surrounding the era of détente by considering the accuracy of Brzezinski's claim and the responsibility, or otherwise, of the Carter administration in the demise of détente.

The Ogaden War began in August 1977 when, supplied with Soviet arms and reinforced with more than 4,000 Soviet advisors, Mohamed Siad Barré launched an invasion of the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region of Ethiopia. The Somali leader was motivated by irredentism but believed that he could achieve his dreams only

through military conquest because of the Cairo Resolution, passed by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1964, which stated that existing borders of African nations would be honored and maintained. Within weeks, with 85 percent of the Ogaden in Somali hands, it appeared that Siad might achieve his aim of merging the region with Somalia (*New York Times* 1977b).

The Ogaden War loomed, according to Paul Henze, the national security staffer responsible for Africa, as the Carter administration's "first foreign policy crisis"[1] and provided a major test of the suitability and credibility of Carter's vision for American foreign policy. Faced with the constraints imposed in the era of the Vietnam War, Carter rejected traditional methods, such as American military power, to fight the cold war. Instead, he chose to emphasize American moral superiority by emphasizing human rights and peaceful resolution of conflict and by focusing upon regionalist, rather than globalist, concerns.

Carter, therefore, limited American involvement in the Ogaden conflict and supported a negotiated settlement to be determined by either the countries directly involved or other African countries—in the administration's regionalist context that African problems should have African solutions (U.S. Department of State 1977, 319), the ideal forum to sponsor negotiations was the OAU. The Policy Review Committee, one of the two subcommittees of the National Security Council during the Carter administration, resolved on August 25 that "we want to try to persuade other Africans to feel a sense of responsibility for what is happening between Ethiopia and Somalia" (Policy Review Committee 1977b) and pledged "to try to get as many African leaders as possible to participate in a call to all outside powers to refrain from supplying arms to fuel the Ethiopian-Somali confrontation so that there can be a cease-fire and an effort at mediation" (Policy Review Committee 1977a).

The OAU officially became involved in the Ogaden War after the Ethiopian government demanded an emergency meeting to discuss Somali aggression. The foreign ministers of eight African nations met in Libreville, Gabon, from August 5 to 9, 1977, but diplomatic skepticism that the talks would fail soon thereafter appeared well founded (*New York Times* 1977d). The Ethiopian delegation insisted that they would never accept the "humiliation" of surrendering part of their territory, and they refused to allow the Ogaden guerrillas to participate in the mediation talks, which led to Somalia's withdrawing from the negotiations. The meeting concluded with a call for the hostilities to cease between Ethiopia and Somalia (*New York Times* 1977a), although because of the Somali withdrawal, this announcement carried little weight. A month after the emergency session had ended, a spokesman for the Ethiopian government pointed out that Somalia had "shown no respect" for the resolution passed by the OAU and clearly "intended to pursue its aggression" (Ross 1977).

Carter also endorsed the standpoint of the OAU that "outside powers should not be 'fuelling' African territorial disputes" and pledged an arms embargo on both sides for the duration of the conflict (Cabinet Meeting 1977). However, the United States's main rival in the cold war did not share Carter's commitment to regionalism and peaceful resolution of conflicts—and the involvement of the

Communist bloc in the Ogaden War posed perhaps the greatest challenge to Carter's new foreign policy approach.

During the first few weeks of the war, the Soviet Union continued to supply military aid to both Ethiopia and Somalia (see Ottaway 1977a; *Washington Post* 1977a; *New York Times* 1977e), but it became increasingly clear that Moscow was choosing sides. In September, the Soviet leadership expressed open disapproval of the Somali incursion (*New York Times* 1977c) and in October took their displeasure a step further by announcing the cessation of all arms supplies to Somalia. The Soviet ambassador to Ethiopia, Anatoly Ratanov, told a news conference in Addis Ababa that Moscow had "officially and formally" terminated military aid to Somalia but was providing Ethiopia with "defensive weapons" to counter the Somali invasion (Benjamin 1977, A27). In addition, the Communist bloc provided manpower to support the Ethiopian troops in the war; on November 5, 1977, the State Department estimated that about 250 Cuban and Soviet military advisors were assisting Ethiopia in the fighting in the Ogaden as well as in Eritrea (the northern province bordering the Red Sea where insurgents had been fighting for independence since the region had been formally incorporated into Ethiopia in 1962) (Hovey 1977).

