

The Crisis in Somalia: US-NATO Plans to Control the Indian Ocean

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Global Research, May 03, 2009
[Stop Nato](#) 3 May 2009

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)
Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Cold War Origins

For the past seven months world news outlets have provided daily coverage on what has been described as escalating piracy off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden and attempts by international, primarily Western, military vessels to combat it.

Absent from such reporting, as the exigencies of commercial news broadcasting inevitably entail, is how and why the situation in the region reached the impasse it has and what its broader significance is.

Instead the picture presented is, according to the standard formula, a point on a blank canvas with no historical depth, no geoeconomic and geopolitical width and no strata of diversified and interrelated causes that contribute to and dynamics that result from what is in truth a lengthy and complex process of developments.

In short the Somali situation is portrayed as a simple and self-contained event that at a seemingly gratuitous moment was declared a crisis.

There are dozens of comparable cases in the world, analagous in the general sense of presenting economic, security, national and regional threats to other nations and their environs, but these have not been declared crises and so aren't given world attention.

The determination of what constitutes a crisis, and a world crisis at that, since the end of the Cold War is a prerogative of the United States and its allies, the governments of which render the verdict, with their own and much of the world's news media echoing the claim.

And the evaluation is inevitably a onesided affair. What has been observed about Europe's most mature writers – Skakespeare, Goethe and Balzac, for example – that their antagonists were never mere villains, that they reflected the complexity and even ambiguity of real life with no character monopolizing the virtues or the vices – is summarily discarded and a broad panorama of multifaceted motives, players and conflicts reduced to an banal pseudo-morality play with just three actors: Evil culprits, innocent victims and valiant heroes.

The first category is assigned to any individual or group which is opposed to the designs on their nation by major Western powers or, what is interpreted by the latter as the same thing, pursue a policy of protecting local rights and interests. The second is comprised of whoever can be cast into the role to arouse indignation and hostility against the first, currently the crews of Western commercial vessels in the Gulf of Aden. And the third is led by the United States, NATO and the European Union, the self-deputized military vigilantes of the world.

That many of those off the Somali coast capturing foreign, mainly Western, vessels and holding them, their cargo and their crews for ransom are reported to be former fishermen driven out of their sole occupation by years of intrusive and illegal large-scale poaching by world commercial concerns or affected by eighteen years of toxic, including nuclear, wastes dumped off their shores isn't acknowledged. To do so would complicate the narrative contrived by those who have with disastrous consequences interfered in the internal affairs of Somalia and its neighborhood for several decades and are in large part responsible for the current crisis.

Instead the action begins where the governments of the Western states that have deployed warships, helicopters, snipers and bases to the region script its opening act: With pirates.

As though a director would begin a production of Shakespeare's Hamlet with the protagonist thrusting his sword through Polonius and not with the visitation of his father's ghost, so that Hamlet appeared as a brutal murderer and not a reluctant avenger of parricide and regicide.

The national tragedy of Somalia didn't begin last summer with an increase in the seizure of foreign vessels off its coast; it didn't begin with the armed conflict between the Transitional Federal Government and the Islamic Courts Union in 2006 and the invasion by military forces of the US proxy government of Ethiopia; it didn't commence in 1991 with the ouster of long-time president Siad Barre and internecine fighting between militia groups.

It started in 1977.

Eight years earlier, almost forty years to the day, a military government headed by General Siad Barre came to power in Somalia. Anticipating what would become a general pattern in Africa and indeed throughout most of the non-Euro-Atlantic world, the government pursued a path of non-capitalist, avowedly socialist development. The term Barre and his allies used was scientific socialism; that is, Marxism.

In the decade between 1969 and 1979 similar political and socio-economic transformations occurred throughout Africa, resulting in socialist-oriented governments allied with and receiving assistance from the Soviet Union. In addition to Somalia, nations matching this description included Angola, Benin, Capo Verde, the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), the Republic of Guinea (Conakry), Guinea Bissau, Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe, with Namibia, Rhodesia, South Africa and Western Sahara poised to follow suit.

The pattern also emerged in Asia – Vietnam with its unification in 1975, Laos, Cambodia (after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge in 1978) and Afghanistan; on the Arabian peninsula with South Yemen; and in Latin America and the Caribbean with Chile, Nicaragua, Grenada, Jamaica and Surinam during the same period.

What was progressing at an apparently inexorable pace was the integration of the Soviet-led socialist bloc, including Cuba, with the entire developing, non-aligned world which coincided with and gave substance to the demands for a New International Economic Order advocated by the developing nations through the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and supported by the world socialist community.

Demands included the replacement of the US-enforced Bretton Woods system – the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the first instances – in a revision of the entire

international economic system that would elevate the nations of the South from mere monoculture exporters to diversified and modernized countries with industrial bases.

On March 25, 1975 the Second General Conference of UN Industrial Development Organisation, meeting in Peru, adopted the Lima Declaration and Plan of Action on Industrial Development and Co-operation which included the following provisions:

“That every state has the inalienable right to exercise freely its sovereignty and permanent control over its natural resources, both terrestrial and marine, and over all economic activity for the exploitation of these resources in the manner appropriate to its circumstances, including nationalisation in accordance with its laws as an expression of this right, and that no state shall be subjected to any forms of economic, political or other coercion which impedes the full and free exercise of that inalienable right.”

“That special attention should be given to the least developed countries, which should enjoy a net transfer of resources from the developed countries in the form of technical and financial resources as well as capital goods, to enable the least developed countries in conformity with the policies and plans for development, to accelerate their industrialisation.”

“The new distribution of industrial activities envisaged in a New International Economic Order must make it possible for all developing countries to industrialise and to obtain an efficient instrument within the United Nations system to fulfil their aspirations.”

One objective of the plan was to insure that by 2000 25-30% of world industrial production was to occur in the developing world – and not in the manner that has ensued in the current neoliberal order with the transfer of manufacturing to underdeveloped states in a manner that has rather intensified than diminished exploitation of both labor and resources.

With the rising tide of political changes in the developing world during the same time, a shift from neocolonialist dependency toward genuine independence and development, and the support of the Soviet-led socialist bloc – which with its industrial base was issuing longterm, low interest loans to southern nations for infrastructural and industrial projects – the prospects for the creation of new global economic and political order was on the near horizon.

But not everyone was pleased with this development.

The US – alone – opposed the Lima Declaration and the follow up New Delhi Declaration and Plan of Action four years later.

America’s NATO allies, almost to a member at the time former colonial powers bent on maintaining historical prerogatives over their former possessions, were no less dissatisfied.

And the People’s Republic of China, having lost earlier bids to dominate the world communist movement and what it deemed the Third World alike, was focused entirely on combating what it derided as “Soviet social imperialism” and after the secret meeting of Henry Kissinger and Chou En-lai in Beijing in 1971, followed by Richard Nixon’s meeting there with Mao Tse-Tung the next year, worked hand-in-glove with the US to counter Soviet influence around the world, including providing joint support to armed groups fighting against the governments of Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Ethiopia.

With what would in the 21st Century be called the US's hard power/soft power duality and rotation, the Nixon era method of dealing with the reorientation of developing nations away from the West and toward the East – most cynically and brutally exemplified by its support to the military overthrow of the elected Salvador Allende government in Chile in 1973 – gave way to that of the Carter administration and its foreign policy grey eminence and all-purpose Mephistopheles Zbigniew Brzezinski in January of 1977.

The Carter administration had barely moved into the White House when it began to bribe the governments of Somalia, Afghanistan, Egypt and Iraq into entering political and military alliances and in several cases giving notorious “green lights” for military invasions of other nations. Its foreign policy architect was not Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, but the man who brought about Vance's downfall and resignation over the Operation Eagle Claw fiasco in Iran in 1980: Brzezinski, an arch-Russophobe during the Soviet period and ever since even onto the grave.

Somalia is the main subject of investigation, but a brief review of similar cases is in order.

In its first year in office the Carter administration bought off Egypt's Anwar Sadat, splitting the Arab world, destroying any unified approach to the Palestinian catastrophe and the realization of UN resolutions 242 and 338 and ousting the Soviet Union as the fourth partner in the Middle East peace process, leaving Israel and Egypt armed and backed by the US and the rest of the Arab world, including Palestine, unrepresented, unprotected and defenseless.

Since 1979 Egypt has been the second largest recipient of US military aid in the world, with only Israel besting it in that category. Over the past thirty years Egypt has received more US aid, over \$30 billion, than any other country.

In the period between Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel in November of 1977 and the Camp David Accords of September of 1978, in March of 1978 Israeli launched an invasion of Lebanon, Operation Litani, with over 25,000 troops, a warm-up exercise for the full-fledged attack of 1983.

This was one of the green lights given by the Carter administration.

A year later Washington gave a green light to China to invade Vietnam, according to Beijing to “punish” the latter for its role in helping drive the Khmer Rouge from Cambodia the previous year.

In the summer of 1978 US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, emulating Kissinger's trip in 1971, paid a secret visit to Beijing to normalize relations with China, leading to recognition of the People's Republic and derecognition of Taiwan on January 1, 1979.

On January 29, 1979 Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping arrived in Washington, the first visit by a senior Chinese official to the United States since 1949.

According to former Balkans hand and current US Afghanistan-Pakistan point man Richard Holbrooke, the trip “began with a private dinner at Brzezinski's house.” [1]

Deng left on February 6 and eleven days later China launched an invasion of Vietnam along its entire northern border.

Reports exist that in July of 1980 US CIA officials – some rumors say Brzezinski himself – travelled to the Jordanian capital of Amman to meet with high-ranking officials of the Iraqi government. Then Iranian president Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr claims the meeting included both Brzezinski and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. [2]

As recently as March of 2009 Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei renewed the accusation, stating that "They gave Saddam the green light to attack our country. If Saddam had not received the green light from the U.S., most probably he would not have attacked our borders."

Later the first Reagan administration secretary of state, Alexander Haig, wrote in a memo to Reagan that "President Carter gave the Iraqis a green light to launch the war against Iran through [Saudi Arabian Prince] Fahd."

In appreciation of Somalia's geostrategic importance, in the first days of the Carter-Brzezinski administration efforts were made to wean Somalia from its pro-Soviet stance and to secure military, mainly naval, bases on its territory.

The covert campaign was largely conducted through the mediation of Saudi Arabia and in July led to the Somali invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia with tens of thousands of troops, tanks and warplanes.

"Somalia had mounted its major offensive in Ogaden because of a U.S. promise to furnish arms aid. The U.S. policy had resulted from Ethiopia's decision to expel U.S. military advisers from the country and its successful bid for aid from the Soviet Union.

"According to the report, Somali President Mohamed Said Barre had received secret U.S. assurances that the U.S. would not oppose 'further guerrilla pressure in the Ogaden' and would 'consider sympathetically Somalia's legitimate defense needs.' [3]

The Soviet Union and its Cuban ally assisted Ethiopia and the US and China, mainly through Saudi Arabia, provided arms to Somalia.

Brzezinski urged the deployment of the US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk to the region as a show of support to Somalia and an act of defiance toward the Soviet Union and its Ethiopian ally and, referring to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks of the time, said "SALT lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden," as a report of the time phrased it "signifying the death of detente."

Somalia was defeated and withdrew the last of its military forces from the Ogaden Desert in March of 1978. Estimates are that the war cost Somalia one-third of its army, three-eighths of its armored units and half of its air force.

It marked the beginning of the end for Barre and for Somalia itself. Barre would linger on as president of a weakened Somalia until his overthrow in 1991, yet another former client cast off after having served his purpose.

His ouster would be followed by years of conflict between rival armed militias and US military intervention that caused the deaths of thousands of Somalis.

Yet for all the horrors US administrations from that of Carter to the current one have visited upon the Somali people, Washington gained what it intended to: Military bases and forces astride many of the world's most strategic shipping lanes and chokepoints in an area

encompassing the Suez Canal and the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.

In 1977 the Carter White House issued a presidential directive calling for a worldwide mobile military force which in October of 1979 Carter would officially designate Rapid Deployment Forces (RDF).

The site for its first deployments were to be the recently acquired military client states of Somalia and Egypt along with Sudan, Oman and Kenya.

The initiative was inaugurated as the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) on March 1, 1980 and according to its first commander, "It's the first time that I know of that we have ever attempted to establish, in peacetime, a full four service Joint Headquarters." [4]

Originally envisioned to focus on the Persian Gulf, the RDJTF was expanded to include Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia as well as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, the People's Republic of Yemen [Aden], Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the Yemen Arab Republic.

That is, from the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf to the eastern coast of Africa to the western one of the Indian subcontinent with the northern half of the Indian Ocean and its seas and gulfs included.

Carter's announcement of the launching of the Rapid Deployment Forces preceded by three months his 1980 State of the Union Address in which he laid out the doctrine that has since borne his name.

