South Africa's recent foreign policy towards Africa
issues and literature

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South Africa’s Recent Foreign Policy Towards Africa: Issues and Literature

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Part I – Argument

1  Aim and Scope

The first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 and the end of the Cold War in Africa set new parameters defining South Africa’s foreign policy towards the African continent. On the one hand, Pretoria can for the first time since the Republic’s independence in 1961 openly establish and maintain contacts with African states. In the earlier period this policy was mostly pursued secretly. Today, in contrast, South Africa’s relations with the African continent are much more an issue of open discussion and they have became a matter of high importance within its overall foreign policy. A new international setting, on the other hand, forces African states to find new ways and means in dealing with the country at the southern tip of the continent.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, I present the issues that currently dominate the relations between South Africa and African states. Second, it provides a comprehensive compilation of literature on the identified themes.

2  Introduction

The 1994 democratic elections in South Africa ushered in a new government. Its main aim is the creation of new domestic political and socio-economic structures, but it also signalled a change in the area of foreign policy.

South Africa’s position in the Southern African region has always been one of a predominant actor. During the last decade under apartheid it pursued a policy of coercive hegemony or dominance. This is reflected in terms such as Destabilisation, Total National Strategy, and Constellation of Southern African States (CONSAS). All relevant publications on South Africa’s foreign policy state and presumed that South Africa’s Africa policy was restricted to the Southern African region after the mid 1970s. However, South Africa’s influence went far beyond the region ever since the Republic gained its independence in 1961 and this influence carried on right through the 1980s. Contacts with black African states were kept highly secret and no information was publicly available to the public, in particular after the failure of the policy of dialogue or outward movement. This policy started in the late 1960s under then Prime Minister Balthazar Johannes Vorster but came to a standstill in the

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1 My thanks for the many helpful comments go to Prof. Jürg Martin Gabriel at the Center for International Studies, ETH Zurich, and Dr. Jacky Kalley, Johannesburg.
mid 1970s. Pretoria did not want to lose face again and thereafter kept its initiatives on the African continent secret.

Recent research in Pretoria at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Department of Defence has brought to light hitherto unknown details of South Africa’s contacts with black African states since the former became a Republic.2

A brief introduction to South Africa’s recent overall foreign policy is followed by an overview of the issues that dominate the debate on South Africa’s recent foreign policy towards the Southern African region and the African continent as a whole.

3 South Africa’s Overall Foreign Policy3

3.1 General Remarks

In recent years, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has become the most important body in the arena of foreign policy making, followed by the Department of Trade and Industry. There are discussions under way to bring these two Departments closer together and even to integrate them completely. On the Parliamentary side, the Portfolio Committee on Foreign Affairs has gained some importance, while it was almost irrelevant under apartheid.4 This illustrates the democratisation in the sense of bringing foreign policy making closer to the electorate. The media, and to a certain extent also the public, now take a more active part in the foreign policy formulation debate.5

With the ending of apartheid, Pretoria was able to normalise its position within the international community. It returned to various international organisations from which it was previously excluded. This, combined with President Nelson Mandela’s reputation, led to a

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2 See my Ph.D. project *South Africa’s Continental Strategy Beyond the Region, 1961-1992*. It is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation’s “Young Researchers” programme (http://www.kfpe.unibe.ch/chrespro.html) and by Prof. Jürg Martin Gabriel.

3 See chapters 1.1, 2 and 3.1 (Part II) for reading material on that issue.


"honeymoon period" which gave rise to unrealistic hopes on a new foreign policy. However, there were also cautious voices.  

