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Structural challenges facing the SANDF- what did we learn from the 2020 SONA?

Background

Despite [structural challenges](#) facing the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), there was no mention of the SANDF in the President's 2020 State of the Nation Address (SONA). Given the President's new role in the African Union, one would have expected him to at least refer to the SANDF especially their role in the continent and their future roles, if any. The SONA did not give the SANDF any political indication that things will be different in the future.

Discussion

The primary object of the defence force is to defend and protect the Republic, its territorial integrity and its people in accordance with the Constitution and the principles of international law regulating the use of force. Whether perceived, or not, the SANDF as a reliable political tool of diplomacy portrays disturbing challenges that do not lend themselves to quick or simplistic adjustments.

The SANDF is facing serious structural disequilibrium such as ageing infrastructure and equipment, an ageing fighting force, rising wage bill, lack of critical skills and budget constraints among others. These challenges threaten the SANDF's ability to fulfil its Constitutional mandate of defending and protecting the Republic as stated in Section 200(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. The SANDF's budget allocations from the Treasury have been declining in real terms and the alarming rise in the military's personnel costs made it worse. Estimates show that the SANDF spends more than half of its budget on [personnel](#), whereas the globally accepted standard for defence force expenditure on personnel is 38%. It is true that, when viewed in totality, the defence budget has decreased over the medium-term budget policy framework. Defence expenditure as a percentage of the National Budget

(it is well known that as a percentage of GDP, it is less than 1%), has been in decline since 1983, post 2004 has been less than 5% of the budget and still declines.¹

Budgets for health and education over the same period (1983-2018) have increased by 20 to 30%. However, school completion rates are estimated to be about 48-51%. In addition, conditions at clinics and hospitals are reported to be nearing crisis levels in certain provinces. This then begs the question if defence budgets were cut in order to foster developmental goals- given these statistics - are we meeting development goals? Therefore, is it not time to increase the budget again? A worrying trend is that not only has defence expenditure been declining as a percentage of the budget, but it also appears to still decline. In other words, it has not stabilised and it remains to be seen how defence obligations will be affected by the president's position at the AU. The President however acknowledged in the [2020 SONA](#) the fact that South Africa is facing serious financial difficulties.

Facing the SANDF is also a cohort of medically unfit personnel and an ageing fighting force. This is an indication that rejuvenation must happen as a matter of urgency, but without raising the HR budget, implies a very difficult trade-off between financial, socio-economic and political agendas.

One other structural challenge facing the SANDF is ageing infrastructure and equipment. This hampers the SANDF from fulfilling its obligations both internally and externally. As a result of this, training and operations are compromised. All these cannot be addressed without proper funding to phase out, renew, and train to meet constitutional obligations.

Also, the military is increasingly used to assist the state internally in areas of crisis e.g. the Vaal River operations, anti-gangsterism operations in the Western Cape, medical support at hospitals and clinics in times of strikes and as of recent, with bringing back and quarantine of South African citizens from China due to the emerging [Corona Virus pandemic](#). The mentioned structural challenges will hamper the SANDF from achieving success in executing some of these tasks, or make them extraordinary difficult to complete.

Skills shortages affect almost every sector in South Africa and the SANDF is no exception. To make up critical skills shortages, the SANDF preferred to contract foreign military personnel. There are now many [Cubans](#) mainly in technical roles, including the management and maintenance of the military ground transport fleet. These Cubans are mechanics and technicians recruited to repair and maintain part of the military' fleet of ageing vehicles and in effect redirect a large funding package away from a much needed SANDF skills base to one more fleeting or temporary in kind.

Conclusions

Since the President made no mention of Defence in the 2020 SONA, it serves as an indication that little to nothing is going to change in the near future and the status quo will be maintained: The SANDF will remain locked into a small budget and whether real, or perceived, remain underfunded.

South Africa is facing serious financial difficulties. The SANDF as an organ of state is faced with the reality of competing for funds with other government department that render essential services on the domestic humanitarian landscape. The country's wider economic woes are not helping and rather suppress hope of any increase in defence allocations. However, as in any other country, a neglected defence establishment augers nothing good for the state as it fosters elements of the defence

¹ Data calculated from online statistics offered by the SA Reserve Bank on Defence within National Expenditure.

dilemma: that of vulnerability to military attack and the fear of being unable to defend your national integrity successfully.

Rejuvenation in the SANDF as discussed in the 2015 Defence Review is inevitable. A fit and capable fighting force is required to make the SANDF relevant. If rejuvenation in the SANDF is to happen (and no doubt, it is both an obligation and imperative by responsible government) savings can be incurred. Perhaps it is time to change the defence orientation by cutting down on what the military does. For rejuvenation to take place, surely, the status quo cannot continue and the relevant 2015 Defence Review recommendations must be implemented.

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