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Military Downsizing in the Developing World: Process, Problems, and Possibilities

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Military downsizing has been a key issue in many countries throughout the world since the end of the Cold War. The US military has only recently completed its own five-year, 20-percent reduction in strength. Calls for military downsizing in the developing world are increasing, not only in the countries themselves, but from the US government, other donor governments, and the World Bank.

There are a number of objective reasons for military downsizing in the developing world, just as there are elsewhere in the world. In some cases, states must demobilize forces in accordance with a negotiated settlement to armed conflicts. In others, the reason is to reduce the economic burdens that a large military places on the resources of a state. In many countries, oversized military establishments far exceed legitimate security needs and act as a brake on the national economy. Some countries may want to rationalize their force structure in accordance with a realistic threat assessment, while others could be required to reduce their armed forces as part of an internationally negotiated economic Structural Adjustment Program. Finally, military downsizing can also directly support efforts to enhance democratization; politicized militaries are often the greatest threat to nascent democracies in the developing world, and in most such countries the military will remain an important political actor for the foreseeable future. Support for democratization in the developing world is an officially stated strategic goal of the US government.[1]

This article examines the military downsizing process in Sub-Saharan Africa and provides recommendations for US policy changes that might improve the likelihood of contributing to successful military downsizing in the developing world.

Conceptual Categories

It is useful to divide military downsizing programs into two conceptual categories, those undertaken for economic or political reasons and those required by, and agreed to, as part of a peace agreement.

Military downsizing programs initiated for political reasons, or for the purposes of economy or military reform, benefit from the comparative luxuries of extended timelines and flexibility in implementation. The government has the opportunity to study its ongoing security needs while determining its new force requirements. It can review the capabilities and needs of the national economy while developing retraining and reintegration programs for discharged veterans. It has the opportunity to secure (or at least seek) the external financial assistance and technical advice required to support the military downsizing effort. The government can also prepare psychologically both the soldiers identified for discharge and the communities to which they are to be relocated. Finally, it can adjust the timing of demobilization and reintegration to meet economic, social, and security constraints, which will vary widely from case to case.

In most instances where military downsizing is undertaken for political or economic reasons, the state can use the opportunity to raise the personnel standards of those retained by the military. The downsizing program provides the opportunity to purge the military of the aged, the infirm, the criminal, and those with disciplinary problems. Educational, literacy, and physical fitness standards also can be raised as part of a downsizing effort.

Conversely, downsizing efforts specified in peace agreements are constrained by severe time limitations and lack of

flexibility in implementation. Demobilization usually is mandated by a given date, regardless of whether sufficient funding or administrative infrastructure exists to support the downsizing program.

The physical condition of those to be demobilized also tends to be different in cases of conflict resolution. Except for the injured, they tend to be young, fit, better disciplined, more highly dedicated, and often better educated than peacetime soldiers. Unfortunately, they may also suffer greatly from stress-related psychological problems. Most have not yet chosen a career, so they will have different needs and aspirations than peacetime soldiers. Anyone involved in providing military advice to a demobilization process would do well to recognize these differences.

Process

Military downsizing in developing countries should be viewed as a multi-step process focused on family units and communities, rather than as a single event (demobilization) affecting individual soldiers. Successful military downsizing programs must not only achieve a significant reduction in military forces, but should enable countries to meet legitimate security interests and help discharged personnel reintegrate into the civil society and economy. A successful downsizing program will need to include the following objectives:

- Restructuring of the military
- Survey of the retraining and reintegration capabilities, desires, and needs of the personnel to be demobilized, as well as the needs of the soldiers' families
- Study of the specific local economy, including the needs and capacities of the communities in which demobilized personnel may be located
- Demobilization of selected military personnel
- Reintegration of demobilized personnel into civilian society

To date, there have been relatively few demobilization and reintegration programs in the developing world, and no completely successful experiences to draw upon. Although some programs have produced force reductions, they cannot necessarily be counted as successes since large numbers of discharged soldiers have not been reabsorbed into the national economy and civilian society. Most military downsizing efforts are either ongoing or are too recent to permit detailed analysis; they have, however, produced some useful lessons, and some key issues have been identified that require action by policymakers.[2]

Downsizing Challenges

The goodwill of the parties involved--the military as an institution, the national government, and members of the international community providing program assistance to support the downsizing effort--is the most important variable in a downsizing effort. With the cooperation of the concerned parties, problems in a downsizing program can be worked around or through. Without that cooperation, however, not even a well-designed downsizing program could be completed successfully.

Even assuming the full cooperation of the parties involved, a number of common problems have plagued most military downsizing programs in developing countries. These problems include a non-holistic approach to the issue, failure to abide by the details of the program once it is planned and approved, unrealistic expectations on the part of those to be demobilized, and resource issues. This important latter category includes funding to support the downsizing program that is inadequate, late, or both, and requests for US security assistance funds to help downsized forces reorganize and re-equip themselves.

Non-Holistic Approach

A significant problem concerning support for military downsizing in the developing world is that virtually no one--not the US Congress, nor executive branch bureaucratic offices, nor nongovernmental organizations--takes a holistic view of the problem. The downsizing issue is normally looked at piecemeal rather than as a process.

