

# Contested Narratives: South African and Cuban Military Action in Angola (1987-1988)

A Monograph

by

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## **Abstract**

Contested Narratives: South African and Cuban Military Action in Angola (1987-1988), by MAJ Jayson N. Williams, US Army, 45 pages.

The purpose of this monograph is to explore how Cuba and the Republic of South Africa used tactical actions in southern Angola to pursue their strategic objectives in the South African Border War from 1987 to 1988. The monograph focuses on how the two states used these tactical actions to further their respective narratives of victory and seek a continued strategic advantage. The monograph compares and contrasts the strategies and interpretations of military actions in Angola from the perspective of each belligerent. The monograph argues that although the accounts of the military actions at Cuito Cuanavale and in Cunene Province were remarkably congruent, each state contested the purpose of these actions and fought to define the meaning of the war. By fighting for their differing interpretations of events, they sought to rationalize their competing claims of victory at the conclusion of the war. The monograph argues that the interdependent nature of the complex environment in which these states acted increased the importance of the narratives to each state's pursuit of its strategic objectives.

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## **Acronyms**

ANC	African National Congress
ATN	Cuban Northern Force Group
ATS	Cuban Southern Force Group
FAPLA	Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola
FAR	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba
MK	Spear of the Nation
MPLA	People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola
PLAN	People's Liberation Army of Namibia
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SADF	South African Defense Force
SAI	South African Infantry (Battalion)
SWA	South-West Africa
SWAPO	South-West Africa People's Organization
SWATF	South-West Africa Territorial Force
UN	United Nations
UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
UNTAG	United Nations Transition Assistance Group
US	United States (of America)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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## Introduction

To understand the South African Border War, one must place it in the greater context of the Cold War. Following Portugal's Carnation Revolution and the resulting independence of Angola in 1974, Cuban military forces intervened to secure Angola's new Marxist government controlled by the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Even while fear of the spread of communism in southern Africa grew among Western powers, international pressure mounted for Namibian independence from the Republic of South Africa (RSA). The RSA's apartheid government faced international condemnation and internal domestic threats to its survival. In 1978, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution (UNSCR) 435 calling for the withdrawal of South African Defense Forces (SADF) from Namibia.<sup>1</sup> The RSA, threatened by the spread of communism and encouraged by the United States' (US) policy of constructive engagement, delayed the implementation the resolution. For over a decade, the RSA supported its occupation of Namibia by tying its withdrawal from Namibia with that of Cuban troops from Angola in a policy of "linkage" while simultaneously supporting its allied forces in Namibia and Angola.

In 1987, the strategic situation in Angola changed dramatically. Soviet and MPLA forces initiated offensive operations against the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the Angolan forces backed by the RSA. The RSA came to UNITA's aid and forced the MPLA north from the Lomba River to Cuito Cuanavale. The success of the SADF counterattack drew Cuba to the aid of its MPLA comrades. After several SADF attacks on MPLA forces near Cuito Cuanavale, two major battles between Cuban and SADF mechanized and armored forces near the Namibian border, and political posturing on all sides, something had changed. By the end

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council, "UN Security Council Resolution 435," *United Nations Website*, September 29, 1978, accessed 24 August 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/1978.shtml>.



of 1988, the parties involved were prepared to negotiate after over two decades of war. The principles agreed that Cuban forces would withdraw from Angola, the RSA would withdraw from Angola and Namibia, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) would withdraw northwards in Angola, and the Angolan government would no longer host the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC).<sup>2</sup>

There were several potential reasons for the involved parties' sudden willingness to negotiate. Some of these reasons were not directly related to the South African Border War. By 1988, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was wrestling with important domestic decisions concerning the direction of the state as the nature of the Cold War changed following Gorbachev's election in 1985.<sup>3</sup> The RSA faced domestic political turmoil as pressure against apartheid mounted. The economic and political cost of the war continued to mount for Cuba, which would have preferred to end a protracted foreign war.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, military operations in southern Angola from 1987 to 1988 played a significant role in the negotiated settlement between the RSA, Cuba, and Angola. After the final military actions in Angola, the belligerents concluded that a decisive military victory was unlikely given the nature of their environment. Acting as a catalyst in the changing global political environment, the final battles of the South African Border War demonstrate both the challenges and the potential of pursuing strategic objectives through tactical action in a complex environment and highlight the importance of military action to contested political narratives of victory.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Agreement among the People's Republic of Angola, the Republic of Cuba, and the Republic of South Africa (Tripartite Agreement), December 22, 1988, accessed 26 February 2016, <http://peacemaker.un.org/angola-tripartite-agreement88>; Sue Onslow and Anna-Mart van Wyk, eds., *Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974*, Oral History (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2013), 323-334.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 331.

<sup>4</sup> Piero Gleijeses, "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 122.

## Interdependent Perspectives

Those actors engaged in the South African Border War could view their participation through at least three different but interdependent perspectives. A first perspective recognizes that the South African Border War was a part of the larger Cold War. A second perspective grants that the war was a part of the RSA's fight for hegemony in southern Africa. A third perspective views the war as part of the series of the internal domestic struggles inside of the countries involved. Even a simplified visual depiction of these relationships illustrates the complexity and interconnectedness of the actors in this environment (Figure 1). Each of these perspectives provides a lens to gain greater insight into the layers of context of the war.

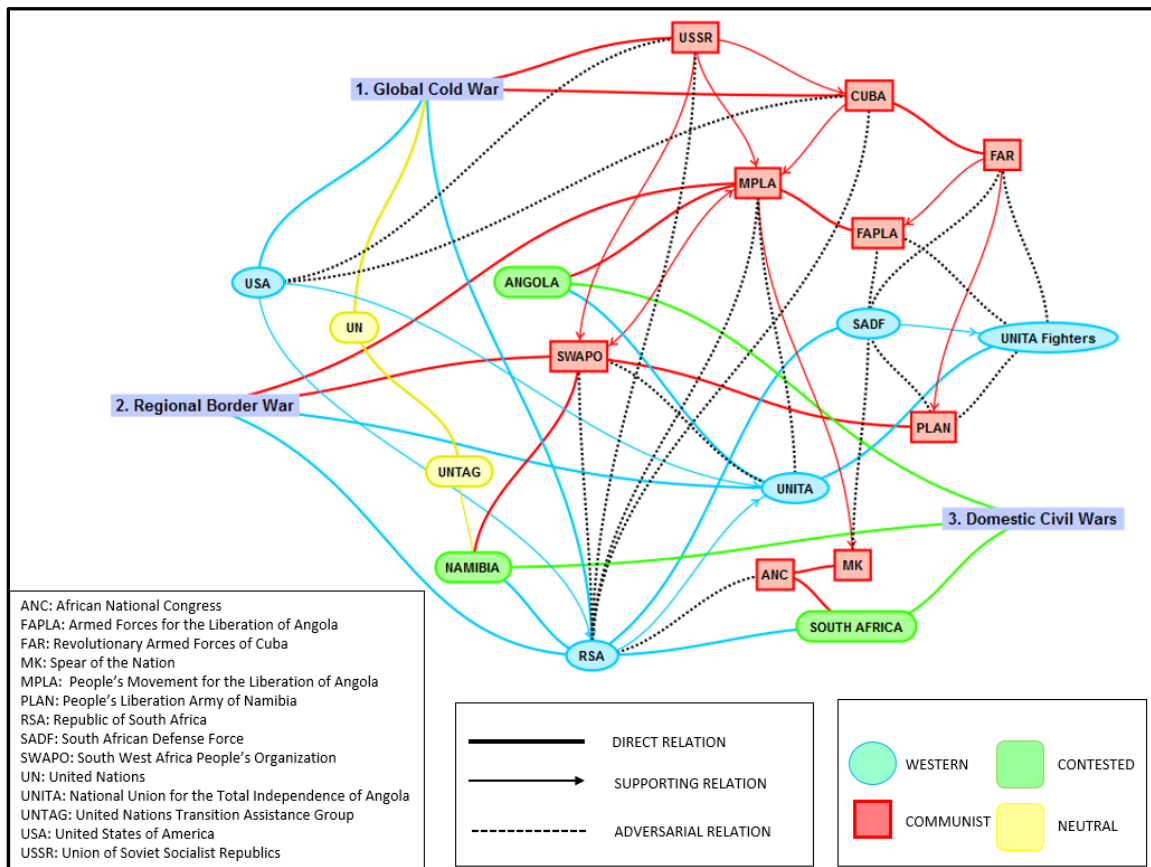


Figure 1. International Relations in Southern Africa, 1987-1988.

*Source:* Created by author.

## Global Cold War

The Global Cold War, the first perspective, primarily focused on the two major world powers at the time. The United States and the USSR were the major players, but the conflict was global as each state attempted to expand its influence. Other countries such as the RSA and Cuba played supporting or regional roles in this power struggle in their limited capacities. Each great power sought to legitimize its actions through the United Nations (UN) when it could, and, as such, the UN was involved in the conflict from its beginning.

The omnipresent influence of the Cold War created strange effects in practice. The US chose a policy of “constructive engagement” in the region based on the recognition that southern Africa is an interdependent region and that violence in one area will have effects in others.<sup>5</sup> The United States had “neither the leverage nor the mandate” to impose change on countries in Southern Africa but recognized that it was in a competition with the USSR for influence in the region.<sup>6</sup> Because of the primacy of winning the Cold War, the United States found its interests aligned with the RSA despite the United States’ strong disapproval of the RSA’s apartheid policies. Under the policy of constructive engagement, the United States maintained an arms embargo against the RSA, disallowed American use of SADF facilities, and categorically rejected the RSA’s policy of apartheid. The United States precluded economic sanctions on the RSA, and continued to meet with all leaders in Southern Africa as appropriate to advance US interests.<sup>7</sup>

For the RSA, the Soviets and Cubans provided a foil around which to rally domestic support for wars against regional revolutionary movements that helped ensure the continued

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<sup>5</sup> Chester A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 79.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

survival of the RSA government. Politicians and senior officials couched the war in terms of “stopping Soviet aggression” and “bringing freedom to the southern African subcontinent” to help domestic audiences understand the rationale for the war.<sup>8</sup> The RSA implemented a policy of linkage and insisted on the connection of the withdrawal of the SADF from Namibia with the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Cuba had linked the drawdown of its military presence in Angola to the elimination of external threats to the MPLA and the independence of Namibia in accordance with UNSCR 435 from at least 1984.<sup>9</sup> This linkage mirrored in some ways the RSA’s policy of linkage, but the Cubans argued that they were there at the request of the legitimate government of Angola whereas the SADF was an illegal occupying force in Namibia.

