

THE FORWARD DEFENCE STRATEGY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE (SADF), 1978-1989

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1960, the political clash of wills between the South African government and insurgent movements² such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) culminated in war.³ This war would entail a classical example of revolutionary warfare in which the insurgents strove to undermine the different power bases of the state to mobilise the international community and the population against the government.

The first step was the establishment of armed wings for the two organisations, namely Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the Azanian's People's Liberation Army (APLA) respectively. Both organisations initiated a sabotage campaign against infrastructure targets, supplemented by the infiltration by guerrilla groups trained abroad, who intended to start a people's war that would mobilise the population and, combined with international pressure, topple the government. By 1965, however, the first insurgency campaign had failed. The main reasons for this were:⁴

- Afrikaner nationalism and the perception of the white population that to retain political and economic power were prerequisites for national survival. This meant that the prospects to force a voluntary capitulation were slim. Consequently, the government had no scruples to use draconian measures such as the pass laws, influx control and detention without trial to curb the activities of the insurgents.

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² Insurgency refers to a localised armed conflict between forces of a constituted government and other forces originating within the same national territory. The form may or may not be that of guerrilla warfare. If the conflict is internal but is not localised, then it is a revolutionary war. E Luttwak, **A dictionary of modern war** (Penguin Press, London, 1972) p. 116.

³ T Lodge, **Black politics in South Africa since 1945** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983) p. 217.

⁴ F Toase, "The South African Army: the campaign in South West Africa/Namibia since 1966" in **Armed forces and modern counter-insurgency** (Croom Helm, London, 1985), pp. 194-8.

- Although the black population was dissatisfied with the status quo, they were not yet politicised enough to spontaneously support the insurgency. Also, the South African Police (SAP) had an extensive network of informants that enabled them to track down the saboteurs.
- Most of the political leaders were either arrested or had to flee the country.
- A buffer of states friendly to the South African government, whose armed forces and police intercepted the infiltrators before they reached South Africa proper, made it difficult to wage guerrilla warfare inside the country. The fact that the Portuguese were already fighting a counter-insurgency war against indigenous groups inside Angola and Mozambique notwithstanding, Rhodesia was under white rule and South-West Africa was a United Nations Mandate Territory occupied by South Africa.

The stage was thus set for the next phase in the war, the conflicts in the buffer states that would impact decisively on the strategies of the South African government and the insurgents.

2. REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE

Revolutionary warfare was the most prevalent form of conflict against colonial and minority governments during the Cold War era. Thus, the strategies of both the insurgents/revolutionaries and the government would focus on the population and the international community as manifested in different dimensions of the war. The insurgents would try to create alternative political and socio-economic structures in order to turn the population against the government.⁵ The struggle in the international arena constituted two subdimensions, the global international community and neighbouring states.⁶

As long as South Africa could participate in the international economic system the revolutionaries would be faced by a population experiencing rising living standards, thus undermining the very fabric of the revolutionary climate needed to mobilise the masses. Therefore, the international community had to be mobilised to introduce sanctions, especially Western countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom that had close economic ties with South Africa. Military support in the form of weapons and training would be forthcoming from Marxist and the Afro-Asiatic bloc of states.⁷

⁵ Lodge, pp. 71-4.

⁶ J Baylis, "Revolutionary warfare" in *An introduction to strategy* (Croom Helm, London, 1975), pp. 135-6.

⁷ J Grobler, *A decisive clash?, A short history of black protest politics in South Africa, 1875-1976* (Acacia, Pretoria, 1988), pp. 149-51.

The application of military power by the insurgents would supplement this and in activating this dimension of the struggle, the insurgents needed bases in neighbouring countries from where to infiltrate and to flee back to, to recuperate if pressed too hard by government forces. This was vital until such time that liberated areas could be established inside the country from where guerrilla warfare could be waged against government forces.⁸

3. THE WAR IN THE BUFFER STATES, 1965-1980

Initially the Portuguese government resisted the revolutionary challenge against its rule, but by 1974 the protracted war slowed down economic growth and the statistics for the previous year indicated that 13 000 Portuguese soldiers had died in Africa. This also negatively affected the morale of the soldiers and the population of metropolitan Portugal.⁹

The insurgents succeeded in controlling small areas in Angola and Mozambique and used neighbouring countries such as Zaïre, Zambia and Tanzania respectively from where they infiltrated and escalated the insurgency. This was, however, not enough to oust the Portuguese and it entailed a military coup in Lisbon in 1974 to start the process which would lead to the independence of the former colonies. Within one year, with the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola and Mozambique, the strategic balance in Southern Africa had been overturned to the detriment of the South African government.¹⁰

In 1965, the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Rhodesia led to a war with the nationalist movements in that country. While the Portuguese controlled Mozambique the insurgents could only infiltrate via Zambia, where the difficult terrain of the Zambezi Valley made it easy for the government forces to detect and thwart the movement of guerrilla groups further into the country. The Frente de Libertação de Mozambique's (FRELIMO) success in escalating the insurgency in the Tete Province in Mozambique enabled Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) cadres to activate the northeast theatre inside Rhodesia. This gained momentum when, since 1975, the FRELIMO government allowed these guerrillas to use its territory as a base area to escalate the insurgency. This was augmented by larger infiltration by Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe Peoples' Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) cadres from Zambia, with the Rhodesian armed forces and police stretched to the utmost limits of its ability to cope with.¹¹

⁸ CM Beer, **On revolutionary war** (Galago, Bromley, 1990) pp. 46-8.

