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The Conflict in Cabo Delgado and South Africa’s Capability of Handling It

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Introduction

With the fall of Apartheid and the end of the Natal Civil War in 1994, South Africa entered a period of complex and multidimensional changes related to its Defence Force and military strategy. Under the de Klerk administration, the country started to make significant shifts in its policy towards the neighbours and the whole continent. A real breakthrough, without a doubt, was the Namibian independence and the end of the long-lasting Border War. However, this remarkable achievement was not the end of the story, as the South African government started to take relatively frequently part in the peacekeeping operations either on the local or a more significant, regional scale. In this analysis, I would like to discuss the perspective of allegedly more significant interference of South Africa in the security affairs of Mozambique in its northern province of Cabo Delgado. My goal is to explain the main threats and consequences of the greater South African involvement in the conflict since June 2021. However, before going directly to the analysis of the new South African operation, I would like to recap the South African military activity since 1994 briefly.

In order to illustrate the revision of the old South African military doctrine, several examples could be given. First of all, it is the events of 1998 taking place in Lesotho. Despite the controversial

nature of the operation conducted by South African forces against the rebellious Lesotho opposition, the suspected coup d'état was thwarted, while the elected government of Lesotho was secured in power. Following the Lesotho Operation, South Africa took part in the Central African Republic Civil War in 2013. Despite its brief participation in the conflict and a debated efficiency of its aid, South Africa gradually earned itself a regional power capable of supporting the internationally-backed governments, thus, advancing its status as a democratic nation guarding the principles of liberty and equality. In the same year of 2013, South African forces joined the MONUSCO¹ mission in DRC. Participation in the peacekeeping operation of MONUSCO against the M23 forces in the north-eastern part of DRC brought about one of South Africa's most remarkable and widely acknowledged victories, which strengthened the position of the South African government in the eyes of the international community. Still being a part of MONUSCO, South Africa since 2014 has been participating in an operation to suppress the ADF insurgency in Uganda and Congo, successfully developing and applying its air force capabilities to demolish ADF strongholds.

What is happening in Cabo Delgado?

In this section, I would like to describe the essence of the conflict in Cabo Delgado, which, apart from being the main scope of the paper, is the most recent full-scale conflict with the involvement of South Africa. In short, the North-Eastern part of Mozambique, which is occupied mainly by the Cabo Delgado province, is the home of the most prominent Muslim community in Southern Africa (Bonate, 2009: 281-282). Since the 15th century Islam has become a dominant religion since North-Eastern Mozambique was the southernmost frontier of the Omani Empire, controlling these areas until the late 17th century (Al-Issa, 2020: 4-5).

In fairness, it is worth noting that the whole East coast of Africa has a significant Muslim population, from Somalia to Mozambique. That factor was successfully used by the Al-Qaeda fraction, known as Al-Shabab, which operates in Somalia and Kenya. The Kenyan cleric, Aboud Rogo, responsible for raising money for al-Shabab in Kenya, has created a movement called Ansar al-Sunna, based on already standard anti-Western, pro-Sharia Islamist rhetoric (Heyen-Dubé and Rands, 2021). Interestingly, this movement did not have strong ties with al-Qaeda and was mainly focused on the propaganda of an Islamist agenda among the Cabo Delgado locals. This factor of relative loneliness of Ansar al-Sunna has attracted ISIS – Central Africa Province, which according to the available information, has started its activity in the region since 2018 (Heyen-Dubé and Rands, 2021).

As a result, the situation looks strangely at the moment. In the environment of chaos, it is very complex to construct a complete picture of how the two antagonist groups of ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliated Ansar al-Sunna coexist. However, it is possible to say that the Ansar al-Sunna's distant location from the main strongholds of al-Qaeda and its success in constructing a state within a state made Ansar al-Sunna relatively independent from al-Qaeda and made a joint action with

¹ MONUSCO stands for the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This operation has taken place in the Congo since 1999 and involves a joint action of more than sixty states. The mission's main aim is to monitor the compliance of the military groups with the peace accords signed on the tenth of July 1999.

ISIS possible. It is unclear whether the two organisations will continue a joint struggle or be dragged into an internal war similar to Afghanistan. However, in 2021, the US State Department recognised the ISIS factions in Mozambique as a separate terrorist organisation named "ISIS-Mozambique".

