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## Soviet Influence and Intervention in Ethiopia between 1974 and 1991

Mohamed Ibrahim Al Habib\*

\*Royal Holloway university  
m-e-alhabib@hotmail.com

### Abstract

This research paper examines the political strategic and involvement of the two superpowers (the Soviet Union and the United States of America) in the Horn of Africa during the Cold war. It discusses more particularly the dynamic of the Ethiopian-Soviet relationship in the context of Soviet influence and intervention between 1974 and 1991. Likewise, it shows how the Soviet Union profoundly engaged in the regional affairs of the Horn of Africa as part of Pax-Sovietica scheme, especially when this region became a geopolitical concern for the superpowers to export their political influence, ideolog, and military business during the Cold War. Such circumstances lead to a dramatic change in both superpowers to reverse their traditional political allegiances in the region in the 1978. Ethiopia, traditionally was an ally of the United States, became an ally of the Soviet Union, and in turn, Somalia, formerly was an ally of the Soviet Union, became an ally of the United States. The united efforts of the West and Arab nations in confronting the Soviet threat which jeopardized their individual interests in the Horn of Africa played also a part of weakened the position of the Soviet Union in the region. As a result, the Soviet dream of a Pax-Sovietica never came into being in the Horn of Africa.

**Keywords:** The Cold War in the Horn of Africa, History of Ethiopia during the Cold War, Superpowers in the Horn of Africa, Pax-Sovietica Scheme in the Horn of Africa, History of the Soviet in the Horn of Africa. Historical Relationship between Ethiopia and the Soviet Union.

## **Introduction**

The Cold War, (1945-1991), between the Soviet Union and the United States of America is one of the most interesting phases in modern world history; Two superpowers armed with nuclear weapons and missionary ideologies, communism and liberal democracy sought to dominate the world. However, historians commonly pay more importance to Europe, an area long regarded as the principle location of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, historians have focused their attention on Asia, primarily because of the Korean and Vietnamese Wars.<sup>2</sup> Emphasising the Cold War in Europe and Asia has marginalised other regions, especially Africa. This paper argues that Africa featured significantly in the Cold War, and was used strategically by both superpowers. The Horn of Africa was a notable place of importance during the Cold War. Specifically, this paper will focus on the dynamics of the Ethiopian - Soviet relationship in the context of Soviet influence and intervention between 1974 and 1991. The paper contends that the Soviet Union became heavily involved in the regional affairs of the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia and will show that this involvement was part of its Cold War strategy in Africa. As a result, Ethiopia, traditionally an ally of the United States, became an ally of the Soviet Union and in turn, Somalia, formerly an ally of the Soviet Union, became an ally of the United States. A dramatic change in political allegiances which took place in the late 1970s and led both the superpowers to change their partners. As a result, the Soviet dream of a Pax-Sovietica never came into being.

## **Historical Connection between Ethiopia and Russia (1300-1950)**

Before discussing the historic relationship between the Soviet Union and Ethiopia, it is important to consider the historic trajectory and external connections, especially from the Middle Ages, in the Horn of Africa. Marina Ottaway, in her book entitled, *Soviet and American influence in the Horn of Africa*, argues that there are four pivotal elements which must be acknowledged while analysing the role of the Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa, and especially Ethiopia. She correctly observes:

An understanding of what has been happening on the Horn of Africa demands several levels of analysis: first, an appreciation of the internal developments in Somalia and Ethiopia and how these have affected foreign policy behavior; second, knowledge of the political, ethnic, and military aspects of Somalia-Ethiopia relations and the way these have shaped regional developments and alignments; third examination of the relation between each of regional actors and each of the superpowers; and finally evaluation of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in that area of Africa and how this rivalry fits into their ongoing competition elsewhere in Africa and the Third World.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand the Soviet influence upon, and intervention in Ethiopia, the historical relationship between these two countries must be considered. It is a relationship which began to develop in medieval times, although it was not as intense in those early stages.<sup>4</sup> During the fourteenth century, Ethiopian and Armenian monks, and Copts established connections via the diverse religious communities within Jerusalem. The diverse nature of these groups led to the development of clerical networks and connections between them which continued for the next few centuries. The Russian Orthodox Church was part of this clerical network; the Russian Church follows the principles of Orthodox Eastern Christianity.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these early links, several important Russians made the effort to travel to the Horn of Africa, especially to Ethiopia. These religiously led journeys led to strengthened political and diplomatic connections between Ethiopia and Russia, two Orthodox Christian countries.<sup>6</sup> It can therefore be concluded that Russia's interest in Ethiopia grew because of the commonality of their religious beliefs. Within the framework of religious amity, the eminent Russian monk, Porfiry Uspensky, who had travelled to Jerusalem in 1848, encouraged the Russian government to increase its influence in Ethiopia. Remarkably, he encouraged the Tsar to expand its influence in Ethiopia not only to foster good relationships with a co-religionist country, but to undermine Ethiopia's enemies; the Ottoman Empire and Britain.<sup>7</sup> Acquiescing, Russia increased its influence in Ethiopia to counter British influence in the region. This was important because Britain had already established a base in Egypt during the second half of the twentieth century. The occupation of Egypt gave the British control of Suez and the more direct link between India and Britain.

