



# A Reluctant Hegemon

## The SANDF and its 'defined' role in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## Introduction

At the end of May 2021, South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced sweeping changes to the new military command of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), following the retirement of the long serving General Solly Zacharia Shoke. General Shoke was replaced by Lieutenant General Rudzani Maphwanya, who was promoted to General a month later, accompanied by new appointments heading the other branches of the force. In the President's view, the new appointments represented an opportunity to undertake, "substantial change" in which he expected a "seamless and smooth" transition. The implications of the President's call were to urge the generals to develop and implement appropriate policy and organizational reforms, within the security sector, that would benefit the overall continuing attention towards the state formation of the country. Conceptually, the transformation in the security sector, envisaged by Ramaphosa, was to address the complex and challenging state formation and institutional construction processes that include political, socio-economic and security dimensions of a relatively youthful post-apartheid democracy. The message was against the background of what has now been widely acknowledged as the major post-independence challenge facing African nations – establishing a viable and functional state. Instead, throughout the continent, the African state is in crisis. Characterized by dysfunctional states lacking legitimacy, with some becoming victim and totally captured by factions of ruling political parties, or even families, as we have witnessed in Togo and Gabon, who have remained in power for over 50 years.

But, in the case of the SANDF, precisely what are the role challenges envisaged in order to establish and integrate the armed forces into the nation's developmental agenda? Stated differently, General Maphwanya (promoted with effect 1 June 2021) and his new team must formulate, develop, and adopt appropriate policy options at the strategic and tactical operational levels that will satisfy the president's publicly stated expectations of 'ushering in substantial change' from what has been the practice in the past. Given the 'marching orders' to the new military command by the South African President, as well as taking into account the uninspiring continental experience, this discussion offers some considered views on how the SANDF may execute its mandate, through suggested strategic and structural approaches, to result in comprehensive security sector reform and alignment to national interests. The SANDF's Military Command (MC) comprises an innovative delegation of sectoral responsibility, under the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). This includes heads of the Army, Air Force, Navy, Military Health Services, the Chief Joint Operations, Head of Defence Intelligence, Logistics, Human Resources and the forces' Chief of Staff.

Furthermore, in making this statement, the president implies that the institution has to consider almost fundamental reforms to move it away from past experience.



Significantly, the president is making these comments against the background of widespread negative comments about the role and participation of elements of the security sector emerging from the State Capture inquiry, chaired by Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, as well as findings of commissioned reports, such as the *High Level Review Panel Report on the State Security Agency*, established during December 2018 and chaired by former Minister Sydney Mufamadi. To this end, *The High Level Review Panel* reveals the successful establishment of personalized and factionalized units within the State Security Agency and Secret Services with different reporting lines outside the constitutional provisions. Against this background, the motivation and need for comprehensive security sector reform for South Africa has never been more urgent. The challenge, therefore, remains for General Maphwanya to come up with appropriate corrective measures, designed to reset the national roles and functions of the SANDF, to occur within the existing budgetary constraints. On this note, while General Maphwanya is coming into office facing a R15 billion budget cut, available evidence also indicates almost consistent deficit funding on defence and security over the last three years, according to the parliamentary monitoring group. It is to his credit that Maphwanya has already raised concerns on “the diminishing allocation of resources with a deleterious impact on the Defence Industries such as Armscor and Denel with important downstream and upstream economic linkages under threat.”

On the question of the new role definition, a respected colleague and security analyst on the SANDF, Jakkie Cilliers, firmly asserting the point that urgent attention needs to be paid towards the reform of the SANDF, argues that the institution “be repurposed for African peace support operations, border protection and support to police. (Note: cited in “SA Intelligence Agencies not up to scratch: Time for Change,” 22 July 2021, DefWeb)

However, this discussion suggests at least five priority areas, around which balance must be mediated, for the security sector to begin to align itself to appropriate roles.

