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occasional paper

THE  
SOUTH  
AFRICAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
AFFAIRS

SOUTH AFRICA  
AND ITS  
NEIGHBOURS:  
CO-OPERATION  
OR CONFLICT?

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This paper is based on a talk delivered by Professor Barratt in January this year at a symposium of the Cost Engineering Association of South Africa in Sandton.

It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.

# **SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS: CO-OPERATION OR CONFLICT?**

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**ISBN: 0 908371 61 6**

**February 1988**

**The South African Institute  
of International Affairs  
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PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, South Africa**

## INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of Portuguese colonial rule in 1974 and the independence of Mozambique and Angola in 1975, Southern Africa has become a focus of international attention as one of the unsettled regions of the world. The region has attracted the direct involvement of both superpowers, as well as some of their respective allies, and their competition for influence has become one of the main factors in the disturbed situation. Far from contributing to a resolution of the regional disputes, their involvement has aggravated the conflicts. Nevertheless, their undoubted power gives them the potential to assist in stabilising the region, resolving problems and promoting economic development. The United States has tried to do this with its policy of constructive engagement, but that policy foundered on the rocks of apartheid in South Africa and domestic politics in America. What is needed now is some form of agreement between the superpowers to work together rather than in competition and there are a few tentative signs that they may be manoeuvring in that direction. Neither superpower has gained much - apart from trouble - in Southern Africa, and this may be providing the incentive (at least in the Soviet Union's case) for a reassessment of policies.

The main focus of international attention has, of course, been on South Africa's own domestic crisis. In recent years, however, there has been increasing concern about South African policy towards its neighbours and about conflicts within some of our neighbouring countries, notably Angola and Mozambique. There is a constant interaction and ultimately there will not be stable development in the region as a whole until there is a political settlement and peace within South Africa itself. It is necessary to recognise that inescapable fact before turning to consider the wider regional relations in this paper.

It is not possible here to go into the details of South Africa's regional relations. The intention rather is to mention some points which, in my view, characterise the current state of the region and then to attempt to list a few conditions for improved co-operation.

*I start from the assumption that the countries of Southern Africa form a regional system by reason of their geographical configuration (for example, many are landlocked), infrastructure (especially transport and communications), interdependencies, etc. I also take for granted that co-operation between neighbouring states works to their mutual benefit, whereas conflict works to the detriment of all.*

South Africa as part of the region - even if the strongest part - cannot be isolated. Nor can it isolate itself by its own economic and military strength. The negative effects of instability and deprivation cannot be kept beyond our borders. Neither can we fail to benefit from the stability and growth of our neighbours.

## REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

A reasonably detached observer would probably note these current characteristics of the Southern African region:

### 1. Conflict and instability

Violent conflict occurs both across borders and within several countries at varying levels of escalation - Angola being the prime example currently. In some cases the conflict is continuous, in others sporadic. This has been a characteristic of the region for more than two decades, although the disastrous effects have been most marked during the eighties, especially in Mozambique and Angola. Only in Zimbabwe has a major conflict been resolved (although even there some low-level has continued in the southwest and recently some cross-border violence from Mozambique in the east has resumed).

In these circumstances the region as a whole remains unstable and in several countries instability also threatens the regimes. Although so far there has been only been one successful military coup in the region, i.e. Lesotho (if one excludes the Transkei case), the current instability is a fertile breeding ground for attempted military take-overs in the future - of which the failed attempt in Bophuthatswana may be a further indicator.

In addition, there is a regrettably high level of rhetorical conflict between South Africa and some of its neighbours, deriving from political and ideological differences, which does not improve the climate.

### 2. Dominance and dependence

South African military and economic dominance of the region is clear. Militarily it is evident not only in the overwhelming superiority of forces and industrial back-up, but also in the actual assertion and exercise of power. This has been demonstrated once again in Angola, where Unita is dependent on SADF support (and US aid) to counter the annual offensives of the MPLA, backed by the Cubans and increasingly sophisticated Soviet equipment.

Economically, the dependence of most neighbours cannot be questioned. There are some elements of interdependence (for example, in the relationship with Mozambique), but dependence is the predominant characteristic. No matter how much they may desire and try to increase their independence - through SADCC or by imposing sanctions - their dependence is an ever-present reality constraining the actions of South Africa's neighbour states.

