

On South Africa's Intervention on the African Continent:

Utopia and myth distinguished

Nicasius Achu Check¹

This policy brief examines South Africa's role in resolving some of the intricate crises on the African continent. The focus is on the perceived predatory nature of South Africa's relations with the rest of the continent, and why such relations are Utopian, without malice intended. Though interests are the main drivers of foreign policy formulation, South Africa had since 1994 relied on the astute and shrewd nature of its former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki to drive the foreign policy agenda of South Africa. In the post-Mbeki era, democratic exigencies have been the main drivers of South African policy on Africa, with little reference to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The myth surrounding South Africa's involvement on the continent stems from the bullish and structural weakness of the domestic foreign policy generation process. The brief argues that South Africa needs to reallocate its resources and re-strategise its African policy agenda in order to offer insights into adaptations in foreign policy that emerging economies are pursuing in other regions of the world.

Introduction

The euphoria generated in the world, and more particularly on the African continent, soon after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the hopes he brought on the role a democratic South Africa would play on the continent, has been gradually dissipating, and giving way to despair and hopelessness. The despair is about the manner in which the African agenda has been handled in the current administration, and the hopelessness about the prospects of a new

role for South Africa in the increasingly changing patterns of development on the continent. Despite this bleak observation, there are prospects that South Africa can play a meaningful role in the development agenda of the African continent.

However, the primary determinants of any foreign policy formulation rest with the domestic policy orientations. One of the first of these was the process of demilitarisation of the country in order to restore civilian control over a security apparatus that had become too powerful in the formulation of South African domestic and

¹ Nicasius Achu Check is a Research Specialist: Governance and Security Research Programme, Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA), and is a PhD candidate, Department of Politics, University of Johannesburg.

**South Africa
needs to
reallocate its
resources and
re-strategise
its African
policy agenda**

foreign policies.¹ Detailed negotiations between the apartheid-era South African Defence Force (SADF) and the military wing of the African National Congress or ANC, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), emphasised the overriding importance of national self-defence in which the South African military would be deployed internationally for peacekeeping operations, humanitarian relief exercises and, as witnessed in 1998 in Lesotho, to restore democracy.²

South Africa's military intervention on the African continent has thus been guided by this important new orientation, which was bequeathed to the military by the new South African Constitution of 1996. One of the critical challenges prior to this was the necessity of integrating previously opposed military forces into the newly created South African National Defence Force, the SANDF. Though the process of integration encountered some hitches, it was normalised by the firm and political leadership of Joe Modise, Minister of Defence under the Mandela administration. By 1996 more than 25 000 guerrillas from the MK, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) and soldiers from the former 'homelands' had been integrated into the new SANDF.

The second important area of importance was the complete restructuring and overhaul of the foreign policy-making establishment in the country. This area of policy orientation centred on the restructuring of the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure better and more streamlined foreign policy formulation and implementation. This saw the birth of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which would integrate the best and brightest diplomats from the foreign service of the former apartheid regime, who numbered about 1 917, the ANC's Department of International Affairs with 139 employees, and the foreign ministries of the four homelands, which totalled about 415 members. These were all absorbed into the new department.³

As the life engine of South Africa's foreign policy formulation and implementation, the department underwent fundamental changes in 2009, the year in which Jacob Zuma became president, and was renamed the Department of International Relations and Cooperation. It is perhaps the largest foreign service department in the world after the United States (US), with over 104 embassies and high commissions abroad and more than 120 diplomatic missions accredited to the country.⁴ This gigantic foreign

service department has been spearheading a foreign policy that responds to the domestic and international obligations of the South African nation.

