

South Africa's Foreign Policy: Striving towards Mandela's Ideals

Alex Dudley

The recent deployment of South African forces to the Central African Republic in the wake of that country's rebellion was clearly motivated by Pretoria's desire to boost its image as Africa's regional power and by its commitment to capacity building. Inconsistent statements by South African officials as to the reasons for the intervention have raised suspicions regarding such ignoble motives. This intense controversy highlights a general need for more transparency and clarity by South Africa's government regarding foreign policy actions.

Introduction

In January 2013, before the temporary ceasefire between the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Seleka rebels, followed by the resumption of warfare in March, South Africa deployed an estimated 200 paratroopers as part of a bilateral security agreement between Pretoria and then-President Bozize. While defending the capital of Bangui during the rebels' final advance on 23–24 March, 13 South African troops were killed – the largest number of military casualties since the end of white minority rule in 1994 – and 27 were wounded. A Stratfor source in South Africa has since reported that the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) will probably send reinforcements to the CAR with 200 new troops, reportedly positioned in Entebbe, Uganda, to support the South African mission in Bangui.¹

The forces deployed by South Africa to the CAR were inadequate to attack and defeat the estimated 5 000-strong Seleka rebel army. As the contingent had been stationed in Bangui for two

months, and had probably received intelligence on the rebels' strength and location, its objective was probably not to defeat the insurgency. If this had been the aim, South Africa would have deployed a larger number of troops, as well as forces – such as armoured units, attack helicopters, and strike aircraft – better suited for the task of an intervention.²

Therefore, it is much more likely that the South African contingent had been sent to ensure a safe exit for Bozize. Reportedly, the troops had managed to defeat an alleged coup from within the CAR army before the rebels overran the capital. Thus, Pretoria could argue that its forces held back the rebels' advances long enough to allow Bozize to escape the country.

South African sources have stated that, aside from evacuating casualties, they are not withdrawing forces from the CAR. As there are no longer reports of looting, the need for an external force to maintain law and order has

Alex Dudley is a University of Colorado (USA) student on practicum with the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) Governance and Security Programme on the Peace from Within book project led by Dr Sylvester B. Maphosa.

During the rebels' final advance on 23–24 March, 13 South African troops were killed – the largest number of military casualties since the end of white minority rule in 1994

been minimised. The troops' continued presence in the country therefore indicates that they will probably act as a protection force for a future political settlement. Though it is possible that the South African army could attempt to recapture the capital from rebel forces, such a move would require a more substantial troop contingent and the cooperation of French forces, who still control Bangui's international airport. France has not shown any interest in such an attempt and is not permitting any other country's military forces – not even the South African troops – to access the airport, except for the purpose of evacuating casualties.³

Institution-based capacity building

This was not the first time South African forces had been deployed to consolidate stability in other African countries. From 2001 to 2009, troops were deployed to Burundi to serve as a protective force for politicians attempting to consolidate peace. In 2011, South Africa mediated in the rebellions in Libya and Cote d'Ivoire, though those governments declined Pretoria's offer to provide a safe exit for their leaders.⁴ Currently, the African Union (AU) forces in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) include South African contingents.⁵

The security agreement in effect between South Africa and Bozize focused on Pretoria's providing 'capacity-building' for security-sector reform, specifically, professionalising the CAR's army. This reflects the general top-down, institution-based policy pursued by Pretoria in its efforts to assist other African countries to consolidate peace and capacity-building, rather than a bottom-up peace-building approach informed by indigenous mechanisms. Similarly, United States (US) discourse on stability and conflict resolution in Africa focuses overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, on the efforts of military organisations – namely the five regional standby brigades under the umbrella of the AU's African Standby Force (ASF), and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).⁶

Officially, the US intention in supporting such organisations is to provide humanitarian assistance and to counter the influence of militant Islamic organisations in countries such as Libya and Somalia. Clearly, however, US policy throughout the continent is also informed by underlying factors – particularly access to natural resources. Securing more favourable oil contracts after the removal of Gaddafi clearly played a role in Washington's decision to intervene in Libya,

and the US also maintains an interest in Somalia's stability because of the country's strategic location by the Bab-el-Mandap Strait, a key shipping route for Middle Eastern oil. Additionally, Britain and France reportedly spearheaded the 2011 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) intervention in Libya partly out of fear that continuing repression by Gaddafi would trigger an exodus of Libyan refugees across the Mediterranean at a time when European economies were poorly situated to absorb such migrants.

