

THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

SOUTH AFRICA'S ROLE AS A
"MIDDLE POWER"

A Report compiled by Members of the Pretoria Branch of the S.A. Institute of International Affairs, for Inclusion in a Study to be Published by the Forschungsinstitut Der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany).

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JOHANNESBURG

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Rapporteur: Dr. Denis Worrall.

Introduction

In March of this year the Director of the Institute received a request from the Director of the Forschungsinstitut Der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik in Bonn, Germany, for co-operation in a study of the role of "middle powers" in world politics, South Africa having been chosen as one of about ten countries in various continents qualifying as a "middle power".

Accompanying the letter from the Director of the Forschungsinstitut was a questionnaire which he explained as follows:-

"A detailed and uniform questionnaire has been worked out in order to obtain comparable answers. We ask for information on views held by interested and informed sections of public opinion in your country rather than for personal views. If a variety of views is held on any question we would appreciate if the various views were given, and if the relevant quarters holding those views were mentioned as well as the relevance of the respective quarter.

We do not presume that all sections of the questionnaire will be answered in a detailed way. Some questions are of major concern to certain countries and are less pertinent to others. Emphasis should be laid on the answers to the questions under I and II."

The Pretoria Branch of the South African Institute agreed to undertake the task of compiling the replies to this questionnaire, and a group of members under the Chairmanship of Professor M.H. Louw, with Dr. Denis Worrall as Rapporteur, produced the report which is set out below.

Represented in the group were professional men, businessmen, journalists, economists, political scientists, historians, and philosophers. Throughout its discussion of the questionnaire the group consciously kept in mind the purpose of the survey, namely, to obtain information on views held by interested and informed

sections of public opinion in South Africa on the part which Middle Powers play in world politics today. Their report therefore purports to reflect informed public opinion in South Africa on the questions posed.

Before dealing with the responses to the questions, one preliminary point might be made. It was unanimously felt that certain of the questions could have been more clearly formulated. The definitions of the different kinds of Powers distinguished in the questionnaire also caused concern, e.g. it was not clear what was meant by a Power's "region".

In accordance with the instruction in the covering letter from the Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, the group paid more attention to the questions under sections I and II in the questionnaire, than to those under sections III and IV. This is reflected in the report.

I.

THE ROLE SOUTH AFRICA PLAYS IN WORLD POLITICS

1. How would you define the role South Africa plays in world politics?

In answering this question the group decided that there are essentially four distinguishable roles that a Big and Middle Power in particular can play in world politics.

(i) It being assumed that countries follow policies which promote their national interest, they play an active or passive role in world politics depending on the vigour with which they pursue their goals. In this regard South Africa plays a relatively passive role. It belongs to far fewer international organisations than most other states - using population, size, and resources as yard-sticks; and its participation in the bodies of which it is a member is fairly limited. Similarly, South Africa exchanges diplomats with fewer countries than comparable states. Despite its strategic importance for the sea-route around Africa, South Africa is not a signatory to any military treaties with the exception of the reciprocal agreement with the United Kingdom relating to use of the Simonstown naval base. It should be stressed that this relatively passive role in world affairs is not entirely one of choice: hostility towards South Africa has forced that country on to the defensive. However, recently there have been signs that South Africa is beginning to pursue its own interests somewhat more energetically, particularly in Southern Africa.

(ii) The second distinguishable role identified in this report refers to the role which countries play in the Cold War. Countries may be committed in their foreign policy to the West, or they may be committed to the Soviet Union, or to Communist China, or they may declare

themselves to be non-aligned. These are all possibilities; but whatever the commitment, this is for each state a distinguishable role in world politics. While it is recognised in informed circles in South Africa that the Cold War is beginning to lose some of its intensity, South Africa is seen to be solidly pro-West. Most South Africans recognise the United States as the undisputed leader of the West and the champion of "Western democracy". This is so notwithstanding a certain amount of anti-Americanism which has manifested itself in recent times because of the official United States attitude towards South Africa.

