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SOUTH AFRICAN ARMY PRIORITIES AND ROLES IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY*

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa entered a new democratic dispensation based on universal suffrage in 1994, five years after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. At the time there existed a state of euphoria, in which it was believed that there would be no security threats to the well-being of the South African state and its people in the near future. It was generally felt and even written in the media, that South Africa was posed to set a positive example to the international community, Africa in particular, and to areas of conflict around the world. The publicity given to the Truth Commission and the introduction of the very liberal South African Constitution supported these impressions.

However, in 1994 the genocide in Rwanda took place. African wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Angola, Somalia, and the Sudan, to name but a few were raging and no one,

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including South Africa had the influence to stop the carnage. By 2000 the slide into chaos in Zimbabwe was well under way when the agricultural sector was destroyed to suit the whims of the ZANU-PF leader, Robert Mugabe, who had a political disagreement with the commercial farmers.

One threat to South Africa has thus proved to be an unstable poverty-stricken and war-prone Africa whose peoples seek refuge in a relatively prosperous South Africa. South Africa itself is over-populated, has a high level of unemployment, high levels of crime and violence, an HIV/AIDS pandemic and many people living in abject poverty. To add to these problems, the South African authorities in spite of good policies leading to economic growth, based on an effective private sector, have not always been able to govern well. Ineffective governance leading to bad service delivery at district and municipal level, as well as the lack of employment opportunities, has resulted in strikes, civil disobedience, and to attacks on foreign nationals attributed to xenophobia.

The above conditions are reported on in the media daily. The roles of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in order to improve and stabilise conditions have been debated on continuously. The basic policy is that there should be one national police force which polices the country and fights crime, and that the SANDF, and in particular the army, with air force, navy and medical service support, should concentrate on peace-keeping operations in Africa. Whether the army is being employed to the best advantage of the state, and whether its present employment will ensure that South Africa has an effective multipurpose land force in future is debatable.

2. THE ROLES OF THE DEFENCE FORCE AS STIPULATED IN SOUTH AFRICAN LAW

According to the South African Constitution the "primary object of the defence force is to defend and protect the Republic, its territorial integrity and its people in accordance with the Constitution and the principles of international law regulating the use of force".¹⁾ The Constitution does not name any secondary objects or functions of the Defence Force but the *Interim Constitution* of 1993, which in this matter is still

applicable, provides that the Defence Force may be employed as follows:²⁾

- (a) For service in the defence of the Republic, for the protection of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- (b) For service in compliance with the international obligations of the Republic with regard to international bodies and other states.
- (c) For service in the preservation of life, health or property.
- (d) For service in the provision or maintenance of essential services.
- (e) For service in the upholding of law and order in the Republic in co-operation with the South African Police Service under circumstances set out in the law where the said Police Service is unable to maintain law and order on its own.
- (f) For service in support of any department of state for the purpose of socio-economic upliftment.

The law by way of the Constitution thus allows the government the desired latitude to employ the SANDF and the army as required to satisfy its strategic aims, and to secure and or stabilise the country in co-operation with other government departments when necessary. At present the strategic priorities are evident in that the vision of the Department of Defence (DoD) is seen as the "effective defence for a democratic South Africa".³⁾ The strategic focus of the DoD is to achieve an affordable, sustainable force design and structure by 2025 in order to meet the commitment to defend and protect South Africa and its people, and to support the government's strategy and its diplomatic initiatives in Africa.⁴⁾

For a number of years the DoD has made it clear that the SANDF's main task is the defence of the country, and that the army would train for that purpose. At the same time the priority task now is to deploy forces on peacekeeping operations in Africa, and that the Defence Force withdraws from borderline control and internal deployments as far as possible. Whenever asked defence spokesmen do, however, confirm that troops will be made available for internal deployments if needed.

When actual SANDF deployments on operations are considered it should be understood that the basic principle concerning deployments is that the army, air force, navy and medical services train and

make forces available for the Operations Division to employ. The concept can become quite confusing and is only mentioned so that the allocation of tasks to the SANDF and the army can be seen as one and the same thing.

3. MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS IN 2009

The SANDF's 'measurable objectives' for the army described as the Landward Defence Programme for the defence and protection of South Africa (2008), included the following forces for external and internal deployments:⁵⁾

- Three infantry battalions for external deployment;
- three infantry companies for internal deployment;
- three engineer squadrons for external deployment; and
- one composite engineer squadron for internal deployment.