. The US Department of Defense, in principle, is willing to conduct defense requirements surveys, but rarely receives

funding to do so. Further, DOD is often reluctant to conduct such a survey on its own (with State Department concurrence, but without a Security Assistance Program funded case) out of concern that completing the survey suggests to others that DOD will provide funds for the needed military restructuring.

. Donor governments and international lending institutions increasingly seek to impose conditionality on developmental assistance, requiring military downsizing (for purposes of either reducing government expenditures, enhancing democracy, or both) before finding a country eligible for assistance. While the community of donors and lenders may be willing to assist with funding to support the demobilization and reintegration components of downsizing, there is great reluctance to assist with restructuring the military (and possibly police) forces, or with the assessment of what soldiers' needs may be once they have been discharged from the military.

. In several post-conflict cases, there has been great difficulty in identifying funding sources to feed the encamped military personnel while they were being out-processed for their demobilization. Developmental agencies and organizations did not want to become involved with the soldiers until after they had been officially discharged.[3]

Currently, no one is effectively integrating the capabilities of DOD (or other Western military forces) and development donors to create a cohesive plan for a given country in a non-conflict downsizing program. The closest any case has yet come was the World Bank's involvement in Uganda, where the bank conducted needs surveys and helped the government of Uganda to plan and conduct the demobilization and reintegration phases of the program. Unfortunately, the bank did not help with either planning or funding assistance for restructuring the Ugandan armed forces. In another case, the US Department of Defense conducted a seminar on civil-military relations in support of military downsizing in Chad in April 1997; funding has yet to be provided to facilitate the restructuring of the Chadian armed forces. Resourcing for military reorganization, often to include elements of modernization, normally falls under the rubric of security assistance, while support for the reintegration of personnel into civilian society falls under developmental assistance.

Attention to Details

In 1994, the United Nations official in Liberia responsible for demobilizing and reintegrating ex-combatants in accordance with a 1993 peace agreement did attempt to conduct holistic planning of the process, including setting timelines for receipt of essential materials and the establishment of secure processing camps. Political leaders in Liberia (both UN and Liberian) ignored the details of these plans, however, and initiated the demobilization process prior to meeting the timelines and prior to the arrival of key personnel and several items of critical materiel required for the demobilization program. The result was predictable: many logistics problems and collapse of the demobilization program within three days. These avoidable problems decreased confidence in the process among the fighters wanting to be demobilized and increased tensions among the Liberian warring factions, and between the factions and the UN.

Most often, such failure to abide by the details of a demobilization program results from a calendar-driven peace process rather than one that is event-driven. Not unlike exit strategies, which "can be based on the passage of time, the occurrence of events or, most often, a combination of the two,"[4] demobilization is a kind of final phase in a UN peace operation. Those charged with planning and conducting demobilization programs should not become fixated on a rigid schedule. Rather, they should make decisions based on events on the ground--the security situation, and encampment and disarmament goals--with the planning calendar serving as a guideline instead of an inflexible series of deadlines.

Unrealistic Expectations

It is not uncommon for soldiers identified for discharge to develop unrealistic expectations concerning the demobilization benefits that are to accrue to them.[5] Upon discovering their error in the matter, many individuals become reluctant to participate in the process, or unwilling to consider their case closed. The unrealistic expectations may stem from willful disinformation, from personnel receiving an erroneous explanation of the program from superiors whose own understanding of the process is incomplete, or from reductions in planned benefits caused by diminishing resources in an underfunded program.

In many situations this problem may be complicated by the fact that those to be demobilized are not "soldiers" in a professional, disciplined sense as we think of them. Rather, they are "warriors" of "shifting allegiance, habituated to violence, with no stake in civil order." [6] Bush-hardened warriors with no ties to any community may find the promised demobilization benefits paltry when compared to the profits they might gain by continued violence. The cost to them of disarming and standing down may be prohibitive.

A different challenge is that posed by "boy soldiers," 12- to 15-year-olds who may have functioned as warriors for four or five years of their young lives. In some instances, such as in Liberia, one may encounter 16-year-old "generals." Such youths may believe it proper, as "senior officers" about to be demobilized, to receive a university degree or even attend a staff college or war college course. It is difficult to convince these young combatants that it is appropriate for them to relinquish their automatic weapons and return to life as high school students.

Funding: Inadequate, Late, and Sometimes Both

Downsizing and restructuring of the military, coupled with demobilization and successful reintegration of demobilized military personnel into the civil society, is an expensive undertaking. In some cases the demobilization effort was planned in detail and announced to the military before funding for the program was identified, as in Mozambique and Rwanda. In others, such as Liberia in 1994, the funding identified (\$5.2 million for the demobilization of 60,000 personnel) was clearly inadequate to support the needs of the soldiers being discharged and their families.