These two policies created a situation where neither side wanted to give ground first. Despite the RSA’s concern over the potential threat of communism in southern Africa and Cuba’s desire to eliminate external threats to Angola’s MPLA government, Cuba and the RSA formed an odd relationship in which each state’s persistence provided the justification for the other’s continued presence. Rationally, the RSA should not have wanted communist forces completely out of Angola if it desired continued control of Namibia. The communist presence in Angola coupled with SWAPO’s Marxist aspirations for Namibia provided the RSA with a justification for its continued occupation of Namibia.<sup>10</sup> Once the communists withdrew, international pressure for the implementation of UNSCR 435 would likely follow, as the West’s support for the RSA’s fight against the spread of Communism no longer balanced its disapproval of the RSA’s apartheid policies.

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<sup>8</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 380; Leopold Scholtz, “The Namibian Border War: An Appraisal of the South African Strategy,” *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies* 34, no. 1 (2006): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy?” 120.

<sup>10</sup> Scholtz, “The Namibian Border War,” 34-46.

## Control of Southern Africa

The South African Border War provided a second, more focused, perspective that added cumulatively to the first. The RSA, SWAPO, and the MPLA were the primary belligerents in this perspective of the war. The focus of this perspective was southern Africa as a whole and the RSA drove action as the dominant power in the region. The RSA fought to secure its interests in the region, which included security and stability of pro-Pretoria governments. From the RSA's perspective, multiple black, socialist, revolutionary movements that either had overthrown or were trying to overthrow their white, minority governments surrounded it. The fear of the spread of revolution to South Africa was real, but SWAPO and the MPLA did not by themselves present an existential military threat to the RSA.<sup>11</sup> SWAPO and the MPLA did not need to defeat the RSA militarily, however, as they had neither the intention nor the capability of dominating southern Africa. For these groups, victory and survival were synonymous.<sup>12</sup> SWAPO and the MPLA had a marriage of convenience driven by a common enemy. SWAPO needed the relative protection of bases in Angola in order to operate in Namibia, and they received communist support in the form of supplies, materiel, and training.

## Localized Intra-State Conflict

A third perspective viewed the Border War as integral to the internal domestic politics of the actors involved. This included the revolutionary and civil wars of Angola, Namibia, and South Africa as well as the domestic politics inside of Cuba, the United States, and the USSR. The three civil wars added an additional level of complexity to the environment. The conflicts were domestic struggles for power internal to the contested countries and were part of a larger

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<sup>11</sup> Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War," 20.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Nujoma, *Where Others Waivered: The Autobiography of Sam Nujoma* (London: Panaf Books, 2001), 322.

challenge to European colonialism. It was at this level that UNITA and the MPLA fought for control of Angola and that SWAPO fought an insurgency against the RSA for control of Namibia. These civil wars were important to the US, the USSR, and the RSA as each wanted to influence the results of the struggle between the rival parties. Local actors viewed the superpowers and the regional hegemon differently, as either benevolent big brothers supporting freedom or oppressors intent on perpetuating access to and exploitation of resources.<sup>13</sup>

The three different perspectives on the character the South African Border War were all valid, intimately connected, and irreducible.<sup>14</sup> States could neither choose to deal with one perspective at a time nor disregard any of them without accepting risk. Whether intentional or not, actions taken to solve a problem at one level affected the situation everywhere. Because of this interconnectedness, rational choice became problematic for these actors because their legitimate interests at times conflicted. The US policy of constructive engagement provides a relevant example of this tension. The policy sought to reconcile the United States' disapproval of the RSA's apartheid government with its conflicting interest in limiting the spread of communism.

### **Complex Problems**

#### Not so Simple

The South African Border War was complex. It included independent but interrelated agents that continually adapted their strategies while pursuing their goals.<sup>15</sup> The agents involved in the South African Border War were independent, each with its own free choice and its own

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<sup>13</sup> Nujoma, *Where Others Waivered*, 349.

<sup>14</sup> Neil E. Harrison, *Complexity in World Politics: Concepts and Methods of a New Paradigm* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Axelrod and Michael D. Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity: Organizational Implications of a Scientific Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 14.

internal objectives. There are several examples that demonstrate this characteristic. The MPLA surprised Cuba and the USSR by signing the Lusaka Accord with the RSA in 1984 without consulting either despite the impact on both.<sup>16</sup> Cuba demonstrated independence through its unilateral actions in 1988. It did not reveal its intentions in Angola to the USSR until the operation was a *fait accompli*.<sup>17</sup> UNITA frustrated the RSA by pursuing its own objectives against the advice of its ally.<sup>18</sup> Because of this independence, the likelihood of misunderstandings among allies was high given that none of these actors had perfect information about the others intent. The probability of miscalculations between adversaries was even greater.

Interdependent relationships between agents was a second key characteristic of the war. In this interdependent system, each agent's actions provided the context around which the others continue to operate.<sup>19</sup> In a simple system, cause and effect are obvious. Because of the interconnectedness of free-willed agents in this complex system, causal links were less certain. Actions could result in unanticipated consequences of disproportionate size.<sup>20</sup> Agents had to act without a complete understanding of their environment or the results of their actions. In addition to the potential for misunderstandings that resulted from the independence of the agents, there was a near certainty of unintended consequences resulting from even calculated action.

The RSA and United States demonstrated their recognition of the interconnected nature of their environment through their insistence on the policy of linkage. The RSA's withdrawal from Namibia in compliance with UNSCR 435 would have had effects outside of Namibia and southern Africa. Actions in the Border War affected other systems both locally and globally. This

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<sup>16</sup> Gliejeses, "Moscow's Proxy?" 122.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>18</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General's Story: From an Era of War and Peace* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1995), 223.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, *Complexity in World Politics*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Axelrod and Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity*, 14.

characteristic of complex adaptive systems is why the fight for the narrative mattered so much at the conclusion of the war. A narrative of victory in the Border War could support a larger positive Cold War narrative, which could influence both the perceptions and behavior of the allies and adversaries of all of the actors involved.

### Acting in a Complex System

The implications of interdependence are not simply academic. In complex adaptive systems such as war and politics, one can never do just one thing.<sup>21</sup> There will be significant reactions. Carl von Clausewitz noted the challenges of weighing the almost endless combination of factors against each other and “the vast, the almost infinite distance there can be between cause and effect” in war.<sup>22</sup> Although thinking about acting in complexity is not new, its lack of novelty does not make the problem easier to manage.

The South African Border War was a succession of military actions taken by the actors in an attempt to achieve favorable political outcomes. Given the environment described, there are inherent challenges to this logic. Any action taken in the system changed the system. A state’s well-intentioned military operation may or may not have favorable consequences regardless of the tactical results of the engagement, and feedback from the effects of these actions can either decrease or increase stability. Both the MPLA and the RSA’s initial tactical successes in Operation Salute to October and Operation Moduler respectively may be examples of such a “catastrophic successes” in which each achieved its aims but because of unanticipated consequences found itself unintentionally escalating the scale of the conflict.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Jervis, “Thinking Systemically About Geopolitics,” *Geopolitics* 15, no. 1 (2010): 165-171.

<sup>22</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 577.



Despite these legitimate concerns, actions in complex adaptive systems can also produce unexpected opportunities. Tactical success can provide opportunities to political leaders that were not previously available or even considered. The political aim can change over time as the environment changes. While the political aim is primary over military operations, it is not a tyrant, and military success can result in increases in the demands of a state as politicians see opportunities that were previously infeasible.<sup>23</sup>

### **Breaking the Stalemate in Southern Africa**

#### Operation Salute to October

In late 1987, there was no foreseeable end to the South African Border War.<sup>24</sup> Cuban involvement in Angola had surpassed twelve years at this point, and almost a decade had passed since the adoption of UNSCR 435.<sup>25</sup> The MPLA was no closer to defeating UNITA or even preventing external support to it.<sup>26</sup> Given the stagnation of the situation, Soviet and Angolan leadership revised their approaches to include again in their political intercourse with the West “the addition of other means.”<sup>27</sup> President José Eduardo dos Santos adopted a “fight and negotiate” strategy in an attempt to gain a better settlement with the United States and the RSA through a credible military threat to UNITA.<sup>28</sup> Soviet and Angolan leadership intended to do so through Operation Salute to October and dos Santo’s diplomatic negotiations. In December of

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<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 353.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>26</sup> Edgar J. Dosman, “Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale: Cuba's Angolan Campaign,” in *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflict*, eds. Gary Baines and Peter Vale (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2008), 208.

<sup>27</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 605.

<sup>28</sup> Dosman, “Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale,” 208.

1987, Soviet forces assisted the Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA), the MPLA's armed wing, in offensive operations against UNITA. The offensive targeted UNITA bases at Mavinga and Jamba in southeast Angola in order to deny UNITA control of territory in Angola (see figure 2).<sup>29</sup>



Figure 2. Sketch of Angola.

*Source:* Created by author. United States Central Intelligence Agency, “Angola” (digital map), 1990, Library of Congress, accessed 29 March 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/item/91681435>.

Despite the support for the audacious offensive in Luanda and Moscow, the course of action was risky, and there were other options available to the MPLA. The MPLA could have

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<sup>29</sup> Dosman, “Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale,” 208.

maintained support to SWAPO and attrited UNITA forces through framework operations. It did not have to launch a major offensive, and there were good reasons for prudence. Despite their shared goals, Cuba opposed Operation Salute to October. While there are many possible reasons for its caution, lessons from Operation Second Congress, an earlier MPLA/Soviet offensive that failed in 1985, likely influenced this judgment.<sup>30</sup> Cuba's judgment in this case proved sound.

