

THE STRATEGIC CONTOURS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN NAMIBIA AND ANGOLA DURING THE 1970/1980s

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1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the United State's (US's) "War on Terror" in Iraq since 2003, South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and the Angolan Civil War during the 1970s and 1980s was the result of the geopolitical and geostrategic realities of the time. Stated differently, geopolitical and geostrategic realities made South African involvement in these conflicts not a matter of choice for the South African government. The apartheid government and its white Afrikaner constituency believed that it was a matter of survival. This reality can only be grasped if the global, regional and national geopolitical and geostrategic realities of the time are considered in relation to each other.

There are two specific challenges concerning "Border War" or "Bush War" literature at present. Firstly, most of the journalistic reports, (auto)biographies, histories and other books on the war reflect a particular tendency to romanticise (white) South Africa's role in the war, to provide ideological justification for South Africa's involvement, and to ignore the involvement of other actors, namely Angolans, Namibians, Cubans and the Soviets.² Moreover, the tendency is to focus primarily on the operational and tactical influences and dimensions of South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and the Angolan Civil War. There is some irony in this focus on operational matters since there is an increasing search for an understanding of what happened in the Border War.³ Such an understanding, though, is almost impossible with an exclusive focus on tactical and operational matters. A true understanding of South African military involvement in SWA/ Namibia and the Angolan Civil War requires a shift to and a consideration of the higher-order contexts of the war.

Secondly, the label "Border War" or "Bush War" makes a true analysis of South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and the Angolan Civil War somewhat problematic. The names "Border War" or "Bush War" group South African

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² I need to thank a colleague in the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University – Ian Liebenberg – for bringing these tendencies to my attention.

³ LJ Bothma, *Die buffel struikel 'n storie van 32 Bataljon en sy mense* (Bloemfontein, 2006), p. 5.

military involvement in SWA/Namibia and the Angolan Civil War together as if these were all one. There were many connections or links between the South African counterinsurgency war against SWAPO fought primarily inside SWA/Namibia, and South African military involvement in support of UNITA in the Angolan Civil War. True analysis, however, requires a clear distinction or line of demarcation between these two wars. South Africa's counterinsurgency war against SWAPO inside SWA/Namibia, at times spilled over into Angola. Very often, terminology such as *pre-emption* or *cross-border* and so-called *follow-up* or "hakkejag" (i.e., hot pursuit) operations is at the heart of the confusion about the Border War. Periodical and short time operations against SWAPO became mobile or conventional and were conducted inside Angola against SWAPO. In objective and by nature the operations against SWAPO, though, were primarily unconventional and fought inside SWA/Namibia; it was a true corporals' war.

South African military involvement in the Angolan Civil War, in contrast, was primarily in support of UNITA and reflected for the bigger part of it a conventional orientation. These operations had a strategic defensive purpose and were directed primarily against FAPLA, the armed wing of the Angolan MPLA government, their Cuban allied forces in Angola⁴ and Soviet and other East Block advisors. By the middle of the 1980s, South Africa's counter-insurgency war against SWAPO inside SWA/Namibia had been successful – to a large extent – and the focus shifted towards military support for UNITA in Angola. This support eventually developed into conventional operations inside Angola during the latter part of the 1980s. Historians (and retired generals) are still at loggerheads about the outcome of these operations with some claiming a resounding victory for the South African and UNITA forces.⁵

⁴ Reference to the Cuban forces in Angola as surrogate or proxy forces is considered by some as stereotyping by the Western media. The argument is that Cuba frequently intervened despite Soviet hesitation – with the escalation of the war in Angola in the late 1980s as the prime example. The issue is contentious with arguments, for example, rooted in debates about how fiercely the Cubans and Soviets often differed about battlefield tactics in Angola. There is also the highly debatable questions about Cuba as a surrogate for the Soviet Union and South Africa as a surrogate for the United States in these countries' efforts to widen their influence in Africa. This argument, however, will be very difficult to substantiate from a South African perspective.

⁵ The title of the book by the Chief of the SADF at the time of these operations in Angola, Gen. Jannie Geldenhuys, reflects his opinion of the outcome of these SADF operations. See J Geldenhuys, *Die wat wen 'n generaal se storie uit 'n era van vrede en oorlog* (Those who win: A general's story from an era of peace and war) (Pretoria, 1993). The chapter in Gen. Magnus Malan's autobiography that focuses on the South African military operations in 1985-1987 is titled "Die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag se grootste oorwinning op die slagveld" (The South African Defence Force's biggest victory on the battlefield). See MA de M Malan, *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (Pretoria, 2006), p. 267.

With MPLA still in control of Angola 20 years later, and SWAPO governing Namibia, others view the results a great success for the combined Cuban-Angolan forces.⁶

Colin S Gray identifies seven contexts that shape the nature of a specific war. These contexts, he argues, should not be treated separately since all of them always come into play “with everything influencing everything else simultaneously”.⁷ The first or *political context* is rooted in the Clausewitzian notion of the logic of strategy.⁸ It is what war is about and where war and peace come from.⁹ The *social-cultural context* is shaped by the values and beliefs of the belligerents that have evolved over time. The social-cultural context explains how states and societies approach strategic issues and how they think about the employment of their military forces.¹⁰ All wars are influenced by the *economic context*, whether as a motivation for war or as a potent constrain upon war. In the contemporary era, Gray argues, the economic context functions primarily as “a potential show stopper”, given that a major economic shortfall is strategically fatal.¹¹ The fourth or *technological context* is dynamic and provides the belligerents with a range of opportunities and limitations. An understanding of the *military-strategic context* – the Clausewitzian grammar of war¹² – is rooted in an understanding of the difference between war and warfare, and the interaction between the tactical, operational and strategic dimensions of war. The military-strategic context is also reflected between the age-old interplay between the offensive and the defensive. The *geographical context* of war is shaped by the geographical location of states, together with the identity and characteristics of their neighbours. The geographical dimension of war is also reflected in the sea, land and air as the physical environments of conflict and war. Finally, the *historical context* of war gives recognition to the fact that people in a war are moulded by the times in which they live, the society of which they are a part and the ideas which at that specific time are fashionable and sometimes authoritative.¹³

