

# SOUTH AFRICA: A HAMSTRUNG REGIONAL POWER

On paper, South Africa meets all the criteria for taking on a regional hegemonial role in southern Africa: Economic power, political weight, military might, and moral authority. But because of an erratic foreign policy and a lack of regional acceptance, Pretoria is experiencing significant difficulties in playing the regional leadership role that the countries of the West expect of it and to which its own elites aspire. This contrasts with South Africa's self-confident demeanour on the global stage.



*South Africa has yet to discover its international role: President Jacob Zuma celebrating Freedom Day in Pretoria, 27 April 2011.*  
 REUTERS/Siphiwe Sibeko

Most international observers had expected a bloodbath. But South Africa's transition from internationally ostracised pariah state to liberal democracy was largely peaceful. After the end of the Apartheid regime in 1994, South Africa under the presidency of the nation's figurehead Nelson Mandela rapidly gained political clout. This was closely linked to the expectation of many external actors as well as the South African elite that the country would play a prominent role in the region, the continent, and globally in the future.

Indeed, South Africa has gained standing in international politics over the 17 years since the end of Apartheid. The country

is an economic engine for southern Africa. In terms of security policy, Pretoria is actively engaged in its regional and continental neighbourhood, for instance by contributing troops for peacekeeping missions or providing mediation services. At the global level, since being admitted to the BRICS group of states in the spring of 2011, South Africa is ranked together with the emerging powers Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Also, the country is currently a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Despite these successes, South Africa has been unable to this day to leverage its potential as a regional power and global

advocate of African interests as expected, due to countervailing foreign and domestic factors, the scepticism of neighbouring states towards South Africa's hegemonial ambitions, and contradictory expectations of South Africa in terms of its regional and global role.

## Post-1994 ascendancy and current status

The Apartheid system, based on racial segregation and violence, was designed to ensure the broad social dominance of the white minority. The violent enforcement of this racist system caused South Africa to experience increasing international isolation, particularly since the 1960s and 1970s. This ostracism was partially alleviated in the context of the Cold War through continuing economic and diplomatic contacts with Western countries such as the US, the UK, and the Federal Republic of Germany. They regarded the country, situated in a key geostrategic location at the southern tip of the African continent, as a bulwark against the spread of Communism in the region and were thus reticent in enforcing sanctions against Pretoria.

The end of the Apartheid regime, the peaceful transition to democracy, and Mandela's policy of reconciliation led to a political and economic resurgence after 1994. Pretoria resumed diplomatic relations, disrupted under Apartheid, with numerous countries and opened more than 40 new diplomatic missions. Within just two years, the country joined 45 in-

## Switzerland and South Africa

- I** In 2005, amid international power shifts, Switzerland identified South Africa as a strategic partner, according the African nation a preferential position. In 2008, a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding was signed that encompasses the areas of politics, economics, development, peace support, education, science, and culture.
- I** Economically, South Africa is Switzerland's most important overall trade partner in the African continent and its most important export market. The total trade volume between the two countries in 2010 was around CHF1.5 billion. South Africa imported goods worth CHF768 million from Switzerland (mainly chemical goods, machines, and precision instruments). At the same time, South Africa exported goods worth CHF760 million to Switzerland (mainly precious metals, especially platinum). Switzerland ranked sixth in the list of South African exports and 24<sup>th</sup> in its list of imports.
- I** Between 1995 and 2004, Switzerland supported the transition process in South Africa in the framework of a special programme of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) with a volume of CHF95 million. Also, in the area of peace support, the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with financial aid and expertise. The special programme has now been replaced by the Regional Programme for Southern Africa with the core topics of good governance, HIV/AIDS, and rural development/food security. The regional programme has a special South African component focusing on governance, training, and climate change.
- I** There are some dark chapters in the history of relations between Switzerland and South Africa. For instance, Switzerland continued to maintain normal trade relations with the Apartheid regime when most other industrialised nations had already imposed economic sanctions. Relations between Switzerland and South Africa were subjected to a historical review by a Swiss National Research Programme (NFP 42+) and the results published in 2005.

ternational organisations. For instance, in 1994, South Africa joined the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, replaced in 2002 by the African Union, AU) as well as the South African Development Community (SADC); in the same year, it also rejoined the UN, from which it had been suspended in 1974.