After decades of white minority rule, reflected in the domination of the DFA by the Afrikaner community, foreign policy could not change overnight. The new government had to be careful not to try to effect change simultaneously. South Africa was rightly described as a "middle power" with limited capacities. However, scholars have suggested that it could and should take the lead in the promotion of human rights. Given the country’s own experience – overcoming apartheid rule and establishing a democratic system, investigating human rights violations under apartheid with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – South Africa is considered to be predestinated for becoming active in that field internationally. Foreign policy also had to be legitimised at home, given the great expectations for change and improvement amid the ANC’s predominantly black electorate. Finally, South Africa still had to position itself in the North-South divide. In 1995 Rhodes University professor Pau-Henri Bischoff summarised the conflicts of foreign policy makers which have remained until today:

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The management of this foreign policy inheritance has needed to be reconciled with a rather complex and unique domestic political dispensation. A preoccupation has been to respond to the international community’s invitation to rejoin its international deliberations. In all this a conservative interpretation of the RDP in foreign policy has tended to encourage continuity in relations with the North. Politically the endeavour to be a part of Africa and the South remains a must. How to achieve an optimal balance in the two sets of relations has still to be found. This has to be achieved if the country wants to take full advantage of the opportunity to stand out as an African power, able to play a symbiotic role between North and South and in so doing, put its own stamp on international relations. 

3.2 The Legacy of the ANC’s Foreign Policy in Exile

The ANC’s experience in exile impacts on the formulation of the current foreign policy. After the ANC was declared illegal in South Africa in 1963/64, the international dimension of its struggle became increasingly important. Particularly within the UN, where it had a special status since 1974, it gained experience in the international arena.

Only little has been written on the ANC’s past foreign policy. Until recently an informed debate was difficult given the ANC’s exile status and the lack of primary sources. But since 1996 the archives of the ANC Exile Missions can be consulted at the ANC Archives at Fort Hare University in Alice, Eastern Cape.

An interesting study in that context has been undertaken by British geographer Anthony J. Christopher. His findings indicate that the ANC’s geographic priorities seem to have continued after 1994. Of the 28 ANC exile missions existent in 1985, ten were in Africa and twelve in Europe. After assuming power, the ANC government increased the number of embassies on the African continent from 4 to 21, while retaining the 16 in Europe.


4. Africa after the Cold War

When the ANC was elected into office in 1994, it found itself running a country on a continent which had undergone profound changes since the end of the Cold War. Despite various international initiatives Africa’s economic indicators still show a decline. With the end of the Cold War, Africa also became increasingly marginalised in a political sense.14

France, Great Britain, the US, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund increasingly took the stance that Africa’s political and economic decay was home-made. The strategies propounded to solve them were "good governance" and Structural Adjustment Programmes. The end of the Cold War also affected security policy. The UN would still legitimise measures to keep the peace or to enforce peace, but increasing responsibility was placed on the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and regional security organisations.

Politically the consequence was a "second wave" of democratisation. Elections took place in many countries but setbacks also had to be noted. In the economic sphere two trends were triggered off: liberalisation on the one hand, regional and continental economic co-operation on the other. Examples are the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Lagos Plan of Action. In terms of security policy, SADC debated the creation of a Conference for Security and Co-operation in Southern Africa (CSCSA); in West Africa, ECOWAS created a Military Observer Group (ECOMOG); and the OAU established a Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution Centre in Addis Ababa.

These new realities profoundly impacted on South Africa’s foreign policy towards the region and the continent as a whole. The new government had to position itself so that its economic and military predominance would benefit the entire region. On the continental level, the question arose what position South Africa would take opposite other regional powers, e.g. Nigeria in West Africa. This question is also of importance in the on-going discussion on the restructuring of the UN Security Council and the creation of a new permanent seat for Africa therein.15


5. The African Dimension in South Africa’s Foreign Policy

5.1 Introduction

Regarding its foreign policy towards Africa the ANC government was put before the choice “between old loyalties and new responsibilities”.16 As briefly indicated above, the new ANC government paid tribute to old loyalties, in particular with respect to Africa. Publications from former President Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki – Head of the ANC’s Department of International Affairs until 1994, then Deputy President, and since 1999 President –, and the ANC Department of International Affairs show: Pretoria now feels a great responsibility and loyalty towards the African continent and in particular towards the Southern African region:

South Africa cannot escape its African destiny. If we do not devote our energies to this continent, we too could fall victim to the forces that have brought ruin to its various parts. [...] We are inextricably part of southern Africa and our destiny is linked to that of a region, which is much more than a mere geographical concept.17