⁶ V Shubin, "Red star over Southern African skies: Soviet military and liberation struggle", paper presented at the XXXIIIth International Congress of the Society of Military History in Cape Town, 13 August 2007. Prof. Vladimir Shubin is a member of the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. During the 1970s and 1980s, Shubin was deeply involved in the orchestration of Soviet support to the liberation struggles in southern Africa. In addition, see the recent publication of J Sithole, "An epic tale of selfless sacrifices: Cuba's internationalism in Africa, 1962-1991", paper commissioned by the Freedom Park Trust (The Freedom Park Trust, 2007), pp. 36-49.

⁷ CS Gray, *War, peace and international relations An introduction to strategic history* (London, 2007), p. 10.

⁸ C Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by M Howard and P Paret (New Jersey, 1976), p. 605.

⁹ Gray, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² Clausewitz, p. 605.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

This article represents an effort to analyse South African involvement in the Namibian Border War and Angolan Civil War from this contextual perspective. It is of course impossible to consider the influence of each of these contexts in its totality in a short article like this. The emphasis is therefore on the dynamics that were created by the interplay between these contexts and the way “everything influences everything else simultaneously”. From a historical perspective, the article relies strongly on the work of the two acclaimed international scholars, Paul Moorcraft and Robert Jaster. The theoretical framework for the analysis is provided by Colin S Gray in his work on strategic history.

2. THE COLD WAR AS THE GLOBAL GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT OF THE NAMIBIAN AND ANGOLA CONFLICTS

No war fought between the beginning of the 1950s and the end of the 1980s can be explained without due recognition to the strategic history of the Cold War – irrespective of how minor or insignificant the wars in SWA/Namibia and Angola might have been. The fact that this time frame corresponds with the period of decolonisation in Africa and the rise and fall of apartheid as a government policy in South Africa may be purely incidental, but is of major significance in understanding the historical context of South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and the Angolan Civil War. The international stage of these conflicts was shaped by the Cold War.

The higher-order context of the Cold War infused South African involvement in the SWA/Namibian and Angolan conflicts with an ideological dimension. Apartheid South Africa saw itself as the defender of free market western Christian-Judean democratic values in a region that was increasingly dominated by Pan-African values and views interwoven with that of the Kremlin. The decolonisation of Africa presented the former Soviet Union with many opportunities for expanding its influence. Moorcraft noted that “the Soviet Union was in the business of franchising revolutions” and sought “influence rather than real estate”.¹⁴ This influence was informed by socio economic perceptions and communism as a form of government. In the aftermath of western colonisation, nobody could blame the Soviet Union of imperialism in Africa and socialism presented an alternative model to new independent African states.¹⁵ Unlike the western democracies, though, the Soviet government did not have to concern itself with ethical international behaviour and being accountable to a liberal public opinion at home.

Africa, like many other Third World regions during the Cold War, was therefore the playing field of the struggle between the free market-driven democratic West and

¹⁴ PL Moorcraft, *African nemesis War and revolution in Southern Africa, 1945-2010* (London, 1990), p. 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the socialist-driven communist countries in the East. From a military context the so-called proxy wars in Africa became a dumping and testing ground for large quantities of weaponry from the superpowers leading these power blocks. In the case of Angola, the introduction of Cuban proxy forces, supported (and financed?) by the Soviet Union, ensured the internationalisation of the Civil War. The war became much more than a regional conflict. Internationalising the Angolan Civil War meant – amongst other things – that the solution to that war and the SWA/Namibian conflict became a global issue requiring the involvement of, among others, the superpowers, the UN and other non-regional entities. From a South African perspective, internationalisation of these conflicts necessitated, for example, close cooperation between its own intelligence agencies and that of its reluctant allies in the West. In addition, the maintenance of trade relations between South Africa and the West became critical for the survival of apartheid South Africa.

From a geopolitical perspective, South Africa aligned itself with the West by emphasising the role that it could play in helping the West to contain communism in southern Africa. After the US experience in Vietnam, the British experience in a number of decolonising wars and the French experience in Indo-China and Algeria, a militarily strong South Africa was a good partner in southern Africa. Such a partner could have been of assistance in containing the spread of communism in a region that was of no real interest to the West. It is therefore interesting to note for how long the governments of western countries, such as the United States and Britain, resisted international pressure for sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. South Africa, from its side, emphasised the importance of its strategic minerals to the West and the need to defend the Cape sea route as a possible choke point if war had to break out between the East and the West. For the South African government this became a fine balancing act between an emphasis on the importance of its strategic minerals and the Cape sea route on the one hand, and the need to not infuriate those pleading for sanctions and supplying oil to South Africa on the other.

