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Where to now? The role of South Africa in multinational peace missions post-Zuma¹

Background

Participation in multilateral peace missions has constituted an essential part of South Africa's foreign policy since the intervention in Lesotho in 1998. The White Paper on peace missions (1999) guides South Africa's contribution to peace missions, while the Defence Review (2015) confirmed that the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) should play a significant future role in peace missions and primarily in Africa. South Africa has since 1998 contributed noticeable military contingents to missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, and Sudan, and in Comoros, Ivory Coast, and the Central African Republic (CAR) as part of multinational, regional or bilateral independent missions. South Africa has furthermore been very active in the establishment of the African Standby Force (ASF) initiative and was instrumental in setting up the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (ACIRC) in 2013. Internationally South Africa served as a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2006-07, 2011-12 and on 1 January 2019 took up its third term. The announcements from the South Africa's Foreign Ministry (DIRCO) before the third spell on policy priorities were limited, and reflected no apparent strategy and priorities apart from assurances that South Africa was ready and prepared for its membership. However, some uncertainty exist on what principles and alliances that will guide the coming foreign policy direction and decisions.

Discussion

South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), Lindiwe Sisulu, recently announced that the ongoing review of South African foreign policy priorities and national interests aspires to give expression to the norms and values enshrined in South Africa's 1996 Constitution in the country's foreign policy as well. In many ways, this indicates that South Africa intends to return to what Landsberg recently coined as "the heydays" of South African diplomacy during the Presidency of Thabo

¹ This brief follows a 2018 Round Table organised by the Danish Embassy in Pretoria and SIGLA (Stellenbosch University) on Sustainable Peace Missions in Africa. However, the content and opinions expressed in the brief are the author's alone, and not that of SIGLA or the Danish Embassy, South Africa.

Mbeki from 1999-2008.² A return to this earlier model presupposes increased activities in peace mediation, conflict prevention and pre-emption, promotion of good governance, and implementation of peace. The anticipated change could also imply a continuation of the much-criticised “quiet diplomacy” strategy. Such a shift would entail reverting to the “South African” peace model, or “Pax Africana”³, as part of fostering South African led sustainable solutions to violent and violence-prone conflicts. Adam Habib et al. noted back in 2005 on South Africa's role in Africa that “if it is to remain committed to economic rejuvenation and democracy in Africa, stability is required. South Africa as an economic and military power must assume that leading role”.⁴ The South African military thus features in this envisaged peace model, but as one available tool amongst others and one that must be trained and ready to support diplomatic endeavours.

Compared to the time under Mbeki, South Africa and its policy institutions are in a much different state today, including the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Nine years of political mismanagement under the Zuma Administration eroded the SANDF as well and has significantly reduced and hollowed out South Africa’s military capacity to play a meaningful role in supporting South Africa’s foreign policy. This poses a credibility challenge to South Africa in the sense that apprehension surrounds the capacity of South Africa to contribute to international peace missions and general peace efforts. The South African economy is periodically experiencing negative growth rates, the official unemployment rate is above 27 percent, the government revenue base is under pressure as tax revenues are declining, and government departments experience deep budget cuts. All of the former pressures spill onto the Department of Defence (DOD) as well through constant budget revisions. Consequently, by the end of 2018 the SANDF only deployed 1300 troops to international peace missions, the lowest number in more than 15 years.

The above-mentioned decline contradicts South Africa’s stance at the recent 2018 BRICS Summit on peace missions as a priority area for the event. Some BRICS members questioned this stance since South Africa no longer visibly features as a noteworthy contributor to International Peace Missions. While this does not necessarily constitute a political problem, it does however, raise questions about South Africa’s commitment to sustainable peace and stability on the continent beyond that of mere statements. Compared to its African partners, South Africa should in principle, be prepared to contribute more to peace and stability on the African continent. Countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal and Kenya are currently committing more resources, personnel in particular, than South Africa, to multinational peace missions. So what can one expect of South Africa concerning peace and security after the Zuma Administration’s departure, and how and where could it continue to play a constructive role?

South Africa and the sustainable peace - political conflict nexus

Sustainable peace is a critical challenge in most contemporary peace missions with Mali, DR Congo, CAR and Somalia being current examples reflecting just how difficult and time consuming such missions have become. A common thread in the said missions shows that the initial progress and space for peace that military contingents set in place are rarely followed-up with credible political and institutional progress to secure sustainable peace. As two recent studies on peace missions in Somalia and DR Congo illustrate, reducing the capacity of the armed groups does not only foster elements for sustainable peace, but also opens exploitable opportunities to non-military actors to function as spoilers in the operational theatre. Comprehensiveness regarding tools (both mandating and political)

² View expressed by Professor Chris Landsberg at the Foreign Policy Review Hearing, 5 October 2018, Pretoria.

³ Former President Thabo Mbeki spoke about the “Pax Africana”, whilst his critics, notably President Laurent Kabila of the DR Congo called the model a “Pax Pretoriana”.

⁴ Habib, A. & N. Selinyane, South Africa's Foreign Policy and a Realistic Vision of an African Century, in Sidiropoulos, E. (ed). 2004. *Apartheid Past, Renaissance Future: South Africa's Foreign Policy 1994-2004*. p. 59.

and actual capabilities are central to fulfil the mission mandates aiming at securing sustainable peace. In both Somalia and the DR Congo, national government institutions have not stepped up to constructively use and fill the space carved out by incumbent peace missions to address root causes of ongoing conflicts, which fundamentally are political in kind. In the case of the DR Congo, CAR and South Sudan, the South African government has played an important role in mediation between the parties, and in the cases of the DR Congo and CAR the SANDF deployed training missions to improve national military capabilities.

One of the challenges contemporary peace missions portray is their military focus and that the civilian side is not a priority and/or not well integrated with military efforts. While not an argument for leaving out the military tool in peace missions where there is often no peace to keep, it is a valid argument for increased prioritisation of critical and indispensable non-military tools for peace missions. This is where South Africa could play an increased role and one not necessarily premised upon the deployment of more SANDF troops. South African decision-makers could employ their experiences and influence in conjunction with partners, both bilateral and multilateral, to pave the way for better and sustainable political solutions. However, a lower military commitment often presupposes that other partners are willing to provide the requisite military capabilities allowing political solutions to take root and prosper. In its current state, and with the lack of priority to keep the SANDF on a more credible readiness footing, an essential pillar of the South African peace model is no longer readily available.

One potential model of success could be to seek for donor support for SANDF deployments if the government dare enter that route. This model featured once before, when Denmark and South Africa during the last part of the of Thabo Mbeki Administration signed a Memorandum of Understanding where Denmark offered to help finance SANDF deployments in Africa and thereby strengthen South Africa's ability to function as an effective peace broker on the African continent. The model never came to fruition in practice, and has since been dormant. However, South Africa needs to look for creating alternatives to the existing models of financing and the deployment of the military tool as part of its peace model, if it wishes to continue to revitalise and employ the SANDF as part of its "Pax Africana" ambition.

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