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Looking back: Pitfalls in post-94 defence oversight

Background

On 18 September 2024, the Portfolio Committee on Defence and Military Veterans (PCDMV) of the South African Parliament held a round-table discussion with academia from Stellenbosch University and the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA) on the theme of '[Political oversight of armed forces: Strengthening defence oversight in South Africa's seventh democratic administration](#)', at Parliament, in Cape Town. Before the Committee discussed contemporary issues, defence oversight in South Africa since democratisation in 1994 was examined. The aim of this brief is to provide a high-level overview of defence oversight in South Africa over the last three decades.

Political oversight of the armed forces

According to section 199(8) of the [South African Constitution](#) (Act No. 108 of 1996), multi-party parliamentary committees must have oversight of all security services, including the defence force, and give effect to the principles of transparency and accountability. In a democracy, political oversight over defence is at the heart of civil–military relations. Civil–military relations involve an interdependent relationship between government, society, and the military to ensure that military power is used for clear political purposes in accordance with the constitution of the country. Without credible political and civilian defence expertise and oversight, militaries tend to operate in isolation,

and resist attempts to change their culture, routines, planning and resource management. In Africa, this often translates into coups.

Defence oversight from 1994 to 1999 (First Parliament)

During the apartheid era, the South African Defence Force (SADF) largely controlled the management of defence structures and the making of defence policy, without public or parliamentary consultation. During the first democratic parliament, the Joint Standing Committee on Defence (JSCD) and the Portfolio Committee on Defence (PCD) played an important role to establish civilian control over the Department of Defence (DoD) and defence policy processes. The JSCD took important steps in 1995 by –

- compelling the military to consult Parliament before any major military equipment could be acquired; and;
- finalising the 1996 White Paper on Defence to provide a policy framework for informing such acquisitions.

In conjunction with the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the parliamentary defence committees impelled the leadership of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to participate in defence policy processes and to face tough scrutiny on defence management issues. The First Parliament established a culture of bipartisanship, critical debate, and inclusive consultation on defence issues – in the interest of all South Africans. The parliamentary defence committees were closely and meticulously involved in debates and the formulation of defence policy documents, especially the [1998 Defence Review](#). The JSCD provided clear political direction on transformation issues.

Defence oversight from 1999 to 2004 (Second Parliament)

In 1999, Joe Modise pushed the approval of the [Strategic Defence Packages \(SDP\) through Cabinet](#), apparently without properly consulting Parliament or allowing public scrutiny. The associated corruption with the so-called ‘arms deal’ eroded progress with democratic defence reforms, as well as bipartisanship and accountability. It also resulted in negative public opinion on any form of defence procurement. The full exposure of the arms deal corruption was prevented by removing key members of parliament (MPs) from positions of scrutiny. So, for example, was [Andrew Feinstein removed](#) as the head of the African National Congress (ANC) study group on the Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA). In 2001, the [JSCD investigated the arms deal](#) through a special defence inquiry. This process involved questionable transparency, limited details on the procurement process, and alleged protection of the executive, which marked a weakening in defence oversight. While the arms deal

eventually cost more than R50 billion, South African foreign policy became focused on conflict resolution and peacekeeping – not conventional defence. This expensive mismatch intensified criticism of the arms deal.

Under President Thabo Mbeki, decision-making on foreign and security policy became centralised within the Presidency. Moreover, the constitutional role of Parliament in [approving SANDF deployments](#), particularly peace operations, was at times delayed or circumvented. The lack of political vision and direction to reorientate defence policy paradigms, strategy, and funding to accommodate increasing SANDF involvement in African peace missions, produced a growing affordability crisis in the DoD.

Defence oversight from 2004 to 2009 (Third Parliament)

Since 2004, Parliament received more detailed information and reports on SANDF performance in terms of its 'business plans' and expenditure. Less attention was however paid to addressing strategic issues, such as resolving the tension between prioritised funding for expensive conventional capabilities coupled with the declared primary role of the SANDF, while also rapidly expanding involvement in so-called 'secondary roles' (e.g. peacekeeping). This reduced operating funds further. With a declining defence budget, the above-mentioned tension worsened the unaffordability of the SANDF. Oversight of these aspects came under increasing pressure during the Third Parliament as a result of a [reduction in JSCD activities](#) compared to the previous ten years.

The [2004 Defence Update](#) process was unable to change the direction of defence policy, the strategic focus, force design, and funding priorities of the SANDF towards actual threats and plausible roles in the African context, particularly peace operations, counterinsurgency, and border safeguarding. The PCD was reluctant to review defence policy comprehensively and to assess security challenges objectively. During this time, the Minister of Defence, Mosiuoa Lekota, neglected the defence portfolio while doing work for the ruling-party. His eagerness for additional defence commitments in support of an already over-ambitious foreign policy, promoted unrealistic mandate-driven strategies in the DoD and further entrenched a narrow conventional defence paradigm in the SANDF. This duality inhibited the affordability of Defence in terms of policy, budget, strategy, and structure. Furthermore, consensus-building between political parties on defence matters declined, and the criticism of opposition parties, academia, and civil society during [public hearings](#) about the role and funding priorities of the SANDF, was largely ignored.

