

Conditions for Successful Entry and Exit:

An Assessment of SADC Allied Operations in Lesotho

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INTRODUCTION

On 22 September 1998, the early morning silence of Lesotho was shattered by the sounds of Operation Boleas when 600 South African soldiers moved into Lesotho. Thus began the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) almost seven month-long operation in an effort to deal with the deteriorating security situation in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho. Although it was said to be a combined task force, consisting of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and the Botswana Defence Force (BDF), it was not before nightfall on 22 September that approximately 200 Botswana troops arrived in Maseru.

The *mission* of the combined task force was "*... to intervene militarily in Lesotho to prevent any further anarchy and to create a stable environment for the restoration of law and order.*"¹ The *battle concept* was described as "[t]he deployment of forces in order to locate and identify destabilisers and destabiliser resources, to disarm and contain them and to strike where applicable with the necessary force to eliminate the threat."² The *desired result* was to create a stable environment in Lesotho, and to restore law and order to enable negotiations to take place between the political parties in Lesotho.³

The South African government insisted that the military intervention did not constitute an invasion,⁴ while the SANDF maintained that there was not only a proper SADC mandate, but also a virtual moral obligation on South Africa and Botswana to intervene in Lesotho.⁵ The decision was based on and justified by the fact that SADC was directly approached by the prime minister of Lesotho, Pakalitha Mosisili, who requested the intervention;⁶ that the intervention was based on agreements reached in SADC; that all attempts at peacefully resolving the dispute had failed; and that South Africa had intervened to protect certain South African interests such as the Katse Dam water scheme. It was furthermore stated that the Lesotho government was democratically elected (despite certain irregularities during the election process) and that it was increasingly required of South Africa to play a role in regional peacekeeping efforts.⁷ In addition, it was stated that the decision to intervene had signalled to

ambitious elements in the military forces in the region that the political aspirations of any military faction would not be tolerated in any member state, and that South Africa's commitment to this policy was also a commitment to development in the region.[8](#)

For collective security to be effective and to ensure successful multiparty entry and exit in conflict situations, certain conditions are required both at the military and political levels. In this context, this contribution is an attempt to discuss Operation Boleas with special focus on the South African forces that participated in the operation. The broad political context in which the operation took place, is briefly discussed, before turning to an assessment of the operational activities during 1998 up to the point where Operation Boleas began displaying many of the classic hallmarks of a peace mission.

BROAD INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Success in any multinational operation depends upon a broad political process. Such missions never only comprise military exercises. In fact, military operations play a distinctly supportive role, and may even produce few obvious results with regard to the outcome. Of significant importance is the broad political apparatus or institutional framework created to manage co-operative security and to co-ordinate the military effort.

In addition, military operations in the realm of peace and security critically depend on the extent to which international authority underpins such operations and on the political will of participating member states. This kind of authority is necessary to assist in reducing political pressure on the countries involved, to prevent the international isolation of the participating countries if an operation aborts, and to prevent over-extending the capabilities of a country's armed forces.[9](#) Such a political apparatus and institutional framework are also important for the legitimacy of an operation. Legitimacy is frequently a decisive element in intervention operations, as such operations are only likely to be supported by other external roleplayers if they are perceived as legitimate.[10](#)

Framework for military intervention

One of the greatest difficulties experienced during Operation Boleas was clearly its political justification from a regional perspective. Much confusion surrounded the modalities for security co-operation under the auspices of SADC. In August 1998, SADC became the focus of international attention when Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia decided to intervene in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The decision was based on requests from President Laurent Kabila for military assistance (the DRC became a member of SADC in 1997) against advancing rebel forces.[11](#) Still, the undertaking was *ad hoc* and was not organised under SADC auspices, although it did receive retroactive endorsement from SADC.[12](#)

South Africa specifically emphasised the need for a peaceful solution and declined to send troops. It was also reported that South Africa would only consider sending troops

should a peacekeeping force (presumably in accordance with a UN mandate) be deployed in the DRC.¹³ The South African decision eventually proved to be a wise one, since Rwanda and Uganda decided to engage in the conflict in support of the rebel movement, while Chad and Sudan were subsequently drawn in to fight on the side of Kabila.¹⁴ Another important point relates to the fact that Zimbabwe and Angola were harshly criticised in the South African media, as reporters claimed that Zimbabwe's main motive was an effort to promote Zimbabwean business interests in the Congo. Similarly, it was reported that Angola's interest was to prevent the Angolan rebel force, Unita, from using the DRC as a rear-base.¹⁵

On 31 August 1998, the UN Security Council issued a statement calling for a cease-fire in the DRC, the withdrawal of all foreign forces and the opening of political dialogue towards national reconciliation. The statement also repeated an earlier call for an international conference on peace, security and development in the region to be held under the auspices of the UN and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).¹⁶ However, at the Eighteenth SADC Summit held in Mauritius on 13 and 14 September 1998, the SADC heads of state and government "... welcomed initiatives by SADC and its Member States intended to assist in the restoration of peace, security and stability in DRC ..." ¹⁷

