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**From Destabilising to Restabilising:  
South Africa's military transition and its capacity for peacekeeping**

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**Introduction**

Fifteen years ago, the South African military actively fought to destabilise African states. Today it is being asked to 'restabilise' African states - through peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations. South Africa's elected leadership has noble aims in their desire to pacify long running African conflicts, and their skill in bringing together political coalitions to assist with peace efforts is clear. However, ending wars requires multinational military peacekeepers from an increasingly reluctant world. Commendably, South Africa has shown a willingness to support diplomacy by pledging troops as a part of multinational peacekeeping missions. But 10 years since the change to democracy has the military transformed enough to perform such a task?

**Capabilities**

South Africa is home to one of the largest and most effective militaries in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of its personnel have invaluable combat experience and its equipment (mostly manufactured domestically) is designed specifically for African-style conflicts. A new R30 billion package of arms purchases will ensure that the South African Air Force retains unassailable regional superiority long into the future. The same package will dramatically increase the navy's size and operational capabilities. Another positive attribute of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) is its subservience to the civilian government. The apartheid military of old greatly influenced and on occasion actually challenged the authority of the government,<sup>1</sup> the new South African military is solidly under civilian control. At the same time, South Africa remains the uncontested regional military power in Southern Africa, and there are few doubts that the military is fully willing and capable of defending the country's geographic borders against any conceivable threat.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stiff, *Silent War: South Africa Recce Operations 1969-1994*, Galago Books, 1999. Stiff mentions a number of instances when the military directly challenged or ignored the orders of the civilian government, the most obvious of which was the continued support for RENAMO forces in Mozambique long after the South African government had order such support to end.

## **What About Peacekeeping?**

In fact, conventional military threats to South Africa are minimal and are unlikely to increase in the foreseeable future. The SANDF is much more likely to be used for ‘missions other than war’ in other parts of Africa. These missions will be either humanitarian – such as the recent assistance to Mozambique to help alleviate flood related problems – or peacekeeping and peace enforcement. *Peacekeeping* involves the use of armed soldiers to keep warring factions apart when all relevant factions have agreed to a truce. *Peace enforcement* actually involves direct combat and uses troops to force a peace where warring factions are reluctant to end their conflict.<sup>2</sup> Both missions require committed and disciplined soldiers and specialized training, and both missions are highly dangerous and stressful for the militaries involved.

Nevertheless, in the next year the SANDF could be committed to difficult and high-risk African peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations, most likely in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Such a mission could very well shake the institution to the core. Current Navy and Air Force assets are likely to prove inadequate to supply and support distant large-scale operations without external assistance. The recent arms purchases focus on combat assets and will do little to change the inadequacy. But more importantly, embarking on such missions will test the degree to which the SANDF leadership and the civilian government are able to coordinate political goals with military capabilities. The SANDF is capable of an effective deployment, but of a limited nature, and it must be approached with extreme caution.

## **The pace of transformation: too fast or too slow?**

Two incidents in the past two years revealed unhealed post-apartheid wounds that are ominous indicators of the state of the SANDF: the bloody Lesotho intervention in September 1998 and the murder a year later of seven white officers at the Tempe Army base by a black soldier. Ironically, the mistakes of the first incident were caused by too rapid transformation, while the tragedy of the second incident was due to the widely perceived sluggishness of the transformation.

The Lesotho intervention by SADC troops painfully revealed many operational flaws within the army. What should have been a peaceful deployment of peacekeepers into a neighbouring country quickly fell into confusion and chaos. Poor planning, incomplete and inept intelligence, poor communication between the government and the military, and inexperienced leadership left the first South African peacekeepers with no live ammunition to face armed rioters - tragically resulting in dozens of deaths. Instead of being hailed for bringing order to Lesotho, the SANDF was perceived as an invader. The intelligence services had failed to warn of this

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Malan of ISS says, “As far as the peace enforcement option is concerned, this is obviously something that would be avoided like the plague by Foreign Affairs.” “Renaissance Peacekeeping – A South African solution to conflict in the DRC?”, Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper No. 37, March 1999. However, the DRC situation is so complex it seems likely that any troops committed there as peacekeepers have a high likelihood of evolving into peace enforcers.

possibility.<sup>3</sup> While the mission ultimately achieved its primary goals, it was much more difficult and bloody than it should have been.

While the SANDF came away with many “lessons learned” from the operation, the reality is that it was a small peacekeeping deployment (the initial contingent was only 600 troops) into a tiny country in close proximity to South Africa.<sup>4</sup> A full deployment to DRC could theoretically involve as many as 10,000 troops or more with a long supply chain. And of course, once in DRC the SANDF would be faced with the horrendous task of sorting out multiple combating factions. Even the best-prepared militaries would find such a mission a daunting task. However, even if the operational weaknesses have been corrected, long simmering internal racial stresses could undermine SANDF peacekeeping efforts.