In addition, Russia may have taken economic factors into consideration.<sup>8</sup> To Russians, Ethiopia (formerly known as Abyssinia) was an economic and commercial treasure trove. According to Robert Patman,

Russian's interest in Ethiopia also had an economic aspect. Unlike the other European powers, Imperial Russia was convinced that Ethiopia or Abyssinia, as it was then known, had vast economic potential. A memorandum addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs listed the country's products as cotton, coffee, grain butter, honey, hides, and meat, and observed that the abundance of these products, as well as their low price, the plentitude of labour, the unusual richness of the soil... an extremely favourable position on the international trade route from Europe to the Orient, relative proximity to the sea with the construction of a railroad... should make Abyssinia a country of great world importance. In short, Ethiopia was regarded as a country where the cream was yet to be skimmed.<sup>9</sup>

To increase its influence in Ethiopia, the Tsarist government played a significant role supporting Ethiopian's several Emperors during the second half of nineteenth century, such as, Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868), and

his successors Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), and Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913). This support helped them stand against potential threats from the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and Italy. It also provided various forms of aid to Ethiopia including military, humanitarian, educational, medical, and technical materials, support, and expertise. Their common religious values also prompted them to turn against the Catholic Church, particularly in the context of their stand against predominantly Catholic Italy.<sup>10</sup> For instance, historical records indicate in 1891, Tsar Nicholas II supported Menelik II's army with 10,000 modern rifles and military advisers.<sup>11</sup> In 1896, during the first Italo-Ethiopian war in Adowa, the Russian government sent first aid assistance before her hospital prior to the establishment of a hospital during Menelik II's reign. It also supported Ethiopia militarily by sending Russian advisers whose guidance and counsel helped Ethiopia defeat Italy.<sup>12</sup> Russia also provided technical aid in the Ethiopian gold mining operations and the geological surveys in the Wollega province.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as the amicable ties between the two countries grew, educational and medical support also increased. Russia sought to help Ethiopia modernise. For example, Menelik II sent some Ethiopians to study in Russia; Takla Hawaryat and Takla Mariam were the first Ethiopian students sent to Russia to study military science. Similarly, two Ethiopian students, Gizaw and Dagne, studied medicine in Russia.<sup>14</sup> Russia's involvement from the late nineteenth century, according to Robert Patman, directly and indirectly benefited Ethiopia. Russia's influence had strengthened the military position of Addis Ababa which in turn had increased its international stature and brought Ethiopia to the attention of the academic world.<sup>15</sup>

However, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Russian government showed little to no interest in Ethiopia. Russia had been experiencing civil war, military defeat in 1914, and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, all of which ended contact between Ethiopia and the Tsarist government.<sup>16</sup>

Following their defeat at the hands of the Bolsheviks, the White Russian Community took shelter in Ethiopia as political refugees. Settling there, they contributed to the development of Ethiopia by imparting their technical and commercial knowledge. The new Communist government in Russia resumed its relationship with Ethiopia in late 1931, particularly for foreign trade. So, it was the Bolsheviks who restored Russia's traditionally friendly relationship with Haile Selassie's government, and who supported him militarily and financially until the end of the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Addis Ababa reopened its Russian embassy in 1956, and Selassie visited Moscow in 1959, the first African head state to do so.<sup>18</sup>

## Superpowers Entered New Phase of Relationship in the Horn of Africa

After World War II, several internal and external factors, and circumstances evident within the Horn of Africa, directly influenced and shaped the relationship between Ethiopia and Russia.

First, the advent of the Cold War was a result of the ideological, economic, strategic, and political rivalry between the superpowers. As the superpowers sought to increase their sphere of influence in the Third World, countries in the Horn of Africa played substantial roles in shaping the relationships between them and between their allies, Ethiopia and Somalia. Consequently, the superpowers' national interests in the Horn of Africa, as Samuel Makinda argues, were justified in terms of security for the region, even though the term "security" had never been defined by the superpowers. The real needs of the people in the Horn was never taken seriously by the superpowers.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the birth and independence of Somalia in 1960 led the country to revive and pursue its irredentist policy in several regions including, Ogaden in Ethiopia, the northern district in Kenya, and the Afars and Issas territories in Djibouti. Somalia's goal was to unify all nomadic Somalis under the banner of "Greater Somalia". Somalis are considered the majority population in those, particularly in terms of religion, language, and ethnicity.<sup>20</sup> Somalia's widely used slogan was, "until that legacy is eradicated and all Somalis are united under a single political jurisdiction."<sup>21</sup>

Third, Ethiopian and Eritrean relations began to flourish in the aftermath of World War II. Since Italy had been defeated in the World War II, Eritrea, which had previously been under Italian colonialism, was integrated and federated with Ethiopia in 1952, under the jurisdiction of the United Nations (UN).<sup>22</sup> However, Ethiopia's government rejected any notion of Eritrean autonomy. Because its geography provided Ethiopia with access to the sea, and because the Ethiopian government feared a successful secessionist movement allowing Somalia to claim Ogaden and cause the loss of Ethiopia's other provinces.<sup>23</sup>

Fourth, the commitment of the Organisation of African Unity, (OAU), to the idea of self-determination and territorial integrity of post-colonial states in Africa, was not acceptable amongst the nations in the Horn of Africa. Samuel Makinda argues:

The majority of African States are not inhabited by homogenous ethnic groups, because a large number of these groups have been divided among several states. To preserve the present African states as political units and respect their territorial integrity, it is natural that the OAU should support self-determination at the level of territories recognized under its Charter and that of the UN as sovereign states. The OAU member states, in fact, tried to sanctify this *status quo* by pledging, through the Border Disputes resolution of 1964, to respect the borders existing on their

achievement of independence. That resolution was motivated by the fact that if one region or group of people within a state were given the right to secede, no matter how justified their claims to self-determination, other regions or groups would also want to secede, and this would eventually lead to the disintegration of the original state. This principle has, however, been challenged by those who demand self-determination for certain groups within independent states... if the OAU supported that view, it would re-open border disputes between a number of states, including Morocco and Mauritania; Morocco and Algeria; Tunisia and Algeria; Niger and Benin; Malawi and Tanzania, and many others. It is because of this sensitivity of border issues that the OAU and majority of its members maintain that the present states boundaries are inviolate.<sup>24</sup>

So, all these primary elements, coupled with the national interests of states, contributed to the involvement of the superpowers in this region and caused these shifting alignments with their on and off allies, Ethiopia and Somalia, who in turn, sought to use the superpowers for their own respective interests.