⁹ I Beckett, "Portuguese Africa" in **War in peace** (Orbis, London, 1981), p. 153.

¹⁰ AJ Venter, "Why Portugal lost its African Wars" in **Challenge: Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context** (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989), p. 234.

¹¹ JK Cilliers, **Counter-insurgency in Rhodesia** (Croom Helm, London, 1985), pp. 7-11.

In South-West Africa (SWA), the South-West Africa Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) waged an armed struggle against the South African government's occupation of this country since 1961. However, its military wing, the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) could until 1975 only infiltrate from Zambia because of the Portuguese presence in Angola. The collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa enabled PLAN to activate the whole length of the border with Angola, forcing the South African Defence Force (SADF) to expand its counter-insurgency activities. From an insurgency point of view, this held the further advantage that the Ovambo people, SWAPO's main base of support, lived on both sides of the international boundary. Furthermore, the terrain and weather favoured the insurgents, especially during the rainy season when the bush made the detection of movement difficult.¹²

Events in Angola would escalate the conflict in the subcontinent, leading to the closer involvement of the two leading powers in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union. However, it also provided the SADF opportunities to influence events. In 1975, the three main liberation movements that had fought against the Portuguese, failed to co-operate in establishing a democratic Angola. This led to a civil war between the Soviet and Cuban-backed Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) under Agostino Neto and the Chinese and later US-backed Frente de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) under Holden Roberto and Jonas Savimbi's União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA).

This initiated the co-operation between the SADF and UNITA that tentatively started in 1974 when weapons had been delivered to this movement. The civil war led to the involvement of South African forces, but in spite of initial military successes the SADF and UNITA had to withdraw within sight of the capital Luanda, due to a lack of support from the West and some African countries such as Zambia. Soviet and Cuban involvement became more intense and the South African withdrawal from Angola restored PLAN's initial strategic advantage. The insurgency in Namibia intensified as the MPLA's armed forces, FAPLA, supported PLAN in its campaign against the South African forces. Thus, closer military co-operation with UNITA became a strategic necessity from a South African government point of view.¹³

¹² WS Barnard, "Die geografie van 'n rewolusionêre oorlog: SWAPO in Suidwes-Afrika", *S.A. Geographer*, 10(2), 1982, pp. 162, 166.

¹³ SL Barnard, "'n Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik op die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië, 1966-1989", *Acta Academica*, 23(1), 1991, pp. 115-6.

With regard to the eastern border, the expectation was that the close economic ties between South Africa and Mozambique would cause the FRELIMO government to refrain from supporting insurgency in South Africa. The war in Angola had virtually destroyed the South African government's previous diplomatic efforts to make inroads in Africa, but after initial radical rhetoric, public statements by key government figures created the impression that Mozambique wanted closer co-operation.¹⁴ Prime Minister Vorster reacted positively to this by stating that South Africa would try and co-operate with the new government in Mozambique.¹⁵

Early in 1975, however, the rhetoric changed. Pressure from the Frontline States,¹⁶ the Organisation of African Unity, the ANC and the Soviet Union probably led to the leader of FRELIMO, Samora Machel, declaring that the people of South Africa had the right to fight against Apartheid and that Mozambique would support this. Joachim Chissano, the Mozambique Minister of Foreign Affairs, also stated that the liberation of Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa would be supported with military action if need be.¹⁷

Of the buffer states lost to South Africa from 1975 to 1980, the take-over by the self-declared Marxist government of FRELIMO was the most detrimental from the South African government's point of view. With its long coastline of 2 500 km and good harbours such as Beira and Maputo, foreign maritime powers such as the Soviet Union and Cuba, could upset the balance of power in terms of conventional forces in the region. This could be done in a short time span by supplying the Mozambique armed forces with main equipment and military advisors, as had happened in Angola. The southern part of the country, with Maputo harbour, was also geographically the closest area from where the Frontline States could deploy conventional forces to threaten the industrial heartland of South Africa, the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV) complex. It is also relatively close to the Durban-Pinetown industrial area.¹⁸

Furthermore, Mozambique's location posed a threat in terms of the escalation of the insurgency in Rhodesia, as indeed occurred between 1975 and 1979, and the reactivation of the internal front in South Africa itself. In the border region, the bushveld type vegetation would retard the detection of groups infiltrating into South Africa and the straddling of the international boundaries by different ethnic

¹⁴ B Fourie, **Brandpunte, agter the skerms met Suid-Afrika se bekendste diplomaat** (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1991), p. 189.

¹⁵ Hansard, 20 August 1974, columns 1883-4, speech by the Prime Minister.

¹⁶ Zambia, Botswana, and later Mozambique, Angola and Tanzania that regarded themselves as in the frontline of the struggle against colonialism and white minority rule in Southern Africa.

