

NOREF Report

The challenges and ambiguities of South Africa's foreign policy

Jean-Paul Marthoz

Executive summary

In 1994, after the African National Congress's electoral victory, the Republic of South Africa emerged as a promising regional foreign policy actor. The rise of a generation formed in one of the most epic global political struggles, its proclaimed commitment to promote peace and development and its promise to put human rights at the heart of its international relations seemed to open a new era in Africa. The new South Africa established itself as a key actor in the region, acting as a mediator and sending peacekeeping troops to conflict zones, launching ambitious plans to develop the continent, and guiding the reforms leading to the (re)birth of the African Union (AU). This Africa focus was complemented with a strong commitment towards the global South and the forging of alliances with other new emerging powers, in particular democratic Brazil and India.

Over the last two decades South Africa has scored some significant victories and become one of the major players on the continent and a legitimate voice of Africa on the world scene. It has failed, however, to project its influence as it initially planned to.

Despite its ambiguous record, South Africa remains an important partner for Norwegian peacebuilding diplomacy, particularly in the context of supporting the AU in the region. A major challenge will be to address South Africa's "solvency", i.e. to balance its diplomacy with its economic and social realities, and its political and military capacities.

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A new country

South Africa's foreign policy has come a long way from the apartheid period, when the Pretoria regime was considered an international pariah and carried out an aggressive foreign policy that was mostly focused on protecting white minority rule in an increasingly hostile regional and international environment.

In 1994, in a clear break with the past, President Nelson Mandela announced an ethical foreign policy that was meant, on the one hand, to establish South Africa as a "model global citizen" and, on the other, to leverage this new foreign policy to transform South Africa from the preserve of a racist, unjust and authoritarian regime into a non-racial, just, prosperous and democratic nation.

The challenges have been immense. South Africa had to create a new foreign policy from scratch, linking with dozens of countries that had boycotted the apartheid regime, joining dozens of international organisations that had banned the country, reforming a foreign affairs bureaucracy mainly focused on the defence of white supremacy, redefining relations with countries that had been complicit with South Africa's "rogue policies" and redirecting international economic relations that had been constrained by United Nations (UN)-imposed sanctions.

Two decades later South Africa has fully reintegrated itself into the international community. It has even taken an active role in trying to forge a new international order, in particular in Africa, where it worked hard to establish the African Union (AU), and at the UN, where it is serving a second term on the Security Council. It has also hosted international events – the Durban 2001 World Conference against Racism, the World Soccer Cup in 2010, the Climate Change Summit in 2011 – that testify to its achievements as a bona fide international actor.

However, Mandela's dream has not been completed: South Africa is undoubtedly the most powerful African nation and it has played a leading role as a peacekeeper and peacemaker in the region, but it has not succeeded in fully implementing its proclaimed idealistic foreign

policy nor in resolutely addressing the social and economic domestic problems that this international ambition was supposed to help alleviate.

A divided policy

Currently, South Africa's foreign policy appears contradictory, torn between ethics and interests, between liberal internationalist and human rights values, on the one hand, and the attachment to a doctrine of national sovereignty that tolerates authoritarian regimes, on the other.

The definition of South Africa's foreign policy doctrine reflects a complicated quest for identity after decades of wrenching apartheid policies and centuries of Western colonisation, and expresses the tensions between two major ingredients of the anti-apartheid struggle: democracy and human rights, on the one hand, and anti-imperialism and South-South solidarity, on the other.

The issue of "military-humanitarian interventions" provides an example of this split vision. Although international sanctions were instrumental in undermining the political legitimacy and economic sustainability of apartheid, South Africa is wary of foreign interference, an approach reflecting the roots of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) as falling within the third-worldist tradition, its rejection of the apartheid state's bullying policies in the Southern African region, and lingering resentment towards Western countries' ambivalence towards or even complicity with the apartheid regime.

