

## REGIONAL SECURITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA IN THE 1990S: CHALLENGING THE TERMS OF THE NEO-REALIST DEBATE

Peter Vale and John Daniel

As South Africa has moved beyond apartheid, the debate on security has not, as one might have expected, become muted; indeed, quite the opposite seems to have happened. While questions of domestic security may have become less pressing, those concerned with Southern Africa appear to have been amplified. True, all the familiar old phrases have gone, but some fundamental insecurities seem remarkably untouched by political change. Such 'new' issues as narcotics and arms smuggling, refugees and illegal immigrants, and, of course, AIDS are now the staple diet of a security establishment weaned on the cold war.<sup>1</sup>

Of course specific events have nourished the debate on security in the Southern African region. So - for instance - the Rwandan crisis and constitutional fracas in Lesotho drew (or nearly drew) South Africa into events on the ground. And the energetic efforts of SADC to formulate some kind of a security role for itself has drawn the highest state officials into the discussion. The tenor of the debate is, however, markedly different from what it once was. No longer the international pariah, South Africa is being urged to open, widen and deepen its engagement with the region. Many in Washington and elsewhere in the West, are asking South Africa to fulfil her 'historic destiny' of hegemonic order in the region.

These are the voices of the neo-realist school of thinking. Its view is that South Africa should use her economic power in the region to exert a sense of order while, simultaneously, the argument runs, enlightened use of this power could create a series of benefits and incentives to keep the region stable; this stability, in turn, would support 'hegemonic stability' elsewhere in the world. It is important to flag this particular debate; as will come clear, many are drawn to the idea that conventional notions of regional 'stability', like the proverbial cleanliness, are next to godliness.

Why this is happening on a more mundane level is quite clear. Bloc-formation, within the discourse of the market, is a motor-force for a thousand debates on regional relations across the planet. For the many intent on driving South Africa towards the market, the region's many conflicts have become a supporting

argument. The power of naked capitalism as a force for changing the act of Southern Africa - in the opinion of influential voices both within and without South Africa - cannot be underestimated.

To understand the implication of all this on (and in) South Africa, we need to turn to the classroom. We need to ask how South Africans view the world and why they ask the questions they do about the region and its security. This takes us away from the gallant world of new policy prescriptions towards theory; from that term so beloved of the Department of Foreign Affairs 'the real world' to the tricks of social science; from South Africa's regional compass to the nature of its transition.

### **The Neo-realist Conceptualisation of Southern Africa**

The debates which shape current security policy reside in a corps of neo-realist thinkers which are mostly, though not exclusively, associated with the Institute for Defence Policy (IDP).<sup>2</sup> Established by a former SADF officer in 1991, the IDP has, in very public ways, filled the void left by such crude pro-apartheid organisations as the University of Pretoria's Institute for Strategic Studies (ISSUP) and the Department of National Strategy at the Rand Afrikaans University.

The IDP has also filled the public space which seems to have been vacated by self-styled liberal organisations, like the South African Institute of International Affairs. Traditionally funded by the country's business community, these liberal groups often reflected capital's views and interests.

The strands of neo-realism which emerged elsewhere in the world in the 1970s were not given great ventilation in South Africa. In the rare cases where theoretical deviancy did occur, it was drawn more towards interdependency and, to a lesser degree, with theories around regime-building. So to use 'neo-realism' (in its universal sense) is, probably, too generous. It can, nonetheless, be used to describe much of the writing and thinking on regional security in Southern Africa in the period since February 1990.

This 'new' thinking rests largely on four closely-linked understandings of international society beyond the cold war. The first is that defence is an integral part of the life of a nation and that events in the aftermath of the cold war have demonstrated the continuing saliency of the notion that South Africa after apartheid requires a modern and well-equipped defence force. Southern Africa, the argument goes, contains all the seeds and symptoms of the chaos and collapse which have marked recent international relations in Eastern Europe.

South Africa thus, if needs be, still requires a capacity to keep the region at arms' length. Its political turmoil and social spillage could destabilise South

Africa's search for democracy. South Africa must, therefore, be able to defend its sovereignty from the predatory ambitions of its neighbours, most especially its people.

Consequently, all regional pacts needed to be carefully weighted and any effort to expropriate what belongs rightly to South Africa resisted, if necessary, by force. While the changing face of global politics does not mean that the posture should necessarily be offensive, as it had been for most of the 1980s, good electric fences make for good neighbours. This is, of course, a repetition of the well-worn South African strategic doctrine of previous decades; its roots are found deep in the Afrikaner mythology of the laager, the traditional fortification of trekker people.