The external deployment in real figures are reported to total about 3 000 troops at any one time. In February 2009 there were 636 troops in the Sudan, 973 in Burundi and 1 130 in the DRC.⁶⁾ Evidently a soldier's deployment usually spans a period of six months, and they can be deployed once in every three rotations. The average internationally is once in every five rotations, which means that an external deployment every third cycle is above average and is stretching the army's capacity somewhat.⁷⁾

3.1 Force deployments by the United Nations and the United States

The United Nations (UN) has many countries deploying troops for peacekeeping operations. In June 2006, 34 African countries were contributing 20 749 personnel for deployment in Africa.⁸⁾ That seems to be a great number but there are many unstable regions in Africa where peacekeeping contingents could be deployed, and their operations have clearly not brought much peace to the continent. The rules of engagement applied by UN peacekeepers, and the fact that the countries supplying the forces naturally do not accept injuries and losses to their troops lightly, makes the success rate of UN operations doubtful. Although the UN has deployed peacekeepers around the world with some

success, it has never been able to enforce a cease-fire. It can virtually be accepted as a principle that peacekeeping and peacemaking using military forces can only be achieved where all parties to a conflict desire to end hostilities.

The problem is partly that as soon as a force such as that of the United States (US) in Iraq, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Afghanistan is involved in peace enforcement, they are not seen as being neutral. They have been part of the conflict since the start of operations, and it has proved to be extremely difficult to end hostilities successfully and leave.

The UN thus has good reason to avoid Iraq and Afghanistan type conflicts. In spite of the efficiency of the troops involved in these conflicts, the 'surge' of US forces in Iraq to stabilise Baghdad and its surroundings required as many as 30 000 soldiers. The new US administration has ordered two additional combat brigades deploying 17 000 more troops to join the already 36 000-strong US force operating in Afghanistan.

3.2 Motivation for the reduction of South African Army peacekeeping deployments

The above totals show that the South African force deployments, which require a considerable financial and logistic sacrifice on the part of the country and the SANDF, to be so small, that their contribution to world and African peacekeeping is relatively negligible. In order to be seen to be in Africa the force levels can easily be reduced to a maximum of one battalion as was envisaged when the *Defence Review* of 1998 was published. South Africa could insist on having independent companies deployed in various operational areas, if that is seen to be of value for either diplomatic or operational experience reasons. South African soldiers will thus continue to experience deployments abroad while the air transport and logistic requirements to deploy them will be reduced considerably. The standard of the army's troops deployed can also be raised making a far better impression internationally.

The internal deployments in South Africa should be increased in any case on projects of priority in the country. The army has become largely irrelevant to the South African population, who have little interest in unobservable operations in little known countries far away. The

number of units and soldiers spending time on improving their skills and doing advanced training can also be increased. This will improve the army's reported weaknesses where basics such as musketry and weapon handling skills were found to be below standard after the annual combat readiness exercise in 2008.⁹⁾

3.2.1 *The Army's discipline problems*

The Chief of the Army has on various occasions stated that discipline is one of the biggest problems the army is grappling with. Undisciplined troops and units are not able to provide an effective defence for South Africa, which is the DoD's stated vision. Under fire they will most probably lose cohesion and cease to be effective. To rectify the situation the soldiers who are over "40-something years old" recruited in 1994-1995 to reward them for their services during the period referred to as the 'struggle', must be phased out quickly.

Some years ago when young soldiers began to be recruited again, a commander of the British Military Advisory Training Team (BMATT), warned that the new intakes should be kept separate from the first post-1994 intakes. The latter may well be part of the discipline problem since they were inculcated with revolutionary thinking. Those who are by nature disciplined may, however, be useful for internal deployments, when their experience can be valuable on operations where direct contact with the public is called for. This group should thus be phased out selectively.

The external deployments are without a doubt part of the disciplinary problem. It is reported that between 2002 and 2007 SANDF members on external deployments were found guilty of 495 cases of absence without leave, 473 cases of refusal to comply with lawful commands, 245 of assault, 189 cases of rebelliousness, 155 of drunkenness and 103 guilty of conduct to the detriment of military discipline.¹⁰⁾

In the DRC it is reported that between 2002 and 2008 there were 264 cases involving disciplinary misdemeanours and 546 military trials. These included five cases involving mistreatment of subordinates, 90 of refusal to comply with lawful commands, 81 of assault, five of indecent assault, seven of intimidation and even three of culpable homicide.¹¹⁾

The record in Burundi from 2002 to 2008 includes 392 cases of disciplinary misdemeanours and 929 military trials some of which were:

one case of rape, two of murder, four of culpable homicide, 160 of assault and many of absence without leave, refusal to carry out lawful commands and rebelliousness. Evidently the deployment in the Sudan where alcoholic liquor is not available due to it being an Islamic country is much better, there were only three trials involving bad discipline and 25 so-called military trials.¹²⁾

From time-to-time reports are received of specific deployments which were particularly successful, under command of competent officers. There are far too many reports of senior officers who are guilty of misconduct and who set a bad example. Clearly only the best commanders and selected units should be deployed externally on far fewer rotations. The army should be busy with diligent training to improve its standard of discipline and its combat efficiency. The long periods of boredom and largely idle deployment with the temptations of cheap sex, and an abundant supply of liquor is no place for an army with disciplinary problems.