The successful transition process also laid the groundwork for South Africa's ascent to become the continent's biggest economic powerhouse. Globally, the South African economy ranked in 27<sup>th</sup> place in 2010, measured in terms of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around US\$362 billion. It was thus ahead of countries such as Denmark, Finland, or Singapore. Until the economic and financial crisis began to take effect in 2008/09, it experienced an annual economic growth of around 4.8 per cent. In 2010, its growth was at 2.8 per cent. South Africa's GDP represents around two thirds of southern Africa's entire GDP, around one third of the GDP in sub-Saharan Africa, and about one fifth of the entire continent's GDP. One crucial pillar of its economy is the export of natural resources. South Africa has the world's largest reserves of gold, manganese, and platinum. On the other hand, the image of South Africa's economic upswing is marred by high unemployment rates estimated at between 25 and 40 per cent, rapidly growing income disparity, and persistent poverty among large parts of the population.

Militarily, Pretoria has one of the most powerful armed forces in all of Africa. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) with its 62,000 active troops may not be the largest, but is certainly a well-equipped force due to relatively high military expenditures. In 2010, the defence budget was US\$4.15 billion, or 1.15 per cent of GDP. South Africa is the only African nation to command substantial own airlift capacities and thus has the ability to project military force. Of the other sub-Saharan states, only Nigeria and Angola come close to matching South Africa's military capabilities. However, even in South Africa, the armed forces are confronted with great challenges, including rising costs, the danger of overextending capabilities due to multiple peacekeeping engagements, and a high rate of HIV/AIDS infections among the troops.

### Foreign policy: Seeking a clear profile

One reason why South Africa has so far failed to actualise its potential in terms of regional and global influence more successfully is an erratic foreign policy beset with tensions. Under Mandela (1994–99), South Africa pursued a strongly value-oriented foreign policy, based on its own historical experience. It was grounded in an anti-racist and anti-imperialist stance.

At its centre were the global promotion of human rights, peace, and democracy, advancement of African interests, and development aid. The goal was to shake off the stigma of Apartheid and to demonstrate solidarity as a “good global citizen”.

Under Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) and the current President Jacob Zuma (since 2009), there has been a shift of emphasis away from a value-driven foreign policy to one guided more by national interests. This was not a radical reversal of the foreign policy precepts of the Mandela era, but rather an adaptation to the pressures of realpolitik. At the time of writing, the conceptual outcome of this process is the foreign policy strategy paper agreed by the government in August 2011. It emphasises the priority of Africa and the SADC in particular, the importance of South-South cooperation, the value of multilateralism and Global Governance, the necessity of a constructive North-South dialog, and the relevance of strengthening selected bilateral relations.

The core weaknesses not just of the strategy report but of South African foreign policy in general are the lack of prioritisation of goals, the need to state the oft-referenced national interests in specific terms, and the resulting conflict of goals. For instance, which is more important – the protection of human rights and moral credibility, or maintaining pan-African solidarity? When Mandela attempted – unsuccessfully – to prevent the execution

***The core weaknesses of South African foreign policy in general are the lack of prioritisation and the resulting conflict of goals.***

of political dissident Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Nigerian military junta by bringing his own moral authority to bear, he was accused of undermin-

ing African solidarity and supporting international interference in internal affairs. More recently, Pretoria's reticence towards the autocratic regime in Zimbabwe and its incoherent position with regard to the international intervention in Libya have given cause for irritation and doubts regarding the stated value-oriented foreign policy. Such tensions are indications of South Africa's unclear regional and international role.

### Regional power with acceptance problems

Since the end of the Apartheid regime, South Africa has been acting to some extent as a regional power in southern

Africa and the continent. Under Mandela's successor Mbeki, in particular, Pretoria became very involved in building and expanding institutional structures. South Africa played a key role in the launch of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001 and in the foundation of the African Union (AU) in 2002 and makes disproportionate financial contributions to these institutions. Another project initiated by Pretoria was the revitalisation and reform of SADC, which had originally been founded in 1980 as a federation of neighbouring countries against the Apartheid state.

Economically, South Africa is on an expansion course on the continent. Exports and direct investment in other African states have both more than tripled in the period from 1990 to 2007. However, this development is put into perspective when considering the fact that overall, African markets only play a secondary role for the South African economy. In 2008, these exports accounted for only 7.7 per cent of all sales abroad. South African corporations are also making headway on the continent, for instance in the resource extraction sector, in energy supply, and in the telecom business. The country also makes its economic power felt in the SADC free trade zone and in the South African Customs Union (SACU).

