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The 1.5% Defence Problem: Matching South Africa's Military Ambitions With its Means

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Abstract

South Africa faces a binary choice on defence. It can fund the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to match its foreign policy ambitions, which would require roughly doubling the defence budget from the current 0.78% of GDP to at least 1.5%. Or it can accept a diminished level of ambition, scaling back peace-enforcement commitments and recasting its continental role as diplomatic rather than military. The one path it can no longer credibly walk is the one it is on: maintaining ambitious commitments while starving the force tasked with executing them. This paper develops the case at three levels of analysis. At the tactical level, South African soldiers continue to perform creditably and sometimes admirably in combat: Bangui, Cabo Delgado and Goma bear this out. At the operational level, the force is critically deficient in rotary-wing aviation, strategic airlift, ammunition and joint logistics. At the strategic level, deployments have been ordered without clear objectives, exit criteria or alignment with actual military capacity. Tactical competence cannot redeem operational and strategic failure. Four case studies trace the pattern: the 2013 Battle of Bangui; the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM, 2021–2024); the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC, 2023–2025), which ended in strategic defeat at Goma with 14 South African soldiers killed; and the maritime Operation Copper (2011–present). Their cumulative weight creates an inescapable set of policy choices for South Africa's government.

Introduction

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) ended January 2025 with a battalion confined to its own bases in Goma, unable to extract it without the cooperation of the very regional power that had organised the defeat. Its Joint Operations Division lacked the strategic airlift to bring the soldiers home, and the SADC mission terminated two months later: the country's most consequential expeditionary deployment since 2003 ended in a forced retreat. In the same year, the Department of Defence circulated an internal planning document conceding that the institution would reach a 'culmination point' by 2026 without an intervention. The 2024–2028 National Security Strategy, released in July 2025, articulated ambitions for continental leadership but said nothing about how to fund them.

Four major defence policy documents in a decade, from the 2015 Defence Review to the 2024–2028 National Security Strategy, have gone unresourced. The mismatch between the country's foreign policy ambitions and its actual military capacity is now structural rather than cyclical, and the binary choice between the two has become unavoidable.

At the same time, the global trend is moving decisively in the opposite direction. World military expenditure reached $2 887 billion in 2025, the 11th consecutive year of growth, and the global military burden rose to 2.5% of GDP, its highest share since 2009. African military spending rose 8.5% in 2025 to $58.2 billion. Algeria, the continent's largest spender, devoted 8.8% of its GDP and a quarter of all public expenditure to defence, a share second only to Ukraine's. Yet South Africa's 2025 allocation of $3.2 billion was 1.2% lower than in 2024 and 19% below its 2016 level.[1]

Rearmament is not confined to Europe and East Asia, nor is it driven by great-power competition alone. African states are spending more because the security environment on the continent has deteriorated and the external support they once relied on is being withdrawn.

That withdrawal is the other half of the setting. French forces have left the Sahel; the successor juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have quit ECOWAS and formed their own alliance. The UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) has been drawing down since 2023 at Kinshasa's insistence. The financing mechanism designed to solve the African peace-operations funding problem, UN Security Council Resolution 2719, has stalled since 2024 owing to a failure to agree on its application to the AU mission in Somalia. UN peacekeeping itself entered 2026 facing arrears approaching $1.6 billion and a proposed 15% budget cut.[2] African regional

1 Xiao Liang et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure" (Fact Sheet, Stockholm Peace Research Institute, April 2026); SIPRI, "Global Military Spending Rise Continues as European and Asian Expenditures Surge", Press Release, April 27, 2026; SIPRI, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database", accessed April 27, 2026, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex.

2 Tamrat Zeyede Haile and Dawit Yohannes, "Two Years On, UNSCR 2719 on Peace Operations Remains at a Crossroads", *ISS Today*, December 15, 2025; Partha Moman, "With AUSSOM's Funding Challenges Here to Stay, What Are the Options for the Mission's Future in Somalia?", International Peace Institute Global Observatory, January 16, 2026.

organisations are being asked to carry more of their own security burden at precisely the moment when the assessed funding that made the multilateral route affordable has become unreliable. Meanwhile, South Africa has a defence budget of 0.78% of GDP and an air force able to fly, at best, one-fifth of its aircraft.

> Both options are defensible. The present position, which maintains the commitments and starves the force, is not.

The question this paper asks is therefore whether South Africa can sustain a foreign policy that continues to assign military tasks to a force funded at 0.78% of GDP, and if not, which of the two available corrections it should make. Either the force is funded to match the commitments, which, based on the Department of Defence's own analyses, means something close to 1.5% of GDP (total defence expenditure as a share of GDP, not the NATO Hague sub-target of the same value) or the commitments are cut to match the force and the continental role is recast as diplomatic rather than military. Both options are defensible. The present position, which maintains the commitments and starves the force, is not.

This paper makes its case at three levels of analysis. Existing assessments of the SANDF tend to focus on either budget trajectory or equipment availability. Both matter, but neither explains why competent soldiers continue to be sent into operations that fail. The framework used here distinguishes the level at which the South African contribution still works (the soldier on the ground) from the levels at which it consistently does not (joint-force architecture, political mandate). The four case studies show a similar pattern across the Central African Republic (CAR), Mozambique, the eastern DRC and the Mozambique Channel. The recommendations that close the paper follow the same framework.

Levels of analysis

The three levels used here are conventional in military theory. The tactical level concerns engagement: what a unit does in contact and whether it does so competently. The evidence is battlefield performance, unit cohesion under fire, small-unit leadership, fire discipline and casualty ratios. The question at this level is whether the soldiers can fight.

The operational level concerns the campaign: how engagements are linked in time and space to produce a military effect, and what is required to sustain a force in the field while that happens. This is the level of joint enablers, encompassing strategic and tactical airlift, rotary-wing aviation, medical evacuation, ammunition and spares pipelines, surveillance and reconnaissance, communications interoperability with partner forces

and headquarters arrangements. Two clarifications are relevant here. First, this paper treats platform serviceability as an operational rather than a technical question, because a helicopter fleet with five of 39 aircraft flying is not a maintenance problem but the absence of operational capability. Second, this is the level at which national contingents become a force. Where two allied contingents in the same province cannot share an intelligence picture, the failure is operational even if nothing has gone wrong tactically. The question at this level is whether the troops can be sustained and combined.

The strategic level concerns the purpose: what political objective the deployment is meant to achieve, under what mandate and legal framework, financed by whom and with what definition of success, as well as on what conditions the force comes home. The evidence is the deployment directive, the mandate instrument, the financing arrangement and the exit criteria. The question at this level is whether the deployment makes sense.

The dependency between the levels runs downward. Strategic clarity determines whether operational investment pays off, and operational capacity determines whether tactical competence produces anything. Competence at the bottom cannot compensate for incoherence at the top. This asymmetry is the paper's central analytical claim, and it is not novel: the study of combat effectiveness in peace operations has increasingly located mission failure in force generation, enabling capabilities and mandate design rather than in the fighting quality of contingents.[3] The four cases that follow test the claim in the South African instance.

