

South Africa's Foreign Policy: An Assessment of the Draft White Paper and the ANC's Policy Document on International Relations

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Introduction

This analysis revisits some debates on South Africa's foreign policy. It suggests that a proper review of South Africa's foreign policy is long overdue. The recent draft White Paper on International Relations is an insufficient attempt. Similarly, the policy document of the African National Congress (ANC), prepared for its forthcoming national policy conference, shows little evidence of clarity of thought on foreign policy challenges confronting South Africa today, and the kind of priorities the country should pursue.

While acknowledging the important role that the ANC government has played in establishing strong normative foundations for the country's foreign policy, the world is changing but South Africa foreign policy remained stuck in time. I focus on the two most recent and authoritative foreign policy statements in undertaking this review. The policy brief begins by contextualising South Africa's foreign policy in its evolution in the early 1990s, particularly the preference for multilateralism. It then looks at some of the weaknesses in South Africa's foreign policy white paper. Finally, it offers a critique of the ANC's discussion document on international relations.

Setting the Scene: The Evolution of South Africa's Foreign Policy Thrust

Multilateralism in South Africa's Foreign policy

A quick journey through the evolution of South Africa's foreign policy shows that integrating into the global system was one of the major priorities in the early 1990s, as the country sought to define itself away from the pariah image associated with apartheid rule. Consolidating democracy at home, and advancing internationalism abroad, pretty much

summed up the African National Congress' core purpose in power.

Accordingly, South Africa post-apartheid became one of the most vocal champions of multilateralism.¹ The ruling party's multilateralist predilections were influenced by several related factors. The first has to do with the sharp spotlight that was shone upon the country at the dawn of democracy, and the goodwill that the remarkable political transition and its conciliatory tone attracted as a result. Upon taking over governance, the ANC was keen on burnishing the country's credentials as a responsible internationalist, and ready to play an active and constructive role in global affairs.

The second can be located within the internationalist outlook of the African National Congress (ANC), which was cultivated during the exile years and manifested in the wider diplomatic network the ANC spawned in Africa and abroad. The ANC prided itself for its internationalism and solidarity with other former colonies or "Third World" revolutionary movements.

This internationalism found expression in its activism in the Non-Aligned Movement (the ANC participated in the 1955 Bandung conference which established NAM), UNCTAD, the G77 and the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) mechanism. This south-south commitment retains strong currency in the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). It is also a commitment born of the injury of colonialism and apartheid rule in South Africa. Accordingly, South Africa's conception of its multilateralist identity is subliminally anti-Western and anti-imperialist – the two being seen as synonymous. This comes out strongly in the ANC's discussion document on international relations, which I review later.

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The third factor shaping South Africa's multilateralist commitments draws on the country's commitment to the normative ideals of fairness, justice, and human rights - these were very much the guiding values in the ANC's struggle against apartheid. The cardinal principle of multilateralism as a rules-based framework therefore finds easy acceptance in South Africa's socio-political milieu, in particular its liberal constitutional arrangement. Not only is South Africa's foreign policy thinking conscious of historical injustices, it is deeply sensitive of external interference or use of power by Western countries to bully others.

The fourth factor can be attributed to the role played by leading political figures both within the ANC and elements of the old guard who were intent on positioning the country in multilateral processes. South Africa's own negotiated political settlement was to be a moral capital the country would draw on to vie for recognition and influence in multilateral processes. The former Ministers of Trade and Industry, successively, Trevor Manuel (who later became Minister of Finance) and Alec Erwin demonstrated passionate commitment to the Liberal Internationalist order, in particular the multilateral reduction of tariffs, and pursuit of open and integrated global markets. As such, South Africa became active in championing multilateralism in trade, using this platform to cast itself as a bridge-builder between the developing South and the developed North.

The ANC government was so intent on cleansing the country's image as a pariah and charting a new course in global affairs that it accepted onerous accession terms to the GATT, as a developed rather than a developing country, albeit under pressure from the US, Japan and the European Union.¹ The argument used by these three actors, as Soko points out, was that as one of the founding GATT members, before its international isolation, South Africa had joined as a developed country and would thus be anomalous accept its accession to GATT using any other status.¹

South Africa's accession to GATT in 1993, and subsequent membership of the WTO in 1995, was

one of the significant steps South Africa took in locking itself into multilateral processes in the post-apartheid period. This activism in the multilateral trading system was also partly informed by South Africa's desire to play a role as a bridge-builder between the advanced industrial countries and developing countries, and to be seen as an honest broker in international affairs.

