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Balancing views on EXERCISE MOSI 2: Placing the South African Navy first

Introduction

Exercise MOSI 2 of 2023 involving naval contingents from China, Russia and South Africa drew much negative national and international attention, largely because of Russia's military attack on Ukraine since February 2022. While political accusations fly, the naval exercise continues within a set programme of activities linked to a larger [display of armed forces](#) on the South African side. Each participating country brings its own agenda to the exercise although the common denominator remains the opportunity for the three navies to exercise at sea. Despite the [criticism](#), three matters must be balanced when viewing MOSI 2.

Naval diplomacy¹

Irrespective of their size, [navies play diplomatic roles at home and away](#). This is a historic feature of navies and one cemented into naval cultures worldwide. Whether coercive warfighting or the threat thereof, for persuasion, or cooperative, navies are foremost political instruments employed to support government policies. In a sense, MOSI 2 is an exercise in naval diplomacy with the participating countries playing along in the cooperative arena. Russia and South Africa are very vocal, while China appears to be more subdued about the exercise. Nonetheless, Russia and China could well also have persuasion objectives on the agenda to showcase their reach and [deployments to the far seas](#) - Russia perhaps more so with early suggestions of launching one of its modern Zircon hypersonic missiles (until [officially denied](#) when the exercise commenced). Not to be ignored is that China and Russia are probably also watching each other's vessels and actions very closely as benchmarking partners and

¹ Rowlands, K. *Naval diplomacy in the 21st century. A model for the post-Cold War global order.* (2019) Routledge.

the opposition is an entrenched practice and reported on during these naval diplomatic endeavours. This is possibly also the reason why the Russians eventually did not demonstrate their declared hypersonic missile capability during MOSI 2.

The [two Russian naval vessels](#) completed an extensive voyage through the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean that brought them to South Africa while the [three Chinese vessels](#) are homeward bound after having operated in an anti-piracy role in the Western Indian Ocean. Both navies are showcasing their naval power and international reach to influence global opinions for hard and soft security reasons. The Russian vessels followed a route close to the USA mainland and the Chinese task force contributed to good order at sea in the Western Indian Ocean showing persuasion and cooperation respectively. For the SAN however, it is an opportunity to cooperate with two modern blue water navies and showcase their platforms and skills, albeit under conditions of severe financial austerity alongside criticism for cooperating with the Russian contingent. Overall, the three navies have slightly different objectives that culminate in MOSI 2 under the naval cooperation banner.

The Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) factor

Commentators often wrongly flag MOSI 2 as a BRICS exercise given that BRICS arrangements make little provision for security cooperation and no scope for naval cooperation. At most, BRICS members expressed themselves on maritime security cooperation in the [2018 Johannesburg Declaration](#) in support of a maritime economic agenda, although this domain remains underdeveloped and not at a level that calls for naval cooperation. Flagging MOSI 2 uncritically as a BRICS exercise holds its own difficulty as it requires explanation of the glaring absence of India and Brazil which undermines the unity and anti-West stance of BRICS. Whether MOSI 2 is to become a future platform or template for BRICS countries considering its possible expansion to include [other littoral states](#) from the global south remains an open question. If Algeria, Iran, Egypt and Malaysia join a future expanded BRICS, the maritime implications of strategically located members could well open a new geostrategic scenario and a greater impetus for naval cooperation. Such an extended membership offers access to strategic seas with [South Africa presiding over the southern route](#) into the Southern Atlantic and Indian Oceans. For the moment however, MOSI 2 is not a BRICS naval exercise.

The SA Navy (SAN)

Being on the receiving end of much local and international criticism, the SAN is in an unfortunate position. It is ridiculed by many in the public domain and snubbed budget-wise by its political heads [only to be pushed to the forefront when it suits the political agenda](#). It is nonetheless a national asset and to be maintained given the lack of other maritime security and policing agencies that can be put to sea. Together with splashes of public anger for cooperating with the Russian Navy, the SAN has no option but to sail and play its role as a policy instrument of the South African government. Fortunately, the activities making up the exercise are largely about cooperation and good practices at sea, and probably for the SAN within the ambit of capacity building, exposure, and public relations. Behind the scenes it is no secret that the SAN is resource constrained, hence the [absence of intensive naval warfighting actions in the execution](#) of the exercise. If all goes well, one can expect a joint declaration of success, respect and learning when completed as this is the nature of cordial diplomatic exchanges when countries cooperate in military exercises.

Concluding remarks

Navies are the most pointed and prominent defence diplomacy instruments in the armed forces of countries. This makes the reputational damage high if navies are ill-prepared and employed wrongly. In South Africa a neglected SAN must make its stand amidst public and political criticism against the

Russian participation, state capture and an electricity crisis that combine to constrain political support and resources for defence, thus raising overall perceptions of weak defence governance also entering the political arena. Nonetheless, MOSI 2 is an opportunity for the SAN for exposure and to undertake much-needed sea time, conduct international cooperation and skills development. Whilst the critique, political statements, neglect and ignoring the sensitivity to the one-year anniversary of the Russian attack on Ukraine hold merit, MOSI 2 affords the SAN training opportunities that should not be conflated with controversial political expressions of solidarity. After all, it is possible to be critical of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and continue with MOSI 2 as professional navies must remain combat ready irrespective of the whims of their political masters.

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