Whilst the Soviet Union and its allies did not shy away from actively pursuing their own interests in Africa at the time of the outbreak of the Angolan Civil War, this was not the case with the United States. At the time of the *coup d'état* in Portugal and the outbreak of the Angolan Civil War, the United States military was in the final stages of leaving the battlefields of Vietnam. Vietnam was a military shock to the mighty US military bureaucracy. At the same time, the Watergate scandal shook the United States politically, whilst the 1973 oil crisis had a ripple effect on the economies of the US and the rest of the western world. Given these realities, the mid-1970s was a time of

military, political and economic consolidation for the United States to such an extent that there were isolationist tendencies in the US government.¹⁶

As a consequence, the crisis in Angola did not feature very strongly on the political or economic agendas in Washington. Of course, politically and otherwise the United States was concerned about growing Soviet influence in southern Africa. Stopping this kind of perceived Soviet expansionism was after all precisely what the US doctrine of containment was all about. However, the US did not have direct security and other interests that were threatened in southern Africa in general and in SWA/Namibia and Angola in particular.¹⁷ Subtle support for South African efforts – who viewed its vital security and other interests threatened by growing Soviet influence in southern Africa – was a direct reflection of the US approach to southern Africa at the time. Such an approach allowed the US the luxury of dealing with the problem of Soviet expansionism without the danger of being sucked into a peripheral conflict as was the case in Vietnam. This placed the South African government in a very unique position where it had almost no other choice but to become involved in Angola and SWA/Namibia. Yet, at the same time, South Africa was to a large extent politically isolated and could not count on substantial military and/or other forms of support from the US or other western powers.

3. THE FRONTLINE STATES: DEFINING THE REGIONAL PARAMETERS

The regional context within which the South West African/Namibian conflict and Angolan Civil War took place was shaped predominantly by the existence of apartheid South Africa as the regional economic power and a loose conglomerate of black states in southern Africa – the so-called Frontline States – that vigorously opposed the white regime in South Africa. Regional pressure against South Africa was rooted in the assumption that neither the black neighbouring states nor the resistance movements inside South Africa were strong enough to overwhelm the South African security state.

The SWA/Namibian conflict and the Angolan Civil War were the last signs of the wave of decolonisation that spread over most of Africa since the early 1960s. The struggle for independence left most of Africa's leaders with an ingrained attitude of anti-colonialism and anti-(white)racism. With a host of problems confronting most of these newly independent states and their leaders in the period immediately after independence, the continued struggle against white minority rule in southern Africa

¹⁶ P Beinart, "The isolation pendulum: Expect a cyclical U.S. retreat from world affairs after the Iraq War", *The Washington Post*, 22 January 2006, p. B07. Available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/20/AR2006012001654.html>> (18 January 2008).

¹⁷ M Clough, *Free at last? US policy toward Africa and the end of the Cold War* (Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1992), p. 3.

served two particular purposes. Firstly, it took the focus away from the domestic challenges that confronted these new black governments within their own states. Secondly, it served as a unifying cause amongst the wide diversity of black states within the southern African region. Consequently, the struggle against the white minority regimes in Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and, after that, South Africa was raised almost to the level of an ideology. Jaster noted that, in part, the emphasis on the ending of apartheid in South Africa was also rooted in a black fear for reactionary white attitudes amongst white minority groups within their own countries.¹⁸

The idea of "Frontline States" first came to the fore in 1976 when Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia were grouped together by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in an effort to bring unity in their support of the liberation struggle in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.¹⁹ After independence, Zimbabwe became an important member and leader of the Frontline States. In their search for security in southern Africa, the Frontline States focused predominantly on the settlement of the SWA/Namibian conflict, not the Angolan Civil War. The SWA/Namibian conflict provided these states with a legitimate cause to rally Western and international economic support for their security.

The potential or real impact of destabilisation or the threat thereof from South Africa, diversity and economic weakness impaired the capacity of the Frontline States to act in crises. The capacity problem was linked to domestic and foreign political challenges. In the domestic realm, a number of Frontline States had to contend with serious political dissidence, while their foreign policies were predominantly informed by the tension with their powerful white neighbour in the south.²⁰ From a South African perspective, the end of the white minority regime in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and the birth of the new state of Zimbabwe had two particular implications: it shifted the regional political power balance away from the white minority governments in southern Africa towards the Frontline States and it brought the SWA/Namibian conflict to the fore as the most important military security challenge in the region. The geographical area available as a sanctuary to insurgents fighting the South African forces in SWA/Namibia, Angola and other parts of southern Africa was exponentially broadened.

Efforts by the Frontline States to weaken and undermine the white minority rule in South Africa were to a large extent undermined by a tension between the interests of the Frontline States and the higher-order geostrategic security concerns of the western powers in general. The inclination of the majority of the Frontline States to accommodate the interests and influence of the Soviet Union in southern

¹⁸ RS Jaster, "A regional security role for Africa's Frontline States: Experience and prospects" in *Adelphi Paper 180* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1983), p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Africa contributed to a large extent to reluctance on the part of most western powers to cut off their military and economic ties with South Africa.

Mostly on account of geographical reasons, Angola, as SWA/Namibia's northern neighbour, bore the brunt of the support by the Frontline States to SWAPO in their fight against the South African military in SWA/Namibia. The southern part of Angola, where a great deal of the fighting between the South African military and SWAPO took place, became economically unproductive and almost uninhabited. The situation was exacerbated by the successes of the South African-supported Angola rebel movement, UNITA, who, for the most part, dominated southeastern Angola. Although the other Frontline States provided diplomatic and psychological support to SWAPO, almost no military and economic support for SWAPO was forthcoming from these states.

