

The SANDF after 30 Years: Walking the Tightrope between External and Internal Operations on a Shoestring Budget

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Abstract

Since 1994 the South African government's commitment to peace and security in Africa inexorably drew the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) into extensive involvement in multinational peacekeeping operations. These external operations clearly aligned the South African government with its articulated objectives concerning the pursuit of peace on the African continent and its (moral) intention and responsibility to act in a leading role on the continent. However, a dwindling defence budget and the burden of a high-tech force design increasingly impacted negatively on the SANDF to maintain and develop a sustainable capability geared for regional external operations. Yet, in the domestic context the government also increasingly expected the SANDF to render support to the SAPS as murder and death rates are comparable and, in some instances, even higher than death rates in high-intensity war zones in the international community. This simply means that the SANDF has the almost impossible task of balancing its demanding regional deployments with ongoing appeals by politicians and elements of the public for the SANDF to be of assistance in hotspots of high levels of criminality where the SAPS is unable to protect South Africans in accordance with the requirements of the Constitution. In the final analysis, the article concludes that there is a mismatch between what has been expected of the SANDF in the past three decades from its political masters on the one side, and its budget and related capabilities on the other.

Keywords: South African National Defence Force, peacekeeping operations, internal security challenges, budgetary constraints, foreign policy instrument



1. Introduction

Since 1994 the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) gradually re-emerged as a prominent fixture or instrument of South Africa's foreign policy, following the country's political transition of 1994. It also followed the creation of a new South African military after the monumental multi-party negotiations culminated in the adoption of a new South African Constitution in 1993.

The SANDF started to feature prominently as an instrument in South Africa's foreign policy after 1998, specifically in relation to the country's participation in multinational peacekeeping operations (Du Plessis 2003: 106, 117-118). This was anchored in Chapter Four of the South African Defence Review 1998, which alluded to 'South Africa's new status in Southern Africa' and that '[f]or political, strategic and geographic reasons, the government regards security and defence co-operation in Southern Africa as a priority' (Department of Defence 1996: 18).

The post-apartheid South African government demonstrated its firm commitment to regional peace and security by involving the SANDF in peacekeeping operations, first in Lesotho (1998), followed by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (1999) and Burundi (2001). These operations prompted Du Plessis (2003: 132-134) to state that since 1998 the use of the South African military in South Africa's foreign policy 'has become more salient, most notably in the form of peacekeeping operations of varying types in support of diplomatic initiatives to resolve conflict'.

However, since 1998 it became evident that the SANDF found it increasingly difficult to conduct operations as a declining budget started to constrain the SANDF. This is linked to the fact that between 1995 and 1998 the defence budget was cut by 11.1%, which eventually resulted in a growing mismatch between policy intent and execution. As a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) South African defence spending had been reduced to less than 3 per cent in the mid-1990s, which boiled down to less than 10 per cent of total government spending. The defence budget then further decreased to 1.54 per cent of GDP in 2004/05 and levelled out in 2014/15 at around 1.2 per cent to 1.1 per cent of GDP (Defence Review Team 2015: 9-1 – 9-2).

Given these constraints and the changing global and regional geo-political landscape in which the SANDF operated, the Department of Defence appointed a task team to draft a second defence review (following the South African Defence Review 1998), which was finally published as the South African Defence Review 2015. This document remains the most recent and most significant defence policy document.

The task team made it clear that the decrease in funding levels was highly problematic and that inadequate funding would eventually severely compromise the defence capabilities of the SANDF. They emphasized that the government had to decide on one of two options: approving a greater budget allocation to the SANDF or opting for a ‘significantly scaled-down level of ambition and commitment which is aligned to the current budget allocation’. One thing was clear: South Africa’s spending of less than 1.2 per cent of its GDP on defence (Defence Review Team 2015: vii) was low in terms of comparative international military spending practice. Since 2015, defence spending in South Africa has declined even further to about 0,7 per cent of GDP, which is way below the international norm (Martin 2024).

It could be argued that the South African government demonstrated no political will to alleviate the SANDF’s financial challenges. However, it is also true that growing fiscal challenges and dire socioeconomic challenges locally left the government in no position to increase its defence budget substantially. Moreover, the SANDF increasingly found itself in a further predicament, namely to respond to political calls to assist the South African Police Service (SAPS) in maintaining internal security—which should be understood in the context of growing levels of poverty and criminality in the South African state.

This article aims to examine and discuss the SANDF over thirty years in terms of defence policy and budgetary support, and the capabilities and employment of the force in support of government policy. The article will revisit the constitutional mandate of the SANDF and its external deployments post-1994 as a key foreign policy instrument, including its most recent external deployments. The focus will then shift to the internal role of the SANDF and specifically focus on political appeals in recent years for the involvement of the country’s military in fighting crime, and the impact of all the above-mentioned political demands and insufficient budgetary support on the SANDF. It should be stated that much could also be said about other areas of great concern in the SANDF, including personnel, performance, discipline, management and accountability, but these matters will not be discussed.

2. Constitutional mandate and post-1994 defence planning

The South African Constitution states that the primary object of the SANDF is to defend and protect the Republic, its territorial integrity and its people. The President, as head of the national executive, may authorise the employment of the SANDF

(Republic of South Africa 1996)

- in co-operation with the SAPS
- in defence of the Republic or
- in fulfilment of an international obligation.

The South African Constitution, as well as the South African White Paper on Defence 1996 and the South African Defence Review 1998 commit the SANDF to a primary function, namely, the defence and protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Williams (1998: 23) rightly describes this as the *raison d'être* for the existence as well as the maintenance and funding of the post-1994 South African military. In this context, the ultimate and primary responsibility of the state and its military was regarded as that of the security of South African citizens against external attack. In addition, the South African White Paper on Defence 1996 also made it clear that the SANDF “shall have a primarily defensive orientation and posture” (Department of Defence 1996: 4).

