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Author: Professor F. Vreÿ (SIGLA)

Series Editor: Professor F. Vreÿ (SIGLA)

Defence in South Africa: From fixed incrementalism to brave new military futures

Background

Alternative futures are often considered a practice of crystal ball gazing as opposed to a field of study and a practice employed by major corporations and governments to mitigate the rise and impact of strategic surprises. Africa did not escape the futures imperative with Shaw for example mapping out futures for [Africa](#) in 1982 and Cilliers, who took a closer look in 2000 at [South Africa](#) while mapping out a more detailed outlook for Africa in later [publications](#).

The attractiveness of contemplating futures holds several advantages. In 2018 the respected futurist [Inayatullah](#) emphasized the 6 pillars of working towards alternative futures. Distilled from his outline, the pillars noted below inform understanding and the logic of mapping out possible futures and working towards a preferred future or some combination of futures. The six pillars promote logic and an element of scientificity in working with futures in a systematic way to enhance reliability and validity.

Pillar 1 “Mapping the future,” with its primary method in the futures triangle configuring plausible futures.

Pillar 2 “Anticipating the future” with emerging issues analysis as the focal methodology.

Pillar 3 “Timing the future,” with micro-, meso- and microhistory being the most useful “methods.”

Pillar 4 “Deepening the future” with causal layered analysis being the foundation.

Pillar 5 “Creating alternatives” with scenario planning being the most important method.

Pillar 6 “Transforming the future,” using visioning and backcasting as its most important methods.

Discussion

Senior South African business and political officials are not too unfamiliar with the practice of dealing with alternative futures. In the case of South Africa's political transition around 1994, this difficult transition was assisted by designing alternative futures by way of the [Mont Fleur scenarios](#). These scenarios mapped out alternatives that broadly suggested alternatives for getting the transition right, wrong or offering a mediocre transition. Whether a dominant or underlying element of the guiding intelligence for the transition, the Mont Fleur scenarios helped decision-makers to steer away from the worst-case scenario for that which followed and for the country.

Turning to military futures, this important but oft neglected policy domain is not to be ignored given the central threat of the state abdicating the [monopoly on violence](#) they exercise through their defence establishments. With the decline of the Cold War at the turn of the 20th century, numerous countries scrambled to position their armed forces for [new or alternative futures](#). South Africa's transition overlapped with this repositioning for different futures and parties engaged in an extensive [consultative process](#) to transform for a democratic dispensation and different alternative military futures. Eventually, the options regarding the preferred future of the newly established South African National Defence Force (SANDF) emerged as a conventionally styled military as opposed to a defence force largely oriented towards secondary roles below the high-intensity warfighting spectrum. In essence, decision-makers consulted widely, and eventually included civil society, military, and academic views in deciding what kind of defence force should emerge from the transition process. In effect, decision-makers selected from [alternative models](#) to take the SANDF into the future.

By 2021, South Africa's defence force is in a predicament as alluded to by the Minister of Defence in her 2021 [Defence Budget Vote](#). The South African defence budget is probably merely a mirror of the sentiment and unwillingness to fund "old" defence thinking and its establishments. In South Africa no substantial review of military futures and how to set up the SANDF for new futures have taken place and if the 2015 Defence Review did attempt this, it gained little if any traction. This leaves the question of how to respond to the frustrations and expressed in [the South African Defence Budget Vote](#) on 18 May 2021.

If current reality reflects the outcome of incrementalism that slowly immersed South Africa's military in a predicament where the daily activity trap prevents decision-makers to look towards alternative futures, the following suggestions could help with a trajectory to position the SANDF for new futures.

Security and stability benefits stemming from defence policy are common public goods through high-quality defence service delivery while setting up the country's future defence modalities are a sole political and not a military responsibility. Change will always outpace policy adjustments, but futures work limits the scope of and timelines for decision-makers to keep in step and more so if some entrapments and restrictions are self-imposed, and not only international in kind. For South Africa, the persistent [tightening](#) of the defence budget by Treasury over the past decade is also reflected in a contracted and limited defence debate fostering an outlook with little or no futures perspective. The latter is further obstructed by the daily activity trap while both practices demonstrate the danger and outdatedness, if not unwarranted cosiness raised by the ongoing practice of fixed [incrementalism](#).

Defence is hardly an election-winning matter on the 2021 South African political landscape, but it remains a truly national matter for all and thus a rare opportunity for cooperative politics to do better in getting future national defence priorities and thus the SANDF back on track. Failure does, however, have an election repercussion of another service delivery failure by politicians that they can hardly afford given the overall climate of [service delivery failures nationally](#). The potential for cooperative politics underpinning plausible defence futures can benefit from the fact that military matters have less political capital to squabble over despite the upcoming election in October 2021. One reason for

a smoother process in 1998 is in part the result of a willingness to cooperate and allowing less room for partisan politics. This cooperative political window (albeit brief in kind) allows room for considering alternative futures akin to the process after 1994 and re-engaging South African civil society over what kind of Defence Force the country wants as lamented in the 2021 Defence Budget Vote.

Presently the SANDF tends to scramble to cover ad hoc demands for deployments in secondary roles. By 2021, the post-1994 debate and the secondary roles option now appears to have been more accurate - thus demonstrating the value of alternative future options for decision-makers responsible for positioning armed forces for future roles. Reference in the Budget Vote on 18 May 2021 to shutting down major defence systems is a case in point. This does not imply the earlier 1998 process was wrong, but the gold standard for working in the futures realm is that of reviewing preferred futures regularly as noted in Pillar 6 earlier. The inherent uncertainty of futures alternatives in fact rebels against the idea of eternal futures and basking in the false sun of getting defence futures perfectly right with the 1994 transition process.

Summary

South Africa's defence in 2021 in part remains a relic of decisions made around 1998. From a futures perspective this is untenable if the refrain of constant change and this change outpacing policy adjustments in defence is understood. Can one expect military forces to keep in step if policy-making becomes disjointed? If political leaders cannot keep up with change (whether in the strategic or the domestic environment) armed forces remain on the back foot and this is probably where the SANDF currently resides.

While it is easy to raise arguments why the South African defence function cannot move forward by blaming the declining defence budget, it becomes prudent to also frame windows of opportunity. The overall political shifts of 1994 also drew on work depicting alternative futures and this goes for the subsequent military transformation as well. Being viewed as largely positive, these are pointers to again turn to futures work. Secondly, competitive politics might be handy to point out politico-military voids and mistakes or even neglect, but the notion of defence as a common security interest and perhaps a lesser vote-winning domain offer leeway for political decision-makers to move South Africa's defence policy towards more relevant futures. Thirdly, futures work is embedded in a recognized discipline, a known methodology and used widely in the political and business environments. Collectively, the 2021 dilemma affords no space for further incrementalism, but is rather a catalyst for brave new military futures for the SANDF.

Additional reading material:

Galbreath, D.J. & J.R. Deni. (eds). Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies. Abingdon: Routledge (2018). Chapter 1 (Defence as Policy), Chapter 5 (Defence Budgets), Chapter 26 (Military Transformation).

Prof Francois Vreÿ is Emeritus Professor (Stellenbosch University) and Programme Coordinator, Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa ([SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#))

E-mail: fvrey@sun.ac.za