Battle of Bangui, Central African Republic (March 2013)

The South African military campaign in the CAR began with a bilateral agreement in 2007. Extended in 2013, the defence cooperation agreement with the CAR effectively deployed a troop contingent to ensure the safety of the existing SANDF trainers in a deteriorating security environment.[4] This bilateral agreement was supported by the AU Peace and Security Council.[5]

The 22–23 March 2013 Battle of Bangui was one of the most intense actions fought by South African troops since the Second World War. In a relatively short period, SANDF soldiers fought a running battle with a several-thousand-strong force of Séléka rebels advancing towards Bangui from two main roads in the North.[6]

3 Paul D. Williams, "How Peacekeepers Fight: Assessing Combat Effectiveness in United Nations Peace Operations", *Security Studies* 32, no. 1 (2023): 32–65.

4 South African Government, "Defence Cooperation Agreement between the Republic of South Africa and the Central African Republic", Media Statement, January 6, 2013.

5 AU Peace and Security Council, Communiqué of the 352nd Meeting, PSC/PR/COMM.(CCCLII), Addis Ababa, January 25, 2013.

6 Wars in the World, "Central African Republic: Seleka Rebels Seized Town of Damara", March 23, 2013.

The battle was a litmus test of post-apartheid fighting capability, and a force long criticised for its operational standards performed admirably in the worst circumstances. Without losing unit cohesion, SANDF forces withdrew to Bangui's airport without suffering serious casualties, while fighting off several envelopment attempts by Séléka rebels and destroying or securing caches of important supplies.

A total of 13 SANDF soldiers were killed in action and 27 wounded, two of whom later died of their wounds, out of the company-plus contingent of around 200 soldiers. SANDF troop actions resulted in an estimated 800 killed (according to South African officers and non-commissioned officers on the ground) among the Séléka force.[7] Helmoed Heitman, currently the only unclassified expert source on the battle, puts this in perspective: 'In all, they would appear to have used some ten tons of assorted munitions.'[8]

The contingent sustained casualties and expended ammunition on a scale comparable to a six-month British parachute deployment in Helmand, within two days and without equivalent armour, air or logistics support.[9] It consisted of a company of paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion; a Special Forces detachment with two customised 'Hornet' reconnaissance vehicles mounting 107mm multiple rocket launchers; a heavy weapons platoon of four 12.7mm machine guns and four 81mm mortars; and supporting intelligence, engineer and signals elements.[10] This was the most formidable force the SANDF had assembled thus far outside Southern Africa, and from a tactical point of view the battle was a remarkable feat of arms: a numerically superior force fought to a truce by a comparatively minuscule, if well-armed and superbly trained, South African group.

But from an operational point of view, cracks had already begun to show.

While Special Forces and paratroopers fought heroically, senior military planners were scrambling in Pretoria. A desperate need to resupply troops in the CAR left commanders frantically searching for charterable strategic-lift aircraft willing to fly in ammunition and supplies and bring out the dead and wounded.

The SANDF has long lacked such aircraft, and still does. Planners at Joint Operations headquarters had no adequate response ready for a scenario of this kind, a failure repeated in the 2024 deployment to the DRC.

Put simply, the battalion had been sent to the CAR with minimal follow-on support and expected to 'carry on with it'. Very little was left on the shelf for contingencies, with no ready-to-go options available or even planned. A reinforcement force was eventually

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7 "Battle of Bangui Was Not About Business Interests – Modise", *DefenceWeb*, June 14, 2023; Warren Thompson, Stephan Hofstatter and James Oatway, *The Battle of Bangui: The Inside Story of South Africa's Worst Military Scandal Since Apartheid* (Penguin Random House South Africa, 2021), 347. Thirteen soldiers were killed in action and two subsequently died of their wounds; the figure of 14 reported on March 25, 2013 reflected an initially unidentified body.

8 Helmoed Heitman, *The Battle in Bangui: The Untold Inside Story* (Parktown Publishers, 2013), 6.

9 Heitman, *The Battle in Bangui*, 6.

10 Heitman, *The Battle in Bangui*.

assembled, but could only be moved to staging points such as Entebbe, from where the SANDF's overloaded and shrinking fleet of C-130BZ Hercules transports struggled to move elements onward. At least one contracted charter aircraft failed to appear, despite being awarded a contract worth ZAR 23 million ($1.4 million).[11] By the time this additional support was finally assembled and flown in, the fighting was over, with the SANDF contingent and Séléka having negotiated a temporary ceasefire that held.[12]

At a strategic level, the rationale for deploying these troops to Bangui at all was never adequately explained. Opposition politicians and commentators have questioned the decision to deploy an additional protection force and fight so fiercely for a low-value base, rather than withdrawing the training team.

The force had been deployed under an impossible directive: not only to protect the training team and its base, but also to continue the training mission and support 'allies' identified in the memorandum of understanding with the CAR. The orders also instructed troops to use force not just in self-defence but also in defence of allies and civilian populations 'under imminent threat'.[13]

Bangui established the pattern: tactical proficiency, operational improvisation, strategic incoherence.

This was a tall ask for a 200-strong deployment standing almost alone against the advancing Séléka, and the directive had been written at the level of political ambition, without any assessment of whether the force on the ground had the means to execute it. Bangui established the pattern: tactical proficiency, operational improvisation, strategic incoherence. SAMIM, SAMIDRC and Operation Copper would each demonstrate it again, in different theatres and at different scales.

SAMIM, Mozambique (2021–2024)

The Mozambique case opens with a counterpoint: two years before the SANDF's combat shortcomings in Cabo Delgado became apparent, when Cyclone Idai devastated central Mozambique in March 2019, the South African Air Force (SAAF) deployed Oryx and A109 helicopters alongside CASA C-212 transport aircraft.[14] Operating out of Beira, South

11 Thompson, Hofstatter and Oatway, *The Battle of Bangui*, 347.
12 Thompson, Hofstatter and Oatway, *The Battle of Bangui*, 348.
13 Interview with senior SANDF officer involved in Bangui tactical planning, March 25, 2026.
14 "SANDF Continues Rescue Mission in Malawi, Mozambique", *DefenceWeb*, March 28, 2019.

African aircrews rescued 167 survivors and helped bring approximately 2 000 stranded Mozambicans to safety, to widespread praise.[15] It was a reminder that when properly tasked and at the tactical level, the SAAF retained genuine capability.

The contrast with what followed was stark. Since 2017, Cabo Delgado province in northern Mozambique had been gripped by a growing Islamist insurgency linked to the Islamic State. By mid-2021, the violence had displaced more than 800 000 people and threatened the $20 billion TotalEnergies liquefied natural gas project – the largest single foreign investment in Africa. On 23 June 2021 an Extraordinary SADC Summit approved a multinational force under the banner of SAMIM, with South Africa committing 1 495 personnel under Operation Vikela, the largest contingent of any contributing state.[16] The approved strength was 2 900 troops from eight SADC states, although actual deployment never exceeded 2 200, and the mission became operational on 15 July 2021.