¹⁷ HJ van Aswegen and G Verhoef, **Die geskiedenis van Mosambiek** (Butterworth, Durban, 1982), p. 152.

¹⁸ J Keegan and A Wheatcroft, **The world strategic atlas** (Jonathan Cape, London, 1986), pp. 63-4.

groups would enable insurgents to mix easily with the local population before the government forces could detect them. This could develop into rural insurgency and the proximity of the PWV and Durban-Pinetown industrial areas held the potential of activating urban insurrection.¹⁹ Thus, an ideal situation existed for the large-scale reactivation of the internal insurgency front in South Africa.

Military intelligence reports also indicated that in the period 1975 to July 1977 the Soviet Union and its allies delivered military equipment to the value of R400 million to Mozambique. More and more Soviet, East German and Cuban instructors and technical personnel became involved in the training of the Mozambique armed forces (FAM) and the maintenance of their equipment. Also, the demonstrated ability of the Soviet Union to re-supply their clients with an air bridge during the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the Marxist government in Ethiopia during 1977, had to be taken into account. Having Yemen and Ethiopia as client states, it provided the Soviets the opportunity to use such an air bridge to alter the force levels in Mozambique in a short time to the disadvantage of South Africa.²⁰

The most immediate threat to the South African government, however, was the reactivation of the insurgency in South Africa itself. In 1975 the ANC established a political office in Maputo to serve as a reception centre for people that had fled South Africa. At the same time MK cadres moved from Tanzania and it was suspected that they used FAM facilities en route to South Africa.²¹

In November 1976, the first MK cadres infiltrated from Mozambique via Swaziland into South Africa and during the following two years the feared reactivation and drastic escalation of the insurgency in South Africa followed. As a result of the Soweto riots, thousands of young blacks left the country and joined the ranks of MK and APLA, thus creating an even more favourable climate for the escalation of the conflict.²²

During 1976 to 1977 most of the infiltration of MK cadres occurred via the Mozambique-Swaziland route.²³ Also, the first indications of MK recruits being trained in Mozambique raised the spectrum of a repetition of an escalated insurgency in South Africa that would even surpass the situation in Rhodesia where

¹⁹

Ibid.

²⁰ Personal interview with General CL Viljoen, former Chief of the SADF, Pretoria, 20 May 1994.

²¹ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

²² H Barrell, **MK, the ANC's armed struggle** (Penguin, London, 1994), pp. 36-7.

²³ C Williamson, "ANC clandestine operations", **Challenge: Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context** (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989), p. 281.

the government forces were struggling to prevent a military collapse.²⁴ From 1975 to 1976 a small group of APLA guerrillas co-operated with members of the Mgomzulu tribe, a community straddling the South African-Swazi border. The SAP crushed this but the PAC succeeded in re-establishing underground structures in Johannesburg and East London.²⁵

4. THE SOWETO RIOTS AND ITS IMPACT, 1976-1977

While the struggle against the buffer states escalated, international events also worked in favour of the revolutionary movements in Southern Africa. In 1973, the oil crisis in the Middle East weakened the South African economy that led to dissatisfaction amongst the black population that experienced the consequent negative impact of these events the most, while they realised that the war in South Africa's neighbouring states was escalating. In 1974, the gold price increased and the South African economy recuperated, but during the next year a drastic decline caused the economic growth rate to decrease from 8,3% to 1,3% within a year and in 1977 the growth rate was nil.²⁶

The sudden decrease in economic growth caused a phenomenon known as the J-Curve, a situation creating expectations that are suddenly frustrated. This emphasised the difference in income between the population groups and with the escalation of the conflicts in SWA and Rhodesia, the revolutionary climate in South Africa reached its zenith.²⁷

In contrast to the situation from 1960-1965, the black population in the cities was ripe for insurrection. The government's stance that only the homelands should serve to channel the political and economic aspirations of the black population had failed. In spite of draconian measures to prevent it, urbanisation continued apace, but because blacks were regarded as temporary residents, they were not allowed to own property, which had many negative socio-economic implications. Furthermore, the withdrawal of the Portuguese from Africa and the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA created political expectations. In June 1976, when black pupils in Soweto started protesting against inequality in educational systems and the compulsory use of Afrikaans as the medium of tuition, the police opened fire

²⁴ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

²⁵ T Lodge, "Soldiers of the storm: A profile of the Azanian People's Liberation Army" in **About turn** (Institute for Defence Policy, Halfway House, 1995) p. 106.

²⁶ J Barber and J Barrett, **South Africa's foreign policy, the search for status and security, 1945-1988** (Oxford University Press, London, 1990), pp. 177-8.

²⁷ RJ Greyling, **Terrorisme** (JL van Schaik, Pretoria, 1985), p. 60.

and killed several. Unrest spread throughout the country and thousands of youths left South Africa and swelled the ranks of MK and APLA.²⁸

Since 1965 the government had had ten years to find a political and socio-economic solution that could satisfy the reasonable expectations of the black population in South Africa. However, the unimaginative manner in which the government executed its counter-political strategy and regional events, aggravated the situation, rather than subdue it. This called for a drastic revision of the government's national security strategy.