To succeed, the strategy involves the grim ritual of threat and counter-threat. The approach is clearly grounded in an idiom redolent of the previous era; a Police General, for instance, has recently argued that drug traffic 'seriously undermines ... the political authority of the state ... the problem ... is ... exacerbated by the existence, and involvement of revolutionary and insurgency movements ... in some countries' (Grove, 1994:3).

The inevitable spillage of other regional debris - cattle-rustling and the stolen motor vehicle trade - are viewed in similar terms. The conclusion is clear - meaningful order can only be maintained - to use Jim George's view of traditional international relations - by the idea that 'aggression should be met with greater aggression' (George, 1993:200).

A second plank to the argument is that South Africa's defence capability - not to mention its economic prowess - is enhanced by the country's armaments industry. The long years of investment in this sector have provided an unexpected wind-fall in a highly competitive world. Sound economics, as recognised by the country's Reconstruction and Development Programme, understand that competitive exports are vital for foreign exchange. The defence industry can provide these. This view was echoed by *Business Day* (10 July 1994) when it argued that 'apart from contributing significantly to South Africa's foreign currency earnings, (arms/defence) export growth could make an important contribution to economic growth and the creation of thousands of new jobs'.

There is thus, the neo-realists tell us, no necessity for any angst over the export of weapons - all countries do it. This position is considerably strengthened by powerful voices within the Government of National Unity. Recently *Africa Confidential* (17 May 1994) unkindly remarked that Joe Modise 'is fast becoming as effective an advocate for the military as former defence minister Magnus Malan'.

The third plank is an extension of the second and argues that Southern Africa

itself is a source of support for the further consolidation of South Africa's industrial-military complex. So the growth of Armscor is seen as integral to the nourishment of the region's militaries. South Africa's prowess, as the following exchange suggests, is part of the region's latent strength. *Salvo*, the corporation's in-house journal, recently asked its chief executive officer what areas of growth there would be for Armscor in future? He replied as follows:

In the area of acquisition there are tremendous growth opportunities - not only in serving our established clients, but also in extending our services to government institutions. Especially in the area of logistical support and upgrading we can be of invaluable help to other countries in Southern Africa. In fact, this is an area in which I perceive growth potential. The whole of the sub-continent has a wealth of military vehicles and equipment left over from recent wars. These need to be maintained and upgraded (Boshoff, 1994).

The point is taken further by the view that Armscor could, with the necessary encouragement, develop into a regional defence and policing procurement agency by providing to the region the services it now offers to South Africa (Celliers, 1994:15).

A fourth dimension to the argument is the proposition that the security forces are important vehicles in the overall process of nation building in South Africa. Although attempts by the SADF in the 1980s to use the military for this purpose failed, the political settlement of 1993/94 provided the necessary legitimacy and climate to pursue again this endeavour.

Constructing the 'new' South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has been conceptualised by the neo-realists as a nation-building exercise. Whether it, in fact, has been is open to dispute. Initial efforts were subjected to fairly strong accusation and counter-accusation. The issue was, from the outset, complicated by certain unavoidable political circumstances around it.

The 'old' SADF entered the exercise as a regular military force with a specific self-image and an aggressive internal culture derived from its role in the building of the South Africa state and the defence of its security. For their part, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, and the PAC's Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) were irregular armies, guerrilla forces with distinct and very different views on what constituted South Africa's security and regional relations (Shaw, 1994:17-22). In addition, despite agreements to the contrary, what transpired was a process of absorption and not of integration. The tension between the former guerrilla cadres and the SADF old guard turned on the realisation that the process was not building a 'new' South African National

Defence Force (SADF).

The conclusion of the neo-realists is clear: to defend its 'national interest' South Africa should move forward on a security track bequeathed, in many respects, by the apartheid era. There are many instances of this kind of logic and the resulting policy advice. For example, in July 1994, the IDP's Director argued that the National Intelligence Service (NIS) was the 'best placed agency to carry out intelligence functions for the new government as the old security police had been disbanded and Military Intelligence was not appropriate for the job' (*The Argus*, 27 July 1994).

Three months later, the *Mail and Guardian* (30 September 1995) reported that the NIS had 'turned its spies on the reconstruction and development programme' and that this had 'provoked an angry response from the president's office'. At about the same time, Armscor was caught 'off-sides' in a supposed arms deal to Lebanon; in fact, the arms were destined for the UNITA movement in neighbouring Angola. In response to these allegations, the IDP was quick to suggest that Armscor was 'set up' by American arms-dealers (*Cape Times*, 4 September 1994).

