

Commentary

SADC MISSION WITHDRAWAL FROM MOZAMBIQUE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST INSURGENCY IN CABO DELGADO

In July 2021, the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) was deployed to Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, to combat terrorism and violent extremism. Troops from eight SADC member states supported the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) in addressing the insurgency led by Ansar al-Sunna, a group affiliated with the Islamic State. Despite initial successes in reducing violence and reclaiming territory, SADC announced the mission's phased withdrawal by July 2024, to be replaced by a larger Rwandan force partnered with the EU. However, a resurgence of insurgent attacks and rising displacement has raised concerns about the timing of SAMIM's withdrawal and the ability of FADM to maintain security. The mission faced challenges, including outdated military equipment, funding constraints, and divided attention due to simultaneous deployments in the DRC.

Abhishek Mishra*

On 15th July 2021, the South African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) was deployed in the Cabo Delgado province in northeastern Mozambique as a

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regional response to support Mozambique in combatting terrorism and acts of violent extremism.¹

The mission comprised of troops from eight South African Development Community (SADC) member-states namely, Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, working with the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM). Surprisingly, in early April, the SADC stated that by 15th July 2024, the mission is expected to complete its phased drawdown in lieu of the gains the mission has achieved in restricting insurgent activities. In its place, the SAMIM

* Associate Fellow, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean and United Nations Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi.

mission will be replaced by a larger deployment of the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) in partnership with the European Union (EU).

The mission's withdrawal leaves several questions behind – Why did SADC intervene in Mozambique? Did SAMIM achieve its mandate in Cabo Delgado? Although SAMIM's initial operations effectively contributed to its mandate of combatting terrorism in Cabo Delgado, the decision to withdraw from SAMIM now seems to be premature due to a surge in insurgent activities once again. In this context, this article takes a stock of the genesis of civil war in Cabo Delgado and discusses some of the pre-deployment considerations the SADC had to take. The article assesses the degree to which the SAMIM missions' objectives were met and highlights the primary challenges faced by the mission. This is followed by a summarisation of the implications of SAMIM's withdrawal for regional security and possibilities that lie ahead.

Genesis of civil war in Cabo Delgado

Since October 2017, militant insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has threatened to turn the Mozambique Channel, a key waterway and global shipping route, into the next major security hotspot in the Indian Ocean. The insurgency began when a group of armed men, calling themselves Ansar al-Sunna ("followers of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings"), invaded three police stations in Mocimboa da Praia district.

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Vicious poverty, a deep sense of marginalisation, and inequality among locals and elites provided the motive for these attacks. The fighter's primary aim was to establish a counter-society ruled exclusively by the Islamic law (Sharia) and gain access to resources and power.

In 2010, large number of natural gas reserves were discovered off the coastal town of Palma in Cabo Delgado. Anadarko, an American hydrocarbon company had shown interest in the prospective gas project that was subsequently taken over by the French energy giant TotalEnergies in 2019. In Cabo Delgado, vast deposits of minerals like rubies and graphite which are an essential component in electric vehicle batteries could be found. While the province attracted international attention, extremist preachers capitalised on socio-economic frustration, turning dissatisfied youths to jihadist militancy. In June 2019, Ansar al-Sunna formally affiliated with the Islamic State Central African Province (ISCAP). This helped to expand the group's financial and technical resources. Following this, the Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) was designated as a distinct province of the Islamic State (IS) in May 2022. There is little available information on the nature of relationship the ISM and the senior IS leadership enjoys. However, a rise in insurgent attacks in recent months may imply the onset of a closer relationship.

What were SADC's pre-deployment considerations?

Before SADC's troops were deployed in Mozambique, several questions were raised as to how and what role should the organisation take in combatting acts of terrorism in Cabo

Delgado. Much thought had been given to the nature and type of response the organisation had to conduct to counter the insurgency threats. Before SADC authorised the final deployment, a report by the Chief of Staff of the SADC Standby Brigade, Brigadier Michael Mukokomani recommended five objectives for the mission.²

These involved providing support to Mozambique to combat insurgent attacks in Cabo Delgado by combatting terrorists and restoring security; maintaining peace and security, restoring law and order in affected communities; work in collaboration with humanitarian agencies to provide relief to populations affected by terrorist activities, including internally displaced persons (IDPs); support FADM's operational capabilities by providing air and maritime support; and provide logistical support and training to the FADM. On 23rd June 2021, the SADC authorised the deployment of SAMIM for an initial period of three months with an estimated budget of EUR 10 million.³

Did the mission achieve its mandate?

