SOUTH AFRICA — INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC ASPECTS

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It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.

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This is an attempt to assess the military and strategic position of South Africa in the light of the changing attitudes of outside powers to the Republic and to Southern Africa generally.

South Africa's perception of her own role is the obvious starting point. The last decade has seen the evolution of a 'total strategy'. The evidence for this lies not only in Prime-ministerial statements and those of the military, but in the practical steps which have been taken in the defence field.

In the first place, expenditure on the armed forces has increased from 470 million rands a year in 1973 to 1972 million rands in 1979/80, and in the second half of that period both the permanent cadre of the South African defence force, and its conscript base, now with an initial training period of 24 months have been expanded to the point where it would be possible to put not less than 200,000 white men under arms with 300-400 tanks and 1600 armoured cars.

At the same time, there has been a dramatic movement towards self-sufficiency in military procurement. The coordination of the arms industry through the national corporation, ARMSCOR, has reached the point where all but a relatively limited number of sophisticated weapon systems and parts can be produced locally, directly, or indirectly under licence from European companies. (It should, however, be realized that losses of the more sophisticated aircraft in any sustained operation would be difficult

to replace, at least in the short term.) It has been accompanied by relevant stockpiling of oil and other essentials. The capacity of the Republic to resist an invasion, unless such an assault was supported by a major power, remains unquestionable. Black Africa stands no prospect of success on its own, though the long land frontier does put a premium on radar surveillance and highly mobile artillery and other forces which have been the object of expensive shopping expeditions overseas. Whether or not South Africa has or intends to develop a nuclear weapon is in practical military, but not in political, terms largely irrelevant. Only a neutron tactical weapon would appear to have direct utility for the kind of war which seems to be envisaged.

The 'worst case' for which South Africa is clearly preparing, however, involves not only a conventional assault but a major insurrection at a number of points internally, perhaps provoked by guerilla infiltration and certainly exploited by it. Whether there is a complete defence against this kind of situation is in the light of the population configuration in doubt, and the total 'fortress' strategy linked to the concept of 'a constellation of states' is a response to this. The defence of Namibia also could, in the longer run, turn into an intolerable burden and a strain on the morale of white conscripts and is an important factor in the context in which such decisions have been taken. The decline of farming activity in some frontier areas already presents something of a problem as does a lack of volunteers for some rural commandos.

To use the full force and undoubted strength of the security forces to put down a major rising would be self-defeating and is probably recognized as such: the act of so doing would in practice destroy the South Africa

it was intended to defend. This perception strengthens the validity of the concept of a wider Southern African defence zone with the identifiable common enemy of international communism seen as posing a threat not only to white South Africa but to the black national and homeland leaders in the vicinity. According to Lieut-General Boshoff of the SADF "All the nations in South Africa must strive for solidarity and form a solid communal front against outside attack".

The drive for internal reforms in turn makes sense in such a context as well as in its own right, if the reforms are radical and quick enough. The raising and deployment of ethnic army battalions is an inevitable concomitant of such a strategy, but itself generates additional pressures, and will produce more, for black political participation, as well as creating problems of inter-racial and inter-ethnic balance.

The 1979 Defence White Paper referred to 'a more equitable division of the defence load amongst all population groups', which is scarcely practicable without a greater commitment and allegiance on the part of all races to the South African state and socio-political system. On the other hand, the emergence and example of black Zimbabwe does not necessarily, as somebelieve, militate against such a concept.

It can well be argued, however, that the Government's open proclamation and open pursuance on an overt basis of the concept of the 'constellation of states' was not best calculated to ensure its success; indeed, it was bound to arouse fears, justified or unjustified, of an imperialist, expansionist South Africa in the states to the north. In the terms of internal politics and the need to keep the white political power base

secure, there may, however, have been no alternative to such a tactic in that only a positive approach to the modification of separate development and the 'homelands policy' would make the necessary impact especially on elements of the Nationalist party in the provincial constituencies.

In the international context, in adopting a new kind of fortress strategy, the South African attitude to the West seems ambivalent. On the one hand, the emphasis of the policy and the search for support is being switched from Europe and America to the local region, where the drive, as it were, for mutual self-sufficiency will be stepped up. On the other hand, it is clearly expected that a successful consolidation of Southern African power would rally Western support against Soviet and other incursions in the area - which would, in any case, for geographical reasons, be militarily more vulnerable than a 'laager' based on the Republic alone, especially if Namibia were to be abandoned. Such a policy is congruent with an appreciation that it is the resources of South Africa and its neighbours, rather than its position astride the Cape route, which are of most interest to the world outside.

The Soviet Union's attitude is, on the other hand, in a sense, negative. The peculiar geographical, geological accident by which she has shared with the Republic a near-monopoly in four or five cases of the world's known resources of important minerals, for example, platinum and vanadium, means that she does not need access to them herself. Competition on the world's markets and the need for any future governments, whatever their colour, in Southern Africa to sell their products profitably raise interesting questions about Soviet attitudes and policy options. In what circumstances and by what methods could she - Russia - then deny the mineral resources of South Africa to the West, or to NATO particularly?

Probably only if there was prolonged chaos or perhaps if total economic sanctions were to be induced.

