RECOMMENDATIONS

South Africa should:

- In its own interest, accept the security responsibilities that come with being a regional economic power.
- Accept that an autonomous intervention will sometimes be the only effective means to head off or contain a conflict.
- Prioritise the development of crisis response intervention capability, and provide the required funding.

On the basis of that prioritisation, the SANDF should:

- Expand its intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance and special forces capabilities to make focused, effective and prompt intervention possible.
- Develop effective rapid deployment early-entry and follow-on forces with the required airlift, amphibious lift and in-flight refuelling capability.
- Work with SADC and other African forces to develop wider capability to act promptly and quickly to head off or contain conflicts.

SUMMARY

There is a reasonably general understanding and acceptance of peacekeeping as a sometimes necessary task; less so of peace enforcement; and hardly any understanding or acceptance at all of offensive military interventions.

However, some situations do require offensive military intervention to create a situation that will allow peace enforcement, let alone peacekeeping. Unfortunately, this reality seems to elude many academics, diplomats, journalists and politicians. The inability to grasp the harsh reality of human, group and state behaviour is what allowed the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 1995 mass murder at Srebrenica; what allowed the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone and the conflict in Darfur to carry on for so long; and what allowed extremists months of freedom in northern Mali.

The difficulty is that a military intervention to stop a conflict is, in everything but name, war-fighting; and no one wants to propose going to war – not even when the only alternative is to allow a conflict to drag on, condemning many more people to be displaced, maimed or killed. So even when there is some understanding of what must be done, valuable time is lost while political leaders and international bodies argue and dither about taking that decision.

This policy brief starts from the premise that offensive military intervention operations will, in some cases, be a critical precursor to peace enforcement and peacekeeping. It discusses some of the challenges involved in intervention operations in Africa, and then outlines the capabilities the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) will need if it is to be capable of such operations and, particularly, of autonomous intervention to provide the prompt and quick response that is essential to success.

INTERVENTION OPERATIONS IN AFRICA

There have been more than 80 intervention operations in Africa since 1959. Most involved either the evacuation of foreign civilians or the protection of a favoured government. However, some were launched with the genuine intent to either stop a conflict or bring relief to the local people, with Operation Restore Hope in Somalia (1992) arguably being the outstanding example of intervention on humanitarian grounds. There have, of course, been intervention operations elsewhere, with the Australian-led intervention in Timor Leste providing a good example of an operation launched with the clear intent to assist the country’s people by stabilising a violent situation.
Even though most intervention operations have a pragmatic
if not cynical political intent as their driving force, it is still
important to study them, because what works for that
purpose will also in most cases work for an operation with
an altruistic intent.

Intervention operations in Africa, whatever their purpose
and scale, all have to contend with four factors, namely:

- Nature of the opposing forces
- Strategic distance to the theatre of operations
- Operational distances within the area of operations
- Challenges to tactical movement

OPPOSING FORCES

There has been a steady and accelerating improvement in the
capabilities of the forces that might oppose an intervention, be
they regular forces, guerrillas or even just local militias or
bandits. There is a clear trend of their being increasingly:

- Experienced: Leaders often have many years and even
decades of experience in fighting in a particular area, which
gives them not just practical, tactical experience, but also
an intimate knowledge of the area and close links to the
local population, which serves as an early-warning and
intelligence gathering network.
- Well trained: Training is often provided by more experienced
comrades, former regular officers or non-commissioned
officers (NCOs), mercenaries, or the special forces of a major
power with an interest in that country or region.
- Well led: These forces are sometimes led by leaders who
have survived years of operations and lead by example and
on the basis of practical experience, or by former regulars.
The fast-moving rebel attacks on N’Djamena, Chad in 2006
and 2008 and Omdurman, Sudan in 2008, for instance,
reveal an outstanding ability to plan movement and logistic
support.
- Well equipped: Light vehicles allow good mobility along
rough tracks, with some having night-vision equipment and
almost all being equipped with communications equipment
that allows tactical control, operational coordination, and
links to sources of supply.
- Well-armed: Light infantry and support weapons are
genearly used, but increasingly with heavier weapons,
including heavy machineguns and anti-aircraft cannon,
often mounted on vehicles (technicals), automatic grenade
launchers, recoilless guns, 120 mm mortars and 107 mm
multiple rocket launchers. Mines, improvised explosive
devices (IEDs) and missiles remain rare, but will become
more common. Some also have armoured vehicles, 122
mm BM-21 multiple rocket launchers and field guns. A large
proportion of these irregular forces, including bandits and
smugglers, make use of air transport to bring in supplies
and fly out goods to pay for those supplies.

Many of Africa’s regular forces have also begun to modernise,
with the T-72 main battle tank, the BMP infantry combat
vehicle and the Mi-35 attack helicopter now quite common.
Among the newer systems are Su-30 fighters and Mi-28
attack helicopters, as well as more modern MBTs, such as the
T-90S and the Chinese T-96. The BRDM-3 reconnaissance
vehicle and the BTR70 and BTR-80 armoured personnel
 carriers are also used.

