

THE 1977 UNITED NATIONS MANDATORY ARMS EMBARGO AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AFTER 30 YEARS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The mandatory arms embargo adopted by the United Nations (UN) on 4 November 1977 against South Africa was the culmination of a series of measures taken by this world organisation, as well as other organisations and countries, against South Africa, in an effort to bring about a change with regard to the policy of apartheid that was implemented in the country since the National Party (NP) had come to power in 1948. The aim of this article is to place the 1977 arms embargo in its historical context, *inter alia* by analysing the reasons for its imposition, and then to ascertain the extent to which the embargo can be said to have been successful. This will be done by analysing its immediate consequences, as well as the development of the South African arms industry in the years following the imposition of the embargo, and the impact (if any) of the embargo on South Africa's defence force. In conclusion, and against the background of military and political developments in the country in the course of the past 30 years, the question as to whether the country's armed forces are better off today than they were 30 years ago, and why this is (or is not) the case, will be considered.

2. THE REASONS FOR THE 1977 ARMS EMBARGO

The 1960s were an unsettling time for South Africa. In the course of that decade, while the rest of the African continent was engaged in a rapid process of decolonisation, the South African government intensified the implementation of its policy of apartheid, despite the growing demands for freedom from the black, coloured and Indian people. The racial policies of the NP government and events in South Africa such as the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960, generated ill-will towards South Africa on an international basis. In

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addition, in March 1960, crowds of demonstrators gathered to protest against the pass laws which determined where black South Africans could live, work and travel. At Sharpeville, the police fired on a crowd, killing 69 people and wounding 186. Most of the victims were shot in the back as they were running away. The shooting was immediately condemned throughout the world, primarily because it exposed the harshness of a system of control which the rest of the world condemned as inhuman. The South African government declared a state of emergency and detained more than 18 000 opponents of the state.³

As from 1961, after South Africa had become a republic outside the Commonwealth, the country was increasingly isolated by the international community and apartheid was severely criticised. At this stage, the decolonisation of Africa was in full swing, and several new states called for sanctions against South Africa. From 1966 onwards, the South African security forces also became involved in combating insurgents of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) in the northern border region of South West Africa (SWA; now Namibia). These activities eventually spilled over into Angola, where the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), backed by the Soviet Union and its allies, came to power in 1975. In the meantime, from 1963 onwards, the UN adopted a number of restrictive resolutions regarding the sale of arms to South Africa.⁴

On 7 August 1963, the Security Council (SC) adopted Resolution 181, calling upon all states to cease the sale and shipment of arms, ammunition and military vehicles to South Africa.⁵ On 4 December 1963, the SC unanimously approved the so-called voluntary arms embargo under SC Resolution 182.⁶ The SC also requested the Secretary General to appoint a small group of experts to examine methods of resolving the situation in South Africa through the peaceful and orderly application of human rights and fundamental freedoms, for the benefit of all inhabitants of the country as a whole, regardless of race, colour or creed, and to consider what role could be played by the UN in the achievement of this goal.⁷ Those countries that were in the best position to supply arms, namely the United States of America

3 TRH Davenport and C Saunders, *South Africa: a modern history* (5th ed., Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 413-414.

4 TD Potgieter, "The geopolitical role of the South African Navy in the South African sphere of influence after the Second World War", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 24(1), June 2002, pp. 105-106.

5 Anonymous, <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/special-chrono/mainfram-unapartheid.html>>, consulted 18 October 2007.

6 JP McWilliams, "The arms embargo against South Africa: success or futility?", *Journal for Contemporary History* 13(1), June 1988, p. 1.

7 Anonymous, <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/special-chrono/mainfram-unapartheid.html>>, consulted 18 October 2007.

(USA),⁸ Britain, West Germany and Italy, all complied without much delay; but France used the opportunity to strengthen its military ties with South Africa and henceforth became the latter's main arms supplier.⁹

By 1963, Britain had cancelled 93 arms licences and the USA had suspended all arms manufacturing assistance to South Africa.¹⁰ In December 1968, the General Assembly requested all states and organisations "to suspend cultural, educational, sporting and other exchanges with the racist regime and with organizations or institutions in South Africa which practice apartheid".¹¹ On 23 July 1970, the SC adopted Resolution 282, calling on states to take a series of measures to strengthen the arms embargo against South Africa. Twelve countries voted in favour thereof, while three (France, the United Kingdom and the USA) abstained. On 29 November 1971, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 1775D (XXVI), calling for a boycott of sports teams selected in violation of the Olympic principle of non-discrimination. It also condemned the establishment of Bantustans and the forced removals of black people in South Africa.¹²

In the 1970s, the boycott campaign gained momentum as a result of the Soweto uprising of June 1976, during which police opened fire on schoolchildren protesting against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, and South Africa's intervention in the Angolan Civil War.¹³ The international repercussions that followed the Soweto riots struck directly at the South African government's strategic and economic vulnerabilities. Since the mid-1960s, the South African government had worked cautiously, and with great success, towards the creation of a cooperative diplomatic and strategic relationship between itself and the Western powers – in particular the USA. Soweto and its consequences sharply reversed this process, producing the greatest diplomatic estrangement of South Africa from the West in that country's history.¹⁴

In September 1977, South Africa once again made headlines all over the world with the death of the black consciousness leader, Stephen (Steve) Bantu Biko, in police custody. By this time a compulsory arms embargo was expected. The internal

8 As far as the USA and early sanctions against South Africa are concerned, see A van Wyk and J Grobler, "The Kennedy administration and the institution of an arms embargo against South Africa, 1961-1963", *Historia* 46(1), May 2001, pp. 109-133.

