Under pressure

South Africa’s defence industry is restructuring amid investigations into alleged misdemeanours.

South Africa’s Armscor is being put under the interrogator’s lamp by the Government’s Cameron Commission, examining the legality of its international dealings under the apartheid regime.

It is not an experience which Armscor is enjoying, although Tielman De Waal, the group’s managing director, says that it is “...committed to being transparent and accountable”.

De Waal has made an impassioned plea for the debate surrounding the Cameron Commission to be to a held at a high “moral standard”. Some of those attending the commission have accused Armscor of being a “Frankenstein’s monster”, which should be destroyed.

Underlying the hysteria of such a war cry are legitimate issues and topics, but they demand to be addressed in considerably measured tones.

The previous covert relationships fostered to provide access to technology, particularly with Israel, are now also being re-examined in the aftermath of changing political perspectives. South Africa is looking for legitimate defence-collaboration agreements which reflect its changed position in the international community.

Armscor was the progeny of the apartheid state, providing the military equipment and support which the country was unable to purchase under a United Nations arms embargo.

With the collapse of the apartheid regime, many of the former targets of Armscor-manufactured weaponry are now in positions of Government.

One of the most senior is South Africa’s defence minister, Joe Modise, who was previously on the military wing of the African National Congress.

Modise, however, and his president, Nelson Mandela, are far from publicly demanding that Armscor and its companies be pulled down as the last vestiges of an apartheid regime. Both are adopting instead a pragmatic approach which views Armscor as a supporter of the new state’s armed forces and as an economic bonus which offers a potential, and welcome, source of export-derived revenue.

Mandela says: “Arms are for the purpose of defending the sovereignty and integrity of a country. From that angle, there is nothing wrong in having a trade in arms.”

Mandela and Modise, who has become a vocal supporter of Armscor, attended the recent Defence Exposition (DEXA) in Johannesburg.

If Armscor and its offshoot companies do not need to fear that the Government will actively pursue its dissolution, they must nonetheless re-orientate themselves to take on board the prospect of continuing in a radically changed environment.

Given the welcome advent of an emerging democracy in South Africa, along with reduced tensions in the region, defence expenditure is falling rapidly. The country’s defence manufacturers are like their Western counterparts in having to “downsize” while trying to bolster dwindling national procurement by expanding their exports.

While in some ways South Africa might have been expected to re-enter the Western fold, it appears to be trying to steer an independent, almost non-aligned, path in the defence sector. This was reflected in the DEXA show, held between 22 and 26 November, with senior delegations in attendance from Gabon, Israel, Malaysia, Oman, Rumania, Singapore, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.

Given the former political allegiances of the African National Congress and of the apartheid regime, a non-aligned approach to defence collaboration and sales would not be unexpected.

FIRST POINTERS

One of the first indicators of the path which South Africa might follow was the funding of a development programme to refit the air force’s Atlas Cheetah C fighter aircraft with a variant of the Mikoyan MiG-29 Fulcrum.

The outcome of this programme may prove a critical milestone, not only in marking future trends in South African defence collaboration, but also in the viability of Russian defence aerospace products in competing in an “open” market.

South Africa’s Aerosud is working with Mikoyan, Marvol and Mikoyan on the programme. A Dassault Mirage F.1AZ — modified to accommodate a variant of the Klavom RD-33, dubbed the SMR-95 — has already been flown. Flight-test results have so far been encouraging, with the projected marked improvements in performance having been borne out.

Given Modise’s background, it is hardly surprising that he is in favour of collaborative programmes with Russia. “It is no secret we are going to work with the Russians now,” he says. Modise envisages this collaboration extending beyond the proposed re-engineering programme.

Discussions between South African missile manufacturer Kentron and its Russian counterpart, Vympel, are indicative of this. Such a tie-up, even at the level of technology exchange on particular projects, were it ever to come to fruition, could potentially see advanced air-to-air missiles becoming avail-

Douglas Barrie/Johannesburg

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