There is therefore an asymmetrical relationship with each of our neighbours (and with all of them together, for that matter), which enables the South African government in large measure to impose its will when it so wishes, subject only to some wider, currently rather weak, international constraints. Even some initiatives on the diplomatic level, where theoretically the parties negotiate on the basis of equality, have depended for success on the prior use or threat of military or economic coercion - for instance, the security accords with Swaziland and Mozambique, as well as the case of Lesotho.

### 3. Paradox

In spite of the conflictual relationships, plus the resentment of other states at the assertion of South African dominance, important functional links continue and in some cases are growing. Even more significant is that it is still possible, through patient negotiating processes and the preservation of channels of communication, to develop co-operative ventures where interdependence is a characteristic rather than a simple dependence. The attempts to restore the flow of electric power from Cahora Bassa and to develop the soda ash deposits in Botswana, as well as the massive Highlands water scheme in Lesotho, are notable examples of a currently emerging pattern of co-operative ventures undertaken in spite of the continuing conflict.

Although these ventures are to a great extent a product of the great needs the neighbouring states have, they also fulfill South African needs and demonstrate paradoxically that the incentives of mutual benefit can still operate, if allowed to, while a conflictual relationship continues at other levels - an example perhaps of centripetal and centrifugal forces operating at the same time.

Nonetheless, it must be recognised that the functional links and more dramatic co-operative ventures remain fragile in this unfavourable political atmosphere, subject to setbacks resulting from events which at any time can raise the temperature of suspicion and conflict (for example, cross-border raids, ANC incursions, the Machel air crash, etc).

### 4. Economic decline

This is characteristic to varying degrees of the whole region and does not need much elaboration, except to repeat that it has reached disastrous proportions in Mozambique and Angola. There are various causes, but the escalating conflict in both countries has undoubtedly been the major problem. This fact should be the major incentive for ending these conflicts.

### 5. East/West rivalry

This has been a characteristic since the mid-seventies, but change is now taking place. It is not yet clear what is happening, but some of the pointers are:

Both superpowers seem interested in resolving regional conflicts in which they are both involved and these regional issues were briefly discussed at the December summit in Washington. Angola is the particular issue of concern in the region. The Soviet Union under Gorbachev seems anxious to withdraw from unproductive and embarrassing entanglements and it has put out feelers about the possibility of a political settlement. Mr Franz Joseph Strauss has confirmed this trend during his recent visit to South Africa, on the basis of his recent talks in Moscow. The Soviets will not, however, simply capitulate and risk losing face in the Third World. They will therefore want some kind of political deal, which would presumably also include a Namibian settlement and which would not exclude them from playing a diplomatic role along with the US in future regional developments.

At the same time there is an increase in West European involvement in the region. This is evident in the European Community and Scandinavian aid for SADCC, particularly in the Beira Corridor project, as well as the growing focus on Mozambique in general, with Mrs Thatcher's government leading the way. One must also note the visit to Maputo last year by Chancellor Kohl and Dr Strauss' more recent visit.

There is also a clearer focus on the regional causes of the acute problems of Southern Africa, rather than simply a view of them as part of an East/West global contest.

#### **CONDITIONS FOR CO-OPERATION**

Against this background of the region's current characteristics and recent trends, one can consider some of the conditions that must be met if regional relations are to be normalised and more effective co-operation achieved. I shall concentrate mainly on what seems to be required from the South African side, but clearly there are corresponding steps needed from other governments. Neither conflict nor co-operation is a one-sided affair.

##### **1. Removing the apartheid barrier**

Apartheid remains at the core of the differences and conflicts with South Africa's neighbours. The continued existence of a political system based on the apartheid ideology of separate ethnic groups prevents the full acceptance of whites and of their role in the region. It also prevents any unified South African approach to the neighbouring states, either for co-operation or over such differences as exist apart from the apartheid issue. Socio-economic reform, important as it has been and is, is not enough. The hard issue of political change has to be tackled so that black South Africans are also directly involved in decisions on regional relations (apart from the even more important decisions on our political future). At present the government is perceived as representing only the white group and its interests. When regional policies are seriously questioned by our black leaders (as they are, for example, on Angola at present), these policies will not be regarded, regionally or internationally, as credible and legitimate. Foreign policy is maintained in general as a preserve for the white group and there is a serious and widening gap between white and black views on South Africa's international relations.