#### Unintended Consequences

While dos Santos' purpose may have been to gain an advantage at the negotiation table, the unintended consequences of his actions would affect the achievement of his goal. The RSA had earlier leaked the fact that it would respond violently to Soviet-MPLA aggression against Mavinga, but the warning was not effective in deterring the attack.<sup>31</sup> The FAPLA offensive was effective enough to elicit an SADF response, shifting the balance of power in Angola. Operation Moduler, the SADF's operation to stop the FAPLA advance and maintain control of UNITA's previously held territory, was so successful that it in turn threatened the communist-backed MPLA. In pushing FAPLA back and reestablishing UNITA control over southeast Angola, Pretoria now had an opportunity to set conditions for the establishment of UNITA control of Angola as well as a continued SADF occupation of Namibia. The extent of the SADF's success at the Lomba River changed the strategic situation.

Operation Moduler provoked yet another unanticipated response. Although Cuba provided approximately three thousand military advisors to FAPLA units, the bulk of Cuban forces established a defense line 250 kilometers north of the Namibian border to protect Angolan

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<sup>30</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 208.

<sup>31</sup> "Operations Asterix and Luxor: Establishing the Perception Amongst MPLA of SADF Intervention Against an Offensive," 31 May 1987, H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, File 310-4, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Centre, Pretoria, 1.

lines of communication.<sup>32</sup> With the threat of the defeat of its ally by the SADF, Cuba felt obligated to defend its interests in Africa. It did so through military means, namely, Operation XXXI Anniversary. Cuban President Fidel Castro deployed two of his divisions from Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) to Angola. These forces enabled the retention of the FAPLA's bridgehead objectives east of the Cuito River while mobilizing a strike force that presented a credible threat of cross-border operations into RSA-controlled Namibia.

### Strategic Asymmetry

Events following dos Santos' Operation Salute to October are controversial. The RSA's narrative of the events differs significantly from the Cuban narrative. While there are certainly differences in the record of the actions taken, the fundamental difference between the two narratives stems from conflicting perceptions of each belligerent's intent.<sup>33</sup> An appreciation of intent is critical to understanding the meaning of action. Intent gives purpose to action whereas an understanding of action alone is devoid of meaning. The fight for the narrative in the Border War was the fight to define perceptions of each belligerent's reasoning and their purpose of military action.<sup>34</sup> By comparing and contrasting these two narratives, the controversy that surrounds the events in southern Angola and the resulting impassioned but contradictory claims of victory becomes clearer.

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<sup>32</sup> Gleijeses, "Moscow's Proxy?" 121.

<sup>33</sup> W. Breytenbach, "Cuito Cuanavale Revisited: Same Outcomes, Different Consequences," *African Insight* 27, no. 1 (1997): 54-59.

<sup>34</sup> Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first-century Combat as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31-39.

## Operation Moduler and the Southeast Theater

From the perspective of December 1987, indeed, even as the last stages of the operation are being played out in Angola, it is apparent that, from the point of view of the military balance in that long-suffering country at least, things will never be quite the same again.

—SADF After Action Report, 1987

### Strategic Considerations for the RSA

The RSA based its decision to conduct Operation Moduler on its strategic objectives. The RSA's political aims and strategic goals focused primarily on its survival and security. Its apartheid government faced internal and external threats. The establishment or maintenance of supportive Angolan and Namibian governments denied safe havens and support bases to its adversaries such as SWAPO and the MK that used them to attack into RSA-held territory.<sup>35</sup> The RSA desired regime change in Angola, favoring its ally UNITA over the incumbent MPLA. It also demanded that Cuban forces withdraw from Angola. Communist forces in the region, even in limited numbers, presented a potential security threat to the RSA.

The RSA's other strategic ends dealt with honor and interest. The RSA wanted to maintain its local hegemony in southern Africa. Permanent occupation of Namibia was not a realistic goal, but, through linkage, the RSA could buy time to help shape conditions and build support for the election of its allies in Namibia.<sup>36</sup> A friendly Namibian neighbor would help the RSA retain access to resources and the strategic, deepwater harbor at Walvis Bay.<sup>37</sup>

The RSA envisioned several ways to achieve these ends. It used the Cold War to maintain relationships with West by focusing on a common communist enemy. The RSA bought time through the policy of linkage. This policy linked the withdrawal of the SADF from Namibia with the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. To safeguard against the spread of

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<sup>35</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War," 33.

<sup>37</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 212.

communism, the US supported the policy of linkage while still opposing apartheid. The policy of linkage allowed the RSA to delay its withdraw from Namibia in order to grant independence to that country on its terms. The RSA's preferred model for transition in Namibia would help prevent the spread of communism in southern Africa and maintain a buffer between the RSA and a growing revolutionary movement.

Military success could also contribute toward the RSA's achievement of its strategic ends. If Operation Modular helped stop the Soviet-backed FAPLA offensive to retake southeastern Angola, the RSA could maintain the buffer zone that UNITA provided to Namibia and South Africa. Operation Modular promised "the long awaited breakthrough in the prevailing political, diplomatic, and military deadlock in the Angolan-SWA/Namibian conflict."<sup>38</sup> Further military success could support favorable negotiations with the MPLA. If the SADF were to threaten the defeat of FAPLA or make significant territorial gains inside of Angola, the RSA could have a significant advantage during these talks.

The RSA could employ significant and varied means toward its objectives. The SADF was a formidable force in its own right, and it bolstered both its size and effectiveness with surrogate forces.<sup>39</sup> The actual number of forces employed by the SADF during this period is a still a point of contention, however. In addition to its conventional and irregular forces, the RSA had a tacit nuclear weapons capability that may have served as a strategic deterrent to direct aggression by foreign powers against the homeland.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "A Concise History of Operation Modular," 4.

<sup>39</sup> Joe Escandon, "Bush War: The Use of Surrogates in Southern Africa" (Master's Thesis, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2009), 1.

<sup>40</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, "New Information on South Africa's Nuclear Program and South African-Israeli Nuclear and Military Cooperation," March 30, 1983, accessed 6 March 2016, <http://www.foia.cia.gov>, 1-4. By 1989, the RSA possessed six nuclear warheads.

The RSA faced several problems with regard to the Border War. Physical space was one part of the problem. The RSA needed a buffer between its state and those who might pose a threat to it, namely communists and African revolutionaries. The geographical distance of the battlefields of Angola from South African bases limited the operational reach of the SADF but also presented challenges to the MPLA.<sup>41</sup>

The RSA also faced internal domestic issues. Politics pressured leaders to maintain low casualty rates. The SADF's focus on relative body counts when reporting the results of battles and progress in the war highlights this constraint.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the power of the ANC grew steadily and presented a potentially existential threat to the apartheid government. The RSA faced increased vulnerability to internal revolutionary forces and confronted greater challenges in maintaining control due to its policy of exclusive rule, its centralization of power, and the increased external pressure on the state.<sup>43</sup> Its leadership could argue that the government's survival depended on the success of operations in Angola as the MK sought refuge in that state.

The RSA faced both domestic and international political pressure to implement UNSCR 435. The joint US-RSA policy of linkage helped stay the demands for implementation, which bought a significant amount of time, but the RSA would have to eventually implement it or face international condemnation. The challenge of limited time would be a constant consideration.

#### Competing Narratives in Southeast Angola

In response to Operation Salute to October, the Soviet-MPLA offensive against UNITA, the SADF launched Operation Moduler on 14 September 1987. The operation resulted in an

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<sup>41</sup> See Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Lieneke Eloff de Visser, "Winning Hearts and Minds in the Namibian Border War," *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies* 39, no. 1 (2011): 95.

<sup>43</sup> Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 284.

initial SADF victory over FAPLA forces at the Lomba River on 3 October. The SADF destroyed some of FAPLA's best-trained and equipped units, specifically the FAPLA 47 Brigade. Speculations on the RSA's intentions following the Battle of the Lomba River are contentious. Some scholars have contended that the SADF's ultimate purpose for Operation Moduler was to move "on to Cuito Cuanavale... destroying the FAPLA brigades which had escaped from Lomba" and then move to "threaten the main garrison at Menongue."<sup>44</sup> Others reject this assertion as unfounded.<sup>45</sup> These different narratives are important because they help to shape international and domestic perceptions of success in the campaign.

From the RSA's perspective, Operation Moduler, while appearing offensive in practice, was primarily defensive in purpose. UNITA's failure to stop the Soviet-Angolan offensive had forced the RSA to intervene to save its ally. The SADF had two principle objectives for the operation.<sup>46</sup> The first objective was to halt FAPLA's attack to defeat UNITA in Angola. The SADF perceived that FAPLA's operational objective was to seize the city of Jamba, UNITA's headquarters with intermediate objectives that included crossing the Lomba River and seizing Mavinga in order to allow that operation.<sup>47</sup> After accomplishing the first objective, the SADF's second objective was to destroy FAPLA east of the Cuito River or, failing to accomplish that, at least push FAPLA west of that linear water obstacle. Success would create space for UNITA to

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<sup>44</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 211.

<sup>45</sup> Leopold Scholtz, "The Standard of Research on the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, 1987-1988," *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies* 39, no. 1 (2011): 121, accessed 29 January 2016, <http://scientiamilitaria.journals.ac.za/pub/issue/view/19>.

<sup>46</sup> Gerhard J.J. Oosthuizen, "The South African Defence Force and Operation Hooper, Southeast Angola, December 1987 to March 1988," *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies* 42, no. 2 (2014): 84.

<sup>47</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 212.



defend against future attacks and force FAPLA to consider the tactical cost of conducting a contested river crossing before reinitiating offensive operations against UNITA.

Despite the SADF's tactical success against FAPLA at the Lomba River, the RSA determined that it had not met all of its objectives during Operation Moduler and began planning for Operation Hooper and Operation Packer.<sup>48</sup> Despite the change to the name of the operation, Operations Moduler, Hooper, and Packer were essentially different administrative periods of the same operation used to signify the change of SADF-internal manning cycles or "duty roster shifts."<sup>49</sup> Operational phases overlapped these administrative periods. There was no change of intent in these subsequent operations; the aim remained control of the terrain east of the Cuito River in order support UNITA defenses upon SADF withdraw.<sup>50</sup>

The Cuban-MPLA narrative for the operations in southeast Angola was significantly different. The alternate narrative claimed that SADF's goals were much more ambitious and included the destruction of FAPLA at Cuito Cuanavale, followed by the seizure of Menongue, Munhango, and the provincial capital of Luena in order to cut Angola in half.<sup>51</sup> These offensive operational goals differed greatly from the defensive goals purported by the then Chief of the SADF, General Johannes "Jannie" Geldenhuys. Geldenhuys claimed that the SADF never intended to seize Cuito Cuanavale and never considered the central highlands or the Benguela railway as operational objectives.<sup>52</sup> He claimed that the SADF lacked the combat power and bridging assets to make such objectives feasible. While the SADF desired the destruction of the

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<sup>48</sup> "Gesamentlike Militere Aksies deur RSA en UNITA teen FAPLA Magte in die Sesde Militere Streek van Angola vanaf Desember 1987 tot Maart 1988," 1988, JF Huyser, Vers, Box 92, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Centre, Pretoria, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 209.

<sup>50</sup> "A Concise History of Operation Modular," 1-5.

<sup>51</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 211.

<sup>52</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 225.

FAPLA brigades, it was not essential, and, while control of the terrain east of the Cuito River was an objective, the SADF would only capture Cuito Cuanavale if they were unopposed.

## Events

The RSA and the Cuban-MPLA alliance constructed their conflicting narratives of military action in southeast Angola from the same set of events. Accounts of the events leading up to the Battle of the Lomba River are similar. On 14 August 1987, FAPLA employed the 16, 21, 25, 47, and 59 brigades as a part of Operation Salute to October. FAPLA's 25 Brigade had previously crossed the Lomba River and supported the advance of the other brigades. FAPLA's remaining four brigades used two axes of advance toward Mavinga. The 16, 21, and 59 Brigades took a direct approach at Mavinga, moving along a southern-oriented axis north of the Lomba, while the 47 Brigade took an indirect approach, moving westward around the source of the Lomba river and then eastward toward the city.<sup>53</sup>

The means with which the RSA responded to the MPLA offensive is one point where the various accounts conflict. The SADF organized an ad hoc command to support UNITA's defensive efforts.<sup>54</sup> As the RSA's support for UNITA grew, the SADF task-organized the newly formed 20 Brigade with forces from the 32 "Buffalo" Battalion, the 61 Mechanized Battalion, 4 South African Infantry (SAI) Battalion, and the 101 SWATF Battalion with supporting fires, aviation, and special forces. General Geldenhuys vehemently claimed that the SADF-SWATF contingent never exceeded three thousand men. He reasoned that propaganda or inaccuracies due to counts during troop reliefs in place might account for the discrepancy.<sup>55</sup> The RSA lost

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>55</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 234.

credibility and early opportunities to clarify the record by officially denying RSA involvement in the operation until confronted with independent evidence to the contrary in November of 1987.<sup>56</sup> The result was conflicting accounts.

The SADF won an important military victory on the Lomba River. On 4 September 1987, SADF rocket and cannon artillery attacks halted the advance of the 47 Brigade. On 10 September, FAPLA's 21 Brigade failed in an attempt to cross the Lomba River. SADF estimated that they destroyed one battalion of the 21 Brigade in the attempt. From 12-13 September, elements of FAPLA's 59 Brigade crossed the Lomba and linked up with the 47 Brigade. From 14-23 September, FAPLA continued unsuccessfully to try to cross the 21 Brigade. On 3 October, the SADF's 20 Brigade with supporting fires destroyed the FAPLA 47 Armored Brigade as it attempted to withdraw north of the Lomba River to link up with the FAPLA 59 Brigade. Remnants of the force withdrew to Cuito Cuanavale, but SADF leadership viewed the battle as decisive.

Following that battle, Geldenhuys intended to consolidate his gains, reorganize his command, and establish conditions to transition responsibility for the defense to UNITA forces as quickly as possible.<sup>57</sup> Time was a primary consideration, because the SADF feared the imminent termination of the cross-border operation by the RSA government due to political pressure from the international community. He established a limit of advance for the SADF at the Cuito River because it provided a natural obstacle from which UNITA could defend if augmented with captured armor and other equipment. Geldenhuys argued that he did not expect to have as much time as he did, and that he only intended for the operations following Operation Moduler to strengthen UNITA's defensive disposition and that he had no offensive ambitions beyond the

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<sup>56</sup> Breytenbach, "Cuito Cuanavale Revisited," 54.

<sup>57</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 216.

Cuito River at the time.<sup>58</sup> Cuito Cuanavale was not an objective because the SADF recognized that UNITA could not hold it and saw risk in maintaining a base so deep in Angola.<sup>59</sup> The SADF recognized the value of raiding Cuito Cuanavale but needed to protect against a Cuban breakout attack from Cuito Cuanavale toward Mavinga and UNITA headquarters at Jamba.<sup>60</sup>

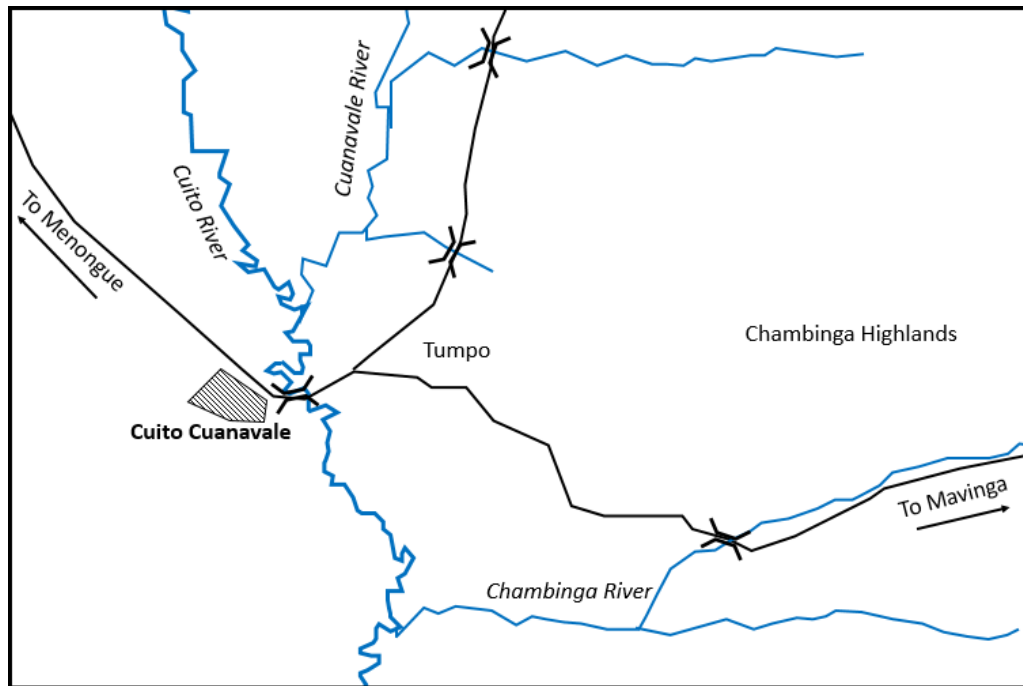


Figure 3. Sketch of Cuito Cuanavale.

*Source:* Created by author. United States National Imagery and Mapping Agency, “Cuító-Cuanavale, Angola” (digital map), Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, 1978, accessed 29 March 2016, [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/jog/southern\\_africa/sd-34-13-cuito\\_cuanavale-angola.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/jog/southern_africa/sd-34-13-cuito_cuanavale-angola.jpg).

The Cubans and the MPLA may have reasonably interpreted the SADF’s intentions differently. The SADF brought in armored reinforcements and attacked the airfield at Cuito

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<sup>58</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 217.

<sup>59</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 370.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

Cuanavale by fire, rendering it inoperable. During November, as the last push of Operation Moduler, the SADF launched four offensives intended to drive FAPLA forces across the Cuito River. Despite these offensives, FAPLA forces remained up to twenty-four kilometers east of the river.<sup>61</sup>

The SADF continued to press for the objectives of Operation Moduler with Operation Hooper.<sup>62</sup> On 13 January 1988, after finally mitigating Cuban air superiority, the SADF launched the first of five major attacks, concentrating the 4 SAI and UNITA's 3 Regular Battalion on FAPLA's 21 Brigade on the northern section of defensive line east of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>63</sup> Despite initial SADF and UNITA success, a reinforced 21 Brigade counterattacked and reestablished the defensive line on 18 January. After the attack, Castro ordered General Arnaldo Ochoa, head of the Cuban Military Mission in Luanda, to reorganize the defense.<sup>64</sup>

On 14 February, the SADF conducted a second attack to drive FAPLA west of the Cuito River, this time focusing on the 59 Brigade in the center of the defensive line.<sup>65</sup> UNITA and 4 SAI attacked FAPLA's 21 and 59 Brigades resulting in their withdrawal to Tumpo. 25 Brigade withdrew to Tumpo in the morning. FAPLA and FAR forces organized a counterattack on 15 February but were unsuccessful in retaking the terrain that they had lost. A Cuban reserve force of eight tanks provided cover for the withdrawal of the 59 and 25 Brigades though at a significant loss. The SADF destroyed seven of the eight tanks that the Cubans had employed. The SADF was unable to exploit its success and destroy the last FAPLA defensive positions at Tumpo.

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<sup>61</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 221.

<sup>62</sup> "Gesamentlike Militere Aksies," 1.

<sup>63</sup> Oosthuizen, "The South African Defence Force and Operation Hooper," 91.

<sup>64</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 219.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 221; Oosthuizen, "The South African Defence Force and Operation Hooper," 95.

The FAPLA's forced withdrawal to Tumpo was a significant tactical success for the SADF. FAPLA had to retain Tumpo in order to maintain the bridgehead on the Cuito River. With this bridgehead, FAPLA could defend the airfield at Cuito Cuanavale and potentially continue its offensive against UNITA in the future.<sup>66</sup> For the SADF, Tumpo was decisive terrain. By eliminating FAPLA's last defenses east of the Cuito River, the SADF would have accomplished the final objective of Operation Moduler. On 25 February, the SADF launched its third attack aimed at eliminating the bridgehead at Tumpo.<sup>67</sup> The Cubans and FAPLA had established a formidable integrated defense that included infantry, armor, field artillery, mined obstacles, and significant aviation support. The defense repelled the SADF-UNITA attack, resulting in an SADF withdrawal and the continued FAPLA control of Tumpo.<sup>68</sup> On 29 February, after reorganizing, the SADF attempted a second and similar attack on Tumpo.<sup>69</sup> This attack failed as well due to a combination of the effectiveness of the FAPLA defenses and insufficient SADF combat power.<sup>70</sup>

On 23 March, following shortly after the transfer of authority from the 20 Brigade to the 82 Brigade, the SADF launched its final attack on Tumpo. The 82 Brigade's attack was a continuation of the same operation to which the SADF now referred as Operation Packer. The SADF faced many of the same challenges that it had during the previous two attempts.<sup>71</sup> The defensive obstacles were significant and Cuban air power remained a challenge. It also faced improving Cuban logistics. The Cubans owned the ground line of communication from

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<sup>66</sup> Oosthuizen, "The South African Defence Force and Operation Hooper," 99.

<sup>67</sup> "Gesamentlike Militere Aksies," 142.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-150; Oosthuizen, "The South African Defence Force and Operation Hooper," 100-101.

<sup>69</sup> "Gesamentlike Militere Aksies," 158.

<sup>70</sup> Oosthuizen, "The South African Defence Force and Operation Hooper," 103-104.

<sup>71</sup> "Gesamentlike Militere Aksies," 173.

Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale at this point. Poor weather conditions helped the SADF by limiting Cuban close air support, but FAPLA and the Cubans achieved their objective of defending the bridgehead.<sup>72</sup>

#### Assessment

Judgments of success at Cuito Cuanavale must be qualified. Differing interpretations of enemy intentions resulted in both sides claiming victory in what each viewed as a primarily defensive battle. The SADF saw itself as victorious despite its failure to achieve all of the objectives of Operations Moduler. The SADF defeated the FAPLA offensive, maintained the Lomba River as an obstacle between FAPLA and Mavinga, and demonstrated the RSA's support to UNITA. The Cubans and FAPLA on the other hand may have seen themselves as victorious at Cuito Cuanavale. Despite FAPLA's defeat at the Lomba River, they had successfully defeated the SADF's multiple attempts to eliminate their bridgehead at Tumpo and thus remained a potential threat to UNITA.

Both the RSA and Cuba competed to construct a viable narrative that described the "true" purpose of the war. While the RSA saw its attacks on the FAPLA and Cuban garrison at Cuito Cuanavale as a shaping operation to allow for consolidation of earlier gains, Castro focused his narrative on the criticality of the defense of the base. Castro constructed a narrative that described the RSA's objective as Cuito Cuanavale and beyond. As long as the RSA did not capture Cuito Cuanavale, Castro could claim victory. Castro employed strategic asymmetry by redefining the narrative of the war and exploiting an interpretive difference.<sup>73</sup> Strategic asymmetry in this sense means that the actors involved possessed different interpretive template of the war. The RSA did

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<sup>72</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 425.

<sup>73</sup> Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 31-39.

not fully understand the implication of the differing narratives and arrived at the London Conference in May of 1988 prepared to negotiate with a significantly different opinion than the Cubans on the progression of the war.<sup>74</sup>

The interpretation of these military actions became important to both sides as it affected relations with domestic and international audiences. International pressure on the RSA lightened following the initial success of Operation Moduler but shifted again with Cuba's claims of victory at Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>75</sup> Geldenhuys attributes some of the RSA's difficulties in influencing external audiences to its policy of relegating all media relations to UNITA and its desire to give UNITA alone all credit for success. The maintenance of UNITA as a strong and legitimate ally was in the interest of the RSA. Attempts to manipulate public perception may have been counterproductive by discredited the legitimacy of UNITA in the eyes of observers both locally and internationally.

The RSA did not adequately anticipate the rapidly changing political situation or the traction that a Cuban narrative of victory at Cuito Cuanavale could gain. After its success at the Lomba River, the SADF sought to consolidate its gains and prepare for the next phase of an indefinite campaign. It did not, however, allocate sufficient combat power to achieve its objectives or weigh the effect of repeated failed efforts on its narrative of victory. The SADF had cleared a large region between the Cuatir and Chaminga Rivers, two tributaries of the Cuito River.<sup>76</sup> The SADF sought to prevent the loss of these gains by eliminating FAPLA's bridgehead on the Cuito River. According to the RSA, however, the SADF never fielded a unit larger than a brigade at Cuito Cuanavale and reduced the force to 1500 personnel after April of 1988.<sup>77</sup> Given

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<sup>74</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 379.

<sup>75</sup> "Gesamentlike Militere Aksies," 173; Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 213.

<sup>76</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 370.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.



the RSA's limited aims, its repeated attacks with limited resources suggest a miscalculation of the potential risk of its actions on its narrative of victory.

Despite the tactical benefits of consolidation along the Cuito River after Operation Moduler, the SADF may have enabled the Cuban narrative by pursuing that objective. Continued attacks on Tumpo, regardless of intent, coupled with FAPLA's successful defense, detracted from the SADF narrative of victory at the Lomba. Ironically, the RSA's failure to achieve an uncontested narrative of victory at Cuito Cuanavale may have worked to its advantage, given that the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola was a primary objective.<sup>78</sup> The RSA could have created unnecessary friction that might have prevented the withdrawal of Cuban troops from the continent. Had the RSA disgraced the Cubans at Cuito Cuanavale, the Cubans may have had to continue fighting to regain their honor.<sup>79</sup>

Any assessment of the actions in southeast Angola must also take into account the interdependent domestic and international systems. Domestic political demands competed with the operation in southeastern Angola for the RSA's attention. As early as 5 December, General Geldenhuys announced that SADF would begin a deliberate withdrawal of troops from Angola despite the tactical situation at the time. On 15 December, SADF had to release a cohort within its force from its service obligation, the SADF planned to transfer responsibility back to UNITA, and by late December, UNITA took Munhango. On 10 February 1988, domestic political issues pulled the SADF's attention from the situation in Cuito Cuanavale to a coup d'état in the semi-autonomous nation of Bophuthatswana within South Africa.<sup>80</sup> On 20 February, Geldenhuys confirmed the withdrawal of SADF from Angola, but claimed that was slow due to operational conditions. These examples demonstrate the challenge of acting in a complex system.

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<sup>78</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 230.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>80</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 219.

## Operation XXXI Anniversary and the Southwest Theater

We accepted the challenge. And from the first moment we planned to gather our forces to attack in another direction, like a boxer who with his left hand blocks the blow and with his right—strikes.

—Fidel Castro, September 1988

### Strategic Considerations for Cuba

Cuba based its decision to conduct Operation XXXI Anniversary on its strategic objectives. It had been involved in Angola in a limited fashion as a part of its policy of revolutionary internationalism since the late 1950s and increased its support to the MPLA following the Portuguese withdrawal in 1975.<sup>81</sup> This support initially focused on security assistance including military aid and training programs but quickly escalated into major operations following Operation Savannah, the RSA's intervention in Angola later that year.<sup>82</sup> Following the RSA's withdraw, Cuba reduced its presence in Angola and focused on two efforts. Cuba's Northern Force Group (ATN) guarded Angola's resource-rich northern exclave of Cabinda and its capital at Lusaka along with the connecting infrastructure. The Southern Force Group (ATS) formed a 600km defensive perimeter 250 kilometers north of Namibia from Namibe to Menongue.<sup>83</sup>

Despite Cuba's significant investment in Angola, dos Santos excluded Cuba from negotiations during the Lusaka Accords in 1984 and again at the critical meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker in July of 1987.<sup>84</sup> Ignoring Cuban admonitions, dos Santos took the advice of his Soviet advisors and adopted a "fight and

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<sup>81</sup> Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 14-23, 63-65.

<sup>82</sup> George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 68-81.

<sup>83</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 209.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

talk” strategy that sought advantage in the Crocker meeting through military means. As the failure of Operation Salute to October became apparent, dos Santos appealed to Cuba for military assistance.<sup>85</sup> Castro recognized an opportunity to assume leadership inside of the alliance. Cuba was never merely a proxy for the Soviets, but Cuba adopted a more independent, “inform but not consult” relationship following its decision on 16 November 1987 to answer dos Santos’ request for assistance.<sup>86</sup>

Cuba had several strategic goals when Castro directed Operation XXXI Anniversary. Cuba sought to maintain its honor and increase its prestige in the world. Castro wanted to demonstrate Cuba’s resolve to support to its allies and to Angolan’s attempt at self-determination in particular. As a part of this effort, Cuba demanded that the RSA withdraw from Angola and Namibia in accordance with UNSCR 435.<sup>87</sup> Despite its loyalty to its ally, Cuba did not want a protracted war in Africa.<sup>88</sup> Cuba sought an honorable withdrawal of the Cuban military from Africa, but its minimal acceptable conditions was the withdrawal of the RSA from Angola and Namibia and full Cuban participation in negotiations.<sup>89</sup> The financial cost of Cuba’s involvement was significant, moreover Cuba needed to retain sufficient combat power to defend the Cuban homeland. Because the US and the RSA shared this objective with him, Castro could leverage the withdrawal of his troops to gain South African concessions. In this way, Castro used the US-RSA policy of linkage to his advantage.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>87</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 368.

