Critical Reflections of the African Standby Force: The Case of its SADC Contingent

Hussein Solomon

University of the Free State, South Africa

Abstract

The conflict-ridden nature of the African continent has compelled the African Union (AU) to establish an African Standby Force or ASF. The envisaged 25,000-strong ASF operating through five regional brigades was to be the backbone of Africa's new peace and security architecture. This paper examines the Southern African Standby Force at both military and political levels and raises deeper questions as to the underlying assumptions underpinning this important initiative.

Introduction

Africa remains arguably the most conflict-prone continent in the world today. In North Africa the ructions of the Arab Spring have brought not just democracy in the case of Tunisia but the potential of greater civil-military strife in Egypt and the potential for Libya to slide into inter-clan warfare. In West Africa, the violent Islamist Boko Haram in Nigeria continues its murderous attacks on churches and government institutions whilst the Tuareg and radical Islamist Ansar Din in northern Mali have forged closer ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. These developments are also mirrored in the Horn of Africa where Islamic extremists in the form of Al Shabab continue to do battle with Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops.

In the very heart of Africa, the situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continues to deteriorate as rebel troops, ostensibly with Rwandan assistance, continue to challenge the sovereignty of Kinshasa. Elections, meanwhile, long meant to demonstrate the popular will of citizens have brought new challenges as incumbents refuse to accept the popular mandate of citizens. The Ivory Coast and Laurent Gbagbo come to mind as countries like Kenya head to the polls.

In other countries, notably South Africa, we are witnessing an upsurge of increasingly violent service delivery protests as citizens protest against an uncaring and often corrupt state. Unemployed and frustrated youth living in slums often form the core of these protestors as government belatedly responds to demands with ad hoc measures sure to cause further alienation.

All over this blighted continent we are witnessing the resurgence of the politics of identity: in Kenya between Kikuyu and Luo, in Nigeria between Hausa-Fulani and Igbo, in Algeria a resurgence of Berber identity, in central Africa a virulent ethnocentric nationalism in the form of Banyamulenge Tutsi identity, in Mozambique between Shangaan and Ndau, in Angola between Ovimbundu and Mbundu, and in South Africa rising tides of xenophobia pitting a narrow South African nationalism against the proverbial other.

More than ever before, there is an urgent need for robust responses to the challenge of peace and security on the African continent. Unlike its moribund predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the African Union's (AU) Constitutive Act does provide for such a robust response. Article 4h of the AU's Constitutive Act creates not only a legal basis for intervention but also imposes an obligation for the AU to intervene in grave circumstances which includes genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes (Dersso 2010: 4). Such an approach is in keeping with international thinking on the 'Responsibility to Protect'. Whilst the AU's Constitutive Act recognises the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states, it also mooted the principle of non-indifference to the plight of those suffering under the yoke of an oppressive government. In this way a fine balance was created between the twin principles of sovereignty and responsibility to protect.

In May 2003, the African Chiefs of Defence and Security began deliberations on how to operationalize such an intervention. Towards the end of 2004 what emerged was the creation of an African Standby Force or ASF, operating under the auspices of the AU's Peace and Security Council (Cilliers 2008: 1). The purpose of this paper then is to examine the ASF from the perspective of the southern African region. Whilst some discussion will take place on the military instrumentalization of such a force, the paper will also focus on the political dimensions which might well impede the widely accepted norm of responsibility to protect.

The African Standby Force

From the very beginning, the Peace and Security Council of the AU understood the complexity of the security context in which African peacekeepers are to be deployed and insisted that the ASF should not only include military elements but also civilian police and other capabilities on account of the multiplicity of roles they saw the ASF playing. These included preventive deployment, peacekeeping, peace building, post-conflict disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of armed combatants, and humanitarian assistance (Cilliers 2008: 1). In the language of the United Nations, then, the ASF was envisaged to be both a Chapter 6 traditional peacekeeping mission and a more robust Chapter 7 peace enforcement mission. The establishment of the ASF is also in keeping with Chapter 8 of the United Nations which allows for regional arrangements to establish peace and security in their specific region.