South Africa's foreign policy also mirrors shifting alliances and relations of power among the diverse groups that form and shape its society. The "liberal" tradition that was part of the anti-apartheid struggle and tends to focus primarily on a human rights-inspired diplomacy has been losing ground at the top. The power to define the country and therefore to a large extent its foreign relations has moved towards sectors that tend to emphasise other values and priorities: African unity, the economy, the social debt of apartheid and the needs of the majority black population.

Indeed, the failure of successive ANC administrations to profoundly transform South Africa and uplift its black majority from poverty affects its foreign policy. On the one hand, it fans a “populist” and at times “anti-Western” mood that tends to align the country with authoritarian “anti-imperialist” regimes; on the other, it reinforces a “realistic” and “pragmatist” foreign policy where economic necessity and developmental interests inevitably trump idealistic values.

In order to respond to the huge expectations among the poor black majority that the end of apartheid would quickly improve their social and economic situation, foreign policy is expected to make tangible contributions to domestic challenges by helping the country redress decades of social injustice and by reinforcing its capacity to reach highly ambitious growth and development goals.

This domestic approach has been reflected abroad by the adoption of a “foreign policy of transformation”. According to University of Johannesburg professor Chris Landsberg, who coined the concept, South Africa not only prioritises development issues and issues of poverty and inequality, but also advocates a “fundamental redistribution of both power and resources at the global level”.¹

Initiated under President Mandela, this doctrine was particularly developed during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, who both prioritised the African continent and tried to reform the international rules of the game in favour of the global South.

African priority

Early on, the “new South Africa” made its mark in the region, moving outward in concentric circles from Southern Africa to the whole continent. It effectively worked to strengthen the Southern African Development Community. It acted to transform the discredited Organisation of African Unity into what was hoped would be an energised AU endowed with a new philosophy, new prerogatives, and new institutions and agencies. It also launched with great fanfare the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) as

a powerful lever to bring Africa out of poverty and backwardness by promoting good governance. This African focus has been backed by a series of initiatives (peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, election support, etc.) backed by the African Renaissance and International Co-operation Fund.

The core idea was to foster an African Renaissance that would turn the “forgotten continent” into a vibrant actor on the international arena and above all break free from foreign exploitation and intervention under the mantra of “African solutions to African problems”.

The understanding that South Africa's fate is directly linked to that of the continent has dominated the country's foreign policy. Africa is a primary outlet for the country's manufactured products, a source of raw materials for South African industry and a lever for its global ambitions. But it is also a continent of armed conflicts, arbitrary rule and poverty, which inevitably spill over into South Africa through clandestine migration, illegal trade and transnational crime that undermine South Africa's own external security, economic prospects and internal civility.

“Global apartheid”

This “Africa first” policy was complemented at the global level by a resolute rapprochement with the global South, and in particular with new emerging powers like Brazil, China and India. South Africa has sided with the developing countries on matters of debt relief, global free trade and the reform of multilateral institutions, like the International Monetary Fund, in order to make them less beholden to Western interests.

This “pluralisation” and “Southernisation” of foreign relations were meant to counter the West's influence by reinforcing the South's drive to reform long-established international rules and by finding alternative sources of investment and trade. But it also expressed the deep conviction that the global future lies “in the East” and no longer in the economies of the North.

These initiatives have reflected a particular view of the world based on a particular view of South

¹ Author interview with Prof. Chris Landsberg, Johannesburg, November 3rd 2011.

Africa. "South Africa is made of two nations", Thabo Mbeki said in 1998, "one which is rich and predominantly white, another the poorest of the poor who in the main are ... black".² This analogy was applied to the world and its "global apartheid", with the understanding that overcoming these two divides should be elevated as strategic foreign policy goals. "Mbeki's government was elected by the downtrodden in South Africa and on the world scene he would side with the downtrodden", says University of Johannesburg professor Deon Geldenhuys.³

This strategy, however, is not seen as a panacea. If South Africa seems to have benefited from IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa) – the forum created with Brazil and India – which has served as a platform for its transformational foreign policy and as a laboratory for the exchange of experiences in key areas of development (health, education, etc.), it is much more ambivalent in its relations with China. Although the government and the ANC have intensified the country's relations with Beijing and trade ties are growing, a strong current within the ruling Tripartite Alliance⁴ and, in particular, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), South Africa's leading trade union confederation, sees China as a threat to South Africa's economic interests and even evokes the spectre of a new era of colonialism.

