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Entering into the fray? The extremist threat in Cabo Delgado: strategic policy choices for South Africa and SADC

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The extremist threat in Cabo Delgado province in northern Mozambique has been on the rise since October 2017, with recent reports pointing to a 300% escalation between 2019 and 2020 in violent events that have so far claimed over 1495 lives and resulted in the internal displacement of over 250000 people.¹ The risk of regional spill-over and looming humanitarian crisis has gripped the attention of neighbouring countries and the regional body, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC).

In an initial step to map out strategic policy choices for national and regional decision makers in the context of the complex and rapidly evolving dynamics of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, the IGD convened a closed webinar on 20 August 2020 with a range of stakeholders and experts to gather insights from the political, security, humanitarian, civil society, foreign policy and corporate dimensions. This policy brief captures crucial aspects identified from the aforementioned proceedings that will be of relevance for policy makers and analysts keeping a close eye on the trajectory of violent extremism in northern Mozambique, and the region at large.

The debates on the origins and dynamics of the insurgency: local grievances, transnational drivers and the global-local interface

A pertinent question has emerged with regard to understanding the trajectory of the insurgency in northern Mozambique - *Is the insurgency a result of structural drivers and grievances linked to the local root causes, or is it largely an import of external actors driven by exogenous factors?* The emerging picture points to a complex, multi-layered threat that is comprised of local structural drivers intertwined with the internationalization fuelled by links to illicit trafficking networks and the hijacking of the insurgents' agenda by the Islamic State (IS) which has ambitions of a resurgence in Africa.

Mozambican experts in academia and local press emphasize the insurgency is most likely rooted in the historically unequal distribution of political and economic power among the predominant ethnic groups in the province, namely the Mwani and the Makonde. The ethnic divide between the Mwani who are mostly Muslim and the Makonde, who have largely embraced Christianity, is also reflective of the north-south divide in the history of the ruling party, the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). In spite of the cessation of armed conflict under the 1992 Rome General Peace Accords after a 15-year civil war, the political monopoly of FRELIMO and the incomplete process of disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration (DDR), and failure to implement decentralisation gave way to a resurgence of violence in 2013. A series of talks led to the signing of the third peace agreement between FRELIMO and Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) in 2019 that focused on a decentralisation agreement incorporating constitutional amendments and the relaunch of a second DDR process.² Within FRELIMO itself, the dominance of the Makonde ethnic group with President Filipe Nyusi (himself a Makonde) at the helm, has fostered rivalries among the ruling elite drawing on long-standing rifts between leaders from the north and south of Mozambique. Corruption and fraud in government has also led to growing disenchantment with the FRELIMO government who have been accused of serving only the interests of the 'Big Men' while neglecting needs of the broader citizenry.³

There has also been a pervasive lack of public trust in the capability of the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) who have been kept weak deliberately by the FRELIMO government as a cost-minimization strategy and as a consequence of the incomplete integration of combatants from both government and opposition forces.⁴ The economic decline, failure of government to deliver services, rising levels of poverty unemployment and widespread corruption in government have gradually given rise to an increasingly restive population, especially among the youth in marginalised provinces and districts outside the capital, Maputo.

The labelling of Cabo Delgado as 'Cabo Esquecido' that is, Forgotten Cape underscores the worsening socio-economic conditions, lack of access to basic services and high poverty and unemployment levels that have plagued Cabo Delgado and other parts of northern Mozambique that have been marginalised and excluded from the anticipated benefits of economic transformation.⁵ The irony of Cabo Delgado's misfortune is the province's vast mineral wealth and the discovery of massive reserves of natural gas that has attracted an influx of foreign investment and concessions, which has been projected to largely benefit the elite at the expense of the local population.

It is in this context of political and socio-economic grievances that the roots of the insurgency can be located, compounded by traction of an Islamist militant ideology among the youth exposed to radicalisation by transnational jihadism spreading across Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. When the insurgency launched its first wave of attacks in October 2017, the agenda and *modus operandi* of the group was mysterious leading to the locals labelling them 'Al-Shabaab' given their deviation from the Islam practiced in the region, but as the insurgent group shifted strategy from 'Islamic sectarianism to armed jihadism'⁶, the term *Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamâa* (ASWJ) gained traction which is what the insurgents preferred to refer to themselves.