Siad realized that, if he were to defeat Ethiopian troops backed by Soviet and Cuban might, he too needed external support. This was most likely to come from the West, but presumably only if he no longer had ties with the Communist bloc. Thus, in November 1977, following a 19-hour government meeting, Siad renounced the Treaty of Friendship between Somalia and the Soviet Union; ordered the expulsion of all Soviet military and civilian advisors; and closed the Soviet naval bases on the Indian Ocean, including the base at Berbera (*Time* 1977). At the same time, Siad broke relations with the Soviet Union's ally and perceived proxy, Cuba, and also expelled Cuban diplomats and advisors (*Newsweek* 1977; *Time* 1977). The official government announcement that Siad was breaking these ties was couched in terms designed to elicit Western sympathies by emphasizing the Somali position that Soviet actions were contributing to the repression of freedom. Somali Information Minister Abdulkadir Salaad Hasan charged that the Soviet Union was "brazenly" interfering "in the struggle of the peoples fighting for their liberation from the Ethiopian government" (Wilkinson 1977, A1).

Carter, however, recognized that Siad's ulterior motive in expelling the Soviets was a search for external support and continued to apply a regionalist policy, maintaining the doctrine that outside powers should not fuel the Ogaden conflict. On November 15, the State Department spokesman, Hodding Carter, announced that, despite the Somali action, there would be no change in the administration's policy of refusing to supply arms to Somalia and stated that the administration continued to believe that "African problems should be solved by Africans themselves" (Ottaway 1977b). The determination of the administration to refrain from direct involvement did not please the Somalis, however. At a news conference, the Somali advisor on foreign affairs, Hussein Abdulkador Kassim, declared that "it is the feeling of my Government that the international community has a

responsibility to see that the plan of the Soviet Union to destabilize the area is not carried out" (*New York Times* 1977f, 8). The same month Siad called on the United States to "fulfill its moral responsibility" to Somalia. He said he had received "words, just words from the West" instead of material aid, even after expelling the Soviets (*Washington Post* 1977b, A8). However, Carter's new approach to the cold war, and emphasis on regionalism, meant that he saw no reason why the Somalis should expect to be rewarded just because they had expelled the Soviets.

Instead, Carter continued with his attempts to remove Soviet influence from the region. The president shared his concern about the "Soviet Union's unwarranted involvement in Africa" with "the NATO alliance, and specifically with France, the Middle Eastern countries, and India" (Carter 1978a, 57) and also appealed to the Latin American countries, perhaps in the hope that this would influence Cuba. In official communiqués sent to the leaders of various Latin American nations, including the president of Venezuela, Carlos Andres Perez, Carter pointed out that despite American efforts to the contrary, "the Soviet Union and Cuba have become increasingly involved in the Horn, in a way that has transformed a conflict largely limited to regional powers, to one with broader implications and risks" (Carter to Perez 1978). Carter requested that Perez use his influence to "condemn foreign intervention in the internal affairs of another country" (Carter to Perez 1978). The following month, Carter wrote to President Jose Lopez Portillo of Mexico expressing the "deep concern" of the United States over the situation in the Horn, and especially the Cuban involvement, and seeking his "advice on how [to] persuade them to exercise more restraint" (Carter to Portillo 1978).

