



# POLICY BRIEF

## South African peacebuilding needs new purpose

Priyal Singh

After a period of waning influence, South Africa is beginning to reclaim its place on the world stage as a responsive and capable player on peace and security on the continent, in the region and internationally. Despite recent efforts, its role as a leading actor in global peacebuilding processes has remained unduly under-prioritised. This policy brief looks at the country's political and financial peacebuilding commitments to identify opportunities for South Africa to renew its former role as a leading force in global peace and security.

## Key findings

- ▶ South African peacebuilding engagements remain uncoordinated and under-prioritised, despite the utility of its past engagements in bolstering its international standing and influence.
- ▶ South Africa lacks a clear strategic plan that links its bilateral and multilateral peacebuilding commitments with longer-term foreign-policy objectives to spur trade, development, and investment.
- ▶ A lack of clarity about the long-delayed transition of the African Renaissance and Cooperation Fund (ARF) has inhibited the effectiveness of the country's foremost financial mechanism in support of conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
- ▶ Recent progress on the Foreign Service Act and the Partnership for Development Bill indicates that the establishment of a central government agency responsible for rationalising and coordinating peacebuilding and development engagements may be imminent.
- ▶ South Africa's declining visibility and engagement in global peacebuilding processes, and apparent lack of political will in championing new initiatives, must be reversed if South African foreign policy is to be renewed and recalibrated.

## Recommendations

- ▶ South Africa's former peacebuilding roles and responsibilities need to be repurposed to serve the country's current aims and to respond to prevailing international challenges.
- ▶ Government should prioritise tangible initiatives and material resources to change prevailing perceptions that the country merely pays lip service to global peacebuilding goals.
- ▶ DIRCO should view its reporting to Parliament on the implementation of the Foreign Service Act as a key opportunity to showcase progress on long-awaited administrative reforms and cost-effectiveness.
- ▶ The passage of the Partnership for Development Bill should be expedited, alongside the necessary repeal of the ARF Act, to establish a central government coordination agency as soon as possible.
- ▶ Much more stringent and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks are needed to rationalise the foreign service. This is necessary to better assess the effectiveness, value for money and impact of the country's future peacebuilding efforts.
- ▶ Greater attention needs to be paid to the development of a strategic approach towards the country's peacebuilding commitments, that would align development, trade, and investment priorities.
- ▶ South Africa's existing wealth of technical peacebuilding expertise and experience needs to be better considered in the design of future peacebuilding engagements.

## Introduction

South Africa is beginning to slowly reclaim its place on the world stage as a responsive and capable international stakeholder, following a prolonged period of waning global influence. Its commitment to the maintenance of international peace and security resonate with the broader theme of renewal associated with the overarching, albeit unofficial, mandate of the present administration led by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Yet South Africa faces considerable economic and political challenges that inhibit its international engagements, and which stand in the way of bold regional and continental leadership aspirations. A reinvigorated foreign policy requires greater consideration of the value for money of the country's extensive international relations. The not-too-distant past illustrates that if these efforts are coherent and well-coordinated, and have common overarching objectives, the pursuit of pressing domestic priorities and global aspirations can be mutually reinforcing and need not be viewed as a trade-off.

South Africa is slowly reclaiming its place on the world stage as a responsive and capable stakeholder

As South Africa attempts to streamline its foreign service and consolidate the gains of recent multilateral appointments, government would do well to revisit key elements of South African foreign policy. Specifically, those elements which have historically bolstered South Africa's standing in the world, and need to be repurposed to serve the country's current aims.

One element that has been considerably neglected recently are the particular role and responsibilities of South Africa in championing conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction and development. South Africa once led by example, but has been noticeably absent in recent years from key policy processes, has not adequately prioritised new initiatives and interventions, and has ultimately failed to acknowledge the immense added value of such efforts in bolstering its international profile.

This deserves much greater attention by government, given the long-standing acknowledgement that the country's own development is interwoven with the peace, security and stability of the broader continent. A revived South African peacebuilding agenda need not be a drain on the national fiscus but could have significant returns. As demonstrated in the past, South Africa's commitments to peace and stability could have far-reaching positive implications in terms of trade, investment, and bilateral relations with post-conflict states. Such gains could ameliorate short-term budgetary concerns.

This policy brief interrogates South Africa's commitment to peacebuilding, to identify opportunities for a reinvigorated foreign policy that better recognises and makes use of these engagements. It is argued that government must explore and renew the country's role as a leading international peacebuilding stakeholder to help rebuild the considerable moral and political capital it once had on the world stage.

## Why reinvest in peacebuilding?

South Africa's peacebuilding initiatives up to the late 2000s bolstered the country's standing within multilateral bodies including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). South Africa readily supported these bodies by means of visible political and technical engagements.

