

REVISITING THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE REVIEW

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Background

Post-apartheid defence policy in South Africa developed in an open and consultative manner. It developed in phases starting with the negotiations for the Interim Constitution of South Africa (1993), which included a chapter establishing the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Shortly after the 1994 elections the Government of National Unity started with the development of the White Paper on Defence (completed in 1996) and the Defence Review (completed in 1998). The latter was the culmination of the defence policy development process. These documents established the national defence posture, defined the functions and tasks as well as the required force design of the SANDF and described the overall structure of the Department of Defence (DoD). They also laid down the principles for the governance of defence in a democracy and the basic framework for the management of the DoD. They have subsequently served as the foundation for the further development of defence legislation (including a new Defence Act), policy and doctrine and have been the primary frame of reference for the initiation of the much-debated strategic defence acquisition projects.

Policy development framework

It is often said that policy is not what you *say*, but what you *do*. By 2003 a significant dis-

crepancy had developed between the outcome of the Defence Review process (stated policy) and the current situation (practice). This is mostly due to the fact that some of the assumptions underlying South Africa's defence policy have not been fully realised.

The ending of apartheid brought with it a vision of peace and stability in Africa and of growth and development. Nationally, the focus was on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) that would produce internal stability and growth. For this reason the White Paper and Defence Review argued that South Africa could significantly reduce defence spending and concentrate on the establishment of a small (core) conventional regular force and a large part-time force, which could be mobilised when required. It was anticipated that the SANDF would progressively withdraw from the internal policing function and that a force of about 1,000 soldiers – with air, maritime and medical support units – would be sufficient for the country's international and regional peace support obligations.

These planning assumptions, combined with budgetary restrictions, led to the approved establishment of a defence force of some 55,000 uniformed regular soldiers focused on the maintenance of a core conventional capability. This figure includes the Army, Air Force, Navy and Military Health Service and is also inclusive of all uniformed

support and headquarters personnel. The total strength of the DoD, civilians included, was set at 70,000. The regular force was to be backed by a sufficiently large part-time component to ensure expansion capability when required.

Factors affecting policy implementation

Many problems and obstacles were encountered in translating this intent into reality. The first was that the plans for the integration of the former soldiers from seven opposing armed forces and the subsequent demobilisation of the excess numbers proved more difficult, drawn-out and expensive than expected. A second is that the continued high level of violent crime in South Africa requires the ongoing deployment of some 3,000 soldiers internally. Third, the on-going conflicts in Africa and South Africa's leadership position in conflict mitigation on the continent is demanding an ever-increasing amount of forces for peace support missions. The SANDF currently serves as an important instrument of foreign policy to a degree unforeseen by government scant years ago. Recent developments, including the establishment of an African Common Defence and Security policy, an African Standby Force and a regional Mutual Defence Pact within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have also served to move South Africa away from a focus on self-defence – as reflected in the White Paper and Defence Review – to a more collaborative approach to defence and security.

At present the SANDF has about 3,000 soldiers deployed in conflict areas in Africa, with a demand for more. This brings the present SANDF deployment (nationally and elsewhere) to some 6,000 men and women, the majority being infantry soldiers – significantly more than that envisioned by the Defence Review. Maintaining these force levels requires, at the very least, three times as many mission-ready soldiers to allow for rotation, contingency reserves, training and force preparation, home duty and leave. Even such a figure would mean a very high percentage of

time spent on operations away from home and would make long-term deployments impossible to sustain.

In short, there has been a steady and pragmatic shift away from the written policy as promulgated in the White Paper on Defence and the Defence Review. Arguably the gulf has become so wide as to render some sections of these core documents obsolete. For example there is a *de facto* move away from the policy of a small regular force backed by a significantly large part-time force towards a larger, full-time force with out-of-area support requirements. Similarly, a force design predicated on short logistic lines for highly mechanised mobile forces prepared to fight in defence of the territorial integrity of South Africa has given way to preparations for out of area force projection and support requirements in distant places including Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The requirement for a contribution to an African Standby Force also places special demands on the SANDF for interoperability and mobility. These changes, together with the financial commitments brought about by the defence acquisition projects (as mandated in the Defence Review), are placing ever-increasing pressures on the DoD to provide the required amount of soldiers for deployments while still maintaining its core conventional capabilities within the given resource envelope. This is leading to non-sustainability and to the eventual erosion of capabilities, as is already manifest in the neglect of the part-time force.

Looking at present developments in Africa and South Africa it is clear that there is some lack of coherence between policy and practice and that a review of defence policy is required. Government policy on defence and its guidance to, and funding thereof, should be brought in line with present reality and practice.

The current defence policy debate

Whereas the development of defence policy in the 1993 to 1998 era was transparent, consultative and inclusive, this does not appear to be the case today. The prominent role played by the parliamentary defence committees and civil society during the development of the

White Paper and Defence Review has been significantly reduced. Policy development also appears to have become inconsistent due, in no small manner, to the mismatch between mandated policy and present demands. The most recent example of the lack of consultation and integration was the announcements and uncertainty regarding the future of the commando system. At a time when there is no evidence of a reduction in the requirement for military support to the police and no alternative developed to the commando system as an important component of national defence, successive announcements were made about the future of the commando system without any consultation with the principal stakeholders, namely: Parliament; the affected rural communities; and the members of the commando system themselves.

The White Paper and Defence Review process presented a coherent defence policy framework but the vision presented in both documents has not fully realised. The time has come for an open and consultative re-engagement in the defence policy debate in South Africa. This debate should take cognisance of the premises and assumptions underlying present approved and promulgated defence policy as well as the changes that have occurred in the strategic environment since 1998. These include the high level of crime and violence in South Africa as well as the nature of such crime, regional instability and the continuation of intra-state conflicts in Africa, the new and developing regional and continental peace and security framework and management mechanisms and the changes in the international security environment since 11 September 2001.

Such a review would have to enquire into a number of the fundamental assumptions that underpin present policy, including the relationship between the core (defence of national territory) and secondary tasks (such as peace-keeping and support to the police) of the SANDF and the resources that are devoted to each. The SANDF today acts as a force for crisis prevention and intervention rather than preparing to defend South Africa against a con-

ventional onslaught, and this definition of roles and functions should serve to inform subsequent defence acquisition packages. These developments require that the department and concerned South Africans have to re-think key assumptions such as the relationship and resources committed to the full-time and part-time forces and the size and composition of each. It also means that the DoD may have to revisit the acquisition planning that it is busy with. This does not imply the cancellation of the current strategic arms deal – since that is near impossible and will have serious negative impacts on the status of South Africa as an honest, responsible and dependable trading partner – but rather budget and policy realignment, innovative adaptation to present realities and optimisation of the available human, material and financial resources.

Conclusion

In the period after the 1994 elections the defence debate in South Africa was an open and consultative process. South Africa was internationally applauded for the manner in which the development of defence policy and defence transformation was conducted. Given the fundamental changes that the South African, regional and international environment had experienced at that time, and the massive scope of the policy challenges that faced South Africa, both the process and result of defence transformation are laudable. It would, however, have been unrealistic to expect that the process would have led to answers that would last forever. The world continues to change (as 9/11 demonstrated so dramatically) and policies need to keep pace with these changes. The South African and regional realities have shown some inconsistencies between promulgated defence policies and the challenges facing the SANDF today. This paper has attempted to highlight some of these inconsistencies and calls for the revisiting of the South African Defence Review in a spirit of consultation, openness and shared ownership for the defence and security of South Africa.