

Scientia Militaria

South African Journal of Military Studies

Editorial

The months since our last issue, published in June 2025, have revealed significant transformations in the international security environment, characterised by protracted armed conflicts, evolving alliances, and accelerated military modernisation efforts. Escalating hostilities in Europe and the Middle East, alongside persistent instabilities in Africa and the Asia-Pacific, have strained diplomatic frameworks and heightened the risk of wide-ranging confrontations. Concurrently, record levels of defence spending and advancements in hybrid capabilities underscore multipolar competition, where state and non-state actors increasingly exploit technology to pursue strategic objectives. Recent sources portray a world in which traditional alliances contend with emerging coalitions, hybrid threats proliferate, and nuclear postures evolve in ways that challenge existing arms control regimes.¹ This overview reports on key developments across regions and themes, emphasising their implications for international stability, and the scholarly discourse on military affairs.

Armed conflicts persisted as a central concern, with the Russia–Ukraine War still demonstrating attritional warfare amid evolving international support on both sides. Russian advances in eastern Ukraine, particularly around Pokrovsk and Kharkiv, reflected a strategy of incremental gains.² By late August, Ukrainian responses, including drone strikes on Russian refineries, had disrupted approximately 17 per cent of the Russian refining capacity around Moscow, leading to regional fuel shortages. The integration of foreign forces and the suspension of specific United States (US) aid packages under the new Trump administration highlighted uncertainties in Western commitments, even as European nations assumed greater roles in coordination through groups, such as the Ukraine Defence Contact Group.³ Diplomatic efforts, such as US–Russian talks in August and postponed summits in October, aimed at ceasefires, but encountered obstacles over territorial concessions and enforcement of sanctions.⁴

In the Middle East, instability arose from ongoing hostilities. The fragile truce between Israel and Hezbollah endured intermittent violations through airstrikes in Lebanon, driven by Israeli impatience regarding the disarmament of Hezbollah. At the same time, Iranian procurement of sodium perchlorate from China enabled round-the-clock missile production, exacerbating fears of renewed confrontations with Israel.⁵ The collapse of the Assad government in Syria in late 2024 created vacuums that persisted into 2025, with groups, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), influencing transitional processes amid Israeli strikes and Turkish pressures on Kurdish forces. Under President Ahmed al-Saraa, leader of the HTS (and formerly designated as a terrorist leader), Syria joined the US-led international coalition against the Islamic State group, and strengthened political and economic ties with the United States, shortly after the United Nations (UN) Security Council had lifted economic sanctions on Syria.⁶ Gaza saw continued incidents of Israeli

attacks, with humanitarian gestures, such as the return of the remains of Palestinians, juxtaposed against settler violence and infrastructure damage.⁷ These dynamics not only strained regional alliances but also intersected with global energy security, as Houthis maritime attacks continued to disrupt shipping lanes.⁸

Asia-Pacific security challenges manifest in territorial disputes and militant activity. Clashes in the South China Sea, including a mid-October incident near Pag-asa Island where a Chinese coastguard ship rammed a Philippine fisheries vessel, underscored assertive maritime claims, and prompted reaffirmations of US defence obligations.⁹ Border tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan escalated with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan attacks and cross-border airstrikes, culminating in a ceasefire mediated by Qatar and Turkey, although new militant factions emerged.¹⁰ In Myanmar, a Chinese-brokered truce between the ruling military junta (known as the Tatmadaw) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) enabled the Tatmadaw to redirect troops, equipment, and resources from the stabilised northern Shan State front to other active conflict zones across the country.¹¹ Violence in the Indonesian Papua region involved deadly confrontations between separatists and security forces.¹² North Korean ballistic missile launches and troop contributions to Russia further destabilised the Korean Peninsula, signalling deepening ties with Moscow.¹³

Currently, Africa faces over 50 active armed conflicts, which represents an approximate 45 per cent increase over the last five years, aggravating humanitarian crises on the continent.¹⁴ African developments revealed multifaceted instability, with the Sudan civil war reaching a pivotal moment through the capture of el-Fasher by the Rapid Support Forces in late October, displacing thousands and intensifying humanitarian needs.¹⁵ In Mali, the Al Qaeda-linked group, JNIM,¹⁶ continues its siege of the capital Bamako, cutting off fuel supplies, and applying increasing pressure on the military junta in its search for legitimacy – raising the risk of another military coup.¹⁷ Jihadist rivalries in Nigeria claimed around 200 lives, while piracy resurged in Somalia.¹⁸ These events amplified calls for external intervention.

Broader thematic trends include surging military expenditures and arms modernisation. Global spending reached \$2,7 trillion in 2024, with projections for 2025 indicating continued growth, particularly in Europe, where North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members, such as Poland and Romania, exceeded targets.¹⁹ Nuclear forces expanded, with the Chinese arsenal nearing 600 warheads, and Russia modernising its strategic nuclear forces and updating its doctrine. Arms transfers remained robust, dominated by the United States and France, while non-state actors accessed advanced drones and missiles.²⁰ The European Union Defence Readiness Roadmap and the NATO Hague Summit resolutions emphasised collective capabilities, including rapid troop movements and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into warfare.²¹

Hybrid threats, encompassing cyber intrusions and drone incursions, gained prominence. The authorisation of drone shoot-downs by Belgium in response to suspected Russian activities exemplified defensive postures, while global discussions on AI ethics advanced through UN resolutions.²² Environmental and health security intersected with military affairs, as outbreaks and natural disasters strained operational capacities, such as typhoons

that affected military readiness in the Philippines and Vietnam.²³ These developments collectively signal a fragile international order, where diplomatic avenues have to counterbalance military escalations to foster stability. Against this backdrop of evolving global security dynamics, the contributions in this issue of *Scientia Militaria* offer timely perspectives that resonate with contemporary challenges.