This niche diplomatic space positioned it as a middle-power whose effectiveness drew more on its soft power capabilities than its hard-power.¹ This soft-power is predicated on South Africa's political culture, in particular, success in negotiating its transition, its progressively liberal Constitution with human rights as a cornerstone, and its preference for negotiated solutions rather than resort to military options. It is without a doubt that, quite apart from its negotiations to accede to the GATT, South Africa's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, beginning with the dismantling of its nuclear stockpiles, cemented its image as an internationally responsible actor in the eyes of Western powers. This also acted to reinforce its multilateralist credentials. Situated alongside its multilateralist commitments, and the identity it projects as a bridge-builder, South Africa has also cultivated an identity as an African country speaking for Africa's interests in global affairs.

South Africa's African Agenda

The ANC government is aware of history, especially the negative role played by the apartheid government in the southern Africa sub-region and its consequent isolation from the rest of the African continent. It therefore feels that it owes a huge debt to the continent. As such it views South Africa as having no right to explicitly express leadership intentions or speak against wrongs committed by other governments. It also sees its foreign policy thrust in the continent as more about offering support in the form of peace-building and developmental assistance. Further, it seeks to use its privileged position as a recognised global actor to advance Africa's economic interests. This is certainly the case with respect to the WTO and the G20. South Africa genuinely believes that such acts would go a long

way in casting South Africa's image in a better light and helping to benefit the country in the long run.

The view that South Africa's destiny is inextricably intertwined with that of the region remains embedded in the conscience of South Africa's foreign policy. What is missing in this positioning is a pursuit of South Africa's own economic interests in the African continent. Government, in particular DIRCO, is sensitive about encouraging pursuit of explicit economic interests in the African continent, even though corporate South Africa has been increasing its African footprint, in spite of government's attitude since the early 1990s.

South Africa's Africa Agenda evolved strongly under Thabo Mbeki's administration between 1999 and 2007, and it emphasised Africa's renewal. This was captured under the theme of the African Renaissance and translated into foreign policy as the African agenda pillar. It involved both commitments that African leaders would take to advance good governance and rule of law, on the one hand; and commitments by developed countries towards reducing Africa's debt and increasing developmental assistance by the Western world. It was an agenda that featured strongly in the G8+5 outreach processes¹ to evolve a pact aimed at improving Africa's development profile and integrating the continent beneficially into the global system.

Limitations in South Africa's foreign policy

It is now almost two decades since 1994, yet there has never been a thorough review of South Africa's foreign policy, the strategic thought that underpins it and the objectives that it should aim to achieve in a changing world. The attempt towards developing a second foreign policy white paper has failed to put forward clear and coherent ideas for a foreign policy that takes into cognisance both values (multilateralism, human rights, and peace) and interests (for example, how South Africa should leverage its developmental contributions in the continent for commercial benefits), or, what concrete elements in its pursuit of multilateralism can help to enhance national prosperity.

This is important for, at least, three reasons.

First, both developed and middle-income countries view participation in global processes not just purely on the basis of idealism – to make the world a better place – but also to improve their aggregate wealth.

Second, in Africa, in particular, the political economy landscape has shifted somewhat and has witnessed increased diplomatic and commercial activism of emerging powers such as China and India targeting natural resources, services, and potential manufacturing bases for export purposes. It is a game that South Africa has been slow at.

Third, South Africa's socio-economic profile, including stunted growth, high levels of unemployment, and prevalence of poverty, requires that foreign policy is utilised principally to create meaningful economic benefits for the country. This requires that diplomatic missions are carefully calibrated to achieve objectives related to trade and investment promotion. This focus should permeate all bilateral relations South Africa has with countries in the continent and outside.

In the two major policy developments (the white paper framework and the ANC's policy discussion document), there little evidence of serious thinking about repositioning South Africa's foreign policy differently. The white paper emphasises continuity from the Mandela and Mbeki era whereas the ANC's document reawakens the anti-Western discourse. Below I undertake a concise review of both the new White Paper drive on International Relations – “the Diplomacy of Ubuntu” – and draft ANC's discussion document on International Relations in preparation for its national policy conference. A closer look into these two documents provide some clues to emerging thinking in South Africa's foreign policy.