With the withdrawal of SADC's intervention force in Cabo Delgado province, various questions were raised about the mission's performance and achievements. Did the mission finish its mandate it set out to achieve? Was the withdrawal timely or premature? The SADC mission's objectives were twofold - a combination of both offensive military operations against the insurgents and civilian and humanitarian efforts. When the mission was deployed in 2021, it was successful in directly targeting Ansar al-Sunna and retaking the port town of Mocimboa de Praia. The combined efforts of SAMIM along with FADM, Rwandan forces and local militias were able to push back the insurgents and reclaim important territories. During 2023, there was a 71 percent decrease in violence in Cabo Delgado province due to the mission's operations.⁴ Some reports indicated that SADC was successful in regaining control of 90 percent of territory from the insurgents by the end of 2023.⁵

The advances the mission made in combatting the insurgents between 2021 and 2023 led to two crucial decisions. Firstly, SADC announced that the mission's deployment would evolve from simply conducting offensive operations to a broader focus on civilian and police services. Subsequently, the mission's objective shifted from conducting purely offensive operations against the insurgents to an emphasis on restoring law and order on the ground. Secondly, SADC announced that it would begin its phased withdrawal from Mozambique due to the mission's "success" in fighting the insurgents. However, from January 2024 onwards, there has been an uptick in violence and sporadic attacks which has resulted in an increase in the number of civilians that are internally displaced. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), more than 110,000 people have been displaced since the end of 2023 due to resurgence in insurgent activities.⁶ This showcases the limits of a counterinsurgency strategy heavily focused on a military approach.

Another mandate of the mission was to provide training and enhance the capabilities of the FADM to conduct counter-insurgency operations in the future. This included providing air and maritime support to the FADM. Some reports suggest that the South African Navy's Makhanda 'warrior-class strike craft' was reportedly deployed in the region along with Tanzanian Navy's patrol vessels.⁷ In terms of the provision of air support, there is uncertainty

around the kind of air support the troops had – whether reconnaissance, mobility or combat. Additionally, it also remains unclear the extent to which SAMIM provided logistics and training to the FADM. Most efforts in this regard were led by the European Union and the United States, particularly the European Union Training Mission in Mozambique (EUTM) which had an estimated budget of EUR 15 million.⁸

Following SADC's decision of its intent to withdraw its troops from Mozambique, insurgents have taken advantage of the security vacuum leading to an uptick in violence and displacement.⁹ On 10 May 2024, Islamic State-linked insurgents attacked the town of Macomia in one of its most daring attacks which resulted in almost 700 people fleeing and 10 soldiers losing their lives.¹⁰ According to Human Rights Watch, the insurgents reportedly used boys as young as 13 to raid and loot shops and warehouses in Macomia.¹¹ The upsurge in attacks is indicative that people of Cabo Delgado are far from safe and the threat of violence from insurgents continue to disrupt daily life. Yet, the Mozambican government continues to downplay the insurgents' threat, and insist that the security forces backed by SADC and Rwanda have the situation under control.¹² With SAMIM's withdrawal from Cabo Delgado underway, it remains to be seen whether the FADM can effectively take SAMIM's place in the province.

Challenges faced by the mission

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF), which is the primary provider of soldiers for the mission, faced funding constraints and has been overstretched.

It is difficult to answer the question of whether SAMIM mission successfully achieved its mandate. However, the mission did face two major challenges. Firstly, the military equipment's used in the mission were outdated in addition to facing funding constraints and lacking appropriate assets. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF), which is the primary provider of soldiers for the mission, faced funding constraints and has been overstretched.¹³ The average age of deployable soldiers

in the SANDF is 40 years. Additionally, the Casspirs armoured personal carriers that were deployed is old with only 3 of 36 in operational condition.¹⁴

The second major issue confronting the mission was its divided attention. On 15th December 2023, the SADC authorised the deployment of its mission in neighboring DRC known as the SAMIDRC, which led to two concurrent

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deployments.¹⁵ With limited financial and logistical capacities, the wisdom of such a decision is open to debate. An early premature withdrawal from Mozambique and setting an unrealistic expectation in DRC, where the task of fighting the notorious M23 rebel movement is far larger in scale and complex, could lead to potentially lethal consequences for regional security. The likelihood of the SAMIDRC achieving its objectives in DRC remains to be seen.

However, what could be argued is that the decision to withdraw from Cabo Delgado and concurrently engage in another conflict in DRC did side-track the SAMIM in Mozambique.¹⁶

Going forward, the Rwandan forces are expected to deploy its own mission in Mozambique which is going to be independent of the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU). This naturally raises some questions about Rwanda's counterinsurgency doctrine or the conduct of its army. Rwanda's decision to deploy its troops is informed by several factors. Its troops have been able to limit civilian casualties while battling insurgents and have actively patrolled and interacted with local communities to gather information.¹⁷ Their knowledge of Swahili language also enabled them to communicate directly with locals. Some reports suggest that due to surge in violent attacks, Rwanda is deploying an additional 2500 soldiers to help the FADM contain the spread of insecurity.¹⁸

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Insurgents in Mozambique continues to be active and have not been contained. This necessitates the continued presence of troops from neighboring countries if peace and stability is to be maintained. Some reports even indicate that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has extended the deployment of its soldiers to Mozambique until 31st December 2024.¹⁹ Even Tanzanian troops may continue to remain deployed in Cabo Delgado province.²⁰ Additionally, there could be a change in leadership as Mozambique is set to hold its presidential elections in October later this year. The ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) party has chosen Daniel Chapo as its presidential candidate.²¹ If the new leadership comes to power, the question of continuity or discontinuity in the government's approach to peace and security could become a vital point of contention. This would have a direct bearing on Mozambique's ability to fight insurgents and provide relief to affected communities.

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