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A CRISIS OF IDENTITY? SOUTH AFRICA AND THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY

Morabo Morojele is a Researcher at the
South African Institute of International Affairs.

Executive Summary

South Africa played a pivotal role in recent negotiations for the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). On the one hand, South Africa has been commended for using its special attributes to build consensus amongst a divergent group of countries. On the other hand, South Africa has been criticized for bowing to American pressure, and forgoing a more inclusive approach to an important international issue. Other signals emanating from recent foreign policy decisions indicate the lack of a coherent policy. This points to the need for a more proactive approach to foreign policy-making, informed by wider participation in the foreign policy-making process.

South Africa's recent role in negotiations around the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), reflects ambiguities inherent in the dual nature of the country. At once a first world and third world nation, South Africa appears to be uncertain about what the substance and direction of its foreign policy should be. Whereas pre-election policy statements by the ANC, which now dominates the Government of National Unity, indicated intentions to change the thrust of foreign policy to reflect South Africa's new identity as a developing African democracy, it would appear that the Government has not yet adopted a clear approach to international affairs.

On the one hand, certain foreign policy positions have been shaped by ideology and the stimulus of solidarity with erstwhile developing country allies such as Indonesia and Cuba. These will bring few if any significant economic or security benefits. On the other hand, South African foreign policy-making has been tempered by the realities of superpower political and economic influence. South Africa's largest diplomatic missions will continue

to be in the United States (US), in Europe and increasingly in the Far East despite policy statements that priority will be given to Africa.

The demise of the Cold War, and the emergence of a new anarchical society in which the US is the single global power, has rendered foreign policy-making a complex undertaking. And yet at the same time it is unclear whether or not the early post-Cold War global dispensation will remain intact. Emerging isolationist tendencies in the US on the back of a Republican ascendancy in Congress, the failed outing in Somalia, and the possibility of a new involvement in the rapidly heating-up Bosnian crisis, might result in fracture, and the actual emergence of the long-touted multipolar world.

At this juncture, it is no longer possible for small states such as South Africa to adopt broad pro-Western or pro-Eastern postures, or to claim to stand above the fray by membership of such heterogeneous and often centrifugal would-be-collectives as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

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Indeed, growing US isolationism and the 'marginalisation' of Africa (of which, despite all protestations to the contrary, South Africa is a part) might demand of South Africa a new role as the regional and continental superpower. Whilst South Africa's large domestic ambitions place the focus of public policy on the domestic arena, at the same time reconstruction and development require peace, stability and co-operation in the region, and might compel a more proactive role to secure these conditions.

At the global level, the new South Africa finds itself inserted into a world in which modern nation states are confronted by an array of factors beyond their control. These include the globalising nature of modern capitalism over which even powerful states have limited control; the emergence of supra- and non-state actors which challenge the *raison d'état* of nineteenth and twentieth century nation-building, among them new social movements whose global agendas transcend national boundaries; as well as the growth of global fissures around such issues as the environmental crisis, the AIDS pandemic, and the movement of growing numbers of migrants across national boundaries and with them, the proliferation of illegal small arms, drugs and other contraband.

One consequence of the radically altered international arena is the obfuscation of what used to be a more definable 'national interest'. Instead, many often contradictory influences now come to play in the making of foreign policy. With a new primacy afforded to economic matters, for many developing countries - South Africa included - the institutions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) increasingly determine the limits of national, and by extension foreign policy. Regional integration between states is the new model for existence and South Africa is committed to this ideal, though the reality of participation in the international arena has aroused xenophobia and impulses to turn on the electrified fences once again.

South Africa remains a hugely divided society. Though the successful transition might provide a window of opportunity for former enemies to make common cause much more than in other more homogeneous countries, there may be no such thing as a 'national interest'. At one level, there is a growing tendency for competition between the component parts of the South African state. Provincial government jaunts to attract foreign investment in the Far East or in Europe appear to localise the foreign policy making process and to challenge the nation-building project. At another

level, the 'end of history' and the unavailability of alternatives to the victorious neo-liberal political and economic view of how the world should be constructed means that critical voices have little credence. The foreign policy arena remains the genteel preserve of gentleman warriors, and despite some changes in faces, it is one of the few remaining closed shops in this remade society.