Notable initiatives included:

- Direct conflict resolution and peacekeeping engagements in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan, and South Sudan (all of which either contained considerable peacebuilding elements within their mandates or were followed by targeted South African peacebuilding interventions);
- The part it played in global multilateral policy processes driven by the UN Security Council, the AU Peace and Security Council, the UN's Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), and the G20, among others;
- Its role as a pivotal stakeholder in developing and underwriting the cost of regional and continental institutions — which now constitute key components of the AU's Peace and Security Architecture.

These engagements supported the overarching representation of South Africa in the international system as a regional anchor state that could not be bypassed in multilateral processes promoting peace, security and development in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The country's commitment to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, which had been informed by its own history, provided it with a deep reservoir of moral and political capital on the world stage – and allowed to it punch well above its weight. In this period, it developed a considerable reserve of technical peacebuilding expertise, and experience in post-conflict reconstruction and development. This experience would later prove useful to government, military and police officials (as well as personnel from the non-governmental sector) in future peace processes.

### A little goes a long way

In 2000, Parliament passed the African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund (ARF) Act (2000).<sup>2</sup> The Act established a dedicated fund with a broad mandate to enhance international cooperation through, among other things, the prevention and resolution of conflict – one of the fund's six strategic goals.

South Africa had, by the late 2000s, established itself as a leading financial contributor to continental peace, security and development

The ARF has played a central role in the country's peacebuilding efforts in Sudan, Burundi, the DRC, and other states across the continent.<sup>3</sup> It has a small yet flexible budget, which allows for annual budgetary allocations from National Treasury to be rolled over year-on-year. The Act signalled South Africa's willingness and capability to support its rhetorical commitments to peacebuilding with material resources, and thus to support tangible on-the-ground interventions.

Alongside the country's substantial contributions to international organisations in support of peace and security, South Africa had, by the late 2000s, established itself as one of the leading financial contributors to peace, security and development of the continent.

To illustrate this commitment, the current ARF budget allocation from Treasury over the 2019-2024 period is R143.6 million (US \$8.84 million), with an allocation for 2020/21 of R50.8 million (US \$3.13 million). The reduction in funds from the previous four-year period is a result of the country's ongoing economic challenges and lagging growth.<sup>4</sup> South Africa's other peacebuilding efforts are largely channelled through its membership of various international organisations, which maintain subsidiary organs or agencies responsible for the implementation of peacebuilding interventions. South Africa's total financial transfers in the exercise of its membership of such organisations totalled about R904 million (US \$55.6 million) for the 2020/21 period, representing about 13.84% of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation's (DIRCO) overall budget.

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While not all of this expenditure goes to organisations that have an explicit peace, security and development mandate, the bulk of it does go to organisations including the AU, UN and SADC.<sup>5</sup> And, although South Africa remains one of the largest African member-state contributors to these organisations, it lacks a clear strategy that effectively links its bilateral and multilateral peacebuilding and development initiatives within an overarching long-term framework to bolster development, trade and investment. This stands in stark contrast with the efforts of other emerging powers, which have enhanced their global profiles by means of well-coordinated peacebuilding interventions and financing.<sup>6</sup>

The relegation of conflict resolution to this low level over the last five years requires greater scrutiny by government

It is even more concerning that only 4% of all ARF disbursements over the last five years were directed towards conflict resolution.<sup>7</sup> Despite conflict resolution constituting one of the fund's six strategic objectives (as aligned to the National Development Plan's medium-term strategic framework<sup>8</sup>), a total allocation of only 4% is a telling indicator of where South Africa's priorities now stand in relation to these issues. The relegation of conflict resolution to this low level over the last five years requires greater scrutiny by government. In recent engagements between the DIRCO and the National Assembly's portfolio committee on the performance of the ARF, disbursements relating to conflict resolution were not even reported on, let alone interrogated.<sup>9</sup>

## Getting its house in order

South Africa's international peace and security profile has been undermined by its continued inability to effectively quantify, coordinate and leverage its peacebuilding engagements. These efforts remain largely reactive and piecemeal in nature, as seen by the lack of coherence between under-prioritised bilateral interventions and its rhetorical commitments within multilateral bodies. This is compounded by the lack of a detailed strategic framework that speaks to the current global conflict environment, and South Africa's particular peacebuilding role conception in response to prevailing dynamics.

It has long been acknowledged that the ARF is inadequate to advance South Africa's interests in a deliberate manner. Major criticisms tend to focus on the lack of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to gauge impact.<sup>10</sup> It must be remembered that the ARF was not intended to serve as a fully-fledged mechanism for the maintenance of long-term strategic partnerships, that are vital to effective peacebuilding. These concerns laid the basis for the establishment of a dedicated government agency to coordinate international development assistance, and this remains an ongoing process today.