Defence oversight from 2009 to 2014 (Fourth Parliament)

The neo-patrimonial culture instilled by the Zuma administration eroded military professionalism, effectiveness, and accountability from an oversight perspective. Lindiwe Sisulu, then Minister of Defence, refused to [report on the state of the SANDF](#), which encouraged DoD officials and ANC MPs to follow suit in avoiding parliamentary oversight. Excuses not to “compromise national security” were often used to delay the briefing of Parliament and the PCD on the true state of a declining SANDF. There was a lack of parliamentary debate on the [2009 South African National Defence Union strike](#) at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, and the [2013 Battle of Bangui](#) in the Central African Republic (CAR). There was also continuation of the inertia within the JSCD, as well as a decline in PCDMV activities towards the end of the Fourth Parliament. Between 2009 and 2010, the Chief of the SANDF and the SANDF service chiefs were absent from PCD meetings for almost a year, despite complaints about this by the Opposition. Moreover, before parliamentary defence committee meetings, the governing party study group often held meetings with members of the executive authority, particularly the MoD and the DoD leadership, which weakened the oversight role of the PCDMV and JSCD, and blurred the lines between party and state.

Enduring oversight pitfalls

Parliamentary defence oversight in South Africa was complicated by several aspects, especially since 2009. Firstly, there was an [unnecessary securitisation of issues in South Africa](#), which created “a culture of secrecy within the state, the unjustified use of force, many instances of police brutality, the passage of laws that militate against a democratic ethos, and a weakening of parliamentary oversight structures”. Ruling-party MPs rarely, if ever, queried the securitisation narratives of ministers on matters such as policing, border safeguarding, migrants, or green security. This securitisation drew the military into more secondary roles, which it could not afford. Secondly, ruling-party leaders did not provide the political direction, tough decisions, leadership or political space to allow the DoD and SANDF to make difficult and cost-saving trade-offs, through strategy, in order, for instance, to reduce personnel, improve the readiness of units, as well as address irregular expenditure and qualified audits. On the instruction of Sisulu and her successor, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, the [2015 Defence Review](#) did not consider fiscal limits, and [objections of the Opposition](#) in the PCDMV in terms of the unaffordability of this policy, were ignored. Despite extensive public consultation by the DoD, the PCDMV did not host any public hearings on the 2015 Defence Review. Consequently, less direct debate and engagement between MPs, the public, and defence officials took place, compared to previous processes. Thirdly, a [civil–military gap](#) and defence-knowledge gap exists between the SANDF on the one hand, and the legislature, civilian government officials, society, and the media on the other. In

essence, the SANDF has become disconnected from societal values and norms. This military isolationism restrains the deepening of democratic defence reforms, and in some instances, manifested in the form of [open disrespect towards the parliamentary committees](#) and disregard for the principles of transparency and accountability. Although debate and consensus building on the PCDMV and JSCD improved during the Ramaphosa administration between 2019 and 2024 – especially regarding the [need for a bigger defence budget](#) – several enduring civil–military challenges from previous administrations still impeded transparency and accountability.

The SANDF disregard for transparency and accountability to Parliament has several roots. Firstly, several senior SANDF generals from both the old guard (SADF) and new guard (former non-statutory forces) had a misconception about who directs defence. [Generals preferred to believe that they reported to the president](#) (the Commander-in-Chief), and that the Minister was a mere ‘administrative head’. Secondly, both parliamentary defence committees often allowed the DoD to ignore questions during committee meetings. Lastly, the committees were reluctant to hold defence ministers accountable. This was indicative of the executive authority dominating the legislative authority through the party list system.

Conclusion

Political oversight over the military in South Africa started off well in 1994. The parliamentary defence committees were effective in helping to establish civilian control over the military, and pressed through democratic reforms in the DoD. However, in the wake of the corruption linked to the arms deal, the executive authority relegated the role of Parliament to a rubberstamp of the ruling-party policies on defence, which undermined bipartisanship and oversight. During the Zuma administration, defence oversight reached a low point with the avoidance of oversight and accountability. Despite improved cooperation by the PCDMV since the inception of the Ramaphosa administration, political oversight did not change the trajectory of the SANDF decline in terms of institutional challenges, funding, and capabilities. The parliamentary defence committees did not pressure the SANDF to change its conventional paradigm, make difficult trade-offs, or address its isolation from society. Resultantly, the avoidance of difficult political decisions on defence, produced strategy by default, and not by design. During the seventh democratic administration (2024–2029), there is an opportunity to provide better political direction, intervention, and oversight to improve civil–military relations, as well as align the DoD structures, personnel, and equipment more closely with budget realities and actual security needs.

Suggested reading:

- Evert Jordaan, [South African Defence Policy-Making, 1994–2015](#)
- Greg Mills, [The SANDF's Real Challenge: It's become a Welfare not a Warfare Agency?](#)

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