Ironically, although Russia historically had a long-term relationship with Ethiopia, particularly from religious and economic perspectives, the United States succeeded in putting Ethiopia under its sphere of influence between the early Cold War period and Ethiopian's revolution in 1974. It is also important to consider the geopolitical characteristics of the Horn of Africa, and how this land mass was important to the superpowers during the Cold War, especially in the context of their competition for allies within the Horn of Africa. Peter Schwab writes:

The Horn of Africa, an area comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti, is an area of the world whose strategic location has thrust it into the international arena as a potential crisis zone. Overlapping the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, it flanks the oil-rich states of Arabia, controls the Babel Mandeb Straits which in turn is one of the narrow arteries of Israel's lifeline, dominates a part of the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean through which oil tankers are constantly moving, and overlooks the passage where the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean converge.<sup>25</sup>

The geopolitical concern of the superpowers, however, were not the only reason for their interests in the Horn of Africa. Ideological and military goals were another reason for their interest in the region. For example, Soviet Union was focused on the acquisition of a military facility in the region and ultimately sought to neutralise the hegemony of western power in Indian Ocean. In addition, the Soviet Union tried to promote and spread its socialist ideologies in the region, although they knew the Third World leaders would be unlikely to fully adopt the Soviet socialist principles.<sup>26</sup> As Robert Grey observes:

While Soviet ideologists have been sympathetic to most of political leaders of the Third World they have been under few illusions that these 'revolutionary democrats' were interested in, or likely to successfully promote, socialism as understood from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. Nevertheless, they assumed that these new nations might be hostile to their former colonizers, and somewhat friendly to the socialist world.<sup>27</sup>

For the US, its anti-communist stance under the containment policy formed part of its interest in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, new external dimensions were being added to the internal conflicts amongst the countries in the Horn of Africa, such as territory claims. And yet, one can argue that, Ethiopia and Somalia took advantage of the superpowers' rivalry by political maneuvering and requesting military and economic aid in support of their individual interests. The superpowers in turn, exploited the intra-regional disputes over territory between their allies, Somalia and Ethiopia, for their own ideological, economic, strategic, and political interests and to bolster their own foreign policies.

The superpowers' impact on and involvement in the Horn of Africa deepened in 1952 when the Ethiopian government sought American aid because of the fear of Soviet expansion.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the Soviets realised the Horn of Africa had fallen under the influence of Anglo-American imperialism which they believed would replace Italian imperialism. Robert Patman argues, the situation was obvious for Russia for two reasons: first, the East African shilling had been changed to the Ethiopian dollar and pegged to the US dollar, second; the British manager of the Ethiopia State Bank had been replaced by an American national.<sup>29</sup>

Russia's fear of the developing relationship between the US and Ethiopia was confirmed when the two nations signed a military assistance agreement on May 23, 1953. According to the agreement, the US would supply military aid and advisors to Ethiopia for 25 years in return for the right to install and control an Ethiopian communication station in Asmara named Kagnev.<sup>30</sup> According to Peter Schwab, Kagnev station was vital to the US's global interests because this key location facilitated the tracking of space satellites, relayed military communications, and monitored radio broadcasts from Eastern Europe and the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> In his book entitled, *The United State and Ethiopia*, Baffour Agyeman-Duah summarises the importance of the Kagnev installation for the US. The US ambassador to Ethiopia, Joseph Simonson, echoed the same view about the importance of the Kagnev station in Asmara:

- A transmitter site approximately 75 acres on northwest city limit of Asmara located on ex-Italian state land.
- Receiver site approximately 39 acres, three miles west of Asmara.
- Commercial facilities at Massawa for petroleum products storage purposes.

- Camp Delmar E. Park- a rest camp for military and civilian personnel, ancillary to Radio Marina.
- Main U.S. Army Radio Station.
- Garage within Asmara Leased from FIAT (Italian company).<sup>32</sup>

### **Changing Allies in the Horn of Africa**

The United States succeeded in bringing Ethiopia within its sphere of influence, had nurtured a mutually beneficial relationship, and strengthened military ties from 1953 until the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the resulting alliance between the Soviet Union and Somalia was a direct reaction to their opposition's alliance. During the period of the Cold War, the Soviet Union made several attempts to bring Ethiopia and Somalia under its sphere of influence, and in so doing, dominate the Horn of Africa, however, this goal was never achieved because of the political and strategic maneuvering of the US, its rival superpower. Within this environment of rivalry, the Soviet Union maintained its influence in the area by aligning with Somalia. This also balanced US power in the Horn of Africa. The Somali Prime Minister, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, visited Moscow in the spring of 1961 to discuss Somalia's military program.<sup>33</sup> The Soviet Union had agreed on military support for Somalia in exchange for Moscow controlled naval and air base facilities in Berbera port, a location considered of high strategic importance in the Indian Ocean.<sup>34</sup> The actual intervention and penetration of the USSR in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia, took place in July 1960, eight years after the beginning of US intervention in the region. Somalia sought Soviet military aid because it was more generous than Western countries, including the US. The US, along with its allies, Italy and West Germany, had offered 10 million in aid whereas the Soviet Union had responded with an offer of 32 million in aid.<sup>35</sup> It is therefore understandable that Somalia would choose to accept the USSR's offer and pursue its irredentist policy.