### **Threat analysis**

In the southern African sub-region, South Africa is the only country that has not been under threat of invasion from any of its neighbours. This situation has not changed in the post-apartheid era. For General Rudzani Maphwanya and the Military Command, the challenge is therefore to forge an operational SANDF that operates on what is defined as defence diplomacy in its relationship with its neighbours. Stated differently, the SANDF has to seriously engage and consider some of the defence and security options demanded, particularly by former liberation movements in government, while at the same time taking into account its own internal challenges, especially when this comes to budgetary commitments. A singular example in recent times, has been the call



by SADC member-states for South Africa to deploy its air assets in the region. Pretoria countered by asking for the other member-states to provide for the much needed, and expensive, fuel. Confronted with the realities of costs up front, the requests fizzled out, demonstrating that through defence diplomacy and realism, countries' defence and security structures can be challenged to move realism.

However, taking the wider picture into account, the actual threat to South Africa's stability is the absence of internal cohesion and the unattended consequences of increasing resource and access inequalities, as shall be argued below. We examine the four areas that should seize the minds of the new CDF and the Military Command going forward.

**First**, almost without question, the SANDF must continue to be ready to fulfil the country's signed up to, **international security obligations**. Furthermore, it is on this level that South Africa plays a unique role, participating with the elite international defence and security community, where she is invited to either join maritime naval exercises or even air and landward joint or multi-national events, because of the sophisticated assets that the country has.

South Africa is an acknowledged defence and security equipment manufacturer and weapons exporter, a role shaped and defined by the competitiveness of global markets. In Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa has no match for the inherited and economically integrated defence industry, with thousands of workers employed. This niche cannot be neglected, and in the planning and execution of the new mandate, attention must be paid to the public and private sector, whose management requires developing networked markets with sophistication. On this, it is illustrative to acknowledge that General Maphwanya is on record committing to saving threatened defence industry companies, while pointing out the detrimental effects of outsourcing service, maintenance, repair, refit and supply of the basic weaponry needs of the SANDF. Significantly, the General alludes to the security implications separate from the high cost of outsourcing.

In summary, the first area of focus reveals at least three critical dimensions of a) meeting constitutional international security obligations; b) continuing to benefit from invitations by First World countries to participate in joint exercises, from which the country gains exposure and access to new knowledge and operational doctrine, either for maritime-submarine, air or landward assets, including cyber and drone equipment now on the market; and finally, c) the need to sustain the country's defence and security industry, from which shared expertise and technologies is always ongoing.

The **second** area of participation which the new MC need to consider, is **readiness to engage in peacekeeping**, mandated by either the United Nations, or the African Union and its sub-regional structures, organized as the African Peace & Security Architecture



(APSA). To this end, cutting edge technical and strategic assets, such as those available within the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) called to assist in the December 2013 crisis in the Eastern Congo and South Sudanese city of Juba, represent the manifestation of this second layer of participation. In that operation, the SANDF demonstrated its highly sophisticated air assets and other intelligence acquisition equipment not normally available to most African nations. But it must be appreciated that this is but a secondary and technical area of participation that does not equate to the maritime or even air and cyber knowledge sharing and exercises that the country is exposed to in the first category.

Furthermore, in response to continental demands, South Africa has just spent R984 million deploying 1 250 troops in the volatile Cabo Delgado Province of Mozambique, which are scheduled to remain on the ground until 15 October. This development is an example of the country's commitment to continental security under the auspices of the AU and the sub-regional SADC. In an illustrative development, weeks before this deployment, the United States had publicly approached South Africa to suggest the country join the superpower in military collaboration against extremists operating in Cabo Delgado. This direct invitation came at the height of ongoing deliberations, within SADC, on how the sub-region could invoke its own provisions, under the auspices of the Organ of Defence and Politics. It is therefore important to take note that such overtures, from the USA to South Africa, will continue, and the country must prepare to participate in split roles. Significantly on this point, Mozambique herself had also invited other external players to offer military assistance, including Russia, the USA, the European Union (EU), Portugal, and more recently, Rwanda, while showing reluctance to formally sign up to the SADC Status Force Agreement (SFA), that would allow any of the 16 member-states to immediately deploy. Mozambique's unstated reasons for its preference for external military assistance appears to have been informed by the historical negative experience of the SADC deployment in the country during the conflict with the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) during the 1980s and early 90s.