While South Africa was paving the way for an African foreign policy arena with which to engage, the continent was engaged in a bitter struggle to rid itself of the appendages of colonialism and the Cold War. The collapse of the central state authority in Somalia and the disastrous US intervention in that country in 1993 led to a gradual shift in the international community's intervention on the continent. The failure of the United Nations (UN) to stop the genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent killings in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has put enormous pressure on the UN system to collectively protect human and people's dignity across the globe. According to the UN, the international community has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from crimes against humanity. If a state is manifestly failing to protect its population, the international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect the population, in accordance with the Charter of the UN.⁵ Despite this important UN framework, few interventions have been witnessed on the continent.

The dawn of a new global order after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1990 saw a renewed effort on the African continent to liberalise the political space which had been rigidly controlled through the one-party system. There was hope that the wind of change blowing across would open a new era of tolerant regimes, paving the way to democracy. As pluralistic political spheres were introduced, so also were their attendant drawbacks. National conferences were organised in several African countries and dictatorial regimes were swept out of office. Ethnic cleavages emerged, with devastating consequences, in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC. The world stood by as hundreds of thousands of people were killed in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

The African Union (AU)/South African intervention should therefore be seen as seeking African solutions to African problems. The first heads-of-state summit in 2011 was premised on this (which, coincidentally, is the Africa Institute's research theme in the coming years). This policy brief's relevance to contemporary African issues is therefore clear.

Conceptualising South Africa's relations with Africa

A few months before South Africa's general elections in 1994, Nelson Mandela, then president of the ANC, indicated that the foreign policy of a democratic South Africa would be based on respect for human rights, humanism in the conduct of foreign affairs, support for democratic institutions, and respect for the international law instruments to which South Africa was signatory. Though Mandela endeavoured to pursue this policy direction, the emphasis was on strengthening of democratic practices and economic liberalisation throughout Africa.⁶ South Africa's policy on Africa has since 1994 been based on the following policy orientation: regional integration and development, territorial integrity and state sovereignty, peaceful resolution of conflicts, promotion of democracy and human rights and free trade and investment. Within the realm of regional integration and development, South Africa has strengthened its leadership role in regional and sub-regional organisations such as the AU, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). South Africa's shrewd diplomacy led to the successful election of its own foreign minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, as the first woman to chair the AU.

South Africa's policy on Africa was anchored on strengthening African multilateral organisations so that these could better respond to the twin challenges of underdevelopment and poverty on the continent. Premised on this understanding was President Mbeki's African Renaissance project, which culminated in the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the AU, and also the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD. The Mbeki doctrine was premised on the notion that South Africa's future economic prosperity was tied to a prosperous and viable African economic growth and sustainable development.

However, though South Africa succeeded in putting Africa on the map, its treatment of Africans from other parts of the continent has cast doubt on the extent to which its African policy has taken root on the continent. These attacks have damaged South Africa's standing on the continent by contributing to negative perceptions of the country as standing aloof and seeing itself as apart from and superior to the rest of the continent.⁷

South Africa has vehemently opposed the violation of territorial integrity and state sovereignty of many African states. This found expression in Mandela's rejection of US demands that South Africa should relinquish, or at best avoid, diplomatic relations with Libya. This non-interventionist approach was equally pursued by Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma in their rejection of French intervention in Côte d'Ivoire and the international community's imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya.

Another important policy model that has characterised South Africa's policy on Africa has been the peaceful resolution of conflicts. This policy direction was premised on the assumption that conflict retards the development of African countries and that Africans should champion any sustainable conflict-resolution initiatives. It was in the pursuit of such conflict-resolution models that South Africa intervened in Lesotho in 1998, Burundi in 2001, Sudan in 2005, the DRC in 2003, and the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2007.

South Africa's African policy orientation in the post-Cold War era has also been anchored on the promotion of democracy and human rights across the continent. The restoration of the democratic tradition in Lesotho in 1998, and the South African intervention in the peace process in Burundi, the DRC and recently in Cote d'Ivoire are just some examples of this. South Africa has also shown a willingness to adopt the liberal economic model of free trade and investment on the continent.⁸ Today South African companies are present in over 40 countries on the continent, as against only 10 in 1994. This is a major shift from the reclusive and predatory state of the early 1990s.