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South Africa's perceived prioritisation of conflict resolution and peacebuilding are seen to have waned since the late 2000s due to a confluence of intervening factors. These relate to domestic political and economic challenges, a series of missteps in global peace and security bodies, and some misguided bilateral interventions. South Africa's earlier sense of global mission, which was interwoven with its own developmental priorities, became diluted and contradictory. The country's conception of itself as a preeminent continental voice in global peace and security processes appeared increasingly at odds with its ability to play a continued leadership role on these issues.<sup>11</sup>

Remarks by former President Thabo Mbeki at a conference hosted by the Institute for Global Dialogue in late 2019 cut to the core of these concerns. He noted that the current administration appeared to have no discernible foreign policy on pressing global and continental peace and security developments,<sup>12</sup> suggesting that its stated commitment to these issues did not appear to be supported by much foresight or substantive action.<sup>13</sup>

The country's gradual loss of strategic foreign policy intent has further plagued the necessary reform of the ARF and inhibited its effectiveness over the last few years. The process intended to repeal the ARF Act and to move the fund towards the mooted South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA) has dragged on for more than a decade now.

### Cause for optimism

Encouragingly, the present Ramaphosa administration has sought to deal with these challenges, renew confidence in the country, and recalibrate its international affairs.<sup>14</sup> Although much more work is needed, there has been some visible progress. The first indicator of such progress was seen in the findings of a 2019 ministerial-level foreign-policy review, which took stock of the state of South Africa's foreign relations over the past several years, and acknowledged that South Africa had failed to realise its aims in this area. In a media briefing, the then DIRCO Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, admitted that 'the country has not sufficiently played the role it was expected to play ... in engaging a number of international issues,' and that 'there have been missteps which have reversed earlier gains,' leading to 'the decline of South Africa's influence regionally, continentally and globally.'<sup>15</sup>

Despite the findings of the ministerial report, a thorough review of the nuts and bolts of the administration and cost-effectiveness of the country's foreign service is yet to be done.<sup>16</sup> This was addressed, at least partially, in a meeting of the National Assembly's Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation, in late May 2019. It focused on budget allocations to DIRCO, and emphasised two key DIRCO policy initiatives.<sup>17</sup>

The first related to the passage of the long-anticipated Foreign Service Act, which has since been signed into law.<sup>18</sup> This is encouraging, given the need to professionalise South Africa's foreign service. The implementation of the Act is now a key priority which requires detailed timelines and a hierarchy



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of key priorities. DIRCO should view its reporting to Parliament on the Act's implementation as a critical opportunity to showcase its progress on these long-awaited administrative reforms, as well as on its cost-effectiveness.

The second initiative was surprisingly related to resuscitating the transition of the ARF and the establishment of SADPA. Although this has been referenced in DIRCO's annual performance and five-year strategic plans, it is noteworthy that, in this meeting, special emphasis was given to the draft Partnership for Development Bill, which is necessary for the establishment of SADPA when the ARF Act is repealed.

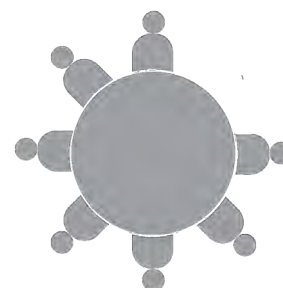
The establishment of SADPA has been stalled for many years. SADPA was initially discussed at the July 2007 policy conference of the governing African National Congress, in which challenges relating to the ARF had already been identified. Accordingly, a central government agency to coordinate the country's development assistance was proposed.<sup>19</sup> After an initial period of interdepartmental negotiations, during which business cases were prepared, a draft Bill was submitted to Parliament. This Bill has since been rejected, re-tabled, and sent back again for further amendment. By 2014 the process appeared to have lost momentum. The reasons for this delay are often informally attributed to a stalemate between DIRCO and Treasury, although key personnel changes over the years have also frustrated the process. And by the time Ramaphosa assumed office, SADPA appeared to have fallen completely off the agenda.

Government should first acknowledge that South Africa has woefully failed to live up to its peacebuilding role in recent years

Given the recent passage of the Foreign Service Act, the priority given to reviving the long-dormant Partnership for Development Bill may indicate that the establishment of SADPA is now back on the government's to-do list. The renewed attention given to moving the ARF towards a more effective agency is thus encouraging, especially because it shows South Africa's potential to renew its commitment to peacebuilding.