In September 1998, shortly after Kabila's request for assistance, South Africa and Botswana intervened in Lesotho in an attempt to assist the Lesotho government in restoring law and order following the election-related unrest. The undertaking was labelled as a 'SADC force' in name after a series of phone calls between the relevant heads of state.¹⁸ The intervention was immediately questioned, as some observers claimed that the operation went beyond existence in international law as only the point that South Africa had intervened to protect certain South African interests, such as the Katse Dam water scheme, would seem to have clear existence in international law.¹⁹ Specifically, this implies that a case of propping up a shaky regime, unable to represent Lesotho as its government, could not be regarded as a proper response in terms of international law.²⁰ It was furthermore pointed out that there were no clear guidelines on the part of SADC regarding military responses to internal conflicts in SADC member countries.²¹

Co-ordinating military intervention

It can be rightly argued that any justification for a military intervention on the grounds that it is in the interest of peace must proceed from the assumption that such justification cannot be contradictory to the purpose and principles of the UN, as embodied in the Charter of the world body.²² To this end, Article 24 of the Charter confers upon the UN Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Article 52 deals with 'regional arrangements' and states that nothing in the Charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security. Yet, intervention operations should not be contemplated without UN authorisation, as Article 53 of the UN Charter clearly states that "... no enforcement action shall be taken under regional arrangement or by regional agencies without the

authorisation of the Security Council ... [23](#)

Until recently, intervention operations were conducted under the auspices of the UN and under the guise of peacekeeping — especially peace enforcement. The UN operation in Somalia is a typical example as it was basically a peacemaking operation based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter.[24](#) However, recent developments in Africa, with special reference to intervention in Sierra Leone, the DRC and Lesotho, have pointed towards intervention operations without UN endorsement.

What seems to be important is to address potential conflicts or *coups* before they take place or escalate beyond control. Indeed, Boleas commander, Colonel Robbie Hartslief, suggested that *"... this kind of intervention [in Lesotho should] be accepted as a new kind of peace operation in Africa, because such operations may prevent a massive loss of lives and enormous economic damage."* According to Hartslief, everything possible must be done to prevent civil war, and this can be achieved only if intervention takes place before armed conflict occurs. *"The problem is that people romanticise peace operations. It would seem to me that firstly they want to have an outbreak of civil war, then a cease-fire, then an agreement which is acknowledged by the UN, and only then should the peace force move in."*[25](#)

However, it should be borne in mind that peacekeeping is essentially a UN responsibility, that it should be endorsed by the world body, and conducted in accordance with the international ethos of the UN Charter. This would imply that any justification for military intervention on the grounds that it is in the interest of peace must proceed from the assumption that it is not contradictory to the UN Charter. At the same time, some analysts suggest that intervention operations should be led by regional organisations or military alliances, or even a single nation, under the political authorisation of the UN.[26](#) However, this would mean that the formulation of UN mandates should not inhibit swift intervention in internal crises, and that regional or subregional organisations should clearly provide for guidelines with regard to military responses to internal conflicts within the framework of sound objectives.

What is also significant is the fact that the UN now seems prepared to form partnerships with willing regional organisations and alliances in Africa as far as operations for maintaining peace and security are concerned. This relates to the idea of a shared responsibility between the UN and continental stakeholders for the effective management of conflict in Africa. As such, Africa is the first continent where extensive efforts have been made between the UN and a regional body (the OAU) with the specific objective of enhancing the management of conflicts in the region. However, many issues remain unclear, specifically in terms of an ideal arrangement between the UN, the OAU and other roleplayers. If these and the above issues are not resolved, the justification and motives of interventionists in regional conflicts are likely to be called into question and, consequently, the military aspects of such operations are also likely to be subjected to a greater degree of criticism and scrutiny.

OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF BOLEAS

The nature of intervention operations is multidimensional (political/diplomatic, military/

security, humanitarian/economic/social) and this requires planned co-ordination with the view to ensure a coherent multinational effort.²⁷ To assess Operation Boleas as a military operation, certain essential elements or requirements in any peace intervention operation or enforcement action have to be taken into account.²⁸ From a theoretical and practical viewpoint, the successful conduct of such operations requires a high degree of co-ordination between various contributing nations and bodies, as well as clear objectives and demands.

Mission and mandate

Multinational military forces of all kinds are often presented with serious challenges and resistant operational environments. In such volatile situations, mandates must provide for sporadic changes in the nature of operations and in the military action to be taken. Moreover, as multinational operations in the name of peace and security reside in the interface between political and military affairs, the need for clear mandates and rules of engagement is paramount. Against this background, the experience of military forces in many theatres highlights a critical issue concerning the contemporary challenge of operations in internal conflicts, namely the problem of formulating mandates of which the humanitarian and political objectives are effectively understood and reinforced by the forces on the ground.²⁹

As far as Operation Boleas is concerned, the SANDF claimed that the forces were mandated to conduct a military intervention operation to establish control over the border between South Africa and Lesotho, to protect South African assets and to stabilise Maseru in order to create a safe environment in which Lesotho's problems could be negotiated.³⁰ The task of the SANDF was therefore to prevent any further anarchy, to negate the threat of a military *coup*, and to create a stable environment within which a political settlement could evolve.³¹ From a political perspective, it was also stated that the operation did not intend to 'prop up' either the Lesotho government, or the opposition. Intervention was intended to quash a military *coup* which would have prevented the people of Lesotho from democratically resolving any conflict dividing the majority and its opposition.³²

In a *post mortem* of its foray into Lesotho, however, the SANDF did claim that the government lacked a clear national security policy and that it had not been made clear to the SANDF that Operation Boleas was an intervention operation as opposed to a peace support operation.³³ Still, in the light of the above, it would be fair to conclude that the military forces were not hampered by political uncertainty or confusion over the political and strategic objectives of Operation Boleas. Unlike many other multinational operations — especially peace enforcement operations — previously conducted on African soil, the operational situation did not fluctuate and require sporadic changes in the nature of the operation and in the action to be taken on the part of the military forces. In fact, the operation was conducted in a tiny country with a 909 kilometre long border. The forces simply had to deal with a deteriorating security situation, to secure South African interests in respect of the gigantic Highlands water project, and to prevent a military *coup* by mutinous members of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF).