The above are some of the models through which South Africa has interacted on the continent. To understand further how these models are operationalised on a continental scale, it is important to look at some of the key drivers of South African foreign policy formulation and implementation.

Sources of South African foreign policy

In international policy, three important issues generally determine the nature and sources of foreign policy generation in Africa. First is the personal whims of the leaders involved; secondly the geopolitical setting, and third the dependency relations between African states and their former colonial masters.⁹ However, the peaceful transition

The African Union (AU)/ South African intervention should therefore be seen as seeking African solutions to African problems

**South Africa
has vehemently
opposed the
violation of
territorial
integrity
and state
sovereignty**

of South Africa from an autocratic regime into a democracy has favoured the emergence of a wide range of state and non-state actors capable of influencing South African policy on Africa. The demise of the bipolar world and the role civil society and public opinion play in the shaping of public debate and policies on the continent have drastically changed the manner in which foreign policy is formulated and implemented in Africa. State influences that have a bearing on foreign policy formulation in South Africa are the Constitution of 1996, several international conventions and treaties which South Africa is party to, and the domestic exigencies of the local economy. Prominent in this trend is the foreign policy direction of the ANC, which had earlier benefited from state and non-state actors in the international arena. Beside the presidency and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, the parliament of South Africa is the final state actor that has emerged as an important foreign policy influence in the democratic era.¹⁰ The role of the Portfolio Committee on Foreign Affairs in shaping foreign policy direction should equally not be underemphasised.

With regard to the role of non-state influences in the determination of South African foreign policy, the ANC is particularly powerful due to its status as the ruling party. Because of its dominance in both the legislative and executive arms of government, the ANC largely influences South African foreign policy agenda. Though President Mbeki imposed his thinking and helped shape South African policy direction, he did so with the blessing of the ANC and the ruling coalition of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). The opposition parties in South Africa have also played significant roles in shaping its foreign policy. South Africa's joining of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) bloc and its special relations with Britain and Australia are partly influenced by the foreign policy agenda of the main opposition party in South Africa, the Democratic Alliance (DA). South Africa's vibrant civil society movements have also been very active in articulating specific foreign policy direction, which the government has sometimes reluctantly been able to pursue.

Within the international arena, South African leaders have been influenced by the huge expectations placed on South Africa by its African peers and the wider international community.¹¹ Several African countries look upon South Africa as their mouthpiece in international policy arenas. This role is also reciprocal, as many international

partners are looking to South Africa to be the gateway into Africa for business. South Africa's joining of the BRIC group is thought to have been premised on this assumption. The role of international actors is also within the realm of Official Development Assistance, ODA, which has grown exponentially since 1994. All these have had an important role in shaping and fashioning South African policy on Africa over the years.

The Utopian concept of South Africa's intervention on the African continent: Some clarifications

South Africa has not been swayed by international actors to intervene militarily or otherwise on the African continent. Any South African intervention has been guided by its constitutional provisions and the need to preserve and protect the democratic ethos which underpinned the transition to democratic role in 1994. The South African military intervention in Lesotho in 1998 and its humanitarian assistance to Mozambique in 2000 were both based on the shared principles which underpinned the democratic national revolution in South Africa. These interventions were not guided by some selfish narrow agendas, but by a genuine desire to promote peace and democracy on the continent. These interventions also fall in line with South Africa's desire to see African problems being handled and resolved by Africans themselves.

Mandela's attempts to resolve the DRC conflict in 1996 before it exploded were generally guided by a genuine desire to stop the sufferings and massive killing of Africans in the Congo. It was not an attempt to advance South Africa's selfish interest in the region or to create an enabling environment for the implantation of South African companies. Even though South African companies benefited from the relative peace that followed Desire Kabila's coming to power, the intervention to broker a peace deal between Kabila and Mobutu was not in itself aimed at advancing the interests of South African companies.