However, Williams (1998: 34–35) questioned the view of defence planners who regarded and promoted the preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity as the primary function of the SANDF. He argued and anticipated that the South African military would over time increasingly be configured around non-conventional or non-traditional roles and that these roles would encompass roles beyond or in addition to its “primary function”, that is, the defence of the country’s territorial integrity. His view was thus that the SANDF of the future would be increasingly faced with ‘threats’ relating to the ‘secondary function’ arena or non-traditional roles. Such non-traditional roles would typically be involvement in regional peacekeeping operations, maritime protection, border protection, a variety of internal stability tasks and protection of civil power against unconstitutional action. He further expressed concern that the SANDF would experience growing (political) pressure to become active in the ‘secondary function’ arena and that the military would then be without the required equipment and personnel to play a meaningful and sustainable role. Williams (1998: 30) opined that when conflict manifests in general and in sub-Saharan Africa in particular it is, with very few exceptions, intra-state conflict either between opposing political or civil groups or between central governments and secessionist or guerrilla groups.

Le Roux (1999: 58) similarly argued that in a world where conventional threats in the form of inter-state wars are almost absent, governments tend to look for more ‘peacetime utility’ from their defence forces. He further argued that the end of the Cold

War brought new uncertainties in a volatile and unpredictable international landscape marked by new threat patterns such as:

- organised transnational crime
- the re-emergence of piracy on the high seas
- new forms of terrorism by non-state actors
- information warfare
- threats to embassies, ships, aircraft and offshore assets
- mass migrations due to internal conflict or economic collapse

The above-mentioned threats highlight a non-conventional (secondary function) response. Le Roux (1999: 60) further argued that defence policy should position the SANDF to play a supportive and meaningful role in the South African government's commitment to the advancement of an African Renaissance, which was premised on the building of a more peaceful African political landscape. In addition, the SANDF also had a constitutional commitment to play a role in border control (land, sea and air), as well as supporting the SAPS in the maintenance of law and order domestically. Williams (1998: 37) likewise appealed for a force design that would increasingly be 'suited to African contingencies'—practically requiring a force design that should shift from fighter aircraft and heavy armour to an armed force that would be suitable for deployment in the so-called secondary functions arena.

The above arguments coincided with the issuing of the White Paper on South African Participation in International Peace Missions, as approved by the Cabinet on 21 October 1998. This policy document was a clear indication of the South African government's commitment to the SANDF's future participation in peacekeeping operations as a secondary function. It also acknowledged that since 1994, expectations internationally have steadily grown that as 'a responsible and respected member of the international community', the SANDF would play a leading role in peacekeeping operations on the African continent (Department of Foreign Affairs 1999: 3–5).

The above arguments were the main reasons why the post-1994 government's project of re-equipping the SANDF with new arms, called the Strategic Arms Package (SAP), precipitated fierce and sustained criticism from several defence analysts and scholars (Seegers 2008: 52-53). According to a Cabinet decision of 18 November 1998, South Africa would procure the following military equipment from foreign arms manufacturers:

- nine dual-seater Gripen and 12 Hawk aircraft from British Aerospace/SAAB to replace the SAAF's ageing Cheetah and Impala aircraft. A further

option was taken on the balance of 12 Hawk aircraft and 19 single-seater Gripens

- thirty light utility helicopters from the Italian helicopter manufacturer, Agusta, which would replace the Alouette helicopters (which had been in service since 1962)
- four patrol corvettes from a German frigate consortium to replace the ageing strike craft of the South African Navy (which had been in service since 1979)
- three submarines from a German submarine consortium to replace the ageing Daphne submarines (which had been in service since 1971).

As much as the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity in the maritime domain specifically required an upgrading of naval platforms, critics felt that the corvettes, submarines and jet fighters could be regarded as offensive weapons; weapons that would not be suitable to supporting South Africa's foreign policy as a policy of cooperative defence, and also equipping the SANDF for the 'most improbable of primary missions' (Sylvester and Seegers 2008: 52). The argument that the purchasing of the above-mentioned equipment did not cater for or recognise the growing importance of the SANDF's secondary roles (Sylvester and Seegers 2008, 52) soon proved to be of substance when President Nelson Mandela first and then his successor President Thabo Mbeki involved the SANDF in external operations in the realm of regional peace and security. This will be discussed in the section below. At the same time, it should be noted that the discussion below provides a cursory overview of the SANDF's most important activities and that a detailed analysis is not practical and feasible here.

3. The SANDF's major external deployments since 1994

South Africa's foreign policy since 1994 has gone through a major transformation. South Africa, once a state oriented to the West and seeking to impose its will and domination upon its Southern African neighbours, took on a foreign policy approach that was increasingly Africa-centered and focused on cooperative relations with its neighbours. Under Mbeki (1999-2008) South Africa actively pursued a leadership role on the African continent, notably through the African Union (AU) and the promotion of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) as a macroeconomic development programme of the AU. NEPAD explicitly linked Africa's future and development prospects to the resolution of conflicts on the continent and the promotion

of peace. The activism of the South African government and its commitment to peace and security inexorably drew the country and specifically the SANDF into extensive involvement in peacekeeping operations (Southall 2006, 23).