Others, however, for economic reasons and out of fear that the ANC would be tempted by China's political model of an authoritarian developmental state, underline the need to develop a balanced economic foreign policy and maintain strong relations with the U.S. and the European Union (EU), which has signed a strategic partnership with Pretoria.

Peacebuilding

In a clear rupture with the militaristic and aggressive policy followed by the apartheid regime towards its African neighbours and with

an acute awareness of the negative impact of conflicts on the country's economic and social development, the "new South Africa" has been keen to play a positive role on the African continent as a mediator, peacemaker and peacekeeper.

South Africa's transition to democracy has been heralded as a model, in particular its constitution of a government of national unity and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that helped contradict the doomsayers who were predicting an inevitable slide into violence and chaos.

However, this "peace diplomacy" was also a direct corollary of South Africa's desire to create international conditions for the development of the country based on the conviction that "there could not be development without peace nor peace without development".

From the first years of the Mandela administration, South African diplomats have mediated in African conflicts, especially in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Angola, Comoros and Zimbabwe. This policy has been institutionalised by the creation of a Secretariat for Peacebuilding within the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO, the country's foreign affairs ministry).

South Africa has also actively supported international negotiations and agreements on nuclear non-proliferation, the banning of landmines, the non-proliferation of small arms, the use of mercenaries and the recruitment of child soldiers.

It has also taken part in peacekeeping operations, particularly in the DRC, Darfur (Sudan) and Burundi. Although its army, one of the best equipped in Africa, has developed a strong peacekeeping wing, South Africa has set limits to its rules of engagement (in particular regarding the use of force), allegedly due to its bad memory of the apartheid-era war in Angola and the public's "lack of stomach" for the loss of troops in foreign lands. Some analysts also fear that South Africa cannot sustain the current level of troop commitments due to budgetary constraints or, the emergence of new security threats like Somali

² Thabo Mbeki, speech at the opening of parliament, May 29th 1998, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0529.htm>.

³ Author interview with Prof. Deon Geldenhuys, Johannesburg, November 2nd 2011.

⁴ Comprising the ANC, which dominates the alliance, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party.

piracy or the high level of AIDS infection among its troops.

This peace agenda has been complemented by the promotion of corporate social responsibility in the context of armed conflicts, like the Kimberley process on conflict diamonds, and by involvement in post-conflict reconstruction. Former president Thabo Mbeki, for instance, headed the AU's High-level Implementation Panel that helped ensure a peaceful solution to Sudan's north-south conflict, while the South Africans, with backing from Norway, are training the new police force in South Sudan.

However, in parallel to this commitment to peacebuilding, South Africa insists on its rejection of "great powers' interference". In March 2011, although wary of any form of "gunboat diplomacy", South Africa voted in favour of UN Resolution 1973 on Libya as a recognition of its commitment to the doctrine of the "responsibility to protect" and as a way to open a space for mediation between Qaddafi and the rebels. But it soon backtracked and came to believe, as stated by Deputy Foreign Minister Ebrahim Ebrahim on September 16th 2011, that "NATO misused the United Nations resolution 1973 to carry out its bombing escapades on a defenceless African country".⁵

Human rights diplomacy

South Africa has officially put human rights at the centre of its foreign policy. "Human rights will be the light that guides our foreign policy", Nelson Mandela declared in 1993.