Nevertheless, while recruiting the former Mozambiquan police officers, border guards and locals, the two organisations were able to create a criminal syndicate, which controlled the drug routes and taxed the local population (Mutasa and Muchemwa, 2021: 7-8). Since 2017, the activity of terrorists started to take more aggressive forms, which the Mozambiquan government effectively concealed. The situation worsened in 2018 and 2019 with a devastating series of cataclysms striking Northern Mozambique (Unicef.org, 2019). Even though the rebels halted their attacks for a certain period, it is possible to suggest that since chaos hit the people of Northern Mozambique, the terrorist organisations seemed to be the only entities capable of providing people with a mere illusion of aid.

The turning point, which led to a more excellent activity of the rebels, was the discovery of significant gas repositories, which has become a target of the Total SA (Mukpo, 2021). In 2020 the terrorist had captured one of the main northern cities of Mocímboa da Praia, which led to the exodus of several thousand locals, leading to a significant humanitarian crisis (The Islamist insurgency in Mozambique, 2021: 2). After that, greater attention was directed at the Cabo Delgado crisis, which led to a small-scale involvement of the South African task force responsible for humanitarian assistance (The Islamist insurgency in Mozambique, 2021: 1). The final straw in the long-lasting conflict has become the Battle of Palma in spring 2021. The result of this operation was a successful recapture of the city of Palma by the government forces, which led to its absolute destruction and a complete withdrawal of the Total SA facilities from the country, which put an end to the Mozambiquan plans to develop its gas and gas fields.

The deteriorating situation led to an extraordinary meeting of the SADC in June. The primary outcome was a legal blur but a firm decision to hold a joint regional operation against the rebel forces. Such states as South Africa and Rwanda were about to take the central part (Deutsche Welle, 2021, sadc.int, 2021).

A Puzzle of Experience

Under the frustrating and obscure conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the global community has largely overlooked the actively changing situation in Northern Mozambique and the South African intention not to limit itself solely to the humanitarian effort. Probably, for those unfamiliar with the historical background of Southern Africa, it would be unclear why the question of intervention is so essential for the two states is? Thus, we must answer a first and foremost question: what can South Africa do to circumcise the problem of insurgency in Mozambique? Following that question, another one could be answered: who may replace South Africa? Finally: does South Africa have a capacity, in general, to cope with that issue?

Let me start with the last question. As seen from the introductory section of this short analytical review, South Africa has been participating in a series of peacekeeping operations on the African

continent since the fall of Apartheid. Essentially, what is essential is not the very fact of participation. The critical aspect here is South Africa's strategy and engagement during those peacekeeping missions.

The number of South African personnel involved, so far, is approximately 1500 people (AfricaNews, 2021). However, several things remain unclear. First of all, will there be any enlargement in the number of people involved? Secondly, what exactly would become the functions of the deployed forces and whether or not they will change? Furthermore, how will South Africa manage its operation if it has already passed a promised pull-out deadline of the 15th of October?

Moreover, does South Africa have enough professionalism to overt a vast and diverse network of warlords, field commanders and leaders of ISIS in Mozambique, despite the recent success? Suppose we refer to the South African involvement in MONUSCO. In that case, we will see that from 2013 up until today; South Africa has kept only one battalion there, providing specific assistance in the field of intelligence (Kuele and Cepik, 2017: 47). The same applies to the M23 rebellion in DRC, where the same South African battalion from MONUSCO, equalling 1,500 soldiers, participated. In addition, South Africa was also involved in a short operation in the Central African Republic known as the Battle of Bangui. The operation ended in a complete failure, and the brigade general van der Waals once characterised its crucial target as "saving Zuma's friends" (van der Waals, 2021). It leads us to certain doubts on the reasonability of such an operation, considering a general controversy surrounding the Bangui operation.

As it could be seen, the South African approach towards the recent military operations has been more or less the same, except that the MONUSCO mission was characterised by its pure peacekeeping rationale. The case of Mozambique is quite different. The war in Mozambique is a type of warfare South Africa has not been familiar with since the end of the Border War and its operation in Angola. Moreover, the principles of the ISIS forces operating in Mozambique are pretty different from what South African troops were encountering in Namibia and Angola while fighting with the SWAPO and MPLA insurgents. The reason is that the ISIS forces are applying the techniques they have learned in Syria and Iraq while fighting against the technologically comparable forces (e.g. Iraq) to the military capacity of the African states that decided to intervene in the Cabo Delgado province.

Moreover, the recent news circulating in the international community demonstrates that even though ISIS forces are retreating, their way is directed at other regions with less protection and regulations (Devermont and Harris, 2021). For instance, Mozambique's northern neighbour, Tanzania, has faced a series of attacks by the terrorists' forces during their regrouping (Devermont and Harris, 2021). These instances illustrate the complexity of the war on terror and raises doubts on whether the joint forces can handle the situation competently?