From the outset, the gap between tactical ambition and operational reality was visible. Only five of 39 Oryx transport helicopters were functional, and just three of 11 Rooivalk attack helicopters could fly – 'with restrictions', owing to obsolete avionics and a chronic shortage of spares.[17] The force was, in effect, attempting a counter-insurgency campaign in dense bush without reliable rotary-wing support, a deficiency for which no amount of tactical skill could compensate.

And yet, at the tactical level, there were genuine successes. In September 2021, SAMIM forces captured a major insurgent training camp south of the Messalo River.[18] Key roads from Pemba to Macomia, Mueda and Nangade were reopened, restoring public confidence and basic services. These were meaningful achievements, driven by the professionalism of individual soldiers and small-unit commanders.

But the operational and strategic picture told a different story. Coordination between SAMIM and the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), which had deployed separately to Cabo Delgado under a bilateral agreement with Mozambique, was virtually non-existent. Incompatible communications equipment, language barriers and the absence of a high-level coordination framework meant two allied forces operated in the same province with no shared intelligence picture or joint planning and several reported incidents of near-fratricide.[19]

Conduct issues compounded the problem. In January 2023, a video emerged of SAMIM soldiers, at least one an identifiable SANDF member, apparently burning insurgent bodies, drawing condemnation from Amnesty International and triggering a military

15 "SA Air Force Helicopters Help Rescue 167 People in Flood-Ravaged Mozambique", *Times Live*, March 20, 2019.
16 SADC, "SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in Brief", November 10, 2021.
17 "South African Troops in the DRC, Mozambique at Risk Without Helicopter Maintenance Contract", *DefenceWeb*, February 20, 2024.
18 "SAMIM Captures Insurgent Training Base in Cabo Delgado", *DefenceWeb*, September 4, 2021.
19 Liesl Louw-Vaudran, "SADC and Rwanda Shouldn't Go It Alone in Mozambique", *ISS Today*, April 11, 2022; Thomas Mandrup, "Lessons from the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)", ACCORD, Conflict & Resilience Monitor, April 24, 2024.

board of inquiry.[20] The incident damaged the mission's credibility at precisely the moment it needed moral authority.

Strategically, the mission suffered from a familiar ailment: the absence of a clear endgame. SAMIM adopted an exclusively military approach without addressing the socio-economic grievances that had fuelled the Cabo Delgado insurgency in the first place. There was no civilian engagement strategy, no development or reconstruction component and no dialogue initiative. When the 43rd SADC Summit decided in August 2023 to begin withdrawing SAMIM from 15 December 2023, the decision was driven by budgetary concerns rather than any assessment that the mission had achieved its objectives.[21] South Africa's contingent officially departed on 15 April 2024, although approximately 200 troops remained until early 2025.

The aftermath validated the concern. The Islamic State's Mozambique affiliate mounted 51 attacks in 2023 and accelerated to 57 in the opening months of 2024 alone, exceeding the full-year 2023 pace. Insurgent fighters re-established a presence in the Palma district on the mainland for the first time since February 2023.[22] SAMIM had suppressed the insurgency; it had not defeated it. And when the force left, the problem returned.

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This judgement is supported by a joint study by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network and the Training for Peace programme, published in 2025. The study assessed SAMIM against a standard effectiveness framework and reached the same three conclusions by an independent route. It states that the mission was hampered by mismatched resources, limited host-nation cooperation and the parallel Rwandan deployment with which it never integrated. Its most pointed finding is that air and maritime support was a mandated task that was never delivered, and that member states did not adjust the mandate to fit the tools actually deployed.[23] The shortfall was thus an unmet obligation of the mission's own mandate. Nor was the funding failure unforeseeable: the International Crisis Group had warned as early as February 2022 that SADC contributors would need additional resources to remain in the field.[24]

20 Amnesty International, "Mozambique: Video Showing Soldiers Burning Corpses", January 11, 2023.

21 Marko Svicevic and Ricardo Teixeira, "Feature: SADC's Withdrawal from Mozambique – Has SAMIM Fulfilled Its Mandate?", *DefenceWeb*, May 3, 2024.

22 Borges Nhamirre, "Cabo Delgado Insurgency Persists amid Failed Military Strategy", *ISS Today*, October 7, 2025; The Soufan Center, "ISIS in Mozambique", Intelbrief, January 15, 2025.

23 Thomas Mandrup et al., *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)*, Report (Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network and Training for Peace, NUPI, 2025).

24 International Crisis Group, "Winning Peace in Mozambique's Embattled North", Africa Briefing no. 178 (February 10, 2022).

The Mozambican experience crystallised the pattern. At the tactical level, South African soldiers performed creditably and sometimes admirably. But the operational infrastructure needed to sustain them (functioning helicopters, reliable logistics, adequate ammunition stocks) was lacking. And at the strategic level, no one in Pretoria or at SADC headquarters in Gaborone appeared to have asked the most basic question: what does success look like, and when do we leave?

The answer, when it came, was that SADC left when it ran out of money, mostly driven by South Africa's inability to keep paying for its force, not when it had achieved anything resembling a strategic objective.

SAMIDRC, Democratic Republic of Congo (2023–2025)

To understand the scale of the SAMIDRC disaster, it is necessary to recall its predecessor. In March 2013, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2098, creating the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) within MONUSCO. This was the first UN peacekeeping force with an explicit offensive mandate to 'neutralise and disarm' armed groups in the eastern DRC.[25] Composed of well-armed infantry battalions from Tanzania, South Africa and Malawi, the same three countries that would later comprise SAMIDRC, the FIB drove M23 out of the eastern DRC by November 2013. It operated with international legitimacy, UN financing and logistical support, and it worked. The FIB is treated throughout this paper as the control against which the SADC missions are assessed.

The FIB's success rested on three pillars: a clear UN Security Council mandate, MONUSCO's logistics and intelligence infrastructure, and funding that did not depend on the strained budgets of troop-contributing states.

When M23 re-emerged in late 2022, emboldened by renewed Rwandan military support, the question was whether SADC could replicate the FIB model. The answer exposed every structural weakness in Southern Africa's security architecture: a decade after the FIB defeated M23, SADC attempted to duplicate its success without the UN.

On 8 May 2023 an Extraordinary SADC Summit in Windhoek approved the deployment of SAMIDRC, with a Status of Forces Agreement signed on 17 November 2023 and deployment commencing on 15 December.[26] South Africa committed 2 900 troops under Operation Thiba, the largest national contribution to a planned force of 5 000. The mandate was identical in ambition to the FIB's: 'neutralise negative forces and armed groups'. But in every other respect, the mission was set up to fail.