This should be seen against the fact that, firstly, none of the Frontline States were directly threatened or affected by South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia. Secondly, there was a certain amount of war fatigue after their relative high profile support for the liberation movements in the Rhodesian War. Thirdly, Frontline States such as Mozambique, had their own domestic challenges to cope with at the time. Fourthly, the military performance of the SWAPO forces against South Africa was also not of such a nature as to encourage the Frontline States to support them militarily. In fact, at no time during the South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia did SWAPO succeed in creating a military situation that gave the slightest idea of military success or a military strategic situation that was of grave concern to South African strategists. Fifthly, their security-minded neighbour, South Africa, never hesitated to execute its strategy of purposive destabilisation. South Africa at various occasions executed operations or attacks into different Frontline States such as Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Lesotho. In the case of Mozambique, South Africa created a domestic challenge with its support – taken over from the Rhodesians – of RENAMO. Lastly, the interests of most Frontline States were not threatened by South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola. There was nothing to gain from greater involvement by the Frontline States in the SWA/Namibian conflict or the Angolan Civil War. As a regional power, South Africa had the military and economic capability to act directly against any of the Frontline States. Therefore, for most Frontline States there was more to lose than to gain from support to SWAPO in the SWA/Namibian conflict and the MPLA government forces in Angola.

4. SOUTH AFRICA IN THE GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT OF THE 1970/1980s

South Africa has always been the central economic, military and political power in southern Africa. From an economic perspective, South Africa dwarfed the combined economies of all the Frontline States. South Africa's economic role in southern Africa was based on the inherent tension between the apartheid government and the Frontline States. South Africa was therefore not in a position to capitalise on its economic strength to the benefit of its own economy. Jaster noted that the condemnation of South Africa by most African states denied South Africa the economic regional leadership role it was looking for.²¹

For South Africa, the counter-insurgency war in SWA/Namibia had its political and legal roots in the continuation of the former League of Nations' mandate over the former South-West Africa that was given to South Africa in the aftermath of World War I. From a geostrategic perspective SWA/Namibia, though, was an important buffer state for the apartheid government to keep both the *swart gevaar* (black threat) and the *rooi gevaar* (red threat i.e., communist threat) as far away from South Africa's borders as possible. In addition, SWA/Namibia had longstanding cultural, economic and political ties with the traditional white Afrikaans constituency of the apartheid government. Losing SWA/Namibia would have been a political and psychological setback for the apartheid government and its white constituency, who often referred to SWA/Namibia as South Africa's fifth province.

South Africa's geostrategic outlook was shaped by what was perceived as a multilevelled, multidimensional and well-coordinated threat orchestrated by the former Soviet Union. The 1997 White Paper on Defence noted *inter alia*, "African states do not possess the ability to successfully initiate aggression against the RSA, but some African countries are supported by a super power [*sic*] with the ability to simultaneously wage integrated revolutionary and conventional warfare."²² Was South Africa that important to the grand design of the Soviet Union in general and for Africa in particular? Nobody can deny that the ANC had a socialist agenda during the 1970s/80s and that they received their primary military support for the armed struggle against the apartheid regime from the former Soviet Union.²³ Of course, financial support for

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²² Republic of South Africa, Department of Defence, *White Paper on Defence 1977* (Cape Town, 29 March 1977), p. 8.

²³ The article by O'Brien provides an excellent overview of the most salient features of the Revolutionary War Strategy of the ANC and the South African Communist Party between 1961 and 1990. The central argument of the article is that the ANC and its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, for all intents and purposes – and despite all claims to the contrary – failed to overthrow the South African state by force. See KA O'Brien, "A blunted spear: The failure of the African National Congress/South African Communist Party revolutionary war strategy 1961-1990", *Small wars and insurgencies* 14(2), Summer 2003, pp. 27-70.

the ANC and SWAPO came mostly from European sources and western churches. However, whether a Soviet-inspired threat was real or not is not important.²⁴

What is important, though, is that the white society in South Africa in general and the apartheid government in particular perceived the threat of communism in southern Africa as real. This threat perspective was driven home by the decolonisation process and in particular the failure of the counter-insurgency wars in the white corridor states of Angola, Rhodesia and Mozambique. The coming to power of regimes in these states with a strong orientation towards the Soviet Union and Communist China isolated apartheid South Africa from a geostrategic perspective. Apartheid South Africa's participation in the conflicts in Angola and SWA/Namibia can only be grasped to its full potential if it is seen from this threat perspective or, rather, threat paranoia. Viewed from this geostrategic perspective, it could be argued that the South African government at the time saw no other choice but to become militarily involved in SWA/Namibia and Angola.

What is even more important than the threat perspective of the South African government of the time is the political-strategic response that the government designed to deal with this threat. The grand design of this political-strategic response was rooted, firstly, in the successes of the policy of apartheid and was based, secondly, on the strategic theoretical writings of the French General André Beaufre.

The successes of apartheid made possible South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola. Apartheid was a psychological success for the ideologically isolated white people of South Africa. As Paul Moorcraft noted, "Afrikaners *need* to be in a laager. When things are going smoothly, they provoked aggression in order to make one."²⁵ Apartheid did succeed in bringing the white people of South Africa psychologically together in one laager. Apartheid filled them with fear for the *swart* and *rooi gevaar* from Africa and elsewhere. This was augmented by the sense of isolation and the reality that white South Africans were the underdogs of the world who were not really welcome in any of the traditional "white" western states. Unlike their English-speaking counterparts in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, who were accepted in places like South Africa, Britain and Australia, white South Africans felt that they had "nowhere to run to". Of course, it is easy for a government to motivate a society with such a strong sense of isolation to avail themselves and their country's resources for a war in SWA/Namibia and Angola to "protect" themselves – even if it only serve the purpose of providing a false sense

²⁴ Shubin quoted figures that were provided by the Moscow Institute of Military History indicating that "up to 1 January 1991, 10 985 Soviet military advisors and specialists visited Angola, including 107 generals and admirals, 7 211 officers, 1 083 warrant-officers and midshipmen, 2 116 sergeants, petty officers and privates and 468 civilian employees of the Soviet Army and Navy". He also noted that until 1 January 1995, 6 985 Angolans were trained in the Soviet/ Russian military educational institutions and that between 1976 and 1989 military supplies of 3,7 billion roubles were supplied to Angola. See V Shubin, pp. 5-6.

