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## South Africa - Regional Kingpin?

South Africa is the undoubted social, economic and geopolitical powerhouse of the southern cone of Africa. Yet its unique regional perspective on power is currently more concerned with global than regional dynamics.

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Regardless of the [expanding influence](#) of emerging powers such as China, [ongoing ethnic violence](#), and the continuing challenges [posed by HIV/AIDS](#), South Africa's sheer size and wealth guarantee that it will [continue to dominate its partners](#) in the South African Development Community (SADC). Indeed, among the 15 member-states of the SADC, South Africa accounts for nearly 75 percent of the group's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). And while Pretoria only spends 1.1 percent of its GDP on defense, that figure (\$3.19 billion) is still greater than all the other SADC countries combined (\$3.03 billion). Finally, Pretoria's relative lack of internal security challenges should allow it, in theory, to continue playing a constructive and stabilizing role across the southern African region.

Yet despite the capacity to define and impose desired security arrangements across its region, South Africa often seems reluctant to exercise its power in conventional ways. Far more often, its behavior seems to be shaped by the lingering nationalist and 'anti-colonialist' beliefs of the African National Congress (ANC), and not necessarily by its objective security interests and those of its neighbors. In fact, in the view of some analysts, this discomfort with traditional forms of regional hegemony does not stem from a simple aversion to pursuing interventionist policies. Instead, it actually reflects a nuanced 'second-generation' nationalism that prioritizes global concerns over regional and local ones.

### **'Second Generation' Nationalism**

South Africa's approach to international politics is powerfully shaped by the identity and values of the ruling ANC, which continues to define itself as a national liberation movement that successfully ejected the previous apartheid regime from power. In foreign policy terms, this narrative has translated into concerns with under-development and racial inequality, an insistence on national self-determination and nonintervention, and a rhetorical emphasis on the importance of a more just and equitable global order. In this respect, the ANC resembles 20th century national liberation movements embodied by figureheads such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and India's Jawaharlal Nehru.

However, the ANC has also been shaped by the failure of such movements to achieve their goals in the past. [According to Adam Habib](#), a political scientist who works at the University of Johannesburg,

recent global power dynamics have provoked three types of second generation nationalist responses. The first is what Habib characterizes as an appeasement strategy, which can be associated with the current President of Pakistan (Asif Ali Zardari) and with Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia. In pursuing this strategy, these states actively seek to establish closer diplomatic ties with the West and replicate the economically-driven rise of China and the 'Asian Tigers.' The second strategy is the militant, anti-colonial and anti-Western posture favored by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Finally, the third approach - as championed by South Africa's Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma - emphasizes participation in and engagement with the global order in order to reform and ultimately subvert it. These last two leaders are acutely aware of their country's relative weaknesses and that their liberation-oriented, justice-promoting agendas will not materialize if the balance of power in the global order is not fundamentally transformed.

### **Power politics from the 'South'?**

Because of the above philosophic orientation, Pretoria [remains reluctant](#) to become a more dominant regional actor. Instead, it has targeted its resources to support what it perceives to be a global struggle, the cornerstones of which are South Africa's alliance with India and Brazil in the IBSA Forum; its active participation in international organizations such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; and its growing role within the BRIC group of emerging powers. While the second generation nationalist policies we previously discussed aim to redistribute power along a North-South axis, the latter efforts seek to play the West and China off each other in what some have called a strategy of 'dual engagement,' or 'soft balancing'. By pursuing these agendas, Pretoria hopes to achieve a number of goals and concessions that are, in the long-term, in the interests of South Africa and other developing countries - i.e., racial equality, national self-determination, a balanced relationship with 'the North,' etc. (Indeed, Habib describes this combination of particular goals with hard-nosed power politics as "the application of the neo-realist paradigm *from the South*.") Pursuing these goals and concessions, however, ultimately means that Pretoria (at least for now) believes it has better things to do than tidy up its own backyard. Its political elites are loath to see the country as many others see it - as the region's natural kingpin and enforcer.

Editor's note:

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