The **third** area of attention for the new Military Command is to prepare for the traditional role of the Armed Forces, which is **safeguarding the territorial integrity of South Africa on its borders**, oceans and air space. Preparations include paying attention to human resource capacity and skills, as well as developing, deploying and maintaining appropriate equipment. This category also includes undertaking the actual reform and reconstruction specifically called for by the President. Stated differently, each of the heads of command are not merely 'robustly reconstructing their sub-divisions or units', but specifically exorcising the same from the negative attempts at creating parallel and unconstitutional elements operating, answerable only to a select political elite. For instance, the newly appointed Chief of Defence Intelligence, Major General Thalita Mxakato, has her work cut, out if we consider the findings and recommendations of the



Dr Sydney Mufamadi *High Level Review Panel* on the country's secret service. Furthermore, evidence of the absence of defence intelligence was also revealed during the shocking mayhem and destruction witnessed, manifest in the riots, looting and threats to citizens with serious loss of life, over the period 9 to 16 July 2021, as shall be fully discussed below.

What is not stated, but is also a critical component, is that the SANDF maintain defence and security diplomacy relationships with the neighbouring states with whom she shares contiguous borders, to facilitate future operational movements. Formal and informal working relationships have to be established with Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe now, under the auspices of what we refer to as defence diplomacy, beyond the provisions of SADC protocols, as the challenges, when they arise at a bilateral level, pose different dimensions that are generally best addressed through existing structures.

The greatest challenge for the Military Command, in preparing the SANDF for effective operational fitness, is the perennial budget cuts, reported to have become the norm over the last three years. Against shrinking budgets and yet increasing operational demands by the state, contingency plans have to be in place, as well as a sharpened role of the Military Command as advisors to political decision makers, sensitizing them towards the implications of its reduced budgets and increasing tasking trend. In that conversation, a balance has to be reached, considering role expectations and the provision of necessary resources.

The **fourth** suggestion towards reconstruction, refocusing and strategic as well tactical deployment of the SANDF by Maphwanya and his new cadres, is a straightforward one: **working within constitutional parameters to support the civil power in the domestic arena.** The recent events of July 2021 have shown serious flaws in the defence and security working intelligence and knowledge of South African society including: a lack of anticipatory or reaction capacity, where internal peace and security is deliberately undermined; ignorance of potential and active perpetrators leaving the organization in the unenviable position of being 'one of the spectators' and only able to act after the event. To prove some of these points, this discussion will briefly look at the events during the second week of July that left the international community, investors and tourists, shocked at the level of the breakdown of even citizens' security, to result in the Embassy of India, amongst others, urgently contacting the South African government for assurances on the safety of their citizens. This development was unprecedented, and will have left a serious dent, particularly on the SANDF and its capacity to provide timely and effective security towards arresting what turned out to be a week of chaos and lawlessness in the country.

According to a respected journalist, *Daily Maverick's* Ferrial Haffajee, using empirical evidence, the sources of which researchers can trace and determine, the recent



internal, almost complete breakdown, in law and order, in particularly KZN and parts of the central province of Gauteng, began with a WhatsApp Group calling themselves “Free Zuma Coordinators”, which later changed to “Free Zuma Information.”<sup>1</sup> Haffajee was also able to identify yet another group that encouraged upheaval, sharing incendiary materials fuelling the riots, looting and deliberate destruction of property, including killings. This was the INK WhatsApp group, representing satellites from Inanda, Ntuzuma and KwaMashu. The group emerged after former president Jacob Zuma had been imprisoned by the Courts and was scheduled to report for incarceration. A palpable air of tension and potential conflict gripped the country, as the event also represented the factional struggle within the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). In an elaborate development, just two days after Zuma was jailed on the night of 7 July 2021, the perennially vulnerable Mooi River Toll Gate on the N3 highway, connecting the heartland with the port city of Durban, had been closed. Trucks were held up and torched, their contents looted. It’s important we refer to the ‘perennially vulnerable Mooi River Toll Gate’, where trucks are required to stop, and were therefore ‘like sitting ducks’ awaiting destruction. For decades, gangs have shut down the flow of traffic from Gauteng to Durban at the Mooi River Toll Gate with impunity. According to Gavin Kelly, Chief Executive Officer of the Road Freight Association, “over that weekend, over 250 trucks were hijacked and burnt with the majority, 45 from Mooi River Toll Gate.” This area is widely known for constant and persistent attacks, with little or no response from the authorities to address the security vulnerability.