This incident suggests two things - in the neo-realist world, the state and its agents are supreme, and that strategic culture is unchanged and unchanging. But are they? And is it?

### A Critique of the Neo-realist View

One of the weaknesses of the neo-realist argument lies in the fact that the intellectual and political gaps which are apparent in its approach to South Africa's place in the world are not questioned. The obvious point that exporting (or procuring) arms may add to existing insecurity is missed. Also missed is the fact that South Africa's economy and her industrial base would be strengthened at the expense of her neighbours who would, presumably, have to pay for these services in hard currency. Nowhere do the neo-realists grapple with the view that South Africa's security and her economic progress cannot be bought at the price of exporting insecurity into its neighbourhood.

The capacity of the neo-realists, however, to sustain their view of the world is under increasing pressure. While transition secured the state's position, it has also released a host of new forces which may well prove to be the neo-realists' undoing. Accepted 'truths' about the country's security are no longer cast in stone; other voices outside of the old state security establishment are being heard. These include academics ignored in the apartheid era, think-tanks like the Centre for Policy Studies, a progressive corps of MPs like Robert Davies, some of whom sit on the increasingly influential Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Foreign

Affairs, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). This body has a particularly different position to the Home Affairs Department on regional relations, especially on issues like illegal immigration and the question of residence and voting rights for longtime migrant workers.<sup>3</sup>

It is also probably no exaggeration to suggest that, Home Affairs notwithstanding, there are elements within the GNU with a similar view on the region as the 'new' voices cited above. These would likely include both the Departments of Trade and Industry and of Water Affairs, as well as Jay Naidoo's RDP office. The contestation over the Defence Department's desire to acquire naval corvettes was indicative of the fact that the new voices inside government are beginning to drown out the old ones and helping to change the strategic culture of the apartheid yesteryear.

It remains, nonetheless, contested terrain, witness this frank assessment of the arms industry by the ANC's Department of Economic Planning:

With proponents and opponents of the arms industry squaring up for a tough debate, the future of the arms industry is not a foregone conclusion. At the end of the day all the arguments about cost-benefit analysis, the impact on trade and international relations, and the effect on the moral fibre of our nation will play an equally decisive role in the direction that we as a nation ultimately choose. Do we support an arms industry because it says it can create wealth and thus provide finance for social programmes, or do we spend this money directly on urgently needed social programmes? This dilemma is yet to be resolved (African National Congress 1994:4-5).

The obvious key here is who decides the 'national interest'. If the state is to build the nation, then the state must, in the neo-realist perspective, articulate its own interests in the name of the nation. One approach (Mills, 1994) suggests that what constitutes this country's 'national interest' has not essentially changed since General Jan Smuts' time. In other words, the basic tenets of regional engagement have remained constant in the 50 years between Smuts' death and the birth of the new South Africa. Like Smuts' South Africa, the proposition appears to be, the new South Africa will not want to be 'lost in the black pool of Africa' (Garson, 1978:101).

The *Financial Mail* (27 May 1994) put it somewhat differently by using Henry Kissinger's perspective of 'vital interest' as the most rational place to locate policy. It is far 'more sensible than a policy based on paranoia (the old SA) and sentiment (the new SA, so far)'. As one might expect from the country's leading weekly economics digest, 'vital interest' here is linked to the orthodoxy of the

market and to securing South Africa's position as a 'western' country permanently attached to dominant international economic structures.

It is important to interrogate - in order to entrench the point about the continuity of strategic culture through the transition - the thinking around national interest. From the state's point of view, the idea of 'national interest' during the transition was central to their nation-building project, enabling them to defend the status quo. The idea of 'a national interest' - and its close convergence with 'national security' - enabled security and foreign policy-makers to hold the world constant while the transition ran its course.

But these ideas have now run their course. The democracy which most South Africans seek will undermine the neo-realist position formulated, as it largely was, within the closed confines of the State Security Council and its allied agencies. New voices have entered the fray, determined to subject South Africa's foreign policy as a whole, and particularly its regional relations, to public scrutiny and the exchange of ideas. Defining the 'national interest' - and the strategic culture which defends it - will be subject to the push and pull of public debate.