²⁵ Moorcraft, p. 4.

of security. The syndrome of “we are alone” was worsened by South Africa being forced out of the British Commonwealth and the UN resolutions on apartheid and the illegal presence in SWA/Namibia.

Moorcraft notes that apartheid worked economically for the white people of South Africa – up to a point. During the 1960s, the gold price was good and oil cheap. After 1973, the economy slackened off, growth declined, and youth revolt started. By the middle to late 1980s, economic isolation and sanctions, internal disorder and the state of emergency, together with the economic burden of the war in SWA/Namibia and Angola became almost too much for the white South African taxpayer, to the extent that the South African government was on the brink of bankruptcy. Between 1986 and 1988, South Africa lost R18 billion in private capital because of disinvestment.²⁶ However, towards the late 1980s it was primarily the non-whites who were affected by economic stagnation in South Africa. In general, the white people of South Africa were economically much better off because of the policy of apartheid than their black counterparts.

The sense of fear and isolation among the white South African population, together with the economic growth of the country during the 1960s and 1970s, created conditions for the apartheid government to build up a strong and powerful defence force. Apartheid South Africa was militarily a success.²⁷ The sense of isolation within the country and the “can do” mentality of the Afrikaners as a frontier society greatly contributed to the development of a strong military in South Africa. Through a big irony, the UN embargoes on defence sales to apartheid South Africa also contributed to the development of a very unique defence establishment. South Africa, during the 1970s and 1980s, not only succeeded in becoming self-sufficient in defence equipment, it also developed into a major actor in the highly competitive international weapons trade industry – to the extent that the UN also had to place an embargo on the procurement of weaponry from South Africa.²⁸ It should be noted that South African “self-sufficiency” in weapons was supported by a number of strategic partnerships of which the details are still not fully known. Israel, a country that faced a security situation very similar to that of South Africa at the time, featured strongly in this regard. There were links with Taiwan and military regimes such as Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and at some stage even Brazil. In North Africa, links were built up with Morocco.

The organisational culture of the South African Defence Force (SADF) was an interesting and successful blend of British military regimentalism and Boer frontierism. By the late 1980s, the SADF was the largest, most up-to-date, and

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁸ See the discussion in R Dale, “A comparative reconsideration of the Namibian Bush War, 1966-1989” in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18(2), June 2007, p. 206.

most organisationally sophisticated military force in southern Africa.²⁹ The military featured very prominently in sustaining the apartheid system and white South Africa's sense of security. The SADF was professional and operationally effective by international standards. However, over time it became politically contaminated. The SADF employed non-whites in various roles. Its leaders in general, however, were unwilling to mobilise the non-white South African majority to fight the country's regional and internal wars.

The idea of part-time soldiering (the nation-in-arms concept), characteristic of most frontier societies in the world, was an important part of the history of the white (Afrikaner) population and this determined to a large extent the composition of the SADF. Hence, structurally the SADF was organised around part-time, white regimentalised citizen soldiers. Huge numbers of university graduates were conscripted each year, while senior academics, industrialists and business people served in the reserve force regiments and commandoes – mostly in a leadership capacity. This interaction with the broader well-educated part of the South African society positively influenced the organisational climate of the SADF in general.³⁰ However, it also meant that the SADF was influenced by the general attitudes in society and, in particular, the fighting fatigue and growing resistance to the securocratisation that was increasingly visible in white South Africa towards the late 1980s. By the late 1980s, there was increasing pressure on the apartheid South African government to contain its defence spending and to deal with the growing domestic resistance from antigovernmental groupings.

The French General, André Beaufre, is normally regarded as the father of the notion of "Total Strategy" that shaped South Africa's involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola.³¹ The idea of a "Total Strategy" eventually became synonymous with the South African security strategy of the time.³² The total strategy that the South African security establishment developed was a multicomponent strategy based upon the experiences of other countries in counterrevolutionary warfare and low-intensity conflict, and refined and reinforced with unique techniques for the South African context. Most of these unique approaches were well-tested in the Rhodesian (Zimbabwean) War.³³ As a theorist, Beaufre featured prominently in the more intellectual of the SADF training courses. Virtually every course at the South African Defence College at the time was based on one or other of Beaufre's strategic works. On a more operational level, Beaufre's writings were complemented by the counter-insurgency theories of the

²⁹ J Winkates, "The transformation of the South African National Defence Force: A good beginning" in *Armed Forces & Society* 26(3), Spring 2000, p. 452.

³⁰ Anon, "A people's army" in *Armed Forces* 2(12), December 1977, p. 20.

³¹ See A Beaufre, *Introduction to strategy* (London, 1965), pp. 30-31.

³² A Seegers, *The military and the making of South Africa* (London, 1996), pp. 133 and 141.

³³ F Toase, "The South African Army: The campaign in South West Africa/Namibia since 1966" in IFW Beckett and J Pimlott, *Armed forces & modern counter-insurgency* (London, 1985), p. 199.

American army Colonel, John J McCuen.³⁴ The views of both Beaufre and McCuen are instrumental in explaining and understanding South African involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola in the 1970s and 1980s and understanding the South African approach to counterinsurgency in SWA/Namibia in particular.