9 Davenport and Saunders, p. 545.

10 *Sunday Times*, 15 November 1987, p. 11.

11 Anonymous, <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/special-chrono/mainfram-unapartheid.html>>, consulted 18 October 2007.

12 Davenport and Saunders, p. 431.

13 A Brooks and J Brickhill, *Whirlwind before the storm* (London, 1980), p. 7.

14 R Price, *The apartheid state in crisis: political transformation in South Africa 1975-1990* (New York, 1991), pp. 62-63.

situation in South Africa during the period 1976-1977 served as a catalyst to the embargo, and further internationalised the political problems of South Africa.¹⁵

3. A MANDATORY ARMS EMBARGO IMPOSED, 4 NOVEMBER 1977

On 4 November 1977 the SC unanimously adopted SC Resolution 418 (1977), imposing a mandatory arms embargo against South Africa. The reasons cited for this action included the South African government's "massive violence against and killings of the African people" and "persistent acts of aggression" against neighbouring states. The SC also noted its grave concern that South Africa was "at the threshold of producing nuclear weapons". The UN resolution banned the export of all arms and related material of all types to South Africa, including the sale or transfer of weapons and ammunition, military vehicles, equipment, paramilitary police equipment and spare parts, and all types of equipment and supplies, as well as grants in respect of licensing arrangements for the manufacturing and maintenance of the aforementioned.¹⁶

The rationale behind the actions of the UN was that if Pretoria had no means of procuring arms, South Africa could no longer pursue its political objectives aggressively through its military and police. The apartheid policy that was followed by South Africa at the time was regarded in the international arena as unacceptable. This internal policy of "slavery" was therefore the basis for the UN's decree regarding the compulsory institution of an arms embargo.¹⁷ The UN embargo against South Africa could be viewed as the final milestone on the road to international isolation on which South Africa had been travelling at a quickening pace since the early 1960s.¹⁸

The former US ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, stated that the arms embargo was aimed at encouraging moderation in South Africa's government. In addition, by the 1970s, countries such as Britain and the USA had grown tired of waiting for signs of meaningful change in the South African government's apartheid policies.¹⁹ However, South Africa's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Roelof ("Pik") Botha, said on 5 November 1977 that the UN arms embargo would only increase the resistance of South Africa's whites to foreign interference. In addition, South Africa's then Minister of Defence, PW Botha, stated during a television interview

15 A van Wyk and J Grobler, "The Carter administration and the institution of the 1977 mandatory arms embargo against South Africa: rhetoric or active action?", *Historia* 51(1), May 2006, p. 184; JP McWilliams, *Armscor: South Africa's arms merchant* (London, 1989), p. 136.

16 Anonymous, "Embargo", *Leadership* 7(3), 1988, p. 137.

17 McWilliams, *Armscor: South Africa's arms merchant*, pp. 22-23.

18 *Cape Times*, 5 November 1977, p. 9.

19 *The Argus*, 25 May 1994, p. 4.

that it was only a matter of time before South Africa would be able to build all the military equipment it needed, including naval vessels and aircraft. He pointed out that it was a known fact that when a country is forced to satisfy its own needs, it becomes more independent and its industry tends to be strengthened.²⁰

The objectives of the embargo were seriously undermined by the way in which it was interpreted and implemented by South Africa's major trading partners and certain other countries. Resolution 418 (1977) failed to mention technicalities – technicalities which were seen as loopholes by the South African government.²¹ In December 1977, Resolution 421, in terms of which a committee was established to monitor the embargo, was adopted by the SC. This committee pointed out that, as yet, there was no acceptable definition of “arms and material of all types”, and drew attention to the possibility that items might be exported to South Africa ostensibly for civilian use, but then be diverted for military use.²² Goods exported to South Africa sometimes fell into the vague “dual-purpose” category. The export of such goods was technically “legal”, as the relevant items were declared to be outside the scope of the arms embargo. However, much of the equipment was put to military and strategic use once inside South Africa.²³

Numerous recommendations to close loopholes were made by the committee, resulting in Resolution 558 of 1984, which strengthened the arms embargo. Although Resolution 558 was not mandatory, it took cognisance of South Africa's ability to produce arms and placed a moral duty on states to refrain from importing arms from South Africa.²⁴ The idea was to limit South Africa's export drive, which was essential to the economic viability of its domestic arms industry. But there was still the problem of the contravention of the arms embargo through third parties – legislation adopted by states was often ambiguous and vague, and large-scale confusion resulted from the different interpretations of the wording of the Resolution.

Meanwhile Armscor's controversial participation was the catalyst for the Security Council (SC) to adopt more measures aimed to prevent Armscor from export or import of armaments. Defendory Expo 82 was an important exhibition on the international defence calendar and was held in October 1982 in Athens, Greece. This was Armscor's first participation in a major international defence exhibition

20 Anonymous, “South Africa-UN mandatory arms embargo”, *Africa Research Bureau* 15(11), December 1977, pp. 4655-4656.

21 MS van Wyk, *The 1977 United States arms embargo against South Africa: institution and implementation to 1997* (D.Phil., University of Pretoria, 2004), p. 100.