The ASF was to be organised into five regional brigades: the Southern African Development Community brigade (SADCBRIG), the East African Peace and Security Mechanism known more commonly as the Eastern Africa Standby Brigade (EASBRIG), the North African Regional Capability brigade, better known as the North African Standby Brigade (NASBRIG), the

Economic Community of West African States brigade (ECOBRIG), and the Economic Community of Central African States brigade (ECCASBRIG) also known as the Multinational Force of Central Africa – each comprising 5,000 personnel, bringing the total to 25,000 personnel (Dersso 2010: 7). Figure 1 (below) clearly demonstrates the need for a light, flexible and highly mobile force.

Figure 1: Key Components of a Regional Brigade (Cilliers 2008: 3)

Unit	Personnel	Light Vehicles	Armoured Vehicles	Light recce	Helicopters
Brigade HQ	85	15	As required		
4 x infantry battalions	3,000	280	As required		
Helicopter unit	80	10			4
Recce company	150		15	13	
HQ support company	65	16			
Military police unit	48	17			
Light signals unit	135	47			
Field engineer unit	505	65			
Logistic specialisation unit	190	40			
Level 2 hospital	35	10			
TOTAL	**4,293**	**500**	**15**	**13**	**4**

There was an attempt then to co-locate the ASF with each of the existing five regional economic communities (RECs) on the continent thereby reinforcing a common sub-regional identity. Such an approach, however, is not without its problems especially in the form of overlapping regional membership. Angola and the DRC, both members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) REC are part of both the central region and the southern region from the perspective of the ASF. Similarly both Madagascar and Mauritius who are members of SADC, from the perspective of the ASF are members of both the southern and eastern regions (AU 2003). From an operational point of view this leaves such countries overstretched and mechanisms of coordination that need to be worked out between the respective regional brigades in order to ensure that overlapping memberships do not hinder the deployment of a brigade in times of crisis. In theory, such overlapping memberships should not be a problem given the coordination between the AU and the respective regional brigade.

Conceptually, once a peace and security operation has been launched, the Peace and Security Operations Division (PSOD) of the AU becomes the strategic headquarters whilst the regional planning element becomes the operational headquarters with constant communication between

the two (correspondence from Captain (SAN) Kobus Maasdorp, 26 June 2012). In my discussions with various security officials within the AU and the regional structures however, there continues to be a lack of clarity as to where the PSOD lines of authority end and where those of the REC begins. Moreover, smaller countries like Mauritius, feel themselves overburdened by belonging to two such regional command structures.

In an effort to prevent anymore Rwandas, the ASF was called upon to be able to deploy within two weeks from the provision of a mandate by the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the AU (Cilliers 2008: 9). In practice, the lack of a strategic airlift capability on the African continent is preventing such rapid deployment. A case in point is the deployment of AU troops to Sudan's troubled Darfur region. Months after the PSC mandated troops in 2007 to go there, Rwandan and Nigerian troops waited in their respective countries whilst the conflict in Darfur claimed ever more lives. Eventually in 2008 the United States Air Force transported these troops in C-130 Hercules transport planes. Once on the ground the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assisted in equipping these peacekeepers. The point being made is a simple one: unless the ASF is adequately resourced, it will remain a nice idea impossible to truly implement.

Besides overlapping memberships and scant resources, a third problem related to the manner in which the ASF was conceptualised has also come to the fore. At its conceptualization it was assumed that any ASF mission would be deployed for a period of between one and two years after which a UN mission would replace the force (Dersso 2010: 8). In practice we have seen AU missions lasting much longer – consider here the length of the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Moreover, instead of an AU mission leading to a UN one, we are increasingly witnessing hybrid UN-AU peace missions such as that of the United Nations African Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and that in the DRC. On both these counts, it is imperative that the PSC go back to the drawing board – taking on board these new realities.