[...] South Africa is of course very much part of the African continent. [...] the fate of a democratic South Africa is inextricably bound up with what happens in the rest of the continent. [...] what happens elsewhere on the continent will inevitably affect South Africa [...].18

[...] our foreign policy should reflect the interests of the continent of Africa [...].19

5.2 Economic Co-operation20

The same publications and documents indicate the importance of economic relations. The proposed argument is that they should not only be in the interest of South Africa but also to

20 See chapters 1.2 and 3.3 (Part II) for reading material on regional co-operation in Southern Africa.
the advantage of the region and the African continent. Given South Africa’s past, the ANC and its exponents try to reassure black Africa and the neighbours of the government’s non-hegemonic intentions:

A democratic South Africa should therefore explicitly renounce all hegemonic ambitions in the region. It should resist all pressure to become the "regional power" at the expense of the rest of the sub-continent; instead, it should seek to become part of a movement to create a new form of economic interaction in Southern Africa based on principles of mutual benefit and interdependence. [...] We are conscious of the need for any plan or programme seeking to promote greater co-operation and integration in Southern Africa to take account of the acute imbalances in existing regional economic relations. [...] South Africa should avoid using regional co-operation or integration as a vehicle for the one-sided promotion of its immediate interests. Instead, it needs to recognise that balanced and mutually beneficial co-operation and integration can be of considerable significance to the efforts of a democratic South Africa to place its economy on a new growth path.  

These intentions and declarations are well-meant, but figures present another picture. Table 1 on trade between South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa since 1994 shows an enormous trade surplus to the advantage of South Africa. The necessity of implementing compensatory mechanisms addressing this unequal balance, particularly in the Southern African region, is an important aspect of South Africa’s economic foreign policy. This is evidenced by the recent trade dispute between Zimbabwe and the Republic.

Solutions can be found in bilateral negotiations. However, multilateral structures such as SADC, the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) should assume more importance as arenas for these discussions.

5.3 Security Policy

The plans for the establishment of a Conference for Security and Co-operation in Southern Africa (CSCSA) were briefly mentioned above. This move is an interesting and stimulating signal for increased co-operation between former enemies. However, it must be noted that, for the moment, it is wishful thinking rather than reality. Nothing concrete has been decided or as yet put in place. Compared with the steps taken towards economic co-operation progress here lags behind.

Given this experience it is of paramount importance that the security aspect no further be neglected in comparison to the economic dimension. In his suggestions well-known academic

21 ANC 1994, pp.11.
22 See chapter 3.6 (Part II) for reading material on South Africa’s security policy.
Peter Vale argues along the example of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). He suggests eight baskets which should be part of a CSCSA: Health, Women, Technology and Education, Migration, Law and Human Rights, Security questions, Economic options, and Agriculture.  

In December 1994, the governing ANC also argued that security can no longer be reduced to military security: “Security is not only limited to military matters; it has important political, economic, social and environmental dimensions. Additionally, the security of the state is dependent on meeting the social, cultural, political, economic and human rights needs of its people”.  

In other words, the necessity for co-operation in the field of security policy is widely recognised. Form and structure of such co-operation are still a matter of debate. Suggestions from the academic world are plentiful. Researchers from the Institute for Security Studies (Pretoria), the South African Institute of International Affairs (Johannesburg), and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (Durban) are consulted by the respective government departments.

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24 ANC 1994, pp.23.
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**Table 1: Foreign Trade between South Africa and sub-Saharan African states (in million South African Rand)**

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**Notes:** Italics = Jan-Oct; Exp./Imp. = SA Export to/Import from; N.A. = not available. **Sources:** Foreign Trade Statistics and Monthly Abstract of Trade Statistics. Pretoria: Customs and Excise. Jorge Maia and Gena Krasnik at the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) in Johannesburg supplied me with missing data.
6. South Africa’s Africa Policy: Dominance or Primacy?  
6.1 Between Theory...

For the moment and in the foreseeable future, South Africa’s Africa policy is focussed on Southern Africa. Compared to the apartheid period, the economic and political settings are different. But due to its superior technology, economic resources, location and military power, South Africa has retained a predominant position in practically all fields. Predominance is used here as the term describing an asymmetric power relation between a relatively stronger and relatively weaker actors.