25 UN Security Council, Resolution 2098, S/RES/2098 (March 28, 2013); UN, "Force Intervention Brigade Authorization", Security Council, Meetings Coverage, March 28, 2013.

26 SADC, "Deployment of SADC Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo", Press Release, January 4, 2024.

By October 2024 only 1 300 SAMIDRC troops had deployed, barely a quarter of the planned strength.[27] They faced a combined force of approximately 3 000 M23 fighters and 3 000–4 000 RDF personnel, as documented by UN monitors, resulting in a force ratio approaching five to one against the SADC contingent. SAMIDRC deployed without dedicated air support or unmanned aerial vehicles for surveillance, and with chronic ammunition shortages. Reports emerged of soldiers buying their own boots, tents and even uniforms, at personal cost.[28]

In other words, there was no real plan.

The consequences became brutally apparent in January 2025. On 23 January, M23 captured the strategic town of Sake. Between 25 and 27 January fierce fighting around Goma Airport claimed the lives of 14 SANDF soldiers, the heaviest loss in a single engagement since Bangui.[29] By 28 January M23 had captured the airport, and on 30 January the rebels declared Goma 'liberated'. Between 1 000 and 2 000 SANDF personnel, along with their Tanzanian and Malawian counterparts at SAMIDRC, were trapped on bases around the city, with no clear evacuation plan.[30]

The assessment of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) was unsparing: South Africa had invested public resources and South African lives in the operation but was 'ultimately incapable of providing what it promised'.[31] On 13 March 2025 an Extraordinary Summit of SADC Heads of State formally terminated SAMIDRC. The consensus among analysts at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), SAIIA and the *Africa Defense Forum* was that the mission had been an abject failure.[32] Where the FIB succeeded with a clear mandate, adequate resources and international backing, SAMIDRC attempted the same task with a fraction of the force, no air power and regional rather than international legitimacy. No strategic 'success' metric existed, and the result was predictable and devastating.

The estimated annual cost of SAMIDRC was $500 million, funded by troop-contributing states rather than the UN. This left a $200 million funding gap in the first year alone. The mission's defenders argue that South Africa's soldiers fought bravely and that M23 remained tactically wary of SANDF units. This is true but immaterial: tactical competence without operational capacity and strategic clarity is a recipe for defeat, and at Goma

27 Stephanie Wolters, "What Are the South Africans Doing in Eastern DRC?", SAIIA, May 26, 2024; Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa and Alexander M. Rusero, "Another Regional Intervention Falls Short in the Democratic Republic of the Congo", IPI Global Observatory, March 31, 2025.

28 Lindy Heinecken, "South African Troops Are Dying in the DRC: Why They're There and What's Going Wrong", *The Conversation*, January 31, 2025.

29 "Nine SANDF Soldiers Killed in Fierce Fighting with M23 Rebels in the DRC", *DefenceWeb*, January 26, 2025; "SANDF Death Toll in the DRC Rises to 14", *DefenceWeb*, February 2, 2025.

30 Peter Fabricius and Takudzwa Pongweni, "About 2,000 SA Troops Remain Trapped in DRC with No Clear Rescue Plan", *Daily Maverick*, February 2, 2025.

31 Stephanie Wolters, "DRC Debacle Batters South Africa's Standing as an Actor in African Peacekeeping", SAIIA, March 18, 2025.

32 "SAMIDRC Was a Failure – Experts", *DefenceWeb*, May 5, 2025; Paul Simon Handy, "Anatomy of SADC's Failure in Eastern DRC", *ISS Today*, March 20, 2025.

the defeat was neither honourable nor ambiguous. Footage of unarmed and clearly unsupported South African troops under rebel guard in their own camps circulated internationally for weeks.

The contingent was extracted by road through Rwanda, the same country whose support for M23 had created the crisis the mission had been deployed to address. The fact that no other route was available made the political point on its own: South Africa could not extract its own forces without the cooperation of the regional power most directly responsible for their defeat.

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The deployment, as multiple analysts have noted, appeared designed to 'punch a time card' and buy political capital in Kinshasa rather than to achieve any genuine security outcome.

Operation Copper, Mozambique Channel (2011–present)

The pattern of initial promise followed by hollowing out is not limited to the land and air domains. Operation Copper, South Africa's anti-piracy mission in the Mozambique Channel, commenced in January 2011 with the deployment of SAS Mendi in response to the southward expansion of Somali piracy.[33] A trilateral memorandum of understanding with Mozambique and Tanzania followed in February 2012, and in April that year SAS Drakensberg helped capture seven Somali pirates, the SA Navy's first hands-on pirate apprehension.[34] Indian Ocean piracy incidents dropped from 237 in 2011 to 75 in 2012, with successful hijackings falling from 28 to 14. Operation Copper was delivering results.

The degradation was swift. In July 2012, an operational pause was declared because the use of frigates was proving 'costly and expensive', and the Navy switched to cheaper Warrior-class offshore patrol vessels.[35] SAS Mendi suffered a total seizure of her starboard propulsion engine while on deployment; the damage was beyond repair, and a replacement engine was not installed until December 2019. By the 2023/24 financial year, no Operation Copper deployments were scheduled, despite the presidential mandate remaining formally in place.[36]

33 "An Insight into South Africa's Counter-Piracy Operation", *DefenceWeb*, February 2, 2016.
34 "South African Navy Helps Catch Pirates", *DefenceWeb*, April 23, 2012.
35 Dean Wingrin, "Pause in South African Anti-Piracy Mission", *DefenceWeb*, October 16, 2012.
36 "Ramaphosa Extends Operation Copper Maritime Security Deployment", *DefenceWeb*, April 11, 2025.

The SA Navy's broader condition explains why. Only one of four Valour-class frigates, the SAS Amatola, is operational, as funding does not allow more to be made ready simultaneously. None of the three Heroine-class submarines is seaworthy owing to long-delayed refits and issues with spare-parts delivery. The full refit bill stands at ZAR 1.47 billion ($89 million), of which only ZAR 786 million ($46 million) (53.4%) has been funded.[37] Navy sea hours have fallen by more than 75% since 2018, reaching just 2 641 hours against an annual target that was once 22 000. Personnel costs consume about 63% of the Navy's budget, leaving chronic shortfalls for operations and maintenance.[38]

South Africa has a coastline of 2 800km, and more than 80% of its GDP is dependent on maritime trade routes. The Mozambique Channel alone carries approximately 30% of the world's crude oil tanker traffic. The fact that this coastline is now effectively guarded by a single frigate represents a national economic vulnerability. Ships deploy only when available, not when needed; maintenance is deferred, training compressed, readiness traded for presence. Without persistent maritime surveillance, patrol vessels traverse vast areas on predetermined routes, reacting to chance encounters rather than shaping behaviour. As the *Financial Mail* asked in February 2026: is the Navy now in its sunset years?[39]

Four cases, three frameworks

Read as a sequence of choices about the framework under which South African soldiers were committed, the cases say something the chronology alone does not.

