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THE FORWARD MARCH OF SADC?

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Diplomatic and business circles in Southern African countries often express cynicism when asked about the achievements of the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the regional grouping that (nominally) brings together Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This is often followed however (particularly in South Africa) with a mention of the potential for future regional integration and development. Politicians from visiting the region from Europe or North America share this tendency to talk about golden prospects and South Africa's key role. But what kind of vehicle to regional integration can SADC be? And What has been the record of the first couple of years of South African membership?

At first glance it is difficult to know just what to make of SADC. The organisation has survived for sixteen years and - with some skill - reinvented itself to deal with the changes in the region since the end of apartheid. South Africa joined in 1994 and Mauritius in 1995. Kenya, Uganda and Zaire have been mooted, from time to time, as prospective new members, even if staff at the secretariat in Gaborone are already overstretched - and not particularly keen to see any more new faces at SADC summits.

Much of the cynicism about SADC stems from the mixed record in its previous life as the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC). Back in 1980, with support from the Nordic countries and what was then the EEC, SADCC set itself high and somewhat contradictory aims. Firstly, it was to reduce 'economic dependence, particularly but not only on South Africa'. Secondly, it would 'forge links to create a

genuine and equitable regional integration'. It would simultaneously 'mobilise (external) resources' for 'economic liberation'. In the rhetoric of the day, economic liberation for the Frontline States would be another weapon in the struggle against apartheid.

However, the incorporation of South Africa and the transformation from 'Co-ordination Conference' to 'Development Community' in 1992, might be seen less as a vindication of the former's success as an agent of liberation, than a confirmation that the latter had played only a relatively tangential role in producing the new South Africa. In 1994, when the SADC secretariat invited suggestions from member-state citizens for a new SADC logo, a satirical commentary in Zimbabwe's weekly *Financial Gazette* suggested that SADC could be best symbolized by (*Financial Gazette*, 3 February 1994): 'a begging bowl. What has SADC achieved apart from mugging gullible Scandinavian countries? SADC members are today more dependent upon South Africa than they were in the 1980s'.

Together with the fact that electrified border fences between South Africa and some of its erstwhile SADC partners are being reinforced (although a decision for their removal has been taken in principle), plus the way that the possibility of integration presupposes formal state sovereignty, admittedly somewhat tentative in Angola, for example, some of the scepticism about SADC seems well-founded.

Yet SADC has endured. True, the policy of intergovernmental sectoral co-operation has been handicapped by the fact that civil servants in many member states deal with SADC affairs as just one

of their responsibilities. And whilst communications from the secretariat or SADC partners elsewhere may often get relegated to the bottom of the pile, SADC-led co-operation in regional food security during the Southern African drought of the early 1990s is widely acknowledged as a success.

The conversion from SADCC to SADC also saw a formal treaty signed by member states (the old SADCC had operated on the basis of a memorandum of understanding) and the old aims replaced by commitments to 'deeper economic co-operation and integration', 'common economic, political, social values and systems' and 'strengthened regional solidarity, peace and security'. The treaty incorporates a mechanism to achieve substantial protocols. Once approved by a summit of SADC heads of state, these should become part of the treaty - and be legally binding on members.

To date, however, protocol achievements in the relatively non-controversial domains of shared water resources and control of narcotic trafficking have occurred against the backdrop of drawn-out and contentious negotiations concerning proposals (emanating from the SADC secretariat) on regulating the movement of migrants, as well as on trade and security. Hopes in the SADC secretariat that a protocol on freedom of movement in the region could be signed soon are widely dismissed by regional diplomats as a virtual non-starter - unless in a severely watered down form. The security/military co-operation theme tends to be seen by member states as a delicate matter and certainly something that must remain outside the remit of officials working at the SADC secretariat. Meanwhile, the potentially vital trade protocol is hostage to so many vested interests and unresolved questions as to make for snails-pace progress. The main unresolved questions in this respect concern South Africa's relations with the EU and the future of the Southern African Customs Union (the long-standing agreement between South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland and Namibia known as SACU) as well as the relations between SADC and the so-called Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). COMESA formally came into existence in 1994. But it is a large and very disparate grouping - which includes a number of SADC members as well as countries as far north as Sudan.

Whilst the essentially political decision taken by President Mandela in 1994 that South Africa would join SADC and not COMESA was a big blow to the latter, it soldiers on - much to annoyance of the SADC secretariat, who argue that COMESA should have a completely separate membership and remit.

Meetings between officials from the two secretariats have repeatedly been postponed, leaving the future of relations between the organisations in a kind of uneasy stalemate.

The diversity of positions concerning these and other tricky issues among the SADC governments (not to mention the varied social interests that cut across borders) can keep negotiators and commentators in work for a long time. But a few major fractures are particularly obvious.

Lesotho and Swaziland still tend to regard the SACU as more important than any dealings with SADC, not least because SACU allows them to use customs revenue to subsidise state coffers. SACU's treaty is currently being renegotiated - a tricky process - not made easier by the fact that the terms of the current treaty should include all members in anything that South Africa signs with a third party. Given that South Africa has also been busy trying to work out a free trade agreement with the European Union, it comes as no surprise that the SADC trade protocol is being held up.