3.2.2 Lack of funding for the Army

It has repeatedly been reported in the media that the arms deals involving the procurement of aircraft and ships, to modernise the South African Air Force and Navy, has caused a backlog in the procurement of army equipment. The maintenance of landward defence equipment, as well as the maintenance of buildings in military bases has suffered considerably. Funding is required to pay for the increasing numbers of military skills development (MSD) system members, who are recruited to serve for two years prior to joining the regular army or the reserve forces.¹³⁾ This recruiting system is of vital importance to the army in order to feed its units with young soldiers.

The conclusion drawn by various military commentators and analysts is that the South African Army simply does not have the funds to carry out proper training, and that it will not be able to obtain and maintain the needed equipment to carry out the roles it has been tasked to perform. The Landward Defence Programme accounts for a mere 27,7 per cent of the DoD's total expenditure.¹⁴⁾ Taking into account the major role which the army must play in the government's priority task, namely to deploy peacekeeping forces in Africa, it is a surprisingly low percentage of the total budget.

Leading members of the South African government have con-

tinuously explained, when making external affairs policy speeches, why the SANDF should be deployed in Africa on peacekeeping missions. The basic motivation is that by deploying the SANDF in Africa, South Africa is helping to secure Africa and in so doing is securing itself. The truth is probably that the SANDF has become a mere foreign policy instrument, the deployment of which shows that South Africa is a player in the global diplomatic field.

The lack of understanding on the part of most politicians regarding the army's financial and deployment needs are underlined, when they make statements showing no knowledge of the real state of the army. A newly appointed Deputy Minister of Defence on a visit to the Combat Training Centre at Lohatla is reported to have stated, that it was imperative that the Defence Force be "turned around" if its vision of being a competent and capable combat-ready force was to be achieved. During the same visit the Minister said "(w)e have the will, the way and very soon the capabilities to be the top defence force in Africa and serious contenders to the US and the rest of the world".¹⁵⁾ No one with any knowledge about the relative efficiency and strengths of the world's defence forces will take such a statement seriously.

3.2.3 Lack of mobility on land and in the air

In early 2009 the Chief of the South African Army stated during a media briefing, that the army's vehicle fleets both armoured and thin skinned were in a state of disrepair. The technical services evidently lack mechanics to repair vehicles in the field because it was decided some years ago to send unserviceable military vehicles to civilian repair facilities to be repaired.¹⁶⁾ For years it has been reported that the malfunctioning of army vehicles during peacekeeping deployments in Africa is a common problem. Specifically in the DRC it has even on occasion forced South African soldiers to go on foot while performing their duties.¹⁷⁾ This obviously has a negative effect on their mobility and on the efficiency with which they execute their mission. Taking into account the fact that these deployments are in nature an important part of South Africa's foreign policy, such a major deficiency can only result in a very poor image of the South African Army, the SANDF and the South African state as a whole.

The lack of strategic transport aircraft to deliver heavy equipment such as armoured vehicles, helicopters and bulk logistic packages is

not directly the fault of SANDF planners. A major acquisition project known as Project Continental, involving the procurement of a number of Airbus A400M heavy airlift aircraft, was reportedly launched some time ago. Eight aircraft costing about R1 billion each were ordered to drastically improve the South African Air Force's ability to support the peacekeeping deployments. However, the A400 project has been delayed for as much as four years, before the aircraft may be available for long distance military strategic operations.¹⁸⁾

A number of other countries affected by the delay include Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Germany, Spain, Turkey, the UK and Malaysia, from which the conclusion can be drawn that a lack of heavy transport aircraft must be an international problem.¹⁹⁾ To support SANDF deployments transport aircraft will probably have to be hired at great cost, since the South African Air Force's heavy transport fleet of Hercules C130s urgently needs to be replaced, or at least strengthened by the addition of the A400Ms.

A decrease in the number of troops deployed will prolong the life of the C130 fleet and keep it available for internal South African duties. In view of the world-wide shortage of heavy transport aircraft the demand for hiring them, which normally includes their crews, will be greater than usual and may increase the hiring price considerably. The shortage of funds for defence spending and the current international economic recession which certainly affects South Africa negatively, simply affirms the fact that South Africa should lessen its peacekeeping role and conserve its means.