The Loss of Technological Capacity and a Troubled Reform

The latter assumptions logically lead us to South African technological capacity to face the military challenge in Mozambique. At this point, we must go thirty years back to the time of reform and eventual transition. As a country of authoritarian past, South Africa facing transition had to make

complex decisions regarding the status of the army. Considering an almost non-stop militarisation in South Africa from 1966 until 1990, it is easy to predict that for a newly-elected government of 1994, this problem was one of the most important things to resolve. It was an important goal to decrease the role of the military, redirect the spendings and, consequently, change the image of South Africa in the eyes of the world (de Klerk, 2014).

Security re-orientation

According to the memories of a former Brigadier General of South African Defence Force Willem van der Waals, FW de Klerk was so worried about the army's role in the political life of the country that he wanted to ban the military officials in uniforms from attending his inauguration. However, this desire was not flourishing for the sake of ritual and tradition. If the army was retaining its positions in the field of administrative settings, on a decision-making level, the status of the bureaucrats was significantly damaged by a new political orientation of the government.

As van der Waals once again highlighted it, the role of the State Security Council also decreased profoundly. In the years of PW Botha, who reigned over South Africa as an absolute autocrat, the State Security Council was a body uniting several institutions: SADF, Police and the Intelligence Service. That body was responsible for decision-making processes almost in every possible field in the country. Thus, the people from the security sector were in charge of deciding on vital issues on which they had no legal title to rule upon. As a result, it was pretty logical that FW de Klerk was willing to abandon the practice of using the powers of SSC as soon as possible. However, something else is most interesting about SSC. As Brigadier van der Waals recalls, at the dawn of a new age in South Africa, in 1989-1990, SSC made an offer to de Klerk to assist in the upcoming negotiation process with SWAPO regarding the future elections in Namibia and a democratic transition after the end of the Border War. Nevertheless, surprisingly, de Klerk had firmly rejected that proposal and decided to take decisive actions to dissolve SSC even though the people present there already belonged to the circles close to the new government (van der Waals, 2021). This example shows that the decisive policy targeted at the significant weakening of the military positions in the South African society and politics had been approved by the government almost immediately after the departure of the most conservative hardliners.

SADF and its problems in a contemporary retrospect

Even though the previous examples instead speak for themselves, those are not the only instances of a gradual decay of the South African military. The rumours about the SADF troubles have been circulating in the media sphere of South Africa for a relatively long time, occupying the minds of politicians, journalists and former army officials. For instance, in May 2020, a South African journal titled 'BusinessTech' showed that the number of active people in the South African army had declined from almost 80,000 people to 73,000 from 2011 to 2020. In addition, the journal highlighted severe economic troubles, which the SADF is currently facing, taking into consideration the closure of the South African Defence Account (businessstech.co.za, 2020). The Account is a still-functioning entity in the South African Defence Force, responsible for placing orders on new equipment.

In a presentation delivered by DoD representatives to the parliament in Spring 2020, it was said that: "In situations of war or external aggression, South Africa will not have a defence-related

industry of its own for arms manufacturing and modernisation.” (businessstech.co.za, 2020) When South Africa is involved in an open conflict in Cabo Delgado, this particular statement sounds even more menacing. For sure, the conflict in Northern Mozambique is not aggression against South Africa. However, even though the statement on the SADF’s inability to effectively participate in combats has been made, it was decided that the South African involvement should occur. That leads us to the question of whether South African involvement is justified or not? Is it an immediate necessity since the situation may deteriorate rapidly without South African involvement, or is it just a desire of a regional economic colossus to strengthen its positions concerning the neighbours without realising its weaknesses? All those questions require a detailed review in the following part of the article.

As the South African Defence Review suggests, South Africa is willing to expand its influence on the continent (Heitman, 2014a; Heitman, 2014b). That is not just a hypothetical proposal of the Ministry of Defence, but it is also an assumption supported by the Cabinet and Presidential Office. However, at the same time, the review states that the South African Defence Force needs at least 1 billion Rands more to sustain one of its current operations dedicated to protecting and monitoring the borders (Heitman, 2014b). The main problem is that the border control scheme is one of many South African military projects. However, unfortunately, despite a great variety of the latter, they strongly lack money. Only after reconsideration of the funds would it be possible to talk about restoring the South African military capacity (Heitman, 2014b).