In the same light, Mbeki managed to get cabinet approval and to subsequently secure the endorsement of the UN Security Council on 29 October 2001 to intervene in the Burundi conflict that had started in 1993 with the killing of the first democratically elected president of the country, Melchior Ndadaye.¹² Table 1 indicates other important areas of South African interventions on the continent.

Table 1: South Africa's interventions on the continent since 1994

No.	Country	Year(s)	Reason(s)
1	Congo	1996–1997 2003–present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peace facilitator between Laurent Desire Kabila and Mobuto Part of the various UN Peacekeeping operations in the country
2	Lesotho	1998	Restore constitutional democracy after the overthrow of the monarchy
3	Burundi	2001–2010	Part of the AU and UN peace-support operations in the country
4	Sudan	2005–present	Part of various AU and UN peace-support operations in the country
5	Comoros	2004–2010	Part of AU peace-keeping and peace enforcement in the country
6	Central Africa Republic	2006–present	Bilateral security arrangement
7	Côte d'Ivoire	2010	Part of AU mission in the country
8	Mozambique	Continuous	Humanitarian intervention
9	Zimbabwe	2008–present	Facilitator of the SADC peace mission in the country
10	Madagascar	2009–present	Facilitator of the SADC peace mission in the country

South Africa's vibrant civil society movements have also been very active in articulating specific foreign policy

Myths about South Africa's intervention on the continent

A common use of the word 'myth' is that of a widely held but inaccurate assumption. In this sense a myth is a fiction or an illusion, the product of wishful thinking rather than the result of any serious attempt to understand the world in which we live.¹⁵ The myth about South Africa's involvement in continental conflict resolution should be understood within this context, principally to shed light on some of the inaccuracies of the information that is available in the public domain.

One of the myths surrounding South Africa's intervention on the continent relates to its involvement in the Lesotho debacle of 1998. The argument has been that South Africa wanted to portray its 'big brother' attitude, in total disrespect of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of a neighbouring country. However, one important aspect of the Lesotho intervention was the fact that it was an SADC-authorized intervention. In addition, South Africa was practically propping up the Lesotho economy through the Lesotho Highlands Water Project and dividends from SACU. It is therefore unfair and perhaps injurious to assume that South Africa was projecting a big-brother attitude by its intervention in Lesotho in 1998.

The Burundi and the DRC interventions were equally contemplated within South Africa's grand scheme of a new dawn for Africa. The dismay that Africa might be regarded as the 'scum of the earth', and the fact that South Africa could use its military and human resource expertise to help a fellow African country were the motivating factors, and the interventions should not be construed as a way to create an enabling environment for South African companies. The fact that South African companies have benefited from the peace that subsequently prevailed in the region should not be seen as the primary objective with which South Africa went in in the first place. The same could be said of the CAR debacle, where a bilateral agreement was signed between South Africa and the country to reform the security sector and provide security for the fragile economy. There are no indications that South African intervention in the CAR was for a covert mission or to protect the business interests of some prominent South Africans.

The understanding that South Africa is the gateway to Africa for many industrialised and other developing economies is unsubstantiated. The involvement of China, Brazil, India and Japan in African economies did not pass through South Africa. These countries established trading and political connections with African countries without the consent and approval of South

The expectations of the role a democratic South Africa should play on the continent are perhaps exaggerated

Africa. On the contrary, South Africa should ensure that the door to Africa's riches should be shut to these industrialised countries, as South Africa itself has the technological and human resource capital to exploit these resources for the benefit of its people and the continent as a whole. South African companies operating on the continent have not in any deliberate manner instituted labour-restrictive laws in the countries in which they operate. South Africa has ensured that the same labour practices applicable to its domestic operations should be the same in all the countries in which these firms operate. They must even ensure that technological transfer and skills development is one of the cardinal pillars of their involvement on the continent. More than half the technical staff of MTN operations in all African countries are sourced from the local pool, as are top management. The General Manager of MTN Cameroon, for instance, is from Nigeria. The company is committed to equity and empowerment of local talent in the African continent.