Before this can occur, however, government should first acknowledge that South Africa has indeed woefully failed to live up to its peacebuilding role in recent years. Apart from the country's declining contributions to multilateral peace operations,<sup>20</sup> it has been noticeably absent from international policy and institutional processes. Despite its past role as a facilitator of the UN peacebuilding architecture's first five-year review, for instance, there has been little visible initiative displayed by South Africa in the current 2020 review process.<sup>21</sup>

Its engagements in New York, in particular its support of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), have been questioned, because its rhetorical commitments are often devoid of detail or follow-up. Since its



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establishment in 2006, South Africa has made no voluntary contributions to the UN Peacebuilding Fund – a vital instrument to finance and implement identified peacebuilding priorities by the PBC.<sup>22</sup> The country's efforts in the UN Security Council since the beginning of 2019, have, however, underscored the importance of advancing global multilateral peacebuilding processes,<sup>23</sup> but these have not translated into tangible country-specific commitments, interventions or on-the-ground outcomes.

Similarly, South Africa's recent engagements in Addis Ababa do not appear to be situating it as central voice in continental peacebuilding efforts. Its term on the UN Security Council was not accompanied by a concurrent appointment to the AU Peace and Security Council, which could have facilitated a more streamlined approach toward peacebuilding-specific debates between the two bodies. As current AU Chair, South Africa could have also sought to advance pressing peace and security priorities much more deliberately. Whereas the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a change of approach by Ramaphosa, the comparative lack of engagement with peace and security issues stands in stark contrast to the actions of the two prior AU chairs, Egypt and Rwanda.

This contrast is perhaps even more frustrating given that South Africa occupies this position under the annual theme of the AU's flagship 'Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020' initiative. This lack of visible engagement spills over to the ongoing operationalisation of the AU Peace Fund, the recently established AU Centre for Post-conflict Reconstruction and Development in Cairo, as well as on the ongoing structural reforms of the AU Commission. All of these require vocal and sustained member state support, and would benefit from regular interventions by the AU Chair or, at the very least, regular status updates in the chair's public statements and interactions.

### **Repurposing South African peacebuilding**

As South Africa attempts to reclaim lost ground, it must reassess its political and financial commitment to peacebuilding. Its prior role as a leading force for peace and security requires renewed attention, and should be repurposed to serve the country's current aims and to respond to global challenges.

This is all the more necessary given the renewed attention placed on the institutional and legislative processes surrounding the long dormant transition of the ARF and the establishment of SADPA. The passage of the Partnership for Development Bill should be expedited, alongside the repeal of the ARF Act, to get SADPA operating as soon as possible. Government should understand that the longer this process takes the longer the identified challenges facing the ARF will remain unaddressed, and the longer South Africa's peacebuilding efforts will remain uncoordinated, under-financed and under-appreciated.

Moving forward, more stringent and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks will be needed to support ongoing efforts to



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rationalise the foreign service. They will be necessary to better assess the value for money and the overall impact of South Africa's peacebuilding efforts in the future.

In addition, as the country aims to re-establish itself as a central voice in continental and international peacebuilding, government would do well to leverage its existing wealth of technical peacebuilding experience in future engagements. Supporting its rhetorical commitments with tangible initiatives, interventions and material resources would go a long way towards shifting the perception that South Africa merely pays lip service to global peacebuilding processes.

## Notes

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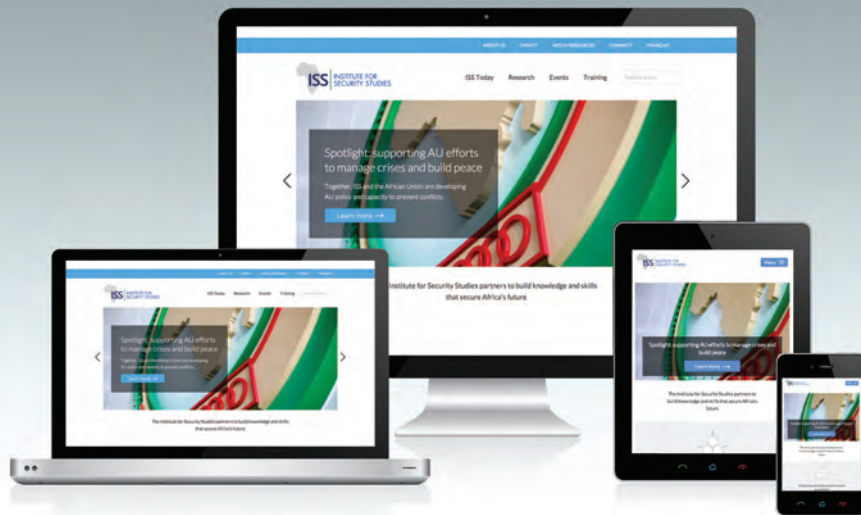
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This policy brief was published with funding from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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