STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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# THE OGADEN WAR: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS CAUSES AND ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL PEACE ON THE HORN OF AFRICA

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USAWC STRATEGIC RESEARCH PROJECT

**The OGADEN War**: An analysis of its causes and its impact on regional peace on the Horn of Africa.

by

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ABSTRACT

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The OGADEN War, a brief but costly war fought by Ethiopia and Somalia had been aggravated by outside intervention for many years, and in 1970s by the so called superpowers. At the heart of the issues underlying the OGADEN War in the Horn of Africa lie three legacies of the past: European colonial rule; Somali irredentism; and superpowers intervention. Fundamentally, this costly war did not achieve any tangible positive result as far as the Horn of Africa is concerned. Indeed OGADEN and other border issues between Ethiopia, Somalia and other regional neighbors remain unresolved some 19 years after the OGADEN War. This conflict can be viewed as a meaningless tragedy for the people of the Horn of Africa.

## CONTENTS

Abstact----------i

Contents----------ii

Introduction----------1

Aim & Historical Background----------3

Terrain Analysis----------5

Military Balance----------7

Prelude & Causes of War----------8

Conduct of War----------13

Lessons Learned----------20

Conclusion----------23

Bibliography----------25

Notes----------26

# THE OGADEN WAR

## INTRODUCTION

The OGADEN war, a brief but costly war fought by Ethiopia and Somalia that ended in Somalia defeat and withdrawal in the summer of 1978, was viewed differently by different sides. To the Ethiopian government, it was a war of aggression, and the Ethiopian Army was fighting to defend the territorial integrity of its country. To Ethiopian Marxist radicals on the other hand, it was a "reactionary war" which diverted attention from crucial national, political and economic issues.[1]

The African governments by and large condemned Somalia as the aggressor, citing the sanctity of the colonially fixed boundaries accepted by the OAU at the Cairo Conference in 1964. When Somalia invaded Ethiopia's OGADEN region in September 1977, the OAU condemned the move and as a consequence the irredentist claim of Somalia found little or no support at all in Africa. To put the OGADEN war into perspective, it is appropriate to begin with a brief regional geographic analysis and historical background of both Ethiopia and Somalia.

The Horn of Africa approximately covers an area of 2,033,283 Sq. Km and is usually understood to comprise Djibouti, Somalia and Ethiopia. It is a geographical region falling within that horn-shaped part of north-eastern Africa that protrudes into the Indian Ocean, literally like a rhino horn. The Sudan, Kenya, Red Sea and the Indian Ocean are important neighbors of this strategic region. The Horn has conflicting cultural and religious traditions and has been an arena of uninterrupted armed conflict for many decades prior to the OGADEN War. This conflict, rooted in history and geography, has been aggravated by

outside intervention for many years, and in the 1970s, by the so called "superpowers". At the heart of the issues underlying the OGADEN War in the Horn lie three legacies of the past: European colonial rule; Somali irredentism; and superpower intervention or penetration (with Ethiopia as the main focus).[2]

The legacy of the European colonial rule

Most of Africa's fifty-three states are multi-ethnic, artificial creations, largely the product of the European scramble for Africa in the 1880s. The colonial powers divided the peoples in the territories they claimed largely for their own administrative convenience, generally ignoring precolonial social or political organizations and arrangements. Consequently, during the colonial period, African peoples of very different cultures were thrown together in new politics containing ethnic groups with few (if any) prior relationships.

The legacy of Somalia irredentism

This could be rated as one of the most crucial of the three legacies. It is, of course true that the Somali people are not the only ones divided up into territories claimed by different colonial powers. However, the OGADEN differs from other colonial territories in Africa in a number of ways. First, in the late 19th century, Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia, took advantage of European rivalry to extend the borders of his empire at the expense of the Somali-speaking people of the OGADEN. The eventual demarcation of boundaries between Ethiopia and the European colonial powers imposed an artificial separation between closely-related Somali peoples who never recognized the authority of the colonizers. Ethiopian control over the region, always tenuous, was disrupted by the Italian conquest of Ethiopia ( from Somalia and Eritrea) in the mid 1930s, followed by British "Liberation" and occupation. The departure of the British from the OGADEN in 1948, and its subsequent re-occupation by

Ethiopia without due regard to the wishes of the local Somalis, turned the Horn of Africa into a persistent area of conflicts. In 1960 Somalia obtained its independence and the new republic set for itself the task of recovering all the "lost territories", including the OGADEN, which was (as still is) a part of Ethiopia.[3]

The legacy of superpowers rivalry and intervention

Despite the historic roots of domestic and regional conflicts in Africa, a new dimension was added during the Cold War. In the 1970s and 1980s the two major World Blocs were heavily involved in supporting clients in the Horn. In the process of pursuing what they considered their own vital interests, the superpowers contributed to an escalation of a regional arms race. It was the norm during this period that, while the Soviets and the Americans jockeyed to check each other, the Ethiopians and Somalis tried to outfox one another. One particularly negative consequence for the Horn was the disaster now known by the name of "The OGADEN War" of 1977-1978.