Because of the official alliance between the Soviet Union and Somalia from the 1960s to the late 1970s, several important bilateral exchanges between the two allies took place as a part of their broader relationship. For example, large numbers of Somali officers were sent to Moscow from 1963 to 1969 for military training.<sup>36</sup> Russian military aid to Somalia suddenly increased when Major-General Mohammad Siad Barre gained power after his successful military coup. He adopted the ideology of "scientific socialism" to govern the country which garnered Soviet support.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Somalia's army benefitted from quality Soviet military arms and equipment, superior to those arms used by their counterparts in Ethiopia. The military superiority of Somalia over Ethiopia was confirmed by US military advisors in Ethiopia. The military superiority of Soviet-backed Somalia created skepticism amongst its neighbours that Somalia would ever seek a peaceful solution with them.<sup>38</sup>



The Soviet Union established a missile storage facility in Berbera harbor, and communication facilities in Somalia, directly opposite the Soviet naval facilities in Aden, a naval port in South Yemen. This gave the Soviets a strategic advantage over the balance of power in the Horn. Reflecting upon this power balance, Peter Schwab writes:

The harbour at Berbera is almost directly opposite the Soviet naval facilities in South Yemen's port of Aden. This had obvious strategic benefit for the Soviet Union. Utilising these harbours for shipping and docking altered to some degree the balance of power in the Indian Ocean /Red Sea/Gulf of Aden area. It was possible to choke off Israel; and it was possible to dominate the sea through which oil passes to the Western industrial states. American policy, predicated on retaining its position on the Horn of Africa, maintaining the lifeline to Israel, and preventing a potential blockade of Western oil lanes, had clearly received a setback. Utilizing South Yemen and Somalia, the Soviets had thus succeeded by mid-1970s in crucially affecting the balance of power off the Horn of Africa in their favour.<sup>39</sup>

The developing relationships between the Soviet Union and its allies threatened US interests in the region and posed a significant threat to conservative Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, since Somalia controlled the entrance to the Red Sea and dominated the western Indian Ocean. The Saudi government felt vulnerable and feared losing control of the Red Sea, attempted to persuade Somalia to break its alignment with the Soviet Union in return for a huge aid package from the Saudi government.<sup>40</sup> John Darnton, a correspondent of the New York Times, writes:

As if emphasizing the reference to Somalia's friend he was not even in the country when his pre-recorded message was broadcast. He is on a state visit to Saudi Arabia, one of the key Arab nations attempting to blunt Soviet influence in this part of Africa and safeguard the Red Sea as an "Arab Lake". Saudi Arabia has reportedly offered as much as \$300 million to Somalia in an effort to wean it from its almost total economic and military dependence upon the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup>

Russia's involvement in the Horn of Africa deepened when a dramatic revolution took place in Ethiopia in 1974, overthrowing Emperor Haile Selassie and ending Ethiopia's 24-year military alliance with the US.<sup>42</sup> Because of this change, the Soviet Union shifted its foreign policy in the Horn of Africa and welcomed the Ethiopian revolution. The new Ethiopian government, the *Dergue*, kept its relationship with both superpowers secret and for three years manipulated both, taking advantage of their military aid. In this context, the superpowers reacted reluctantly and cautiously because the *Dergue* had never officially declared its allegiance. The result however, was an increase in aid from the superpowers. The US, increased its aid to Ethiopia to appease the *Dergue* and maintain it under the US's sphere of influence. Professor Fred Halliday, correctly asserts: "There was therefore

some room for the US to think it could ride the storm and re-establish ties with the *Dergue*.<sup>43</sup>

For the Soviet Union, it was an important period in which to maintain its long cultivated, seventeen-year relationship with Somalia, while consecutively establishing a new relationship with Ethiopia by supporting its socialist revolution.<sup>44</sup> However, the Soviet government were skeptical about the seriousness of the Somalian government's recently adopted socialist ideologies, only proclaimed by Siad Barre when he seized power in 1969. The rationale behind Soviet skepticism was because Somalia was the first non-Arabic speaking state to have joined the Arab League in 1974.<sup>45</sup> There had been slow progress toward socialism amongst Somalis and their new ideology had not weakened their faith in Islam.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore understandable why the superpowers, especially the Soviet Union, switched its allegiances in the Horn of Africa after few years following the Ethiopian revolution in 1974.