However, this lofty statement of principles has been hampered by a series of factors, e.g. the weakness of the local human rights constituency and the presence of authoritarian factions within the ANC, among others. It was also constrained by other considerations: many repressive regimes that had supported the ANC during the apartheid struggles were exempted from overt criticism; under the Africanist agenda the principle of national sovereignty was invoked to shield other repressive states from public condemnation;

while South Africa's economic and corporate interests also regularly trumped human rights considerations in Africa and on the international scene, particularly in terms of its arms sales to countries with dubious human rights records.⁶

In fact, most international human rights organisations consider that the new South Africa has been disappointing. They have been particularly critical of its approach to the Zimbabwean crisis and of its voting record at the UN on Burma/Myanmar, Belarus, Cuba and Iran, which put South Africa in the company of authoritarian states like China or Russia. Their criticism has been energetically relayed in South Africa by the "liberal wing" of the former anti-apartheid alliance, as well as by leading "moral voices", like Nobel Peace Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In its peacebuilding initiatives and especially its mediation efforts South Africa has also been torn between "peace and human rights". In Zimbabwe in particular, and despite strong pressures from the U.S. and EU, Pretoria has favoured talks rather than confrontation and prioritised negotiated solutions over the imposition of sanctions, at the risk of appearing to cosy up to President Robert Mugabe or of "generating incentives for anti-democratic behaviour" by promoting power-sharing deals that "condemn opposition parties to accept inferior positions within the government despite their success at the ballot box".⁷

Internal developments might further weaken South Africa's human rights diplomacy. Although the country has one of the most advanced constitutions in the world, the ANC has shown signs of intolerance towards its critics, especially those in the media. The South African Broadcasting Corporation is under tight political control and a law on secrecy, which is currently moving through parliament, might criminalise whistle-blowing and stifle investigative journalism. "In the new South Africa, with its freedom hard-won from apartheid", wrote Nobel Prize laureate Nadine Gordimer in May 2012, "we now have the imminent threat of

⁵ Ebrahim Ebrahim, "South Africa's Libya policy", speech at Pretoria University, September 18th 2011.

⁶ See J. Létourneau, "Zimbabwe, diamonds and the wrong side of history", Ottawa, Partnership Africa Canada, March 2009.

⁷ See A. Wehmhoerner, "South Africa's foreign policy – quo vadis?", Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, April 2011, http://www.feps-europe.eu/uploads/documents/1104_SouthAfrica-ForeignPolicy_Wehmhoerner.pdf.

updated versions of the suppression of freedom of expression that gagged us under apartheid.”⁸ Corruption is also rampant, undermining the rule of law and the exemplarity of the country in its promotion of good governance elsewhere on the continent. In July 2012, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, the authorities initiated a criminal investigation into three journalists of the liberal weekly *Mail & Guardian* who had sought to report details on a multibillion arms deal scandal.⁹

The foreign policy establishment

South Africa's foreign policy is not DIRCO's preserve. In fact, many diplomats complain that the ministry is underfunded, understaffed and mostly forced into the secondary role of an implementing agency.

The foreign policy decision-making process reflects the reality of a “party state” in which the ANC – which sees itself as “defining the rainbow nation” – plays a decisive role at the risk of blurring the lines between itself and state institutions.

The cacophony inevitably worsens when the ANC is divided or clashes with its allies, the South African Communist Party and the leading trade union confederation, COSATU, as happened over Zimbabwe, where COSATU supported the leader of the opposition, union leader Morgan Tsvangirai. “Zuma's main task consists in managing this factionalism that paralyses decision making”, complained a foreign affairs official who wished to remain anonymous. These factions represent old ideological divisions within the ANC, but also different views on the state of the country, in particular on the socioeconomic status of the black majority two decades after the official dismantling of apartheid.

Although pluralistic, the ANC remains attached to its liberation past and is “soft” on regimes that supported its revolutionary struggle. There is also a strong current inside the ANC, in particular

within its Youth League, that sees a link between the slow pace of black empowerment at home and a foreign policy allegedly kowtowing to Western liberal values and interests.