The SANDF publicly stated that the rules of engagement, the status of forces agreement and the mandate had been made clear before the operation began, and that legal briefings had been given to all concerned prior to the deployment of forces. The only problem was that a wider mandate should have been provided to cover incidents such as the looting which took place in central Maseru. Specifically, the maintenance of law and order was inhibited because the SADC forces had no powers of arrest.³⁴

Mandate *versus* means

Sub-Saharan Africa is in need of financial assistance to conduct regional operations in order to maintain peace and security.³⁵ Many African defence forces experience logistical and organisational problems, and are generally plagued by obsolete and worn-out military equipment, while training difficulties are also experienced.³⁶ This lack of resources hinders the participation of many countries in multinational operations, as most experience difficulties in respect of the ground, air or sea transportation required for timely long distance deployment.³⁷

In the case of Operation Boleas, the South African Army deployed a mechanised battalion, with an airborne company in reserve, on 22 September 1998. The South African Air Force deployed six Oryx transport helicopters, two Alouette III helicopter gunships, two Alouette III helicopters (in a command role) and a Cessna Caravan. In addition, a Botswana mechanised infantry company joined after a twelve-hour delay.³⁸ According to the chief of the SANDF, General Siphwe Nyanda, the operation cost the SANDF more than R24 million over the period 22 September to 2 November 1998. These costs included more than R6,2 million for personnel allowances, R13-million for civilian transportation and R2,7 million for air support services.³⁹ In February 1999, it was revealed that the total expenses of the operation amounted to R36 million⁴⁰ and that the Lesotho government would have to carry the costs.⁴¹

Although the SANDF claimed that the costs of its involvement in Lesotho had depleted its already strained budget⁴² and that the SANDF's war reserves were also at depleted levels,⁴³ there is no conclusive indication that the operation was hampered by financial constraints in terms of its day-to-day operational activities. In fact, the strength and capability of the South African forces in the African context are indisputable, while Botswana has become an 'upper middle income' country in terms of the World Bank definition, with one of the world's highest economic growth rates.⁴⁴ It can therefore be argued that a lack of resources and inadequate logistic support cannot be seriously considered as impeding factors in conducting the intervention operation in Lesotho.

Neither were the forces troubled by difficulties of long distance deployment. Certain problems, such as ineffective telecommunications during the operation, were more the result of inexperience and a lack of functionally trained and skilled personnel. Yet, the SANDF's public acknowledgement that there were only limited reserves of ration packs, batteries, vehicle tyres, and vehicle spares for infantry combat vehicles (ICVs) and armoured personnel carriers (APCs), should not be taken lightly and are indicative of the fact that budget cuts have had a deleterious effect on the force's main and other

equipment.[45](#)

At the same time, some analysts argue that the deployment of a force that was too weak to carry out its mission quickly in the face of serious opposition influenced the outcome of Operation Boleas. It would seem that this situation was aggravated by the late arrival of the BDF contingent, leaving the intervention force under strength during the crucial early hours and with no troops to handle the unexpected rioting and looting in Maseru.[46](#) Media reports suggested that, if the SANDF had entered Lesotho with a much stronger troop contingent, the city could have been flooded with patrols, obviating the need to lift a finger against civilians who ran riot, thus possibly saving Maseru from partial destruction.[47](#)

The SANDF, however, maintained that the forces had been correctly composed in the light of intelligence reports and of the operational appreciation of the level of resistance expected, and pointed to the fact that the forces had been committed to the doctrine of minimum force.[48](#) Yet, the SANDF eventually took the step of increasing its troop numbers in Lesotho to 3 500 in the course of events during October 1998, and later admitted that there was a perception on the part of the SADC forces that the dissident elements in Lesotho would be disoriented and that they would be easily overcome.[49](#)

In the final analysis, information on the run-up, planning and execution of Operation Boleas reveals that the preliminary decision made at the operational level was based on Operation Kitso, a contingency plan that was designed only for the evacuation of South Africa's High Commission personnel and South African citizens in Lesotho, and not for military intervention in the event of a possible *coup d'état*. Clearly, a more comprehensive operational plan should have been formulated.[50](#)

Co-ordination and unity of effort

States participating in multinational operations to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts retain their autonomy and sovereignty. Such contending national priorities have the potential to translate themselves into problems with command and control, rules of engagement, disciplinary measures and personnel procedures. Differences of opinion in a volatile situation may result in political differences and disagreements between the participating states.[51](#) Furthermore, challenges concerning a lack of co-ordination between and within mission elements can pose a great number of military problems, particularly given different training standards, operating procedures and suspicions about intelligence-sharing.[52](#)