<sup>88</sup> Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy?” 122; “Kubaanse betrokkenheid in Angola,” April 25, 1988, H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, File 310/4, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Centre, Pretoria, 5.

<sup>89</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 368; Dosman, “Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale,” 226.

Cuba had several ways in which to accomplish its objectives the primary of which was Operation XXXI Anniversary. The purpose of the operation was to place the RSA in a dilemma. Cuba wanted to force the RSA to negotiate a mutually acceptable settlement or else risk a war with Cuba.<sup>90</sup> To do this, Cuba had to convince the RSA that it was ready for a wider war.

Cuba made several diplomatic efforts to set conditions for Operation XXXI Anniversary. Critical to the success of the operation was its timing. To optimize its effects, Cuba had to make negotiations appear forced upon the RSA.<sup>91</sup> Castro may have delinked US aid to UNITA as a precondition for negotiations in order to ensure that the RSA would be at the negotiating table in May of 1988.<sup>92</sup> RSA participation in the negotiations would correspond with the preplanned offensive and would synchronize his military, diplomatic, and information efforts. Cuba could then claim a causal link between the operations in Angola and the negotiations.

To withdraw from Angola with honor, Cuba had to convince the MPLA that it was not abandoning it.<sup>93</sup> This was a serious concern. Cuba would have to set conditions for the withdrawal of its troops while ensuring the MPLA could retain power without its support.

Cuba employed significant means to achieve its objectives. Military forces to include the FAR, FAPLA, and Soviet support were all important. It also used non-material means to much success. Cuba's use of UN Security Council Resolutions, the policy of linkage, and international anti-apartheid sentiment demonstrated sophistication in its strategy.

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<sup>90</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 368.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

Nevertheless, Cuba accepted risk in its strategy. Despite its significant means, it was beyond Cuba's capabilities to dominate the southern African balance for long.<sup>94</sup> The independent nature of its strategy also presented challenges. The Soviets placed limitations on the Cubans with respect to penetrations into Namibia, yet Castro had plans to do so.<sup>95</sup> This could have resulted in undesirable outcomes. Cuban escalation in Angola could have drawn the Soviets deeper into the war. Conversely, it could have alienated Cuba from its Soviet support.

There were additional risks from a purely practical perspective. The logistical challenges of projecting combat power across the Atlantic were significant. Cuba had established basing in Angola as part of its framework operations since 1976, but the Cuban lines of operation were long. These lines ran from Cuba to its seaports of debarkation along the Angolan coast and even the lines internal to Angola would be extended and vulnerable to UNITA and SADF attack. Geography in Southwest Angola limited options for an attack. Extremely rugged terrain and the Kunene River formed obstacles to an invasion of Namibia from the North.

#### Competing Narratives in Southwest Angola

The RSA and the Cuban-MPLA alliance used largely similar accounts of tactical actions to create conflicting strategic narratives in southwest Angola. In response to the RSA's success against the MPLA at the Lomba River, Cuba initiated Operation XXXI Anniversary on 16 November 1987. The operation ultimately culminated with a negotiated settlement between Cuba, the RSA, and the MPLA captured in the New York Accords on 22 December 1988.<sup>96</sup> Like the military operations in southeast Angola, there is significant controversy over the belligerents' intentions.

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<sup>94</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 368.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*; Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 216. Operation Orange was Castro's planned sequel to Operation XXXI Anniversary.

<sup>96</sup> UN General Assembly, Tripartite Agreement, 1-3.

By initiating Operation XXXI Anniversary, Cuba intended to present the RSA with a dilemma. It could either negotiate a peace on Cuban terms or face an uncertain war. Cuba conducted the operation with two main objectives: the defense of Cuito Cuanavale and the clearance of the SADF from Angola. The plan for the defense of Cuito Cuanavale included the defeat of SADF-UNITA assaults, the protection of the Namibe-Lubango-Menongue Line, and the reinforcement of garrisons in the Central Highlands.<sup>97</sup> The plan for the clearance of SADF from Angola included an attack into the Cunene province in southwest Angola, followed by the establishment of a defense on the Namibian border. Cuba maintained that its actions at Cuito Cuanavale were inexorably linked with those in Cunene Province, and, like a boxer, Cuba would parry the RSA's blows at Cuito Cuanavale and force the RSA to negotiate or face a knockout blow in Cunene.<sup>98</sup> Cuban forces would be prepared to strike strategic targets in Cunene such as the Ruacana-Cunene hydroelectric dam or even initiate Operation Orange, an attack into Namibia as an offensive sequel to Operation XXXI Anniversary should negotiations with the RSA fail.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 216.

<sup>98</sup> Glejeses, "Moscow's Proxy?" 132.

<sup>99</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 216.

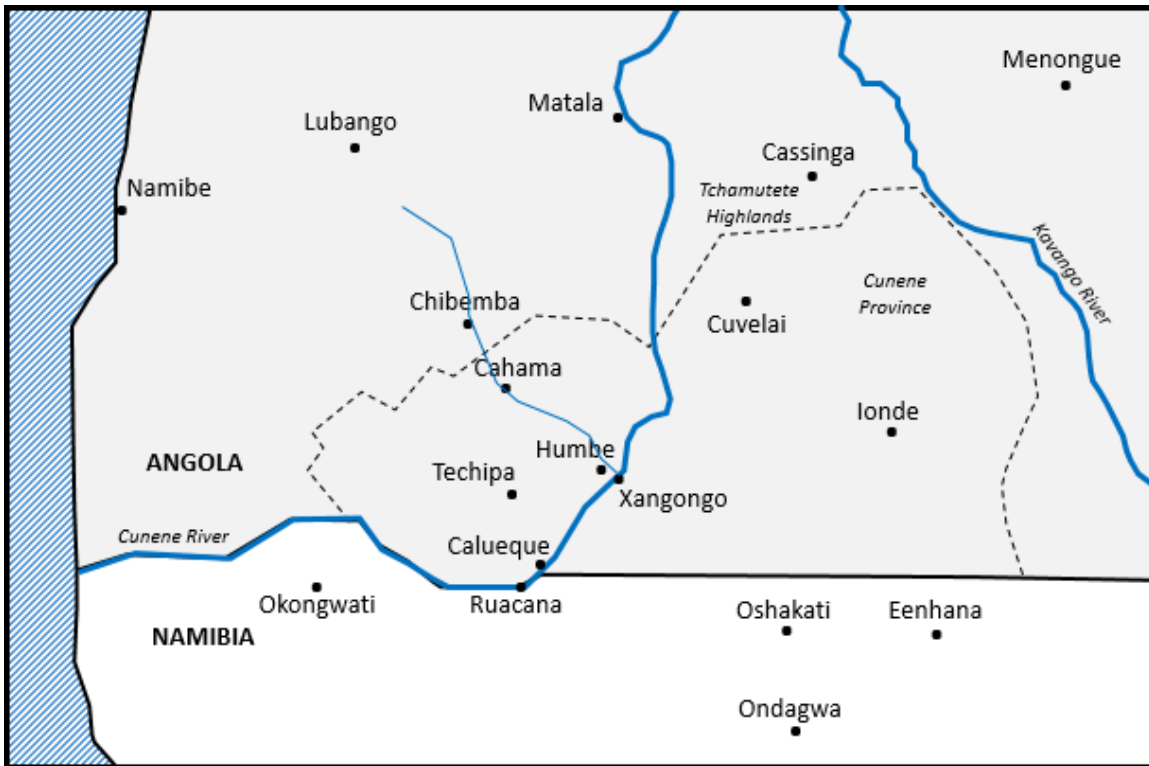


Figure 4. Sketch of Southwestern Theater.

*Source:* Created by author. United States Central Intelligence Agency, “Angola” (digital map), 1990, Library of Congress, accessed 29 March 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/item/91681435>.

From a Cuban point of view, Operation XXXI Anniversary was an audacious counter-offensive that won the South African Border War. Castro accepted significant risk by greatly increasing his support to the MPLA. By taking a division from the homeland, Castro left Cuba vulnerable. He stood to lose that division in Africa should he fail.<sup>100</sup> Cuban escalation had the potential to transform the military situation in Angola. Cuba thwarted US and RSA intelligence collection efforts and used its existing bases on the Angolan coast to mass overwhelming combat power into the theater. Cuba’s reinforcements prevented what it saw as the SADF’s attempts to seize Cuito Cuanavale. It helped to defeat UNITA assaults in the central highlands and eastern

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<sup>100</sup> Dosman, “Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale,” 215.

Angola. Through superior maneuver, the FAR forced the RSA to negotiate by posing a credible threat to Namibia. To Cuba, its success directly resulted in the implementation of UNSCR 435, the end of the RSA's aggression in Angola, and an honorable withdraw of its forces.

From an RSA perspective, the Cuban claims were likely rhetoric. While appreciating the significant increase of Cuban strength in Angola, the RSA did not judge a Cuban invasion of Namibia as probable. Geldenhuys saw three potential reasons for the Cuban maneuvers in the southwest of Angola.<sup>101</sup> The first possibility acknowledged that the Cubans might have intended to attack into Namibia and only needed the provocation to do so. This course of action was unlikely due to Soviet pressure on Cuba to avoid significant escalation with the RSA. Geldenhuys warned Cuba on 4 May 1988 during the London Conference that if it dared "to set one foot across the [Namibian] border... it would be the blackest day in Cuban military history."<sup>102</sup> He set a clear redline for Cuba, but he remained ambiguous as to the consequences of crossing it. Despite no official acknowledgement from the RSA, the USSR and the United States both correctly assessed that the RSA had possessed nuclear weapons since the late 1970s.<sup>103</sup> The primary purpose of these weapons was to deter a Soviet-backed invasion of South Africa or its territories, specifically Namibia. This knowledge and the increased mobilization of SADF conventional forces along the Namibian border may have influenced US and Soviet decision makers to attempt to limit escalation. A second possibility was that the Cubans intended to divide SADF attention and pull resources from southeast Angola to allow another attempt to seize Jamba. SADF planning

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<sup>101</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 239.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4; George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola*, 239.