4. ARMY INTERNAL DEPLOYMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 2008 when foreign nationals living in South Africa were subjected to violent attacks, the SANDF was authorised to make forces available to support the SAPS. The deployments took place after and during a much publicised debate as to whether the military should be deployed in support of the police at all. Since then the agreements for and against have ended in the logical conclusion that the army will definitely be deployed on internal duties as and when required.

In November 2008 an authorisation was published for the SANDF to be deployed for service in co-operation with the SAPS "in prevention and combating of crime and maintenance and preservation

of law and order within the Republic of South Africa during the FIFA Confederation Cup draw" which was to take place at the Sandton Convention Centre from 19 to 24 November 2008. This was included in a message from K P Motlanthe to M J Mahlangu, Member of Parliament of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), dated 17 November 2008. The former, the President, informed the latter, the Chairperson of the NCOP, that he would inform the members of the National Assembly of the decision himself, and requested that Mahlangu should bring the contents of the message to the attention of the NCOP.

In February 2009 it was announced that the Defence Force was ready to assist during the elections to take place on 22 April 2009. Although the exact number of troops required from the army had not been established at the time, it was known that a battalion would be on standby in Gauteng, and that KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape would each have a unit in readiness as well. The air force would supply helicopters and some fixed wing aircraft for election support, while the medical service was sure to feature as well.²⁰⁾

From the above it is clear that there is no doubt that the army is being deployed internally and that it will be deployed internally in the future. The Soccer World Cup in 2010 is bound to demand a large SANDF component on duty, and the army will rightly supply a large number of soldiers to satisfy that demand. The concept that the army is withdrawing from duties inside South Africa to deploy only externally has been found untenable.

That being the case it is no longer logical that the SANDF should not be deployed on borderline protection and control duties on South Africa's land borders. One of the military's primary functions is to defend the country and the "protect the sovereignty of the state". A country which fails to control its own borders is in fact abandoning and forsaking its right of sovereignty and territorial integrity over the geographical area under its jurisdiction. That fact nullifies the argument that tighter border control should be abandoned since illegal migration into the country is too difficult to stop. The SAPS, the Department of Home Affairs and the South African Revenue Service have good reason to staff border posts to control legal entrance and exit from South Africa, but it is difficult to motivate the value of border posts if illegal migrants can avoid them with ease anyway.

By deploying on the land borders the SANDF, and specifically

the army, gets to know the borderline and the surrounding terrain well. That is a prerequisite for successful operations in defence of South Africa's territorial integrity. Since the land borders are so extensive the fences along the borders should be in a state of repair, and the troops on duty should have a high degree of air and land mobility. However, the main motivation for better borderline control is that South Africa has through lack of it, become the target for crime syndicates, human trafficking, drug cartels and massive illegal immigration, and that the SAPS does not have the experience, manpower and equipment for proper control.

It is of course debatable whether the army should be tasked to do all the borderline patrolling on its own, with its current personnel strength and organisation. Possibly in the interim the army and the police, who are currently in the final stages of taking over borderline protection from the army, should supply units to do it in shifts, but the best solution will be to develop a border guard force as a number of countries have done. India has, for example, a Border Security Force to control its border with Bangladesh. The force should best be part of the army trained and disciplined as soldiers, and tasked not only to control the border, but to defend it as part of the army if ever called upon to do so.

5. ARMY VISION 2020 AIMS AND RE-ORGANISATION

The army's Vision 2020 aims and reorganisation publicised from time to time cannot easily be faulted. The army Chief's stated goal to improve discipline should be strongly supported by the SANDF's top structure and the Ministry in the DoD. Although discipline has still not been included in the individual values of the military, it has been included in the organisational values. The aim is stated as to "individually and collectively rebuild the profile and image of the defence establishment as the best disciplined profession".²¹⁾ Should the SANDF and the army as part of it, be able to obtain its own rules of conduct and regulations further divorced from that of the civil service, and also rid itself of the labour unions, which are a hindrance to any military organisation, the SANDF and the army will be able to perform their roles better. It will also allow the officer corps to raise itself to the level of efficiency which

such a corps requires, in order to effectively and morally lead and command the army.

Another stated army aim requiring change in attitude and a lot of training is the concept to implement "mission orientated commands". This is an approach to command and control where commanders down the line of command even as far as the junior leaders, use their own initiative within their senior commander's intent to fulfil their missions. This as well as the stated roles to be ready for warfare in mountains, jungles, deserts and all types of terrain all over Africa, and the internal deployment roles which the army may have to perform, will require training of a very high quality. The training will also be extremely time consuming. The force will essentially have to be a training army most of the time, and the units and formations within it will be forced to specialise in specific roles and aspects of the army's overall missions.