The president of the country, who is also the chair of the ruling party and controls its powerful Foreign Affairs Committee, is in fact the centre of power when it comes to foreign policy. However, this “imperial presidency” has not been able to unify policies. “Several messages are played at the same time”, says Landsberg.¹⁰ At this level of influence, personality matters. Although there is continuity from Mandela to Mbeki to Zuma, each president has imposed his signature, principles and style on foreign policy.

The public's interest in foreign affairs is rather low, except when international issues have direct national repercussions, like migration from Zimbabwe as that country's people flee violence and poverty. The government, however, has learned that some lines cannot be crossed and that key civil society actors have the capacity to cause problems. In 2008 South Africa's trade unions, for instance, blocked the unloading of a Chinese ship that was carrying weapons bound for Zimbabwe. And in 2011 South Africa's refusal to grant a visa to the Dalai Lama also stirred a heated controversy.

Solvency

South Africa is undoubtedly the leading continental economic power – it produces one third of sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product (GDP). It is also considered or hailed as the natural and strongest voice for the continent, more so than Nigeria, and benefits from considerable goodwill due to the symbolism of the anti-apartheid struggle and the country's political transition to democracy.

However, some observers question South Africa's ambition to play such a prominent role and even talk of a “vanity project” when Pretoria refers to its membership of BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) or IBSA.

⁸ Nadine Gordimer, “South Africa: the new threat to freedom”, *New York Review of Books*, May 24th 2012.

⁹ <http://www.cpj.org/2012/07/south-african-journalists-questioned-over-scandal.php>.

¹⁰ Author interview with Landsberg, 2011.

Without endorsing this utterly sceptical view, many agree that the country is still a junior player in the global field and the “weak link” in the community of new emerging powers. “It wanted to be too much too soon whereas it was not ready for this international role”, says a South African analyst.¹¹ Its hard power as determined by GDP or demography pales when compared with titans like China, India or Brazil. Its acceptance in the region as the natural leader is also limited.

“South Africa’s capabilities are overstated”, says Landsberg. “It is an anchor state in Africa but it is not a hegemon.” South Africa’s GDP – which looks impressive in relation to the African continent – “is not a reliable indicator of influence”.¹² Its domestic problems (inequality, violence, AIDS, a weak education system, etc.) partly resulting from the harsh legacy of apartheid, but also from flawed ANC policies, also undermine its international capacity. Indeed, South Africa has been less successful than Brazil or China in bringing millions of people out of poverty and into the middle classes, and its economic base is much less firm, technology-driven and diversified than the other BRICS countries.

Its weak internal cohesion, as illustrated by its highly skewed social redistribution of wealth, levels of common crime or weak education system, is a drag on its capacity to follow a strong and coherent foreign policy.

South Africa also lacks the resources to effectively assume all the responsibilities that are expected of an emerging power. “Our country is overstretched”, says Tom Wheeler of the South African Institute of International Affairs. “We sit on the G-20, the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council, without the resources to effectively operate. Our peacekeeping capacity has also reached its limits.”¹³

In other words, many think that South Africa has been punching above its weight (especially during the Mbeki presidency) and that the time has come

to adopt, as Walter Lippmann famously said, a “solvent foreign policy”, i.e. one that “bring[s] into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, a nation’s commitments – economic, political, military – and a nation’s power”.¹⁴

African suspicions

Since 1994 and especially during the Mbeki period, South Africa has emphasised its anchor in Africa and the global South. It has also shown its readiness to disagree with the West, an attitude forged in the apartheid years when many Western countries supported the racist white regime.

However, this proud statement of belonging to the South does not erase the fact that a major pillar of South African power, namely its multinational mining, telecom or banking corporations, retains considerable links, interests and affinity with the industrialised global North.

South Africa has consistently emphasised its non-hegemonic nature in its relations with the Southern African region and the African continent. “South Africa has tried not to bully the other countries that could feel offended by its hegemony”, insists Liesl Louw of the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies. “Although it weakens its capacity to deliver on its promises, South Africa, for instance, has not pushed hard to clinch key positions of power within the African Union.”¹⁵

However, South Africa has not been able to dispel all fears and suspicions, especially “since African nations”, says Wheeler, “are ambivalent towards Pretoria, expecting help but also rejecting any ‘meddling’ in their internal affairs”.¹⁶ Other countries, like Angola or Nigeria, also resent Pretoria’s leadership drive.