## AIM

The aim of this Strategic Research Project is to appraise and analyze the historical issues and causes of the OGADEN War of 1977-1978 between Ethiopia and Somalia with a view to determining the strategic end - state sought by the Somali government. This paper will assess the impact of the superpowers involvement and intervention in the Horn of Africa, and highlight the lessons learnt from the OGADEN conflict, and the strategic security impact this conflict has had on the whole region of the Horn.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the OGADEN conflict a cursory look at the historical background is most appropriate. In the Horn of Africa, the Somalis have some religious and cultural

similarities to those of the Arabs live just to their north across the Red Sea. (The Arabs and the people of the Horn traded for millennia). The contact intensified with the spread of Islam after the 7th Century. On the other hand, the Ethiopians, now mostly Christians, are believed to be descendants of Afro-Asiatic speaking peoples who migrated from the north along the great rift valley. Christianity in the region dates back to the 4th Century.[4] The kings of Ethiopia were thought to have divine powers, as their subjects accepted the notion that they derived their powers from a perceived legendary union between the Israeli King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Ethiopian kings legitimacy depended largely on this purported lineage. In the 16th Century, the Christian-Muslim conflict emerged in form of raids and counter raids for material and slaves. In 1529, the renowned Somali leader Ahmed "Gran" won a major battle at Shimra Kure. However, in 1543 the Ethiopian Emperor Guladewos (with the support of the Portuguese) defeated Ahmed and subsequently killed him.[5]

When the European Scramble for Africa began in the late 19th Century, the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II laid claim to the whole of OGADEN region and was duly recognized as one of the three colonial players in the dismemberment of Somalia, the other two being Britain and Italy. Menelik who had founded the present day Addis Ababa in 1893 extended his control over most of present-day Ethiopian especially after 1896 when he defeated the Italians at the Battle of Adowa. As it is believed by the people of Ethiopia today, Menelik unified the region into one centralized state. However, when Menelik died in December 1913, Lij Liyasu who succeeded him and who was a Muslim, sought to revive Muslim predominance and established cordial relations with the Somali rebel leader Mohammed Abdulla Hassan. Lij Liyasu was quickly deposed. Since then, Ethiopian attitudes towards Somalia has been influenced by the fears of Somali irredentism. The Ethiopian-

Somali border, which is a key bone of contention between the two countries, underwent changes or shifts several times by treaties and conventions from 1888 to 1950. Some of the most notable are as follows:

a. Anglo - Italian treaties of 1891

b. Anglo - Italian protocol of 1894

c. Franco - Ethiopian convention of 1897

d. Italian - Ethiopian convention of 1908

In 1936 in order to avenge the defeat of Adowa, Italy invaded Ethiopia assisted by approximately 40,000 Somalis. Emperor Hale Selassie was forced into exile and the Somali speaking areas of Ethiopia were annexed to Italian Somaliland in May, 1936. However, when the Italians were defeated in the Horn of Africa by the British in 1941, the OGADEN remained united with Somalia under the British rule. When the British withdrew from Somalia at the end of the war, Ethiopia claimed and quickly re-occupied the OGADEN region.[6]

## TERRAIN ANALYSIS

It is most appropriate to begin with the terrain analysis of the area of conflict. The Horn of Africa is a region of great strategic importance. It contains air and sea ports and sea routes of international significance. Situated at the northeastern corner of the continent, it consists of the countries of Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, and parts of Kenya. The great rift valley dissects the subregion from the northeast to the southwest. Lying to the east is the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, in the south there is the Indian Ocean, and to the north and in the west there is the Sudan and the source of the River Nile. For the sake of brevity and ease of

reference, this terrain analysis has been confined strictly to the areas adjacent to the OGADEN region, and only a brief geographic overview of both Ethiopia and Somalia has been included.[7]