The standard and weaponry of opposing forces can
change very quickly:

- Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war in 1998 with elderly combat
aircraft. Within months they were flying MiG-29s and Su-27s.
- Seleka in the Central African Republic (CAR) began the
rebellion in December 2012 with old weapons, few vehicles
and little other equipment. By March 2013 it had ‘technicals’
with a standard camouflage pattern, heavy machineguns,
automatic grenade launchers and fairly standardised
uniforms, as well as general equipment, satellite telephones
and radios.

Anyone planning an intervention must take into account that
opposing forces may be better than expected (as the French
learned in Mali) and can improve their capabilities in very short
order (as the South Africans learned in the CAR). As a result,
any intervention operation must:

- Have sufficient forces with the mobility and firepower to
overmatch the opposition.
- Deploy promptly and decisively, and execute the mission
too quickly to allow opposing forces to improve their
capabilities.

This has also been brought home by a study of past
interventions. Those interventions that went in quickly with real
force, relative to the opposition of the time, succeeded (from
Dragon Rouge in the Congo in 1964 to Serval in Chad in
2013), while those that involved a slow deployment, such as
the Economic Community of West Africa Monitoring Group
(ECOMOG) operations, or too weak a force, such as the
United Nations (UN) in Rwanda, either dragged on or failed
altogether. A study of operations in the former Yugoslavia
demonstrates the same basic fact.

AUTONOMOUS/UNILATERAL
INTERVENTION OPERATIONS?

Given the disastrous track record of international bodies when
it comes to taking a decision promptly and following through
swiftly, a good case can be made for regional powers or
groups to launch interventions autonomously. Mali is an
outstanding example of inadequate international intervention,
with the African Union (AU) Standby Force ‘standing by’ while
people died and the UN and AU dithered.

The intervention in Burundi worked because South Africa
took a determined lead, persuading others to join and then
embarrassing the AU and UN into becoming involved.
Australia’s intervention in Timor Leste worked for the
same reason.

CHALLENGE OF DISTANCE

Any intervention operation in Africa will suffer from the limits
set by the distances involved – strategic, operational and
tactical – and the limited transport infrastructure.
For example, it is about 3 500 km by air from Pretoria to Bangui (CAR), 2 930 km to Kisangani and 2 600 km to Bukavu (both in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC), while Al Fashir (Sudan) is 4 370 km away. By sea it is 3 450 km from Cape Town to Matadi (DRC), followed by 366 km by rail to Kinshasa and then 1 750 km by river to Kisangani; or 4 830 km from Durban to Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and then 1 230 km by rail to Mwanza on Lake Victoria, where there is a useful airport.

Distances within theatres and areas of operations are equally challenging. In the DRC, for example, the nearest tarred runways to Goma are at Bunia (370 km distant), Kindu (390 km distant), Kalemi (460 km distant) and Kisangani (510 km distant), and the road links from those towns to Goma are not exactly perfect.

Air transport is the obvious solution for strategic and even operational movement and supply. However, that assumes the availability of aircraft able to carry the vehicles and equipment required (C-130s are often too small) into airfields close to the area of operations (which C-17s mostly cannot do).

Other limiting factors are what the runways will bear; the apron size, which governs how many aircraft can unload at one time and whether there is space to refuel without causing delays; and whether safe fuel is available. If the answer to the latter two is ‘no’, the aircraft will be limited by payload/radius, not payload/range.

Light transports are invaluable for moving people, most supplies and casualties, but are not able to deploy protected vehicles or heavy equipment, thereby forcing them onto roads, which brings the challenge of making the roads useable and, until that is done, accepting very slow road moves.

Helicopters are often the answer in terms of tactical movement and supply, but many operational areas are too large, with mountains that are too high, or weather or temperatures that reduce their performance dramatically.

Each theatre and area of operations will require its own optimised approach – there is no ‘one size fits all’ answer.

INTERVENTION OPERATIONS AND SCALE

There is also no standard intervention: some will be carried out by small teams of special forces; many will be combat group operations; and some will be brigade-strength operations. Even small operations may, in fact, require quite elaborate deployment and support planning, mainly as a result of the distances involved, and larger operations will often require elaborate support. Operation Palliser (the British intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000) and Operation Serval (the French intervention in Mali in 2013) are good examples of the latter.

Operation Palliser: This involved the deployment of a parachute battalion and special forces by C-130 from the United Kingdom (UK); the self-deployment of Chinook helicopters from the UK (4 800 km distant) and the Balkans; and the deployment of a Royal Navy (RN) task group with an embarked Royal Marine Commando (the RN task force comprised an aircraft carrier, a helicopter carrier, three landing ships, four frigates and a replenishment ship); and the follow-on deployment by air of other troops and support elements. The force in-country, at the mounting base at Dakar and offshore from Sierra Leone totalled some 4 500 personnel.