22 Anonymous, “Embargo”, p. 137.

23 W Cobbett, *Apartheid's army and the arms embargo* (New York, 1987), p. 225.

24 McWilliams, “The arms embargo against South Africa”; *Beeld*, 25 May 1994, p. 13.

held in a NATO country during which a variety of South African manufactured arms were put on display.²⁵

In 1986, after the Armaments Corporation of South Africa (Armscor) had taken part in an arms exhibition in Chile, the SC passed a further non-mandatory resolution (591) in order to strengthen the 1977 embargo. Resolution 591 reiterated the call for a prohibition on spare parts for aircraft and other military equipment, as well as on assistance with regard to maintenance. In 1986, the USA enacted the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (also known as the Triple-C Act), which included a boycott of arms imports or data from South Africa, as well as an embargo on the export of all items contained in the US Munition List which were covered by the SC's mandatory embargo.²⁶ Another factor that contributed to the strengthening of the 1977 arms embargo was the township uprisings of 1984 to 1986 within South Africa. Other factors included African pressure within the UN.²⁷

4. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE EMBARGO

The issue of the arms embargo against South Africa intensified the debate on the question as to whether, because of the embargo, South Africa had been forced to produce its own arms, thereby becoming less dependent on outside sources, resulting in a degree of independence that was unprecedented in the country prior to the 1963 and 1977 arms embargoes. Some pundits argued that the arms embargo actually had the effect of creating a stronger South African Defence Force (SADF) which was less dependent on the political whims of external suppliers of arms.²⁸ Ironically, South Africa soon became one of the world's top ten arms exporters and gained an impressive reputation in the process for its development of battle-tested weaponry systems suited to the rugged southern African terrain.²⁹

As a matter of hindsight, it is clear that the UN arms embargo served as a catalyst for the armaments industry in South Africa.³⁰ The growth of the domestic arms industry was cited by the government as evidence of the "failure" of the sanctions campaign, and thus, by implication, of any further sanctions efforts. Indeed, the government claimed that the "creative response" of South African talent and industry had been such that the actual effect of the arms embargo had been the

25 *SALVO*, November 1982, pp. 2, 4-6.

26 Anonymous, "Embargo", p. 137.

27 DH Makobe, *The United Nations arms embargo against South Africa: origins, implementation and implications, 1963-1991* (MA, University of Pretoria, 1997), p. 81.

28 McWilliams, "The arms embargo against South Africa", p. 1.

29 Anonymous, "Embargo", p. 137.

30 McWilliams, *Armscor: South Africa's arms merchant*, p. 112.

reverse of what had originally been intended – and that the embargo had thus been undermined.³¹

The arms embargo forced the South African government to go underground in its need to procure weapons and, in some cases, licences. Secrecy was thus necessary, eventually leading to South Africa's "legislative veil of secrecy" on all armament matters. In fact, in 1985, General Magnus Malan, the former Chief of the SADF, and thereafter Minister of Defence, openly admitted that any country at the mercy of an international arms embargo would have to resort to "unconventional" buying methods from time to time.³² Secondly, manipulation became a necessity; and thirdly, South Africa, in its quest for armaments, moved slowly away from procurement into the rehabilitation and upgrading of existing subsystems and weapons and, eventually, into manufacturing what was needed. The end result was the creation of a very powerful arms manufacturing industry. This, of course, enabled the South African government to conduct its regional policy from a position of strength – economically and militarily.³³ In the meantime, black South Africans were still excluded to a large extent from the benefits of the economy, and still had no political rights in the country of their birth.

4.1 The immediate consequences of the arms embargo

The immediate result of the UN arms embargo of 1977 was its impact on the South African Navy (SAN), with the French cancellation of the orders that South Africa had placed in 1975 for two Type-A69 corvettes and two "Agosta"-class submarines. South Africa had already paid some 65% of the purchase price of the two corvettes;³⁴ but before these ships could be delivered, the embargo came into effect. Although the first corvette (*Good Hope*) had been under the South African flag since 17 September 1977 and had a South African crew on board, the French government nonetheless announced on 9 November that it was compelled by the SC resolution to cease supplying weapons to South Africa. The cancellations of these programmes effectively meant that the SAN's focus concerning surface combatants shifted, perforce, to the only remaining programme in this regard, namely the strike craft project.³⁵

31 JP McWilliams, "South Africa's military on the move", *Militaria* 18(1), 1988, p. 63; LH Gann, "South Africa and the arms embargo", *South African International*, January 1978, p. 127; Cobbett, p. 232.

32 *Sunday Tribune*, 30 April 1985, p. 21.

33 McWilliams, *Armscor: South Africa's arms merchant*, pp. 114-115. Also see, in general, I Liebenberg and L Barnard, "Arms acquisition and procurement in South Africa: the socio-history of arms deals with reference to attitudes, strengths and limitations in decision-making (1935-1994)", *Journal for Contemporary History* 30(3), December 2005, pp. 76-91 and 31(1), June 2006, pp. 99-112.