In Mozambique, the demobilization programs ultimately funded by the international community fell far short of the benefits announced to the troops, causing those awaiting demobilization to become disgruntled. Further, the lateness of the funding support delayed the start of the demobilization program, slowing the peace process and prolonging the international peacekeeping operation by a year. Downsizing in Mozambique was, however, completed successfully in 1994. In Liberia, inadequate funding contributed significantly to the collapse of the demobilization process. Inadequate or late funding to support military demobilization, including funds for security assistance and reintegration of the demobilized soldiers, can easily jeopardize the entire peace process.

Security Assistance Reductions

To create conditions favorable to a successful demobilization effort, an enabling environment should exist in the country whose armed forces are being demobilized. The government and its military must be able to accomplish the same basic national security missions with fewer personnel upon completion of the process. To reach this goal, it may be necessary to increase military spending for modernization and mobility capabilities in the short term to gain the longer-term benefits of cost savings from personnel reductions. This most often requires external assistance to ensure that the demobilizing state's legitimate security concerns can be met. And it is precisely this point that successive US administrations and the Congress have failed to grasp. Since the demise of the Cold War, security assistance has fallen out of favor and, therefore, funding levels have been cut severely.

The problem that results from such policies can be demonstrated in an analysis of the "African Conflict Resolution Act," which authorized the spending of up to \$25 million in foreign assistance funding annually in fiscal years 1995 and 1996. The act intended to "facilitate reductions in the size of the armed forces of countries of Sub-Saharan Africa." [7] Yet even with this legislation, some actions essential to military downsizing and demobilization could not have been funded:

- Defense requirements surveys to help governments design rational force structures
- Vehicles for reconnaissance and rapid reaction forces
- Radios and relay systems for command and control
- Maintenance training and repair parts for new vehicles and radios
- Tactical training to create a professional force and to enable it to participate in national defense or in peacekeeping

Security assistance funding was not appropriated--or even requested by the current Administration--to support military downsizing in Africa or any other region of the world. The 1994 legislation expired in 1996 and has not been renewed

or extended by Congress. To be fair, some in the United States could see such payments as a form of bribery, seeking to induce former belligerents to live peacefully in their communities. And in an era of spending constraints, objecting to diverting funds from US domestic programs appeals to many elected officials. Nevertheless, policymakers and politicians seem to be playing the budget game on this issue: speak loudly when authorizing, speak softly or not at all when appropriating. The result is unexecutable policy.

Reintegration Funds

Funding assistance for personnel being demobilized can be used for vocational training; pensions, discharge payments, or both; transportation and relocation assistance; possibly housing construction assistance; credits to enable veterans to establish a business or go into agriculture; and literacy training. Additionally, community-level health care and educational systems may need to be strengthened so these systems can support the increased demands placed on them by demobilized veterans and their families.

One of the undesirable outcomes of an inadequate reintegration process is having ex-soldiers reappear in someone else's opposition army. This appears to have happened to some demobilized personnel in Uganda in 1995 and 1996. An even worse failure occurs when discharged soldiers return to the barracks and rejoin the force from which they were supposedly separated. This is most likely to occur in demobilization efforts associated with the resolution of internal tribal and ethnic conflicts; it has been a common occurrence in Liberia since 1994 and in Angola in 1996 and 1997.

Conclusion

To enhance prospects for successful demobilization efforts in developing countries, an enabling environment must be created through the combined and coordinated efforts of all parties to the process. This most often requires externally provided funding assistance for the demobilization program itself, as well as attention and assistance to ensure that the legitimate security concerns of the demobilizing state are met. Additionally, personnel being demobilized should not simply be paid off, but should be readied, to the degree that resources allow, for reintegration into the economy.

Should the United States ignore legitimate, threat-based security requirements of the affected states, or demand execution of an ill-planned and underfunded program, through aid conditionality or other forms of suasion, a new cycle of coups d'etat or rebellions by disgruntled demobilized military and fearful members of the downsized military could follow. This has been the outcome in several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past two years. Each such failure deals a setback to recent gains in democratization and respect for human rights in those countries and within the region. Such outcomes run counter to American strategic interests in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

NOTES

1. The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington: The White House, May 1997), p. 19.
2. "Demobilization and Reintegration of Military Personnel in Africa: The Evidence from Seven Country Case Studies," a discussion paper published by the World Bank in Washington, D.C., October 1993.
3. See my article "Responsibilities of a Military Negotiator During Peace Talks," *Parameters*, 26 (Summer 1996), 69, for a discussion of problems providing food for demobilization camps in the Angolan peace process during 1992.
4. Kevin C. M. Benson and Christopher B. Thrash, "Declaring Victory: Planning Exit Strategies for Peace Operations," *Parameters*, 26 (Autumn 1996), 69-80.
5. Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Chris Mupande of the Zimbabwe National Army, Lagos, Nigeria, 16 October 1993.
6. Ralph Peters, "The New Warrior Class," *Parameters*, 24 (Summer 1994), 16. Peters does a superb job describing the world views and thought processes of such "warriors," and the problems they might pose for US forces and by

extension to anyone attempting to carry out a post-conflict demobilization program.

7. "African Conflict Resolution Act," 29 September 1994, p. 7.

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Reviewed 24 November 1997. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil