

The AU Standby Force and the challenge of Somalia

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Recent events in Somalia have highlighted once again a glaring gap in the African Union's capabilities. Yet again the continent's main regional body has shown itself to be unable to deploy a capable peacekeeping force at short notice.

Let us recap. In December 2006, in response to what seemed like the imminent fall of the southern city of Baidoa to the forces of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), Ethiopian troops launched an offensive into Somalia in support of the country's beleaguered interim federal government. Apparently catching the UIC off-guard, Ethiopian soldiers – backed by tanks, artillery, attack helicopters and fixed-wing ground attack aircraft – quickly drove the UIC forces out of Mogadishu and most of the territory it had previously occupied. The remnants of the UIC fled to a rugged, forested corner of southern Somalia on Kenya's border.

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However, despite the initial success of the Ethiopian invasion, Ethiopia's position in the country quickly became uncomfortable. Pressure from parts of the international community, the early stirrings of a guerrilla war against Ethiopian troops by disaffected Somalis, and the potential for a regional conflict involving Eritrea have all contributed to the decision by Ethiopia to withdraw its forces from Somalia. Part of the justification is that the AU's Peace and Security Council has authorised the deployment of the African Union Mission to Somalia (Amisom), a planned force of some 8 000 African peacekeepers. Unfortunately, only Uganda and Malawi have thus far offered to contribute troops to Amisom, and there appears little likelihood that a meaningful force will be on the ground before or even soon after the completion of the Ethiopian withdrawal. In the interim Somalia again faces the prospect of a security vacuum in which chaos reigns – an all-too-common occurrence in Somalia's recent history.

The case of Amisom is by no means the first time this capabilities gap has become evident. While the AU has unquestionably played an increasingly important role in peacekeeping on the continent, its responses have typically been slow, logistically creaky, and piecemeal. This problem, of course, has not escaped the attention of decision-makers in Addis Ababa. It was precisely to address situations such as that now developing in Somalia that the AU developed its doctrine of the African Standby Force (ASF).

A central element of the African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC), the ASF is intended to be a body of multidisciplinary military and civilian contingents for rapid deployment when authorised by the PSC. The central rationale for the ASF was to enable the AU to respond rapidly to situations of conflict in order to prevent a developing situation of conflict from becoming catastrophic. This capability was considered particularly important, since it takes on average three to six months for the UN to get peacekeeping boots on the ground once a resolution has been passed, allowing far too much time for the situation to deteriorate. At the heart of the ASF concept is the idea of five regional standby brigades, each consisting of anywhere between 2 000 and 6 000 troops and their equipment. Together this should give the PSC between 10 000 and 20 000 troops available for rapid deployment to hotspots around the continent.

The standby force concept is a good one. Unfortunately, it is a good idea that, since being launched in 2003 and despite some genuine progress, has yet to become a functional reality. Despite an announcement by the South African Minister of Defence, Minister Mosiuoa Lekota, in late 2005 that the SADC brigade is ready to deploy, that there has been no suggestion of deploying the brigade to Somalia makes it clear that this is not the case. As usual, the biggest obstacle to implementation is lack of resources. African countries are generally poor, and having the capability to project military power is expensive. Consider, by way of comparison, the NATO Response Force.

NATO describes its Response Force as a 'coherent, high readiness, joint, multinational force package' that is 'technologically advanced, flexible, deployable, interoperable and sustainable'. This capability allows NATO project a 25 000-strong force across the globe, where it can sustain itself under high-tempo combat conditions for a period of 30 days.

There is no question that the NATO Response Force is a powerful force that offers a potentially valuable tool for addressing international conflict. But the fact that the world's wealthiest security grouping can only manage to sustain a rapid reaction capability of 25 000 troops illustrates how ambitious the AU Standby Battalion concept is.

The biggest problem is not one of finding the troops, though with countries such as South Africa increasingly stretched to meet existing peacekeeping commitments, this is not an inconsiderable issue. The biggest difficulty, however, is having the capability to move necessary forces to where they are needed and to keep them supplied. The old adage remains applicable: 'amateurs talk strategy, professionals talk logistics'. Given the vastness of Africa, there are realistically only two ways to move and supply a force such as one of the standby battalions, by air or by sea.

Because the naval forces of African nations, where they exist at all, have virtually no sea-lift capability, the transport of choice for the standby brigades is airlift. But while the AU's members have more airlift than sealift capability, that is not saying much. The South African Air Force is relatively well off in this regard, but even the SAAF capability falls well below what might be desired. The introduction between 2010 and 2014 of the recently ordered batch of between 8 and 14 Airbus A400M tactical transport aircraft will help, but will not be enough to resolve the problem. Consider, for example, the proposed order of battle of the East Africa Brigade of the ASF. Apart from over 2 000 troops, there is the logistical challenge of moving close to 160 vehicles, not to mention food, ammunition and other supplies.

Existing AU deployments are largely supported by commercial airfreight companies and air assets of Western air forces. This puts AU deployments at the mercy of both Western governments, already facing overstretch of their airlift capabilities, and expensive contracts with companies that some deem to be little more than flying mercenaries. Exclusive reliance on airlift will continue to be expensive and, given the reliance on external providers for airlift capacity, unreliable.

How might this situation be improved? It seems to me that the sealift option needs to be reconsidered. This is generally not regarded as a live option because, though sealift is considerably cheaper than airlift, particularly for transporting bulky items such as armoured personnel carriers, trucks and the like, the cost of acquiring the ships capable of transporting a military force of significant proportions is prohibitive. The Royal

Australian Navy, for example, has recently put out an Aus\$2 billion (over R11 billion) tender for two new multi-purpose amphibious ships.

But perhaps some out of the box thinking might help things. Here is one thought. Recent pressure on the UK defence budget, caused by the costs of involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, have led the UK Ministry of Defence to consider early retirement for some of its ships, many of which still have several years lifespan. Among the ships under consideration for early retirement is the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Ship *Sir Bediviere*. (Readers of a certain longevity will perhaps remember that this ship was slightly damaged in combat actions during the Falklands War, while her sister ships *Sir Galahad* and *Sir Tristram* were respectively sunk and badly damaged by the Argentinian Air Force.) Rather than prematurely mothball *Sir Bediviere*, perhaps the British government could be persuaded to lend it to the SADC Brigade until the end of its useful service. RFA *Sir Bediviere* offers a very useful transport and amphibious capability: it can carry between 340 and 534 troops, 34 vehicles (up to and including main battle tanks), 30 tons of ammunition and supplies. In addition it can accommodate two helicopters. Alternatively, if troops are not needed, it can carry 120 tons of humanitarian aid. Imagine being able to dispatch such a vessel, supported perhaps by the SA Navy's newly purchased frigates and submarines, to an area where trouble is brewing. With attack helicopters decked on *Sir Bediviere* or the frigates, this amounts to a potent entry package. Even just anchoring such a force offshore could in some circumstances be sufficient to sent warring parties hurrying to the negotiating table.

The added bonus of this idea is that *Sir Bediviere* would make an ideal training ship. Apart from South Africa, the navies of the SADC region have very limited capability, and having such a vessel as a shared asset would allow for significant personnel development and national pride. Joint efforts such as this can only contribute to mutual understanding and stability between SADC nations. In addition, this training dimension would mean that this endeavour could benefit from funding through such mechanisms as the US State Department-funded African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance Program, which aims to help African nations develop their capabilities in peacekeeping operations.

Whether something like this could be made to work remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that current events in Somalia have reinforced the need for the African standby brigades. If conflict on our continent is to be properly managed by the African Union, ways must be found to make the ASF operational.