South Africa's strategic philosophy was clearly outlined in the 1977 White Paper on Defence. The White Paper defined a total strategy as "the comprehensive plan to utilize all the means available to a state according to an integrated pattern in order to achieve the national aims within the framework of the specific policies". Consequently, the White Paper claimed that the "resolution of conflict in the times in which we live demands interdependent and co-ordinated action in all fields – military, psychological, economic, political, sociological, technological, diplomatic, ideological, cultural, etc".³⁵ This kind of strategy, it was argued, is the combined responsibility of all government departments, the entire population, the nation, and every population group. As a result, defence was not seen as a matter for the Defence Force alone. Instead, the Department of Defence was regarded merely "as an executive body responsible for the achievement of certain national security goals".³⁶

Alden noted that South African strategists at the time implemented the "external manoeuvre" of the total strategy using all the means at their disposal in three broad theatres: SWA/Namibia and Angola, southern Africa, and the international environment.³⁷ The SWA/Namibian and Angolan theatre constituted to a large extent the military dimension of the "external manoeuvre". The military focus of this particular theatre was informed, firstly, by the presence of a large Cuban troop contingent, supplemented by Soviet and East European advisers in Angola, secondly, by Angola serving as a sanctuary for SWAPO in its fight for SWA/Namibian independence and, thirdly, by South African military and other support for UNITA in the Angolan Civil War.

As the South African Minister of Defence, PW Botha, was the chief architect of the total strategy doctrine that was developed to counter the "total onslaught". With Botha's rise to the apex of power in South Africa in the late 1980s, he, together with Gen. Magnus Malan whom he appointed the Minister of Defence in his Cabinet – the so-called "securocrats" – also became primarily responsible for the implementation of the total strategy doctrine. There was, however, an irony in Botha's implementation of the total strategy. In particular, the theory of a total strategy emphasised the need to shift the focus from military actions to political, economic and other programmes in the attainment of security. However, with Botha's

³⁴ A Peled, *A question of loyalty Military manpower policy in multiethnic states* (Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 40. Also see JJ McCuen, *The art of counter-revolutionary war* (Harrisburg, PA, 1966).

³⁵ *White Paper on Defence 1977*, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ C Alden, *Apartheid's last stand The rise and fall of the South African security state* (London, 1998), p. 97.

background in the defence environment, the military was due to play a bigger role in the security of South Africa. The country indeed began to experience a growing militarisation and securocratisation of society in the late 1970s and early 1980s in general.³⁸ Instead of balancing military actions with non-military programmes, military actions became more prominent. Nowhere was this more clearly illustrated than in the representation and role of the State Security Council that was dominated by the military and members from the other security forces. The increasing emphasis on military actions instead of non-military programmes was augmented by Botha's involvement as Minister of Defence in the SWA/Namibian conflict. The result was a greater emphasis on the (military) situation in SWA/Namibia and Angola and the increasing militarisation of that conflict.³⁹

The so-called Twelve-point Plan, announced by PW Botha on 15 August 1979, became an important instrument to operationalise the total strategy. The Twelve-point Plan in particular came to shape South Africa's approach towards the Frontline States in general and its military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola specifically. Chris Alden noted that the Twelve-point Plan was remarkably vague and it focused primarily on the domestic environment. The plan reflected a growing uneasiness with the way in which the West kept South Africa at arm's length and contained a subtle warning to states within and outside southern Africa that the Botha Government would use any means possible to counter interference in its domestic affairs.⁴⁰ South Africa's nuclear and military capability provided substance to this threat. The points from the Twelve-point Plan that outlined the South African Government's foreign policy stance and which directly influenced South Africa's strategic approach towards the SWA/Namibian problem and the Angolan Civil War during the 1980s, were the following:

- “8. The pursuit of a peaceful constellation of southern African states with respect for each other's cultures, traditions and ideals.
9. South Africa's firm determination to defend itself against interference from outside in every possible way.
10. As far as possible, a policy of neutrality in the conflicts between large superpowers and preference for South African interests.
11. Maintenance of effective decision-making by the State which rests on a strong Defence Force to guarantee orderly Government as well as efficient, clean administration.”⁴¹

These were the higher-order ideas and approaches that shaped South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and the Angolan Civil War. It is, however, important to consider the military nature of South African involvement in greater detail.

³⁸ See KW Grundy, *The militarization of South African politics* (Oxford, 1988) and PH Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians Civil-military relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1984).

³⁹ R Jaster, "South Africa and its neighbours: The dynamics of regional conflict" in *Adelphi Paper 209* (International Institute for Strategic Studies (London, 1986), p. 45.

⁴⁰ Alden, pp. 81-83.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

5. THE MILITARY-STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF SOUTH AFRICAN INVOLVEMENT IN SWA/NAMIBIA AND ANGOLA

South Africa first turned to the police to deal with the SWAPO insurgency in SWA/Namibia in the 1960s. Utilising the police, South Africa was able to treat the SWAPO military presence in SWA/Namibia as a criminal activity and the country could thus avoid acknowledging the legitimacy of SWAPO's armed struggle. Like all counterinsurgencies, the war of words was an important part of the struggle and phrases such as "guerrilla" and "freedom fighter" were loaded with political content.⁴² Police actions centred on preventing SWAPO guerrillas from entering SWA/Namibia from Northern Rhodesia/Zambia via the Caprivi – Angola was still under Portuguese control – and on monitoring the domestic political activities of SWAPO.⁴³ When the Army took over responsibility from the Police in June 1974, it was an implicit recognition by the South African government that they faced a legitimate SWAPO insurgency that was not restricted to criminality.

