

In defence of the region

There's a price attached to military co-operation in southern Africa, writes PETER VALE

FOR better and for worse southern Africa has a common future which is why only the mischievous or the myopic in the region wish South Africa ill during this painful time.

Why our neighbours wish us well is not surprising. They are born of struggle. Each has had to make the new beginning, like the one which faces South Africa in the days that lie ahead. As established and experienced states, they know that South Africa's progress is their own, and they realise that setbacks point in the other direction.

If – as the pessimists now argue – reversals take hold and South Africa begins a slow but certain disintegration, the sub-continent will begin to resemble the Balkans. Already porous borders will be flattened as people flee warlords and small arms.

These developments, and their consequences, will divert much needed resources from development projects. The militaries of the region will gear themselves to protect – as much as they are able – their countries from the fallout which follows South Africa's violent break-up.

Although military planners are taught to keep their powder dry for the worst possible outcome, most in the region hope South Africa will emerge – in spite of the current turmoil – intact and economically sound. If this happens, South Africa will join – like Namibia did in 1990 – their regional family as a peaceful and prosperous member.

Should this happen, military budgets will shrink as priorities shift: southern Africa's swords will be fashioned into the proverbial (and in the local context much-needed) ploughshares. Education, health, welfare: these will benefit and, with them, the prospects for lasting democracy throughout southern Africa will blossom.

For many in South Africa, military collaboration is a contradiction in terms: after all, viewed from *apartheid* the armies of the neighbourhood were bent on the country's destruction. To collaborate with them, so many were taught, is to collude with the enemy, to help bring South Africa to its knees. To argue this, however, is to believe that southern Africa ends at the Limpopo.

The momentous changes which have taken place internationally have driven states

in the furthest corners of the world – corners like southern Africa – closer together.

Together we can help each other understand and manage new security threats – from AIDS to small arms proliferation, from drought to drug-trafficking, from malaria to migrants, from waste-disposal to the management of dwindling water resources.

In May a conference jointly organised by the Peace Research Institute, Frankfurt, the Foundation for Peace and Development, Bonn, and the Centre for Southern African Studies, University of the Western Cape, drew – for the first time – senior military men and academics together to consider the potential which might flow from deeper understanding between the region's militaries. But South Africans had additional interest in the meeting: Umkhonto weSizwe and the SADF shared the same table.

Central to the deliberations were how to replace the traditional security dilemma with a system which could understand, manage and resolve conflict – and its potential for destruction – in the region. At the same time, the delegates were determined that this could only be ensured if the countries of the region committed themselves unequivocally to a democratic future.

In the end three institutions were recommended: one inter-governmental, the other two lodged in civil society.

To understand conflict, both near and far, the conference recommended that a Southern African Institute for Security and Development Studies should be established. Although based in a single country, it would be the property of all southern Africa's people. To be fully effective, it will pursue its goals of research and publication free of partisanship and bias.

Then, the conference argued, only inter-government dialogue can manage conflict. This as an Interstate Committee on Peace and Security – which is user-friendly to SADCC (Southern African Development Coordinating Conference) – made sense to the delegates. If successful, the region will have developed a mechanism to discuss security concerns. But it promises more: not only will it act as an early-warning system, it will help institutionalise joint military training and the exchange of senior military personnel.

Finally, conflict resolution and arbitration should fall outside of government domain. The delegates thought that a non-government centre for mediation which builds, for

instance, upon the excellent work done by UCT's Centre for Intergroup Studies, might help settle disputes if (and when) they arose.

But for these plans to come to fruition, South Africa must become a responsible member of the southern African family. Although sympathetic to the pain of this transition, it was clear that without an internationally-recognised settlement, South Africa could not sup at the region's table.

Many felt, however, that South Africa had to do more than simply pass the test of international respectability. Perhaps, it was suggested, South Africa could unilaterally destroy its offensive weapons capability. Such a signal, too, would begin to resolve the regional security dilemma.

And beyond this, the country would have to integrate all armed formations into a single defence force. This means a fundamental restructuring of the country's defence forces; simply absorbing MK into the rump of the existing SADF will not be enough.

Perhaps the sharpest difference of opinion was on the issue of the past – how will we live with it, how will we explain it to our children.

Some, from South Africa, argued that what has gone before belongs before. To build confidence, we will need to look forward: to delve into the past will not build, but break. Additionally, they argued, if we must talk about what happened in the region in the 1970s and 1980s then all the parties who contributed to southern Africa's chronic insecurity should be called to account.

But many from the region saw it differently – we must jointly explore the past so that we can live in the future. If you sweep the horror of the past away, a British academic reminded us, the region might well face the Yugoslav option. The destruction of that country is in no small way ascribed to the belief that the history could simply be swept under the carpet.

Our neighbours wish us well. But they believe that they are owed some explanations as to why the past was so destructive: why was infrastructure destroyed; why were lives lost.

Those at this conference did not want war crimes or financial retribution. But they do want us to understand our common past in the context of a common history. This, they believe, we must do if our children are to enjoy the peace they deserve.

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