Firstly, Ethiopia was more significant than Somalia from geopolitical standpoint, particularly in the eyes of the Soviets. Ethiopia had a larger population of 24 million people, making Ethiopia the second most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>47</sup> In addition, although the Soviet Union had supported Eritrea when Somalia had been under its sphere of influence, it was now providing military support to the Ethiopian government for their fight against the Eritrean rebels, and to keep the Red Sea away from conservative Arab control.<sup>48</sup> The Soviet Union wanted to retain its control over the Red Sea for the foreseeable future. Steven David states several positive characteristics of Ethiopia in comparison with its counterpart Somalia during that time:

In terms of differences, Ethiopia's area of 472,000 square miles makes it almost twice as large as Somalia (246,000 squares miles). Ethiopia's population (30 million) is nine times that of Somalia (3.2 million) and its GNP (2 billion dollars) is about eight times that of Somalia (250 million dollars). Ethiopia had a rich tradition as black Africa's oldest independent state while Somalia became independent only in 1960.<sup>49</sup>

Second, the Soviet Union also considered Ethiopia as important country because it was privileged to host the headquarters of the OAU, an organisation which could influence several African and Middle Eastern countries and positively influence the Soviets' solidarity with the Third World as a whole. As a result, it was easy to promote the Soviet ideologies as a part of its global foreign policy, particularly within the Horn of Africa.

Third, while an Islamic Somalia had adopted a socialist ideology and initially turned to the Soviet Union, it was not due to any inherent devotion to the socialist ideologies; alternatively, it was the Soviet capability to supply increased military aid which drew Somalia toward the ideological orbit of its aligned superpower. In contrast, when the *Dergue* advocated and

embraced the Marxist ideologies, under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Miriam, it was taken seriously because it was distinctly different from Haile Selassie's regime.<sup>50</sup> The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 was more Marxist in character than anything demonstrated by the nomadic Muslim Somalians.

Fourth, because of Somalia's aggressive irredentist policy against its neighbours in the Horn of Africa, aggression which had while claimed several territories, the Soviet Union did not wish to be Somalia's major supporter.

Fifth, there was a historical legacy of friendship between the Soviet Union (formerly Russia) and Ethiopia, evident in certain periods over several centuries. Harry Brind, a research scholar and former British Ambassador to Somalia, reflected upon the history of the Soviet-Ethiopian relationship and observed "The historical ties between Russia and Ethiopia, and a certain similarity in their histories and backgrounds - Tsar and Emperor; Orthodox and Coptic Christianity; neo-feudalism - may also have influenced Soviet thinking."<sup>51</sup>

Sixth, with its rich soil and huge population, Ethiopia had the potential for significant agricultural development, if the country had political stability bolstered by financial help.<sup>52</sup> And Ethiopia was considered more diverse in its ethnicities and religions. Harry Brind observes again:

Ethiopia is a diverse country in terms of people and religion. No single ethnic group accounts for half the population, nor does a single religion dominate: the numbers of Muslims and Christians are roughly equal, and the Oromos are as numerous as Amharic speakers.<sup>53</sup>

It is fair to say, the reversal in alliances in 1978 between the superpowers and their clients was inevitable, especially when Colonel Mengistu Haile Miriam, who had received training at an American military staff college,<sup>54</sup> "declared his support for the Soviet-proposed federation as a common anti-imperialist front that would fend off conservative Arab states attempting to retaining their dominance over the Red Sea."<sup>55</sup> It is therefore clear that a combinations factors were at work when Mengistu Haile Maram chose the Soviets over the Americans as an ally of Ethiopia. Steven David has succinctly summed up all the reasons that drove Mengistu Haile Mariam to the Soviet camp and led him to abandon the Americans as a traditional ally of Ethiopia. He observes:

The emerging leader of the Dergue, Colonel Mengistu, was not, however mollified. Throughout 1976 a combination of factors pushed him to take an increasingly anti-American and pro-Soviet Stance. First, as a self-proclaimed revolutionary and socialist, it was embarrassing and politically dangerous for Mengistu to be so dependent on the chief benefactor of the previous regime and the world's leading capitalist power. Second, a socialist ideology and Soviet orientation seemed more in keeping with Mengistu's plan of drastic land reform and the continuation of terror he felt necessary to perpetuate his rule. Third, tilting toward the Soviets would undercut much

of the Eritrean Communist and radical support as well as provide the opportunity of getting the Russians to restrain their Somalia clients. Finally, Mengistu and the Ethiopian army were very unhappy with the record of U.S. military support and especially at the sharp drop in American arms deliveries (in the wake of continuous human rights violations and anti-American rhetoric) in 1976.<sup>56</sup>

President Fidel Castro of Cuba tried to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia<sup>57</sup> during his visit to the Horn of Africa in 1977; both had adopted “social scientific” ideologies, however, his attempt failed. President Castro had grander vision for the Horn of Africa; his plan was to unify three socialist states - Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Yemen - as one Marxist Socialist federation.<sup>58</sup> The plan was welcomed by Mengistu and rejected by Siad Barre. Although the two countries were following almost identical ideologies, 17 years of hostilities and disputes over territory led to the evaporation of Russia’s socialist ambitions in the Horn of Africa.<sup>59</sup>

When Mengistu proclaimed Ethiopia’s total allegiance to Soviet Union, several Soviet bloc countries including Cuba, congratulated Ethiopia and provided further military support against its rival, Somalia, particularly in the Ogaden War in the late 1970s. For example, reports indicate, “over 1,300 Soviet military advisers, supplemented by 250 East Germans, and 13,000 Cuban troops were sent to support the war effort against Somalia.”<sup>60</sup> The Arab league condemned the Cuban and Soviet efforts to strengthen Ethiopia against Somalia in Ogaden. Mahmoud Riad, the former Secretary General of the Arab League also condemned the foreign intervention in Ogaden and warned the Soviets and Cubans against continuing their support of Ethiopia. He demanded both Cuba and the Soviet Union to withdraw their forces and warned them if they did not withdraw, Somalia would receive weapons and money from the Arab League. The Arab League’s Council held its meeting in Cairo in March 1978 and adopted this resolution to,