There is a final problem as to how the ASF was conceived. The sub-regional nature of the AU's peace and security architecture together with issues of a practical nature, such as the lack of a strategic airlift capability, means that the regional brigades will be utilised for crises pertaining to their respective region as opposed to engaging in extra-regional peacekeeping or peace enforcement missions. Whilst such an approach has certain advantages such as increased knowledge of local conditions (language, culture, terrain), there is an overwhelming disadvantage in that neighbouring states may have a vested interest in who is victorious at the end of a conflict or who gets to be president. In other words, national interest considerations may well thwart regional considerations. Consider here the case of Kenya, a key member of the AMISOM mission. Given its own restive Somali population in the North-East, Nairobi has been eager to intervene and create a buffer zone between itself and Somalia in the Juba valley (Solomon 2012: 95). It is, however, doing this under the cover of an AMISOM mission. Whilst this mission is aiming to defeat Al Shabab terrorists and to strengthen the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Mogadishu, Nairobi's interests are in a balkanized Somalia, not one united Somalia under central government control.

Having briefly examined the ASF and the challenges it confronts we now turn to the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) regional arrangements.

The SADC Standby Force (SADC SF)

Soon after its conceptualisation, the name SADCBRIG fell away and that of the SADC Standby Force (SADC SF) was adopted on account of the multidimensional character of the force consisting not only of military elements but also police and civilian components (correspondence with Brigadier-General Lawrence Smith, SANDF, 21 June 2012).

Since its establishment in August 2007, the regional component of the ASF has been making steady progress. The SADC SF already has a function planning element co-located with the SADC secretariat in Gaborone. Understanding the need for building effective cohesion between the national forces, the SADC SF has already completed developing a common doctrine, operational guidelines, standard operating procedures and logistics concept (Cilliers 2008: 14). To further foster cohesion, common training is done at the Regional Peacekeeping Training Centre in Harare. Courses here include staff officer as well as command, logistics and other related courses. In addition, national forces train in their respective countries according to the AU and UN peace support operations doctrine which further fosters greater coordination and inter-operability (correspondence with Brigadier-General Lawrence Smith, SANDF, 21 June 2012).

Despite the tremendous progress being made, significant challenges remain. First, the problems of inter-operability, specifically in the sphere of communications, remain. Consider here the language question. SADC consists of Anglophone, Lusophone and Francophone elements. It seems to me that investment in language training at the different military colleges should be a priority. Communication is further hindered by the fact that most countries use different types of communication equipment from different original manufacturers – causing severe inter-operability challenges as was found during the recent SADC peacekeeping training exercise – Operation Golfinho. Whilst there is an expectation that this problem could be resolved by the Brigade Headquarters providing command and control communications downwards to the subordinate commands (correspondence with Brigadier-General Lawrence Smith, SANDF, 21 June 2012), this then raises the question of where the funding is to be sourced for this additional expense?

Second, whilst there has been much progress in the sphere of the military, the civilian and police components of the SADC SF have been lagging behind. Indeed, Operation Golfinho has also made it clear that this is also preventing effective synergy from developing between the military, police and civilian components. Ultimately this undermines the multidimensional character of the force and undermines success if deployed.

Third, there is the problem of national countries pledging forces which are still committed elsewhere, notably in the DRC, thereby hampering the creation of a roster of troops being contributed (Cilliers 2008: 14). In other cases, key elements of such a force, notably the marine elements and special forces are not pledged by any SADC state (correspondence with Brigadier-

General Lawrence Smith, SANDF, 21 June 2012). These omissions undermine the very effectiveness of the SADC SF and needs to be corrected as a matter of urgency.