Unease about SADC's new direction - and about South African intentions - is strongly felt in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe was the largest economic and military power in SADC prior to South African adherence and the country whose own transition to majority rule made the birth of SADCC a possibility. A series of worsening trade disputes between South Africa and Zimbabwe since 1992 have enhanced the perception in the latter that South Africa poses a new kind of threat to Zimbabwe's business and diplomatic interests.

A certain hedging regarding SADC is evident, too, in Zambia where (aside from the fact that Lusaka hosts the COMESA secretariat) there is a strong perception that the country has not received due recognition and recompense for its long-term practical support for Southern African liberation struggles. Although a SADC meeting in 1994 decided that members should withdraw from COMESA, both Zambia and, in particular Malawi (from where COMESA's secretary-general originates), have registered a continued public commitment to it. Some similar sentiments are evident in Tanzania - which is now seeking to reinforce its relationships with Kenya and Uganda. SADC's newest member, Mauritius, has not yet defined a role for itself in the organisation. But it is clear that it sees membership, above all, as enhancing prospects for Mauritian commerce in Southern African markets. In this respect, as well as in a wider get-things-done attitude, Mauritius finds itself sharing common-ground inside SADC with South Africa and - to an extent - with the Namibians.

The difference in perceptions and attitude between these new members and the old club is most sharp in the South African case. In the first place there is a considerable conflict between the established diplomatic culture of SADC and that of South Africa. It is fair to say that in the past the former has characterised, by ritual and formal politeness, hand-in-hand with a strategy of dealing with difficult and controversial issues through avoidance and a kind of diplo-speak. For a long time in the old SADCC, procedure was all important. Indeed, this helped it survive, given the ideological diversity amongst its members in the 1980s. In this respect the success of a meeting or a strategy would be registered in the extent to which participants were happy with procedural issues at least as much as with substance. In a way, procedure substituted for content. A certain degree of disregard in South Africa for such established procedure has been at the root of a number of complaints from other SADC members.

This came to the fore earlier this year when South Africa hosted SADC's annual consultative conference for the first time. The South Africans ended up being accused of ignoring their SADC partners, allegedly preferring to spend more time with visitors bearing aid and trade possibilities from outside the region. Worse, the Zimbabwean delegation was offended by a report from the SADC Finance and Investment sector (which South Africa is in charge of) which had reached the conclusion that the Zimbabwean economy is mismanaged. South African diplomats are quick to explain that these misadventures were equally the responsibility of the secretariat, whose lack of preparation and prior co-ordination (including an unwillingness/inability to prepare proper agendas for meetings) is derided. Worse still, a good many in the South African civil and diplomatic services tend to say what they think about issues in dealings with SADC. This proves rather novel in SADC functions, where positions on a theme are more often coded, unsaid or expressed through later non-compliance with a decision taken.

Difficulties have been reinforced by the hard-nosed market-driven foreign policy of the new South Africa. This articulates with a broader ambivalence amongst other SADC members related to the shift in the representation of South Africa from enemy to ally. On the one hand, many other SADC members feel a new kind of threat from the south, given South Africa's economic weight, its high-profile global status and the weakness of their own economies. Their economic vulnerability has been compounded by IMF and World Bank-supervised structural adjustment, which has opened them to foreign capital. South Africans and other foreigners

are busy throughout the region: striking land deals in Mozambique, working out new mineral concessions in Angola and buying shares in breweries in Zambia.

However, there is a double-edge to perceptions of South Africa in neighbouring states - and one that resonates with sensibilities rooted in an earlier colonial age. As a South African diplomat explained: 'South Africa enters SADC as a bearer of hope, but there is also a fear of domination. This is an ambivalence that resonates with the colonial relationship'.

Further north, it is striking that residual tensions from the 1950s and 1960s still haunt relations between Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. It is worth recalling that in certain respects Southern Africa at the middle of the twentieth century was more economically integrated than today. But the operation of this economy and its slow disintegration, including the establishment and then break-up of the Central Africa Federation (1953-1963) left bitter legacies and bolstered disparities. Among these were a reinforcement of the relative underdevelopment of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland at the expense of Southern Rhodesia and an enhancement of white Southern Rhodesian political confidence. On the legacy of resentments generated by the Federation (which was, of course, swiftly followed by Rhodesian UDI), a Zimbabwean diplomat recounted the anecdote about a Zambian politician visiting Harare, who - when shown around a parliament building said: 'it's our parliament! We built it!'. Such mentalities still play a very important role in shaping contemporary regional sensibilities. In these respects, ideological legacies of colonialism and apartheid are still quite active in Southern Africa - and not as easy to do away with as might be hoped. In particular, those who see South Africa as the natural and undisputed leader of regional renewal will be seen by many people in South Africa's neighbours as rooted in a neo-colonial way of thinking.

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.