Condemn aggressive act by foreign forces in the Horn of Africa calls on all foreign countries to withdraw their forces immediately from the area, urges the settlement of disputes by peaceful means without outside intervention and decide to extend humanitarian aid for refugees who moved to Somalia because of military operations in the Ogaden province.<sup>61</sup>

Russian military advisors, who had previously served in Somalia, were transferred to Ethiopia. The Russian advisors divulged the military secrets of the Somalian army to the Ethiopians, classified information which proved enormously valuable to Ethiopia.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, Siad Barre sought military aid from the Arab world, visiting Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Iran between 1977 and 1987. The military aid was to help combat Ethiopian’s heavy weapons supplied by the Soviets in Ogaden.<sup>63</sup> However, the conflict was over for Somalia; the country was shocked by Cuba’s

presence in Ethiopia, especially since Fidel Castro had visited the region just two months prior had been attempting to bridge differences between them.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, President Siad Barre had delivered a warning message to both the Soviet Union and Ethiopia, demanding Ethiopia cease what he called, “adventuristic military aggression” and emphasising that, “Somalia also has its friends” and finally, he described Ethiopians as “black colonisers.”<sup>65</sup> However, Colonel Mengistu responded to Said Barr, stating there could be no peace in the Ogaden region until all Somalia forces had left the region.<sup>66</sup>

Although the Soviet Union was sympathetic to the Ethiopian side in Ogaden war with Somalia, it urged both countries to stop fighting and start negotiations to resolve their conflict.<sup>67</sup> However, the Soviet efforts to encourage peaceful negotiation proved unsuccessful. Finally, the Soviet Union signed several friendly agreements with its new client, Ethiopia, thereby enhancing their relationship and developing further cooperation including mutual technical and economic endeavours.<sup>68</sup> The Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrey Gromyko, lauded the new Soviet-Ethiopian alliance by saying,

Now that Revolutionary transformations and progressive socioeconomic changes are taking place in Ethiopia our peoples will have greater opportunity to impact a new and richer meaning to Soviet–Ethiopian co-operation in the political, economic, cultural, and other spheres.<sup>69</sup>

The United States, led by the Carter administration, citing concerns over violations of human rights, retaliated against Ethiopia by cutting its aid when the country aligned itself with the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup> Then, in response to the estranged American–Ethiopian relationship, Siad Barre sought aid from the West and President Carter granted technical aid to Somalia, allowing the US to once again revive its sphere of influence in the region with its new ally,<sup>71</sup> President Carter ordered his aides, “to move in every possible way,” according to the Sunday Times report “to get Somalia to be our friend.”<sup>72</sup> Unsurprisingly, Ethiopia’s new Marxist military government decided to shut down the United States’ military mission and its facilities in Kagnev station, and American staff members totaling almost 350 people, were given only a few days to evacuate Ethiopia.<sup>73</sup> By the end of the 1970’s, the superpowers had changed their allegiances in the Horn of African, reacting to the dynamic changes amongst the states in this region.

### **Pax Sovietica Scheme in the Horn of Africa**

Interestingly, although the superpowers had officially switched their allegiances, the Soviet Union continued to pursue its Pax Sovietica,<sup>74</sup> a strategy which was fundamental to its grand ambition to put Ethiopia and Somalia under its socialist sphere of influence. There has been some debate over why the Soviet Union attempted Pax Sovietica in the Horn of Africa, even after it had broken links with Somalia. In theory, Ethiopia and Somalia were still operating under socialist ideologies so if both countries had come

under the Soviet's sphere of influence, the Soviet Union would control all the resources both countries could offer. For example, the Soviets would have control of the Red Sea, the West Indian Ocean, and the Gulf of Aden. And since Eritrea had been federated to Ethiopia in 1952, the Soviets would also indirectly maintain its control there too, although during that time, Eritrea was under the influence of the Arab conservative states, such as the Saudi.<sup>75</sup> With no access to the sea, Ethiopia relied heavily on Djibouti for approximately 80 percent of its imports and exports,<sup>76</sup> so it is clear the Soviet Union also had an impact on Djibouti. As a result, the Soviet Union would be able to increase its influence in the Horn of Africa and globally; all part of the Soviet Union's strategic plan to challenge its rival, the United States. Paul Nitze, an American analyst, emphasises the Soviet Union's expansionist theory, and argues that the Soviets took advantage of the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, (the Shah's presence had guaranteed the oil sea line to the West), by interfering and intervening in Afghanistan. This resulted in, according to Paul Nitze, an increase in Soviet influence and control over the Persian Gulf.<sup>77</sup>

However, Pax Sovietica was not successful because of the united efforts of the West and the Arab nations in confronting the Soviet threat which jeopardised their individual interests in the region. The Arab nations regarded the Soviet Union as another aggressive coloniser in the region, aiming to seize control of the Red Sea from them. Sudan's President, Gaffar Nimeriy, warned the African and Arab states of the Soviet's expansion in the region and described the Soviet Union as a new coloniser.<sup>78</sup> Fred Halliday itemises the Arab States' central interests in the Horn of Africa and highlights their individual interests. The Arab states played an important role in undermining the Soviet ambitions for Pax Sovietica in the region. Fred Halliday observes,

It is to some extent, possible to tabulate four different interests that the Arab states have in the Horn, bearing in mind that these often overlap and that different states entertain these interests in varying degrees:

1. Counter-revolution and ousting the Soviet Union: the fear of revolutionary movement and of Soviet influence is the dominant preoccupation of the Saudis and Egyptians. They want to stifle the Somalia experiment, crush the Ethiopian revolution, gain control of Eritrea, and encircle the revolutionary government in South Yemen. Whether developments in these countries in reality pose a threat to the Saudis and Egyptians is debatable, but they certainly believe this to be the case.