Issues contributing to the financial problem

The financial issue is not the only one altering the current situation in the SADF. As Esterhuysen (2006; 2017) analytic review pointed out, the SADF faced a series of additional problems. First and foremost, South Africa tends to make a grave mistake of becoming “everything for everybody” (The Conversation, 2017) on the African continent without possessing a real strategic potential. The brightest example of such a disproportional stance may be that the present generals and admirals who command the SADF pay way more attention to pleasing the apparatus than managing the defence priorities, such as the technological advancement of the South African military. For instance, to a large extent, the South African army still uses the technologies and equipment that the Apartheid regime left behind it.

It is perfectly outlined in an article by Esterhuysen (2017) that the South African approach towards the military is budget-driven. It means that the state budget is taken as the main departing point. Thus, the military expenditures shall be managed so that they do not become a liability to the budget. Usually, this position is taken by small states which do not have enough technological, political and financial capabilities to act as the influential players in, at least, the regional arena. South Africa also took that approach immediately after the end of the Border War and the Namibian independence. However, interestingly, over time, despite sticking to the budget-oriented approach in a financial field, South Africa has attempted to take an interest-driven approach in international affairs and, especially, security policy. If employing the interest-driven approach, a budget shall be formulated to satisfy the security objectives and plans. Logically, we see one more imbalance in the South African position that its desires do not fit into the financial strategy chosen by the government.

Wrapping up the section dedicated to the military issues South Africa currently faces, I would like to refer to the article by Esterhuysen (2006) and, once again, to an interview of Willem van der Waals (2021). One of the most severe troubles which South Africa is facing, in general, is the problem of education. After the fall of Apartheid, the South African government was willing to dismantle the principles of the old regime in every possible area. On the one hand, it is an important task and a goal that must be achieved. On the other hand, it is also a highly complex process that requires patience, proper administration and correct order. Unfortunately, when it comes to the latter, South Africa cannot boast of any such quality.

Consequently, after the introduction of quotas in the South African educational institutions (including the military academies), both the communities of teachers and the students have been significantly altered. By that, I mean that teaching was now organised not only by the veterans of SADF (who were predominantly White) but also by the Black personnel, which was haphazardly promoted to the higher ranks after the transition (Esterhuysen, 2006). Sadly, it had a menacing impact on the quality of education, which led to a gradual decline of professionalism among the soldiers and newly appointed officers (van der Waals, 2021).

Last but not least, the place stands the question of language efficiency. As Esterhuysen (2006) points out, a traditionally Afrikaans-dominated community, which SADF used to be, has now turned into a multilingual entity where, unfortunately, the level of literate and correct communication was seriously damaged. Currently, the situation has generally been improving, with English becoming a universal language of the army. However, immediately after the fall of Apartheid, the hustle and bustle in the field of language issues directly impacted the quality of the South African military.

Mozambique in the Diplomatic Orbit of South Africa

In the last section, I would like to assess the role of Mozambique for South Africa from a historical perspective. Without a doubt, a radical Islamic group that is causing chaos on the steps of your neighbour's house is alarming in general. However, let us hypothesise, would South Africa be so pro-active if the issue of ISIS had popped up somewhere else? I believe that the most probable answer would be “no”.

Mozambique, unlike Angola, has been attracting considerably less attention from South Africa in times of Apartheid. The situation may have been different if, previously, for an extended period, South Africa was not infiltrating Mozambique economically. Judging from a historical point of view, Mozambique has always been an impoverished place (van der Waals, 2021). Thanks to a great climate and fertile soil for farming, Mozambique has always been a purely agricultural counter; the sector has become the central area of interest for the colonists during the Portuguese control. After the Portuguese left and the FRELIMO government started its economic reformation, the last remains of the proper agricultural system disappeared, leaving Mozambique in despair. The only stable and robust source of Mozambique income was maritime ports' infrastructure, especially the ports near the capital city of Maputo.

It is essential to explain why maritime ports were so valuable. South Africa has its big ports, like Durban and Cape Town. However, both are located at a certain distance from Pretoria and Johannesburg, the most significant economic and political centres. In the case of Cape Town, the question of distance is paramount, while in the case of Durban, a complex terrain around Kwazulu-Natal has always been making it difficult to transport goods. Thus, the role of Maputo was paramount. Due to this, in the first half of the 20th century, the Union of South Africa invested a fortune in constructing the railroad from Southern Mozambique to North-Eastern South Africa while also regularly improving the infrastructure needed for sustainable functioning railroads (van der Waals, 2021). For Rhodesia, for example, Maputo was the only port through which the country could receive goods.