The Significance of the NPT

Within this global dispensation, what then was the ground-breaking significance of South Africa's contribution to the NPT? The objectives of the NPT, first signed in 1968 are fourfold. First, it attempted to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons amongst nations that did not have them. Second, and as a palliative to non-nuclear states, it bound nuclear powers to provide security guarantees in the event of a nuclear threat. Third, it sought to bring an end to the nuclear 'apartheid' of that period by requiring nuclear powers to reduce their arsenals; and as a final objective, it required them to transfer non-military nuclear technology to developing countries.

On balance, it can be argued that the NPT has failed to achieve its objectives. Most importantly, a number of signatories such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea have flouted its provisions and now possess at least near-nuclear capabilities, whilst non-signatories such as Israel, India and Pakistan have improved their capabilities.

Secondly, though no country (with the possible exception of Cuba) was ever provided with unambiguous nuclear guarantees throughout the Cold War, it has been argued that the Cold War exported 'hot' war to superpower client states. The restrictions imposed by successful nuclear deterrence between the superpowers found an outlet in conflict in Africa: in the Horn, in Angola and Mozambique, and to an extent in South Africa itself.

Third, despite a number of nuclear disarmament treaties during the Cold War, insignificant numbers of armaments were dismantled. Even current post-Cold War agreements will have the effect of reducing nuclear armaments by only two-thirds. In any case, a very small number of nuclear armaments can cause vast devastation, and quantitative reductions in the past only had meaning if they maintained mutually assured destruction (MAD). It is not clear what the long term global security benefits of the ongoing and unreciprocated disarmament of the former Soviet Union will be, especially when this disarmament is coming at the

price of illegal transfers of nuclear technology and materials to what are considered pariah states.

Finally, the environmental movement now argues that mankind might have done without the unsafe and unsustainable use of non-military nuclear energy which has proliferated around the globe. However that debate might evolve, the nuclear hazard is here to stay and nuclear technologies cannot be unlearned.

Enter South Africa

What then was at issue in negotiations for the renewal of the NPT, and what was South Africa's role in bringing about its unanimous and indefinite extension?

In negotiations for the NPT, the Big Five (the US, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, France and the United Kingdom (UK) and their allies urged its permanent extension for two reasons. Based on the experience of other international treaties, they argued that countries could take advantage of the long ratification processes of fixed-term agreements to rush through nuclear development programmes. In short, the NPT would come apart. Second, and in a more self-interested manner, the Big Five favoured a permanent treaty because it would be difficult to build into it benchmarks against which some of its other provisions - nuclear disarmament and peaceful nuclear technology transfers - could be tested.

The view of the non-nuclear powers in the NAM was that a fixed term agreement was exactly what was required to break the nuclear monopoly of the Big Five, as well as the nuclear capabilities and ambitions of a small number of other states. After all, the Big Five remain relatively immune to the essentially regional postures of non-core nuclear powers such as Israel, India and Pakistan. It is rather small non-nuclear states that are primarily threatened by continued nuclear proliferation.

Having gone through a remarkable political transition, and as the only country ever to have unilaterally dismantled its nuclear weapons potential, South Africa re-entered the international arena occupying the high moral ground. The reason for South Africa's unilateral disarmament is usually ascribed to political *rapprochement* and the end of the 'communist onslaught' in the region from the late 1980s, such that South Africa no longer needed to possess the ultimate deterrent. A second reason is that South Africa disarmed so that the African continent would become and remain a nuclear free

zone. However, perhaps the most compelling reason for disarmament was because the white minority did not want to bequeath a nuclear capability to the coming black majority government. This should temper any inclination to self-congratulations.

Nevertheless the international prestige of President Nelson Mandela and his 'rainbow nation' meant that South Africa could bring considerable influence to bear in the international arena, especially amongst developing countries. Pretoria indicated its support 'in principle', for the permanent extension of the NPT, a qualification subsequently played down by critical states and commentators. However Pretoria suggested rolling extensions which would satisfy both the Big Five and the NAM at the same time. In the end this was only partially accepted as the NPT has been permanently extended, with some watered down provisions for its periodic review.