The administration also expressed its concern directly to the Soviet Union and Cuba. In a meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in December, Cyrus Vance, the secretary of state, pointed out that the United States supported the OAU position that the major powers should disengage from the Ogaden conflict and added that "it would be useful if the USSR did too" (Vance to Brzezinski 1977). On January 25, Carter sent a letter to Brezhnev seeking Soviet support for a negotiated solution to the Ogaden conflict, based upon respect for territorial integrity, and the "immediate recall of both Soviet and Cuban military personnel from Ethiopia" (Carter to Brezhnev 1978). The following month, a State Department telegram sent via the American Embassy in Cuba requested that the Cuban government also support OAU peace initiatives, pointing out that "continuing Soviet-Cuban involvement will not enhance prospects for such settlement" (U.S. Department of State to U.S. Embassy, Havana 1978).

However, only a year after Carter had entered the White House and inspired new hope for American foreign policy, events in the Ogaden seemed to suggest that his new approach was flawed, as it became increasingly clear that negotiations were unlikely to end the conflict. When meeting with a congressional delegation that Representatives Don Bonker (D-Wash) and Paul Tsongas (D-Mass) led, the Ethiopian leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, warned that the United States should not "expect the OAU to solve the problem" and contended that the

Somalis would not voluntarily withdraw from the Ogaden. As there was "no force at the disposal of the OAU," it was therefore the "duty of Ethiopia and its armed forces to expel the aggressors" (U.S. Congress 1978c, H462–9). On January 18, 1978, the Ethiopian ambassador to the United States, Ayalew Mandefro, reiterated that the "Ogaden is part of Ethiopia and is not a point of negotiation with Somalia" (*Washington Post* 1978, A16). Neither were the Somalis overly supportive or encouraging about the possible success of negotiations; in an interview, Siad insisted that there was no chance of a negotiated settlement with Ethiopia to end the war over the Ogaden (*New York Times* 1978). Paul Henze, the national security staffer who was responsible for the Horn of Africa, perhaps summed up best the chances for successful negotiation in a memo that he sent to Brzezinski on January 12, commenting that "neither the Ethiopians nor the Somalis want negotiations now; how, then, can you bring them to negotiate? Nor do the Russians and the Cubans want negotiations" (Henze to Brzezinski 1978b).

Indeed, the Soviets seemed dedicated to a military solution to the Ogaden War, and large amounts of Soviet military equipment, plus Communist bloc support in the form of Cuban troops, poured into Ethiopia. On January 23, Henze informed Brzezinski that "between 2,000 and 3,000 more Cuban combat troops are scheduled to arrive in Ethiopia shortly and that planning is well advanced to commit them in the northern Ogaden. . . . The Cuban role is thus rapidly shifting from an advisory one to one of significant involvement in the fighting itself" (Henze to Brzezinski 1978b). On February 23, Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA, reported that "a Soviet General [Vasiliy I. Petrov] is directing the Ethiopians in battle . . . [and] nearly 10,000 Cubans are in Ethiopia now" (NSC Meeting 1978). Despite the early success that the Somali insurgents enjoyed in the Ogaden, the extent of Communist bloc support for Ethiopia changed the military situation. Henze informed Brzezinski in January that "sometime this year, with all the Soviet weaponry and Cuban help they are getting, [the Ethiopians] are bound to push the Somalis back decisively" (Henze to Brzezinski 1978a).

Well aware of Carter's constant refusals to provide military aid while the war continued, Siad, in his desperation, attempted to depict the conflict in geopolitical terms in a final effort to change Carter's mind. In an exclusive interview with *Newsweek* on February 13, Siad warned that "Russia is outmanoeuvering America" (*Newsweek* 1978), while a senior aide cautioned that "the Soviets can now see the day when they will control the oil supplies and the sea routes of the Western world" (*Newsweek* 1978). Carter, though, maintained his position that the United States would not be pressured into providing Somalia with military aid while the Ogaden War continued; in his memoirs, Vance recalled that "the Somalis were increasingly desperate. Repeatedly, they appealed for U.S. military help as Cuban and Ethiopian pressure mounted. Each time [the Carter administration] asked whether they were prepared to withdraw from the Ogaden. Their answer was no" (Vance 1983, 87).