With regard to Operation Boleas, the SADC forces initially consisted exclusively of SANDF personnel, rather than a mix of SANDF and BDF soldiers. South Africa, owing to its proximity to Lesotho and its size, contributed far greater force numbers to the operation than did Botswana. In addition, the South African forces were also 'first on the scene' and, as such, had to deal with what was perhaps the most difficult and challenging part of the operation. As already pointed out, the BDF troops arrived in Lesotho only after the SANDF had been engaged in a day-long solo effort, in combat

operations against LDF elements — particularly in and around Maseru. The BDF had also been committed to the less volatile area of southern Lesotho, where its vehicles were more suited to the terrain than the heavier South African vehicles.[53](#)

It should also be noted that a combined joint headquarters had been established by the combined task force to conduct simultaneous planning and execution and to conduct replanning during execution.[54](#) It would therefore seem that challenges associated with a lack of co-ordination and command and control arrangements between and within national contingents cannot be cited as factors that impinged on Operation Boleas in any significant terms.

Intelligence collection capabilities

Contemporary peace initiatives have shown that politically fluid and militarily complex situations may require more advanced resources and procedures for collecting, assessing and distributing intelligence. Intelligence on the military power and disposition of forces, the location of minefields, the level of violence and other features in a deployment area are essential for planning and conducting military operations.[55](#) In order to be effective in mandate execution, a military commander needs to be able to detect the movement of the belligerent forces, determine the location of arms caches, and anticipate the plans and tactics of those who intend to violate agreements and jeopardise the execution of the mission mandate.

The issue of intelligence certainly was one of the most controversial aspects of Operation Boleas. Media reports generally described the intelligence used to guide the South African troops into battle as "*poor and inaccurate*", and associated this with the much higher than expected rate of casualties.[56](#) Even specialised military journals reported, for example, that the underlying cause of problems encountered during the operation seems to have been the failure of South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs and the intelligence services to provide an accurate picture of the situation. Consequently, the SANDF had made an over-optimistic assessment of the situation, resulting in the deployment of a force too weak to handle the situation.[57](#)

In response to media reports and speculation, SANDF spokesperson, Colonel John Rolt stated that "*if there had been a problem internally with gathering intelligence, as was being speculated, then it was best that the problem was sorted out internally.*"[58](#) At the same time, Colonel Hartsliet, the force commander, maintained that the South African forces were in a position to make use of proper intelligence reports. He disclosed that the South African special forces were dispatched to the mission area prior to the operation with the aim of providing the SADC forces with relevant information and that the SANDF did not enter Lesotho blindly. According to Hartsliet, it was, rather, the 'fog of war' that played a role in operational difficulties encountered during the deployment phase.[59](#)

However, the SANDF eventually admitted that the degree of armed resistance that was encountered, was greater than had been expected[60](#) and that the initial commitment of 600 SANDF troops was based on intelligence reports anticipating limited resistance.[61](#)

It was also admitted that, as a result of the withdrawal from Lesotho of the South African military attaché in April 1998, the SANDF had suffered a significant loss of intelligence collection capabilities in that country. By the same token, observation teams could not confirm certain critical tactical information on time, and adequate aerial photographs were unavailable. It was publicly stated that the SANDF intelligence contingent was not sufficiently manned and skilled, while outdated equipment had to be used. In addition, specialised counterintelligence was not immediately available. Intelligence liaison with the BDF was also limited.⁶² In the final analysis, one can only readily agree with the observation that improvements in the SANDF's intelligence-gathering capabilities and/or in the process of its analysis, and in transmission of intelligence to all relevant roleplayers are required, and that these capabilities are imperative in operations of this kind.⁶³

Media relations

Military forces engaged in third-party interventions must be perceived as efficient and effective. Accordingly, it is important that representatives from the media are in a position to have a clear understanding of the operation and of the operational issues within the mission area. Media coverage can enhance perceptions — positive or negative — among both the members of the task force themselves, and the people in whose area they are deployed, as well as among the public at large. An ability to deal with the media may be crucial in determining how peace initiatives are perceived.⁶⁴

Operation Boleas was conducted in the full glare of the media, and reporters played a pivotal role in interpreting news and events surrounding the operation. In fact, the South African government blamed the media for their assessment of the Lesotho intervention and alleged that the media were guilty of manipulating the truth. Moreover, a number of opinions had been voiced on the appropriateness of SADC's intervention in Lesotho, which made it difficult to judge whether the mission could be regarded as successful or not. Judgement was further clouded, since the media created an impression that the intervention was unrelated to any rationale and a clear political mandate.⁶⁵ To this end, the SANDF publicly stated that the 'psychological and media war' had been lost 'at all levels'.⁶⁶ In terms of media liaison, the SANDF also admitted that:

- there was a lack of clear strategic guidelines;
- there was no cohesive corporate communication strategy; and
- external communication tended to be reactive rather than proactive.⁶⁷

However, it should be noted that the external communication that took place during the operation, was enhanced by the direct involvement of commanders in this role, high levels of truth and transparency, and visits to the area of operations arranged for journalists.⁶⁸ Much was done in a personal capacity by the force commander to ensure that the media could view and cover the operation in Lesotho. In fact, Hartsliet was commended for his openness towards journalists. In his dealings with the media,

Hartslief also admitted that there was a problem on the part of the South African government (or military) to relate the intervention to a rationale. He argued that better communication could have tempered some of the criticism and negative reflections by reporters.[69](#)

Thus it, would seem that the South African government found it difficult to propagate a wider understanding of Operation Boleas in media circles. It should be emphasised that peace missions of all kinds reside in the interface between political and military affairs. In view of this, media reports claimed that the South African government and SADC lacked a clear policy framework in their dealings with Lesotho. Another point of criticism in respect of the political handling of the issue related to questions about payment for the operation. The official South African response that "*Lesotho will have to pay*"[70](#) was always treated with a measure of scepticism.