After paralyzing the road network, the group moved quickly to target shopping malls, where they instructed people to start looting and ransacking materials and property. By 22 July, days after the beginning of the orgy, South Africa’s Property Owners’ Association reported that 100 malls had been destroyed, in which over 3000 stores had been looted. Clearly, the frontline South African Police Service (SAPS) had been overwhelmed, and the need for military support to the civil power was urgent. Curiously, during the looting, participating individuals fired guns and later, vigilante groups, especially in Durban, also emerged to protect their own properties while heavily armed. Over 200 lives were lost in the mayhem, demonstrating the seriousness of the event before order was restored.

In response, the Minister of Defence and War Veterans announced, in parliament, the intention to deploy 2 500 (two-thousand five hundred) soldiers, for purposes of “assisting SAPS and other Law & Order Agencies to restore the rule of law.” However, the decision was met with consternation, ridicule and derision, by the media and security analysts, given the shocking scale of the destruction. Overnight, the SANDF number to be deployed increased tenfold to 25 000 (twenty-five thousand), to be in place from 12 July – significantly three days after the beginning of the chaos on 9 July, and remain in place until 12 August, at a cost of R615 665 500, according to statistics available and released by the parliamentary monitoring group. But what then are the



obvious security flaws that were revealed by the events that began with the jailing of former president Zuma on the night of 7 July to date?

The first point to note is that, in retrospect, infighting within the ruling party, the ANC, has had a deleterious effect on the structure, composition and operational efficiency of the SANDF. While this is unfortunate it does, however, confirm the continental trend of the failure to create national institutions, particularly on defence and security, as part of state formation. Instead, what emerges are convoluted structures and questionable command and control elements that are guided by the constitution.

It has been widely acknowledged that the SAPS were aware of the imminent danger and plans for the shocking disruption, which continues to amaze security analysts and the international community. However, information appears not to have been shared, particularly with Defence Intelligence from the SANDF, who ultimately then took responsibility to restore order. This further confirms the dysfunction within the intelligence community, as noted by the Mufamadi *High Level Panel*. Next, why did the SANDF remain spectators to the destruction, loss of life and threats to citizens' security, for several days? The cornerstone of maintaining security is prevention. For a 'perennially vulnerable' site to be met with three days of inaction has left the impression of an organization in crisis. Furthermore, the fact that when they eventually decided to act, with a miniscule force of 2 500, shows that their response strategy had not been properly thought through. It was only after severe public criticism that the SANDF increased its manpower, but certainly towards questionable strategy of effective deployment. With forethought and proper planning, the areas in which the "Free Zuma Coordinators" across KZN and other copy-cat groups dispersed throughout Gauteng were operating, could have been contained. Furthermore, there were public differences on the nature of the crisis and the required response, from both the security ministers' structure and the presidency, confirming the absence of any coherent defence and security preparedness.

Within days of the one week of chaos, the situation appears to have gone back to normal, but it's clear that little sparks can ignite the existing societal flaws of South Africa, for which the SANDF must prepare itself to overcome. In the same vein, the Western Cape public transport taxi system has 'perennially' been associated with violence and assassinations. The SANDF has been deployed in the area and yet even as we write, the problem continues, with the SAPS unable to make a difference, and yet the defence establishment chooses to remain a spectator.