Fourth, given the resource constraints among some countries, South Africa has come to occupy a dominant role within the SADC SF. For example, no medical battalion group, no maintenance unit or field workshop was offered by any SADC country. As such the SANDF agreed to provide these during Operation Golfinho over and above its other pledges since no brigade plus strength force can be sustained in the field without these critical components. In a similar vein, whilst Tanzania pledged a brigade headquarters in 2009, it was never operationalized, compelling the SANDF to also pledge a brigade headquarters for command and control purposes. Sensitive to member states' fears of South African domination, the SANDF has ensured that the Deputy Commander, staff officers and military observers emanate from other member states (correspondence with General Lawrence Smith, SANDF, 21 June 2012).

Despite the challenges posed, the SADC SF has been making steady progress in a resource-constrained environment. Military personnel, in particular, have demonstrated remarkable leadership in operationalizing the SADC SF under difficult circumstances. However, as Solomon Dersso (2010: 17) reminds us, "The deployment of the ASF is not merely a technical matter. It is in important respects a political affair". In order to understand the political constraints which might adversely impact on the operationalization and deployment of the SADC SF we now turn to the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (OPDSC).

The SADC OPDSC

In order to ensure peace and security in the southern African region, SADC established the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS) on 28 June 1996 in accordance with Article 4 of the SADC Treaty (SADC Communiqué, 28 June 1996). However, the OPDS never became operational and a variety of problems plagued it. First, there was the issue of the permanency of the chair of the OPDS. Zimbabwe's President Mugabe was appointed the first chair of the Organ. Despite the fact that the chair was to rotate annually, he managed to secure himself as chair for an additional four years – until 2001, when SADC Heads of State forced him to give up his position (Muleya 2001). Second, there was the problem that the OPDS functioned independently of SADC. Indeed, President Mugabe wanted the Organ to have its own Summit, while others, like President Mandela of South Africa, wanted it to be integrated within only one Summit for the whole of SADC. The relative independence of the SADC Organ vis-a-vis SADC proper allowed President Mugabe to use his chairpersonship of the OPDS to justify his country and his allies – Angola and Namibia – intervening in the DRC as a SADC force. It should be noted that most of the other members of SADC did not recognise it as an intervention done in the name of the SADC Organ but as an initiative of Mugabe. The third set of problems confronting the OPDS revolved around a weak organisational structure incapacitated by a shortage of financial resources, poor political direction and a dearth of skilled professionals (Solomon 2004: 184). By March 2001, a critical review of all operations and structures was finalised (Report on the Review of Operations of SADC Institutions, March 2001).

Following the recommendations of the SADC review, a new structure, the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Co-operation (OPDSC), was adopted by the SADC Heads of State Summit in Blantyre, Malawi later that year. The OPDSC was clearly superior to its predecessor, the rather moribund OPDS in that it lost independence and became an integral part of SADC (Protocol on the OPDSC 2001: 6). This is a positive development for two reasons. First, it reinforces notions of a holistic, expanded and integrated security. Following from this, it emphasises that issues of peace and security cannot be separated from developmental and governance issues. Thus the aims of the Organ were both security (narrowly defined) as well as peripheral issues associated with security such as democratic consolidation and good governance. Second, on a more practical level, it prevents abuse by one state of the Organ for national or even personal reasons as we saw in Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia's decision to intervene in the DRC (Solomon and Ngubane 2003).

Moreover, in a further effort to prevent abuse, and to encourage accountability and collective ownership, the annual SADC Summit elects the chairperson of the Organ and the term of office was restricted to one year only. This stands in sharp contrast to the five years that President Mugabe stayed on as chair and must also be seen as a positive development. Furthermore, the Protocol establishing the OPDSC makes it clear that whilst the Chairperson of the Organ is responsible for the overall policy direction and the achievement of the objectives of the Organ, this can only be done in consultation with the other two members of the Troika in charge of the Organ – the Incoming and Outgoing chairs (Protocol on the OPDSC 2001: 7-8). This also was meant to prevent abuse.