- (iii) The third distinguishable role relates to the varying degree of concern (or unconcern) which different countries manifest with respect to fundamental world problems. As even a cursory survey of the countries of the world will show, some countries are more aware than others of the problems of war and peace, of the need for a better distribution of technology and of the necessity of raising standards of living in the developing parts of the world, of problems relating to food production and of rapidly increasing populations. South Africa may be said to adopt a positive attitude in regard to this role, and where it has been permitted it has shown itself willing to share its relative technological advancement and its skill and experience in, for example, the agricultural and veterinary sciences. Its willingness in this respect is demonstrated by the different kinds of assistance which it has rendered neighbouring states. It might be added that informed opinion in South Africa regards the Republic by virtue of its location and circumstances as better equipped to understand and help the rest of Africa than are some of the more developed countries of the world.
- (iv) The fourth recognisable role which a country can play in world politics is the fairly obvious one of international trade. In this regard South Africa is important, it being rated within the top twenty trading nations in the world. The pattern of South Africa's trade has been greatly influenced by its long association with the United Kingdom, first as a colony, and secondly as a Dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations. This is reflected in the fact that today the United Kingdom is South Africa's largest export market, and South Africa is in turn Britain's second largest export market. This situation notwithstanding, one of the more important features of South Africa's trading position in the world over the last six years has been increasing diversification. It has greatly increased in Western Europe (particularly with France), and despite boycotts and talk of boycotts, South Africa's trade with Africa and the Far East has continued to grow. South Africa is also far and away the most important country on the continent as far as British and United States' investment is concerned.

2. Is there a prospect that this role will change during the next decade? What could produce this change?

In regard to the four recognisable roles which a country can play in world politics, the next decade is unlikely to bring about any radical changes in the case of South Africa. The group that drew up this report was of the opinion that there would be changes, but that these would be of a relatively minor nature. The changes which it is believed will occur may be illustrated in terms of the four roles discussed above.

- (i) South Africa is likely to pursue its national interests in the world more actively than in the past. Circumstances permitting, it is likely to continue to belong to those international organisations of which it is presently a member.
- (ii) South Africa's role in the Cold War is likely to acquire greater importance with the British withdrawal from East of Suez. Greater value, it is believed, is likely to be placed on the strategic importance of the Cape sea-route.
- (iii) In the decade that lies ahead, South Africa's responsiveness to the problems of developing countries (especially in Southern Africa) is likely to grow.
- (iv) All the indications point to South Africa expanding its international trade both with its present main trading partners and with other countries. In the next ten years South Africa is likely to strengthen its trade relations with South American countries in particular.

Of the reasons for these relative changes in the role which South Africa will play in the world during the next decade, the compilers of this report felt, regarding change in the pattern of international affairs, that both an intensification of Cold War tensions as well as a relaxation of Cold War tensions would enhance the role South Africa plays in the world. The former condition would increase South Africa's strategic importance as far as the West is concerned, and the latter development would create more favourable conditions in Southern Africa for South Africa's participation in development and technological programmes. Regarding a possible re-evaluation of South Africa's national interests as a factor which might influence the role South Africa is to play in the world during the next ten years, the compilers felt that a radical re-evaluation of national interest is improbable, unless this is forced upon South Africa or required of her by a sudden and major change in the pattern of international affairs, unforeseen at the present time.

A factor which could affect South Africa's position in regard to all four roles is domestic politics. On this point informed and enlightened public opinion in South Africa tends to divide. There are those who believe that the South African Government will move increasingly in the next decade in the direction of several independent states, i.e. a plural-state

system, and a more widespread allocation of resources and planning for economic development. This is bound to improve the prospects of fuller functioning in all four roles. Enlightened supporters of the Government, most of the Afrikaans-language editors, and a large percentage of the Afrikaans intelligentsia believe that this is what will occur over the next decade. However, enlightened opponents of government policy, many of the editors of English-language newspapers, and the bulk of the English-speaking intelligentsia are of the opinion that the movement towards the creation of a viable, separate states system in which institutionalised political and economic power is shared on territorial lines, is not likely to proceed much beyond its present stage. While persons who entertain this point of view do not envisage South Africa's image improving in the world in the next decade, they are generally agreed that there is unlikely to be any fundamental change in the political system in the next decade. To the extent that public opinion affects the role South Africa plays in the world, the fact should be mentioned that the more active promotion of national interest in the world, the so-called "outward policy", is generally supported.

3. Is it considered in your country that the gap between Big Powers and Middle Powers (like South Africa) will shrink? Are efforts being made in South Africa in this direction?