In the area of peacekeeping, South Africa carries a great deal of clout. Convinced of the necessity of a peaceful environment and equipped with a certain sense of mission based on the experience of its own peaceful transition, Pretoria is engaged in peace support and contributes to the building of an African security architecture within the AU. South Africa has mediated – albeit with mixed results – in peace processes in Angola, Burundi, Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Pretoria contributes military forces to a number of UN and AU peacekeeping missions, including in Burundi, Darfur, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2010, around 2,000 troops and police officers were serving under the aegis of the UN. South Africa also carries the main burden within the SADC Brigade that is part of the African Standby Force (cf. CSS Analyses no. 84 [□](#)).

However, South Africa's role as a regional power has its limitations. On the one hand, this is due to the limited acceptance of South Africa's leadership claim in the re-

gion, and on the other hand, it is the result of Pretoria's own ambivalent stance towards such a role. There is a deep mistrust towards South African dominance in the region for historical reasons. The economic, diplomatic, and military pressure that Pretoria exerted on the neighbouring states during the Apartheid period is not forgotten. What was then a policy of containment is translated under the current conditions into efforts to confine any hegemonial ambitions South Africa may have. Accordingly, the southern African countries in question, especially the competitors for regional influence – Nigeria, Angola, and Zimbabwe – are rather thin-skinned when Pretoria displays highhanded behaviour and assertions of political and economic leadership.

South Africa is well aware of this. Pretoria is keen not to be seen as an egotistical, ruthless regional power and has abstained from formulating an aggressive claim to leadership. Ultimately, South Africa's economic and military power is also too limited to successfully enforce its interests against the combined resistance of other countries. This discretion does not, however, translate into a complete renunciation of a leadership role. South Africa cites a need to "take responsibility" in pursuing a strategy that is more targeted towards generating assent than aimed at an aggressive enforcement of interests.

**Global leadership claim**

On the global stage, South Africa presents itself assertively as a representative of Africa and of the South in general and articulates its leadership claim much more forcefully. In doing so, Pretoria encounters a greater deal of acceptance than in the region itself. Here, South Africa benefits from goodwill based on the country's successful handling of its past and its undisputed economic preponderance in the African context.

*The economic importance of South Africa is primarily due to its relative strength when compared to other African states.*

South Africa is at great pains to secure representation in key global institutions, as illustrated by its second stint on the UN Security Council (UNSC) within a few years. As part of the UN's reform effort, South Africa together with the AU demands that Africa be accorded permanent representation in the UNSC and has lodged its request for a permanent seat should one become available (cf. CSS Analyses no. 72 [□](#)). In the WTO and in debates over climate change, South Africa issued clear statements of solidarity with the countries of the South and played a key role in the blockade of the Doha trade talks and the Copenhagen climate summit. The country gained additional international weight by joining the community of BRICS states in 2011. One of the main *raison d'être* of this alliance between Brazil, Russia, India, China, and now South Africa is to form a counterweight against Western preponderance. The two democratic free-market members Brazil and India have also formed the IBSA Dialogue Forum together with South Africa since 2003.

There are two fundamental problems arising from South Africa's global positioning. First of all, the country lags far behind other emerging powers especially in terms of economic performance. This can be seen from a comparison with other BRICS countries (cf. Table 1). The eminent importance of South Africa is due not so much to its performance in absolute numbers as to its relative strength when compared to other African states. This raises a number of questions regarding Pretoria's foreign-policy autonomy vis-à-vis Moscow or Beijing.

Secondly, South Africa is finding it difficult to meet global and especially Western expectations of its regional leadership role on the one hand without violating either regional sensitivities or the maxim of African or South-South solidarity on the other.

Comparison between BRICS states (2010)					
	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Total population (in millions)	195	142	1,171	1,338	50
GDP (billions of US\$)	2,088	1,480	1,729	5,879	364
GDP per capita (billions of US\$)	10,710	10,440	1,477	4,393	7,275
Economic growth (% of GDP)	7.5	4	9.7	10.3	2.8
Defence expenditures (% of GDP)	1.7	2.8	2.5	1.3	1.15

*Sources: World Bank, IISS*

Evidence of this can be found in UNSC votes. By refusing to impose sanctions on states such as Burma, Zimbabwe, Sudan, or Iran, Pretoria has squandered much political capital and moral prestige, especially in Western capitals.

South Africa's current stance is characterised by sustained insecurity about its role. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the leadership position that Pretoria claims on the global stage is not backed up securely in the region itself. It will be decisive for the West to see whether South Africa will in the mid-term continue to seek a position as a champion of developing nations or rather prefer to act as a bridge between South and North.

**I** Author: Daniel Trachsler  
trachsler@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

**I** Translated from German:  
Christopher Findlay

**I** Other CSS Analyses / Mailinglist:  
www.sta.ethz.ch

**I** German and French versions:  
www.ssn.ethz.ch

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