The SANDF's first external operation in the realm of peace and security of major significance was South Africa's dispatch of troops to Lesotho in 1998. Du Plessis (2003: 130) views the case of Lesotho as a case of the intrusive use of the SANDF in the form of military intervention, although the South African government denied that it was an invasion but a peace support operation. In short, elections were scheduled for 23 May 1998. After the elections opposition parties in the country objected to the results, and the South African government was requested to become involved in the problem and ensure stability in Lesotho politics. South Africa's facilitation did not help much to prevent the situation from becoming more unstable and protest action degenerated into violence and civil disorder that was intensified by a mutiny within the ranks of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF).

In a historical event, on 22 September 1998, about 600 members of the SANDF, mandated as a regional Combined Task Force, crossed the border from South Africa into Lesotho. They were backed by 200 troops from the Botswana Defence Force who arrived shortly after the South African intervention (Du Plessis 2003: 130; Kagwanja 2006: 33). In South Africa, the operation was known as Operation Boleas and the aim was to restore order and stabilise the situation, as well as to pave the way for political negotiations. Although the members of the SANDF encountered strong opposition from mutinying members of the Lesotho Defence Force, the task force eventually succeeded in taking control of the capital Maseru and other areas controlled by the mutineers. Initially, the task force was unable to impose crowd control and prevent acts of looting and burning, but it did not take too long before they were able to take control of military bases of the Lesotho Defence Force and the highly strategic Katse Dam, which feeds South Africa's economic heartland, the Gauteng province. The Combined Task Force remained in Lesotho until April 1999 after which it was replaced by a team from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), consisting of 300 soldiers from Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe who acted as military trainers up to May 2000 (Du Plessis 2003: 131).

In research conducted afterwards (see Williams 2019), it transpired that the SANDF was ill-prepared for Operation Boleas and its soldiers were sent to Lesotho without the necessary training. As such, the SANDF was put under enormous pressure to act as an instrument of foreign policy in its first external post-1994 operation. Major General

Roland de Vries, the then deputy chief of the Army, afterwards stated that he was ‘hopping mad’ when he was told about the deployment to Lesotho and even queried the political heads of the defence portfolio. The SANDF’s report to parliament afterwards also noted that lack of training and preparation relating to the unique challenges and demands of peacekeeping operations was a problem, stating that, ‘[b]ecause of South Africa’s minimal previous exposure to this sort of operation, certain specialised staff were limited in their experience’ (Williams 2019: 36). In brief, the SANDF felt politically rushed into being deployed to Lesotho without having properly trained soldiers or even a clear plan to carry out a major operation (Williams 2019: 36).

The SANDF’s external involvement in Lesotho was followed by deployments to the conflicts in the DRC and Burundi—militarily speaking both in the realm of the so-called secondary functions of the SANDF. As far as the latter is concerned, a civil war broke out in Burundi in 1993 between Tutsi-dominated and Hutu-dominated political parties. A peace process was brokered by the now-defunct Organisation of African Unity (OAU) with former Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, as the chief mediator. After Nyerere’s death, former president Nelson Mandela was appointed to succeed Nyerere as the key mediator. Vigorous diplomacy resulted in the Arusha Accord in August 2000, providing for a three-year transitional government of both belligerent sides and a transfer from a Tutsi to a Hutu president halfway through the three years (Southall 2006: 13). Internal strife and fighting between the forces making up the transitional government continued while external mediation also continued with a view to brokering a cease-fire. External mediators at that point included President Yoweri Museveni from Uganda and Deputy President Jacob Zuma from South Africa. Two cease-fire agreements were concluded as well as a protocol on power sharing (Du Plessis 2003:127) that required external military protection and monitoring.

The SANDF’s intervention in Burundi was described by Du Plessis (2023: 126) as a case of non-traditional peacekeeping where it was agreed that a maximum of two battalions would be deployed following the initial deployment of one battalion. The operation was mainly financed by the European Union (EU) and was AU-sanctioned with United Nations (UN) endorsement. In May 2003, 1 600 members of the SANDF were deployed to Burundi, while 845 of 1 300 soldiers pledged by Ethiopia and the first 20 of 228 soldiers pledged by Mozambique arrived in October 2003 to form the African Mission in Burundi (AMIB) (Du Plessis 2003: 128). AMIB was a one-year peacekeeping operation which was transitioned into the United Nations Mission in Burundi (ONUB) after a year (Accord 2023: 19).

Accord (2003:19) rightly describes the case of Burundi as pioneering and a politically motivated, security-related engagement for the SANDF. It was an operation that South Africa conducted in collaboration with the governments and defence forces of Mozambique and Ethiopia. The SANDF's deployment was the first under the newly endorsed White Paper on South African Participation in International Peace Missions (Accord 2003: 19). What is also of interest is that the SANDF's involvement in Burundi, through Mandela, came when South Africa was still emerging from its post-apartheid transitional process. Having gone through a process of political negotiations and pursuing peace and a new constitutional order, South Africa's aim and response to the case of Burundi was aimed at finding a political solution (Accord 2003:19), and utilising the SANDF as a foreign policy instrument. As such the SANDF's role was described by Du Plessis (2003: 128) as a case of the restorative use of the military instrument. The role of the SANDF also coincided with South Africa's commitment to and support for NEPAD with the ending of violent conflicts that troubled the continent for several decades as a precondition (Accord 2003: 19).

Perhaps the most important peacekeeping operation where the SANDF has been involved as an instrument of foreign policy is the DRC, which was described by Du Plessis (2003:128) as the restorative use of the military instrument in a traditional UN peacekeeping operation to advance a peacemaking process. Since 1998, South Africa has become involved in efforts to end the conflict that plagued the DRC following the collapse of the post-colonial Zairean state under Mobutu Sese Seko. Initially, the South African government showed a reluctance to get militarily drawn into the civil war which became regionalised in 1996. In 1998 the conflict saw several SADC member states, specifically Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe lining up in support of Sese Seko, while the rebel movements were supported by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. Eventually, South Africa emerged as the principal peace broker and the peace process resulted in the drawing up of a transitional constitution, and plans for elections (Southall 2006: 13–14).

