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SANDF in contemporary South Africa – what did the 2020 State of the Nation Address tell us?

Background

The purpose of the State of the Nation Address (SONA) is to share government's policy thinking and vision for the year ahead, closely followed by the budget vote by the minister of finance, indicating spending priorities, and followed thereafter by sectoral budget votes by ministers dealing with their portfolios.

The 2020 [SONA](#) did not address Defence priorities in any detail, but when read in conjunction with an earlier address – President Ramaphosa's acceptance speech at the 2020 [African Union Summit](#), upon taking the Chair for the year, other details emerged that allows us to make an analysis. We conclude that without an urgent intervention to strengthen the security sector, national and continental peace and security will remain elusive.

Discussion

In his Thursday 13 February parliamentary address, the president acknowledged the country's financial and fiscal difficulties, with low or no economic growth constituting a crisis that impacts society at large and the capacity of the civil service in particular.

In suggesting the way out of the crisis, the president adopted an interesting methodology: the use of social compacts. He identified ten distinct 'social compacts' – strategic agreements he or his government intends to negotiate (or finalise), involving key stakeholders, to forge consensus on a master plan to recover or advance a particular or sectoral 'common good' such as employment, security of energy, climate change, connectivity, agriculture, water, local district development, education, rail infrastructure, etc.

Although 'security' or 'defence' was not singled out for this kind of treatment, he noted

Investment and growth require a safe, stable and crime-free environment. More importantly, it is fundamental to the aspirations of all our people to live in security, peace and comfort.

This led him to spend some time on security. In the SONA he prioritised police visibility, effective training, and better resourcing of police stations.

Apart from policing, the SONA was silent on the broader question of the status and envisaged role of the country's security sector, whether Defence, Intelligence, Justice, Home Affairs, and oversight matters.

It is indeed disappointing and we will have to await the additional policy speeches (budget votes).

However, let us turn to a speech the president made just a week prior to SONA, in Addis, as he assumed the Chair of the African Union (AU) for 2020.

For the past two years, his overriding foreign policy interest and priority related to the putative African free-trade regime. Where then does peace and security fit?

The Addis speech helps us understand the president's approach to foreign affairs. He noted that:

Our collective work to ensure political and economic unity, good governance, and peace should be strengthened by supporting integration, industrialization, economic development, trade and investment.

In pursuit of the dream of African unity, he announced that South Africa would host an Extraordinary AU Summit in May to finalise the modalities of the continental Free-Trade Agreement before its implementation on 1 July 2020. However, as we now know, the election of a South African expert to steer the project was not without challenge from the other heavyweight on the continent, Nigeria. Perhaps a taste of what is to come?

He then moved on to the continental peace and security agenda. He pledged -

We will use all the means at our disposal – including our membership of the UN Security Council – to promote peace and security on the continent.

He noted progress with an [AU Convention](#) on Violence against Women¹, declared support for the African Peer Review Mechanism, and then said that the African Continental Free-Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#)) summit will be held back-to-back with the Extraordinary Summit on Silencing of the Guns in May 2020.

On the latter, he identified the conflict resolution in Libya and South Sudan as key.

He then pointed out that the Extra-Ordinary Summit on [Silencing of the Guns](#) in May 2020 will look at the implementation of the AU Master Roadmap, and how to respond to the changing peace and security landscape, including the threat of terrorism.

Conclusions and recommendations

Domestically, the president's focus and that of his administration will be on addressing the economic crisis. In line with this, he has identified ten issue areas in need of social compacting.

Addressing crime, violence and corruption is one such area.

The state of the security sector and in particular Defence received no attention.

¹ The convention aims to build on the 2018-2028 AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE). https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36897-doc-52569_au_report_eng_web.pdf

This is a problem as soon as one looks at the commitments he made in Addis. These include the conflict resolution (Libya and South Sudan – but not others), advancing the AU Master Roadmap, analysing and responding to peace and security dynamics on the continent, terrorism, and outside meddling.

With what capacity and resources – intellectually and physically – will he and his administration realise these commitments?

Despite good intentions post-1994 to establish a professional, outward-looking, well-trained and equipped defence force, expectations of a large force, coupled to the politics of corruption, intervened and crippled South Africa's defence credibility and capability to such an extent that policy-makers find it hard to visualise a domestic and continental role for the SANDF.

The democratic government needs to press the re-set button for the security sector, and by implementing a national security policy and strategy, based on a firm understanding of the national interest, lost ground will be recovered. Policy development, adoption and implementation, coordination and integration are key requirements, as is the capacity of the legislature and civil society to hold the security sector to account.

In other words, instead of making grandiose 'peace and security' promises, it seems prudent for South Africa to first exercise political will to rebuild the security sector, including the SANDF, into an affordable, competent, accountable instrument of national security and over time, a meaningful partner in conducting foreign policy. This ought to be on the priority list of the recently established [National Security Council](#). Without such an intervention, the SONA of 2021 and the AU Summit of 2021 will have little progress to reflect upon.

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