The might of Soviet and Cuban involvement on the side of Ethiopia in the Ogaden War, added to the lack of international support for Siad, led, almost inevitably, to Somali defeat. On March 9, Carter announced that "last night, I was

informed by President Siad of Somalia that he was agreeing to withdraw his forces from the Ogaden area, the occupied areas of Ethiopia" (Carter 1978c, 490). In fact, Siad had little choice in the matter, and the "withdrawal" referred to by Siad was more like a rout. The Ethiopian ambassador to Kenya, Mengiste Desta, told a press conference that the Somali troops were "being chased out from Ethiopian land by [Ethiopian] troops" (Lamb 1978, A1).

Thus, the Ogaden War came to an end. On the surface, it seemed that Carter's policy had borne its promise: there had been no American military involvement, and no American troops had died in another proxy war; the war had ended with the tenets of international law and national integrity fulfilled as the invading army was forced to withdraw; and there had been partial rollback of Communist bloc influence as Somalia broke ties with the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Despite this success, however, Carter's policy was perceived as a failure, arguably because of his inability to "sell" his new approach to the cold war to the American public. Members of the U.S. Congress, in particular, were clearly not convinced by Carter's reorientation of foreign policy and demanded more traditional methods in waging the cold war. As early as October 1977, Representative Robert Sikes (D-Fl) described the refusal of the United States to aid the Somalis as "ineptness" (U.S. Congress 1977a, 35101); and on November 29, he argued that "the United States will be derelict if we do not move quickly to take advantage of the potential" for replacing the Soviet Union in Somalia, particularly in the strategic naval base at Berbera (U.S. Congress 1977b, 38050). On January 19, 1978, Sikes told the House that "I find it exceedingly hard to comprehend an action of the US Government which virtually gives the green light for the conquest of Somalia and Eritrea by Cuban forces under Russian control. . . . Arms for Somalia could have forced a negotiated settlement and kept the strategic Horn of Africa out of communist hands" (U.S. Congress 1978a, 146–47). On February 8, Senator Thomas Eagleton (D-Mo) also expressed his concern about Soviet advances in the Horn, claiming that without U.S. help, "Somalia's relatively small and now-depleted military forces could not meet the military might of Ethiopia's Soviet backed forces, thus assuring a Soviet takeover in the Horn of Africa" (U.S. Congress 1978b, 2664).

In their report to the House Committee on International Relations, following their visit to the Horn, Representatives Bonker and Tsongas also demonstrated a traditional cold war viewpoint. They argued that nowhere on "the African Continent is there an area where the potential for East-West confrontation is greater, or strategic interests more important" (U.S. Congress 1978c, H462–69). The report also invoked the Domino Theory[2] and warned of the dangers of appeasement:

> Soviet strategists have recognized the importance of the Horn of Africa and have shown their willingness to make substantial investments to secure Russia's interests, first in Somalia and now in Ethiopia. By undermining the fragile governments that exist in the Horn, Soviet influence could rapidly spread throughout the region and along the entire East Coast of Africa. . . . As long as there is turmoil and conflict in the Horn of Africa, the United States cannot afford to be complacent. To do so would risk possible Soviet

> domination of the whole Indian Ocean area and a consequent threat to fundamental Western interests. (U.S. Congress 1978c, H462–70)

Carter's seeming inability to convince Congress in particular, and the American public in general, that his approach to the cold war was appropriate did not go unnoticed within the administration. In his report on November 18, 1977, Zbigniew Brzezinski warned Carter that although

> the various initiatives you have taken have been right, and individually correct, I feel that we are confronting a growing domestic problem involving public perception of the general character of that policy. To put it simply and quite bluntly, it is seen as "soft". . . . Our critics—will ask for some examples of "toughness," and exploit against us such things as . . . the current Cuban activity in Africa (*NSC Weekly* 1977).