South Africa desired a quick end to the war in the DRC and an important leap forward came with the signing of the Lusaka ceasefire agreement of July 1999. Importantly, the deployment of a UN peacekeeping operation was part of the peace accords and the SANDF was one of the first defence forces to contribute soldiers to the peacekeeping operation, dubbed Operation Mistral in the South African military establishment. About 1 400 SANDF soldiers were deployed as part of the international force, the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or

Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo (MONUC). The latter would eventually grow to about 20 000 UN peacekeepers (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2018: 176).

Ten years after the SANDF's deployment in the DRC, South African troops still formed part of the ongoing UN peacekeeping efforts in the DRC, which was renamed as the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo* (MONUSCO). Allison (2013) rightly points out that the DRC 'has really been the place where our government has tried to assume the mantle of African leadership, and, for better or worse, they have backed up their commitment with boots on the ground'. Since 2014, the SANDF's role in MONUSCO evolved from peacekeeping to intervention when the SANDF took a leading role in what was established as MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), using the SA Air Force's (SAAF) Rooivalk attack helicopters, deploying Special Forces and taking on a more offensive role against rebel groups in the eastern DRC. This became necessary after one of the strongest rebel groups, the March 23 Movement or M23, captured the regional capital of Goma in November 2012, and posed a threat to state authority and civilian security with other rebel groups (Allison: 2023).

Another important peacekeeping contribution of the SANDF was made after a humanitarian crisis erupted in Darfur, Sudan, in 2003, where there was a clear aspiration for an African response to the conflict dynamics. The government of Sudan had the obligation and the mandate and showed willingness to disarm the Janjaweed, a Sudanese Arab militia group in the country, particularly western Darfur, as well as other militias, but the need arose for an external peacekeeping force to create safety and security in the area (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2005). The SANDF joined the defence forces of 15 other core countries, namely, Algeria, Chad, Congo, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Senegal as part of an AU peacekeeping operation, the African Mission in Darfur (AMIS) (Kagwanja 2003: 52). However, Kagwanja (2006: 54) also notes that South Africa started to feel the 'heavy budgetary weight imposed by its peacekeeping efforts' and in his briefing to Parliament on 15 February 2005, Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota in no uncertain terms made it clear that South Africa had more than 3 000 soldiers deployed in peacekeeping operations of the AU and the UN and that the country was unable to shoulder this burden financially. Moreover, the Mbeki government started to face a political challenge of convincing critics in South Africa that investing heavily in other African states was

in the best interest of the country.

Internationally, a UN takeover of AMIS was pushed as an alternative to the challenging situation in Sudan and the UN increasingly came under pressure to exercise its own institutional agency for better civilian protection in Darfur. This eventually paved the way for the establishment of a hybrid peacekeeping operation, the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). UNAMID was mandated to assemble a force of close to 20 000 military personnel along with more than 3 772 police and nineteen uniformed police units. An important condition was that UNAMID should be a force with a predominantly 'African character' and its members were, as far as possible, to be sourced from African countries (Mickler 2013: 498–500).

In February 2016, President Jacob Zuma made a surprise announcement that a decision was taken to withdraw the SANDF with its 800-odd soldiers serving in Darfur. Zuma provided no particular motivation or reason for his decision, but it was observed by analysts that political and financial motivations played a role. South African military expert Helmoed Römer Heitman, for instance, stated that '[t]he SANDF is already overstretched financially and in troop strength, and might again be needed in areas of greater priority closer to home', and that '[t]he Darfur deployment is not of direct strategic relevance' to South Africa. He also described the operation as 'largely futile as a result of its forces being matched if not overmatched by the weaponry available to the various militias, and the Khartoum government has made sustaining the force difficult and irritating' (as quoted by Fabricius 2016). Cornish (2016) likewise reported that Zuma's brief official statement provided no reasons for the move, but it could be believed that the motivation was mainly budgetary and that former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir from Sudan insisted on a withdrawal of the UN presence in Darfur.

From the above, it is clear that the SANDF has not only assumed an important role as a key South African foreign policy instrument but also a significant actor in peacekeeping operations on the continent. However, increasingly SANDF deployments became troubled by budgetary constraints. At that point, the SANDF was approximately 24 per cent underfunded in terms of its size and shape (Defence Review Team 2015: 9-2). What is further alarming is that the trend of lower spending on defence has continued as recent data shows that spending in 2022/23 was 8,4 per cent lower than in 2021 and 21 per cent lower than in 2013 (defence Web 2023b), which will be further analysed in the following section.

4. External deployments of recent years and budgetary constraints

After more than two decades of deployment in the DRC, the DRC is still not at peace and some 960 members of the SANDF remained an important part of the intervention brigade (Gibson 2021). All in all, in 2023, the SANDF still counted among the five top troop-contributing UN member states (United Nations, 2023). At the same time, it should be noted that the South African Rooivalk attack helicopters—which played a pivotal role in MONUSCO’s FIB—have increasingly been part of a ‘continued emasculation’ of the SANDF. In an answer to a parliamentary question, the Minister of Defence, Thandi Modise admitted in October 2023 that a large part of the SAAF is grounded due to ‘a lack of spares or budget constraints to conduct the necessary repairs’, with aircraft serviceability generally as low as 20 per cent. Modise specifically cited the SAAF 11 Rooivalk combat support helicopters as an example; three of these helicopters were listed as serviceable with the remaining eight in need of ‘major repairs/rebuilds’ (Martin 2023b).