Conclusion and recommendations

The expectations of the role a democratic South Africa should play on the continent are perhaps exaggerated, but efforts have been made to ensure that these expectations are not totally dashed. However, both state and non-state actors will continue to set the tone for South Africa's foreign policy. One of the critical issue is how the ruling ANC in South Africa should focus on foreign affairs as against domestic challenges confronting the country.¹⁴ Consensus should be reached between foreign and domestic policy initiatives that could shape foreign policy direction. It is a given that though the restructuring of the foreign-policy apparatus in the country is complete, the interaction between and within the various branches of government is far from regularised.¹⁵ The disjuncture between the national, provincial and local government should be streamlined to ensure better coordination. On the whole, an effective foreign policy direction could be achieved if the following recommendations are considered in the mechanism of foreign policy formulation and implementation.

- The executive arm of government should ensure that all the various spheres of government, including national, provincial and local government, should adopt a common foreign policy-making and implementation mechanism so as to ensure a seamless and

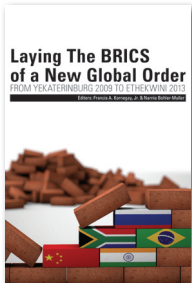
coordinated foreign policy framework. The intelligence services of the country should equally combine their energies in looking at means of advancing the strategic interest of South Africa.

- The government should undertake thorough background research in areas where South Africa is to deploy troops. A clear understanding of the objectives of each mission, deliverable targets and an exit strategy should be adopted before any intervention is contemplated. In cases where intervention is necessary, an integrated approach should be adopted, where civilians, working in cooperation with the police and military components, collaborate to achieve set objectives.
- The government should focus on soft power in advancing South Africa's interest on the continent. The creating of the Ubuntu radio and the impact of eNCA, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) News and ANN7 is quite enormous and should be encouraged.
- Economic diplomacy should equally be encouraged, with a firm understanding of making Africa an enlarged South Africa market for the huge South African industrial base. In the pursuit of this economic interest, South Africa should dedicate human and material resources to promoting South Africa on the continent. Most of South African diplomats posted on the continent are not perhaps the top choice, as the more sophisticated ones are posted to developed countries. In fact, the developed countries do not really need the best diplomats, as their work speaks for itself. African countries need the brightest of South African diplomats, who will be able to address complex issues relating to development and conflict resolution.
- The promotion of human rights and regional economic integration should be the cornerstone of South Africa's relations with the continent. This has been facilitated by the election of Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as Chairperson of the African Union Commission. Mbeki's African Renaissance project also catapulted South Africa to the pinnacle of respect and esteem among Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. The onus is on the current administration to build on these achievements and to infuse a firm political leadership from South Africa on African issues, such as that on the crises in Libya and in Côte d'Ivoire.

Notes and references

- 1 Schraeder, P., 2001. South Africa's foreign policy: From international pariah to leader of the African Renaissance. *The Round Table* 90(359), p.231.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p.232.
- 4 See for example <http://www.dirco.gov.za/foreign/index.html> [Accessed 9 January 2014].
- 5 See *The responsibility to protect*. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/responsibility.shtml> [Accessed 11 June 2012].
- 6 Schraeder, 2001, op. cit., p.233.
- 7 Andreasson, S. 2011. Africa's prospects and South Africa's leadership potential in the emerging markets century. *Third World Quarterly*, 32(6), p.1175.
- 8 Schraeder, 2001, op. cit., p.233.
- 9 Ibid., p.235.
- 10 Ibid., p.237.
- 11 Ibid., p.239.
- 12 ACCORD, 2007. *South Africa's peacekeeping role in Burundi: Challenges and opportunities for future peace missions*. Occasional Paper, 2(2), p.27.
- 13 Tudor, H., 1972. *Political myth*. London: Macmillan, p.13.
- 14 Schraeder, 2001, op. cit., p.239.
- 15 Ibid.