Ethiopia is one of the biggest countries in the Horn and has an area of approximately 1,251,282 Sq. Km. It stretches from Eritrea to the Sudan in the north and west, southwards to Kenya, and to the east and southeast to Djibouti and Somalia. Elevations in the country range from 100M below sea level in the Dallow Depression to 4000M above sea level in the South Mountains of central highlands. Some of this includes part of the OGADEN region. The southern half of Ethiopia is bisected by the great Rift Valley which ranges from 40Km - 60Km in width. The highlands to the east which extend to OGADEN region are drained south-eastward by rivers Shabelle and Juba. These highlands overlook the OGADEN plains which are predominated by sandstones and limestones as they extend into Somalia. The road network is not fully developed and in some areas of the OGADEN it is virtually non-existent, hence vehicular movement is significantly impeded especially during rainy seasons.[8]

The Somalia republic, like Ethiopia, also lies in the Horn of Africa. It has a long coastline on the Indian ocean extending to the Gulf of Aden. To the north, Somalia faces the Arabian peninsula, to the northeast it is bounded by the republic of Djibouti, while to the western and southern is bounded by Ethiopia and Kenya respectively. The dry savanna plains characterized by lava rocks and sand, offer unrestricted mobility for tanks though they pose formidable obstacles to wheeled vehicles. It is worth noting that these dry savanna plains common to Somalia extend into the OGADEN region. The climate is generally hot and dry throughout the year in the OGADEN region. The strategic location of the Horn of Africa

(and the surrounding areas) such as the Red Sea, East Africa and Persian Gulf probably invited more than its fair share of interest and involvement by external powers.[9]

## MILITARY BALANCE

The military balance prior to the OGADEN war in the Horn of Africa in 1977 between Ethiopia and Somalia is important to understand. Ethiopia and Somalia had some 51,000 and 25,000 personnel under arms organized respectively as follows:

| | Ethiopia | Somalia |
|---|---|---|
| Army | 48,000 | 22,000 |
| | 1 Mech. Division. | 6 Tk. Battalions |
| | 3 Inf. Divisions | 9 Mech. Battalions |
| | 1 Airborne Inf. Battalion | 5 Inf. Battalions |
| | 3 Artillery Battalions | 2 Commando Battalions |
| | 2 Engineer Battalions | 6 Field & 5 AA Artillery Battalions |
| | 4 Armored Squadrons ( M 60, M 41 Lt, M 113 APCs, AML 240/60) | 7 Armored Battalions ( T 34, 50, 54, 55, BTR40 & 152 APCs) |
| Airforce | 36 Combat Aircraft | 66 Combat Aircraft |
| | 1 Bomber Squadron | 1 Bomber Squadron |
| | 3 Fighter Squadrons | 1 Fighter Squadron |
| | 1 Recce Squadron | 2 Fighter Attack Squadrons |
| | 3 Transport Squadrons | 1 Transport Squadron & |
| | 1 Helicopter Squadron | 1 Helicopter Squadron |
| Navy | Assorted Patrol Boats | Assorted Patrol Boats |

Prior to the war, the arms and equipment for Ethiopia and Somalia were supplied by the superpowers the USA and the USSR respectively. The USSR was nevertheless, the more aggressive of the two in the arms race in the Horn during and immediately after the war.[10] While Somalia maintained that intensive arms procurement from the Soviet Union was purely defensive in character, Ethiopia saw a growing threat on its eastern border.

After 1974, the local military equation had shifted further in favor of the Somali republic. In the first place, Ethiopia's traditional advantage in manpower was sapped by other military commitments in Eritrea, by the use of the forces to counter domestic opposition throughout the country and by the decimation of the senior officer corps as a result of politically-inspired purges in the Ethiopian army. In other areas, too, Ethiopia found itself at distinct military disadvantage. With regard to air-power for instance, Somalia established numerical parity with Ethiopia for the first time. This gain by Somalia was admittedly the commitment of the Soviets to arm their ally. In the 15 years prior to outbreak of the OGADEN war, the Somali army had been well trained, equipped, modernized and provided with an arsenal of very sophisticated Soviet weapons. Somalia could afford to mass its forces in the OGADEN.[11] As a result, Somalia enjoyed a distinct military advantage in the OGADEN region at the commencement of the conflict in 1977.