### **A brief evaluation of strategic and tactical operational deployment**

African countries continue to view post-apartheid South Africa's military with suspicion when it comes to participation in their local conflict dynamics. And yet South Africa



continues to be invited to participate in increasingly dangerous missions on the continent. In our view, it is time to be forthright in the evaluation of which missions the country supports and which ones are arenas of international theatre to be avoided. A cursory glance reveals several such areas.

Areas for UN and African Union Peace Support Operations continue to represent safe bets, but even then, consideration of the wider political context must be critically appraised. To this end, there is ongoing debate on missions in Sudan and Somalia, where it's not yet clear these will continue to enjoy international mandates.

For example, countries on the continent that have agreed to deploy in the Sahel region and Lake Chad Basin have since become embroiled in wider conflicts that have successfully sapped the energy and capability of the forces deployed. This is an area for the SANDF Military Command to give a wide berth. For now, it is clear there is still some appetite for UN mission deployment in the DR Congo, without being drawn into the volatile Eastern Congo and lower Great Lakes region that includes the Central African Republic (C.A.R), where even extraction strategies have proven to be complex.

### **Domestic deployment: COVID-19 and social engineering with the SANDF in the lead**

In April 2020, at the height of the reaction to COVID-19, President Cyril Ramaphosa, at the time also serving as the Chairperson of the African Union (AU), stood before the South African parliament seeking political and budgetary support to “deploy the entire army” in support of the wider strategy to curb the pandemic. In the end, a massive 73 180 soldiers were deployed under the South African Medical Health Services (SAMHS), working closely with the country's Ministry of Health. At the time, few experts were able to note the huge potential associated with what we called the repurposing of the armed forces associated with the wider AU notions of peace, stability and consolidation. (See *The SANDF Example Shows How We Can rethink African Peace & Security Architecture*, 29 April 2020, *Mail & Guardian*, Martin Rupiya).

The essence of the deployment, important for the Military Command to consider is that the SANDF was and remains available. This time, however, through SAMHS, the target was “supporting remote rural communities, connecting them through pedestrian bridges to schools, clinics and other local commercial entities.” As Ramaphosa acknowledged at the time, this intervention represented processes of sustainable democracy, good governance and the delivery of human rights within the disaster management processes of COVID-19.

Generally, this is a task in which any society and government struggle to effect change in order to and transform the lives of its people, and yet, through COVID-19 and the



internal deployment of the “entire army”, the President was able to make a difference. The presence of SANDF Engineering units, working on what is known as ‘Bailey Bridges’, unlocked sanitation and access to clinics as well as related ambulance services.

## Conclusion

The African state remains in crisis, from Algeria to Zimbabwe. This is true of some of the youngest democracies established during the 1990s, such as South Africa, and during the 2000 era of South Sudan. For South Africa, the background to the call for substantive restructuring of the defence and security institutions to conform to national, constitutional alignment, by President Cyril Ramaphosa, followed the noting of evidence pointing towards serious policy, strategy and structural flaws of the SANDF, particularly in the previous decade. For example, in December 2020, the president had received former Minister Sydney Mufamadi’s *High Level Review Panel Report on State Secret Agency*, which formally confirmed the dysfunctional nature of the security organization, as was being reported at the Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo’s State Capture Commission.

At the end of May 2021, given the opportunity to “change the guards” following the retirement of General Solly Shoke, Ramaphosa was explicit in his public call to the new Chief of Defence Staff (CDF), the then Lieutenant General Maphwanya, and a sweeping change of other formational commanders making up the Military Command, when he urged the generals to undertake comprehensive and substantive reform of the SANDF.

However, barely weeks later, during the second week of July 2021, with events from the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> when former president Jacob Zuma was incarcerated, two days later, from the 9<sup>th</sup> until 16<sup>th</sup> mayhem took over, with unprecedented lawlessness that shocked the global community where over 330 lives were lost. Confined to just the two provinces of KZN and Gauteng, several hundred large trucks were torched with their contents looted, over 100 Malls and 200 Shopping centres were ransacked together with over 3 000 stores, while major arterial highways were closed to traffic as they remained in the hands of the rioting groups.