There was also a negative response towards the fact that Sydney Mufamadi, the minister of Safety and Security at the time, instead of the minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfred Nzo, was given the task to deal with the turmoil in Lesotho. Similarly, the fact that Acting President Mangosuthu Buthelezi (in the absence of President Nelson Mandela and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki) took the decision to intervene was likewise questioned and widely criticised.[71](#) This was aggravated by the fact that a number of informal allegations had been made by prominent government representatives that they were either not informed or only scantily informed of the plans for the Lesotho intervention. Some parliamentarians and the chairpersons of key parliamentary committees were angered by their exclusion from the decision-making process.[72](#) Certain reporters also maintained that a military solution was opted for, while efforts by the South African government to find a negotiated political settlement in Lesotho had not been fully exhausted.[73](#) Such claims were especially roused by the opposition parties in Lesotho, who assertively whipped up suspicion about the motives for the intervention.[74](#)

The above critical claims and viewpoints about the political handling of the operation seem to have had a negative influence on the media's general attitude towards the operational aspects of the operation. Yet, it would also appear that the initial negative reports in the media on Operation Boleas changed somewhat over time, as could be detected in later media reports after Lesotho had returned to normal.

Civil-military interaction

The deployment of multinational forces in situations of conflict demands a delicate and critical relationship with the parties to the conflict, as well as with the local population. Therefore, any type of third-party intervention requires a sensitive approach.[75](#) The fact that members of peace forces are often or frequently in contact with the local population especially calls for a great deal of caution and prudence on their part in order to avoid misunderstandings, tension or even collusion. They can be called upon to use diplomatic skills, and to seek compromises by means of negotiation. Such attributes require an additional dimension to a soldier's professional life.[76](#)

In this context, the task force of Operation Boleas was clearly committed to the doctrine of minimum force. The SANDF maintained that a non-violent approach was followed for as long as this was possible, even at the expense of military effectiveness.⁷⁷ For instance, blank ammunition was initially used by the Ratel 90s⁷⁸ and, on all occasions, the South African troops were fired on first.⁷⁹ Thus, it can be concluded that the SANDF were clearly aware of the fact that the deployment of troops in Lesotho involved a delicate and critical relationship with the respective roleplayers, including the local population.

It should also be noted to the credit of the officers commanding Operation Boleas that a civil-military operations centre was established in Maseru early in the mission's existence. According to Colonel Hartslief, this helped to shape a more positive image of the operation from the viewpoint of civil-military relations.⁸⁰ The establishment of such a centre was done to co-ordinate civilian and military affairs between the SADC forces and the other roleplayers in Lesotho. Specifically, the function of the centre was to oversee the security-related issues in Lesotho and to liaise with government departments, the business community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other roleplayers on security matters and humanitarian relief.⁸¹

Linguistic and cultural diversity

The effective command and control of any military operation depend heavily on its communication capacity and ability. It is necessary to furnish authorities at all levels with timely information on the direction and co-ordination of all activities at ground level.⁸² In sub-Saharan Africa, the military of the various states have all inherited the languages of the former colonial powers, as well as their various military cultures. Previous command and control problems experienced during multinational operations to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa were often related to linguistic diversity.⁸³

Since both the South African and Botswana forces used English as a medium of command communication, problems pertaining to command and control cannot be related to linguistic diversity. In addition, it has already been pointed out that the South African forces arrived first on the scene and had to deal with what was perhaps the most difficult and challenging part of the operation single-handedly. Furthermore, the BDF was deployed in southern Lesotho, where its vehicles were more suited to the terrain than the heavier South African vehicles.

It could also be argued that the combined task force had a decided advantage over any other potential task force as far as their cultural background, language and knowledge of Lesotho were concerned. It would be fair to state that the culture, customs and traditions were not incomprehensible to them. It can therefore be concluded that they had a fairly easy task as far as compatibility with the operational requirements and the local environment are concerned.

Standard of forces

Since the undertaking of multinational operations for the maintenance of peace and security is a daunting challenge in any terms, proper standards of training, and the quality and professionalism of soldiers can hardly be overemphasised. It is imperative that professional armed forces, commanded by professional officers, properly trained and well-disciplined for their primary mission, are the only forces to be deployed for such operations.

In a frank *post mortem* of its foray into Lesotho, the SANDF stated that the situation in Lesotho developed quickly and that time was too short for proper planning and for deployment drills and rehearsals by the soldiers involved⁸⁴ — despite the fact that the president's office instructed the SANDF to conduct contingency planning on 16 September 1998.⁸⁵ Participating units were not fully combat-ready, and stock-level planning for operational reserves was not done, resulting in a strain on supplies.⁸⁶ Accordingly, the subsequent media reports that the SANDF went in "*too quickly and ill-prepared*" cannot be slated as totally unjustified and unfounded.