The shooting incident at Tempe Army base starkly revealed the unresolved racial tensions that simmer just below the surface. While conceding that the black soldier responsible was probably suffering from mental problems, the often-divergent reactions by soldiers of different races to the incident starkly illustrated how far the army has to go before it is able to face external conflicts without internal conflicts distracting it from its mission. The army has been walking a tightrope in attempting to maintain combat effectiveness while transforming into a more stable multi-ethnic organisation.<sup>5</sup> It is balancing the need to retain experienced and skilled white officers while at the same time integrating blacks into the military leadership as quickly as possible. The ex-SADF career officers who continue to serve in the SANDF through its transformation pains thus far are remarkably committed to the new military and new South Africa and uncomplaining of the many sacrifices they have had to endure. Nevertheless, affirmative action programs have created a “canvas ceiling” for most white career officers, prompting many to retire prematurely; taking their irreplaceable skills and experience with them. Clearly, the combination of lost white officer talent and inexperienced black officers contributed to the Lesotho problems. Nevertheless,

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<sup>3</sup> Gavin Cawthra, “Countdown to Lesotho invasion by SA troops”, *Business Day*, 23 September, 1998; also numerous discussions with SANDF personnel.

<sup>4</sup> For the official SANDF views on the Lesotho operation “Boleas”, see [www.mil.za/SANDF/Media/Operations/Operation\\_Deployments/Boleas/military\\_perspective.htm](http://www.mil.za/SANDF/Media/Operations/Operation_Deployments/Boleas/military_perspective.htm). The document emphasizes the attempts at a non-violent intervention but does accept there were some mistakes. It also blames the press for the reputation as a military fiasco, “Unfortunately this transparent approach worked against the SANDF. Information which was not in accordance with the provisions of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) seemed to have been passed to the media. The glaring images of the chaos in Maseru, the fierce fighting and the casualties being evacuated detracted from simple facts such as the comparative ease with which the military goals were reached, the balance of advantages the operation had for Lesotho and the contribution it made to stability inside the country. The honesty and objectivity of the DoD approach worked against it. Perceptions triumphed over realities and facts.” Other SANDF documents focus on the unpreparedness of the SANDF for the type of operation, the failure of logistics to properly supply the forces involved, the poor communication over the political goals of the operation, and severely criticize the intelligence services for poor performance and lack of necessary skills.

<sup>5</sup> “SANDF Racial Tension Widespread”, *Sowetan*, 15 November, 1999. “The report into the Tempe killing found that there is a perception among top management in the Free State Command that transformation is moving fast, even too quickly, whereas lower ranks believe the changes are too slow.”

transformation is essential for the survival of the army as a truly representative and legitimate organization.

### **Government recognition of SANDF limitations.**

It is important that civilian leaders in the South African government do not assume the South African military is able to begin a large-scale peacekeeping deployment (more than 2,000 troops) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The reality is that the military still has far to go in the transition process. To move from a devastatingly effective apartheid military machine, to a truly competent multi-ethnic peacekeeping force will take several more years. While small deployments could be useful for morale and training, large-scale peacekeeping deployments during this fragile period of transformation should be avoided if possible. At worst, such deployments could prove bloody, leading to political humiliation, and militarily disastrous consequences for South Africa. Recent events in Sierra Leone harshly illustrate the perils of peacekeeping operations.

Fortunately, statements emanating from the government indicate that the limitations of the SANDF are understood. Minister of Defence Mosiuoa Lekota, while indicating SANDF willingness to participate in DRC peacekeeping missions emphasizes the need for the proper conditions to be in place beforehand, and that any deployment of South African troops in the DRC would only be to low-risk areas. Secondly, Nelson Mandela himself made clear his adept understanding of the limitations of the SANDF when he made an impassioned plea to the United States to actively participate in DRC peacekeeping as well.<sup>6</sup> As long as good lines of communication exist between the government and the military South Africa can play a limited but increasingly active role in African restabilisation.

### **Potential Demands on the SANDF**

Undoubtedly, the West has high hopes that South Africa will be the African solution to many of Africa's problems, alleviating the need for their substantive military involvement. They are clearly overly optimistic. South Africa can play a critical political role in stabilizing Africa, but as yet only a small military role. And there is no limit to the potential demand for South African attention.

The SANDF has a full plate of potential missions in the next few years. While the possible DRC peacekeeping operation is clearly on the front burner, the South African military has to consider the possibility that it may have a number of instabilities to calm closer to home.

- South Africa's immediate neighbors of Zimbabwe and Mozambique could both become security issues. If unrest in Zimbabwe becomes worse, it could directly impact South Africa in terms of refugees, illegal economic immigrants, and the loss of South Africa's largest African trading partner.

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<sup>6</sup> Spokes Mashiyane, "U.S. Military Backing Sought; Mandela predicts war could escalate", Reuters News Agency, 17 February, 2000.

Much less likely, Mozambique could potentially return to conflict over the recent disputed presidential elections. It is conceivable that the SANDF could be required to do anything from simply beefing up border security to limited peacekeeping to a more substantive police action.