But Brzezinski's concern went further than fears about American public opinion. His priority as national security advisor was American-Soviet relations, and he feared that Carter's approach to the Ogaden War would have a serious impact on that relationship.

Although, in general, members of the Carter administration believed in the rhetoric that human rights should be a concern, that regionalist matters were important, and that the East-West dimension should not be allowed to dominate foreign policy, they also accepted the reality of the world of the 1970s and the fact that American national security concerns necessarily included the relationship with the Soviet Union. The debate that was to plague the administration, particularly in view of media coverage, arose from a difference of opinion over the balance between these two positions. In particular, press attention concentrated upon the relationship between Zbigniew Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance, and although it should be noted that the media often overstated the level of antagonism between the two men, there were key areas in which they differed significantly in their foreign policy outlook. Brzezinski recalled that "we disagreed on a number of issues. We disagreed on Soviet expansionism, we disagreed on how hard we ought to press the Soviets on human rights. We disagreed specifically on the Soviet/Cuban role in Ethiopia and Somalia."[3]

Brzezinski viewed the Soviet Union as threatening and dangerous, and he argued that Soviet actions in the Horn of Africa proved this. In the Special Coordination Committee (SCC) meeting of March 2, 1978, Brzezinski contended that "the Soviets are demonstrating a predisposition to exploit a local conflict for larger purposes. They are frightening more countries in the region and they are creating a precedent for more involvement elsewhere" (SCC Meeting 1978b). In public Brzezinski may have supported the administration's regionalist policy, but in private memos, meetings, and later in his memoirs, it is clear that Brzezinski maintained a more globalist outlook. He argued that "the situation between the Ethiopians and the Somalis was more than a border conflict" (Brzezinski 1983, 178) and warned that Soviet success in the Horn could have serious repercussions around the world. Indeed, parroting classic cold war rhetoric, Brzezinski's report to the president on February 9, 1978, maintained that the Soviet success in the

African Horn demonstrated that "containment has now been fully breached" (*NSC Weekly* 1978a). On February 24, 1978, Brzezinski advised Carter that, unless the United States stood up to the Soviets in the Horn, "we will increasingly find Begin, Brezhnev, Vorster, Schmidt, Castro, Gaddafi, and a host of others thumbing their noses at us" (*NSC Weekly* 1978b). Ten days later, Brzezinski sent a memo to Carter reflecting on the impact of the Soviet's success in the Horn of Africa:

> No one in the region will fail to notice that the Soviet Union acted assertively, energetically, and had its own way. This will have a significant effect on Soviet neighbours; I do not think anyone here appreciates the degree to which the neighbours of the Soviet Union are fearful of the Soviet Union and see themselves as entirely dependent on American resolution. I also do not believe that it is beating the drums of alarm to suggest that in the longer run there will be a ripple effect in Europe as well. (Brzezinski to Carter 1978)

In contrast to Brzezinski's globalist perspective, Vance attempted to adhere to the administration's emphasis on regionalism and, according to Brzezinski, "insisted that this issue [in the Ogaden] was purely a local one" (Brzezinski 1983, 179). Vance argued that the administration should not place too much emphasis on Soviet activities in the Horn and maintained that the Ogaden War had become a "daily crisis" because "we are stirring it up ourselves" (SCC Meeting 1978b). Although it would be wrong to say that Vance took a benign view of the Soviet Union, he did believe that it was possible for the administration to work with the Soviet Union, and his priority, throughout his term of office as secretary of state, was always SALT. For Vance, nothing was more important, and he was determined that nothing should interfere with the talks; at the SCC meeting of March 2, 1978, he warned that losing SALT would be "the worst thing that could happen" (SCC Meeting 1978b).