Likewise, South Africa's commitment to capacity-building operations throughout Africa in general is due partly to a desire to stem the flow of migrants from across the continent into its own borders. Large numbers of such migrants have burdened the South African economy, and in recent years, sporadic outbreaks of violence against the immigrants have flared in South Africa. In the case of the CAR, the possibility also exists that Pretoria aims to secure the country's diamond, gold, and uranium resources, or gain more favourable concessions for such commodities than those already granted to it in more stable and geographically proximate African nations.⁷

Inconsistency in foreign policy

Although this last possible motive for South Africa's intervention in the CAR is difficult to confirm or disprove, what is clear is that official statements regarding foreign policy, both in the CAR and other African countries, have been characterised by inconsistency. While President Jacob Zuma has narrowly stated that the troops were deployed simply in fulfilment of the capacity-building agreement with Bozize, International Relations and Cooperation Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane has characterised the mission more broadly as part of a wider effort to safeguard democracy and respect for international law.⁷ This discrepancy has raised speculation as to whether South Africa's involvement was simply to secure commercial interests, either national or even familial. Indeed, in the wake of the death of the South African soldiers near Bangui, Zuma's ruling party, African National Congress (ANC) hastily had to dispel claims in a national newspaper that the soldiers had been sent to protect the commercial interests of high-level officials.⁸

This confused explanation reflects a general pattern of inconsistency in South Africa's foreign policy that threatens to erode the country's reputation as the regional power whose foreign policy influences events across the continent. In

1994, before assuming office, Nelson Mandela pledged that human rights would be 'the light that guides our foreign affairs', and the concept of *Ubuntu* became the core of South Africa's foreign policy. Mandela's vision led many foreign observers to predict that South Africa would assume a leading role as a promoter of democracy and human rights throughout the continent. However, South Africa's democratisation mission in Africa generated scepticism and a regional backlash, as autocratic states perceived its policy as a threat to their survival and accused South Africa as acting as a front for Western powers.⁹

Therefore, Mandela's successor Thabo Mbeki, refused to speak out against the human rights abuses by Robert Mugabe's regime in neighbouring Zimbabwe – in order not to align himself with the critical West. Despite a string of state-sponsored violence, ranging from rigged elections to killings and torture, Mbeki opposed tough sanctions against the regime and called instead for a soft approach, claiming sanctions would merely steer Zimbabwe into deeper isolation.

During South Africa's first tenure on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), from 2007 to 2008, it contradicted its own renowned democratic manifesto by refusing to address important human rights issues. Its decisions as a UNSC member led to fierce criticism after they appeared to side with authoritarian regimes rather than taking a human rights position. South Africa voted with China and Russia on issues concerning the governments of Myanmar, Iran, and Zimbabwe, arguing that any censure would contribute to the regime's persistence. South Africa claimed that diplomatic measures should be encouraged, in an echo of US Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker's justification of the 'constructive engagement' policy used against the apartheid regime during the 1980s. South Africa's actions in 2007 and 2008 were lamented by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as 'a betrayal of our noble past'.¹⁰

More recently, under Zuma, South Africa has often appeared to champion the contradictory principles of national sovereignty and non-interference on the one hand, and democracy and human rights on the other.¹¹ While during the 2011 uprising in Egypt, Zuma joined the international chorus calling for Hosni Mubarak to resign, South Africa remained silent for months in the face of factional violence in Cote d'Ivoire. Only in March of 2011 did Pretoria accept Alassane Ouattara's

internationally recognised victory in the previous November's presidential elections and endorsed the call of the AU's peace and security committee for Laurent Gbagbo, the defeated incumbent, to step down.¹² The same contradiction has been evident in South Africa's policy towards Myanmar and Zimbabwe. In the case of Myanmar, Zuma did not hesitate to condemn the fraudulent elections of November 2010 and called for the release of the Burmese opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Zuma, however, has continued Mbeki's silence about Mugabe's authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe.