The recent brandishing of the black ISIS flag in attacks perpetrated by ASWJ and the boost in tactical capacity has underpinned speculation of a resurgent ISIS presence in Cabo Delgado, supported by interlinkages to financial supply lines and illicit networks such as drug trafficking, illegal ruby mining, human trafficking and wildlife trafficking. However, some commentators have been wary of pushing an external origins perspective, arguing that the group lacks the political programming and coherence attributable to Islamic State's Central African Province (ISCAP) and international jihadist networks.

Instead, the narrative around the affiliation with the ISIS provinces in Africa should be seen as opportunism and 'hijacking' of the ASWJ agenda by an ambitious ISIS with an interest in exploiting the security vacuum in parts of eastern and southern Africa that have permeable borders, coupled with a widening gap in state-society relations.⁷ The insurgency should be situated in the multi-layered context of local grievances, conflicting ideologies, marginalisation, weak governance and exposure to radicalisation in a politically charged environment. Moreover, the murkiness of the situation on the ground underpinned by the curtailing of press freedoms, make it difficult to ascertain the veracity of ISIS links beyond mere circumstantial, and at times speculative, assumptions.

The Mozambican government's counterinsurgency strategy: 'short-term, knee-jerk and overly securitized'⁸

The response of the Mozambican government has mostly been a military one based on two contrasting interpretations. The first is the view that the violence is primarily local criminal activity rather than an insurgent threat. This is juxtaposed by the second narrative of labelling the conflict as a foreign-backed uprising that reinforces some of the media reports on the situation. As a result, the government has relied heavily on repressive measures such as arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate violence, and the closure of mosques which have had the effect of bolstering the insurgents' agenda and pushing the youth towards radicalisation. The government's heavy-handed approach including state-sanctioned violence against civilians and violation of human rights has only served to highlight the shortcomings of its strategy and the glaring lack of coordination and communication, amidst fractures in the Defence and Security Forces (FDS).⁹

The capture of the port at Mocimboa da Praia on 13 August 2020 by the insurgents suggests elevated tactical capacity and a significant boost in resources, while their ability to hold off government forces for five days and maintain their hold over the port is indicative of weak communication among government forces, poor strategic planning and lack of intelligence. Overall, the capture of the port at Mocimboa da Praia, which is a strategic maritime chokepoint and logistics hub for the LNG projects in Cabo Delgado, has dealt a severe blow to the government's counteroffensive approach and arguably tilted the battle in favour of emboldened insurgents for the time being.¹⁰ The takeover of the port at Mocimboa de Praia also raises the stakes for the multinational corporations engaged in the multi-million LNG projects in northern Mozambique, with concerns prompting security deals between the Mozambican government and energy firms such as Total as a way of bolstering security measures and ensuring a safe operating environment for project partners.¹¹

While trying to assuage the fears of international investors and neighbours, the Mozambican government has held onto the narrative that the insurgency is externally-driven and the result of criminality: out rightly evading the subject of social, political, economic and ethnic cleavages that have taken root in a population that views itself as marginalised and ignored by the state. The securitized response has also been reinforced by a preference for bilateral security arrangements *vis-à-vis* a regionalised approach under SADC. The Mozambican government has entered into bilateral security agreements with Tanzania, Angola, Egypt, Russia, India, while also procuring the services of private military contractors (PMCs) such as the Dyck Advisory Group and the Wagner Group.¹² Experts warn that an approach premised on only 'hard' security issues while ignoring the human security dimension, humanitarian situation and the socio-economic and socio-political roots of the grievances will prove to be

counter-productive in the long-term and broaden the scope for further radicalization of the local population.¹³