## PRELUDE AND CAUSES OF WAR

The republic of Somalia is made up of the former colonies of Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland. The two were united in 1960 as a result of popular insistence on union (and despite objection from some members of newly elected government). The foreign policy of Somalia since independence consists in large part of her attempts to achieve more

than symbolic unity between the republic and three fragments of the Somali nation still considered to be under "foreign" control.[12]

Somalia refused out of hand to acknowledge in particular the validity of the 1954 Anglo - Ethiopian treaty recognizing Ethiopia's claim over the OGADEN or in general the relevance of treaties defining the common border between the two countries. Its position was based on three crucial issues. First, the treaties disregarded the agreements made with the clans that put themselves under the British protection. Second, Somalis were not consulted on the terms of these treaties and as far as they were concerned they had not been informed of their existence. Third, these treaties violated the principle of self determination of the Somali people.[13]

Therefore, the new Somali republic set itself the task of recovering the "lost territories". These included the OGADEN which was and still is part of Ethiopia, DJIBOUTI which is an independent sovereign state and the Northern Frontier District which was and still is part of Kenya. To symbolize this historic mission, the Somali flag was emblazoned with Five Stars each representing one part of the greater Somali nation, the two final stars represented the former Italian and British colonies now constituting the Somali republic. Underlying the territorial claim which was based on historical, ethnic, linguistic and cultural continuity, was extraordinary phenomenon of Somali nationalism which encompassed all Somalis, both in Somalia and in the "lost territories".[14]

Somalia's defiance of African post colonial order, which the rest of Africa has accepted as the inevitable result of the colonial past, has been bold and heroic. It is therefore important to understand its roots, and how it has been able to survive both European colonial rule and the Ethiopian imperial experience. It is also particularly important to understand that

Somalia is the only state in Africa virtually all of whose citizens share a history, language, culture and religion. As a result of all the aforementioned, the dispute over the OGADEN region therefore became the main bone of contention between Ethiopia and Somalia.[15]

All along the provisional border between the two countries, as well as in the OGADEN, tension was rampant for the first five years of Somalia independence in 1960. Minor clashes between Ethiopian police and armed parties of Somalia nomads began within six months of Somalia's independence. Hostilities grew steadily in scope, eventually involving small scale actions between the Somali and the Ethiopian armed forces along the common border. In February 1964, an armed conflict erupted along the entire length of the Somali - Ethiopia frontier and Ethiopian warplanes conducted raids on targets well inside the Somali territory. Open hostilities were brought to an end in April through the mediation of the Sudan, which acted under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity. Although further significant military clashes ended for the time, the potential for future conflict remained very high.[16]

On 21 October 1969, the Somali army took over the government, with Major General Mohammed Siad Barre as the new leader of the Supreme Revolutionary Council. The democratic governmental structure was abolished and "scientific socialism" was introduced as the new ideology. At the same time, Somalia intensified its military build up with the assistance of the Soviet Union. In 1973 oil and natural gas were being prospected by ARMCO, a US company on the Ethiopian side along the common border. Somalia reacted by moving her troops to the border to shadow the activities of both the Ethiopian army and the prospecting American company. This once again increased tension in the OGADEN, but no direct confrontation occurred.[17]

In early 1970s, fractures in Ethiopian society became very evident. The country has always faced an uphill struggle in keeping its diverse regional factions and politically unruly population united under one central direction. In two years before the OGADEN war, a breakdown in internal security in Ethiopia reached alarming proportions. A new regime, which overthrew the government of Emperor Haile Selassie on 12 September 1974, faced various security threats. Key problems included the Eritrea Liberation Front fighting for the secession of the province of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the Western Somalia Liberation Front (supported by Somalia) fighting for the liberation of the OGADEN region from Ethiopia and its subsequent union with Somalia.[18]

The Ethiopian regime also found itself opposed by domestic groups such as the Tigray People Liberation Front which was advocating autonomy for Tigray province. After 1977, also the new US Administration of president-elect Carter expressed displeasure with Ethiopia's deteriorating human rights record, and consequently reduced sharply its aid. Realizing the desperation of his situation and the unwillingness of the US to provide support to his regime, Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam expelled US diplomatic and military advisors and turned to the Soviet Union for financial and military support.[19]

In the wake of this new development, the superpowers switched their backing in the Horn of Africa. This trend escalated the conflict in the OGADEN. During this time of turmoil in Ethiopia, the new Ethiopian regime managed to win support from the Soviet Union and her Eastern Bloc allies. The Somali government, on the other hand, expelled the Soviets and the Cubans from the country and offered the strategic (Soviet built) Berbera military base to the Americans. The shift of the superpowers alliances created uncertainty in the Horn and led to Somali misperceptions of Soviet and US intentions.