The compilers of this report are of the opinion that some Middle Powers - Australia, Japan, Canada, and South Africa in particular - will definitely catch up with certain of the Big Powers - Britain, France, and West Germany, for example. However, this will not occur as a result of any conscious effort. The compilers furthermore believe that this view represents most enlightened thinking in South Africa.

4. If narrowing the gap between Big Powers and Middle Powers is considered a possibility, what conditions have to be met in order to realise it?

Factors which are likely to narrow the gap between Middle Powers and Big Powers are likely to vary from country to country. Thus in the case of South Africa it is the opinion of the compilers of this report that the condition most likely to contribute to a closing of the gap is continued industrialisation, whereas in the case of India it is increased agricultural productivity. Change in the social and political systems is not viewed as an important condition. The acquisition of nuclear arms is in the opinion of the compilers of this report not at all essential.

II.

INSTRUMENTS AND METHODS

1. What are the major contributions of South Africa to international politics?

South Africa's participation in international trade is regarded as her most important contribution to world politics. This trade, it must be remembered, involves considerable strategic commodities, among them gold and uranium, and some important basic minerals. South Africa has played a small mediatory role in the British-Rhodesian conflict, and it has contributed technical assistance to certain countries in Africa. Provision was made in the 1968-69 budget for the expansion of such programmes on a bilateral basis.

2. How does South Africa influence world politics?

South Africa's contacts with other countries have primarily taken a bilateral form. South Africa would willingly play a fuller role in the United Nations, through various regional institutions, and other international organisations, were it given the chance. But opportunities in this respect are limited by the attitude of countries towards South Africa.

3. Which instruments appear in South Africa to be most appropriate to maintain or to increase its influence in world politics?

These are stated in the following order of importance:-

- (i) Economics. South Africa is quite consciously following economic policies which will promote its influence in the world. This is also reflected in the idea of a "common market of Southern Africa" to which various top official spokesmen allude from time to time.
- (ii) Diplomacy.
- (iii) Military preparedness and strategic importance in a situation of non-war.
- (iv) South Africa aims to influence the attitude of countries toward it by explaining to the world what is understood by "separate development" or "separate freedoms", and how this is intended as a response to diversity in Southern Africa.

III.

SUPER POWERS-BIG POWERS - MIDDLE POWERS

1. Is it considered possible in South Africa that new Super Powers will emerge during the next decade?

China - Yes.

United Europe - Possibly.

Japan - Possibly, but unlikely in ten years.

France - Possibly.

2. Is it considered possible in your country that new Big Powers will emerge during the next decade?

Japan - Yes.

India - No.

Brazil - Yes.

Canada - Yes.

South Africa - No.

United Europe - Possibly.

3. Is it considered possible that present Super Powers will become Big Powers and Big Powers Middle Powers, respectively?

No.

IV.

THE FREEDOM OF POLITICAL MANOEUVRING OF MIDDLE POWERS

1. Is world politics considered to be the prerogative of Super Powers or is it held feasible that a Middle Power can play a part of its own in world politics? To what extent and by what method is the political manoeuvring of Middle Powers considered to be limited by Super Powers?

World politics is not considered the prerogative of the Super Powers. It is believed that there is a role for Middle Powers, even though the dominant decisions are taken mainly by the Super Powers.

2. If the politics of South Africa is being considerably influenced by a Super Power, how can the relationship be defined between South Africa and that power?

The politics of South Africa is not considerably influenced by any Super Power. However, South Africa does have relations with the United States. These are essentially in the nature of a community of interests, as expressed through trade, cultural exchanges, a fairly common history, and South Africa's assistance in the United States' outer-space programme. South Africans generally believe that they have a strong bond of interest with Americans, but that this is distorted and blurred by extraneous factors.

3. Is it expected that this relationship will change during the next decade thereby increasing or decreasing freedom of political manoeuvring? What developments might bring about that change?

South Africans generally would hope to improve and strengthen their relationship with the United States. They would hope to do so by means of diplomacy and mutual understanding, and expect that this relationship will improve as a consequence of the recognition of the sincerity of South Africa's effort to create a just, constructive and enduring constitutional and political response to diversity in this part of Africa. It is also thought that another factor which could improve South Africa's relationship with the United States is the realisation in that country of the important role which South Africa stands to play in the economic, strategic and technological development of the Southern part of the African continent.