Operation Serval: This involved French forces moving by road from Côte d'Ivoire; by air from Gabon, Chad and France (supported by other air forces); and by sea from France to Dakar in Senegal and from there by road to Bamako and beyond. The French carried out precision air strikes (the first directly from France with in-flight refuelling) and several parachute assaults to seize airfields for air-launched follow-on forces. The force included special forces with light vehicles, medium forces with light armoured cars and armoured personnel carriers, heavy armoured cars and infantry combat vehicles, 155 mm artillery and Tiger attack helicopters, and peaked at a strength of more than 4 000.

INTERVENTION OPERATIONS AND SOUTH AFRICA

Given South Africa’s position as by far the largest economy in Africa and one of the top 30 in the world, there is an expectation that South Africa will take the initiative in regional security matters. It is also in South Africa’s own interest to ensure a peaceful and stable neighbourhood. Considering this, together with how ineffectually international bodies react to security crises, South Africa should give serious consideration to acting autonomously in the future, as it did with such success in Burundi.

This is not to argue that South Africa should bear the full burden of relevant peace enforcement or peace-keeping interventions, but that South Africa should carry out an immediate intervention to either head off a conflict or stop it from spiralling out of control, and then draw in other willing African partners to share the longer-term peacekeeping and peace-building effort. It is only when a single government takes the first key decision to intervene that a prompt response can reasonably be expected.

However, if South Africa is to be able to act independently in the first instance, it will need to develop the military capability to do so. The SANDF, as it stands today, is not capable of handling any but the smallest of intervention operations. This was illustrated particularly clearly by the deployment of the very small protection force to Bangui in January 2013. Deploying just a reinforced parachute company and a special forces group required chartered aircraft, while prompt reinforcement with stronger forces, possibly including light armour, would have been impossible due to the lack of airlift and suitable vehicles. Without tanker aircraft, the quick deployment of fighters was also impossible.

SOUTH AFRICA: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The Bangui incident and the November 2012 occupation of Goma in the DRC by M23 rebels, where South Africa could not have intervened to reinforce or extract its troops had they been attacked, should serve as a wake-up call. The South African government must decide whether the country is willing to accept the security responsibilities of a regional power. If not, it must scale back its foreign policy ambitions accordingly.
If it is willing, however, it needs to expand the SANDF to enable it to conduct intervention operations, non-combatant evacuation missions and the quick reinforcement or ‘hot extraction’ of South African forces when required. That restructured SANDF will require:

- An extended Special Forces capability with integral air transport.
- Strategic, operational and tactical aerial reconnaissance and surveillance capability.
- Early entry forces, airborne and seaborne, and rapidly deployable follow-on forces, of a strength to be credible as a deterrent to adventures and effective when needed, therefore including air-transportable armour.
- The airlift and amphibious capability to promptly and quickly deploy those forces into airfields rather than airports, through small fishing harbours or, if necessary, ‘over the beach’.
- The ability to ‘poise’ forces; be it at a forward base in a country adjacent to the troubled area, or offshore from the troubled country.
- The ability to promptly and quickly deploy fighters and attack and transport helicopters to a theatre of operations.
- Additional force elements to sustain extended operations (the Defence Review argues for the ability to sustain two extended combat-group strength operations with relevant air and naval support, plus a combat-group strength intervention followed by a twelve-month deployment).
- Force elements trained and equipped for various terrain forms, such as jungle or mountain areas that are likely to be encountered in operations.
- The operational lift – air, road or river – to support deployed forces, and light vehicles for rapid operational and tactical air-landed operations.
- A rapidly deployable reserve to deal with unpredictable crises that coincide with a major deployment.

This will require an increased defence budget, probably to an amount equivalent to about two per cent of the current gross domestic product (GDP). However, this will give South Africa the ability to influence events in southern Africa, with a stronger SANDF that will also be employing people and acquiring equipment that can, given the larger numbers involved, be developed and manufactured in South Africa cost effectively.

The alternative is to cede the country’s ability to influence events in the region to external powers that will be acting in their own interests, which are unlikely to align with those of South Africa.

Co-operative security

Arguing for autonomous intervention capability does not, however, imply South Africa’s going it alone in all respects, which is neither affordable nor desirable. South Africa will also have to make a real effort to turn the SADC Brigade into a viable force with a rapid deployment capability and play a major role in the interim AU Crisis Response Initiative.

The AU Crisis Response Initiative will not, if the AU does its job properly, require much of South Africa except to provide an agreed contingent at short notice. The SADC Brigade, however, will require detailed and frank discussion with the country’s SADC partners and may well need some assistance to enable it to develop effective follow-on forces of adequate strength. The Brigade will also require regular exercises of different mission scenarios, including some in which another SADC state takes the lead and South Africa provides the follow-on or heavier forces.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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