To satisfy the above requirements the army has announced that it is in a process of reorganising itself into a more traditional military structure, from the organisation which was adopted in the 1990s ostensibly based on business principles. A chief of staff together with staff compartments including personnel, intelligence, training and logistics have been reintroduced to improve the staff work at army office or headquarter level. How improvement is to be achieved while the staff training institutions are seemingly compelled to apply a 'one pass all pass policy' is, however, unknown. Officers incapable of doing high standard staff work should not be allowed to qualify as commanders and staff officers at levels beyond their capabilities. As long as the authorities implement a policy which avoids appointing only the best and most capable officers to the most responsible and accountable positions, there will be little improvement in army standards and the Chief of the Army's aims will simply be frustrated.

Specific commands are being introduced to manage force or formation training, that is large manoeuvres, and so-called formal training to supervise the schooling of individual soldiers. This is a sound concept where training must fill such an important part of army activities. A support or logistic command to oversee logistics and a 'Works Regiment' to maintain the army's infrastructure are also being implemented with seemingly good reason.

The army is reintroducing division level formations. One motorised division is to be used largely for peacekeeping duties in Africa, and for

internal deployments for anti-crime and homeland security operations in South Africa itself. A mechanised division will be the true conventional force while a Special Operations Brigade will be rapidly deployable for operations anywhere in Africa. The latter needs the air mobility of large transport aircraft which will not be available for up to four years. Aircraft from other sources which have to be hired will be expensive, and keeping them static on stand-by even more so.

All these organisational changes are wisely to be phased in, to be completed by 2012. The motorised division will have six brigades based in six of the nine provinces. The mechanised division will have three brigades based in Bloemfontein, Kimberley and Mafikeng. Both divisions and the Special Operations Brigade, sometimes referred to as a contingency brigade, will have their headquarters in Pretoria. The organisation and the base and headquarter placings have been well considered. The aim to have 70 per cent of the force to consist of reserves is also sound planning. Reserves have been calculated to be only 10 per cent of the cost of regulars. All the aims down to unit level should be achieved by 2020, when the army will have reorganised into what has been described as a "more rationally designed army".²²⁾

To avoid any misunderstanding it should be understood that the Special Operations Brigade and the Special Forces are two separate organisations. Special Forces are not organisationally part of the army and remain under command of the Chief of the SANDF and report to the Joint Operations Division.²³⁾

6. CONCLUSION

The army's Vision 2020 is sound and very ambitious. It has obviously been put together by an efficient staff team, led by an army chief who knows what the organisation needs to be effective, and who is open to new concepts. The reorganisation is essential to allow inter-corps training and co-operation, and the placing of the brigades all over the country is sound from both an internal security strategic viewpoint, as well as from the viewpoint of local economies.

An important part of the plan is to improve training standards and discipline to new levels. Both rightly need attention. To achieve all the aims the army needs the positive support of the SANDF top structure, the DoD and the government. The latter is a problem since the politi-

cians have proved to have little knowledge of military affairs, and other than giving instructions regarding peacekeeping tasks in Africa are generally disinterested as to the execution of the tasks and the effort required to carry them out. The consequent lack of funding is an obvious major problem.

The army should as far as possible be a training army. The peacekeeping deployments should be decreased by a third to one unit of battalion strength. This will ensure the army's availability for internal deployments and more training time. The peacekeeping deployments have been good for external deployment experience, but have been poor as regards the need to inculcate efficiency and discipline. Other than the reported cases of bad conduct by juniors, there are far too many reports of bad conduct on the part of commanders and senior officers in the media. The problem of poor command could be rectified by direct supervision and more training.

Internal deployments to support the SAPS and other government departments, which are likely to increase in the future, are at least of equal importance to external peacekeeping deployments, and must be performed well. Because of their proximity the deployments will allow tighter command and control, which is necessary because such co-operation can be very trying for the military, who are normally loath to co-operate with organisations whose methods differ greatly from military practice.

Borderline defence and protection must be done efficiently. The idea that the army has nothing to do with it is incorrect, and the idea that it is of lesser importance is a disaster. A Border Guard Force should be established as part of the army. It can partially help to solve the lack of employment opportunities in the country, whilst in itself having a good aim. South Africa must re-establish its sovereignty on its borders, and begin to control the illegal movement of people into the country, who mostly do not have South African interests at heart.

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