The SANDF was also involved in other external operations of which a controversial operation in the Central African Republic in 2013 should be mentioned briefly. Since 2010 a contingent of the SANDF has been involved in the Central African Republic aimed at providing training assistance to the programme of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration in the country (Römer Heitman 2013: 23). Three years later, in March 2013, a battle occurred when a small contingent of South African soldiers engaged a force of 7 000 rebels in the Central African Republic to stem their advance on the capital, Bangui. The operation was a political and military disaster as 15 SANDF members died although from a South African point of view the battle ‘was also filled with heroism, camaraderie, terror, sorrow and triumph over adversity’. Still, several strategic, tactical and logistical blunders were cited by military analysts and at the political level secret diplomatic and commercial deals were also part of the dynamics that underpinned South Africa’s involvement (Kleynhans 2021: 133–144).

Operationally, it is of interest to note that before tragedy struck in Bangui, the force commander requested more equipment and firepower, specifically requesting light armoured vehicles, as well as at least one Cessna Caravan aircraft with day-night cameras to provide basic reconnaissance. Oryx helicopters were also requested for casualty evacuation as well as some Rooivalk attack helicopters for fire-power. None of this was provided, with various reasons offered, varying from a lack of airlift from South Africa to fear of escalation (Römer Heitman 2013: 17).

At this point, it was crystal clear that the SANDF was at a tipping point as far as its budgetary constraints were concerned. The South African Defence Review 2015 articulated the SANDF's predicament in no uncertain terms:

The persistent disconnect between the defence mandate, South Africa's growing defence commitments and the resource allocation has eroded defence capabilities to the point where the Defence Force is unable to fully fulfil its constitutional responsibility to defend and protect South Africa and its people, and is hard pressed even to maintain its current modest level of Commitments... The Defence Force is in a critical state of decline... Left unchecked, and at present funding levels, this decline will severely compromise and further fragment South Africa's defence capability (Defence Review Team 2015: 9-9).

But there was also another issue that increasingly posed a serious challenge to the SANDF in the execution of its functions, as alluded to in the preceding discussion. Dr Jakkie Cilliers, former executive director of the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, highlighted this in 2006, that is, more than a decade after the creation of a new South African military when he pointed out that SANDF's force design was based on "an incorrect interpretation of the primary function", and that the chosen force design did not suit the operational requirements and challenges of the SANDF. In the words of Cilliers (2006: 9): 'I have often argued, and continue to believe that the core orientation of the SANDF should be to serve as "a force for crisis prevention and crisis intervention", not conventional defence'. He pointed out that some defence analysts correctly argued in the late 1990s that the anticipated or future tasks of the SANDF would not involve participation in conventional operations, but rather involvement in operations of low intensity and of counter-insurgency in a multilateral environment (Cilliers 2006: 9). As explained above, defence planners concluded in the 1990s that the SANDF should be designed for its 'primary object', namely, the protection of the RSA's sovereignty and territorial integrity and that other tasks or functions should be executed 'by means of the collateral utility inherent in the design for the primary task' (Le Roux 1999: 59).

Regardless of the budgetary and other challenges experienced by the SANDF as a predicament of the SANDF in its role as a foreign policy instrument, the South African government decided to involve its military in yet another external multinational operation in 2021. This followed the Extraordinary Summit of SADC in Maputo,

Mozambique, on 23 June 2021, in connection with the bloodshed and infrastructural devastation in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province. The summit authorised the formation of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) and the SANDF then launched Operation Vikela as the SANDF's contribution to the deployment of SAMIM in the Cabo Delgado area. The aim and mandate of SAMIM was to combat terrorism and acts of violent extremism in northern Mozambique as carried out by Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ) and affiliated insurgent entities. Apart from the SANDF, the armed forces from seven other troop-contributing countries were also deployed shortly after the SADC summit to work in collaboration with the *Forças Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique* in the Cabo Delgado area under the invitation of the host country, in addition to the deployment of a military contingent from Rwanda that also operated in Cabo Delgado (Basch 2022). It should be noted that Operation Vikela is not the only SANDF operation in Mozambique. Also to be mentioned is Operation Copper, a maritime operation in the region of northern Mozambique and along the southern African coast of the Indian Ocean, launched in 2011. This relates to the task and responsibility of the SA Navy (SAN) to monitor and deter piracy activities in the region, specifically the expansion of Somali piracy towards the Mozambican channel (Martin 2023a).

In April 2023 President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that it was decided to extend the SANDF's deployments in northern Mozambique, eastern DRC and the Mozambique Channel for another year, from 16 April 2023 to 15 April 2024, while Operation Copper was extended from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, consisting of 200 members of the SANDF. In this regard, it should be noted that Operation Copper deployments have been intermittent in recent years due to a lack of resources with costs that varied significantly from year to year. Over and above, the most significant external involvement of the SANDF until now was Operation Mistral in the DRC, aimed at supporting MONUSCO which is tasked to disarm, neutralise and prevent the expansion of armed groups in the eastern provinces of the country (Martin 2023a). At the same time, it should be noted that at the time of writing MONUSCO is in the process of withdrawal from the DRC and will be replaced by the newly created SADC Peacekeeping Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC). South Africa is strongly committed to SAMIDRC and has pledged a contribution in the form of an SANDF component of close to 3 000 troops at an estimated cost of more than R2 billion for 2024/5 (defenceWeb 2024). Of much concern is that this deployment has the potential to become open-ended with serious implications for South Africa's defence budget.

Cilliers and Esterhuysen (2023) rightly argue that in both the cases of the DRC and Mozambique

... there is a vast difference between deployment and impact. No discussions have been had on the operational or strategic effectiveness of these efforts. The SANDF (and government as a whole) seems to struggle to deliver any meaningful outcomes... due to a lack of defence resources – sometimes troops in the field don't receive logistical support – and poor coordination with the international relations department, the country is often left embarrassed by these endeavours.