There are basically two reasons, apart from general global considerations, for the USSR's interest in Southern Africa and they are complementary to each other. In the first place, largely because of South Africa's internal structure and of the role of Western enterprise there is an opportunity to challenge Western interests and embarrass Western governments with a view to forcing a more accommodating policy on their part elsewhere. Secondly, while she has little direct economic interest in the area, political influence in the region and the stance which the Soviet Union adopts towards South Africa is seen as enhancing its appeal to the Third World, with consequent leverage in the UN and elsewhere . In spite of protests to the contrary, in practice the Soviet Union now accepts the importance of global linkages. A senior adviser on Africa has even been heard to argue that they did not become more involved in the later stages of the Zimbabwean war, because they were reluctant to embarrass President Carter, and so to hinder his efforts to achieve SALT II ratification. Even so, this does not mean that the Soviet Union will turn down opportunities to exploit a situation and extend its influence. Indeed, a period like the present, following Afghanistan and the obvious deterioration of East-West relations, may not only increase the rivalry for influence in the Third World, but at the same time make Western collaboration with South Africa more difficult openly to sustain. The mere fact that the Soviet Union has incurred the criticism of the Third World over Afghanistan may make the West the more anxious to bid for support from that quarter - at South Africa's expense.

There are many contradictory indicators at work at present affecting an assessment of the Soviet role. Zimbabwe was, at least initially, in their terms a set-back. At the same time internal domestic grievances, problems over future relations with Islamic peoples, the Afghan entanglement itself, and worries about the situation in Eastern Europe, especially Poland, prevail and this suggests, with some force, that the Soviet Union will not seek, for the time being, a major commitment elsewhere far from her borders. In this sense, indeed, it can be argued that even Angola was an uncharacteristic aberration undertaken because of what were perceived to be exceptionally favourable circumstances for Soviet activity. On the other hand, she will obviously maintain an opportunist interest bearing in mind that the longer it goes on, the less will be the operational utility of the Cuban or possible East German surrogate forces - a version of the law of diminishing returns. On the other hand, military actions and pressures by South Africa against Mozambique and Angola may well cause a fresh influx of arms and personnel from the Soviet bloc and even invite strong counter measures, thus compounding existing defence problems.

In terms of a mounting military threat to the Republic, these factors combined with the emergence of a more conservative government in America, as well as in Britain, may provide a breathing space. The question is how it should be used. In anything other than the short term it does not change the situation. A concern for economic and other self interest will predominate. Looked at from the standpoint of stark Western self-interest, which is perhaps the most realistic way, even for South Africa, to look at the situation, the Republic in its present form is not indispensable to the West. The importance of the Cape route, which was always to an extent debatable, or at least limited, has been put into

perspective by the realisation that access to oil supplies in Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere where they exist, is much more critical than is their transportation to their destination. Even though that, of course, has some importance, the updating of repair and other naval facilities in South Africa has not so far proved so over-ridingly attractive for NATO to seek to develop a real military interdependence with the Republic, in spite of arguments in some quarters that it should be pursued.

With regard to South Africa's own strategic minerals, the supposition that, short of prolonged chaos in the area, nothing is likely to emerge of a nature with which short term stockpiling could not cope is gaining strength. Substitution, alternative sources of supply, the capacity to improvise, as in World War II, and above all the likely brevity of any future global conflict are all factors in this. On the other hand, there is a clear determination on the part of the West to avoid, if it possibly can, the application of economic sanctions by the U.N. against South Africa. Indeed, many of the actions of supposedly hyper-critical politicians, such as David Owen and even Andrew Young, might well have been, - indeed should have been interpreted in this way. Hence the pressure towards a Namibian settlement probably involving guarantees for minority groups and an international approach to the problem of Walvis Bay.

Though the appearance might be that a Reagan administration in the U.S.A on top of a Conservative government in Britain will be more sympathetic to the government in South Africa, in the end they are both likely to want to get off the horns of a dilemma which could damage their immediate economic prospects.

In the end too, and this may seem to South Africans cynical, the particular form of government or social system which South Africa chooses or manages to evolve will be judged largely by the extent to which it engenders stability in the region, by its success in promoting acceptably the interests of all races. Chaos is certainly not what the West wants.

The interests of South Africa, the West and of the black states of Southern Central Africa coincide to the extent that none of them wants a violent confrontation in the area. Each of them needs the ability to trade and to dispose of resources, and encourage investment. While South Africa needs for the sake of its own stability and security a society which is seen as defensible and just, by the majority of its population, the West and the black states to the North need a system with which they can collaborate without being forced to make damaging choices. Black Southern Africa, in particular, just as much as the West, needs a situation in which its dependence on South Africa for communications, for technical assistance, and, at times, for food aid ceases to be a political embarrassment with the profoundly disturbing domestic as well as diplomatic repercussions which that engenders. The alleged incompatibility of a 'constellation of states' based on Pretoria with an association of black states based on Lusaka-Salisbury-Maputo might not in the end be inevitable. It is not a matter primarily of the Communist threat, but of the recognition and realization of black aspirations. The essential fact is that the security of the region now depends, in the first place, on South Africa's own ability to work out an internal political solution acceptable to the bulk of its population - something in which they can acquiesce and be seen to be acquiescing. The feeling that some magic, comprehensive, cure-all

formula exists, which the whole world will instantly applaud as acceptable, is a dangerous and counterproductive delusion. If some kind of just and workable compromise can be found then those who want to see neither the violent disintegration of South Africa nor its takeover by a determinedly hostile regime are likely gradually to come round and even the most vociferous critics might be rendered largly impotent. There is obviously a limit to the time available and that obviously cannot be defined, but internationally the next year or two may be relatively favourable because of the concentration of the superpowers on their involvements and enmeshment elsewhere in the world and of the general preoccupation with survival in the face of acute economic problems.