In these circumstances we cannot simply claim that the domestic political conflict is no business of our neighbours. The reality is that they identify with what they see as the liberation cause of black South African movements and the latter in turn seek their support. Moreover, it is difficult to argue credibly on the basis of the international principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states, when we ourselves have been involved in interference in domestic conflicts in neighbour states.

What would at least go a long way towards lowering the 'apartheid barrier' to greater regional co-operation would be a clear commitment to a goal of full and equal political participation on a non-racial basis and to a

process of open negotiations to reach that goal. While there is a commitment on the part of government and others to negotiations, there are perceptions (whether true or not) that government-sponsored negotiations would be structured to prevent any radical departure from the basic apartheid underpinning the state. A commitment to the contrary would not remove the domestic political problems which must still be overcome, but it would positively affect those perceptions, both inside and outside the country.

## **2. Promoting real interdependence**

In view of the problems involved in removing the apartheid barrier, one has to be realistic and look at what can be done in the meantime, before that barrier falls. There are, for instance, other problematic factors which would apply whatever political system existed in South Africa. An asymmetrical relationship would still persist with the neighbouring states and there is an existing need to increase interdependence and reduce dependence in the economic sphere. Therefore economic and technical projects in which interdependence is a major element are very important - much more important than some functional links which simply reinforce dependence.

Some people view the dependence of neighbour states on South Africa as a useful political tool with which to maintain dominance, but this is clearly counter-productive in the longer term, as genuine co-operation cannot be built on it.

I have mentioned earlier certain joint ventures which are already emerging as a characteristic of the region and these need to be encouraged. From this viewpoint, the work of SADCC is also important because it reduces dependence and promises to promote development in the region as a whole. In the longer term, however, it will be necessary for South Africa to be brought into the SADCC grouping so that the danger of a permanent split in the region can be avoided.

## **3. Changing the aggressive image**

While it is true that many functional links and some joint ventures are currently still possible, even when conflicts persist in parts of the region, a basic condition for normalisation and meaningful, improved co-operation is certainly the de-escalation of conflict. There is therefore a need to give constant attention to the opportunities to settle - or at least manage - divisive issues through negotiating processes rather than through the use of force. This need applies to all sides, but South Africa's greater military superiority gives it a special responsibility.

A somewhat primitive theory is that the best way to achieve agreements is through the 'thump and then talk' approach. This means that the agreements are in effect obtained by coercion and for that reason will remain fragile. Effective co-operation has to be built on common interests, of which security should be one and, where necessary, compromise in the interests of mutual benefit.

It is also necessary to be sensitive to the effect of such an aggressive stance on political attitudes in other countries. The assertion of one's will through the exercise of superior strength does not change opposing political attitudes; in fact, the evidence seems to show that while it may achieve particular short-term objectives, it in fact increases the intensity of political opposition. For instance, one must question whether the military success against SWAPO has reduced its political support within Namibia at all. To take a different example, has the use of coercion against Botswana resulted in a more positive attitude towards Pretoria or its willingness to co-operate?

Angola, where conflict is currently most intense, presents a special case, complicated by the number of parties involved, both inside and outside the country, and by the linkage with the Namibian issue. This case cannot be fully discussed here, but one must hope that the direction taken will be towards a negotiated resolution, or at least a scaling down of both the outside military involvement and the internal strife. Such a trend would make a world of difference to South Africa's position in the region as a whole because the widely-held perception that South Africa's aim is to dominate the region by military power is largely fostered by the SADF's involvement within Angola.

The current perceptions among our neighbours and internationally (as well as among many people in South Africa) about South Africa's actions in the region are summed up in the misused word 'destabilisation' - and even 'aggression'. These perceptions are very widely and strongly held, and one should not underestimate the degree to which they have become for many a reality, whatever the truth. If there is an interest in promoting improved relations and co-operation, then there is an urgent need to find effective ways to change this widely held perception that Pretoria is bent on establishing its hegemony in the region, no matter what havoc is created in neighbouring countries. It is probably true to say that this perception has now become an even more serious barrier to co-operative relations than apartheid itself. Our neighbours feel threatened by us as much as, or even more than, South African whites feel threatened by them and by their perceived links with the Soviet Union and the ANC.