A regional-level solution to the insurgency threat? Prospects for SADC

Given the heightened risk of a regional spill over and destabilisation, with far-reaching humanitarian and security implications, SADC has expressed concerns about the insurgency in Cabo Delgado but has been slow to come up with a coordinated response to the crisis, following Mozambique's formal request for assistance from the regional body in May 2020.¹⁴ However, after hours of deliberations, the SADC Summit of the Troika of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security concluded its meeting with no consensus on the tactical and operational technicalities of any envisaged regional intervention. Unresolved questions include: which country or countries will take on the lead role?¹⁵ How will the operation be funded and to what extent will a regional counter-insurgency operation align with the Mozambican government's own operations? The security situation on the ground is further complicated by the involvement of private military contractors (PMCs) whose activities have been framed against the backdrop of foreign resource interests in the region and the provision of security for foreign interests rather than for the broader, national security of Mozambican population.

The SADC response should be informed by the Regional Counter Terrorism Strategy, premised on Priority C 'Peace and Security Cooperation' of the updated Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020-2030. Peace and Security Cooperation entails enhanced collective action in conflict management, collective defence, border security and migration and refugee management.¹⁶ A comprehensive approach should also draw heavily on multi-dimensional networks of scholars, experts, researchers, media, civil society and humanitarian workers who can provide in-depth analysis of the multi-layered root causes of the insurgency, structural drivers and pivotal lessons on sound practices from wide range of international experiences in countering violent extremism (CVE) and prevention of violent extremism (PVE) strategies. A crucial step in understanding the trajectory of the insurgency and the local-global interfaces with respect to radicalization, socio-political programming and interlinkages with the transnational criminal networks is the commissioning of a baseline study that understands SADC's vulnerability points to the insurgency threat, as well as the multi-level response to terrorism and violent extremism at the national, regional and global levels.¹⁷

At the operational level, an effective strategy has to be backed by intelligence and information sharing; sufficient human, technical and financial capacity; enhanced border security and surveillance and collaboration between government and crucial stakeholders such as civil society and media. Other success factors include updated assessments of the character and

dynamics of the threat and perpetrators, including the nodal points of supply lines and degree of interaction with external networks.

South Africa's African agenda: a pragmatic foreign policy?

The recent threats of retaliatory attacks by IS in South Africa, the 'reluctant' hegemon in SADC, has also elevated the Cabo Delgado insurgency to the forefront of national security agenda in South Africa. The insurgency threat has implications for South Africa including the potential surge of IDPs who might seek refuge in South Africa, as well as opportunities for South Africa's investment in the natural gas industry in Mozambique. As South Africa is set to take up the Chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security from Zimbabwe, there is scope for deepening bilateral and regional cooperation in peace and security.¹⁸

In spite of the time-sensitive nature of the security situation, South Africa should carefully weigh the long-term implications of a unilateral intervention. Pertinent questions have been raised about South Africa's capacity to commit blood and treasure to military intervention in Mozambique given the domestic realities of poorly-funded SANDF, lacking in capacity and political will in the climate of economic recession and a public opposed to military adventurism. It is worth recalling South Africa's humiliation in a 2013 unilateral intervention in Central African Republic that resulted in the deaths of 13 SANDF soldiers when the South African contingent were rendered sitting ducks against advancing rebels in the Battle of Bangui.¹⁹

South Africa's potential involvement is also complicated by the involvement of South-African based PMCs such as the Dyck Advisory Group and the Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection International (STTEP) who claim to have comparative advantage in the region over other PMCs such as the Wagner Group and Lancaster6 Group.²⁰ Additionally, a lack of clarity around the on-the-ground realities, the level of sophistication of insurgents and the extent of their capacity also tempers South Africa's perspective on the situation in Mozambique, which increasingly calls for coordinated intelligence sharing at the national and regional levels.