5. THE REFORMULATION OF DEFENCE POLICY

The election of PW Botha as Prime Minister in 1978 is considered to be the turning point in the change of government strategy,²⁹ but in government circles, the need for a more aggressive defence posture was already prevalent by the end of 1976. The **White Paper on Defence** of 1977 identified the enemy of South Africa as international communism under the leadership of the Soviet Union that wanted to, from a South African government point of view, instigate the so-called liberation movements like the ANC and PAC to wage war against the country and all its inhabitants. The aim was identified as the overthrow of the current state dispensation and the establishment of a Marxist peoples' republic along the lines of countries such as East Germany and Cuba. This would also coincide with the ideals of Pan Africanism that wanted black people to control all the countries on the continent south of the Sahara.

The grand strategy of the "enemy" was identified as a "Total Onslaught" in which the insurgents would try to undermine all the power bases of the state in order to overthrow state authority within the framework of revolutionary warfare. According to the government, the only viable course of action to counter this was a so-called "Total Strategy" that also had to be waged in protection of the power bases of the state.

Political reform was to be one of the cornerstones of the new approach in an effort to address the grievances of the population. This was linked to draconian internal security measures such as the use of states of emergencies to curb internal unrest. The attitude, however, was that this would all be negated if the military dimension of the insurgency spiralled out of control, as in Rhodesia, destroying the legitimacy

²⁸ J Kane-Berman, **Soweto, black revolt, white reaction** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1978) pp. 106-7.

²⁹ RS Jaster, **The defence of white power, South African foreign policy under pressure** (MacMillan, London, 1988), p. 79.

of the government and forcing the population to choose the side of the perceived winners, the revolutionary movements.³⁰

Under PW Botha's leadership the State Security Council was reactivated in 1978 as the main organ that had to formulate the government's grand strategy and coordinate the actions of the different state departments to prevent the duplication of government expenditure and actions for the hearts and minds of the people. This also led to a restructuring of the SADF. In 1979, the staff division Operations was identified as the main formulator of military strategies against the revolutionary onslaught and the role of the SADF in this process.³¹ In order to improve command and control, the decision was also taken in 1974 to create the division Chief of Staff Intelligence out of the Detachment Military Intelligence, and place it directly under command of the Chief of the SADF.³² These two divisions would be the main role players in the execution of what came to be known as the so-called Forward Defence Strategy.

6. THE FORWARD DEFENCE STRATEGY

PW Botha's foreign policy was to promote international co-operation between the countries in Southern Africa within the framework of a constellation of states. Through this he hoped to gain international recognition for the independent black homelands, such as the Transkei and economic integration of the region to offset the hostile attitude of the Frontline States towards South Africa. This would, however, have to be backed up by a defence strategy that had to prevent further escalations of conflict.³³

Until 1978 the regional strategy of the SADF was based on deterrence of conventional aggression through expanding South Africa's arms industry and creating a credible conventional force. This had to be supplemented by the curbing of insurrection through a counter-insurgency strategy within South Africa and SWA. The SADF supplied limited aid in terms of personnel and equipment to the Rhodesian armed forces and UNITA in Angola. However, in the light of the changed security situation in southern Africa it was deemed that this had to be supplemented by a more aggressive intervention in neighbouring states that posed a threat to South Africa. This was to augment the close-defence strategy, as the previous approach was redefined.

³⁰ Republic of South Africa, **White Paper on Defence**, 1977, pp. 4-8.

³¹ SC le Grange, "Die geskiedenis van die die Hoof van Staf Operasies", *Militaria*, 12/2, 1982, pp. 60-1.

³² **Ibid.**, pp. 57-8.

³³ PH Frankel, **Pretoria's Praetorians** (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984), pp. 35-7.

Southern Africa was divided into three geostrategic areas:

- The SADF had to be able to collect information in the so-called area of interest and if necessary to conduct punitive operations. The areas included northern Angola, Zaïre, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi and northern Mozambique.
- The combat area was the most important region in which the strategy would manifest. The SADF had to be able to influence the governments through diplomatic, economic and military means to adopt a pro-Western, democratic and capitalistic stance. These areas included SWA (Namibia), southern Angola, Rhodesia, southern Mozambique, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho.
- The vital survival area constituted South Africa and the black homelands. From within this region the SADF had to be able to conduct conventional and counter-insurgency operations in the combat area and punitive expeditions in the area of interest. This would be supplemented with co-operation of the SAP.³⁴

South Africa had to keep the Frontline States off balance by dominating the subcontinent up to the basin of the Congo River. Support to insurgent groups inside the Frontline States implied that attacks against the rail and road networks in these countries forced them to export and import through South African harbours. This had to be used to ensure the establishment of governments in Rhodesia and SWA that would not support insurgency against South Africa and to put pressure on Mozambique to also toe the line. This would also be supplemented by external attacks by the SADF against insurgents in neighbouring countries and against conventional forces if military confrontation proved to be inevitable.³⁵ Thus, the military strategic concept was to destroy enemies before they could destabilise South Africa and the black homelands.