The Diplomacy of Ubuntu: South Africa's Foreign Policy in the Doldrums

When a government department announces a policy White Paper, an expectation is created that a fundamental policy shift is on the horizon. As such, a White Paper offers bold ideas regarding new policy

directions. This is certainly not the case with the draft White Paper on South Africa's foreign policy developed by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). It would be churlish not to acknowledge the extensive consultations government conducted with various societal stakeholders, from academics to business groups. There is no evidence, however, from the final product that this process seriously engaged with various recommendations made by these stakeholders.

One fundamental shortcoming of the new White Paper on foreign policy is an absence of a clear sense of leadership and purpose about the country's place in Africa and the world. The discourse in the paper on Africa is very much the same as that which prevailed in the early 1990s - namely an emphasis on helping with Africa's development. There is a lack of appreciation of the role that commercial interests can play in improving Africa's development prospects. Because it treats Africa and the world as if they have been on a standstill since the 1990s, its policy ideas remain frozen in time.

On Africa, the same old framework of the need to develop Africa, build its multilateral institutions, and offer support towards peace-building prevails. What is missing is a lack of appetite to pursue commercial opportunities in the continent. Along with this is a diffidence about playing a leadership role in the continent. There is a great deal of sensitivity in South Africa about continuing to run trade surpluses with its African counterparts as if this were harmful. It is as if South Africa would rather prefer African countries to purchase goods and services from Europe, China and India than from South Africa, for fear of being perceived as recolonizing Africa.

In its recent discussion document on International Relations (reviewed below), the ANC asserts that: "...the South African government has deliberately avoided playing a hegemonic role in African institutions and politics. We have resisted the call for us to take a hegemonic posture, which others have called a robust regional leadership that we lack".¹ Other African countries exploit South Africa's timidity

to further weaken its potential leadership. They appeal to historic injury, i.e., apartheid South Africa's destructive role in the continent, to construct their identity *vis-a-vis* South Africa as a way of driving guilt into its foreign policy on Africa.

I do not suggest here that commerce should be the sole logic that undergirds the African Agenda. Indeed there needs to be a balance between the 'soft power' elements of South Africa's foreign policy and deriving gains for the domestic economy, in particular, spin-offs for growth and development.

The draft white paper suffers weaknesses in other important areas.

First, in its opening paragraphs the White Paper makes the unsubstantiated claim that foreign policy is aligned with South Africa's domestic and developmental needs. Yet there is no serious attempt throughout the document to demonstrate convincingly how this is advanced, except to offer a cursory reference to South Africa's socio-economic profile. There is not even a single line in this foreign policy document devoted to the New Growth Path or the National Development Plan: for Vision 2030 – which are evolving frameworks defining the country's development focus.

The lack of a coherent development framework or economic strategy limits the extent to which the country uses its foreign policy as an instrument to promote national prosperity. This is worsened by poor organisation in the intra-government processes ("cluster system") intended to coordinate policy and draw synergies between related government departments. It is a weakness that reflects leadership deficiency, since such a system requires strong and engaged leadership to ensure that the country's core objectives are achieved.

Second, there is an absence of a prioritisation of countries that South Africa needs to deepen relations with, both within the African continent and in the rest of the world. Not every country should be viewed as important to South Africa since it is expensive to run a foreign policy machinery and maintain a diplomatic presence across the world. There should be more

thought to the kind of concrete benefits that South Africa's foreign policy should yield. This can only be possible if there is greater prioritisation. It is no longer tenable to pursue all and sundry in foreign policy processes and continue to maintain a corpulent diplomatic structure in the face of massive domestic challenges, especially when South Africa's fiscal position is weak.

Finally, there is an ambiguity regarding the weight placed on various multilateral processes and clubs that South Africa participates in. These include the IBSA Forum, the BRICS, and the G77, amongst others. Further, the White Paper misses a reconceptualization of multilateralism in a world that is no longer pivoted by a unipolar arrangement, but rather characterised by multipolarity. For example, what distinct contribution will South Africa make in the evolving global governance architecture and how will it simultaneously pursue interests that benefit its own people?

ANC foreign policy thrust

In preparation for its national policy conference, as well as its main national conference to take place in Mangaung later this year, the ANC released a welter of draft discussion documents, one of which discusses international relations. ANC policy discussion documents carry political weight as the thinking contained therein informs the substance of government's policy. In its ANC thinking there is no distinction between the party and the state, which suggests that the policy framework that it agrees upon would likely be foisted into government.