Thus, debates arose within the administration as to the extent to which other issues should be allowed to impinge on Vance's priority, and the issue of "linkage" became a matter of contention. As Brzezinski recalled

> whether the African problem would be treated purely as an African issue disregarding the Cuban and Soviet involvement and on Rhodesia and South Africa there was agreement between NSC and State that this was a purely African problem. On Ethiopia, Somalia and Angola there was disagreement, the NSC feeling we cannot disregard that since it's part of a larger Soviet policy that therefore affects our larger strategy and the State Department feeling was strongly that now the two issues could somehow or other be compartmentalized.[4]

Notwithstanding internal discussion, the official administration standpoint was that there would be no linkage between various aspects of foreign policy. On February 21, 1978, the SCC "agreed unanimously that there is no direct linkage between Soviet or Cuban actions in the Horn and bilateral activities involving either country and the United States" (SCC Meeting 1978a), and Vance subsequently told a congressional hearing that there was no linkage between events in the Horn and SALT (SCC Meeting 1978b).

However, despite such categorical assertions, in reality the situation was much more complicated, and in practice, some elements of linkage could not be avoided. State Department spokesman Hodding Carter maintained that "as a matter of policy, there is no linkage," but it was inevitable that Soviet actions in the Horn were "going to have a spill over effect in Congress and in the nation as a whole" (Marder 1978, A1). President Carter told a news conference that the administration would never "initiate any linkage," but Soviet activities in the Horn might "lessen the confidence of the American people in the word and peaceful intentions of the Soviet Union, [and] would make it more difficult to ratify a SALT agreement or comprehensive test ban agreement if concluded, and therefore, the two are linked because of actions by the Soviets" (Carter 1978b, 442). Even Vance accepted this fact, acknowledging that Soviet and Cuban involvement in the Horn "cannot help but have an effect upon the relationship between our two countries. It affects the political atmosphere between the United States and those two countries. . . . I am not suggesting any direct linkage, but I do suggest it affects the political atmosphere in which these discussions take place" (U.S. Department of State 1978).

Brzezinski was more blunt when considering the matter of linkage between Soviet activities in the Horn and other aspects of policy. At the SCC meeting on March 2, 1978, he asserted that "if there is an aggravation of tensions because of what the Soviets are doing in the Horn, there is going to be linkage. That is a statement of fact" (SCC Meeting 1978b). Indeed, on January 25, 1978, Carter sent a letter to Brezhnev arguing that Soviet involvement in the Horn "can only breed similar counter-reactions, with unavoidably negative effects on our bilateral relations" (Carter to Brezhnev 1978).

The debates surrounding the deployment of a carrier task force to the Horn also provided evidence of differences of opinions within the Carter administration. The SCC meeting minutes from February 21 noted that the "SCC was divided" over the issue (SCC Meeting 1978c). Brzezinski argued that a task force should be sent because "it is important that regional powers not see the United States as passive in the face of Soviet and Cuban intervention in the Horn and in the potential invasion of Somalia—even if our support is, in the final analysis, only for the record" (SCC Meeting 1978c). However, Brzezinski met with united opposition; in his memoirs, Vance recalled, "every other member of the committee opposed the idea of deploying a carrier task force" (Vance 1983, 87). Brzezinski remembered that "Vance particularly was against any deployment of a carrier task force in the area of the Horn. For the first time in the course of our various meetings, he started to show impatience, to get red in the face, and to raise his voice. I could sense that personal tension was entering into our relationship" (Brzezinski 1983, 182). In this matter, the majority of the SCC, supported by the president, held sway; and the SCC meeting of March 2 noted that "an aircraft carrier will for the time being be kept in the area of Singapore" (SCC Meeting 1978b).