7. CONFLICT WITH MOZAMBIQUE, 1978-1984

In 1978, the situation in Rhodesia created the impression that this strategy could be successfully implemented. An internal settlement between the Smith government and certain black leaders led to elections and the establishment of a government of national unity under Abel Muzorewa. It was hoped that numerous of the insurgents would support them and that, what was then Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, would be recognised by Western countries.

³⁴ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

³⁵ PL Moorcroft, *African nemesis, war and revolution in southern Africa, 1945-2010* (Brassey's, London, 1990), pp. 166-7.

Within the framework of the new strategy South African military aid to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia increased drastically. The Rhodesians attacked guerrilla bases in Zambia and Mozambique, leading to large losses of lives amongst the insurgents.³⁶ Another facet of this approach was the establishment of an insurgent movement in Mozambique by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) with help from the army. By 1979, the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RNM or RENAMO) cadres were conducting a guerrilla war in the central provinces of the country against the Mozambican FAM (Forças Armadas de Moçambique).³⁷

The new strategy of the Zimbabwe-Rhodesian armed forces could, however, not stem the tide of the insurgency inside the country and Western recognition did not materialise. South African and British intervention in 1979 led to the Lancaster House agreement, elections in 1980 and the establishment of the Republic of Zimbabwe under the leadership of Robert Mugabe.³⁸ Another of the buffer states had been lost and the Zimbabwean border was now added to the area which MK and APLA could use to infiltrate their cadres into South Africa. Furthermore, access via Zimbabwe could also lead to the activation of Botswana as a base area for the insurgents. Previously, the location of Rhodesia and the Caprivi Strip in SWA made this difficult. Even worse, intelligence indicated that these events contributed substantially to an increase of support for the ANC amongst the black urban population in South Africa.³⁹

To aggravate matters the Soviet build-up of conventional forces in the Frontline States increased unabated, with the probable aim of deterring the SADF from conducting military operations against their armed forces and the insurgents. Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique also created the impression that they were prepared to support Marxist client states to the hilt to expand their influence in the Third World.⁴⁰

In spite of this, certain international trends favoured the South African government. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister of Britain and during the next year, Ronald Reagan was elected the president of the United States. Both were well known for their anti-Marxist points of view and preparedness to actively combat the spread of global Soviet influence. This would eventually entail

³⁶ IFW Beckett, "The Rhodesian Army: Counter-insurgency, 1972-1979" in **Armed forces and modern counter-insurgency** (Croom Helm, London, 1985), pp. 166-8, 178-9.

³⁷ D Martin and P Johnson, "Mozambique: To Nkomati and beyond" in **Destructive engagement. Southern Africa at War** (Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1986), pp. 3-10.

³⁸ P Moorcraft and P McLaughlin, **Chimurenga - The war in Rhodesia, 1965-1980** (Sygma, Johannesburg, 1982), p. 234.

³⁹ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 August 1990.

⁴⁰ Personal interview with General CL Viljoen, former Chief of the SADF, Pretoria, 20 May 1994.

American military support to insurgents in self-declared Marxist states. The South African government believed that, coupled to internal political reform, its external military actions would receive tacit support from the West.⁴¹

The first component of the military strategy against Mozambique constituted operations by special and air forces against houses in Maputo used by MK as training and transfer facilities to infiltrate their cadres into South Africa.⁴²

During 1981, SADF Special Forces also conducted raids into Lesotho. In December of the next year, an SADF raid on Maseru killed 42 people, including more than 20 MK members.⁴³ Close co-operation with the Swaziland Defence Force also led to the eventual expulsion of MK cadres from that country.⁴⁴

However, the support to external insurgent movements in Frontline States produced the most spectacular military results. After the establishment of Zimbabwe, the SADF moved RENAMO to Phalaborwa, close to the South African border with Mozambique, started training their cadres and infiltrating them into Mozambique. Most of the time, the insurgents were accompanied by SADF Special Forces to help with planning and guidance. From 1980-1983, the civil war in Mozambique escalated to the point that RENAMO conducted operations in all but one of the country's provinces and exploded bombs in Maputo and Beira. The FAM could only move in large formations in certain areas. The strategy seemed to work.⁴⁵

8. THE INTERNAL FRONT, 1978-1984

The leadership of the ANC took note of the change in government strategy. From 1976 till 1979, several sabotage acts were carried out in South Africa, but were pinpricks compared to the military resources the government could mobilise. According to Barrell,⁴⁶ the ANC's focus was still too much on the military dimension of the struggle and this was only rectified after a visit to Vietnam in 1978. The lessons the ANC leaders learnt from this visit were that the most important aspect was the establishment of underground structures and the mobilisation of the masses. Their focus would also shift to the cities where the discontent amongst the black population was rapidly rising.

⁴¹ Barber and Barrett, pp. 274-6.

⁴² Republic of South Africa, **White Paper on Defence, 1984**, p. 3.

⁴³ Barrell, pp. 48-9.

⁴⁴ J Hanlon, **Beggar your neighbours, Apartheid power in southern Africa** (CIIR, London, 1986), p. 138.

⁴⁵ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

⁴⁶ Barrell, pp. 36-8.