34 Anonymous, "South Africa-UN mandatory arms embargo", *Africa Research Bureau* 15(11), December 1977, pp. 4655-4656.

35 Potgieter, p. 108.

The strike craft project had its origins in the delays experienced with the Portuguese corvette project,³⁶ when the then Minister of Defence, Mr PW Botha, decided to open negotiations with Israel for the acquisition of six “Reshet”-class missile strike craft. On 17 April 1974 he notified the president of the Armaments Board of his decision to conclude a “package deal” with Israel, only mentioning it to Cabinet in June 1974. The strike craft project was controversial from the outset, as two schools of thought existed within the SAN. One school believed that, as the ideal solution to South Africa’s maritime defence needs, the SAN should acquire frigate-type ships (in the tradition of the Royal Navy), while the other school propagated a move to smaller fast-attack craft, or strike craft armed with missiles.³⁷

Despite the internal debate, the project went ahead, with Israel Aircraft Industries as the main contractor for the first three strike craft. The first ship (SAS *Jan Smuts*) was launched in Haifa on 18 February 1977; and by mid-April 1978, the last strike craft had already sailed for South Africa.³⁸ Construction of the first locally-built strike craft (SAS *Jim Fouché*, renamed SAS *Sekhukhune* in 1997) started in 1977, while the final delivery of the third locally-built vessel to the SAN took place in March 1980.³⁹ These small, fast and lethal ships, armed with at least six Scorpion surface-to-surface guided missiles, two 76-mm guns, as well as smaller close-range weapons, henceforth formed the backbone of the Navy’s surface strike power.⁴⁰ Although the local programme produced the first complex warships to be built in South Africa, it initially experienced several problems with the transfer, flow and understanding of technological know-how. In the light of the arms embargo, it became increasingly difficult to keep the SAN’s three Type-12 frigates operational. This problem created a gap that the strike craft, because of their small size and operational limitations in the turbulent seas around South Africa, could not completely fill.⁴¹

Following the arms embargo, South Africa came to regard self-reliance and the maintenance of the shipbuilding expertise that it had developed through the first strike craft project, to be strategically significant. Early in 1978, the SAN decided to extend its strike craft fleet by means of a further two vessels. Although the envisaged vessels were not seen as a replacement for the embargoed French-built corvettes,

36 South Africa planned to acquire six (later only three) corvettes from Portugal, but the change of government in that country, brought about by a *coup d’état* in 1974, scuttled that plan. TD Potgieter, “Another apartheid dilemma: corvettes for the South African Navy”, *New Contree* 47, 2000, pp. 90-94.

37 Potgieter, “The geopolitical role of the South African Navy”, p. 108; A du Toit, *South Africa’s fighting ships past and present* (Rivonia, 1992), pp. 297-300.

38 Anonymous, “South Africa-UN mandatory arms embargo”, pp. 4655-4656; Du Toit, p. 298.

39 *To the Point* 8(18), 4 May 1979, p. 18; Du Toit, pp. 300, 309.

40 Anonymous, <<http://www.navy.mil.za.aboutus/history/index.htm>>, consulted 18 October 2007.

41 Potgieter, “The geopolitical role of the South African Navy”, p. 109.

this project provided a way to get more “hulls in the water”; and it also contributed to the maintenance of the local shipbuilding industry. The two new vessels were launched in 1982 and delivered to the SAN in 1983. During 1980, the planning phase for the building of another four strike craft commenced. Two years later the project was shelved (with only one instead of four additional strike craft having been built), owing to the weakening South African economy, as well as the fact that the South African Army and South African Air Force (SAAF) were heavily involved in operations in SWA/Namibia and in Angola (with the Army receiving the major share of the defence budget). As a result, military planners and politicians did not regard naval projects as a priority.⁴²

However, during the mid-1980s, the capacity to build and design warships remained a key strategic factor, at least in terms of maintaining a core ability to meet future vessel needs. A so-called survival plan for the warship building industry came into being, as a minimum requisite for ensuring the maintenance of the shipbuilding industry. As a result, one more strike craft (already referred to) and a locally designed replenishment ship (SAS *Drakensberg*) were produced, commencing service in July 1986 and November 1987 respectively.⁴³

4.2 The development of the South African armaments industry

During the 1960s, in the wake of political unrest, the South African government began a major drive to modernise the SADF. It included an increase in the domestic arms manufacturing capability. This initiative drew on the technological expertise of the French, Belgian, British and Italian defence industries, as well as that of the Federal Republic of Germany, and later also that of Israel. Private-sector links with Western countries also contributed to the achievement of this objective. By the end of the decade, the SADF was being supplied with locally-produced rifles, mortars, ammunition, bombs, grenades and landmines.⁴⁴ In 1968, South Africa created two organisations to procure and to produce its arms – the Armaments Board and the Armaments Corporation. They were merged in April 1977 as Armscor, in an attempt to create a more streamlined organisation for maximum productivity,⁴⁵ clearly in anticipation of the imposition of the mandatory arms embargo.⁴⁶ Piet Marais, former chairman of Armscor, said: “Until the formation of Armscor, SA did not have a proper arms industry. In both world wars we relied mainly on imported arms. But

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 110; *Navy News* 6, December 1987, pp. 11-14; *The Cape Times*, 12 November 1987, p. 9.

44 L. Nathan *et al.* (compilers), “Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: business sector hearing”, <http://ccrweb.ccr.uct.ac.za/archive/staff_papers/guy_trc.html>, consulted 18 October 2007.