To some analysts, the decision to send troops to Lesotho marked a sea change by the government that, until the intervention took place, had unsuccessfully pursued the path of peaceful negotiations. Then, after failing to persuade the quarrelling political parties in Lesotho to sit down and hold talks, "*it wielded the big stick*"⁸⁷ — but without a contingency plan on the part of the SANDF.⁸⁸

Another problem encountered in Operation Boleas relates to reports of poor discipline among SANDF soldiers. A number of allegations of misconduct — especially absence without leave — were reported. However, the SANDF took a firm stand in this regard⁸⁹ and it is doubtful whether this really inhibited the ability of the SANDF to perform its task. In fact, the SANDF claimed that its troops distinguished themselves by demonstrating very good battle discipline.⁹⁰

Furthermore, the selection of key appointments with proper managerial skills and experience is a vital issue in the context of resource requirements. In previous multinational operations in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the failure of military planners to select officers with adequate training and expertise for vital aspects of operations influenced the ability of forces to arrest the conflict successfully.⁹¹ By the same token, collective operations in the name of peace and security are seldom 'tidy', and 'the fog of war' demands strong and competent leadership.⁹²

A lack of sound leadership would not seem to have imperilled the execution of Operation Boleas at any stage. For example, it can be pointed out that Colonel Hartslief, officer commanding during the first part of Operation Boleas, was highly commended by the South African media for his leadership role in the operation. Hartslief, an officer who has undergone training in peace operations in Canada, Germany and Bosnia, was also the officer commanding of 43 Mechanised Brigade, a SANDF rapid deployment formation. As such, he was undoubtedly an experienced officer.⁹³ The rest of the South African command structure in Operation Boleas also seem to have proven themselves in the fields of managerial skills and good leadership during the operation,⁹⁴ despite a few tactical errors in the early stages of the

operation.[95](#)

Lessons to be learned

One cannot disagree with the chief of the SANDF, General Siphwe Nyanda, that the military objectives defined in the mandate were accomplished,[96](#) despite the fact that certain tactical errors were made and the degree of armed resistance that was encountered, was greater than had been anticipated. It would be fair to state from a purely military viewpoint that Operation Boleas had been successfully conducted, as it did succeed in stabilising the security situation in Lesotho, which allowed the political parties to resume negotiations around the issue of governance. In addition, it safeguarded South Africa's interests in Lesotho and succeeded in securing strategic installations from being taken over or destroyed by the mutinous forces. However, the operation did not succeed in preventing and controlling the destruction and looting of property in central Maseru. From a political perspective, it has yet to be seen whether the operation has paved the way for fresh elections in pursuit of a medium and long-term political goal and settlement.

Most importantly, the combined task force managed to withdraw ahead of schedule in May 1999 under relatively stable conditions, and avoided becoming involved in an interminable and intractable conflict.[97](#) It is especially laudable that a training element with a strength of 300 soldiers from South Africa and Botswana remained in Lesotho to assist in the training and restructuring of the LDF in accordance with the principles of defence in a democracy.[98](#)

In the context of the above, a number of lessons from Operation Boleas can improve the performance of the SANDF and other Southern African forces in future operations of this kind. These lessons include the following:

- The parameters of possible future intervention operations (enforcement action) need to be clarified in terms of South Africa's foreign policy (or national security policy).
- The degree of resistance of armed soldiers, in particular those who are not commanded by a formal structure, should never be underestimated.
- Intervention operations should be conducted with an outlook or approach of expecting the worst under hostile conditions, and should move on a continuum from enforcement action towards a peacekeeping role.
- Planning for future intervention operations needs to address all foreseeable contingencies.
- Successful intervention is possible only when an appropriate contingency plan exists, covering all possible aspects of the anticipated action and response.
- In the event where no contingency plan exists, enough time must be allowed for

the full spectrum of deployment drills.

- **Military staff who understand intervention operations (or rapid deployment) under hostile circumstances need to be in control.**
- **The challenges of interoperability and the deployment of the SANDF in a combined or regional force need to receive continuous attention at all relevant levels.**
- **Efficient intelligence for intervention operations should be available at all relevant levels.**
- **Military intelligence resources should be deployed prior to intervention to provide real time and timely intelligence during execution.**
- **Intelligence personnel should be trained and skilled to execute their functions under hostile conditions.**
- **Contingency planning for rapid deployment needs to include the stockpiling of war reserves.**
- **Communication with the media and other relevant roleplayers is a critical factor if intervention operations are to be successfully conducted.**
- **Communication with the local population is important for the image of the intervening forces and for communicating the reasons behind the intervention.**
- **Mandates for intervention operations should provide for all possible collateral incidents, such as looting and arson, and the necessary powers (for example, powers of arrest) to deal with such incidents should be provided.**
- **The ability to draft a status of forces agreement and rules of engagement on short notice must be available.**
- **A proper understanding of and commitment to legal principles (such as the law of armed conflict) on the part of all relevant functionaries are imperative in cases of enforcement action.**

Finally, it can be pointed out that entrance into an area of conflict should be preceded by a sound assessment of the situation. All relevant decision makers must be provided with a thorough evaluation of:

- **the nature of the conflict;**
- **the prospects for a political solution to the conflict,**

- the extent to which military intervention will facilitate conflict resolution; and
- the political objectives of the intervention.

Clear exit criteria must be considered in terms of the achievement of a desirable political endstate within an acceptable period of time, rather than in terms of the technicalities of a military withdrawal plan. Decision makers must therefore be reasonably convinced that intervention will not result in a diplomatic or political failure.