Despite these positive developments, there are also shortcomings which may adversely impact on the deployment of the SADC SF. Article 8(c) of the SADC Protocol establishing the OPDSC stipulates that decisions shall be taken by consensus. This is problematic. Consider the following scenario: a SADC member state engages in gross human rights violations and hangs on to power by means of fraudulent elections. Should other member states believe that intervention is needed in this country through the deployment of the SADC SF, then this country would simply vote against such a decision. In this way, one recalcitrant member holds the SADC Organ hostage. In other words, decisions by consensus are effectively a right to veto the majority decision. As such, it is recommended that the SADC Organ follow the example of the AU's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity in its latter years that decisions should be reached by consensus minus one (Solomon 2004: 190).

Then there is the question of sovereignty. In an increasingly interdependent world where sovereignty is challenged on a daily basis, the Organ has chosen to interpret sovereignty in an absolute sense. Consider here the following statement to be found in the Protocol: "Recognising and re-affirming the principles of strict respect for sovereignty, sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, good neighbourliness, non-interference in internal affairs of other States" (Protocol on the OPDSC 2001: 16). This absolutist notion of sovereignty is extremely problematic. The SADC position on sovereignty contradicts that of the AU which allows for state sovereignty to be disregarded in order to protect human life. From the

perspective of the SADC Standby Force, given this absolutist notion of sovereignty, will it ever be allowed to deploy?

A related question, which has been posed by Maxi Schoeman (2002: 20), is whether the OPDSC, "... will be used by heads of state and governments to protect each other, or whether, in the spirit of the SADC Treaty it will be used to protect the people of the region". Simply put, is security about citizens or political elites? Time and again, the SADC leadership has answered this question in favour of the latter. When Malawi's former president Bakili Muluzi was harassing the political opposition, SADC stood by the incumbent president (Solomon 2004: 193). When Robert Mugabe unleashed a reign of terror against his own people, SADC refused to act to protect the innocent. As the situation deteriorates in Swaziland, SADC has remained aloof as King Mswati III, Africa's last feudal monarch, has refused to give in to the demands of the pro-democracy demonstrators – thereby risking a civil war in this tiny kingdom. Under these circumstances, can we see a situation where SADC, under whose mandate the ASF contingent falls, approves of the SADC SF entering a country to save innocent live, as was the AU's intention with its creation?

Conclusion

The creation of an African Standby Force was a positive development for Africa and its one billion citizens. Given constraints at the UN level – both resource and political (the use of the veto), the establishment of the ASF was truly ground-breaking in that it operationalized the norm Responsibility to Protect or in traditional African parlance concretising the notion of ubuntu – our common humanity. Despite problems from sourcing funding, developing common command and control, improving communications, overlapping memberships of the regional brigades and the danger of one state dominating the regional brigade, military officers across nations and regions have demonstrated tremendous leadership in moving the concept of the ASF from the drawing board and into military academies and onto the battlefield.

Unfortunately, the greatest challenges are political, not military, as to the success of the ASF. The SADC political leadership has proved deficient in terms of the values it represents – preferring to keep incumbents in power as opposed to allying themselves with long-suffering citizens. Simply put, the SADC political leadership seems to exist for the security of state elites as opposed to the human security of citizens under the yoke of political oppression by the likes of Robert Mugabe and King Mswati III. Their absolutist notion of sovereignty stands in sharp contrast to the position of qualified sovereignty that the African Union has embraced – allowing for intervention in order to save human life. Such an absolutist notion of sovereignty together with the ruling of decisions by consensus allows one to conclude that intervention by the SADC SF will not take place. Irrespective of the great military strides undertaken, the underlying political values of SADC's political leadership prevent the effective deployment of such a force. For this reason, conflict and tragedy will continue to be the bane of southern Africa's existence.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Hussein Solomon is Senior Professor in the Department of Political Studies and Governance at the University of the Free State, Republic of South Africa.

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