For Brzezinski, this matter was a turning point in the life of the administration. In his memoirs he explained why:

> In March 1980, as we were reacting to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, I wrote in my journal: "I have been reflecting on when did things begin genuinely to go wrong in the

> US-Soviet relationship. My view is that it was on the day sometime in . . . 1978 when at the SCC meeting I advocated that we send in a carrier task force in reaction to the Soviet deployment of the Cubans in Ethiopia. At that meeting not only was I opposed by Vance, but Harold Brown asked why, for what reason, without taking into account that that is a question that should perplex the Soviets rather than us. The president backed the others rather than me, we did not react. Subsequently, as the Soviets became more emboldened, we overreacted, particularly in the Cuban Soviet brigade fiasco of last fall. That derailed SALT, the momentum of SALT was lost, and the final nail in the coffin was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In brief underreaction then bred overreaction." That is why I have used occasionally the phrase, "SALT lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden." (Brzezinski 1983, 189)

But the question remains as to whether Brzezinski was correct to assign such importance to a conflict in an area of the world that David Lamb of the *Los Angeles Times* described as a "hot, barren and inhospitable . . . desperately poor region . . . [with] little economic or strategic value" (1977, B1). In other words, it arguably mattered little in geopolitical terms who controlled the Ogaden, and it was Carter's policy in other parts of the world that were more important in influencing Soviet actions.

The most obvious example would be the situation in Iran and the perceived inability of the Carter administration to free the American hostages held there. Although Carter brokered the deal that secured the release of the 52 hostages, the fact that the men were not allowed to leave Iranian territory until Ronald Reagan took the presidential oath remains the enduring image. There are no grounds to suggest that the policy of the Carter administration toward the Horn of Africa prompted the crisis in Iran—it was undoubtedly an issue of religious fundamentalism and the legacy of American support for the Shah. Similarly, it appears much more likely that, if the Soviet Union were motivated by the image of American weakness, it would have been weakness in Iran, rather than in the Horn of Africa, that gave rise to this crisis.

The decision of the Carter administration to offer full diplomatic recognition to China, and consent to the seating of the People's Republic in the United Nations and on the UN Security Council, is also worthy of consideration as an inducement for Soviet adventurism. Fears within the Kremlin that Soviet influence might be waning in Asia, resulting from the forging of closer relations between the United States and China, may well have played a part in the Soviet decision that direct action was needed to bolster its position in other countries in that region, thereby prompting the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan in support of the pro-Communist government. Indeed, in his biography of Cyrus Vance, David McLellan argues that it was Soviet suspicion and concern over the growing Sino-U.S. closeness, and the implications for Soviet interests in southwest Asia, that prompted Soviet action in Afghanistan (McLellan 1985, 156). Again, Carter's policy toward China was unconnected to his African policy, throwing further doubt on Brzezinski's claim.

Additional evidence that Brzezinski's notion was flawed can be found in quotes from others during that time. Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States from 1962 to 1986, claimed that "from the long-term geopolitical

point of view, the developments in that part of Africa were unmistakably of local importance, and the political leadership in Moscow regarded them as such" (Dobrynin 1995, 403). Thus, if the Kremlin did not attribute any global significance to events in the Horn, it seems unlikely that American actions—or indeed inaction—there affected subsequent Soviet policy toward Afghanistan. This view was shared by Robert Gates, a member of the CIA who transferred to work as Brzezinski's executive assistant from June 1977 to early 1980, before returning to become the director of the CIA during the George H. W. Bush administration. In his autobiography, Gates (secretary of defense during the Obama adminstration) contended that events in the Horn, with regard to either Soviet or American policy, "had no impact on the broader US-Soviet relationship" (Gates 1996, 74).

So détente was perhaps not "buried in the sands of the Ogaden," but the importance of the conflict in the demise of détente should not be underestimated. The war represented the first foreign policy crisis for the Carter administration, and it was here that the president's new approach to the cold war was put to the test. Carter deemphasized American military power and strove for a peaceful resolution of the conflict—but he failed. He invoked the principle of regionalism by insisting that African problems should have African solutions and attempted to remove all outside influence from the conflict—but he failed. Nevertheless, one still might argue that Carter was right, and that the commitment of American military power would have been even worse, both for the situation in the Horn of Africa and for American-Soviet relations.