Similarly, at the start of Libya's uprising in February that year, South Africa, then on the UNSC, signed up to Resolution 1970, referring Libya to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and to Resolution 1973, authorising 'all necessary measures' to protect Libyan civilians and enforce a no-fly zone. Soon after, Zuma complained about NATO's bombing of Libyan government forces, and lamented the ICC's arrest warrant against Muammar Gaddafi as 'disappointing'. South Africa was also among the last African countries to recognise the National Transition Council as Libya's legitimate government.¹³ Although the foreign policy of any country certainly changes in response to events in other countries, the overall inconsistency of South Africa's approach to crises in other African states does indicate that the country has fallen short of Mandela's ideals.

Finally, in October 2011, South Africa's reputation as a moral crusader was further undermined by its reluctance to grant the Dalai Lama a visa. In October 2011, the Dalai Lama was scheduled to visit South Africa for Archbishop Desmond Tutu's 80th birthday celebrations. Although he applied for a visa, after many complications encountered with the South African government, he withdrew his application and cancelled his trip. Accusations arose that South Africa had acted out of fear of alienating its most important trading partner, China, who had invited South Africa to join the group of emerging countries constituting the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) coalition in 2010. The reluctance to act over the Dalai Lama led to huge criticism, and Tutu equated the ANC government's actions with those of the apartheid regime. This and the aforementioned examples illustrate the degree to which South African foreign policy has struggled to balance the demands of European powers on the one hand and those of the other members of the BRICS coalition on the other.¹⁴

Official statements regarding foreign policy, both in the CAR and other African countries, have been characterised by inconsistency

South Africa's reputation as a moral crusader was further undermined by its reluctance to grant the Dalai Lama a visa

If South Africa is to be respected across the continent, it must find a way to reconcile respect for other countries' sovereignty on the one hand, and human rights and democracy on the other, to create a more coherent and clear-sighted foreign policy

Conclusion

Such inconsistencies in foreign policy are far from unique to South Africa; indeed, US policy has long been characterised by turning a blind eye toward abuses committed by governments who supported its regional policies throughout the Cold War and more recently the War on Terror. Perhaps the most glaring current example is America's condemnation of the ongoing repression in Syria, long an obstacle to US policy in the Middle East, but simultaneous silence about the human rights abuses of Bahrain, the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet and a bulwark in the Persian Gulf against Iran. However, in the case of South Africa – a rising rather than established power – the discrepancies in its stated (rather than only actual foreign policy) are more glaring, and bode ill for its aspiration to become Africa's political power broker. Ultimately, if South Africa is to be respected across the continent as a guarantor of stability and across the world as a defender of human rights, it must find a way to reconcile its inclination towards respect for other countries' sovereignty on the one hand, and towards human rights and democracy on the other, to create a more coherent and clear-sighted foreign policy.

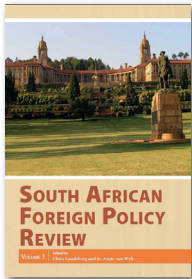
Recommendations

The following measures are recommended:

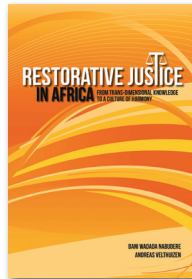
- Better coordination is needed between government offices as to articulating South Africa's foreign policy.
- More transparency regarding South Africa's military efforts in other African countries is needed.
- South Africa's government offices must reach consensus on a foreign policy that reconciles the country's conflicting inclination towards respect for other countries' sovereignty (advocated by the BRICS coalition) and thus non-intervention, on the one hand, and toward human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (advocated by Western powers) on the other.