45 LJ van der Westhuizen, “Die neutralisering van die wapenboikot teen Suid-Afrika reeds voor die amptelike instelling daarvan in 1977”, *Journal for Contemporary History* 18(1), June 1993, p. 119.

46 Cobbett, p. 235.

with increasing international pressure on SA, the position was unacceptable. We could see the arms embargo was coming and we had to act swiftly.⁴⁷ The short-term and unintended consequence of the 1977 embargo was that the South African government saw this move as signalling the cancellation of licensing agreements, which benefited South Africa, as Armscor could continue production without paying expensive licence fees.⁴⁸

In 1966, South Africa spent R30 million on weaponry, most of which was imported; but by 1980, the country was spending R1 600 million on weapons that were mainly manufactured locally. By that time, Armscor controlled subsidiaries which built military aircraft, firearms and artillery of very high quality, as well as missile-guidance and radar systems, and various types of military vehicles adapted and modified for conflict under local conditions.⁴⁹ The weapons that South Africa produced were mostly modernised or rebuilt versions of the systems that the armed forces had imported or built under licence in the pre-embargo days. However, Armscor incorporated so much new technology (often from foreign technological sources) that the end result was an almost completely different product.⁵⁰ See in this regard, for example, the Cheetah jets (rebuilt Mirage IIIs) and Oryx (rebuilt Puma) helicopters.

The production of the new G-5 155-mm gun/howitzer was first announced by the then State President, PW Botha, in April 1979. Then followed the G-6 155-mm self-propelled gun/howitzer which, at 37 tons, was the largest gun on wheels at the time. In September 1982, Armscor invited foreign news correspondents to a champagne breakfast to announce the launch of the G-6. The barrel and ammunition were based on a Canadian design, but were developed and produced in South Africa.⁵¹ The SADF was the first to deploy frequency-hopping transmitters/receivers in 1978, which bounced a signal ten times a second to avoid interception. The Ratel infantry fighting vehicle, developed from commercially available parts, was almost entirely a South African product. Dubbed the Rolls-Royce of infantry vehicles, it was also sold abroad.⁵² Mine-resistant armoured vehicles such as the Buffel, with a high chassis, and a shape and armoured hull designed to deflect landmine explosions, were used in the operational areas of SWA/Namibia, as well as in Angola. The SAAF's V3C Darter air-to-air heat-seeking missile was originally based on the American Sidewinder,

47 *Sunday Times*, 15 November 1987, p. 11.

48 Nathan *et al.*

49 Davenport and Saunders, p. 545.

50 *Time*, 9 May 1988, p. 51.

51 *Cape Times*, 20 February 1984, p. 7; H-R Heitman, *South African arms and armour* (Cape Town, 1988), pp. 76-80. See also LJ van der Westhuizen and JH le Roux, "Armscor and the birth of the G5 artillery system", *Journal for Contemporary History* 22(2), December 1997, pp. 37-62.

52 *The Citizen*, 23 June 1983, p. 6.

and was therefore a third-generation South African modernisation. Armscor also produced an experimental attack helicopter, the Alpha XH-1, with a novel body shape and the engine of the French Alouette III.⁵³ In addition, the British battle tank, the Centurion, was modernised and equipped with a new engine, transmission and a 105-mm gun, and was henceforth known as the Olifant tank. The company also rebuilt the Air Force's French Mirage IIIs into a more modern fighter, known as the Cheetah.⁵⁴ So, through Armscor, South Africa was able to build up an efficient and expanding arms industry that won the respect of other countries.⁵⁵

In 1987, Armscor was said to have an annual turnover of R3 billion and was employing 90 000 people. It was thought to be South Africa's fourth largest employer.⁵⁶ Exports also became of major importance to Armscor. In January 1988, *Jane's Defence Weekly* contained a report on South African arms sales to 23 other countries, amounting to R1,8 billion; and Armscor also claimed, at the time, to be one of the top ten suppliers of armaments in the world.⁵⁷ It is also interesting to note how South Africa's defence budget increased from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s. In 1950, South Africa's defence budget amounted to a mere R16 million. It grew to R230 million by 1966; to about R1 300 million by 1976; R3 000 million by 1984; and to just under R10 000 million by 1989.⁵⁸

4.3 The impact of the arms embargo on the South African Defence Force

As has already been pointed out in section 4.1, *supra*, the SAN was the worst affected by the arms embargo. With regard to the SAAF, it appears as if, in a certain sense, the mandatory arms embargo of 1977 had very little effect. The reason for this was that Italy and France were more than willing providers of aircraft and helicopters during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, there was the issue of grey-area sales in which civilian aircraft were being sold to South Africa. These aircraft were then used for military purposes in practice, for example, the American-built Merlin. The USA's Carter administration aimed at closing up loopholes concerning grey-area sales to the South African military and police.⁵⁹ The fact of the matter was that the SAAF was henceforth not able to buy any new fighter or bomber jets, or advanced trainers,

53 *Paratus*, April 1986, p. 38; Heitman, p. 158.

54 Heitman, pp. 42-43, 146-147; H Potgieter and L Birns, *More than a game: a salute to the South African Air Force* (Morningside, 1995), pp. 20-23.

55 *The Citizen*, 23 June 1983, p. 6.

56 *Sunday Times*, 15 November 1987, p. 11.

57 M Hough, "The UN arms embargo against South Africa: an assessment", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 10(2), November 1988, p. 35.