- 2- Sudan: this is a specific, and extremely important, component of Saudi-Egyptian perspective. Egypt has a traditional interest in the Sudan, and the Saudis have recently acquired one. It is via the Sudan that events in the Horn most immediately affect the Arab world, and both Sadat and the

Saudis are concerned to keep Nimeriy in power. A revolutionary Ethiopia is seen as a threat to Sudan.

3- Israel: The Red Sea is seen by both sides as an area of potential dispute, and the Arab states would like to prevent Israel from having any influence at all. Yet the Arabs are forced, by US and Iranian pressure, to permit Israel to import oil from Iran via Red Sea, and in any case, they exaggerate the significance of the Israel presence in Ethiopia for diversionary reasons.

4- Arab nationalism: the rhetoric of Arab support for forces in the Horn is normally couched in a nationalist, and sometimes chauvinist, manner. In the Arab press it is universally alleged that Eritreans, the Somalis and the people of Djibouti are Arabs, where-as this is, in each case, only a partial truth.<sup>79</sup>

### **US Policy Against Pax Sovietica Scheme in the Region**

As a part of the United States' containment policy against the Soviet Union, the Horn of Africa was important regionally and universally; the US continually made every effort to decrease Soviet influence in the region. For example, because the Soviet Union had a sphere of influence in South Yemen, the US attempted to exert influence in North Yemen with a view to balancing power and preventing Soviet influence from spreading out in the region. The US goal was to obtain strategic facilities in the port of Hodeida by forming a political alliance with North Yemen.<sup>80</sup> US policy was to monitor and counter the Soviet Union's interventions and attempts to bring the nations in the Horn of Africa under their own sphere of influence. For example, President Carter's administration took immediate action when the Soviets interfered in Afghanistan after the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979. President Carter declared:

Any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States. It will be repelled by use of any means necessary, including military force.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, when President Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, Russia's foreign policy experienced a dramatic shift; Gorbachev focused on Russia's internal economic development under "glasnost", or his openness policy, which forced the Soviet Union to cooperate with the West<sup>82</sup> and seek a peaceful solution to the territorial disputes between the Somalian-Ethiopian governments.<sup>83</sup> Gorbachev conveyed this message to Mengistu,

Improve your relations with your neighbours and persuade them to withdraw support for insurgent movements. Establish internal peace so you can get on with the task of development.<sup>84</sup>

It is fair to say the new policy initiated by Gorbachev affected the relationship between the two countries. Baffour Agyeman-Duah

emphasizes the decline of the relationship between the new Russian regime and Ethiopia's government during the late 1980s. He observes,

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was simply in no mood to prop up a regime which, in any case, appeared to have no future. Since 1987 the Soviets had attempted to distance themselves from Mengistu's failing fortunes. In April 1990 Gorbachev pulled his military advisers and even refused to allow Soviet cargo planes in Addis Ababa to be used to resupply Asmara which had been cut-off by separatist groups. The Soviets now pressed Mengistu to negotiate a political solution to the domestic war.<sup>85</sup>

Both Ethiopia and Somalia had their own interests which both opposed and contradicted the Soviet's Pax Sovietica ambitions. The Pax Sovietica dream died with the changes in Russia's internal politics and had disappeared entirely with the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In this context, it is important to examine the nature of the Soviet's intervention and influence in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Ethiopia and to question whether it was limited or not. Historians believe there was noticeable, albeit limited, Russian influence in Ethiopia. Historically, Ethiopia's Emperors, such as Tewodros, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II, had refused any foreign interference in their internal affairs. However, Robert Patman argues that Mengistu purposely took advantage of the Soviet's influence which increased after he seized power in the late 1970s.<sup>86</sup>

Several incidents and ensuing issues demonstrate the Soviet influence on Ethiopia. For example, to demonstrate their commitment to the Soviet Union and socialism, Ethiopia's government erected Lenin's statue in Ethiopia in 1983. The statue was eventually pulled down when the *Dergue* was defeated in 1991.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Mengistu's government generally sided with the Soviet government, particularly on foreign policy issues. For example, Ethiopia voted against the UN resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1980.<sup>88</sup> Ethiopia joined the Soviets in their 1984 boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics, another mark of their friendship and allegiance with the Soviet Union.<sup>89</sup> Mengistu signed military, economic, agricultural, educational, medical, and cultural treaties with the Soviet government in the spirit of friendship and cooperation.<sup>90</sup>

However, these examples of cooperation do not confirm the Soviet Union's unrestricted and unlimited influence over Ethiopia because they were minor concerns, particularly in comparison to the following issues; Samuel Makinda asserts, the cause of the war and peace between Ethiopia and Somalia was not controlled by the superpowers. He observes,

The involvement of the superpowers in the Horn has added a new dimension to the conflict by heavily arming one state against the other, creating uncertainty and making it possible for one state to strike deep in another state without warning. Such is the depth of superpower involvement



that one writer recently states: ‘The situation in the Horn is uncertain. Neither war nor peace is allowed unless it is to the advantage of superpowers.’ This, of course, is an exaggeration. While it is plausible to argue that the belligerents gain confidence to wage war due to the availability of arms, it is wrong to assume that it is the superpowers that decide whether or not there should be a war in the region. Such a view tends to ignore the concrete struggles within the region.<sup>91</sup>

Fred Halliday also observes,

Events since 1974 show above all that whilst the USA and the Soviet Union can influence events in an area like the Horn in a number of ways, there are also real limits on what these two countries, often inaccurately ‘superpowers’ can do. The Americans could not hold Ethiopia, and the Russian lost Somalia. Neither country has a controlling grip on the internal political dynamic in their newly-acquired Horn allies, and it may be a long time before a new stable system of international alliances emerges in the region.<sup>92</sup>

Marina Ottaway argues that superpowers never practiced coercion policy in Ethiopia or Somalia, saying, “Coercion played very little part in the relations between the great powers and the countries of the Horn.”<sup>93</sup> She also the fragile nature of the superpowers’ foreign influence, particularly regarding Ethiopian internal affairs which were defined by clans and regions, not by politics. In Ethiopia, the Emperor’s power was absolute, even in the eyes of foreigners. History shows Ethiopia’s rulers did not always pay heed to foreign advice. Furthermore, during that time, there was no stable political organisation within Ethiopia so the superpowers had no clear communication channel over which to exert their influence.<sup>94</sup> She observes,

As long as domestic stability remained fragile, the government had limited freedom to decide upon policies and thus could not easily respond to the pressures of a foreign ally. The fact that interests were defined by clan and region, rather than by choice of political orientation, made foreign influence particularly difficult.... In Ethiopia the divisions were not allowed to find political expression. In theory the emperor’s power was absolute. This was an obstacle to foreign influence for two reasons. First, the emperor was not a man to follow advice. Second, since no political organisations existed in the country, foreign powers could exercise influence through other channels.<sup>95</sup>

The various historical episodes in the relationship with Ethiopia show the Soviet Union had limited influence, especially after the Ethiopian revolution. For instance, their unsuccessful Pax Sovietica policy and Castro’s futile attempts at mediating and federalising the two countries, clearly indicate the limits of Soviet influence within the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, following the revolution in Ethiopia, both the US and Soviet Union were awaiting the *Dergue*’s decision on which power it would align

with. Interestingly, each superpower attempted to convince the *Dergue* to remain within their sphere of influence but neither could do so. Mengistu finally made the choice align with the Soviet Union. Following the revolution, although Ethiopia was officially allied with the Soviet Union, it maintained relationships with most of the Western countries. Harry Brind stresses this issue and observes,

During the period in which Somalia and Ethiopia had treaties of friendship with the Soviet Union they maintained their diplomatic links with the West and with China...Indeed, most of Ethiopia's trade and non-military aid comes from Western and international sources rather than from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>96</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The involvement of the superpowers in the Horn of Africa is an interesting case study of the Cold War period. Both the superpowers sought to bring the region under their own control. However, intra-regional dynamics ultimately limited their influence. There is no doubt Ethiopia and Somalia switched their respective partners to reflect their changing ideologies and national interests, and in turn, the superpowers were forced to reflect and accommodate these regional dynamics within their own foreign policies. For a period, the Soviet Union's goal of establishing Pax-Sovietica seemed to be gaining momentum, however, it was not a successful venture. It can be argued that therefore the Soviet sphere of influence collapsed in the region, far more dramatically than had been expected.

**المخلص****التأثير والتدخل السوفيتي في إثيوبيا بين عامي ١٩٧٤م و ١٩٩١م****محمد إبراهيم الحبيب**

تعالج هذه الورقة البحثية سياسية قطبي العالم (الاتحاد السوفيتي والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية) تجاه دول القرن الأفريقي خلال الحرب الباردة. وتناقش على وجه الخصوص ديناميكية العلاقة الإثيوبية-السوفيتية في سياق النفوذ السوفيتي وتأثيره بين عامي ١٩٧٤ و ١٩٩١م في تلك المنطقة من خلال التدخل الواسع للسوفييت في الشؤون الإقليمية لدول القرن الأفريقي خاصة إثيوبيا كجزء من مخطط "الوحدة السوفيتية" خاصة عندما أصبحت هذه المنطقة مصدر قلق "جغرافي سياسي" للقوى العظمى لمحاولة فرض نفوذها السياسية من جانب، وتصدير أيديولوجياتها والإستفادة إقتصادياً وعسكرياً من جانب آخر خلال الحرب الباردة. وقد نتجت عن هذه المواجهات السياسية لقطبي العالم تغيير جذري في سياسة كلتا القوتين المتصارعتين؛ بحيث عكست كل منهما تحالفاتهما السياسية التقليدية في المنطقة في عام ١٩٧٨م؛ بحيث أصبحت إثيوبيا - التي كانت حليفاً للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية - حليفاً للاتحاد السوفيتي. وفي المقابل، أصبحت الصومال- التي كانت سابقاً حليفاً للاتحاد السوفيتي، حليفاً جديداً للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. كما أن الجهود المؤحدة التي بذلتها الدول الغربية والدول العربية في مواجهة "التهديد السوفيتي" التي كانت من وجهة نظرهم تشكل خطراً على مصالحها الفردية في القرن الأفريقي عاملاً مساعداً أدى أيضاً إلى إضعاف موقف الاتحاد السوفيتي في تلك المنطقة. وعلى ضوء ذلك أصبح الحلم السوفيتي لتحقيق هدف "الوحدة السوفيتية" في منطقة القرن الأفريقي غير قابل للتطبيق.

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