- Despite the tumultuous SADC intervention in Lesotho, that country continues to show signs of instability. Ideally, another military intervention could be avoided through diplomacy and carefully directed political assistance, but Lesotho's instability will not end overnight.
- It is often forgotten that the SANDF is a key player in ensuring internal security, especially around elections. Large scale internal deployment saps the morale of military units, interferes with vital training operations and stretches military capacity needed for external deployments, but there seems little alternative at this time.
- Other, more distant conflicts could also require peacekeepers. Mandela's personal assistance in resolving the Burundi conflict could lead to military commitments. Should Ethiopia and Eritrea come to some sort of truce agreement, South Africa might be asked to commit peacekeepers to that conflict as well. Less likely would be peacekeepers for the Angolan conflict which shows no signs of ending, and Sierra Leone, whose current UN peacekeeping operation is clearly inadequate for the task.

South Africa will have many opportunities for peacekeeping deployments in the next few years. While the urge is strong to participate in numerous multinational operations, South Africa's political elite would be wise to limit the number and size of military deployments as much as possible. More time is needed to heal old wounds and prepare for the new challenges.

### **Peacekeeping Capabilities**

The military has recognized the need for training for peace operations, and Operation Blue Crane in April 1999 brought together 4,700 troops from the SADC to learn the necessary techniques. Blue Crane was a good start, and subsequently there has been a strong emphasis on ongoing peacekeeping training for officers in the SANDF. There are a number of healthy indications that military officers and some politicians have taken "lessons learned" from the Lesotho intervention to heart.

Of three mechanized infantry battalions being specifically earmarked for peacekeeping operations, one (2 South African Infantry – 2 SAI) is currently ready for immediate deployment and two others could be ready in six months. 2 SAI is unique in that its core comes from the old apartheid-era 32 Battalion, Angolans used against the MPLA government in Luanda. It has been supplemented with troops from the liberation armies but with an average age of around thirty, the troops are experienced, tough and capable. This unit has received extensive peacekeeping training and would welcome operational deployment. As the other peacekeeping battalions complete their training, it would be possible to maintain one battalion in the field indefinitely.

Combining 2 SAI with support units such as medical and engineering units, and Air Force transport helicopters with their maintenance and crews, South Africa could effectively deploy around 2,000 troops as a part of a multinational peacekeeping force. Air Force transport assets would be stretched to the limit, so supply and transport to the DRC would have to be contracted from private companies or come from other participants in the peacekeeping operation. If 2,000 troops seems small for a military of the size of the 90,000-strong SANDF, it should be remembered that many of the Army's battalions are tied up doing internal security operations and that it takes a huge amount of resources and months of training to prepare units for effective peacekeeping. Premature deployment would seriously strain the Army and the SANDF.

There are serious questions about whether such a force would be vulnerable to a Sierra Leone-type fiasco without some form of "quick reaction force" in case the peacekeeping troops end up in serious trouble. Lightly armed paratroopers could be flown in on a few hours notice from South Africa but commanders on the ground would much prefer something on immediate call in the DRC – such as armor or attack helicopters. However, such units create additional transportation and supply headaches and create political problems for what is supposed to be mission for peacekeeping – NOT peace enforcement. In light of the complexities of the DRC, those units should not be ruled out.

Despite its many problems, it must be emphasized that there are few – if any – militaries in sub-Saharan Africa that can match the SANDF in either training or equipment. Indeed, the South African army still maintains a certain level of irreplaceable combat experience from its involvements in then-South West Africa and Angola. While the infusion of the liberation armies as expected created transitional problems, these are gradually being overcome. The army's effective deployment capabilities are steadily increasing, but the critical question is whether they are increasing fast enough to satisfy Africa's many demands for their services.

## **Conclusions**

Once the scourge of Africa with its devastating ability to destabilise African states, the South African military has done an about-face and will soon be helping African states restabilise. It has made great strides in becoming a more diverse and legitimate military force. With peacekeeping missions likely to be the primary focus of the SANDF for at least the next decade, the military would greatly benefit from a re-evaluation of recent equipment purchases which are of little utility for such missions. While the SANDF has clearly lost some of its combat effectiveness from its peak in the 1980s, the necessary doctrinal changes have been instituted and it now boasts a small but growing peacekeeping ability. With additional resources and clear political direction from the civilian government the SANDF could potentially become as effective at restabilizing as the SADF was at destabilizing.

In the immediate case of the DRC, it is essential that the South African government resist international pressure and not over-commit the SANDF to a highly risky peacekeeping deployment. The SANDF is more capable than many would believe of deploying effective peacekeepers but only if such a deployment is limited to a size of

around 2,000 troops and only as a part of a larger multinational effort. Sending more than that magic number would mean sending units that are not yet fully trained or prepared for such delicate operations so far from home – a recipe for disaster. Peace *enforcement* operations should simply be avoided at this time.

If a greater peacekeeping commitment is needed or desired for the future, the SANDF will require substantive redirection of current policies and resources. This would make sense because there are no strategic threats on the horizon and the government has made clear its interest in making South Africa a key peace maker on the continent. With many potential hotspots in Africa, such a policy change should be instituted sooner rather than later.