Three scenarios in the trajectory of the insurgency threat in Cabo Delgado

As a preliminary analysis²¹ based on a rudimentary understanding and discourses on the unfolding insurgency in Cabo Delgado, three scenarios can be mapped out in considering strategic policy choices:

Scenario One **Emboldened ASWJ**: This is the scenario that is most attuned to the present reality. The militants increase recruitment, acquire more resources, they recover and learn quickly from their previous offensives and continue to capitalise on the government's distorted

narrative and alienation from local population to win the hearts and minds of youthful recruits. The overly securitised response by the government is mostly counterproductive as civilians decrying state-sanctioned violence and human rights violations embrace the insurgents' agenda. The humanitarian situation deteriorates further and the growing number of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) fleeing violence puts pressure on Mozambican system with elevated risk of regional spill over.

Scenario Two Jihadist contagion effect with ISIS backing: In this worst-case scenario, ISCAP would be considered as the 'owner' of violence,²² building on an alliance of convenience between ISIS, illicit business and local jihadist armed groups to create an Islamist proto-state in Cabo Delgado to prevent newcomer elites and private interests from profiteering out of the Cabo Delgado LNG industry. The secessionist elements in Mozambique re-awaken historical political rifts and ethnic cleavages, leading to further destabilization and increased events of localised violence.

Scenario Three Ideal scenario: ASWJ overextends itself militarily, undermining its local support and the government manages to contain the threat within Cabo Delgado. The government embraces a whole-of-government approach aimed at addressing the root causes of the insurgency at community level, improves service delivery and access to employment opportunities for youth while engaging religious and community leaders in de-radicalisation programmes. The government boosts its intelligence-gathering and information sharing with regional security counterparts while improving border security and surveillance, and works with international law enforcement to disrupt and sever connection points of illicit trafficking networks and insurgents' supply lines.

All three scenarios must be weighed against the potential pitfalls of 'Iraqification' of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado linked to foreign interests who might utilise PMCs to create security corridors for the benefit of LNG projects, entrenching an iron-fist approach to counter-insurgency while side-lining the broader political goals at the heart of CVE and PVE approaches.²³

Policy recommendations

For South Africa

- i. Carefully weigh the ramifications of a unilateral vs. multilateral intervention when viewed through the prism of the African agenda pillar of its foreign policy and its positioning as a dominant actor in southern Africa.
- ii. Boost intelligence-sharing with regional counterparts while enhancing border security, surveillance and identifying vulnerability points and at-risk assets such as infrastructure or tourist hot-spots.

- iii. Commission a baseline study on the origins, dynamics and evolving character of the insurgency in northern Mozambique involving a multi-dimensional network of experts, analysts and researchers from academia, think tanks, civil society, media and NGOs.

For SADC

- i. Expedite the implementation of the Plan of Action of the 2015 Regional Counter Terrorism Strategy with support from the AU, the United Nations Counter Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UN-CTED), and the Terrorism Prevention Branch and Regional office for Southern Africa of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.
- ii. Facilitate the creation of an institutional platform for information-sharing and the coordination of intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance operations at the regional level
- iii. Align a prevention of violent extremism (PVE) strategy with a Countering violent extremism approach (CVE) strategy, aimed at addressing drivers of radicalisation.

For the Mozambican government

- i. Embrace a multidimensional approach that forthrightly recognises the root causes of the insurgency and merges a national security response with a human security-centric and developmental approach.
- ii. Facilitate urgent provision of humanitarian relief and essential services in the affected and at-risk communities in collaboration with local community and international humanitarian workers on the ground.
- iii. Identify and undercut the local financial supply lines and links to transnational illicit networks that fund the insurgency as a short-term measure.

Conclusion

The security situation Cabo Delgado cannot be viewed as being separate from the human development disparities that prevails in region. The political disconnect and socio-economic exclusion of the north from the country's overall body politic has been a contributing factor to the unfolding of the insurgency. Lessons from elsewhere in the continent relating to the 'development trap' aligned to the resource curse must remain a part of the discussions in diffusing the situation. If interventions are mainly seen as reactive then the continued insurgency will find deeper traction among the disaffected groups in the region, mainly the youth. The point of departure for the Mozambican government, SADC and South Africa will be to recognise that if left unattended the situation will morph into a regional military complex dilemma where there is no peace in poverty, inequality and underdevelopment.

Endnotes

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