This second regular issue for the year reports on the multifaceted dimensions of military history, psychology, law, foreign policy, and security reforms, offering a bridge between historical legacies and contemporary defence challenges in South Africa and beyond. By integrating archaeological insights with modern operational resilience, procurement regulations, diplomatic dynamics, and institutional rivalries, the contributions underscore the interdisciplinary nature of military scholarship. This collection not only advances understanding of specific contexts but also highlights broader implications for policy and practice in an evolving global security landscape.

Building on historical perspectives, the first article is authored by Anton C van Vollenhoven, an extraordinary professor of History at North-West University. With over 35 years of research experience, his primary focus lies in the archaeology of the Anglo-Boer War. This contribution examines Steinaecker's Horse, a volunteer unit aligned with British forces during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). Comprising local Lowveld inhabitants – including Swazi, Pedi, and Shangane individuals – alongside a minority of British soldiers, the unit operated in the Lowveld and Swaziland to intercept Boer communications with supporters in Portuguese East Africa. Several outposts were established to facilitate this objective. Recent investigations have addressed the scarcity of historical sources through archaeological excavations, yielding artefacts that illustrate soldiers' daily lives, environmental adaptations, and interactions with indigenous communities. This archaeological lens not only reconstructs historical events but also reveals social dynamics in colonial warfare. With this research, Van Vollenhoven contributes to a nuanced understanding of multicultural military engagements.

Shifting from historical archaeology to contemporary psychological dimensions, the second article is by Charles H van Wijk, a clinical psychologist practising in Simon's Town, South Africa, and a research fellow in the Department of Industrial Psychology at the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Military Science. His prior work examined adaptation to isolated, confined, and extreme environments. Here, he discusses psychological readiness as a pivotal element for mission success and personnel well-being in the South African Navy. The investigation reported on here particularly addressed the demanding submarine context. Key factors are robust clinical mental health, adaptability, and integration with support systems. The study centred on the aftermath of the SAS *Manthatisi* accident in September 2023. In his research, Van Wijk analysed submariners' resilience and associated risk-protective factors. The findings underscore the necessity of rigorous pre-service selection, ongoing screenings, and prompt interventions to sustain operational readiness. Insights from this event highlight the value of resilient individuals capable of rapid recovery. The study concluded that sustained psychological support and resilience cultivation are essential for submariner efficacy. This work extends beyond naval operations, as it offers broad applications for high-stress occupational environments.



Transitioning to legal frameworks, the third article is by Ernst Heydenrych. He serves as Academic and Quality Manager in the Faculty of Law at Boston City Campus and as research fellow in the Department of Mercantile and Public Law at the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Military Science. Derived from his LLD dissertation under Geo Quinot and Michelle Nel, this article summarises and extends the fourth chapter of Heydenrych's dissertation. Although public procurement research in South Africa is prevalent, defence procurement remains understudied despite its fiscal and operational significance. This gap is alarming amid extensive discretion granted to contracting authorities and endemic fraud, corruption, and irregularities within the Department of Defence and the South African National Defence Force. The article delineates "acquisition" and "procurement" as distinct forms. It identifies challenges, such as persistent budget reductions, cost containment, delays, and corruption. The article also evaluates the *Public Procurement Act* (No. 28 of 2024). Recommendations advocate for robust policy implementation to eradicate malpractices, build capacity, and ensure legal compliance. These steps optimise system efficiency. By proposing combined assurance mechanisms for accountability, Heydenrych's contribution addresses oversight deficiencies, and fosters a resilient defence sector aligned with national priorities.

Moving to the diplomatic arena, the fourth article is by Riaan Eksteen, a research associate in the Department of Political Studies and Governance at the University of the Free State Faculty of Humanities. This article scrutinises South African foreign policy amid the shifting dynamics of President Donald Trump's second term. South Africa has grappled with adapting to these changes, profoundly influenced by domestic realities. The assertive negotiations and prioritisation of economic, national, and security interests of the Trump administration have strained global partnerships. The "America First" doctrine prompted withdrawals from commitments, affecting bilateral ties. Exacerbated by the South African incomplete understanding of US political nuances, policy divergences have led to misinterpretations. Notable escalations include the March 2025 declaration of the South African ambassador as persona non grata and tariff impositions, with potential congressional sanctions looming. While relations may evolve, current ambiguities persist. The analysis emphasises informed engagement and comprehensive political comprehension. It further provides critical lessons for navigating superpower influences in African diplomacy.

Concluding with regional security analyses, the final article is by Mokete Pherudi, a research fellow at the Centre for Gender and African Studies within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State. Post-Cold War and independence-era reforms bolstered security apparatuses across nations. These reforms included the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF), the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS), and the National Security Service. These initiatives intensified tensions between the LDF and LMPS. The tensions evolved into rivalry after the 1966 independence and impeded mandate fulfilment. Pherudi examined the origins of conflict, including intra-LDF divisions, manifestations, remedial measures, and governance repercussions. Recommendations advocate for inclusive reforms to promote stability and collaboration. These reforms address politicisation and enhance institutional efficacy. The study demonstrated the perils of securitised politics, and the findings offer pathways for sustainable African governance.

Scientia Militaria takes pride in this rigorous, diverse assemblage of articles, spanning temporal and thematic spectra. The issue culminates in five book reviews by Fanga Agbor Martial, J David Thompson, Craig Bailie, Hussein Solomon and Piet Bester. The journal is grateful to the efforts of these authors, the peer reviewers, book publishers and reviewers. Engagement through reading, critique, and new article submissions advances collective innovation in military and security studies, reinforcing the role of the journal in scholarly discourse.

The Editors

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Endnotes

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