Coming less than a month after the first Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, Carter's comments included this disingenuous hyperbole:

"The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: It contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world's oil must flow."

That at the time a small handful of Soviet troops had arrived in Kabul, the capital of a landlocked nation hundreds of miles from one of the world's five oceans, could in no conceivable manner affect the Straits of Hormuz.

Carter continued: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

Brzezinski claims credit for authoring the second half of the above sentence, modeling it on the Truman Doctrine "to make it very clear that the Soviets should stay away from the Persian Gulf." [5]

It is exactly the Carter Doctrine that was employed by the US for its two wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and for its ongoing military presence in the Persian Gulf in preparation for aggression against Iran.

As “soft power” Carter was succeeded by “hard power” Reagan, the Rapid Deployment Forces were converted into Central Command, the US’s first new regional military command since World War II, under Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

Central Command (CENTCOM) has as its area of responsibility twenty nations: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. It also takes in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and western portions of the Indian Ocean.

It also included the only African nations not formerly assigned to the European and Pacific Commands – Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia and the Sudan – until all 53 African states were turned over to the new African Command last October.

CENTCOM was the main force in the 1991 and 2003 wars against Iraq and the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Both Iraq and Afghanistan remain in its area of responsibility and its current commander, General David Petraeus, is in charge of operations in both nations.

It has bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Pakistan and Central Asia and until recently at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa, now part of African Command.

The Command’s zone of operations is in fact the northern half of the Indian Ocean from the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz where some 40% of the oil shipped in the world passes to the Gulf of Aden where, as recent reports frequently repeat, ten percent of all global shipping occurs to the Strait of Malacca between Malaysia and Indonesia where 25% of world trade, including half of all sea shipments of oil and two-thirds of global liquefied natural gas shipments bound for East Asia, pass.

In addition to the US, NATO launched its first naval operation in the Gulf of Aden last October and has now resumed it with the deployment of the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1).

The SNMG1 held naval maneuvers with Pakistan last week off the coast of Karachi in the Arabian Sea.

These deployments are a continuation of NATO’s plans in the region described last year by veteran Indian journalist M K Bhadrakumar in an article titled “NATO reaches into the Indian Ocean”:

“By October 15 [2008], seven ships from NATO navies had already transited the Suez Canal on their way to the Indian Ocean. En route, they will conduct a series of Persian Gulf port visits to countries neighboring Iran – Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which are NATO’s ‘partners’ within the framework of the so-called Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. The mission comprises ships from the US, Britain, Germany, Italy, Greece and Turkey.

“NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General John Craddock, acknowledged that the mission furthers the alliance’s ambition to become a global political organization.

“By acting with lightning speed and without publicity, NATO surely created a *fait accompli*.

“NATO’s naval deployment in the Indian Ocean region is a historic move and a milestone in the alliance’s transformation. Even at the height of the Cold War, the alliance didn’t have a presence in the Indian Ocean. Such deployments almost always tend to be open-ended.

“In retrospect, the first-ever visit by a NATO naval force in mid-September last year to the Indian Ocean was a full-dress rehearsal to this end. Brussels said at that time, ‘The aim of the mission is to demonstrate NATO’s capability to uphold security and international law on the high seas and build links with regional navies.’ In 2007, a NATO naval force visited Seychelles in the Indian Ocean and Somalia and conducted exercises in the Indian Ocean and then re-entered the Mediterranean via the Red Sea in end-September.

“[An] Indian warship [dispatched off the coast of Somalia] will eventually have to work in tandem with the NATO naval force. This will be the first time that the Indian armed forces will be working shoulder-to-shoulder with NATO forces in actual operations in territorial or international waters.

“The operations hold the potential to shift India’s ties with NATO to a qualitatively new level.” [6]

Securing the safe passage of vessels in the Gulf of Aden and particularly those delivering United Nations World Food Programme aid is a legitimate concern.

But plans by the United States and NATO to take control of the whole Indian Ocean for military purposes and to insure global energy dominance is not a legitimate concern.

Notes

- 1) Project Syndicate, December 28, 2008
- 2) My Turn To Speak: Iran, The Revolution And Secret Deals With The U.S, 1991
- 3) Newsweek, September 23, 1977
- 4) Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies Journal, June 1981
- 5) Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser
- 6) Asia Times, October 20, 2008

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