Henceforth MK's military actions would only serve to enhance this process and contribute to the raising of the morale of the insurgents. They realised that the South African government would never tolerate the establishment of large military facilities in countries such as Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Botswana. Barrell⁴⁷ claims that after 1979, MK military attacks such as the explosions at Sasol in 1980 and Koeberg in 1982, as well as the Church Street car bomb in Pretoria in 1983, highlighted MK's ability to conduct sabotage inside the country. However, the overwhelming reaction of the black population, as measured against the attendance of funerals of MK members killed by government forces and the support to protest actions reflected the effect of the new strategy. In August 1983, the United Democratic Front was established inside South Africa to act as a front organisation for the ANC to facilitate the mobilisation of the masses against all the power bases of the state.⁴⁸

In spite of this, the leadership of the ANC realised that the establishment of liberated areas inside South Africa was still a far way off. In 1982 they decided to deploy an MK brigade inside Angola to fight against UNITA, probably to gain military experience in preparation for the future when a full-scale guerrilla war in support of the revolutionary struggle could be waged.⁴⁹

9. THE WESTERN FRONT, 1978-1984

In SWA, the SADF followed a new approach to counter-insurgency. The government declared its intention to co-operate with the United Nations in granting independence to the territory, Apartheid was scrapped and an own army, the South-West Africa Territory Force (SWATF) consisting of all the population groups in the country, would bear the main burden of the military action. Rather than trying to incorporate the territory, the war became an attempt to win enough time for other political parties to defeat SWAPO in an election.⁵⁰

In accordance with the Forward Defence Strategy, external attacks against PLAN bases, already clandestinely executed since 1976, rapidly increased. By 1984 the SADF maintained a semi-permanent presence of light, mobile search-and-destroy teams up to 100km inside Angola and aid to UNITA continued. Angola and Mozambique were feeling the pinch of the SADF strategy. However, international

⁴⁷ **Ibid.**, pp. 38-9.

⁴⁸ **Ibid.**, p. 51.

⁴⁹ S Ellis and T Sechaba, **Comrades against Apartheid, the ANC and South African Communist Party in exile** (James Currey Ltd, London, 1992), p. 131.

⁵⁰ L Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War: An appraisal of the South African strategy", **Scientia Militaria**, 34(1), 2006, p. 33.

pressure against South Africa had escalated to the point where the government felt itself military secure enough to give diplomacy a chance.⁵¹

10. THE JOINT MONITORING COMMISSION AND NKOMATI

After lengthy negotiations, the Lusaka Accord was struck between South Africa and the Angolan government. A joint monitoring commission consisting of members of the two defence forces had to determine if all SADF elements had withdrawn south of the border and if FAPLA and Cuban forces did not occupy this area. However, SWAPO exploited the situation to escalate the conflict and the FAPLA and Cuban forces reinforced their conventional force capability. Thus, South Africa withdrew from the commission.⁵²

In Mozambique, the Forward Defence Strategy's results became even more spectacular. RENAMO had by March 1984 activated all the provinces in Mozambique and the SADF Chief of Staff Intelligence Division reckoned that they would be able to wrest political power from FRELIMO by 1985.⁵³

Certain media in the Western World, however, used South Africa's destabilisation of the subcontinent to tarnish the name of the South African government, and in so doing, contributed to the isolation of the country even more from the international community. The argument was that South Africa's regional actions had become an embarrassment to the Reagan Administration.⁵⁴ At the same time, South African efforts to promote RENAMO as a viable alternative to FRELIMO in the West met with only limited success.⁵⁵

Mozambique's president, Samora Machel, realised that the Soviet Union would not be able to bail out his government in a conflict with South Africa. It also became clear that the United States did not want to overthrow the governments of Angola and Mozambique, but was using UNITA and RENAMO respectively to move them away from Marxism towards democratic and free market dispensations.⁵⁶ Since 1981 the Mozambique government liaised with the United States, which had the clear message that MK did not have the capacity to escalate the war in South Africa

⁵¹ Barnard, p. 120.

⁵² HR Heitman and WA Dörning, "The Joint Monitoring Commission", *Militaria*, 18/1, 1988, pp. 3-5.

⁵³ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

⁵⁴ *The New York Times*, 25 January 1983.

⁵⁵ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

⁵⁶ CA Crocker, *High noon in southern Africa, making peace in a rough neighbourhood* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1992) p. 243.

to a full-scale guerrilla war and as long as the Frontline States supported insurgency against South Africa, they should not expect help from the West.⁵⁷

The Nkomati Accord between South Africa and Mozambique was signed on 16 March 1984. In exchange for Mozambique's undertaking to cease support to MK, South Africa agreed to halt its support to RENAMO.⁵⁸

The Nkomati Accord was a serious setback for the ANC. Simultaneously it became known that Swaziland had a secret agreement with the South African government to act against MK in its territory. The result was that MK cadres had to deploy hastily into South Africa and there was a sudden rise in casualties inflicted by the SADF and the Police. In spite of maintaining armed activity for a short time in South Africa after that, the outbreak of a new wave of protest in September 1984 could not be supplemented with a full-scale guerrilla campaign, due to the loss of military facilities in Swaziland and Mozambique. At the same time infiltration routes through Zimbabwe and Botswana had not been developed. To aggravate matters, dissatisfaction with the circumstances in which MK members had to fight in Angola led to mutiny in some MK camps.⁵⁹

In a secret meeting between PW Botha and Samora Machel it was agreed that South Africa would continue to provide non-military aid such as agricultural implements, seed and medical support to RENAMO. This could then be used to facilitate negotiations between RENAMO and the FRELIMO government, with the aim of creating a government of national unity.⁶⁰

11. THE FINAL PHASE, 1985-1989

In spite of the diplomatic setback of the failure of the Joint Monitoring Commission to end the wars in Angola and SWA, on face value it appeared that the Forward Defence Strategy allowed the South African state to survive. It was, however, soon to prove that appearances were misleading.