Three frameworks are represented: a bilateral defence cooperation agreement in the CAR; a trilateral memorandum with Mozambique and Tanzania for Operation Copper; and a Chapter VII UN Security Council mandate for the FIB and, for SAMIM and SAMIDRC, SADC authorisation by extraordinary summit.

The legal basis of the SADC missions is more revealing than it first appears. SAMIM was created under the SADC Mutual Defence Pact and deployed at the invitation of the Mozambican government; the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed it within the African Standby Force policy framework only on 31 January 2022, more than six months after the mission had become operational.[40] Scholarly treatment places it under Scenario 6 of the Standby Force framework, on a composite basis drawing on the SADC Treaty, the Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation and the Mutual Defence Pact.[41]

37 Guy Martin, "Only One of SA Navy's Four Frigates Operational; No Submarines Serviceable", *DefenceWeb*, March 2, 2023.
38 "Years of Budget Cuts Leave South Africa's Navy Struggling to Stay Afloat", *Africa Defense Forum*, October 31, 2024.
39 "Is South Africa's Navy in Its Sunset Years?", *Financial Mail*, February 12, 2026.
40 Mandrup et al., The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission"; SADC, "Mutual Defence Pact (2003)", accessed September 25, 2026, https://www.sadc.int/document/sadc-mutual-defence-pact-2003. The EPON study records the SAMIM Head of Mission's statement that the mission was created in terms of the Mutual Defence Pact at Mozambique's invitation, and that the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed the deployment within the ASF policy framework on 31 January 2022.
41 Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa, "The Southern African Development Community's Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM): Policymaking and Effectiveness", *International Peacekeeping* 30, no. 2 (2023): 198–229.

Scenario 6 is the most demanding contingency in the continental doctrine: intervention in a grave situation. SADC assigned its forces the hardest task in the framework, obtained continental endorsement after the fact and resourced the mission for neither.

TABLE 1 COOPERATION FRAMEWORKS AND OUTCOMES, 2011–2025

Deploy-ment	Frame-work	Mandate source	Financing	External enablers	Mandated objective achieved?	Assessment
CAR / Bangui (2013)	Bilateral	Defence cooperation agreement	National	None	Partly: force and base protected, wider directive unexecutable	Tactical success; strategic incoherence
Operation Copper (2011–)	Trilateral	MOU with Mozambique, Tanzania	National	None	Initially, then lapsed	Early effect, hollowed out by naval decline
FIB (2013)	UN Chapter VII	UNSCR 2098	UN assessed contributions	MONUSCO logistics, intelligence	Yes, at the time; not durable	M23 defeated in 2013, re-emerged in 2022
SAMIM (2021–24)	Regional (SADC)	SADC Extraordinary Summit	Troop-contributing states	Improvised	No	Insurgency suppressed, not defeated
SAMIDRC (2023–25)	Regional (SADC)	SADC Extraordinary Summit	Troop-contributing states	None	No	Defeat; mission terminated

Source: Compiled by authors

Each framework comes with a distinct set of considerations, and in each case the choice was made for reasons that were intelligible at the time.

The bilateral and trilateral arrangements offer speed, discretion and direct reciprocity: no UN Security Council negotiation is required, no coalition partner holds a veto over the mandate and the terms can be tailored to a particular relationship. The price is that the contributing state finances the whole undertaking and receives no external enabling support, while the legitimacy of the deployment rests on a single bilateral relationship. That relationship is only as durable as the government at either end. The CAR case demonstrates this vulnerability: the mission's legal and political basis was an agreement with a government that ceased to exist during the battle, exposing the deployment to the allegation that the interests being protected were not South Africa's. The absence of a burden-sharing partner also explains the resupply failure. There was no coalition logistics chain to draw on because there was no coalition.

The UN framework inverts the trade-off. A Chapter VII mandate confers legal authority and international legitimacy, and it comes with assessed contributions and a standing mission infrastructure. The FIB did not have to charter its own airlift or build its own

intelligence architecture, because MONUSCO already had both. The costs are political and procedural: a mandate requires consensus among the permanent members, the process is slow and the resulting mandate constrains national discretion over how the force is used. For a state seeking to demonstrate independent continental leadership, those constraints are not incidental. They are the point of the alternative.

The regional framework was chosen for SAMIM and SAMIDRC because it appeared to offer the advantages of both. It carried multilateral legitimacy of a kind, demonstrated regional solidarity, required no UN Security Council negotiation and could be authorised within weeks rather than months. Such ad hoc regional arrangements have become the characteristic African response to insecurity over the past decade, and SAMIM and SAMIDRC fit within that broader pattern.[42] In the DRC case, the circumstances made the regional route even more attractive. Kinshasa had signed a disengagement plan for MONUSCO's withdrawal in November 2023. It had declined to renew the East African Community Regional Force's (EACRF) mandate, with the EACRF handing its positions directly to the incoming SADC force in December 2023.[43] President Félix Tshisekedi's complaint against both was the same: they would not conduct offensive operations against M23. The opening SADC accepted, therefore, came with the expectation of precisely the proactive posture its predecessors had declined to adopt. The framework did not include money or enablers. SADC has no assessed-contribution mechanism, standing logistics base or joint force headquarters capable of planning and sustaining an expeditionary campaign. The costs fell on the troop-contributing states, which is to say principally on South Africa, and the enablers had to be found from national inventories that did not contain them.

Set out this way, the pattern across the five deployments is not primarily about the quality of the soldiers, which was broadly consistent throughout, nor about force size, since the FIB was not dramatically larger than SAMIDRC's authorised strength. The variable that tracks outcomes is whether the framework came with external financing and external enablers.

Two qualifications are required. Firstly, the FIB, the only comparative success, faced a weaker opponent: M23 in 2013 collapsed partly because Rwandan support was withdrawn under international pressure, whereas M23 in 2024–25 fought alongside several thousand Rwandan regulars. The claim this paper makes is accordingly weaker but still damning: the FIB's framework gave it a chance, while SAMIDRC's framework, whatever the opponent, gave it none. A force deployed at a quarter of its planned strength, without air support, surveillance or an ammunition pipeline, does not lose because the enemy is strong. It loses because it was never equipped to win. Secondly, Operation Copper's

42 Cedric de Coning, Andrew E. Yaw Tchie and Anab Ovidie Grand, "Ad-hoc Security Initiatives, an African Response to Insecurity", *African Security Review* 31, no. 4 (2022).

43 AFP, "East African Regional Force Begins Withdrawal from DRC", *France 24*, December 3, 2023; Jenna Russo, "East Africa's Troops Are Leaving the DRC: What Went Wrong and What Comes Next", *The Conversation*, December 11, 2023; "East African Force Departs DRC Amid Continuing Dissatisfaction as New Force Arrives", *Africa Defense Forum*, December 19, 2023.

hollowing was driven by the collapse of the naval budget, which no framework choice would have arrested. What the framework explains is the absence of any burden-sharing to cushion it: a trilateral arrangement in which each party patrols at its own cost transmits each party's fiscal weakness straight into the mission.