CONCLUSION

Unlike many other previous multinational operations on African soil, the SANDF was not hampered by political uncertainty over the political and strategic objectives of Operation Boleas. Intervention was intended to stabilise Lesotho in order to create a safe environment in which Lesotho's problems could be negotiated and to protect South African assets in the country. Accordingly, the military planners of Operation Boleas were able to define a clear *mission*, a *battle concept* and a *desired result* for the operation. At the same time, the swift decision to send troops to Lesotho left the SANDF without a proper contingency plan, especially in the light of vagueness and uncertainty concerning the ambit of South Africa's foreign policy framework for enforcement action. SANDF units were not fully combat-ready as time was too short for proper planning, deployment drills and for rehearsals by the units involved.

Yet, Operation Boleas did experience certain shortcomings and problems. It is especially clear that, as a result of intelligence reports on the situation in Lesotho, the SANDF's assessment was over-optimistic and resulted in a force too weak to handle the operational requirements and especially the level of resistance from LDF elements. However, this should not simply be made the scapegoat for the higher than expected rate of casualties, since enforcement action is seldom 'tidy'. In fact, the SANDF has admitted that the deployment phase was marked by a few tactical errors.

It can be argued from a narrow military perspective that Operation Boleas was a success, in the sense that the military objectives of the mandate were accomplished. The operation succeeded in stabilising the security situation in Lesotho. Furthermore, the operation safeguarded South Africa's interests in the country and succeeded in securing strategic installations from being taken over or destroyed, although it did not succeed in preventing and controlling the destruction and looting of property in central Maseru. This allowed the political parties to resume negotiations around the issue of governance. In this regard, the overall success of the decision to intervene in Lesotho should be measured in political terms with regard to the extent to which the military action facilitated conflict resolution in the framework of a desired political endstate.

Finally, what has been highlighted by Operation Boleas is the need for an overarching political framework in which SADC countries — and South Africa, in particular — can exercise judgement and undertake enforcement action within a circumscribed framework. The challenge is to establish an acceptable basis for involvement or intervention in intrastate conflicts or threats to regional peace that respects the dignity

and independence of states without sanctioning the misuse of sovereign rights to violate the security of people residing within a state's borders. Suffice it to say that regional enforcement action is extremely difficult, risky and expensive. Multinational operations in the name of peace and security reside in the interface between political and military affairs and success in any operation of this kind depends upon a broad political process. Operation Boleas clearly bears testimony to this.

Notes

1. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-2.htm>, 16 March 1999.
2. Presentation by Colonel Robbie Hartslief, officer commanding, Operation Boleas, Maseru, 2 October 1998.
3. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-2.htm>, op. cit.
4. M Buthelezi, *It was intervention, not invasion*, The Star, 6 October 1998, p 6.
5. SANDF Directorate Corporate Communication, *The SADC intervention in Lesotho ... a military perspective*, Salut, July 1999, p 23.
6. Originally, four countries were asked to participate — Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe — but in the event, only South Africa and Botswana were able to help.
7. Republic of South Africa, Department of Defence Bulletin, 57/98, 22 September 1998; F Haysom, *Defending regional democracy*, The Star, 14 October 1998, p 6.
8. Ibid, p 6.
9. R Williams, *Peace operations and the South African armed forces*, Strategic Review for Southern Africa, 17(2), May 1995, pp 91-92.
10. C Bir, *Interoperability and intervention operations*, The Rusi Journal, December 1997, p 23.
11. M Hough, *Collective security and its variants: A conceptual analysis with specific reference to SADC and Ecowas*, Strategic Review for Southern Africa, 20 (2), November 1998, p 36.
12. E G Berman & K E Sams, *Constructive engagement: Western efforts to develop African peacekeeping*, [ISS Monograph, 33](#), Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House, December 1998, p 9.
13. Hough, op cit, p 36.

14. **F Lötter, 'n Week in die buiteland, Beeld, 24 October 1998, p 9.**
15. **P Fabricius, SA must face reality in the Congo, The Star, November 1998, p 8.**
16. **R Cornwell & J Potgieter, Africa watch: A large peace of Africa, [African Security Review, 7\(6\)](#), 1998, p 77.**
17. **Southern African Development Community, Final Communiqué of the 1998 SADC Summit of Heads of State and Government, Mauritius, 19 September 1998.**
18. **Berman & Sams, op cit, p 9.**
19. **Hough, op cit, pp. 37-38.**
20. **G Barrie, South Africa's forcible intervention in Lesotho, De Rebus, January 1999, p 47.**
21. **Hough, op cit, pp. 37-38.**
22. **M Malan, Regional power politics under cover of SADC — Running amok with a mythical organ, [ISS Papers, 35](#), October 1998, p 8.**
23. **United Nations, Charter of the United Nations, San Francisco, 1945.**
24. **Bir, op cit, p 23.**
25. **A Stofberg, SA moet mag nou steun, Beeld, 3 October 1998, p 9.**
26. **Bir, op cit, p 25.**
27. **Ibid, p 22.**
28. **It should be clear that Operation Boleas was a SADC intervention operation in Lesotho that was conducted in the light of fears that a military *coup* was planned in the country. Hence, it is technically wrong to typify it as a multinational peace support operation, since peace support operations are normally associated with action occurring along a conflict continuum between preventive diplomacy and post-conflict reconstruction and development. In this regard, peace support operations in the military sense generally entail post-conflict activities designed to strengthen and rebuild a country; peacekeeping activities that involve the containment, moderation and termination of hostilities within states; or the application of military force in accordance with UN Security Council authorisation in support of efforts to reach a political settlement. At the same time, the elements required for effective military action during peace support operations are likewise of relevance in the case of intervention**

operations.