⁵⁷ N Macqueen, "Mozambique's widening foreign policy", *The World Today*, 40(1), January 1984, pp. 23-6.

⁵⁸ Fourie, p. 198.

⁵⁹ Barrell, pp. 53-4.

⁶⁰ Personal interview with Major General JF Huyser, former Director Military Strategy, Chief of Staff Operations Division, SADF, Pretoria, 30 Augustus, 1990.

The nature of the war on the western front changed. Although counter-insurgency against PLAN continued, the SADF's main focus became support to UNITA, after FAPLA, the Cubans and SWAPO had started building up forces to destroy Savimbi's hold on south-east Angola. During 1985 and 1986, FAPLA launched military offensives against UNITA, which were beaten off by a limited SADF presence.⁶¹ On face value, it seemed as if South Africa was winning the military side of the conflict in SWA.⁶² UNITA's guerrilla war against FAPLA enabled the SADF to limit the insurgency into Ovamboland and PLAN's losses increased dramatically.⁶³

In January 1986, Major General Justin Lekhanya led a military coup d'état in Lesotho. He favoured closer relations with South Africa and it led to the deportation of ANC members and specifically MK operatives. As MK had used Lesotho to infiltrate into the Eastern and Western Cape, the Transkei and to a limited extent, the PWV area, this was a serious blow.⁶⁴

Strategic realities however, proved the above to be only temporary gains. In 1985, Keegan and Wheatcroft⁶⁵ warned that the position of the South African government was vulnerable, as the following four years would demonstrate. According to them, the war in Angola and SWA had become a drain on the South African economy. They saw part of the solution as a disengagement from this war, as it would ease international pressure and burden South Africa's enemies with the logistic problem of fighting a war with long lines of communication. A glance at the map of southern Africa indicates that after the creation of Zimbabwe in 1980, SWA lost its value as a buffer zone. The argument that a SWAPO government in Windhoek would allow infiltration into the Northwest Cape and via Botswana does not take into account the fact that infiltration through the latter could from then on anyway proceed via Zimbabwe. Also, the semidesert nature of the border with Namibia and its resultant lack of large population concentrations in that area defeats the argument that Namibia, as a strategic buffer was still vital for national survival. Also, according to L'Ange,⁶⁶ by 1988 it was obvious that SWAPO was winning the contest for the loyalty of the population, as they had the political support amongst most black Namibians, especially the numerically strong Ovambo tribe.

⁶¹ SL Barnard, *Acta Academica*, 23(1), 1991, p. 122.

⁶² F Toase, "The South African Army: the campaign in South West Africa/Namibia since 1966" in **Armed forces and modern counter-insurgency** (Croom Helm, London, 1985), p. 216.

⁶³ Scholtz, "The Namibian Border War...", p. 216.

⁶⁴ T Motumi, "The spear of the nation - The recent history of Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK)" in **About turn**, (Institute for Defence Policy, Halfway House, 1995), p. 99.

⁶⁵ Keegan and Wheatcroft, p. 71.

⁶⁶ G L'Ange, "Countries in the cross-fire" in **Challenge.Southern Africa within the African Revolutionary context** (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989), p. 346.

In Mozambique, the problem was that the efforts to facilitate the negotiations between FRELIMO and RENAMO had failed. Also, by the signing of the Nkomati Accord the South African government had for the first time officially acknowledged its support to RENAMO. The civil war escalated and, in desperation, Machel used the continued limited aid to RENAMO to accuse South Africa of breaking the accord. This was aggravated by his death in a plane crash on 19 October 1986. Mozambique, the Soviet Union and the Western media created the impression that the South African government was responsible for the accident and used the accusations of continued support to RENAMO to depict South Africa as the regional bully.⁶⁷ This neutralised the temporary diplomatic advantage gained by South Africa and during 1985, MK and APLA had again started using Mozambique as an infiltration route.⁶⁸ The Mozambican government had clearly outmanoeuvred its South African counterpart within the diplomatic dimension of the war.

The war in Angola escalated as FAPLA, supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, launched large-scale offensives against UNITA. The South African contribution had to increase accordingly. The SADF/UNITA forces achieved spectacular success on the Lomba River in 1987, but then got bogged down in a war of attrition near Quito Quanevale. Ultimately the South African withdrawal from Quito Quanevale, the implementation of UN Resolution 435 and the independence of Namibia established the situation recommended by Keegan and Wheatcroft, but only in 1989, four years later.⁶⁹

The South African government also did not escape unscathed from this conflict. They, and the SADF, never understood the importance of propaganda in war. The events at Quito Quanevale were used to create the impression that the SADF was defeated and that South African diplomats negotiated from a position of weakness.⁷⁰ The effect of this on the election in Namibia and SWAPO's subsequent victory are aspects that will have to be examined by historians. Thus, by 1989 this buffer was also lost.