Hedley Bull suggests three most useful forms of preponderance:

- **Dominance:** “[…] characterised by the habitual use of force by a great power against the lesser states comprising its hinterland […].”
- **Hegemony:** “The great power prefers to rely upon instruments other than the direct use or threat of force, and will employ the latter only in situations of extremity […].”
- **Primacy/Leadership:** “A great power’s preponderance in relation to a group of lesser states takes the form of primacy when it is achieved without any resort to force or the threat of force […]. The position of primacy or leadership which the great power enjoys is freely conceded by the lesser states within the group concerned […].”

South Africa’s Africa policy during the apartheid period can be described with those terms as follows: given its military capacity, South Africa’s policy towards its immediate neighbourhood fell into the category dominance. Southern Africa effectively was South Africa’s “backyard” and many authors described Pretoria’s role as that of a “regional superpower” or “regional great power”. The South African government relied on factors such as trade, control of transport routes and migrant labour to ensure that these states became economically dependent on their powerful neighbour. Militarily, its weapons and arms arsenal placed it in a position to attack any of these countries at any time. Pretoria used these

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25 See chapters 3.4 and 3.5 (Part II) for reading material on South Africa’s role on the continent and within the OAU.


components, for example, to prevent these countries from hosting African National Congress (ANC) military bases.

In its approach towards the African states north of the Southern African region, Pretoria heavily relied on its economic and technological superiority. Here, *preponderance* took the forms of *hegemony* and *primacy*. It varied from country to country and depended on a country’s preparedness to accept South Africa’s predominant position. One must also distinguish between Pretoria’s own view of its role, and the view of the African state concerned. Pretoria saw and presented itself as a *leader* on the continent, generously offering economic, technological and other assistance. It could not, however, understand that those “poor” African countries refused to take it, that they did not want to become its appreciative *followers* on the grounds of its apartheid policy. On the other hand, the policy of apartheid did not in the least match the collective moral and political objective of black African states: pan-Africanism. Consequently, South Africa could never be the *leader* in continental or regional bodies such as the OAU or the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC).

The post-Apartheid situation differs enormously. The policy of apartheid as an obstacle for the political rapprochement between South Africa and African states has been eradicated. South Africa is now in a position to take the *leadership* and also find acceptance among African states for that role. Leadership is an actor’s ability to convince and move others to follow the leader in undertaking a certain action. There exists agreement between leader and followers on values such as democracy, good governance, human rights, etc.\(^\text{28}\)

The policy pronouncements cited in the previous chapter are an indication that South Africa is prepared to use its predominant role to the advantage of the region and the continent. The Department of Foreign Affairs’ *Discussion Document* of 1996 demonstrates that it is prepared to play the role of a leader. The section "principles and cornerstones" underlines the country’s “commitment to the promotion of human rights and democracy, commitment to justice and international law, commitment to international peace and internationally agreed-upon mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts, commitment to the interests of Africa in World Affairs”.\(^\text{29}\) The document further emphasises the necessity for South Africa to become


integrated within multilateral regional and continental organisations. This represents a move away from dominance towards primacy or leadership. It is a prerequisite to avoid South Africa’s retrogression to the role of coercive hegemon or dominant actor and a step in the direction of lasting political stability.

6.2 …and Practice

As in other countries, there is a gap between South Africa’s foreign policy in theory and in practice. As David Ryall has noted: “South Africa’s foreign policy has been characterised by a lack of direction since the country’s first non-racial elections in April 1994. Two visions of the country’s place in world politics have been competing for supremacy: the ANC’s internationalism and the Department of Foreign Affairs’ neo-realism. This clash has led to a persistent confusion [...]”\(^\text{30}\)

Despite South Africa’s stated will to assume a leadership role in the region, it has become apparent that finding followers is not easy. The historical, political, and socio-economic environment is such that both the achievement of lasting political stability through multilateral structures, and South Africa becoming a leader is still far from reality. A few examples dating from 1994 to the present are evidence for this gap:

**Nigeria.** During 1995 a crises erupted over the death sentence imposed on Ken Saro Wiwa. The Department of Foreign Affairs and the top South African leaders did not pursue a common approach. The DFA, President, and Vice-President made contradicting statements. The situation was incorrectly assessed and the execution of several political opponents could not be prevented. A special summit and pressure by the SADC were also in vain.\(^\text{31}\) South Africa’s stance is characterised by the typical conflict between loyalty to a former host during the exile period; Mbeki was head of the ANC exile mission in Nigeria for many years. He adopted an anomalous policy of opposing sanctions against Nigeria, whilst advocating the promotion of human rights.

**Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).** In an unsuccessful attempt to prevent an escalation of the conflict, Mandela brought Mobutu and the rebels together for talks on the SAS Outeniqua, offshore Kinshasa. The SADC, too, has proved incapable of bringing about


political stability. Friction between SADC member states are amongst the main reasons for the failure of South Africa’s leadership position in this instance. It has proved premature to permit the DRC gain SADC membership. That country does not yet conform to the standards which SADC promotes, such as good governance, observance of basic human rights, and multiparty systems. Attainment of SADC membership has not brought about a change in their value system.

Rwanda. During the early days of the conflict, intense discussion took place in the media whether South Africa should become militarily engaged. Two issues were central to the controversy: should South Africa become involved in such a distant conflict, or should it rather solve its own internal problems; and secondly to what extent, and within what structures should such an engagement take place? A compromise solution was found with South Africa deploying a rather low profile military mission, placed under the aegis of the OAU.

Lesotho. This most recent example shows the lack of coherence in South Africa’s policy towards its neighbours and the continent. After the eruption of the conflict in 1998, SADC formally decided on the deployment of a military mission, but this occurred only after South African troops had already been deployed! This decision must be seen against the following background: (1) the troops were sent to stabilise a regime which had obviously manipulated the election results to stay in power; (2) Pretoria was clearly the driving force behind the decision to become involved in Lesotho, of the 800 troops, 600 were from South Africa, 200 from Botswana; (3) the deployment was decided on by the military without the knowledge of the Department of Foreign Affairs. State President, Foreign Minister, and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (Alfred Nzo) were out of the country at the time, and it appears that Jackie Selebi, the then Director-General of the DFA, was not informed. This example shows: (1) the leader South Africa is prepared to sacrifice its democratic values and principles when the necessity for order in its backyard becomes imperative – i.e. where much of its water supplies come from; (2) as in the old days, the Department of Defence, seems to do things without the knowledge of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

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32 According to a discussion with a DFA employee close to Selebi who was in his office when he received the phone call informing him about the troop deployment.

33 My research shows that an early case of such action took place during the Biafra war (1967-70): the then Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, supported the secessionists with weapons without the knowledge of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eric H. Louw.
These examples illustrate that South Africa’s foreign policy towards Africa still is work in progress. However, nothing else could be expected at such an early stage in the Republic’s post-Apartheid political development. The examples also show that proclamations and statements as contained in the DFA’s foreign policy discussion document (1996) have proved too idealist and ill-suited to the political circumstances. Despite all criticism, one can nevertheless observe a move away from dominance or coercive hegemony, as practised under apartheid, to benign hegemony. In some cases South Africa has even tried to take the role of a leader within multilateral structures such as the SADC.

The situation on the continent and in the Southern African region is far from stable as the volatile situation in neighbouring Zimbabwe has recently shown. Political developments in many African countries remain difficult to predict in the foreseeable future. It can safely be assumed that the government in Pretoria will be confronted with critical situations again. An analysis of past experiences is therefore absolutely necessary to be better prepared for future challenges.
Part II – Literature

1 Bibliographies

1.1 South African Foreign Policy/Relations


1.2 Regional Co-operation in Southern Africa


2 Sources


3 Secondary Literature

3.1 South African Foreign Policy (General)


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### 3.2 Foreign Policy of the African National Congress


### 3.3 South Africa in Southern Africa : Regional Co-operation


3.4 South Africa in the Organisation of African Unity


3.5 South Africa on the Continent


3.6 South African Security Policy