This South African exceptionalism has regularly led to frictions. South Africa’s mediation in Ivory Coast, for instance, was not well received by the Nigerian government. South African companies have been accused of undermining local industry

11 Interview with the author, Johannesburg, November 1st 2011. Anonymity requested.

12 Author interview with Landsberg, 2011.

13 Author interview with Tom Wheeler, Johannesburg, November 1st 2011.

14 James Chace, *Solvency: The Price of Survival*, New York, Vintage Books, 1982, p 19.

15 Author interview with Liesl Louw, Pretoria, October 31st 2011.

16 Author interview with Wheeler, 2011.

in poorer African countries¹⁷ and others have been named in UN reports on “conflict minerals” in the DRC and Zimbabwe.

That quintessentially South African project NEPAD has even been described in some quarters¹⁸ as a “neoliberal initiative” mostly tailored to South Africa’s assets and interests, at the risk of increasing regional and social disparities.

South Africa’s “moral narrative” – its reference to its titanic fight against apartheid, its iconic peaceful political transition or the proclaimed “centrality of human rights” – has also riled several African rulers. Although South Africa has adopted the principle of universality in its international relations, it has also successfully pushed for the introduction of common norms and forms of collective responsibility (“sovereignty as responsibility”) in the AU – in particular the African Peer Review Mechanism, the “principle of non-indifference”, and the Peace and Security Council – that are perceived in some quarters as undermining national sovereignty and condoning international intervention in African states under the pretext of good governance, the protection of human rights or the responsibility to protect. “Mbeki’s propagation of these precepts for the entire continent”, says Geldenhuys, “exposed him to charges of being ‘un-African’ and ‘pro-Western’.”¹⁹

South Africa has also been harshly criticised for the xenophobic attacks against migrants that occurred in 2008, reviving the perception that the country is not yet completely “African” and that, even among its black population, it continues to consider itself, even after the collapse of the apartheid state, to be “different”, i.e. more advanced than the rest of the continent.

¹⁷ Patrick Bond, “L’impérialisme contrarié de Pretoria”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 2010.

¹⁸ See Pierre-Paul Dika & Raphaël Porteilla, “La politique étrangère de la nouvelle Afrique du Sud: les dilemmes de l’après Mbeki”, *Recherches internationales*, January-March 2009.

¹⁹ Author interview with Geldenhuys, 2011.

Conclusion

South Africa has established itself as an influential international actor, especially in Africa, based on its size, population, economic strength and military capabilities. Besides this hard power, “it has drawn on its soft power to take on the role of an international norm entrepreneur”, says Geldenhuys. “It has been remarkably successful in getting its ideas adopted in Africa – witness the new institutions of continental governance.”²⁰

There is some illusion, however, in the way South Africa sees itself as a natural African leader and a world leader as if its modernity and above all its victorious struggle against the apartheid regime confers a special status on the ANC government.

In the next years South Africa’s relevance on the continental and global scenes will depend increasingly on its economic assets and its political choices more than on the nostalgic memory of its long liberation struggle. It will be linked in particular to its capacity to solve its deep-rooted domestic problems, particularly its acute levels of social injustice, which feed common crime and social violence, hamper economic development, and tap into the common perception that the country’s international ambitions divert scarce resources and distract attention away from pressing social problems. A peacebuilding diplomacy will lack credibility if the country is seared by social violence, and it will lack sustainability if such efforts are seen by public opinion as a waste of resources and a distraction from pressing domestic issues.

“All politics is local”, U.S. senator Tip O’Neill famously said. All foreign policy is local too, to the extent that the external power of a country largely depends on its internal strength and cohesion.

²⁰ Ibid.