Notes and References

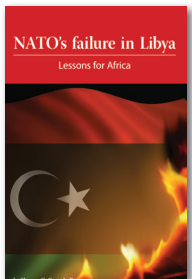
1. *Analysis: South Africa's Involvement in the Central African Republic*. 2013. Stratfor [Online] 30 May. Available at: http://www.ocnus.net/artman2/publish/Analyses_12/South-Africa-s-Involvement-in-the-Central-African-Republic_printer.shtml [Accessed 29 May 2013].
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Personal interview with Dr Sylvester Maphosa, May 29, 2013.
6. Carson, J. 2012. Assessing US policy on peacekeeping operations in Africa. Testimony by Johnnie Carson, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs, to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights. Washington, DC, 13 September.
7. Interview with Dr. Sylvester Maphosa, May 29, 2013.
8. Institute for Security Studies. 2013. *Are we seeing the emergence of a new 'Zuma doctrine' on Africa?* ISS Weekly issue 63, 2 May. [Online] Available at: <http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/are-we-seeing-the-emergence-of-a-new-zuma-doctrine-on-africa> [Accessed 30 May 2013].
9. South Africa's foreign policy: CAR crash: The deaths of 13 soldiers expose South Africa's big-power limitations. 2013. *The Economist* [online], 6 April. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21575788-deaths-13-its-soldiers-expose-south-african-big-power-limitations-car> [Accessed 30 May 2013].
10. Petré, C. 2011. South Africa's Janus-faced foreign policy: South African foreign policy is the sum of the country's contradictory foreign allegiances and subsequently lacks clear direction. *Think Africa Press* [Online], 8 December. Available at: <http://thinkafricapress.com/south-africa/janus-faced-foreign-policy> South Africa's Janus-faced foreign policy [Accessed 3 June, 2013].
11. South Africa's foreign policy: All over the place: South Africa is joining the BRICS without much straw. 2011. *The Economist* [online], 24 March. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/18447027> [Accessed 30 May 2013].
12. Ibid.
13. South Africa and Libya: Huff and puff. 2011. *The Economist* [online], 3 September. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/21528309> [Accessed 30 May 2013].
14. South Africa's Janus-faced foreign policy, op. cit.



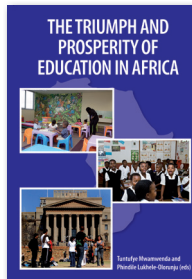
South African Foreign Policy Review Volume 1
 Edited by Chris Landsberg and Jo-Ansie van Wyk
 ISBN 987-0-7983-0291-3



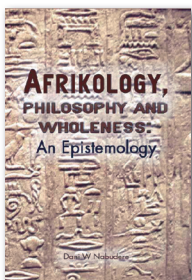
Restorative Justice in Africa
From Trans-Dimensional Knowledge to a Culture of Harmony
 Dani Wadaba Nabudere
 Andreas Velthuizen
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0358-3



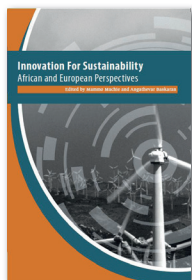
NATO's failure in Libya: Lessons for Africa
 Horace Campbell
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0343-9



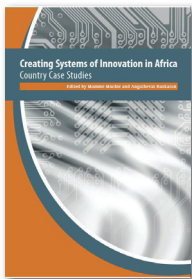
The Triumph and Prosperity of Education in Africa
 Edited by Tuntufye Mwamwenda and Phindile Lukhele-Olorunju
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0371-2



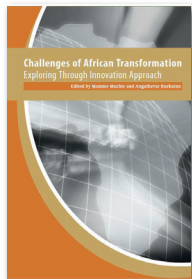
Afrikology, Philosophy and Wholeness: An Epistemology
 Dani Wadada Nabudere
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0255-5



Innovation For Sustainability: African and European Perspectives
 Edited by Mammo Muchie and Angathevar Baskaran
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0346-0



Creating Systems of Innovation in Africa: Country Case Studies
 Edited by Mammo Muchie and Angathevar Baskaran
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0347-7



Challenges Of African Transformation: Exploring Through Innovation Approach
 Edited by Mammo Muchie and Angathevar Baskaran
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0348-4



Building Innovation Research in Africa: Case Studies
 Edited by Mammo Muchie and Angathevar Baskaran
 ISBN 978-0-7983-0341-1



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



9 771998 799009