From a geographical perspective, SWA/Namibia is a huge arid land, which made it very difficult for guerrillas to operate effectively outside the more thickly wooded Ovamboland. The South African military approach was based on the domination of the area through patrolling and pre-emption. Many South African soldiers were trained as normal infantry for the aggressive patrolling of the northern SWA/Namibia and southern Angola border areas. The Namibian War was often described as a corporal's war, reflecting the need of section to platoon size forces to dominate a huge area through active patrolling. SWAPO operators who succeeded in infiltrating SWA/Namibia were hunted in seek-and-destroy type of operations that very often developed into hot pursuit operations into Angola.

The South Africans tried to establish a corridor just north of the Namibia/Angola border in which special operations forces conducted pseudo-type of operations against SWAPO. These operations were conducted, for the bigger part, by the former Angolan and Portuguese-speaking soldiers of 32 Battalion serving in the South African Army using foreign (Soviet) equipment and uniforms.⁴⁴ Mobile, semiconventional, pre-emption operations into Angola during the late 1970s and early 1980s by South African forces aimed at disrupting the logistical and other capabilities of SWAPO to operate inside SWA/Namibia. These operations were an important instrument to keep SWAPO psychologically off balance. It was at the same time an illustration to the people in South Africa that the threat was real and that the military was making progress in the war.

⁴² Dale, p. 199.

⁴³ Toase, p. 202.

⁴⁴ The discussion in the book by Bothma on 32 Battalion provides an excellent exposition of the kind of operations conducted in this regard. See Bothma.

Due to the technological nature of air power and the unconventional nature of African wars, air power is normally not a decisive instrument of power in African wars. In the SWA/Namibian conflict, South African air power was important for strategic and tactical military transport purposes. Strategic air transport helped to sustain South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia over relatively long lines of communication from Pretoria to the northern part of SWA/Namibia. Tactical air transport, specifically that provided by helicopters, was essential for the movement of the relative small numbers of infantry that constituted the backbone of South Africa's counterinsurgency effort in SWA/Namibia. The "fire-force" concept, developed by the Rhodesian Forces and honed by the South Africans, in particular, required the full integration of highly trained specialised infantry and tactical air transport. This was augmented by the close air support provided by Alouette "gunship" helicopters. SWAPO did not have any air power and was not in a position to challenge the South African Air Force for air superiority. Consequently, with the exception of an anti-air capability that confronted South Africa air power during cross-border operations, South Africa's air superiority was never seriously challenged in the SWA/Namibian conflict.

From a South African perspective, the maritime dimension of the conflict was restricted to the involvement of the South African Navy (SAN) in limited landward special force operations making use of the submarine capability of the SAN. This form of operations was exposed with the Wynand du Toit incident when elements of the South African Special Forces were captured and killed in the Cabinda enclave during a sabotage mission. The SAN was also responsible for the tracking of maritime traffic around the Cape of Good Hope and in particular the monitoring of Russian ships sustaining the war effort in Angola.⁴⁵ The marines conducted riverine patrols on the SWA/Namibia-Angola border and were more of an extension of South African ground than its maritime forces. In general, however, the South African involvement in the SWA/Namibian and Angolan conflicts was rooted predominantly in the use of land power.

From a military strategic perspective, it is important to understand that the South African military had an offensive posture in fighting the counter-insurgency war in SWA/Namibia against SWAPO. This manifested as a counter-insurgency campaign that has been described, quite romantically, as "one of the most successful counterinsurgency campaigns in history" undertaken by a military force.⁴⁶ This offensive posture was rooted in the typical military and non-military actions that characterise counterinsurgency. Militarily the South Africans never hesitated to go on the offensive through hot pursuit (*hakkejag*) and pre-emption operations, while

⁴⁵ Helmoed Römer Heitman, *South African war machine* (Johannesburg, 1985), pp. 86-89.

⁴⁶ As quoted in H Giliomee and B Mbenga, *New History of South Africa* (Cape Town, 2007), p. 370.

on the political level the South African government accepted (or pretended to accept) the principle of self-determination and democratic governance for SWA/Namibia. Of course, the South African government linked the idea for self-determination for SWA/Namibia to the withdrawal of Cuban forces, as well as Soviet and other East Block military advisers from Angola. As a principle of counter-insurgency warfare, however, the idea of political self-determination served as an overarching vision for all the military and non-military actions of the counter-insurgency campaign in SWA/Namibia. The non-military actions included the provision of services such as education, health care, and water. The SADF was relatively successful in gaining the trust of the local population by means of these “hearts-and-minds” actions – specifically the non-Ovambo tribes of northern SWA/Namibia.

South African involvement in the Angolan Civil War and its military support to UNITA in southeast Angola had a totally different military dynamic. The Angolan armed forces, supported by their Cuban and East Bloc allies, by the mid-1980s started with a range of conventional operations to uproot UNITA from Jamba, its military stronghold in southeast Angola. Unlike the offensive military posture of the South African forces in the counter-insurgency campaign in SWA/Namibia, South African military support to UNITA in the Angolan Civil War was rooted in a defensive intention and design. In particular, the military aimed at ensuring the survival of UNITA by preventing the Angolan and Cuban forces from overrunning the UNITA heartland in southeast Angola – its headquarters at Jamba in particular. Most analysts argued that the South African forces never had the intention to capture any geographical objective in Angola, including the town of Quito Cuanavale. In contrast, one may also argue that it might have been the intention of the UNITA/South African forces to establish a “second Jamba” at Quito Cuanavale, but that they deviated from this intention once it became clear that they were not able to take the town. This will always be a historic dilemma and the truth will most probably never be known.