58 Davenport and Saunders, p. 545; *The military balance 1976-1977* (London, 1976), p. 45; *The military balance 1989-1990* (London, 1989), p. 138.

59 Van Wyk, p. 124.

medium-sized transport planes, or maritime patrol aircraft, and had to make do with the aircraft and helicopters that it already had – and thanks to the local armaments industry (see section 4.2, *supra*), the SAAF was able to continue lending support to the ground forces in SWA/Namibia and in Angola.⁶⁰

The South African Army appeared to be virtually unaffected by the UN arms embargo. By 1977, the SADF was heavily involved in the SWA/Angolan conflict and most of the country's arms, ammunition, military vehicles and supplies were indigenously provided in the form of R-4 rifles, Eland armoured cars, Ratel infantry fighting vehicles and Olifant tanks, and in due course also locally-built guns/howitzers and multiple-rocket launchers. In addition, South Africa was still able to purchase equipment needed for its military industry by means of third-country sales – for example, Italian naval radar, US decoy launchers and West German high-speed demagnetised diesel engines from Israel, and parts for Mirage fighters from Belgium. This was of great importance for Armscor's establishment of military industries. During Operation Protea, launched in Angola in 1981, 94% of the armaments used by the SADF were produced in South Africa, and by 1985, almost 100% of the Army's equipment was locally developed.⁶¹

5. CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

When the UN instituted its mandatory arms embargo against South Africa in 1977, the expectation was that the country would crumble, having no means of procuring arms to defend its borders. Instead, the opposite occurred and, forced to find solutions for its problems, South Africa established its own armaments industry. The result was that South Africa became almost completely self-sufficient in many areas of weaponry, especially with regard to its land forces. The question therefore needs to be asked: Did the mandatory arms embargo of 1977 against South Africa fail? The answer is both yes and no, for the following reasons: The arms embargo failed to a certain degree, owing to the fact that it was adopted too late. As early as the mid-1960s, the South African government (under Prime Minister John Vorster) had begun to make preparations in this regard. The government realised that a comprehensive arms embargo would probably become a reality, and therefore timely provision was made for such an eventuality.⁶² By 1977, South Africa's technology was highly developed and its economy was strong enough to enable the government to pay black-market prices for weapons and divert large amounts of the country's resources

60 For an excellent review of the equipment used by the SAAF, as well as by the SA Army and SAN during the war in SWA/Namibia and in Angola, see H-R Heitman, "Equipment of the Border War", *Journal for Contemporary History* 31(3), December 2006, pp. 91-98, 100-107.

61 S Landgren, *Embargo disimplemented South Africa's military industry* (New York, 1989), pp. 18, 236.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

to arms manufacture. In addition, it is clear that there were “outcast” states, such as Israel, which had a common cause with South Africa and therefore became willing suppliers of arms. The 1977 clamp-down also accelerated Armscor’s activities. In fact, the corporation manufactured all the items needed to maintain the internal political *status quo* of the day, and also put a wide range of conventional armaments into production.⁶³ Therefore, the effects of the arms embargo were not as keenly felt by South Africa as had been anticipated. The industrial base was broad enough; technological capabilities were sufficient; financial means were available; and above all, military technology was available from outside to build a sizeable and successful South African arms industry.⁶⁴

However, the arms embargo against South Africa was successful in as much as it prevented the South African military from modernising beyond a certain point. During the final Cuban-South African clash in Angola in 1987-1988, South Africa was unable to gain access to modern Western armaments, while the Cubans had access to modern Soviet weapons, especially surface-to-air missiles and fighter planes. Therefore, Angolan airspace was becoming an increasingly dangerous place to be in; and the use of the SAAF was restricted to operations which posed the least risk of losses.⁶⁵ It would have been too expensive for South Africa to develop its own fighter aircraft.⁶⁶ The economic strain imposed by arms procurement was all the more sorely felt as the South African economy was under pressure from other quarters, largely as a result of apartheid measures. The spiral of increasing costs became a vicious circle. As the South African political situation worsened, so the perceived need for armaments increased. Much of the technology for these, however, had to be imported at inflated prices, and with a currency that had been severely weakened by the political crisis. The only way South Africa could finance this huge arms bill was to export its “indigenously” produced arms – here, once again, finding itself confronted by international efforts to prevent such sales.⁶⁷

Although the arms embargo did not bring Pretoria to its knees, it certainly created a forum for those wishing to express their distaste for apartheid. If success could be measured in terms of reducing South Africa to pariah status, then the boycott was indeed successful.⁶⁸ In the years following the embargo, South Africa built up an impressive armament industry, but it was not without its problems. South Africa was forced to become self-sufficient in the field of complex, high-technology

63 *Cape Times*, 10 June 1983, p. 9.

64 M Brzoska, “South Africa: evading the embargo”, *Arms production in the Third World* (London, 1986), pp. 193-214.

65 Anonymous, <<http://www.saairforce.co.za>>, consulted 18 October 2007.

66 Makobe, p. 84.

67 Cobbett, p. 242.

68 McWilliams, *Armscor: South Africa’s arms merchant*, p. 112.

electronic weapon systems and had to overcome problems such as a lack of marketing experience and a lack of experience with regard to project management.⁶⁹ To a large extent, South Africa was able to overcome the arms embargo, and it was able to fight a drawn-out anti-guerrilla war in SWA/Namibia and in Angola (with the conflict in the latter country evolving in due course into a conventional war), achieving many military successes as well as its broad political strategic aim, namely ensuring that SWA/Namibia was not overrun by pro-Soviet forces. But the cost of overcoming (to a large extent, although not in all respects) the arms embargo (and fighting a war) was enormous, devouring financial resources that otherwise could have been used for the upliftment of underprivileged people of all races in South Africa itself.