> A force deployed at a quarter of its planned strength, without air support, surveillance or an ammunition pipeline, does not lose because the enemy is strong. It loses because it was never equipped to win.

With those caveats entered, the finding stands. The one deployment whose framework included financing and enablers achieved its objective, at least at the time. The four whose frameworks included neither produced, in ascending order of cost, a hollowed-out patrol commitment, an inconclusive counter-insurgency campaign, a tactical victory in service of an unexplained objective, and a defeat.

The forward-looking implication is uncomfortable. The obvious lesson of the FIB comparison is that South Africa should route future peace-enforcement commitments through the UN. Yet that lesson is becoming harder to apply. Resolution 2719, adopted in December 2023 to allow AU-led operations to draw up to 75% of their budgets from UN assessed contributions, has yet to be applied to a single mission, having stalled over the financing of the AU mission in Somalia.[44] There is, moreover, a reading under which the problem is structural: the resolution requires a funded operation to remain under direct and effective AU command and control, which no regional or ad hoc operation has ever been.

On the analysis advanced by Amani Africa, operations mounted by regional economic communities, SADC among them, would have no direct access to the mechanism short of a hybrid command arrangement on the UNAMID model, which would mean SADC ceding operational control of its own mission.[45] In either reading, SAMIDRC as constituted could not have drawn on the mechanism even had it been functioning, and the assessed-funding advantage that made the FIB work cannot be assumed for the next deployment. If it is not available, the regional framework is the only remaining multilateral route, and it requires members to fund and enable their own operations for South Africa; that is a defence-budget question wearing a foreign policy hat. It also sharpens the choice this

44 UN Security Council, "Resolution 2719, S/RES/2719 (21 December 2023)", accessed September 25, 2026, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4031070; Haile and Yohannes, "Two Years On".

45 Amani Africa Media and Research Services, "Discussion on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2719 (2023)", July 23, 2024.

paper puts forward, because it removes the third option, on which policymakers have implicitly relied: the hope that someone else will pay for the capability South Africa has declined to build.

Defunding downward to obsolescence: The political economy of decline

To call defunding a 'policy choice' without explaining the political economy that produced it is to mistake the consequence for the cause. Every post-apartheid administration has deprioritised defence, and the reasons are intelligible if not defensible.

Three things explain the trajectory. The first is the post-1994 peace dividend. South Africa was demilitarising rapidly: statutory and non-statutory forces were integrated into a single institution, tens of thousands of personnel were demobilised and government spending was reoriented towards the social wage. Defence had been the apartheid state's most expensive single activity at its peak; reducing it released political and fiscal capital for housing, water, schools and clinics. The 1996 White Paper on Defence and the 1998 Defence Review reflected this logic: a smaller, defensive force suited to a country with no credible external threat.[46] The reduction was a deliberate political achievement, not an oversight.

The second is the post-2008 fiscal consolidation. Government expenditure had grown rapidly through the Mbeki years; the global financial crisis, followed by the protracted slowdown in commodity prices, pushed Treasury into recurrent austerity from 2009 onward. Defence was not unique in absorbing baseline cuts, but it absorbed a disproportionate share. Between 2008/09 and 2024/25, total government expenditure rose by 1 332%; the defence vote rose by 345%,[47] while that for the other security cluster departments rose by between 796% and 2 593%. The relative decline of defence within its own cluster reflects a deliberate reallocation towards policing, intelligence and correctional services, with the South African Police Service (SAPS) dominating the security debate after the 2008–2009 service-delivery protests, the 2012 Marikana massacre and the 2021 KwaZulu-Natal unrest.[48]

The third is the politics of defence procurement. The Strategic Defence Procurement Package of 1999, the so-called Arms Deal, defined the politics of defence acquisition for a

46 South Africa, Department of Defence, "White Paper on Defence" (Department of Defence, 1996); South Africa, Department of Defence, "South African Defence Review" (Department of Defence, 1998).

47 South Africa, Department of Defence, "Our Journey to Greatness: The South African National Defence Force's Long Term Plan" (Republic of South Africa, 2023), 7, Figure 1.4.

48 Sandy Africa, Mojankunyane Gumbi and Silumko Sokupa, *Report of the Expert Panel into the July 2021 Civil Unrest* (SA Government, 2021).

generation.[49] Corruption findings, the government's inability to explain the acquisitions, the collapse of Denel as a credible state-owned defence manufacturer[50] and the later pattern of state capture under the Zuma administration made any politician who advocated additional defence spending vulnerable to the suspicion that they were lobbying for procurement contracts. As a result, the political class has avoided the subject on both the right and the left for two decades. The 2015 Defence Review's costed expansion path, Parliament-approved in 2014 and 2015, was met with silence from Treasury. The department's 2017 'Plan to Arrest the Decline', Parliament-endorsed and fully costed for five years, was met with the same silence.[51] The Department of Defence's own internal planning document, 'Our Journey to Greatness', concedes openly that its plan is 'costed (estimations), but not fully funded'.[52] Four documents in a decade. Four failures of the same political mechanism.

This is the political economy the paper's binary choice runs into. Funding the SANDF to 1.5% of GDP is not just a defence question. It is a fiscal redistribution question: what comes out of the budget to fund the increase, and which constituency loses. Education, health, social grants, public sector wages, debt service or the SAPS: there are no other options on the South African fiscus. None of these constituencies will yield without a political contest, and no post-apartheid administration has been willing to fight that contest on defence's behalf. The country's military decline is not a bureaucratic accident but the cumulative outcome of the rational political choices of every administration since Mandela's. Recognising this is the precondition for taking the binary choice seriously.

The roots of decay: Systemic failures

The case studies above are symptoms. The underlying disease is structural, rooted in three decades of defunding, unimplemented policy reviews and leadership failures that have collectively brought the SANDF to the brink of irrelevance.

The budget trajectory is the starkest indicator. Measured by the fall in its defence spending since 1994, South Africa's decline is exceeded by only four countries: Mongolia, Sierra Leone, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. In each of those cases, the fall was triggered by economic collapse or comparable internal shock. South Africa's was not.[53] The 2025/26 defence budget of ZAR 59 billion ($3.56 billion) drops to ZAR 57.6 billion ($3.47 billion) in 2026/27, with an average growth rate over the medium term of 1.5%, well below

49 Republic of South Africa, *Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Fraud, Corruption, Impropriety or Irregularity in the Strategic Defence Procurement Package (the Seriti Commission)* (Government Press, 2016).

50 Kevin Gopaul, Elma van der Lingen and Rudolph Oosthuizen, "Reflecting on the Rise and Decline of the South African Defence Industry", *Scientia Militaria* 52, no. 1 (2024): 59–86.

