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# Southern Africa's 'Defense Community' - Now You See It, Now You Don't

South Africa's prime geographical location and 'emerging power' status necessitates a robust defense community. Yet, historical memory and a lack of strategic direction from Pretoria continue to compromise the nation's development.

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Any discussion concerning the security dynamics of Southern Africa inevitably rests upon the same fundamental question - what role will South Africa choose (or possibly be forced) to play in safeguarding regional security? Indeed, addressing this concern merely opens up the debate to an additional set of equally important questions. Is South Africa both able and willing to construct a regional security architecture that reflects Pretoria's geopolitical outlook? If so, how might South Africa's near-neighbors respond to - or be a part of - Pretoria's vision for the region? In order to answer these questions we first need to consider the current state of South Africa's domestic security architecture. And in doing so we raise a final question - why is South Africa's defense community so chameleon: now you see it, now you don't?

## **Regionally Strong, But Not That Strong**

In terms of personnel, hardware and capabilities, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) is superior to all of its near neighbors. Indeed, many of the elements that one might also associate with security architectures - a functioning command structure, for example - are in comparatively better shape than the other Southern African states. Yet while the SANDF appears fairly able by regional standards, South Africa's defense community nevertheless remains weak and disjointed. History has a significant part to play in explaining the present situation. South Africa's international isolation during the Apartheid era, forced the SANDF to maintain an increasingly old stock of military hardware (in particular, fighter aircraft) and develop an indigenous defense-industrial base. And while South Africa's defense sector manufactured an array of world class equipment it was inextricably linked with the production of materiel associated with the most pernicious aspects of Apartheid. But while the end of Apartheid contributed to the international rehabilitation of South Africa, it nevertheless posed a number of problems for the SANDF.

The birth of the 'Rainbow Nation' led to the SANDF integrating former adversaries from the struggle against Apartheid into its ranks. Accordingly, appointments and promotions were used to make the SANDF more representative of the new South Africa. As a result, many experienced and high-ranking

personnel were replaced by soldiers who were more at home fighting low-technology campaigns than safeguarding the security and territorial integrity of the state. Despite such concerns, there was also an understandable rush by Western defense contractors to supply the SANDF with the type of modern military hardware required to make South Africa a regional power. However, the modernization of the SANDF was initially compromised by some poor procurement decision. The modernization of South Africa's armed forces has also been overshadowed by claims of nepotism and corruption and a lack of strategic direction from Pretoria.

### **Changing Political Directions**

Modernization of the SANDF was also initially compromised by a post-Apartheid decline in defense expenditure. Between 1990 and 1999, for example, defense spending fell by 57%, a decline that also led to a reduction in personnel. Poor economic conditions, the need to provide basic services to a growing population and the gradual improvement of the security dynamics of the Southern African cone all help to explain the dramatic decline in Pretoria's defense spending. However, a lack of political direction concerning the role that Pretoria should play on a regional and global level also compromised the renewal of South Africa's defense community. This became increasingly problematic as South Africa gradually overcame the legacy of Apartheid. Many actors from the developed world increasingly look to Pretoria to assume leadership of regional security initiatives. This decision partially reflects the West's limited interest in post-Colonial Africa, but also the oft-repeated call for "African Solutions to African Problems" at a time when the developed world lacks the resources to intervene in every regional conflict.

And in part, South Africa has duly obliged. The decision to reduce defense expenditure was reversed at the turn of the century, with Pretoria's investment \$4.8 billion in new aircraft and naval vessels. South Africa's integration into African continent - as reflected by its membership of the African Union (AU) - has contributed to Pretoria's decision to deploy SANDF troops on peacekeeping missions in Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. South African naval vessels also patrol the Mozambique Channel and West African coastline on counter-piracy missions. In 2011 South Africa also began to undertake its first defense review in thirteen years. The decision reflected that challenges posed by illegal cross-border activities and maritime piracy were not considered in the 1998 review.

### **Mixed Messages**

South Africa's continued involvement in a number of activities throughout the African continent suggests that Pretoria is becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that it is a bona fide regional power. Moreover, South Africa's recent accession into the BRIC group of emerging global powers also suggests that Pretoria now wishes to be considered a significant international actor - at least from an economic and development perspective. Yet as Western calls for 'African Solutions to African Problems' perhaps demonstrate, global aspirations often come with obligations. Accordingly, if South Africa is to be recognized as the African continent's voice within the 'BRICS Club', Pretoria needs to wield both hard and soft power within its backyard. However, there are signs that South African remains reluctant to lead the Southern African cone. Pretoria's continued reluctance to criticize Robert Mugabe's regime in neighboring Zimbabwe, for example, hardly bodes well for the development of a regional security architecture led by South Africa.

The findings of South Africa's most recent defense review also bring into question Pretoria's willingness to lead the Southern African region on the global stage. While the review reinforces that South Africa now has an important role to play as a fully-fledged member of the AU, Pretoria's commitment to counter-piracy missions and peacekeeping operations appears to be coming at a heavy price. As current defense spending only accounts for 1.2% of South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it should come as no surprise that the review finds the SANDF as overstretched and

underfunded.

### **What will the Neighbors Say?**

South Africa's 'mixed messages' regarding both its regional and global outlook is likely to elicit a mixed response from its neighbors. Zimbabwe is likely to be buoyed by Pretoria's hesitancy to criticize Mugabe. This arguably reflects that in the post-Apartheid era there are fewer and fewer reasons for the wider African continent to criticize South Africa's domestic and foreign policies. As the combined armed forces of the 14 other member states of the South African Development Community (SADC) outnumber the SANDF, they are likely to remain content that in terms of military power South Africa remains more *primus inter pares* than an outright dominant actor. However, without a dramatic increase in defense expenditure some of South Africa's regional partners might begin to question Pretoria's commitment to safeguarding regional security. Such concerns are particularly relevant to Mozambique and Tanzania, both of whom have signed a tripartite initiative with South Africa to combat maritime piracy.

### **Looking to the Future**

All the signs point to South Africa needing a defense community that will enable Pretoria to project geopolitical power and influence at the regional and global level. South Africa's prime geo-strategic location at the southern tip of the continent, abundance of natural resources and economic necessitate a robust SANDF to safeguard territorial integrity and project power in at least the near-neighborhood. Indeed, such requirements have gained in importance since South Africa reconciled itself with its Apartheid past and become a fully-fledged member of Africa and the international system.

Crucially, as South Africa increasingly acquires the status of an emerging power, the African continent, developed world and BRIC partners will increasingly look to Pretoria to play its part in shaping the international system. This in turn suggests that South Africa will find itself saddled with expectations - if not obligations - that it had not explicitly sought. This is particularly true of South Africa's own backyard, where Pretoria will have to carry its neighbors should it decide to craft a comprehensive security architecture for Southern Africa.

Yet for reasons of history and circumstance, it remains to be seen whether South Africa's defense community is capable of projecting power and influence befitting of a rising power. The lack of clear direction offered by Pretoria seems likely to hamper the development of a more effective South African defense community in the medium to long term. And while the legacy of the Apartheid era continues to fade, the South African government remains sensitive of the less than illustrious of the SANDF and, indeed, the country. But if South Africa is to overcome its seeming reluctance to assume leadership of the Southern African while maintaining the tag of 'emerging power' it needs to revitalize its defense community. Only then will the chameleon come into view and achieve greater respect.

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