By the end of the 1980s, negotiations were under way to find a political solution for the problems in SWA/Namibia and in Angola, which in due course led to the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of the SADF from Angola and SWA/Namibia, and Namibia's attainment of independence on 21 March 1990. In the meantime, Mr FW de Klerk (the new State President in South Africa since 1989) delivered a watershed speech on 2 February 1990 in Parliament, unbanning several organisations, and freeing political prisoners, including Mr Nelson Mandela. Soon, discussions with regard to the political future of South Africa were launched, which put the country on the road to a peaceful negotiated settlement and its first-ever truly democratic elections in April 1994. The end of military conflict in Namibia and in Angola led to the drastic rationalisation of the South African Army and SAAF (the SAN had already been rationalised in the course of the 1980s), which included the closing down of several bases, and – as far as the SAAF is concerned – the withdrawal from service of aircraft such as the Mirage F1 fighter and ground-attack aircraft, Buccaneer strike aircraft, C-160 transport aircraft, Bosbok observation and liaison aircraft, Kudu light utility aircraft, Albatross maritime patrol aircraft, and Super Frelon and Wasp helicopters.⁷⁰

In April 1994 the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF) replaced the old SADF. The new defence force consisted of the amalgamated SADF, the defence forces of the previously so-called independent Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei, and the military wings of the ANC and PAC, as well as certain KwaZulu-Natal self-protection forces. In due course it became clear that the SANDF's weapon systems would have to be modernised, which resulted in the acceptance by cabinet of a fairly comprehensive arms procurement package in 1998. This package concentrated on the renewal of the SAAF's and SAN's inventories, with the acquisition of 28 Gripen jets, 24 Hawk trainers and 30 Augusta A-109 light

69 HE Smit, *A strategic approach to the marketing of high technology electronic equipment of the military in the Republic of South Africa* (MBA, University of Pretoria, 1985), *passim*.

70 Potgieter and Birns, p. 11.

utility helicopters for the SAAF, and four Meko A-200 frigates and three Type-209 Mod 1400 submarines for the SAN – and, in due course, also the procurement of four Agusta-Westland Super Lynx 300 helicopters for use on board the frigates, but operated by the SAAF. For the first time since 1977, ever since South Africa had been welcomed back by the international community in 1994, the SANDF was able to openly acquire arms internationally. As a matter of fact, arms acquisition has never been so easy since the beginning of the 1960s, as it is now; but the availability of money for defence spending is today a bigger problem (and more controversial) than ever before. And in the light of international competition, South Africa's arms manufacturers are struggling to survive today.

When the UN accepted a mandatory arms embargo against South Africa in November 1977, the SADF had 41 000 (predominantly white) soldiers (including 34 000 white conscripts) in its army, with some 150 Centurion and 20 Comet tanks; 1 600 Eland armoured cars; 230 Ferret and other scout cars; 280 Saracen armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and Ratel infantry fighting vehicles; some 500 light APCs such as the Hippo and Rhino; an unspecified number of 17-pounder and 90-mm anti-tank guns; at least 30 25-pounder (88-mm), 75 5,5-inch (140-mm) and a few 155-mm guns and howitzers; an unspecified number of 20-mm, 35-mm, 40-mm and 3,7-inch anti-aircraft guns; and 18 Cactus and 54 Tigercat surface-to-air missile units. The SAAF had 8 500 (all-white) members (including 3 000 conscripts), with 298 combat aircraft, including training jets that could be used operationally (nine Canberras, nine Buccaneers, 50 Mirage F1s, 56 Mirage IIIs, 12 Sabres, 140 Impala MkIs, and 22 Impala MkIIs – with 76 others being built), 26 maritime patrol aircraft (seven Shackletons and 19 Albatrosses), about 97 transport aircraft (seven C-130s, nine C-160s, about 60 Dakotas, eight DC-4s, one Viscount, five HS-125s and seven Merlins), approximately 194 helicopters (about 100 Alouette IIIs, 68 Pumas, 14 Super Frelons and 12 Wasps), 95 communication and liaison aircraft (37 Cessna 185s, 38 Bosboks and 20 Kudus, with 20 additional Kudus on order), and about 150 Harvard basic training aircraft. The SAN had 5 600 personnel (including 1 400 conscripts, and a few coloured and Asian members), three submarines, three frigates, one strike craft (with another five being built or ordered), four small patrol boats, ten coastal minesweepers, one replenishment ship, two hydrographic survey vessels, one boom defence vessel and one torpedo recovery/diver support vessel.⁷¹

In June 1989, on the eve of the SADF's withdrawal from SWA/Namibia, South Africa's armed forces were, notwithstanding the 1977 arms embargo, probably stronger than ever before (and better battle-trained than most other defence forces). This was especially true of the South African Army, and to a large extent, also of the

71 *The military balance 1977-1978* (London, 1977), p. 47; Du Toit, p. 206 *et seq.*; W Brent (compiler), *African air forces (s.l., s.a.)*, pp. 145-179.