First, Somali leaders miscalculated how changing alliance patterns would affect the local balance of power. Second, the Somalis misjudged the nature of military aid that the US (and its allies) would be willing to provide. Third, the Somalis miscalculated how their intervention in Ethiopia would affect subsequent international involvement on the Horn. With regard to the latter, the Somalis miscalculated Soviet and US willingness (and capacities) to intervene in the Horn. They underestimated the degree of Soviet interest in maintaining an influence on the Horn, the length to which the Soviets were prepared to go in order to see their interests preserved, and the Soviet capacity to intervene in order to preserve those interests.[20]

Somalia badly overestimated the extent of the support it could expect from the West to counter Ethiopia's massive support from the Eastern Bloc. Somali strongman Siad Barre underestimated the degree of US interest, will, and capacity to intervene on his behalf. The Somalis failed to realize that the US was in no position to actively support their irredentist claims, least of all when those claims were pursued by overt military intervention against the territory of another sovereign state.

Somalia's misperceptions resulted from the failure to realize the international and regional trends affecting the two superpowers at the time. These included US reluctance after Vietnam to become involved in foreign conflicts. Moreover, the US considered Somalia to be the aggressor in the OGADEN conflict, and still regarded Ethiopia as the prize of the struggle.[21]

Similarly, the Soviet Union's involvement in Africa primarily was designed to undermined Western influence. Africa, and particularly the Horn, were the "boards" on which the game was played because they offered the ripest opportunities, not to mention

Ethiopia's increasing strategic importance to the Soviets. The ultimate fact was that the Soviet Union had the inside track on the Horn and both US and Soviet policy makers knew it. The Soviet advantage arose out of a variety of trends in international politics and certain circumstances of the local situation. But in summation, the shift of super power alliances, changes of political ideologies, Somali irredentism and the Ethiopian domestic instability were the major causes of the OGADEN war.[22]

## CONDUCT OF THE WAR

The OGADEN war began on 13 July 1977, two weeks after the two governments severed diplomatic relations, when Somalia mounted a full scale attack in the southern OGADEN and Bale province. Simultaneously, the Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF) attacked the major Ethiopian towns of Harar, Diredawa and Jijiga in the northern OGADEN. Despite its air superiority, the Ethiopian army was quickly and easily defeated. Jijiga, a major town and regional military cantonment, fell to WSLF and Somali control in early September 1977.[23]

The OGADEN war can be divided into Three Phases:

a. Phase I - Start of hostilities

b. Phase II - The invasion of the OGADEN by the Somali army

c. Phase III - The counter offensive by the Ethiopian army

Phase I: Prior to the war, the Soviets strongly pressured Somali strongman Siad Barre to avoid hostilities, but the Somalis, sensing success, would not accept a peaceful settlement of the dispute. Soviet efforts to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia ended in failure, and the Russians were in any case leaning toward the Ethiopia regime, which suddenly appeared to them the more attractive of the two belligerents. The Somali regime was unwilling to give up

its dream of liberating the OGADEN at this time of seemingly golden opportunity. Only one course seemed most appropriate to Siad Barre: a quick and decisive military action, presenting the world with the **fait accompli** of a reconquered OGADEN.[24]

Siad Barre in 1976, first attempted to negotiate regional autonomy for the OGADEN by sending Somali government representatives to discuss the matter with Ethiopian authorities, but all these efforts were fruitless. By the spring of 1977, the WSLF had already began to step up its military activities in the OGADEN by capturing most of the countryside in Bale province. Sensing that the Ethiopian regime was vulnerable, Siad Barre increased his government's direct support of the WSLF which coincided with the decision by the new US administration of President Carter to greatly reduce its military support of Ethiopia.

The temptation of a deeply divided and strife ridden Ethiopia proved too great for Siad Barre. However the Somali president needed to assure himself that the hard-pressed Ethiopians would not receive massive external assistance. A second consideration for the Somali regime was the avoidance of war of attrition. Somalia lacked both human and material resources to sustain lengthy and protracted hostilities. But because of Ethiopia's internal situation, Siad Barre had every reason to believe that the war could be brought to a rapid conclusion.[25]

The combat readiness of the Somali military had been honed by 15 years of Soviet military assistance in equipment supply, training and modernization. Of even of greater significance, a number of regular Somali units had gained invaluable combat experience through service in the WSLF in the OGADEN region. Fighting in the insurgent conflict prior to the July 1977 war provided the Somali military high command with useful knowledge of the enemy and the natural environment.