It should also be understood that both SADC operations in the DRC and Mozambique put the financial burden on the contributing countries, including South Africa—unlike UN peacekeeping operations where contributing countries get reimbursed for their expenses.

As much as the SANDF's footprint on the African continent has been growing since 1994 and is still significantly evident, sustainability challenges escalated as a result of the country's ongoing dwindling defence budget. In this regard, defence spending is currently about 0,7 per cent of GDP, which is far below the international norm of 2 per cent of GDP (Martin 2024). The critical state of decline of the SANDF became evident in a recent parliamentary question on the serviceability and functionality of equipment. In a shocking revelation towards the end of 2023, the Minister of Defence, Thandi Modise, disclosed a dire state of affairs within the SAAF. She acknowledged that a staggering 85 per cent of the SAAF's aircraft fleet was out of action, leaving South Africa vulnerable to external security threats. Of the high-tech equipment that was purchased since the end of the 1990s, two of the 26 Gripen fighter aircraft and three of the 24 Hawk aircraft were available for service. Another issue of great concern is that 233 aircraft were grounded for reasons such as lack of spares or constraints to undertake the required repairs. This represents more than half of the SAAF's fleet—in fact, a staggering 53%. It means that, in the unfortunate event of a national security crisis, at least half of the SAAF cannot be deployed to protect the country's sovereignty or be deployed domestically (Democratic Alliance 2023). The funding crisis is so severe that some defence analysts are now proposing the unthinkable—to reduce the SAAF to a mere Air Wing (Leitch 2023).

The SAN is in no better position than the SAAF. Already in 2013, three of the SAN's frigates were broken or dysfunctional in one or other way, while a fourth had

been cannibalised for parts. All frigates are in urgent need of repairs and their weapon systems must be replaced or repaired. The three submarines that were part of the arms deal in the 1990s also came with a limited number of spares, like the frigates. Scheduled and regular maintenance on submarines is even more critical than on frigates. One of the submarines has already been cannibalised and sometimes none of the submarines are serviceable (Gibson 2023).

At this point of the discussion it would be useful to note a brief reference to the fact that Defence Review 2015 identified five planning milestones for the restoration of South Africa's defence capability. Planning milestone 1—as the very first action step to be taken—simply states: 'Arrest the decline in critical capabilities through immediate, directed interventions' (Defence Review Team 2015: 9–15). Yet, in 2024 milestone 1 still remains underfunded—despite statements and acknowledgements at the highest political level that South Africa's defence capability is substantially lacking (Mapisa-Nqakula 2018).

In short, a discrepancy developed between what politicians want the SANDF to undertake and the resources available for the execution of tasks. Notwithstanding the SANDF's dwindling defence budget and related sustainability challenges, the South African government has also increasingly used the military for domestic security and policing tasks—thus expecting the SANDF to handle a multitude of tasks externally and internally (Mandrup 2024). In this regard, South Africa's domestic security landscape has been a growing political concern—placing the SANDF under further budgetary and organisational pressure. This will be discussed in the section below.

5. Domestic security challenges and internal operations

From the above discussion, it is clear that the responsibilities of the SANDF extend well beyond defence against external aggression—which is constitutionally described as the 'primary object' of the SANDF. Apart from involving the SANDF as a foreign policy instrument in external operations of various kinds, especially operations in the realm of peace and regional security, the SANDF has also been tasked with a variety of domestic deployments. These have notably included support for the SAPS as the South African murder and death rates are comparable and, in some instances, even higher than death rates in high-intensity war zones in the international community (Esterhuysen 2019: 4). What is of particular interest is that the South African White Paper on Defence 1996 clearly stated that '[p]ublic order policing is primarily the responsibility

of the South African Police Service (SAPS). However, given the relative shortage of police personnel, large numbers of troops are currently deployed to assist them. This tendency is undesirable' (Department of Defence 1996). The choice of the word 'undesirable' should be understood against the backdrop of the controversial history of the former South African Defence Force in the 1980s in a domestic deployment role. Ideally, one can argue that the military should be utilised only in extreme situations, such as a pertinent threat to the constitutional order or a state of emergency. However, the reality of recent years is that service to the SAPS in crime-related operations and support to civil authorities or government departments has become an ongoing military activity.

What is more is that the SANDF was also ordered to retake charge of border control in South Africa in 2010, after a hiatus of several years. This includes patrolling a little less than 4 500km of land borders and almost 4 000 km of coastline (De Wet 2012). Since 2010, the SANDF has conducted Operation Corona in accordance with the mandate of the SANDF with members of the military that are permanently deployed for border safeguarding, involving land, air and maritime borderline domains as well as the cyberspace domain. Since 2023, the SANDF received assistance from the newly established Border Management Agency (BMA), currently incubated in the Department of Home Affairs, but this only concerns responsibility for the border law enforcement functions at the land, air and maritime ports of entry. Several challenges are facing the SANDF, ranging from challenges pertaining to a lack of adequate mobility (land, air and sea), to transport capabilities, to poor borderline infrastructure (border fences, patrol roads and access routes), legislative constraints and many more (BMA 2024; Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2022).