SAAF. (The SAN, which through the years had been the Cinderella of the SADF, had basically been reduced to a coastal naval force since the mid-1980s – owing to the arms embargo, inter-service politics, and the challenges posed by the conflict in SWA/Namibia and in Angola.) In 1989 the Army had about 77 000 soldiers (including 5 400 black and coloured troops, and 58 500 white conscripts), with 250 Olifant tanks; 1 200 Eland armoured cars; 1 500 Ratel infantry fighting vehicles; 1 500 Buffel, Casspir, Bulldog, Hippo, Rhino, Hyena and Lynx armoured personnel carriers; 30 25-pounder/88-mm, 75 5,5-inch/140-mm and 40 G-5 155-mm guns/howitzers; ten G-6 self-propelled 155-mm guns/howitzers; 120 Valkiri multiple-rocket launchers; more than 100 anti-aircraft guns (including 20-mm, 23-mm, 55 35-mm and 40-mm guns), and 20 Cactus and 54 Tigercat surface-to-air missile units. The SAAF had some 11 000 (mostly white) members with 297 combat aircraft (41 Mirage F1s, 50 Cheetahs/Mirage IIIs, five Buccaneers, eight Canberras, 80 Impala MkIIs and 113 Impala MkIs), 19 Albatross maritime patrol aircraft, 86 transport aircraft (three Boeing 707s, seven C-130s, nine C-160s, 47 Dakotas, seven DC-4s, five HS-125s, four Beech King Airs, two Falcon 50s, one Cessna Citation II and one Viscount), about 183 helicopters (approximately 100 Alouette IIIs, 61 Pumas/Oryxs, 13 Super Frelons and nine Wasps), 91 communication and liaison aircraft (32 Cessnas, 34 Bosboks and 25 Kudus) and about 130 Harvard basic training aircraft. The SAN had about 6 500 personnel (including coloured and Asian sailors), with three submarines, nine strike craft, four minehunters, four minesweepers, two combat support ships, one hydrographic survey ship and one torpedo recovery/diver support vessel.⁷²

In November 2007, exactly 30 years after the 1977 arms embargo had been instituted by the UN's SC, the South African Army had about 41 000 soldiers (most of them black), with 167 Olifant tanks; 176 Rooikat armoured cars; 1 200 Ratel infantry fighting vehicles; 370 Casspir and 440 Mamba armoured personnel carriers; 75 5,5-inch/140-mm, 72 G5 155-mm and 43 G6 155-mm guns/howitzers; 26 Valkiri and 25 Bataleur multiple-rocket launchers; 52 ZT-3 self-propelled anti-tank missile units; and 40 35-mm and 36 23-mm anti-aircraft guns. The SAAF had about 9 000 personnel (of all races), with about 45 combat aircraft (21 Cheetahs and 24 Hawks – with the first Grippens on their way), 38 transport aircraft (three Boeing 707s, one Boeing 737-800, three Beech 200 and one Beech 300 King Airs, nine C-130s, 11 Turbodaks, four CASA 212s, two Citation IIs, one CN-235, two Falcon 50s and one Falcon 900), 11 Cessna 208 Caravan and one PC-12 utility aircraft, 13 Cessna 185 liaison aircraft, 55 PC-7 Astra basic trainers, and about 84 helicopters (12 Rooivalk, 40 Oryx, eight BK117s, four Agusta-Westland Super Lynx 300s and about 20 Agusta A-109s – out of an order of 30). The SAN had about 4 500 uniform personnel (of

72 *The military balance 1989-1990* (London, 1989), pp. 139-140; R. Sharpe (ed.), *Jane's fighting ships 1988-89* (London, 1988), pp. 461-464; Brent (compiler), pp. 145-181.

all races), with two submarines (as well as a third undergoing trials), four frigates, three strike craft, three minehunters, one hydrographic survey ship and one combat support ship.⁷³

Thirty years after the UN had imposed a mandatory arms embargo against South Africa, and 13 years after it had eventually been lifted on 25 May 1994,⁷⁴ the SANDF is much smaller than it was in 1977 (or in 1994). This is not the result of any arms embargo, but rather the logical consequence of the down-sizing that took place after the end of the SADF's involvement in the war in SWA/Namibia and in Angola, and the fact that since the start of the new truly democratic dispensation in South Africa in April 1994, the new (ANC-led) government has had to grapple with a variety of challenges, including the provision of accommodation, educational and medical facilities, as well as other services to many people who had been neglected in this regard in the apartheid era – an era that was characterised by, *inter alia*, racial discrimination and the militarisation of the society. That militarisation was the result of, *inter alia*, the involvement in the war “up north”, and the increasing international isolation, as symbolised by, for example, the arms embargo of 1977. Hopefully there will never again be a domestic policy in South Africa that will impel the UN to isolate the South African government, for example by imposing a mandatory arms embargo. In the light of the new challenges that have arisen, such as that of playing a meaningful, and even a leading role in peace-keeping operations, the SANDF needs to have unrestricted access to arms manufacturers internationally.

73 *The military balance 2007* (London, 2007), pp. 291-293; S Saunders (ed.), *Jane's fighting ships 2007-2008* (Coulsdon, 2007), pp. 704-710.

74 *Beeld*, 25 May 1994, p. 13.