Therefore at the start of hostilities, the Somalis had excellent intelligence on Ethiopian order of battle and vulnerabilities in enemy defenses. This enabled the Somali army to isolate Ethiopian units in the southern OGADEN and defeat them in detail. During this phase, Ethiopia proved unable to reinforce its forces, and WSLF took control of much of central OGADEN. The Ethiopian military was incapable of defending against WSLF interdiction and sabotage of logistic centers. The WSLF effectively distracted the Ethiopian military and partially masked the intentions of the Somali army. When the regular Somali units crossed the border on 13 July 1977, Ethiopia appeared to be particularly vulnerable.[26]

Phase II: The isolation of Ethiopian units in much of the central and southern portion of OGADEN afforded Somalia military an opportunity to plan its invasion strategy without concern for flank protection. Armored and motorized infantry were launched in a classical double envelopment of Ethiopian forces, using the former British Somaliland and the adjacent border regions as launching points for avenues of attack during the initial stages of the invasion. The principal targets in the first thirty days of the invasion were the traditional strong points of Harar and Dire Dawa. As far as Somalia was concerned, the capture and occupation of these important regional cities would effectively seal the fate of the Ethiopian control of the OGADEN region. At the initial stages of the invasion, Somalia also intended to interdict the main line of communication between the capital city of Addis Ababa and Djibouti an important 300km commercial artery of Ethiopia.[27]

The **campaign plan** devised by the Somali military was sound both in setting and conception. The attack executed by the regular military units of Somalia in July 1977 to seize control of the OGADEN province of Ethiopia was well conceived, planned and had all the early indications of success. Within a period of two months, all the main communications

centers had been seized or captured, approximately three quarters of the OGADEN was now under Somali control and only two major towns remained in the hands of Ethiopians. At this phase, the Somali irredentist dream of national re-unification with one of the lost territories was about to be realized.

By November 1977, the key towns of Riambiro and Harrawa and much of the south OGADEN were all in the hands of the Somali military. Only Harar and Dire Dawa remained as obstacles to overall Somali military success in the OGADEN. The Ethiopians struggled to reinforce their units in the OGADEN, but the Somalis increased pressure with concentrated artillery, armor and air attacks against all other important regional centers. Kebu Dehar, Regan Bur and Jijiga were dully surrounded by both regular Somali army and WSLF forces and period of siege and bombardment followed. However, the Ethiopians established effective defensive perimeters in these towns and managed to hold the Somalis at bay through a combination of heavy fortifications and artillery counter fire directed at the main advance routes of the Somali forces.

Realizing the importance of gaining time while they built up their strength in the area, the Ethiopians sought to internationalize the conflict. They pressured the two superpowers to intervene. They also sought OAU condemnation of the Somali aggression. Both of these initiatives proved successful. The Soviets had became aware that the Somalis were making tentative overtures to the Americans for military aid and closer diplomatic ties. They also saw that the US "loss" of Ethiopia would result in the loss to the West of a foothold in vital proximity to the strategic sea lines of communications through the Red Sea linking eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. As Ethiopia hoped, the OAU condemned Somalia and supported the provision of military assistance to Ethiopia to reclaim her territory.[28]

During this period of time Somalia, was experiencing mounting difficulties in the grounds war. These pressing problems were:

a. Soviet supplied military equipment (particularly ground transport) did not measured up well to the strains of employment in the difficult terrain.

b. Somali logistical support for artillery and armor units was marginal, undermining efforts to seize Harar and Dire Dawa.

c. Somalia's military advantage was undermined by the refusal of Soviet Union to supply essentially needed spare parts. Instead, the Soviets provided massive support to the Ethiopia.

d. Lack of maintenance capability on the part of Somalia greatly contributed to its inability to exploit initial battlefield successes.

After the OAU decided to support Ethiopia, the Soviets began to supply Ethiopia with large quantities of modern weapons and equipment ultimately totaling about US $1 billion. They also arranged for Cuba to provide combat troops, training instructors, and pilots for newly acquired Soviet aircraft. Transferred to the hard pressed Ethiopians were entire inventories of light armor, artillery and aircraft ranging from MIG 17s to MIG 23s. At the same time, some Soviet generals and a number of military advisors were dispatched to Ethiopia to assist in directing the Ethiopian war effort.[29]

As this was happening, the Somalis continued the attack westwards, gaining control of tactical vital point to the whole area of Kara Mardan pass through the Ahmar mountains. However, the main Somali attack against the city of Harar, which had begun in September 1977, soon began to flounder as it encountered the joint forces of Ethiopia and Cuba using Soviet equipment. The Somali armor, until then was so successful, had by this time found itself significantly impeded by difficult terrain , Ethiopian heavy artillery and concerted air

attacks. The Somalis had committed virtually all their resources during the initial stages of the war. Their attack reached its culminating point by the end of October 1977. By this time they also were very short of ammunition as a result of Ethiopian air interdiction against the Somali army's rear-area infrastructure.[30]

Phase III: The counter offensive phase of the OGADEN war took place when it became apparent to the Ethiopians that they could not achieve a solution through diplomacy. Both the Soviets and Cubans expressed total support for Ethiopia in October 1977. The Soviets carefully assessed the degree to which the West might aid Somalia. By mid - January 1978 the Soviets had obviously concluded that Western intervention on behalf of Somalia was unlikely. Having made that determination, the Soviets began (by all previous standards) a spectacular infusion into Ethiopia of military hardware and troops by air and sea. This was in preparation for a counteroffensive which commenced in February 1978.