In the search for a new direction to South Africa's regional relations, the contest will be between both old ideas and new, as well as between moralists and pragmatists. These latter are not necessarily polar opposites. Possibilities do exist for a convergence of moral purpose and national interest. Could, for example, those who craft our regional relations recall Alexander Hamilton whose aim was not:

to recommend a policy absolutely selfish or interested in nations;  
but to show that a policy regulated by ... interests as far as justice  
and good faith permit, is, and ought to be, (the) prevailing one  
(Chance, 1994:110).

Can this idea of moral purpose have a role in the setting of the country's regional and international policy? Can it seriously shift the country's strategic culture from its narrow frame? Based on apartheid's record and the transition which we have examined, it will need more than the custodians of the 'old' South African state to reach beyond the narrow entrenched myth - both Boer and Brit - which have forged the country's approach to its security.

These margins and what flows from them explain why Nelson Mandela finds himself alternatively caught between the role of international visionary, like Woodrow Wilson, and practitioner of realpolitik, like Henry Kissinger. These different sides highlight the view that South Africa, as presently constituted, has not one but many sides to its 'national interest'. And in many, many ways, the struggle over international and regional policy represents struggle for the proverbial soul of the country. The debate demands the confronting of a chain of

questions raised earlier: what kind of country is South Africa and what does it hope to become? what kind of an international image does the country wish to project? what kind of a region do its people want to live in?

The realist dictum of the need to secure national interest by military capacity has not been borne out in Africa. In fact, the military has been as much a cause of insecurity by suppressing democracy and redirecting scarce resources away from urgent socio-economic needs. In numerous cases, the militarisation of African society has led to untold human carnage and suffering. Apartheid South Africa was one such manifestation.

The prospects for peace and security in Southern Africa will continue to be partially defined by the past. Conflicts spawned by the cold war, such as that in Angola, continue to fester and underline the fact that old legacies die hard. The emergence of a political and military unipolar world and the ending of apartheid has, however, created the possibilities of a pax Southern Africana. But the task ahead is a huge and expensive one. The rehabilitation of devastated economies, the resetting of millions of refugees, the repatriation of exiles and the demobilising of soldiers and combatants, disarming a region awash with weapons will tax the resources of all governments in the region.

Furthermore, beyond these military-type threats to the region's security are a host of dangers spawned by the region's poverty and apartheid's destabilisation legacy. In tackling these, policy architects will need to broaden their understanding of the concept of security to encompass such issues as disease, environmental degradation, drugs, and human rights violations. It is against this widened conceptualisation that efforts will have to be made to recast the region's security problematic in an universal manner and to explore ways by which the old world of hierarchical structures can be replaced with something more relevant to events on Southern Africa's ground. To achieve this, the formal frames around both theory and policy must be challenged; the world beyond apartheid lies beyond the ritual and the mantra of traditional international relations and security studies.

A helpful place to start will be to take on board Ken Booth's (1994) conceptualisation of security in Southern Africa which he sees as a product of a dynamic interplay between internal, external, political, economic, social and environmental threats. These offer new space to explore a range of issues which were thought to be out of the reach of politics; certainly, out of bounds in security studies. Efforts to move traditional barriers are closely linked to changes on the ground. The very 'newness' of the situation has opened the space for discovering new perspectives, new approaches. As this happens, social movements which both compliment and conflict with the state are surfacing. Bureaucrats and

politicians will have to respond to these in new and creative ways. Whether or not all this will lead to the emergence of a pan-South Africanism remains to be seen.

As the region reaches towards its future, it cannot escape the embrace of South Africa: neither, although the neo-realists may wish it to be different, can South Africa escape the region. As the two are drawn together, a range of new issues are playing into the region's politics and its economics. The intellectual parameters of the challenges facing those who wish to change the terms of the debate have been set out. Because Southern Africa's people have suffered so much, their future requires innovative and imaginative thought and emancipatory action. To transform the region into a zone of peace - the essential prerequisite for tackling the region's poverty and inequity - a political agenda of reconciliation and non-hegemonic engagement must fill the policy space previously filled by the dark and destructive fantasies of the neo-realists.

## NOTES

1. This paper represents a reworked and updated extract from a 1994 monograph by Peter Vale entitled 'Of Laagers, Lepers and Leanness: South Africa and Regional Security in the mid-1990s' published in the Human Rights Studies series of the Christen Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway.
2. Primary mouthpiece of the IDP is their bi-monthly in-house journal *African Security Review*. From 1991-95 the journal appeared under the title *South African Defence Review*.
3. See in particular the resolutions on Migrant Labour and on Southern Africa, Africa, South-South and North-South Relations adopted at the *COSATU International Policy Conference*, Johannesburg, 21-13 April 1995.

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