In 1985 Keegan and Wheatcroft⁷¹ also warned that the government's internal policies were not working and that alternatives would have to be found in a short space of time. Since 1983, the UDF synchronised a coalition of anti-Apartheid

⁶⁷ Moorcraft, p. 177.

⁶⁸ R Kasrils, **Armed and dangerous, my undercover struggle against apartheid** (Heineman, Oxford, 1993), p. 244.

⁶⁹ G Mills and D Williams, **7 Battles that shaped South Africa** (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2006), pp. 186-7.

⁷⁰ GC Kwhela, "Umkhonto Wesizwe's contribution to the defence of the African revolution in Angola", **Journal for Contemporary History**, 28(2), 2003, p. 117; L Scholtz, "Cuitio Cuanavale: Wie het werklik gewen?", **Scientia Militaria**, 28(1), 1998, p. 51.

⁷¹ Keegan and Wheatcroft, p. 71.

organisations that included labour movements and educational, youth, civic, women's, religious, and political organisations in mass actions against the government. The government's efforts to placate black political and economic aspirations through the homelands, local government participation in the urban areas and the Tricameral Parliament again aggravated rather than defused the situation. In September 1984, large-scale mass protests started in the urban areas that even spread to certain rural regions. MK and APLA membership increased drastically and some authors reckon that the country was on the verge of full-scale civil war.⁷²

Hough⁷³ is, however, of the opinion that by 1988 the ANC had to admit setbacks in their attempts to transform unrest into insurrection. The government's counter-measures such as states of emergency and in certain cases addressing the immediate causes of discontent stemmed the tide. MK and APLA could not convert any area in South Africa into liberated areas, but the government could also only stay in power through emergency legislation and brute force. Also, international pressure and sanctions further isolated the country. As Magyar rightfully concluded in 1989: "Even an expansionist state cannot conquer with a contracting economy."⁷⁴ Thus, the stage was set for the dramatic events of 1990 that would resolve the conflict.

12. EVALUATION

The main lesson learnt from the Rhodesian bush war was that if the government forces lost the military struggle, negotiations would have to be done from a position of weakness. Military strategy therefore had to win time for the South African government by preventing an escalation of the conflict in South Africa into a full-scale people's war. In order to achieve this, it was imperative to prevent the insurgents from using neighbouring states and eventually liberated areas in the country from where to conduct guerrilla warfare. To win the military dimension of the conflict, however, avails to nothing if the political struggle in the end is lost.

The time gained between 1960 and 1975 was not exploited and the loss of Angola and Mozambique as buffer states to the revolutionary onslaught contributed substantially to the Soweto riots that was in itself an indication of the bankruptcy of the government's internal policies.

⁷² Barrell, pp. 70-2; Motumi, p. 87.

⁷³ M Hough, "Revolt in the townships" in **Southern Africa within the African Revolutionary context** (Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1989), pp. 406-8.

⁷⁴ KP Magyar, "Low-intensity conflicts: The African context" in **Responding to low-intensity conflict challenges** (Washington, DC, US Government Printing Offices, 1990), p. 242.

From 1976 to 1979, the Forward Defence Strategy furnished the government with time to find answers to the internal problems of the country, but the loss of Rhodesia and the escalation of the conflict in Angola and SWA were serious blows, which called for an even more aggressive posture. From 1980 to 1984, spectacular military results were achieved, but on the diplomatic and economic fronts, the South African government could not win the war.

The government again failed to capitalise on the security umbrella to find an answer to the most pressing political question, the design of a constitutional system that would address the aspirations of the majority of the people in the country. Thus, the ruling élite found themselves overtaken by world events such as the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the mounting support for the ANC in the Western World.

This was aggravated by the inability to find a way out of the conflict in SWA and Angola. The result was that the SADF was dragged further into a war of attrition that could not be won, while time and money that could have been used in the struggle against the ANC and PAC inside South Africa were wasted.⁷⁵

After 1980 the only positive result of the continued war on the western front from a South African government point of view, was that MK had to vacate their training bases in Angola and move to Tanzania and Uganda, in accordance with the final agreement between the warring parties.⁷⁶ This was to UNITA's advantage but it is debatable whether it had much influence on the war inside South Africa itself.

In a revolutionary war, the military dimensions can only achieve limited success. By 1989, the government was losing the war on all fronts, except for its military power in comparison with the Frontline States and the revolutionary movements. The end of the Cold War, however, created the circumstances for a new political strategy that would not have been possible had the government also lost the military dimension of the conflict.

⁷⁵ Official figures on the cost of the war over a time of 23 years is R2m per day on average. **Defence Diary**, 1985, p.19; while only the ammunition used during the 1987/88 book year entailed R328m - W Steenkamp, **South Africa's Border War** (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989), p. 158.

⁷⁶ Kwhela, p. 122.