29. M R Berdal, *Whither UN peacekeeping*, Adelphi Paper, 281, October 1993, p 27.
30. T Sutton-Pryce, C Baudin & N Allie, *Baptism of fire for SANDF*, Salut, November 1998, p 26.
31. S Nyanda, *New year messages: Message from the CSANDF*, Salut, January 1999, p 12.
32. Buthelezi, op cit, p 6.
33. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, 16 March 1999.
34. Ibid; SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-7.htm>, 16 March 1999.
35. G Arnold, *The OAU and peacekeeping in Africa*, New African, January 1997, p 33.
36. B Y Mwila, *Equipment requirements in Africa*, African Armed Forces Journal, November 1994, p 8.
37. D Henk, *Peace operations: Views from Southern and Eastern Africa*, US Army Peacekeeping Institute Occasional Paper, 1995, p 19.
38. H-R Heitman, *SANDF blunder means longer stay in Lesotho*, Jane's Defence Weekly, 30 September 1998, p 5.
39. *Lesotho units 'not ready for combat'*, Pretoria News, 3 November 1998, p 2.
40. Approximately US\$6 million.
41. C van der Westhuizen, *Lesotho moet dalk R36 miljoen opdok vir Boleas*, Beeld, 11 February 1999, p 2.
42. *Lesotho units 'not ready for combat'*, op cit, p 2.
43. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, op cit.
44. L van Buren, *Botswana — Economy, Africa South of the Sahara 1998*, 27th Edition, Europa Publications Limited, p 195.
45. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, op. cit.; SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-7.htm>, op cit.

46. Heitman, op cit, p 5.
47. K O'Grady, *A city ruined by bungled intervention*, Business Day, 25 September 1998, p 11.
48. Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 26.
49. G Mills, *After Lesotho...Govt must act to foster trust in its troops*, The Star, 14 October 1998, p 17; SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-7.htm>, op cit.
50. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-7.htm>, op cit.
51. Williams, op cit, pp 91-92.
52. Mills, op cit, p 17.
53. Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 28.
54. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-7.htm>, op cit, 16 March 1999.
55. Berdal, op cit, p 27.
56. *Information to SA troops poor*, Pretoria News, 26 September 1998, p 4.
57. Heitman, op cit, p 5.
58. Ibid, p 4.
59. A Stofberg, *SA moet mag nou steun*, Beeld, 3 October 1998, p 9.
60. Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 27.
61. SANDF Directorate Corporate Communication, op cit, p 28.
62. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, op. cit.; SANDF <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-7.htm>, op cit.
63. Mills, op cit, p 17.
64. M Shaw, *International peacekeeping — Are there lessons for South Africa?*, [African Defence Review](#), 15, March 1994, p 14.

65. Haysom, op cit, p 6.
66. *Govt 'lost war' in Lesotho* — SANDF, The Citizen, 3 November 1998, p 2.
67. SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, op cit.
68. Ibid.
69. Stofberg, op cit, p 9.
70. Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 28.
71. D Geldenhuys, *Vrae oor ingryping in Lesotho bly in die lug hang*, Rapport, 18 October 1998, p 13.
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74. Fabricius, op cit, p 14.
75. M de Brito, *Relationship between peacekeepers, host governments and local populations: A Mozambican perspective*, in M Malan (ed), Conflict management, peacekeeping and peace building: Lessons for Africa from a seminar past, [ISS Monograph Series, 10](#), Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House, April 1997, pp. 61-64.
76. U A Hundt, *Coping with peacekeeping*, Salut, 3(3), March 1996, p 38.
77. SANDF Directorate Corporate Communication, op cit, p 23.
78. The Ratel 90 is an Infantry Combat Vehicle equipped with a 90mm gun.
79. Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 26.
80. Presentation by Colonel Robbie Hartslief, officer commanding, Operation Boleas, Maseru, 2 October 1998.
81. SANDF Directorate Corporate Communication, op cit, p 27.
82. Berdal, op cit, p 41.

83. **H Anyidoho, *Lessons learned during peacekeeping operations in Africa*, in Malan, op cit, p 44.**
84. **SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, op cit.**
85. **SANDF Directorate Corporate Communication, op cit, p 24.**
86. **SANDF, <www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-6.htm>, op cit.**
87. **P Fabricius, *Fearful milestone for South Africa*, The Star, 25 September 1998, p 14.**
88. ***Lesotho units 'not ready for combat'*, op cit, p 2.**
89. **Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 26.**
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92. **Mills, op cit, p 17.**
93. **A Stofberg, *Hartslief sedert skooldae 'lief vir skiet'*, Beeld, 3 October 1998, p 9.**
94. **Based on the author's personal impressions after a visit to the South African forces in Lesotho on 2 October 1998.**
95. **Sutton-Pryce *et al*, op cit, p 27.**
96. **Nyanda, op cit, p 12.**
97. **R Williams, *Lesotho: A bubble that burst*, Business Day, 19 May 1999, p 14.**
98. **Republic of South Africa, Department of Defence Bulletin, 40/99, 24 May 1999.**