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South Africa and Mozambique: Counter-insurgency assistance from the sea

Background.

As attention turns to a South African response to the [insurgency in the north of Mozambique](#), South African decision-makers are confronted with [deciding on how to respond](#), but also avoid entrapment in a prolonged armed insurgency in a neighbouring country. While South Africa cannot sit idle, current events in South Africa such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the resource allocation to assist South African society drains available resources, overcommits the defence establishment (SA Army in particular) and ties up political energy in fighting an existential health threat. Simultaneously pressure mounts for South Africa to respond to events threatening stability in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and possibly also South Africa's maritime lifeline. Being a member of SADC and with SADC having already heard the case for assistance from the Mozambique president, [it is now the time to respond, or decline](#).

Discussion

Literature covering the unfolding events in the north of Mozambique is increasing with the insurgency now almost receiving daily attention in the media. The role of radical Islamic State (IS) affiliations openly participating and purportedly [threatening countries like South Africa](#) not to intervene only heightens the insurgency's prominence in the international media. Simultaneously reports of [South African decision-makers pondering their response](#) are growing as well. It is a trying matter and given the growing salience of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, responding to insurgent threats building up in a fellow SADC member state cannot have come at a worse time. The imperative is to consider a reaction holding the least risk for South African soldiers and avoid wrong political decisions about deploying South African military means to Mozambique.

Risk aversion within the South African response is probably best served by contemplating a visible, but smaller specialized response that lowers the chances of asset loss or destruction and loss of life. If this is a primary consideration, the maritime option holds the intrinsic dynamics to lower political and military risks.

The insurgency in question is taking place in a [coastal province](#) with attacks and threats close to the coast. Ongoing threats close to and on the coast heighten the insurgents' vulnerability to a response

from the sea. The critical energy infrastructure under threat is also sea-based and on the coast with this interface requiring attention to building a visible security presence in this domain – if only as a deterrence.

South Africa is probably the only SADC country that can bring a mix of maritime power elements to bear along the Cabo Delgado coast where the threat is most prominent. Naval reach as well as existing MoUs [to patrol the waters off Northern Mozambique](#) are two very important considerations to assist with decision-making and using existing knowledge of the sea off Northern Mozambique. This, however, does not imply preparing for a battle at sea, but rather assisting with liminality of maritime security where the interaction between events on land and threats at sea create security threats. Furthermore, the east coast of Africa shows increasing signs of harder security threats spilling into the Western Indian Ocean with Mozambique as the latest case and driving a better understanding of the maritime response ladder that coastal countries must design.

South Africa must avoid events that could jeopardize its image and undermine constructive involvement. This danger was aptly demonstrated during the [2013 Battle of Bangui](#) in the Central African Republic where South African decision-makers were caught off-guard. Given that the military option appears to be foremost for the moment, South Africa's capability to construct a maritime response enters the picture. Such a response should not be confused with preparing to do battle at sea, but rather harness the concept of operating from the sea to the land that now features so prominently in the roles of modern and postmodern navies. Irrespective of which vessels are considered, the following remain important facets that frame the inherent advantages offered by a professional navy.

High visibility [attacks on fixed military assets](#) remain a feature of Islamic radical elements and indicators of these are evident even at this early stage of the Cabo Delgado insurgency. South Africa is at the same time under pressure to respond to [statements directly challenging its investments and future role in Mozambique](#). To respond, intelligent diplomacy and the use of a response from the sea would avoid a sensitive and vulnerable landward footprint and simultaneously lower susceptibility to attacks on South African military assets tied to land bases in Mozambique. The mix of capabilities as well as inherent flexibility that modern naval platforms such as frigates and submarines provide, even below the level of naval warfare, is a clear benefit in this regard. The advantages of using maritime forces are clear. Firstly, decision-makers can shift naval platforms closer or further from the shore to support deployment and to operate more effectively, but with a small military force based on specialized multi-service capabilities held at sea. Secondly, forces can sail up and down along the coast to keep in step with shifting events on land, but remain outside the reach of the enemy. Thirdly, given the mix of capabilities that naval platforms house, information gathering from the sea, or on land with [specialized units able to operate at and from the sea](#) becomes possible. Lastly, adding submarine and helicopter capabilities further enhance the flexibility of a small and specialized sea-based force, which is inherently a factor that keeps land-based insurgent forces off balance and keeps the initiative with the sea-based elements – an enduring imperative during irregular operations. Collectively, sea-based assets, their mix of organic and multi-service capabilities, inherent flexibility and the skills to mix and optimise capabilities while remaining on the coast or over the horizon adds a real force multiplier to any response by South African politico-military decision-makers.

Conclusions

A South African sea-based response to the threats from the [ISIL affiliated elements](#) in the Cabo Delgado based Mozambique insurgency can help to build the intelligence picture, do surgical raids or strikes with specialized units from the sea, while maintaining a safe base at sea before any land-based

involvement is considered. This approach also allows for gradual escalation or contraction of effort alongside other SADC members as the politico-diplomatic process takes shape. This becomes possible by either increasing visibility and impact from the sea or contracting the sea-based contribution to enlarge landward options. While it is not suggested that South Africa must base its involvement solely on the maritime option, functioning from the sea holds important advantages to arrive in good time, lower vulnerabilities, create space for political decisions about a larger landward SADC footprint and if required, a quick and clinical withdrawal without the traditional landward entrapments and vulnerabilities.

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