51 Department of Defence, "Our Journey to Greatness", Chapter 1, paragraph 18.

52 Department of Defence, "Our Journey to Greatness", Chapter 21, paragraph 9a, "Strategic Issues".

53 Clive Coetzee, "The Depth and Breadth of the Defunding of the SANDF", *DefenceWeb*, May 16, 2025; SIPRI, "Military Expenditure Database".

inflation, implying a continued real-terms decline.[54] Had South Africa maintained even a modest 2% of GDP allocation since 1994, the defence budget in 2024 would have been approximately ZAR 77 billion ($4.65 billion) (in constant 2010 prices) rather than the actual ZAR 28 billion ($1.69 billion), a cumulative shortfall over three decades of roughly ZAR 780 billion ($47 billion).

South Africa has had no shortage of policy documents recognising this problem. The 2015 Defence Review recommended fundamental restructuring and recapitalisation, but Treasury never funded its implementation, and it has not been enacted.[55] The 2024–2028 National Security Strategy articulates objectives such as territorial integrity, economic security and regional leadership but 'stops short of addressing current funding gaps in concrete terms'.[56] South Africa does not lack strategic documents. It lacks the political will to fund them.

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The personnel crisis is equally severe. The average age of uniformed regular SANDF personnel is 39. For the Reserve Force, it is 49 and rising.[57] An audit by the SA Military Health Service revealed that only 27% of the standing force is medically fit for deployment, while 36% of soldiers have not even received a medical assessment.[58] The inverted rank structure (too many senior officers, too few junior enlisted) reflects years of recruitment stagnation, and the projected departure of hundreds of senior staff by 2027 threatens a catastrophic loss of institutional knowledge without a credible succession plan.

Equipment availability tells the same story. The SAAF can field only two of 26 Gripen fighter jets, none of its five C-130 Hercules transports and two of 11 Rooivalk attack helicopters. Overall aircraft serviceability hovers between 15% and 20%.[59] The SA Army's Ratel infantry fighting vehicles and Olifant tanks date from the 1970s and 1980s, while the Badger replacement programme, contractually scheduled for delivery in May 2012, remains incomplete, with ZAR 7.7 billion ($465 million) spent and several billion still needed.[60]

54 Nzeadibe Ijeoma, "South African Defence Budget Shrinks Despite Govt's Promises", *Military Africa*, February 28, 2026.
55 "Defence Review 2015 Unlikely to Ever Be Fully Implemented", *DefenceWeb*, November 29, 2018.
56 Ricardo Teixeira, "Feature: SA's New National Security Strategy Aims High, but Faces Familiar Hurdles", *DefenceWeb*, July 17, 2025.
57 "Average Age of Uniformed Regular SANDF Personnel Is 39", *DefenceWeb*, September 5, 2025.
58 Sara-Jayne Makwala King, "SANDF Audit Reveals Only 27% of Soldiers Fit for Duty", *Eyewitness News*, December 9, 2025.
59 Ricardo Teixeira and Dean Wingrin, "Setting the Record Straight on SAAF Aircraft Availability", *DefenceWeb*, March 27, 2025.
60 "Financial and Technical Issues Delay New SANDF Equipment", *DefenceWeb*, November 9, 2023.

In every service arm, the SANDF operates equipment that is older, scarcer and less capable than at any point in the post-apartheid era.

The cumulative effect is a self-reinforcing decline. Each year of underfunding deepens the maintenance backlog, raises the cost of future repairs and drives out experienced technicians and officers who cannot be replaced. The SANDF is not merely declining; it is approaching a tipping point beyond which recovery becomes exponentially more difficult and more costly than continuous investment would have been.

Foreign policy consequences

Military capability is not the whole of South Africa's foreign policy credibility, nor is it the largest part. Pretoria's standing rests substantially on other things: a record of legal and normative activism, from the Rome Statute to the International Court of Justice; membership of the G20 and BRICS and a place in the AU's institutional leadership; trade and investment ties that make it the continent's most diversified economy; scientific cooperation, from the Square Kilometre Array to continental health infrastructure; and the moral inheritance of 1994. None of these depends on the SANDF. Its decline has meaningfully degraded none. A country can be a consequential international actor with a small military, and several are.

The claim advanced here is narrower and, for that reason, harder to evade. Military capability is the one pillar that the others cannot substitute for. Diplomatic capital does not generate rotary-wing availability. Trade ties do not extract a battalion from Goma. Where a foreign policy commits soldiers, capability becomes the binding constraint and no amount of standing in other domains relieves it. The reverse holds only partially: a state that declines to commit soldiers pays a diplomatic price, but a manageable and recoverable one. A state whose committed soldiers are defeated pays in every domain at once.

Diplomatic capital does not generate rotary-wing availability. Trade ties do not extract a battalion from Goma.

This is precisely why this paper puts forward a choice, not an argument for rearmament. The diplomatic path is real. Recasting South Africa's continental security role as one of mediation, convening, election support, institutional capacity-building and normative leadership would entail little cost to credibility. It would play to its actual comparative advantages. What is not viable is the current position, in which the military instrument is committed as though it were sound. The credibility of the other pillars is spent underwriting promises the force cannot keep. Two consecutive SADC mission failures

within three years have damaged South Africa's standing as a regional security actor, and the damage came not from a lack of capability but from committing capability that was absent. As SAIIA concluded, Pretoria 'pledged support to a SADC member state based on principles, invested public resources and South African lives in the operation but was ultimately incapable of providing what it promised'.[61]

An ISS assessment of the January 2026 Exercise Will for Peace, a joint naval exercise in Simon's Town that revealed serious command-and-control failures, identified a 'profound disconnect between the country's defence and foreign-policy establishment that appears increasingly ill-suited to a fluid geopolitical environment'.[62] The absence of a national maritime security strategy, the inability to coordinate naval exercises at a ministerial level and the broader pattern of deploying forces without strategic clarity all point to the same conclusion: South Africa's defence establishment is neither structured nor resourced to support its foreign policy ambitions.

While South Africa's military capability has contracted, its continental peers have moved in the opposite direction. Rwanda spends approximately 1.3% of GDP on defence, maintains an internationally respected rapid-deployment capability and currently has between 6 000 and 9 000 troops deployed on peacekeeping and bilateral security missions across Africa. Kenya was designated a US 'Major Non-NATO Ally' in June 2024, with its defence budget rising by 12.7% that year alongside a $236 million modernisation programme.[63] South Africa, by contrast, spends 0.78% of GDP, a figure that is declining in both absolute and relative terms. Where Pretoria once led continental peace operations, it now struggles to sustain them.

Heitman, writing in The *Round Table*, frames the issue precisely: the primary problem is 'the mismatch between what the South African government wants the armed forces to do, and the funding it provides'.[64] The SANDF is expected to safeguard sovereign territory, support peace operations across the continent, assist with domestic policing and respond to natural disasters on a budget that has declined by 25% in real terms since 2015.[65]

Policy recommendations

If South Africa chooses to fund the SANDF rather than scale back its commitments, the following recommendations are sequenced according to the same three-level framework. Tactical investments are necessary but not sufficient. Operational investments are where the gap is widest. Strategic clarity is what determines whether either of the first two pays off.