<sup>103</sup> Waldo Stumpf, "South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Program: From Deterrence to Dismantlement," *Arms Control Today* 25 (December 1995/January 1996): 4; "South Africa: Nuclear," Nuclear Threat Initiative, last modified September 2015, accessed 6 March 2016, <http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/south-africa/nuclear>; CIA, "New Information on South Africa's Nuclear Program," 1-4.



documents identified this second possibility as a likely enemy course of action.<sup>104</sup> A third possibility was that the Cubans intended to use the troop build ups in the southwest to improve their position during negotiations. Geldenhuys saw the third possibility as the most likely of the three, but never fully discounted the other two given his appreciation of Cuba's leadership.

The RSA had only limited interest in southwest Angola but was prepared to escalate the war if Cuba invaded Namibia. RSA Defense Minister Magnus Malan and President P. W. Botha relayed to General Geldenhuys that the RSA's only interests in the southwest were the hydroelectric scheme and the water supply to Namibia. Geldenhuys maintained that his superiors ordered him not to escalate the situation with the Cubans but to "hit them with everything he had" if they were to enter Namibia.<sup>105</sup>

#### Events

Cuban planning and deployment phases began after the failed Operation Salute to October at the request of the MPLA. From 16 to 21 November 1987, just one week, Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro and the Cuban General Staff developed plans for sea and airlift of Cuban forces into Angola.<sup>106</sup> By conducting the logistic preparations at night, the Cubans avoided detection by foreign intelligence agencies. The ships arrived between 11 and 20 December, less than a month after Castro's planning session. The Cubans conducted the deployment in two stages. The first stage ran from 16 November to 20 December 1987.<sup>107</sup> Cuba only informed the USSR of its intentions eight days after it had initiated movement and nine ships had already set sail for Angola. The first contingent of Cuban reinforcements arrived in late 1987 and consisted

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<sup>104</sup> "OP INSTR 21/88: OP HILTI," 30 May 1988, Archive H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, File 309/4, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 240.

<sup>106</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 216.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

of a labor force that built air bases at Cahama and Matala to increase the operational range of Cuban MiG-23 to northern Namibia. Cuba continued to increase its combat power in Angola over several months. By the end of Cuba's second stage, which ran from 17 December 1987 to 25 August 1988, the Cuban Military Mission in Angola (MMCA) included fifty-four thousand soldiers, 340 T-62 tanks, anti-aircraft missiles, heavy artillery pieces, a MiG squadron, and four AN-26 transport aircraft.<sup>108</sup> By September 1988, it had positioned approximately twenty thousand troops in southern Angola immediately north of the Namibian border. Castro would eventually employ a combined force of twenty-seven thousand Cubans, ten thousand FAPLA, and two thousand SWAPO combatants in his offensive toward Calueque.

The Cubans would need time to build up forces to those levels, but by February 1988, the Cubans had thirty-five hundred troops postured in Cunene Province.<sup>109</sup> On 9 March, Cuba began its advance in southwest Angola.<sup>110</sup> The Cubans' southernmost airfields were at Lubango and Matala, and they lacked range-extending fuel tanks for their aircraft as construction of the airfield at Cahama continued. SWAPO participated in the operation with the Cubans. SWAPO's knowledge of the area coupled with air support and mobile air defense systems supported movement. By late March, however, Cuban forces were reaching the limits of their air protection.

From 17-18 March 1988, the United States met with Cuba and Angola in Luanda to negotiate the terms of a settlement.<sup>111</sup> These terms included the unconditional withdrawal of

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<sup>108</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 216; "Implementation Res 435: Military Aspects," September 1988, Archive H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, File 309/4, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 1-2. SADF documents corroborate Dosman's findings based on unpublished Cuban records.

<sup>109</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 367.

<sup>110</sup> Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, 428.

<sup>111</sup> "Meeting between the Delegations of the United States and Angola, 'Acta de las conversaciones realizadas entre la RPA y los Estados Unidos del 17 al 18 de marzo de 1988, en Futungo de Belas, Luanda'," March 17, 1988, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive,

SADF from Angola, the cessation of SADF aggression against the MPLA, the cessation of SADF support to UNITA, approval of UNSCR 435, and the total withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola within a negotiated timetable.<sup>112</sup> The US delegation reported that the RSA had agreed in principle on 14 March in a separate meeting to its withdrawal from both Angola and Namibia if the Cubans fully withdrew from Angola as well.<sup>113</sup> This meeting took place just days before Operation Packer, the last SADF attempt to eliminate FAPLA's bridgehead at Tumpo.

The SADF was aware of the Cuban offensive operation by early April though it assessed a relative advantage in sustainment and experience in the area of operation.<sup>114</sup> Cuba's robust air defense systems maintained a strong deterrence to an SADF attack. Continued Cuban military operations may have sent a signal to the RSA that Cuba would not allow it to force concessions from the MPLA without a fight.<sup>115</sup> On 18 April, Cuban and SADF forces engage south of Xangongo resulting in two SADF casualties. Castro gambled that his military actions would support a favorable negotiated settlement. While Castro's forces enjoyed the tactical benefits of the defense at Cuito Cuanavale, they had to overcome the challenges of expelling the SADF from Angola if it choose to fight. Cuba, like the RSA, did not want to risk a decisive battle under less than favorable conditions that might risk casualties.<sup>116</sup>

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Archives of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, obtained and contributed to CWIHP by Piero Gleijeses and included in CWIHP e-Dossier No. 44, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118130>, 1-18.

<sup>112</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 224.

<sup>113</sup> "Meeting between the Delegations of the United States and Angola," 1.

<sup>114</sup> Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, 429.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

From 2-4 May 1988 at the London Conference, tripartite talks began.<sup>117</sup> Cuba promoted a narrative of a successful military offensive in southwest Angola that drove the SADF back into Namibia. Forward Cuban units occupied a line running from Namibe through Chibemba, Cahama, Humbe, Xangongo, Cuvelai, and Cassinga, and the SADF assessed the Cuban strength at two well-equipped divisions.<sup>118</sup> Following the unproductive conference, “operational activities... had a direct influence on the negotiations.”<sup>119</sup> On 4 May, a Cuban element attacked elements of the 101 “Ovambo” Battalion that was operating south of Humbe against PLAN.<sup>120</sup> The SADF issued orders for Operation Hilti on 30 May and moved heavy units into northern Namibia to confront the Cuban threat.<sup>121</sup> On 30 May, with the risk of escalation in Angola increasing, the United States and the USSR mutually agreed to a 29 September deadline for an Angola-Namibia peace plan.<sup>122</sup>

Operation Hilti was the SADF’s response to Cuban maneuvers in southwest Angola and the implied threat to Namibia.<sup>123</sup> Its intended purpose was to reestablish UNITA control over the disputed area in southwestern Angola bordered by the Cunene River on the West, the Tchamutete highland on the North, and the Kavango River.<sup>124</sup> The SADF divided the operation into three phases code-named Excite, Faction, and Florentine. These phases consisted of preparation,

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<sup>117</sup> Dosman, “Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale,” 224.

<sup>118</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 238.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>121</sup> “OP INSTR 21/88: OP HILTI,” 4-5; Crocker, *High Noon*, 372.

<sup>122</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 242.

<sup>123</sup> “OP INSTR 21/88: OP HILTI,” 1.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

offensive operations, and the establishment of UNITA in the region respectively.<sup>125</sup> The SADF only executed the first phase, Operation Excite, before the conclusion of hostilities.<sup>126</sup>

The preparation phase was necessarily lengthy. Operations Moduler, Hooper, and Packer consumed a considerable amount of the SADF's armament stockpiles and necessitated that the SADF service a large percentage of its heavy equipment.<sup>127</sup> Although portions of the 61 Mechanized Battalion Group were available for immediate deployment on 1 June 1988, the other SADF units tasked to support the Operation Hilti required refit. These forces included 4 SAI Battalion, which would be available for operations by the middle of July, as well as 81 Armored Brigade, 71 Motorized Brigade, a Parachute Battalion, and 10 Artillery Brigade, which would be available in the second half of August. Until it could build sufficient combat power to transition to the second phase, Operation Faction, the SADF's objectives were limited to defending critical infrastructure at Calueque and Ionde and supporting UNITA freedom of movement. The RSA wanted to avoid direct confrontation with the Cubans that could lead to heavy SADF losses, and it considered the potentially destabilizing effects of military operations in southwest Angola to negotiations and the overall political situation.<sup>128</sup>

Despite the initial constraints, the potential for escalation between the RSA and Cuba was real. On 8 June, the SADF announced the activation of its 140,000-man army reserves.<sup>129</sup> From

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<sup>125</sup> "OP INSTR 21/88: OP HILTI," 4-5.

<sup>126</sup> The SADF Headquarters ordered its personnel to refer to Operation Hilti by the relevant phase name (i.e. Excite, Faction, and Florentine) after 13 June 1988 for clarity.

<sup>127</sup> "Appendix A: Forces SA Army OP HILTI to Force Levels SA Army: OP HILTI" 1 June 1988, Archive H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, File 309/4, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 1.

<sup>128</sup> "Operasie Instr 6/88: HILTI," 1 June 1988, Archive HS OPS, Group 9, Box 6, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 2.

<sup>129</sup> Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, 457.

