MILITARY INTERVENTION IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS IN AFRICA: THOUGHTS ON SOUTH AFRICA'S ROLE

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Almost 20 years after it took place, the Rwanda genocide of 1994, in which over 800 000 persons were slaughtered in 100 days while the world stood and watched, continues to haunt Africa. When the African Union (AU) was born, provision was made in its Constitutive Act, signed in 2000, to authorise military interventions, to prevent a Rwanda-type catastrophe ever happening again. But a decade later Africa remains unready to intervene where threats of mass killings arise, as the cases of Libya and Mali have recently shown. In 2011, after the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had authorised the use of "all necessary force", the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) intervened militarily in Libya when there appeared to be a threat that the regime there was about to slaughter civilians in Benghazi. In 2012 France sent troops to Mali to prevent a rebel force that had committed massacres in the north advancing south to the capital, Bamako. The side-lining of Africa in the Libya and Mali crises, and the decision by the NATO countries to move from dealing with the perceived threat of civilian massacres in Libya to regime change, forced African leaders to give new thought to the idea of "African solutions for African problems". Africa should, it was said, have the capacity to intervene in conflict situations.

In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) had conceived of the creation of an African Stand-By Force (ASF) to respond to conflict situations on the continent (for how this idea developed, see Saunders, 2012). From 1989 a number of UN military interventions had taken place in southern Africa (Saunders, 2013), but though UN forces in Africa were often mainly drawn from

African countries, African leaders wanted, if possible, to avoid the UN taking charge of military interventions on the continent. The AU decided that the ASF would be made up of five regional brigades, and have the capacity to engage in rapid combat intervention for humanitarian reasons to stop or prevent genocide, crimes against humanity, atrocities and war crimes by armed rebel forces. Regional brigades were expected to be able to deal with conflict situations in their own regions, and only if they failed in this would other brigades be brought in. The coordination and authorisation of such deployments would be done by the AU. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), had created its regional force, with the Nigerian military as its main component, and this has been employed to help resolve various conflicts in the region. It was, however, unable to act quickly and effectively in the crisis in Mali in 2012. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Stand-by force, was launched with some fanfare in Lusaka, Zambia, in 2007, but in 2013 still does not have the necessary air-lift capacity to intervene rapidly anywhere and is still faced with inter-operational problems between its different military components.

What happened in the Central African Republic (CAR) in early 2013 further showed the weaknesses of the regional stand-by forces. When the regional force of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) known as the Central African Multinational Force (for which the acronym, in French, is FOMAC), was unable to stabilise the situation, ECCAS could have appealed for extra support from ECOWAS or SADC. Instead, it was South Africa that sent a small contingent of 200 additional South African troops in January 2013 to assist those already in place to train CAR forces. In March of this year 15 South African National Defence Force (SANDF) members died when they clashed with Seleka rebels advancing on Bangui, the capital of the CAR. The rebels took the capital, forcing President François Bozizé to flee, and ECCAS asked South Africa to withdraw its remaining troops.

The death of South African troops in the CAR prompted an intense debate in the South African media about whether South African troops should have been sent to the CAR at all. Some commentators argued that sending troops to the CAR was "a force too far", especially given the lack of air-lift capacity in South Africa, which had necessitated the hiring of Russian charter planes at great expense. Meanwhile, most of the 26 very expensive Gripen fighter aircraft that South Africa

bought as part of its controversial arms deal were in long-term storage because spare parts were difficult to acquire after the maintenance contract for them with Saab ended in April 2012 (Gibson 2013).

What was not asked was why, if South Africa was to be involved in a military intervention in the CAR, it did not take place under the umbrella of SADC. It is not known if this possibility was ever discussed. In 1998, when the South African government sent the SANDF into Lesotho, it did so nominally under SADC: it was clearly a SANDF-led operation, with some Botswana troops accompanying the SANDF. Had a SADC umbrella been used in the CAR case, South Africa would still have played the dominant role, but some of the criticism targeted at South Africa for intervening might have been deflected. There were many allegations that the South African intervention in the CAR was to protect South African business interests. President Jacob Zuma denied this, saying that South Africa had intervened in the interests of stability. It turned out that South Africa had no embassy in the CAR, but the CAR adjoins the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Africa may have feared that instability in the CAR would spread to the DRC, which unlike the CAR is a member of SADC.

The CAR disaster highlighted the failure of the ASF strategy and the inability of regional forces to deal with local conflict situations. It suggested that South Africa should not send troops elsewhere unilaterally, but should work within a regional framework, both in its own interests and to promote regional and continental action. In mid-2013 a South African battalion is, along with troops from Tanzania and Malawi, being deployed as part of a new 'neutral' force, authorised by a unanimous vote in the UNSC, to intervene in the eastern provinces of the DRC. In 1998, when the military of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe intervened in the DRC, South Africa refused to get involved, and, in the aftermath of the CAR tragedy, many in South Africa asked why South Africa was intervening in yet another country far from South Africa, this time against the M23 and other rebel fighters. The UN stabilisation mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), to which South Africa has contributed troops over many years, had proved unable to prevent the M23 rebels over-running Goma, the capital of North Kivu Province, in November 2012. Six months later it was not clear why South Africa should become a leading party in a new UN-backed military intervention force with a mandate to conduct offensive operations designed to prevent violence to civilians. It seemed unlikely that the new intervention force

would bring stability to the eastern DRC; it might well stir up new violence.

In May 2013 South Africa asked the AU, at the meeting of heads of state and government in Addis Ababa held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the birth of the OAU, to create a new force, to be known as the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC). This would be made up of combat units of 1 500 troops, drawn from a pool of about 5 000 highly trained, specially-equipped troops, who could be mobilised within 14 days (Anon 2013). It was unclear, however, where the airlift capacity for ACRIC would come from, and who would fund it. Why create a new force instead of developing the rapid deployment capacity of the existing regional forces? The answer appears to be that ACIRC would be centrally controlled, allowing the AU secretariat, the AU Peace and Security Council, and the small number of countries able to provide the resources for such a force, including South Africa, to have more say in its use than in the deployment of regional stand-by forces (Roux 2013).

South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, said recently that because South Africa was an integral part of the African continent, it has to say "yes to preventive diplomacy … When it is called upon to intervene, we will always be there" (Magubane, 2013). It is obvious that South Africa has to be concerned with what is happening elsewhere on the continent, because it is an African country, and seen as such in the global imagery. But instability and conflict elsewhere on the continent does not always directly impact on South Africa, and South Africa's response should surely be determined on the basis of an assessment of the nature of that impact. Further instability in Somalia may increase the flow of refugees from that country to South Africa, but that would not be sufficient justification for South Africa to participate in the AU force now trying to produce a measure of stability in that war-torn country in the Horn of Africa. The impact of instability and conflict in one of its neighbours is likely to have much more direct consequences for South Africa, and may require the kind of intervention that South Africa undertook in 1998 in Lesotho. But while South Africa has the most developed economy on the continent, and one of the best-equipped defence forces, it has to be careful not to be perceived as wielding its power elsewhere, even in its own SADC neighbourhood, in its own interests. It should surely work with the appropriate regional and con-

tinental bodies, SADC and the AU, and only intervene elsewhere if there is broad consensus that it should do so. In this way some of the mistakes of the past may be avoided.

Endnotes

1. In the words of the National Development Plan, South Africa should "Focus on what is practically achievable, without over-committing … Foreign policy should be regularly evaluated 'to ensure that … national interests are maximised'" (South African Government 2011: 216).

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