These mutual perceptions of threat, which I believe are greatly exaggerated on both sides, do not create a healthy climate for co-operation and dialogue, and they influence the policies and statements of governments on all sides, further aggravating the tensions in the region. All efforts to promote communication and contact at official and non-official levels should be encouraged, in order at least to dispel misperceptions which foster this dangerous climate of threat - then we may get nearer to tackling the real differences which do exist.

Support for the MNR in Mozambique is an oft-quoted case of destabilisation, and official South African denials and references to the change in policy since Nkomati do not seem to make an impression. Previous denials in regard to both Mozambique and Angola have created a serious credibility gap when South African involvement subsequently emerged. The evidence of current South African assistance to the Mozambique government, the many negotiating sessions between the two governments, and the joint Cahora Bassa project - as well as the lack of credible evidence of continued

material support of the MNR - should be sufficient to back up the denials that the links with the MNR still exist. But more is clearly needed, unless we are content to let the belief grow that there is still support from South African sources for the activities of the rebel bands of the MNR. For instance, it can be asked why there are not statements at the highest levels clearly condemning MNR terrorist acts, as there rightly are of other acts of terrorism inside or outside South Africa. Likewise, it can be asked whether there are any serious efforts to persuade conservative 'friends' abroad, including, for instance, senior Senators in the United States, not to give encouragement and political support to the MNR simply because it claims to be anti-Marxist. The demonstration publicly and privately of unambiguous opposition to the devastating operations of this so-called 'movement' would surely help to convince those who still doubt the government's word. It would also help to clarify the government's policy towards Mozambique in the public mind here inside our country.

#### 4. Taking account of western interests

As already indicated, there is growing West European involvement in Southern Africa and, while United States efforts to resolve conflicts in the region have largely been frustrated for various reasons, the US still retains an interest, particularly in the Angola/Namibia issue. Western governments' development aid is partly intended to compensate for their inability to influence the South African government and their unwillingness to impose comprehensive sanctions. They are now openly promoting the greater economic independence of SADC states. The British have stated explicitly that donor countries 'need to work closely together and demonstrate their commitment to ending the region's dependence on South Africa'. In the case of Mozambique the UK has a special commitment, dating from 1979/80, when Machel played a vital role in facilitating Zimbabwe's independence agreement. Now Mozambique is almost a member of the Commonwealth!

As a result of this western commitment, South African military and economic pressures and threats against the neighbour states (the so-called 'destabilisation' actions) are increasingly becoming an issue in our relations with the West. The unanimous vote in the UN Security Council last November, condemning the Angolan intervention, was a reflection of this. The military strikes against three neighbour states in May 1986 had a particularly negative impact on our wider international relations, as well as the relations with our neighbours, and were an important contributing factor in the move towards sanctions by the European Community, Commonwealth and United States.

There is thus a need to be more aware of the implications of actions which can detrimentally affect western interests in the region and cause western reaction. Policies in the region cannot be divorced from our wider international relations and our relations with Mrs Thatcher's government are especially relevant, because of her commitment to Mozambique and Zimbabwe and because of the Commonwealth links with most countries of the region.

### **5. A more balanced view of Soviet rule**

There is also a need to clarify our thinking on the so-called Soviet threat. There is a widely held view among whites, promoted by official spokesmen, that we are defending the region against Soviet expansionism, and that the Soviets have been behind all regional problems and all hostile acts against South Africa. One does not have to regard the Soviet Union as a benevolent intervener in the region to reject such a simplistic view, which is not supported by the evidence and which surely cannot be the considered view of the government. In this view, as publicly expressed, several of the neighbour governments are simply depicted as Soviet puppets, and this propaganda is obviously not conducive to co-operation with such governments. If Pretoria is serious about promoting co-operative relations in the region and settling differences over security and other issues, then it needs public support for its dealings with the responsible governments in each of our neighbour states. To this end the public needs a more sophisticated and balanced analysis of the Soviet role in the region in official statements and from the government-controlled media. This is even more necessary now that Soviet policy is undergoing a change, as mentioned earlier.

### **6. Cooling the rhetoric**

Finally, there is a need to cool the rhetoric generally on all sides. We do have serious problems to resolve, there are responsible efforts being made to bridge differences and to avoid conflict, and there is still a fund of goodwill. But a climate conducive to the fostering of trust and confidence is required and there is sometimes too much playing to the gallery, whether it be in Harare, Maputo, Pretoria or elsewhere in the region.