16 May to 25 June, the SADF mission at Ruacana and Calueque was initially to delay the Cuban advance as long as possible and report the Cuban progress but later included denying Cubans access to Namibia through Ruacana. The force was to protect the Calueque and keep water running from the dam for as long as possible. The SADF formed Task Force Zulu under the command of Colonel Mieg Delpont consisting of the 32 Battalion, 61 Mechanized Battalion, three companies of the 101 Battalion, and supporting artillery and mortar units. Sector 10 headquarters was also located nearby in Oshakati. The Cubans had two brigades that could threaten the dam, one at Techipa and the other at Xangongo.<sup>130</sup>

Diplomatic and military efforts proceeded simultaneously. From 24-25 June, RSA and Cuban delegations met in Cairo to continue to work for a diplomatic solution. On 26 June, however, the RSA initiated a spoiling attack against the combined Cuban-MPLA-SWAPO force at Techipa.<sup>131</sup> Using modified weather balloons as a counterfeit demonstration of airpower, the SADF located and destroyed Cuban artillery command posts and SAM sites in Techipa when the Cubans fired at the decoys.<sup>132</sup> Cuba launched a limited offensive toward Calueque in response and the 61 Battalion met the attack. Although both forces suffered losses, each returned to their respective bases. Neither was able to exploit any advantage from the engagement.<sup>133</sup>

On 27 June, the Cubans responded by bombing the Ruacana-Calueque Hydro-electric Complex. The attack demonstrated Cuba's willingness to use military action to pursue its

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<sup>130</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 244; "Jaarverslag van Sektor 10 vir 1988," 8 January 1989, Archive AANV DOK, Group OD-1968, Box 39, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 1-9.

<sup>131</sup> Crocker, *High Noon*, 372.

<sup>132</sup> In Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 228, Dosman claims "SADF claims of inflicting major losses on advancing Cuban forces (at Tchipa, for example) are false."

<sup>133</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 248; "Operational Instruction 6/88 HILTI," June 1988, HS OPS, Group 9, Box 6, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 1-3.

strategic objectives.<sup>134</sup> Cuba's implied threat of escalation and its communication of determination to the SADF and international observers may have been important intended effects of the strike. The Cuban narrative demanded that international community see its 50 Division, the maneuver force assembled in Techipa, as a credible threat to the SADF that had forced it to negotiate.<sup>135</sup>

On 29 June, the SADF initiated Operation Midrand, an operation in which the SADF withdrew from Angola to prevent the appearance of aggression following what the RSA saw as productive discussions in Cairo.<sup>136</sup> The SADF insisted that its aim in Namibia had always been to establish "a stable security situation whereby SWA could develop to political independence."<sup>137</sup> Concurrently with the execution of Midrand, the Chief of the SADF initiated Operation Semi. Semi increased operations in Namibia in order to prevent an anticipated increase in SWAPO influence in Namibia as a result of Midrand. The SADF assigning its newly mobilized Citizen Force reserves to its 10 Division, the conventional force that the SADF had designated to defeat a Cuban penetration into Namibia. During August, the SADF reinforced and reorganized its forces along the border. 10 Division established three task forces.<sup>138</sup> Task Force Zulu consisted of 51, 52, and 102 Battalions and the 61 Mechanized Battalion Group with the headquarters at Ruacana. Task Force X-Ray consisted of 53, 54, and 4 SAI Battalion with the headquarters to Ondagwa. A conventional brigade known as Task Force Yankee served as the Division's reserve and the 10

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<sup>134</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 225.

<sup>135</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 250.

<sup>136</sup> "Operation Instruction 7/88 MIDRAND," 29 June 1988, H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 1-2.

<sup>137</sup> "Operation Instruction 8/88 SEMI," 29 June 1988, H SAW, Group 4, Box 160, South African Department of Defence Archives Documentation Center, Pretoria, 1-2.

<sup>138</sup> "Jaarverslag van Sektor 10 vir 1988," 2.

Artillery Brigade provided fire support. These forces would remain deployed along the southwest border as a deterrent until the last SADF were withdrawn from Angola.<sup>139</sup>

While military actions slowed, diplomatic efforts proceeded rapidly. On 13 July, Cuba, the RSA, and the MPLA agreed upon a set of principles to establish peace that acknowledged a linkage between the implementation of Resolution 435 and the total withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola.<sup>140</sup> On 5 August, all three parties agreed to the Geneva Protocol, which established a timeline for the implementation of those principles and allowed for international oversight of the process.<sup>141</sup> According to the protocol, the RSA would begin its withdrawal from Angola not later than 10 August 1988. The RSA agreed to complete its withdrawal and the Cubans and MPLA agreed to establish a mutually acceptable timeline for Cuba's total withdrawal from Angola by 1 September 1988.

On 22 December 1988, after negotiating the Cuban withdrawal timeline, Angola, Cuba, and the RSA signed the New York Accords.<sup>142</sup> These final accords codified the negotiated settlement. They specified UN oversight of the implementation of the accords to include UNSCR 435 and established 1 April 1989 as the deadline. All RSA military forces would withdraw from Namibia in accordance with UNSCR 435. The accords called for "free and fair" elections in Namibia without any external interference from the parties to the accords. Finally, the FAR would withdraw to the North to deescalate the situation in Cunene and would completely withdraw its forces from Angola.

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<sup>139</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, 249.

<sup>140</sup> United Nations Security Council, Principles for a Peaceful Settlement in South-Western Africa (New York Principles), July 20, 1988, accessed 26 February 2016, <http://peacemaker.un.org/namibia-southafrica-ny-principles88>.

<sup>141</sup> United Nations Security Council, Protocol of Geneva: Agreement between the Governments of Angola, Cuba and South Africa, August 5, 1988, accessed 26 February 2016, <http://peacemaker.un.org/namibia-genevaprotocol88>.

<sup>142</sup> UN General Assembly, Tripartite Agreement.



## Conclusions and Implications

For the goal of strategy is not to culminate events, to establish finality in the discourse between states, but to influence states' discourse in such a way that it will go forward on favorable terms. For continue it will.

—Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy*

The final battles at Cuito Cuanavale and Cunene Province marked the last major military actions prior to the negotiated settlement and the official conclusion of the South African Border War. For military scholars, two lines of inquiry naturally emerge from their studies of these battles. Some scholars attempt to determine how military action may have shaped the termination of the conflict. Others go further and attempt to determine the victor of the battles and even the war itself. Unfortunately, investigations into both of these questions do not lead to satisfying answers.

A study of these battles demonstrates the challenges of using military action to pursue strategic objectives inside of a complex adaptive system. It is impossible to know with certainty exactly how or to what extent military action affected the political decision to end the South African Border War. There was no solitary cause for the negotiated settlement. A combination of interdependent political and military factors likely contributed to the peace.<sup>143</sup> These factors were domestic, regional, and global in scope. Advocates for the decisive effects of military actions cannot ignore the proximity of the end of the war to the USSR's change in leadership and the adoption of the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Internal domestic political considerations influenced each states ability to maintain support for the conflict in southern Angola. These factors along with military action likely contributed to the termination of the war.

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<sup>143</sup> Breytenbach, "Cuito Cuanavale Revisited," 60.

Questions of victory in the South African Border War, while enticing, are misguided. The notion of victory is tenuous, especially above the tactical level of war.<sup>144</sup> The South African Border War demonstrates this reality. While a state may be in a subjectively better position after taking military action, having achieved its objectives, it cannot win history. Rather than celebrating some final victory at the conclusion of war, politicians and military professionals must continue to struggle for advantage and prepare for the next battle. Given this expanded perspective, any state's claims to victory in a war seem premature even years after the conclusion of hostilities. The opportunities available to the belligerents after the signing of the accords can give insight, however, to the differing rationales for their agreement to the settlement and the effectiveness of their military operations in the pursuit of their strategic objectives.<sup>145</sup>

While not a sufficient cause, Cuban military operations likely contributed significantly to the negotiated settlement. By launching a credible offensive toward Namibia, Cuba increased its bargaining position at the negotiations in Cairo to achieve many of its strategic objectives.<sup>146</sup> Cuba withdrew from Angola with honor, and it could rightfully share in the credit for Namibia's independence. The democratic election of SWAPO's Sam Nujoma further strengthened Cuban claims of a favorable outcome in Namibia, but Cuba had to reconcile these gains with the MPLA's continued struggle with UNITA for power in Angola following the settlement.<sup>147</sup>

The RSA achieved the many of its objectives in the negotiated settlement as well. It successfully negotiated the withdrawal of Cuban forces from the continent. The RSA bought time through its continued occupation of Namibia to set conditions for Namibia's transition to a

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<sup>144</sup> Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principles in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.

<sup>145</sup> Breytenbach, "Cuito Cuanavale Revisited," 61.

<sup>146</sup> Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, 467.

<sup>147</sup> Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale," 226.

government that it could tolerate. Although SWAPO won the election, the party's power was limited, and the RSA significantly reduced communist influence in the region.<sup>148</sup> Namibia's transition to a liberal, democratic government provided the RSA with a legitimate chance of retaining influence in the region. All belligerents had achieved limited success toward their strategic objectives through the negotiated settlement.

The final battles of the South African Border War highlight the importance of military action to contested political narratives of victory. Both Cuba and the RSA claimed military victory in the final battles of the South African Border War, but as the United States had learned in its Vietnam War, tactical victories divorced of political meaning are strategically irrelevant.<sup>149</sup> In the fight for the narrative, each side fought to define the purpose of its actions and the actions of its opponents. When viewing the exact same set of engagements, the RSA and Cuba constructed two competing explanations for the logic of these actions.<sup>150</sup> These explanations gave meaning to otherwise disparate and disjointed military actions across space and time. There is a tension between the subjective nature of political narrative and the objective realities of war. On one hand, strategic audiences' impressions of a battle can matter as much as the tactical outcome.<sup>151</sup> While tactical actions are important, especially to those who fight, political and military leaders should not separate the results of these actions from their strategic context. On the other hand, a compelling narrative must be formed from the objective realities of the war.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War," 47-48.

<sup>149</sup> Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1981), 1; Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War," 47.

<sup>150</sup> Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose, eds., *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning domestic support for the Afghan War* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 8. See also Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press), 414-432.

<sup>151</sup> Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*. See Chapter 1 in particular.

<sup>152</sup> De Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War*, 8.

Results matter. States can only create an effective narrative from relatively objective realities. While relative losses in tactical engagements cannot serve as an adequate measure of effectiveness, tactical success can create opportunities to reinforce a narrative of victory, which can in turn lead to more success.

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