Much of the current ANC's discussion document laments the dominance of smaller countries by the West. It is laced with a populist rhetoric of "anti-imperialism" and "anti-colonialism". The radicalism of the document belies South Africa's agency power in various multilateral institutions. It betrays a nostalgia for the period when the ANC was not a governing party, but a liberation movement, that could propound radical views without having to account much for them.

In its document, the ANC argues for 'exclusive

multilateralism' pursued through the BRICS and other similarly structured club arrangements. The *exclusive* aspect denotes a form of multilateralism that is shaped in opposition to the West. This erroneous reasoning is also evident in Nkoana-Maite Mashabane's recent Budget Vote in parliament (25 April 2012), where she characterised the BRICS as a South-South group, despite the fact that Russia does not belong to the South nor has it ever considered itself part of such a designation.

Both the ANC and government's policy thinking assume that the BRICS countries have a collective identity that is essentially anti-Western. They seem to believe, rather wrongly, that the world is formatted along the old structures of North and South rather than in a more diffused manner with a great deal of shared interests across such divides. The country should have known better when China in 2011 signalled its support for Christine Lagarde's candidacy to head the International Monetary Fund (IMF) despite BRICS calls for reform of these institutions including the selection of their heads. In March 2012, Russia took a position that was different from the desire expressed by the BRICS to support developing country candidates, and threw its weight behind the US candidate for the World Bank. This is closer to the reality of how the world works than South Africa's excessive idealism about what is possible through "south-south" arrangements or club diplomacy.

Further, in its policy document the ANC castigates the G20 as a Western tool, and an extension of the G8. It argues that it is a legitimisation of failed ideologies and as 'not yet platform for fresh new thinking on global economic governance, nor should any approach be expected out of it in the absence of proactive strategic interventions by progressives'. It laments that the G20 Seoul 2012 developmental framework is unsatisfactory.

Yet South Africa was instrumental in its shaping. Not only does this suggest a gradual loss of grasp of the meaning of multilateral processes in the 21st century on the part of the ANC, it also betrays an absence of new ideas in the ruling party about advancing South

Africa's place in the world. Beyond rhetoric and lamentations, the ANC's discussion document on international relations has a shortage of ideas on repositioning South Africa's foreign policy under President Jacob Zuma.

Conclusion

If South Africa is serious about its place in the world and its leadership in Africa it will have to reorient its foreign policy. The white paper on foreign policy and the ANC's discussion document on international relations, fall short of a bold policy framework required to navigate the new terrains in Africa and the world. South Africa needs to evolve a clearer view of global change beyond the tantalisingly simple North-South or South-South paradigm. This would require clarity on what its interests are and how best to balance these with pursuit of values and norms. Currently, this is lacking.

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1. While this concept has been used in a legalistic sense to denote a rules-based framework and consensual approach to international agreements, it is important to highlight that it began as a paradigm used by the US to shape the international system in accordance with its preferences. For more than five decades since World War 2 it has served as a device to socialise countries preferences closer to those of the US. However, over time, smaller states saw in it a protection against dominance by great powers and expresses preference for rules over might. It presupposes non-discrimination, cooperation, and joint action. See Ruggie (1996). JG, *Winning Peace: America and World Order in the New Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 18-27.
2. For a detailed discussion illuminating South Africa's accession to the GATT and what influenced it, see Soko, M (2010), "Thrown in the deep-end: South Africa and the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations 1986 – 1994, *Politeia* Volume 29 No. 2 August 2010, pp.4-19.
3. Ibid.
4. According to Joseph Nye, hard power involves military and economic might, whereas soft-power has to do with the ability to "shape the preferences of others" or "ability to attract". Soft-power is constituted by elements such as culture, values, and ideas. See, Nye, J (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*, London: Public Affairs, pp.1-32.
5. This mechanism was launched in 2005 under the leadership of then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who was hosting the G8 Summit at Gleneagles. The G8+5 outreach comprised of leaders of G8 countries (US, Canada, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Japan and Russia) and South Africa, Mexico, Brazil, China, and India. This was meant to set a new tone for international cooperation, and was in recognition of growing multipolarity in the global system.
6. African National Congress, *International Relations: ANC Policy Discussion Document*, March 2012, p.14. www.anc.org.za