Notwithstanding, Carter's ultimate failure lay in his inability to convince the American public in general, and the U.S. Congress in particular, that his policy choices were appropriate. Brzezinski claimed that, because of the Ogaden War, "the momentum of SALT was lost," and he was correct, but it was not the Soviet momentum that was most important in 1978; it was American public opinion. Perhaps Carter's handling of the Ogaden War emboldened the Soviets, but ultimately it was the willingness of the American people to support SALT, not the support of the Soviet Union, that was undermined by Carter's handling of the conflict in the Horn of Africa. As Brzezinski noted in his report to the president in November 1977 (*NSC Weekly* 1977), the Ogaden War raised doubts among the American people, which were exacerbated by international events throughout Carter's administration and consolidated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Subsequently, Carter withdrew SALT from Senate consideration, and the era of the second cold war began.

In conclusion, let us consider how this analysis fits into the historiographical debate surrounding the demise of détente. Carter's foreign policy, whether in 1977 or 1980, was designed to improve the status of the United States in the international environment, suggesting that Halliday's focus on the American role might be most accurate. However, Carter was not acting in an aggressive way, and it could certainly be argued that his policy choices were responsive to the limits on American power that were apparent during his administration. Indeed, given that Carter's ultimate failure was his inability to convince the public to maintain its support for SALT, this suggests that the way that Carter handled the Ogaden crisis seems more emblematic of the historiographical school of thought advanced by Odd Arne Westad (see Westad 1997).

Discussions of Carter's failure to engage public opinion also feature in historiographical evaluations of Carter's presidency as a whole. Some offer this as further evidence of Carter's weakness as president; Gaddis Smith, for example, acknowledged that Carter's vision of foreign policy was "morally responsible and far-sighted" but argued that he failed to communicate this effectively to the American public because of his inability to successfully lead his administration or manage Soviet adventurism (Smith 1986, 247). However, this analysis of Carter's policy toward the Ogaden War supports strongly the view of those analysts, including Jerel Rosati, who, while crediting Carter with a coherent worldview, argue that the president's failure to gain public support lay with the rising tide of conservatism in the United States (Rosati 1994). Indeed, it could be argued that public sentiment in the mid-1970s, which enabled Carter's election and facilitated his initial foreign policy approach, was a temporary aberration: an immediate reaction to Vietnam and Watergate, but one that quickly passed. The conservative right in the United States demanded a tough foreign policy, but Carter was perceived as a stereotypical Democratic president, one who was "soft on Communism"[5] (Ringle 1978, A17); his policy toward the Ogaden War was but one element, albeit an important element, in creating this perception. Ultimately Carter failed in convincing the American people to support his vision because he, similar to many Democrats subsequently, was unable to combat the trend toward Republicanism in American politics—a trend that arguably began with the election of Richard Nixon in 1968; spawned the 1994 Republican Revolution, when Republicans seized control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years; and continued into the twenty-first century.

Events in the Ogaden region of Africa are therefore important to historians of the cold war for many reasons. This study has offered, for example, further insight into the limitations on foreign policy formulation in the era of the Vietnam War and a greater understanding of some of the internal dynamics within the Carter administration, particularly the relationship between Brzezinski and Vance. Perhaps most important, though, is the significance of the Ogaden War to the demise of détente. Although the "ownership" of this region in Africa was arguably unimportant to the overall balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union in the cold war, the perception of American weakness in the face of Soviet strength had a profound impact on the way that the Carter administration was viewed by the American public. As Brzezinski claimed, the momentum of SALT was severely undermined by events in the Ogaden, with serious repercussions for both Jimmy Carter, who failed in his bid for reelection in 1980 largely due to his image as weak and ineffective, and the subsequent development of the cold war.

Notes

1. Paul B. Henze, conversation with author, April 1999.

2. "Domino Theory" refers to the idea that if one country were to become Communist, then, like a row of falling dominoes, its neighbors would be likely to follow.

3. Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to the Carter Administration, 6 July 2000, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C.

4. Ibid.

5. In August 1978, the Republican governor of Virginia, John Dalton, announced his intention to "send the message, all over this state, that the Carter administration is soft on communism." See Ringle (1978).

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