In view of the above, Cilliers and Esterhuysen (2023) critically argue that border protection and support to the SAPS can now even be regarded as the primary role of the SANDF. Tasks and operations in this regard have put the spotlight even more on the military's ever-dwindling budget. In fact, budgetary challenges have increasingly been recognised as key to the SANDF's decline and growing concerns pertaining to its ability to fulfil its mandate in accordance with the Constitution—although leadership and organisational culture were also cited as factors (Bailie 2023). A particularly striking and controversial example illustrating the SANDF's internal role was the deployment of soldiers in July 2019 to gang-ridden Cape Town suburbs, known as the Cape Flats, where high rates of unemployment and drug abuse have been prevalent for many years and fuelled gangsterism as a social phenomenon. The aim was to help the authorities

and the SAPS to quell escalating violence ‘that has killed hundreds’ (Reuters Staff 2019). This deployment followed ongoing bloodshed over a period of seven months where gang-related violence and other forms of criminality led to the deaths of more than 2 000 people, mainly poor black and mixed-race (Reuters Staff 2019).

In response to the instruction from its political masters, the SANDF announced that it would deploy a battalion with support elements to communities in the Cape Flats. The deployment of soldiers was immediately welcomed by community leaders (Reuters Staff 2019) but the use of the military to perform law and order functions once again sparked a debate on whether SANDF members are trained for law enforcement and crime prevention. The argument was even raised that South Africa needs a gendarmerie—a hybrid police-military force that would be more suited for the maintenance of public order functions, rather than involving the military in law-and-order duties (Heinecken 2019).

Nine years prior to its deployment on the Cape Flats, the support rendered by the SANDF to secure events relating to the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa saw the reactivation of the military in domestic security affairs (Esterhuysen 2019: 4). In recent years, the SANDF was even instructed to clean up the Vaal River and deployed to assist with measures to curb the spread of Covid-19, to assist in anti-poaching activities in the Kruger National Park, to be on ‘election duty’, among others (Baillie 2022)—all linked to the political requirement to render support to other government departments and maintaining domestic security.

A significant case of internal deployment pertains to the widespread July 2021 unrest in South Africa when parts of the country, mostly the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, experienced unprecedented violent protests. The July 2021 unrest coincided with colossal economic damage to the country as a result of widespread looting of shops and businesses, as well as theft, burning and destruction of public facilities and private properties. The unrest and violence were ignited by low-intensity protests against the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma and a Constitutional Court decision on his imprisonment for 15 months (Vhumbunu 2021). In view of the above, for more than a year the SANDF continued to be on standby in support of the SAPS, specifically to protect all national key points as well as economic corridors of the country from the potentially devastating impact of civil unrest. In this case, the SANDF was deployed in a security landscape where the government’s intelligence institutions not only failed to conduct timely risk assessments and forewarn the police and government of the impending violence but where the SAPS also lacked the required capacity to deal

with and contain the rioting and looting (defenceWeb 2022). The SANDF moved as fast as they could, but it transpired that they were not equipped for riot control and they were unable to meet all the expectations that the public had of them (Africa, Sokupa and Gumbi 2021).

Another recent example of internal deployment was the government's decision in May 2023 to deploy the SANDF to safeguard the coal power plants of South Africa's major power utility, Eskom. In this regard, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated that '[m]embers of the SANDF will assist police to protect Eskom power stations around the country where sabotage, theft and other crimes may threaten the functioning of stations and supply of electricity'. This came after Eskom complained about high levels of corruption and criminality at its power stations which contributed to power shortages and high levels of power outages or load-shedding (Nyathi 2023).

In August 2023, violence ascribed to illegal miners, better known as zama zamas, attracted the attention of the South African public. It transpired that especially communities living on Johannesburg's gold belt lived in fear as ruthless gang wars between zama zamas broke out in the form of turf battles for gold buried deep at abandoned gold shafts across the southern parts of the city. These zama zamas are heavily armed and ruthless and the brazen activities suddenly caught the attention of South Africans (Rondganger 2023). This led to Gauteng Premier Panyasa Lesufi calling for soldiers to assist in combatting violence associated with zama zamas after the SAPS dispatched members in numbers to the relevant areas to quell the dynamics of violence and put a lid on illegal mining activities. SANDF Chief General Rudzani Maphwanya responded positively by stating that the military would be ready to deploy and 'flush them (the zama zamas) out, like rats out of the holes' (defenceWeb 2023a), but his approach has not been supported by analysts who cautioned that the military is at best a temporary measure and that it would be irresponsible for the SANDF to give people false hope that the military would root out the zama zamas. At the time of writing, about 3 300 SANDF are deployed under Operation Prosper at a cost of almost R500 million (Panchia 2023).

In a broader international context, one should understand that domestic deployments of militaries have previously been associated with autocratic and dictatorial regimes, but since the 9/11 events there has been a growing securitisation in many democracies with militaries being deployed where governments increasingly rely on their military forces for surveillance and the protection of their populations. At the same time, liberal democracies still acknowledge the difference between internal and external security and

the distinctive roles of the police and military, although it should also be noted that the traditional divide between the military and police has become blurred in recent decades in the context of the emergence of new transnational risks and challenges (Esterhuysen 2019 4–5).

Much more can be reported on the details of the SANDF's internal deployments, but suffice it to say that the revival of internal deployments has confronted the SANDF with more critical trade-offs to be made in the distribution of its resources concerning external and internal deployments, as well as command and control structures and human resources and equipment deficiencies. Furthermore, several arguments have been raised by analysts and observers against domestic deployments of which the following are especially noteworthy (Esterhuysen 2019, 3):

- Soldiers are brought in from the outside and do not have the same understanding as members of the police of local communities.
- The constitutional stipulation that the SANDF should 'protect the people' does not necessarily translate into internal or domestic military deployments.
- Since the Zuma presidency the SANDF has been confronted with long-term budgetary neglect and hence, the military has to deal with the challenges of institutional and operational paralysis.
- Combating crime is police work per se, and with the exception of some Special Forces capabilities the SANDF is not geared for tackling law and order issues.
- Calls for the domestic deployment of the SANDF are often rooted in and distorted by party political dynamics and interests.
- Militaries are especially not structured, equipped and trained for the combating of crime in urban areas.
- The budget of the SAPS forms a much larger chunk of the national budget than that of the SANDF.