Soviet military strategy followed a classic model. Emergency assistance to blunt the immediate danger was the first order of business, with an estimated 400 tanks and 50 jet fighters provided to Ethiopia between December 1977 and early January 1978. This was to be accompanied by troops from the Soviet Union, Cuba and other East Bloc allies. These included approximately about 12000 Cubans, 2000 South Yemenis, 1000 East Germans and 2000 Soviets. The Ethiopians had realized that they needed time while they adapted to newly acquired Soviet equipment. The allied troops, especially those from Cuba, also required some time to adapt to the environment. Because of the tactical importance of Jijiga and the Ahmar mountains, the counter-offensive plan itself was developed by the senior Soviet advisor General Vaslov I Petrov. With Ethiopian concurrence, he envisioned a vertical envelopment to trap the Somalis in their positions and destroy them, having first cut off their escape routes

through the OGADEN plains. By January 1978, Ethiopia bolstered by the impressive array of external support and equipped with sophisticated Soviet military hardware, was in a position to launch its counter attack into the OGADEN.[31]

The Ethiopian Airforce, equipped with Soviet-supplied MIGs and US-supplied F-5s, struck at Somali held positions with intensity, and the Somali situation began to deteriorate. The Ethiopian and Cuban forces recaptured Jijiga on 5 March 1978, in a major victory that was organized by the Soviet generals. The key element was surprise. The Somalis had expected the Soviet and Cuban led Ethiopian forces to spearhead their attack through the strategic Kara Marda mountains range. But instead, the Russian planners and advisors organized a massive airlift of troops and an armored unit to positions behind the Somali forces. The Cubans on the other hand played the crucial role of skirting the mountains and attacking the Somali positions from the north and northeast. At the same time , heavy Soviet artillery pounded the Somali held positions at Kara Marda and thousands of Ethiopians militia were sent in successive waves, to draw fire to exhaust Somali ammunition supplies. The concept of this phase of Ethiopian operational plan had five major features as follows:

a. Make the Somalis believe that the main attack would come from the west through the Kara Marda pass.

b. Flank the Somali positions to the north of the mountains with a reinforced Cuban tank brigade.

c. Establish a staging point north east of the mountains for helicopter resupply to the forces that would block the Somali withdrawal.

d. Make a strong diversionary attack down the mountains pass with 3 infantry divisions supported by a Cuban mechanized brigade.

e. Launch a concentrated attack supported by about 8 artillery battalions and 3 fighter ground attack squadrons of MIG 21 from both north and west to destroy the Somali forces in Jijiga.

The main task force struck Jijiga supported by massive artillery fire, while Somali and other observers counted more than 130 airstrikes launched by Ethiopian Airforce. At the same time an armored brigade struck straight at the main Somali strong point at Kara Marda pass on the major LOC from Harar to Jijiga. The Somalis fought bravely, but by this time they had little armor of their own, no air cover and dwindling stocks of ammunition. When the Ethiopian airborne armored and other units overran the rear of the Somali forces, they were caught in a trap, hence they lost the initiative and were hamstrung by lack of logistical support. By the end of the counter offensive, the Somali forces were defeated and 4 Somali brigades were completely destroyed. By 5 March 1978, the Somali forces were completely routed from the OGADEN and the Somali government announced its intention to withdraw. Finally, by 10 March 1978, Ethiopia and her allies had recaptured the OGADEN and the war between the two countries was over.[32]

## LESSONS LEARNT

The defeat of the Somali army in the OGADEN seemed to hold new possibilities for both sides. However, nothing much changed immediately after the war. For the Ethiopians, the fruits of victory were not as sweet as they may have seemed in the days after the battle of Jijiga. The WSLF continued its war of liberation, undaunted by the defeat of the Somali army. Over time, it inflicted serious damage that drastically lowered the morale of the Ethiopian army in the OGADEN. On the other hand and as a result of their defeat, the Somalis realized that their irredentism had created more enemies than friends. Consequently,

they developed a more subtle strategy of abandoning the claims over the OGADEN, but retaining the right to assist the fight by OGADEN Somalis for "self-determination".[33]

The lessons learnt from the OGADEN war were many and varied, but for ease of reference, are grouped into two categories as follows:

a. Political

b. Military

Political

1. The Somalis miscalculated the Soviet's overall interests in the Horn. They thought that the Soviets could not forgo their strategic facilities in Somalia. The Soviet did, and this confirms the dictum that there are no permanent friends only permanent national interests.