The promotion of human rights and regional economic integration should be the cornerstone of South Africa's relations with the continent



Laying the BRICS of a New Global Order From Yekaterinburg 2009 to eThekweni 2013

Edited by Francis A. Kornegay and Narnia Bohler-Muller
ISBN 987-0-7983-0403-0



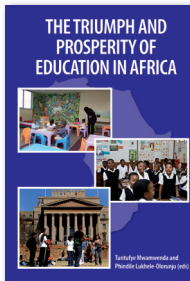
The Social Contract in Africa

Editor: Sanya Osha
ISBN 978-0-7983-0444-3



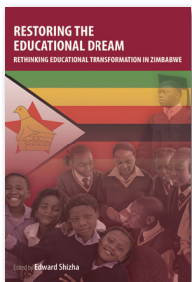
The Future We Chose: Emerging Perspectives on the Centenary of the ANC

Editor: Busani Ngcaweni
ISBN 978-0-7983-0436-8



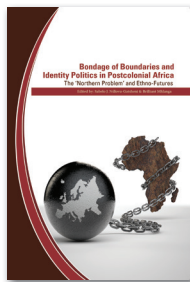
The Triumph and Prosperity of Education in Africa

Edited by Tuntufye Mwamwenda and Phindile Lukhele-Olorunju
ISBN 978-0-7983-0371-2



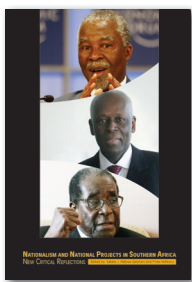
Restoring the Educational Dream: Rethinking Educational Transformation In Zimbabwe

Edited by Edward Shizha
ISBN 978-0-7983-0407-8



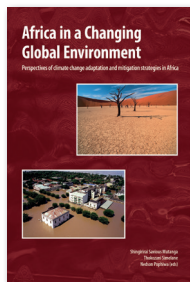
Bondage of Boundaries and Identity Politics in Postcolonial Africa: The 'Northern Problem' and Ethno-Futures

Edited by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Brilliant Mhlanga
ISBN 978-0-7983-0391-0



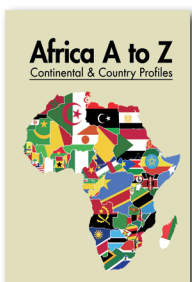
Nationalism and National Projects in Southern Africa: New critical reflections

Edited by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Finex Ndhlovu
ISBN 978-0-7983-0395-8



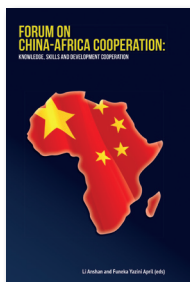
Africa in a Changing Global Environment: Perspectives of climate change and mitigation strategies in Africa

Edited by Shingirirai Savious Mutanga, Thokozani Simelane, Nedson Popiwa
ISBN 978-0-7983-0375-0



Africa A to Z: Continental & Country Profiles

Cartographer: Elize Van As



Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Knowledge, Skills and Development Cooperation

Edited by Li Anshan and Funeka Yazini April
ISBN 978-0-7983-0367-5



PO Box 630
Pretoria
0001
South Africa
Embassy House
No 1 Bailey Lane
Arcadia
Pretoria

Tel: +27 (0)12 304 9700
Fax: +27 (0)12 323 8153

E-mail: publish@ai.org.za,
Website: www.ai.org.za

AISA is a statutory research body focusing on contemporary African affairs in its research, publications, library and documentation. **AISA** is dedicated to knowledge production, education, training and the promotion of awareness on Africa, for Africans and the international community. This is achieved through independent policy analysis, and the collection, processing and interpretation, and dissemination of information.

ISSN 1998-7994