According to a number of commentators, South Africa was pressured by the US government into supporting the position of the Big Five. During his visit to South Africa in 1994, General Colin Powell strongly urged South Africa to support the permanent extension of the NPT. The US backed South Africa's membership of the exclusive Nuclear Suppliers Group, yet this was conditional on South African support for the NPT. Communications between the two governments, most importantly a *démarche* of March 1995, intimated that a negative vote would imperil future US-South African relations. The approval of a billion dollar loan for South Africa by the US-dominated World Bank immediately following the ratification of the treaty, is postulated as South Africa's 'reward' for supporting the position of the Big Five.

South African diplomats have denied that US pressure had anything to do with their position. They argue that South Africa's primary objective was to prevent further nuclear proliferation, requiring as a first provision, an indefinite agreement. However they also recognised the position of the NAM countries and suggested concessions in the form of proposals for the periodic review and monitoring of the disarmament and nuclear technology transfer aspects of the treaty. In the end, South Africa has been somewhat vindicated as the NPT has been permanently extended, and a number of clauses for its periodic review have been included.

In this, South Africa has played a major international role, using its good offices to bring together a large and disparate group of countries. Potential benefits will be reaped in the form of Big

Five support over diplomatic and economic issues. South Africa could now be the first African candidate for a permanent seat in a reformed United Nations Security Council, and could acquire additional staff representation and clout in other UN bodies.

Also, American political support can now be expected for whatever broad position South Africa adopts with regard to regional and continental peace-keeping and security. In the event of a more outward-looking South African regional or continental peace-keeping role, US, European and UN political support is also likely. This new approach could be tested in Angola. In a sense, a more isolationist US and overburdened UN might now wish to delegate peacekeeping operations in Southern Africa and beyond to South Africa. Whether South Africa is up to the task, and whether regional countries will quietly acquiesce to South Africa's further ascendancy, despite a nominally uncompetitive and co-operative regional political dispensation, is a moot point.

On the economic front, though the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Uruguay Round agreement does not facilitate special deals, South Africa can expect preferential trade agreements with the US, and with European members of the Big Five through the European Community (EC). Activities to improve the framework for increased US-South African trade and investment are on hand. Though South Africa is unlikely to accede to the Lomé Convention, which defines preferential trade and aid arrangements between the EC and a large number of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, a customized free trade deal is on the cards.

South Africa's recent role in the NPT has demonstrated some of its special qualities and problems. The country successfully brought domestic attributes of negotiation and consensus building to the complex international arena. In so doing, it inadvertently revealed the post-Cold War shortcomings of bodies such as the NAM. Though the conditions that brought about their formation

have now been altered, they should remain to address the legacies of the Cold War. However, they would need to be reformed in terms of their objectives, constituents and *modus operandi* in order to more meaningfully address current global issues. South Africa could play an important role in reconstituting the NAM and other similar bodies such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

On the other hand, South Africa appeared to kowtow to the superpowers during negotiations for the NPT. Whatever the truth, perceptions are important and can derail otherwise laudable objectives. This points to two responses that are required of the South African foreign policy making machine. First, and this has already been alluded to above, South Africa needs to play a more active role in international affairs. Such a role should be premised on the country's dual status as both a developed and developing African democracy.

This would imply a more Africanist and developing country posture *vis-a-vis* the grand issues of the day, with suitable practical acknowledgments to the imperatives of South Africa's relatively developed economic status. South Africa should champion international political and economic integration and reform, whilst at the same time making a special case for African and other developing countries.

Second, South Africa needs to democratise and open up the foreign policy making process to bring in its other hitherto marginalized constituents. Perceived as too distant and complex for the proverbial 'man on the street' who is anyway largely ignorant about the machinations of the international system, foreign policy making remains the closed preserve of a select few. As a first step towards wider participation, and in order to reverse the parochial and xenophobic inclination of much of the South African public, there is the need for considerable information dissemination and education. It is through such approaches to foreign policy formulation that South Africa will retain its special status in the world, and continue to occupy the high moral ground.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.

It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.