South African conventional operations in southeast Angola against the Angolan and Cuban forces were largely shaped by two specific military capabilities: the availability of world-class artillery and the lack of sufficient air power. In combination, these two capabilities had a defining influence on the nature of the South African involvement in the Angolan Civil War. Irrespective of how effective ground forces are in a modern conventional war, they cannot operate effectively without sufficient air cover. In Angola, the South African Air Force (SAAF) had to operate over very long distances from their bases in SWA/Namibia, which minimised the SAAF’s flight time over the target area. South Africa’s air superiority was also challenged for the first time by the combined Angolan and Cuban air forces. The effect of sanctions, general neglect or an inability to upgrade the air superiority capability of the SAAF, the distance over which the SAAF had to operate in southeast Angola, and the air capability of the Angolan and Cuban forces thoroughly exposed the strategic

vulnerability of the South African military with regard to air power. The anti-air capability of the South African military was also technologically lagging behind. The availability of world-class artillery systems – the G5, G6 and multiple rocket launchers – had a profound influence on the nature of the South African ground operations in Angola. Though this argument should not be pushed too far, artillery is inherently a defensive capability, which suited the operational strategic objectives of the South African forces in Angola.

South Africa achieved its objective of stopping the offensive of the Angolan armed forces towards the latter part of 1987 with successful operations near the Lomba River, during which a large Angolan and Cuban force was destroyed and driven back. The use of precision artillery and the skilful employment of special operations forces, such as the legendary 32 Battalion and 61 Mechanised Battalion Group, featured prominently in this regard. The Russian, Vladimir Shubin, noted that these operations were the “most critical stage of the war in Angola in the 1980s” and that the Angolan offensive against UNITA’s stronghold in southeast Angola in 1987 “was stopped by the South African troops”.⁴⁷ He also recorded that FAPLA suffered serious losses, that two Soviet officers, Col A Gorb and Lt Oleg Snitko, were killed and that several were wounded and shell-shocked.

The sensitivity for casualties amongst white South Africans impressed on the South African government and its military the need to limit South African involvement in the Angolan Civil War. An offensive that could have resulted in more South African casualties would have been political suicide for the apartheid government and its military. The stalemate that eventually developed in southeast Angola made it impossible for the Angolan forces to reach Jamba, the UNITA stronghold, and for the South African and UNITA forces to reach Quito Cuanavale.⁴⁸ Consequently, the so-called decisive Battle of Quito Cuanavale is a myth and fortunately, the battle never took place.

The lack of air power and the rising cost of the war in Angola (the cost of artillery ammunition in particular), together with the growing potential for casualties amongst white conscripts and the pressure of the increasing internal unrest within South Africa in the late 1980s, forced the South African government to search for alternative routes in dealing with the Angolan Civil War. The former Soviet Union was also beginning to feel the economic pressure of its direct military involvement in Afghanistan and its indirect military involvement in Angola.⁴⁹ Consequently, it was increasingly putting pressure on Cuba and the MPLA government in Angola to

⁴⁷ Shubin, p. 12.

⁴⁸ The question about whether it was the intention of the SADF leadership to capture Quito Cuanavale to develop it into a UNITA stronghold is of course a matter of debate.

⁴⁹ Gray, p. 199.

find alternative solutions. Together, this led to a strategic stalemate in the Angolan Civil War that could only be dealt with through political logic.

6. CONCLUSION

Politically, South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola was shaped by the geo-strategic context of the Cold War, the direct and indirect influence of the superpowers in southern Africa and apartheid South Africa's will to survive. The resultant growing sense of isolation in South Africa was informed by economic and other sanctions against the country's apartheid regime and the "us vs. them" approach of both the white South African government and the black Frontline States of southern Africa. The sense of isolation was rooted in the very real threat of socialist and communist influence in southern Africa linked to white South Africans fearing that their western Christian-Judean value system and way of life would be overwhelmed by a black majority government in South Africa with Africanist tendencies. These threats and fears were coloured by the historical ties between white South Africans and SWA/Namibia. South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola kept both the *swart* and the *rooi gevaar* away from the South African borders.

For South Africa, sustaining a war over such a huge distance had both a cost implication on the country's budget and a psychological impact on those fighting and supporting the war. Military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola served a psychological purpose in that it deflected the attention of both the white constituency of the apartheid government and the Frontline States away from the South African problem. From a political perspective, South African military involvement in SWA/Namibia and Angola bought some time for the apartheid government. While the South African military was relatively successful in both SWA/Namibia and Angola, over time, its involvement in these wars began to have a negative effect on the South African society and the country's economy.

Technologically the South African forces were also beginning to feel the dual pressure of sanctions and an enemy well supported by technologically advanced Soviet and Cuban forces. Questions began to surface about the ability of the South African military to sustain its effort. The geographical features of southeast Angola made it possible for South African ground forces to operate for a limited amount of time without air power and to skilfully employ artillery and special operations forces with great effect. However, the inability of the South African forces to dominate the skies over southeast Angola exposed the strategic vulnerability of the South African military and imposed on the South African forces, their leadership and the South African government the need to seek alternative solutions.

The peace that eventually dawned over southern Africa was the result of a whole range of factors in one of history's rare moments of strategic opportunity. An operational stalemate on the battlefield, the rising economic and humanitarian cost of the war for all the forces involved, geo-strategic changes that were beginning to take shape in Europe and elsewhere, and the growing sense in South Africa and elsewhere that ideology sometimes dictates a character of political, economic and social organisation that cannot work were just some of the factors that eventually contributed to a negotiated peace. In the context of these realities, a debate about the successes or failures of either the South African forces or their opponents at Quito Cuanavale or anywhere else in that huge theatre of operations serves almost no purpose.