The importance of ports was also strongly connected to long-lasting relations between Portugal and South Africa, which, surprisingly, have not always been that good. The convenient location of Southern Mozambique has always been attractive to South African officials since the formation of the Union of South Africa. The desire to gain full access to the area intensified even more after establishing mandatory control over South-West Africa (Namibia today). This gain, which motivated the South African expansionist agenda, directly affected South African politics during the Second World War. When Jan Smuts and his generals were waiting for a moment when Portugal might enter the war on the Axis side, they might implement the same approach they had used in Namibia during the First World War (Council-General, Lorenço Marques, 1940). Thus, South Africa was preparing several thousand soldiers to control Maputo and Southern Mozambique immediately after the Portuguese declaration of war. Fortunately for Portugal and Mozambique mainly, it has never happened.

After the Second World War ended and Portugal entered NATO, the South African attitude to Portugal also changed significantly. While knowing that it would not be able to retain a neo-colonial influence over its former colonies (like France was doing), Portugal decided to fight for the physical control of the territories of its main strongholds, namely Angola and Mozambique. (van der Waals, 2021). Due to this, South Africa initiated a considerable programme of aid to its colonial neighbours in the military domain and the sectors of construction, supplies, and energy. The two most prominent outcomes of this cooperation was the erection of the Cahora Bassa plant, which has remained the primary source of electricity in Mozambique (Isaacman and Sneddon, 2000).

As it can be seen, the construction of the basic infrastructure and the most vital industrial hubs in Mozambique is mainly a product of South African involvement during the Portuguese Colonial Wars. Unfortunately for the Portuguese, the war ended with the victory of FRELIMO. Mozambique, unlike Angola, was significantly dependent on South African assistance even after the fall of the last Portuguese stronghold (van der Waals, 2011). Due to this, FRELIMO has always had a very gentle approach towards the Apartheid regime of South Africa, performing a needed minimum of political neutrality to secure the inflow of goods and energy from South Africa. The only exception was the support of RENAMO by the South African side, an initiative that was quickly exhausted after the fall of Rhodesia (van der Waals, 2021).

What was the value of Mozambique for South Africa at the end of the 1980s and immediately after the transition in 1994? Mozambique was an example of a devastated country that was practically in ruins after years of socialist experiments and civil war. The agricultural sector, the primary

source of income, just started recovering in the late 1980s while still being relatively weak until today. Mozambique did not possess any oil or gas reserves until the recent discoveries in Cabo Delgado, which were made just before the outbreak of the conflict (Mukpo, 2021). The role of Mozambique's southern ports for South Africa started to gradually decline with the development of more effective ways of transportation within that country.

Consequently, Mozambique has become a market for South African goods, just like Namibia or Botswana (van der Waals, 2021). However, at least in the cases of Namibia or Zimbabwe, South Africa shares a significant portion of common and much interconnected cultural ties. Mozambique remained a particular detached case of a non-English speaking country, whose role in the region was gradually declining.

Concomitantly, it may be suggested that Mozambique's economic and diplomatic status in its relation to South Africa today has significantly worsened while being a poverty-stricken place facing constant natural disasters. Hence, the doubts over the South African involvement in the Cabo Delgado conflict are even more justified. We may raise a rhetorical question of whether South African involvement is still needed in the form of military aid of such a scale if many other African states have decided to contribute?

Conclusions

The question of the South African involvement in the Cabo Delgado conflict is way too multidimensional. On the one hand, it is possible to suggest that the South African forces are performing their duty of protection and deterrence (relatively successfully so far). However, on the other hand, we see that South Africa is facing troubles in terms of its army performance. The questions of low budget, poor competencies of personnel and outdated technologies lead us to a sad reflection that SADF and South Africa are taking too much responsibility, more than they can hold.

Finally, two key conclusions are drawn. First of all, South Africa decided to play a dangerous game of fighting Islamic terrorism. Even though the SADF of the Apartheid times has had no experience in such operations, the lack of practice and general nature of counter-terrorist warfare may bring South Africa to a lengthy and costly involvement in a regional conflict. The second conclusion is related to the South African position on the continent. Even though a democratic South Africa was willing to depart from the expansionist past of the 'old regime', it still keeps and praises the idea of, at least, a regional superpower. However, the desires and dreams of the South African government do not go hand in hand with the sad realities of an underdeveloped military, high rate of corruption, imbalanced budget and the backlogged economy.

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