2. The Somalis failed to foresee the consequences of playing a double game with the superpowers. Ambiguity in diplomatic signals from both the US and the Soviet Union reinforced Somali misperceptions about superpower positions on the OGADEN conflict. This encouraged the Somalis to resort to conventional war.

3. The Somali government failed to realize that, strategically, Ethiopia was more valuable to the superpowers than Somalia.

4. The Somalis counted for moral and material support from the Arab League that did not arrive, hence the depletion of their logistic capacity to sustained the battle.

5. Somalia was viewed by the world community as aggressor, thus condemned by the OAU and the UN and, on the other hand, Ethiopian action to reclaim her territory through assistance of allies was universally endorsed. This gave both Soviets and the Cubans the mandate to massively assist Ethiopia without the West (and in particular the US) intervening on Somalia's side.

6. Ethiopia's internal instability, on which the Somalis had counted for success, proved illusory. The Somali invasion turned out to be a unifying factor against external aggression.[34]

Military

1. The need for quick success and short war was essential to Somalia to achieve decisive results. Somalia did not have the capacity to sustain a long war due to lack of both material and human resources.

2. The Somali support of the WSLF was flawed, and lacked the tactical principle of concentration of force and objective. Thus, WSLF guerrillas were allowed to operate independently, exhausting their capabilities. When the Ethiopians launched the counter offensive, the Somalis were routed without much resistance.

3. Secrecy and surprise were the key principles of war employed successfully by the Somalis at the start of the OGADEN war. But they did not have coordinated and tangible campaign plans to destroy Ethiopian forces within a limited timeframe.

4. The Ethiopian decision to withdraw from the OGADEN plains on 15 August 1977 under heavy and combined Somali and WSLF forces attack was strategically sound. This move bought Ethiopia precious time for reorganization, pending arrival of Cuban and Russian reinforcements. The coalition had time to develop into a well coordinated fighting entity.

5. The Somalis did not continue the momentum of their attack on the eve of Ethiopian withdrawal from the OGADEN plains on 14 August 1977. The Somalis, for reasons better known to themselves, failed to exploit the initiative and maintenance of momentum after they captured Jijiga. At this time, the Ethiopians were in a state of disarray and if the Somalis

had pressed westward, they would have had little difficulty in seizing the rest of the OGADEN.

6. The use of Air power by Ethiopia proved decisive and lack of its use by Somalia proved detrimental.

7. Natural obstacles such as mountains do not protect an open flank on modern battlefield.

8. Related to the foregoing is the danger of concentrating defenses on mountain passes. The Somalis used all their resources to block the Kara Marda pass. The result of this tactical blunder was their ultimate annihilation in a trap of their own making, after a skillful envelopment by their adversaries.

9. Aerial resupply (by helicopters) to the Ethiopian forces during the counter offensive phase contributed substantially to the defeat of the Somalis.

10. The massive Soviet airlift and other logistical support tilted the operation in favor of Ethiopians.[35]

## CONCLUSION

At the heart of issues that underlie the OGADEN war were the three legacies, namely, European colonial rule, Somalia's irredentist claims and the superpower involvement and intervention in the Horn of Africa. But the war also was due to serious errors in judgment by Somali leaders. As an aggressor, Somalia's perceptions were accurate only with respect to the existence of a local power imbalance.

Regarding the prospects of external support for its irredentist claims, Somalia overestimated the degree of potential Western support and underestimated the potential intensity of Soviet and Cuban support for Ethiopia. There are other regional, local and

international factors that contributed to the outbreak of the conflict, notable among these were the domestic instability of Ethiopia, the rise of Somali power, and the ambiguous signals by Western countries concerning potential support for Somalia.[36]

Despite concerted efforts from the Soviets, the US, OAU and the UN to restrain them, the Somalis would not accept a peaceful settlement of the dispute. This costly war did not achieve any tangible positive result as far as the Horn of Africa is concerned. Indeed, in the long run it contributed to the collapse of Somalia as a state in 1990, a condition still true as this is written in 1997. Fundamentally, OGADEN and other border issues between Ethiopia, Somalia and other regional neighbors remain unresolved some 19 years after the OGADEN war. The conflict can be viewed as a meaningless tragedy for the people of the Horn of Africa.

Notes

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