As far as the latter issue is concerned, South Africa's 2023/24 budget indicates that R112,1 billion has been earmarked for the 'police services', while R52,7 billion has been earmarked for 'defence and state security' (National Treasury 2023). Moreover, in the Department of Defence Annual Performance Plan 2023 it is indicated that the audited outcome of funding for regional security (external deployments) ran at R 886 billion, and for support to the people (domestic deployments) it was R 1 101 billion in 2019/20 (Department of Defence 2023). The above-mentioned data simply means more funding is allocated to the SAPS and the SANDF's internal operations respectively.

6. Evaluation and conclusion

From the above analysis and discussion, five issues should especially be highlighted:

First, following the historic transition of 1994, South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy moved from an arena of conflict with its neighbours to one of regional relations based on the ideas of a common destiny, friendship and cooperation. This provided new prospects for the use of the military instrument, and towards the end of the Mandela presidency, the South African government and the SANDF's involvement in operations in the realm of peace and security became a hallmark of South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy dynamics on the continent (Du Plessis 2003 114). This underlies the SANDF's involvement in Lesotho, the DRC, Burundi and later in Sudan and Mozambique, as well as several smaller external operations that were not discussed in the preceding sections.

Second, even though the post-1994 South African government wished to identify South Africa with the promotion of human rights, peace and development on the African continent, its defence policies continued to commit the SANDF primarily to the safeguarding of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The latter can indeed be described as the *raison d'être* for the establishment and existence of the SANDF since 1994. Because of this, the purchasing of new equipment for the SANDF was based on the South African Defence Review 1998, which stipulated that the specific force design required for South Africa should be a high-technology core force, sized for peacetime, but expandable to meet an emerging threat. Following the process of policy development, it was eventually concluded that the SANDF should be designed for its "primary object" and that it must execute its other functions—including operations in the realm of peace and security—through its collateral utility. However, this point of departure eventually proved to be highly problematic. Since 1998, the SANDF has featured prominently as an instrument in South Africa's foreign policy, but increasingly the secondary functions have become the SANDF's primary function. Some critics thus correctly argued in the late 1990s that the view in official defence circles (towards the end of the 1990s) that the SANDF should confine itself to the primary function and desist from involving itself in the secondary functions would over time become highly problematic.

Third, budgetary constraints increasingly posed a major challenge to the SANDF since 1994. Between 1995 and 1998 the defence budget went down and was cut by 11,1 per cent. More recently, the SANDF's predicament was very clear from the South

African Defence Review 2015 which stated that South Africa at that point spent less than 1.2 per cent of GDP on defence—leaving the SANDF approximately 24 per cent underfunded in terms of its size and shape. To this end, serviceability and functionality became of great concern. What is alarming is that the trend of lower spending on defence has continued as data presented above show that spending in 2022/23 was 8,4 per cent lower than in 2021 and 21 per cent lower than in 2013. Of course, it should be understood that the country's ailing economy and low economic growth put severe pressure on government finances and necessitate lower state expenditure.

Fourth, the role and focus of the SANDF post-1994 have shifted to operations in the realm of peace and security. In 2023, the SANDF was the fifth largest troop-contributing nation in the UN's operation in the eastern DRC and it plays a key role in the SADC operation in northern Mozambique. However, considering the history of SANDF operations, a major problem is that the SANDF's deployments tend to be open-ended, resulting in protracted deployments with serious implications for the defence budget. At this point, it is even unclear what would constitute a favourable security situation in both northern Mozambique and eastern DRC. Moreover, political expectations regarding the support of the SANDF for the execution of foreign policy have remained unchanged, clearly coinciding with the commitment of the South African government to work towards a better and more peaceful continent. At the same time, there seems to be no plan to either opt for an adequate defence budget on the one hand or to alternatively scale down the level of political ambition on the other.

Fifth, border protection and support for the SAPS in internal operations have become of increasing importance in the SANDF's activities and responsibilities and can even be regarded as among its primary functions. What is clear however, is that the SANDF is too often used as a stopgap in South Africa's domestic security scene and this contributes to the predicament of the SANDF to function as a professional and well-equipped armed force with a clear mandate. There can be little doubt that the SANDF has become a hollowed-out institution and that stricter parliamentary oversight over the SANDF's external and internal deployments is imperative. Against this background, Vreġ (2023, 1-20) correctly points out that two issues are having an impact on the growing footprint of the SANDF in South Africa's domestic security landscape: firstly, a declining capacity of the SAPS to police the country's domestic security landscape and secondly, a shift in political views that leans increasingly to domestic deployments or see the military as a handy instrument to assist or even step into policing roles and functions, when necessary. From this point of view, it could even be argued

that political opportunism seems to characterise some of the calls for the SANDF's increasing domestic deployment, although communities also have expectations that the government will utilise all available means to their disposal, which increases pressure on the government to consider the deployment of the SANDF internally.

In conclusion, it can be argued that there is a clear mismatch between what has been and is currently expected from the SANDF at the political level on the one side and its budget and capabilities on the other. The challenge for the SANDF is that defence is still central to its *raison d'être*, but it also has to be ready and responsive to political calls to assist in operations in the realm of peace and security in the region or the continent at large. In addition, the SANDF often needs to support the SAPS in delivering security services in a crime-ridden and fragile South African society. And all of this should be done with less than 1 per cent of the country's GDP. Hence, it is no wonder that the SANDF is often described as institutionally overstretched and has, in fact, for some time been in a critical state of ongoing decline.

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