As this unfolded, in retrospect, the SANDF and other defence and security organizations remained unable to anticipate, lacking integrated intelligence and therefore failed to prevent what had been telegraphed in the obvious warnings picked up by social media enthusiasts, reducing them to mere spectators. From this, a dangerous development was the subsequent emergence of vigilante groups, armed and prepared to protect their own lives and property. This vigilante outcome during the ongoing crisis is one of the most crucifying dimensions of the ineptitude of the SANDF when confronted with the greatest break down of internal law and order witnessed. Furthermore, the MoD & War Vets then announced on 12 July the intention to deploy 2 500 soldiers as its



response to the unprecedented looting. Not surprisingly, this was met with derision and disbelief, criticizing the level of assessment towards threat assessment displayed by the defence and security establishment. Within twenty-four hours, the same department announced a ten-fold increase of 25 000 soldiers to a public that was now particularly lacking confidence in the military. Stated differently, the security public policy response suggested that the organization was groping in the dark, without a standing contingency plan, as well as the capacity to timeously respond to the unfolding chaos. This was particularly unfortunate given the widely known history of the insecurity of the Mooi River Toll Gate that was left to its own devices, and immediately became the greatest crime site. For example, of the 250 trucks burnt during the first two days, 45 were at the Mooi River Toll Gate, where trucks are required to stop and negotiate deliberate entry through the pass.

Against the above background, in order of General Maphwanya and his colleagues within the Military Command, this discussion has suggested the four areas of urgent attention. This begins by simply preparing to meet existing and signed up international security and defence obligations. Secondly, we argue that South Africa must continue to play a role in peacekeeping, divided between UN missions, AU continental mandates as well as sub-regional invitations, such as that now witnessed in Mozambique's increasingly insecure tenth province of Cabo Delgado. Thirdly, commanders have direct responsibility towards maintaining the territorial integrity of the country, and we have offered some innovative pre-deployment strategic options that must now be developed and put into place. Next, again based on constitutional requirements, the force has the responsibility of providing support to the Civil Power, which includes undertaking ongoing assessment of the capacity of SAPS and other agencies, with the view to anticipate and intervene decisively before the situation deteriorates. For now, the example shown, blame cannot be shifted to other agencies without calling into question the anticipatory capability of the defence establishment before SAPS is overwhelmed. To this end, by now the defence establishment should have taken over the security integrity of the Mooi River Toll gate, rather than remain spectators on internal vulnerable points.

Finally, African armies are not solely created to undertake war fighting. We have had examples, from China particularly, where the military is the lead and catalyst for social transformation. Lessons can be drawn from that country. It is in consideration of that dimension that this discussion has sought to raise attention towards the socio-economic social transformation that must take place, as part of the government's broad reform agenda, in changing the structural makeup of the inherited society at independence, in 1994. This is a phenomenon that arose most graphically during the initial COVID-19 deployment, in which the Health Service took the lead, directing elements such as Engineering and Construction units who played an unexpected role, and whose potential must not be lost by focusing on the 'noise' created by war fighting.



This has since been, of course, augmented by even more explicit and credible evidence from the sitting Zondo Commission. The potential for undermining constitutionalism and the stability of the state cannot be emphasized.

A final reference is much more complex and generally not associated with matters military. This is the COVID-19 related innovative deployment of forces, part of whose mandate is the transformation of the more marginalized South African society, as part of social engineering and upliftment from abject poverty. It's important we raise its potential and implications now, to demonstrate that this is not an idea not fully thought through, nor a mere a flash in the pan. Constructively considered, the employment of the SANDF can act as the catalyst, which the state is looking for, to precipitate widespread social engineering well beyond the confines of built-up areas. The evidence of how SAMHS led the process is available, and the new broom may wish to follow through, in order to expand and consolidate the initial thrust.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferial Haffajee, 'Under investigation: Twelve masterminds planned and executed insurrection on social media, then lost control after looting spree', *Daily Maverick*, 14 July 2021 at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-14-under-investigation-twelve-masterminds-planned-and-executed-insurrection-on-social-media-then-lost-control-after-looting-spre/>