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61 Wolters, "DRC Debacle Batters South Africa".

62 Timothy Walker and Priyal Singh, "SA's Naval-Gazing Reflects a Deep Defence and Foreign Policy Disconnect", *ISS Today*, January 22, 2026.

63 "30 Years On, SANDF Faces Budgetary and Readiness Challenges", *Africa Defense Forum*, April 2, 2024; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2026* (Routledge, 2026).

64 Helmoed Römer Heitman, "South Africa's Declining Military Capability", *The Round Table* 114, no. 4 (2025).

65 Theo Neethling, "South Africa's Military Is Expected to Do More Than Ever with Tighter Budgets: How the Force Has Declined over 30 Years", *The Conversation*, February 4, 2024.

At the tactical level

The priority is personnel. A managed rejuvenation programme is the single largest tactical-level intervention available: voluntary early retirement for personnel beyond deployable age, accelerated recruitment of younger soldiers, restored junior-leader development pipelines and a deliberate succession plan for the senior departures projected through 2027. Equipment at this level matters, but less than people: the case studies make it clear that the failure has not been at the level of the soldier on the ground.

At the operational level

The gap is widest here, and three capabilities account for most of it.

The first is rotary-wing aviation. Cabo Delgado and the DRC both showed that a counter-insurgency or peace-enforcement campaign without functioning Oryx and Rooivalk fleets cannot succeed. Recapitalising rotary-wing capability is the single highest-priority operational investment.

The second is strategic airlift. The Bangui resupply failure in 2013 and the Goma extraction failure in 2025 both stemmed from the same problem: the C-130BZ fleet is too small, too old and too unreliable, and chartered alternatives cannot be counted on in a contested environment. Whether the answer is a leasing arrangement with a strategic partner, a domestic recapitalisation programme or a joint-pool arrangement with SADC partners, the absence of strategic airlift is the operational failure the paper has documented most consistently.

The third is the cluster of capabilities that did not appear independently in the case studies because they did not exist to fail: medical evacuation, communications interoperability with regional partners, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Building these is non-negotiable for any expeditionary force. The SANDF's own 'Journey to Greatness' planning document costs an external Rapid Deployment Capability at roughly ZAR 13 billion ($787 million) over three years; this plan exists, is costed and is not funded.[66]

At the strategic level

Four interventions are needed.

The first is a publicly legitimised defence review with a realistic funding mandate. The 2015 Defence Review's expansion path was unaffordable; the SANDF's own 2023 internal planning exercise, 'Our Journey to Greatness', conducted entirely within the Department of Defence without public consultation or external expertise, lacks the legitimacy to serve

66 Department of Defence, "Our Journey to Greatness".

as a substitute. The president must commission a new review that includes external defence and policy expertise; allows public consultations, as with the 1996 White Paper and the 2015 Review; and begins from the funding envelope Treasury will actually provide. If that envelope is 0.78% of GDP, the review must identify which capabilities to retire permanently. If it is 1.5%, the review must sequence the recapitalisation.[67]

The second is a costed and, most importantly, funded Force Employment Requirement that aligns foreign policy commitments with actual military capacity. SAMIM and SAMIDRC were both deployed without an honest assessment of whether the SANDF could sustain them. Any future SADC, AU or UN deployment should be conditional on a written military-readiness assessment, with sign-off by the chief of the SANDF on logistics, medical evacuation and air support, rather than on political-level pledges that the institution is then asked to deliver against.

The third is exit-criteria doctrine. Every case study documented in this paper turns on the same strategic failure: deployments without a definition of success and a date for mission end. SAMIM left when funding ran out, not when it had achieved its objectives. SAMIDRC left after Goma had fallen. A SANDF doctrine on mission objectives and exit criteria, written formally and applied at the political level, would be a low-cost intervention with high analytical leverage.

The fourth is institutional alignment between the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, the Presidency and the Department of Defence. The January 2026 Exercise Will for Peace exposed a defence and foreign policy establishment that does not coordinate at the ministerial level. A standing inter-departmental coordination mechanism, modelled on national security councils elsewhere, would address this gap.

The thread running through all these recommendations is strategic clarity. The SANDF's crisis is not solely a funding crisis; it is a crisis of purpose. A ZAR 50 billion ($3 billion) increase to a force without a defined mission and structure will be absorbed by personnel costs, legacy facilities and the same procurement pathologies that produced the Badger delay and the dormant submarine fleet. A ZAR 50 billion increase to a force with strategic clarity could rebuild the operational base on which tactical competence can again be exercised. The order of recommendations matters: clarity first, then funding, then capability.

Conclusion

The SANDF's decline is a policy choice, made incrementally over three decades by successive administrations that treated defence as a discretionary expense rather than a strategic necessity. Each unimplemented review, each deferred maintenance contract, each recruitment freeze has compounded the problem.

67 Guy Martin, "Increasing Defence Spending to 1.5% of GDP Will Take Many Years – Motshekga", *DefenceWeb*, September 23, 2025.

This choice now produces consequences that cannot be managed at a level where South Africa still performs well. The soldiers can fight: Bangui, Cabo Delgado and Goma established this. However, they cannot be sustained or combined effectively with regional partners, and they have repeatedly been sent to do things nobody defined. The four cases show the same pattern across four theatres, two decades and three cooperation frameworks. The one deployment whose framework included external financing and enablers had a chance of succeeding, while those whose frameworks had neither did not. That finding has the shortest shelf life of any in this paper, because the multilateral financing route is narrowing at the moment South Africa needs it most.

Neither of the proposed solutions is cheap. Funding the force to 1.5% of GDP means a fiscal contest with constituencies that will not yield quietly, and winning it in a political culture that has treated defence advocacy as suspect since the Arms Deal. Scaling back means telling SADC partners, and a domestic audience accustomed to a particular idea of South Africa's continental role, that the country will no longer do certain things. The first requires money the government has not been willing to find. The second requires candour it has not been willing to offer. What the country has done instead is avoid the choice, and the cost of the avoidance has been counted in soldiers' lives: 13 killed in action at Bangui and two more died of their wounds, 14 at Goma.

> The soldiers who fought at Bangui, who deployed to Cabo Delgado and who died at Goma, did not fail South Africa. South Africa failed them.

The soldiers who fought at Bangui, who deployed to Cabo Delgado and who died at Goma, did not fail South Africa. South Africa failed them. Whether the country chooses to correct this failure or to accept its consequences is the defining national security question of the next decade.

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Cover image

SANDF soldiers in Bujumbura, Burundi, on February 25, 2016 (Photo by Yvan Rukundo/Anadolu Agency/ Getty Images)

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