

Pivoting to Russia, China and anti-Western rhetoric: South Africa's foreign policy shifts

President Jacob Zuma of South Africa and President Vladimir Putin of Russia attended China's victory parade on 3 September 2015. The parade celebrated the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender at the end of the Second World War. The leaders of the US, Japan and the UK said they would not attend because they were concerned about a show of military force at a time of regional tensions.

Zuma's visit reflected a broader shift in South Africa's foreign policy in favour of China and Russia. The clear pivot towards China and Russia during Zuma's presidency (2009-present) differs sharply from the more balanced multipolar approach under Nelson Mandela's presidency (1994-1999).

A Better Africa in a Better and Just World

A discussion document by the ruling African National Congress (ANC), also reflects this shift.¹ It formed the basis for foreign policy discussions at the ANC's policymaking National General Council in mid-October 2015. Such discussion documents are often an early indication of ANC policy directions in the next five years.²

The text of the discussion document on international relations was drawn up by a panel of foreign policy heavyweights chaired by Deputy Minister in the Presidency, Obed Bapela, and including Zuma's ex-wife, African Union Commission Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma; Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Maite Nkoana-Mashabane; Minister of Trade and Industry Rob Davies; former Director-General of the National Intelligence Agency Billy Masetlha; and former National Commission of Police Bhekokwakhe "Bheki" Cele.

The document and related steps by the ANC government are covered under three themes:

- How is the ANC looking towards China for symbolic and economic leadership?

- Which new deals with Russia have emerged on nuclear energy, arms trade and intelligence training?
- Are there indicators that point to an anti-Western bias and ideology, also regarding the US African Command?

Due to political factionalism and economic policy failures, the ANC has become more reliant on foreign patrons. The shift in foreign policy also coincides with the shift to a hybrid regime under Zuma's ANC. The locus of politics in South Africa has moved from accountable democratic institutions to a field of power in which weakened democratic institutions and non-democratic institutions interact.³

Looking to China for symbolic and economic leadership

It appears that the ANC leadership views China's communist rulers as an example. *A Better Africa*, the ANC policy discussion document, concludes:

*China [sic] economic development trajectory remains a leading example of the triumph of humanity over adversity. The exemplary role of the collective leadership of the Communist Party of China in this regard should be a guiding lodestar of our own struggle.*⁴

Certainly, China is now South Africa's top trade partner with \$21.9 billion, compared to \$6 billion with the US, \$4.7 billion with Japan, and \$4.1 billion with the UK and Germany each. According to Mills Soko,⁵ political economist at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business, the ANC government is treating China as a unique strategic partner:

The government's refusal to raise tariffs on cheap steel imports from China suggests that it will prioritise its relationship with China at the expense of domestic interests.

Trade with China is important. However, trade with 2000 companies from the European Union as a bloc remains the most important, valued at \$28bn per year. The US comes third. Many countries also trade

¹ *African National Congress NGC 2015 Discussion Documents* can be viewed at http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docs.y.pdf. Chapter 7 of the document, from page 157 to 193, is entitled "International Relations".

² The ANC held its mid-term National General Council (NGC) in October 2015. The NGC is the ANC's highest policymaking body in between the quinquennial meetings of its National Conference. Ahead of the NGC meeting, various sub-committees of the National Executive body have released discussion documents.

³ For an analysis of the shift to a hybrid regime, see *South African Monitor's* June 2015 report at <http://sa-monitor.com/reports>.

⁴ NGC Discussion Documents, op. cit., p. 161.

⁵ <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-22-sa-and-china-a-love-founded-on-state-control>.

profitably with China while remaining close to the US or the EU.

Thus, South Africa's foreign policy shift reflects a geopolitical and domestic political reorientation. Despite the country's strong private sector, arguably, the ANC now sees Chinese state capitalism as its model for a developmental state. A "five- to ten-year strategic programme" between China and South Africa, signed during a visit to China by Zuma in 2014, laid out specific aims on cooperation on state-owned enterprises. Higher-level executives at South African state-owned enterprises (SOEs) will be educated at the Chinese Academy of Governance in Beijing.⁶

Already, many new ANC laws, bills and regulations to gain more government resources have affected or will affect water, coal, steel, minerals, agriculture and other economic sectors. Carol O'Brien, the director of the American Chamber of Commerce in South Africa, stated in February 2015 that the plethora of legislation coming out of South Africa is causing "jitters" in US businesses with operations based in the country.

The ANC is also establishing a Political School and Policy Institute at Venterskroon in South Africa in cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party.⁷ The ANC government already signed a deal with the Chinese government on cooperation related to internet infrastructure and cyber-security.⁸

Regime sovereignty the priority

How will these events impact South Africa's political system? They occurred while Western powers widely criticize the Chinese record on political pluralism and its limiting of citizens' access to "undesirable" news from the outside and social media.⁹ After protests in the Ukraine, Turkey and Venezuela, the UN Human Rights Council brought a resolution in 2014 to safeguard the right to peaceful protest. In March 2014, South Africa led a group including China, Russia and Saudi Arabia in proposing several amendments to dilute the resolution, prompting criticism from the UK representative in Geneva and from Human Rights Watch.¹⁰

Conditions for good democracy or criticisms of ANC policies formulated by Western powers, Western media or domestic opposition groups are often portrayed as neo-colonialist. Western "colonial" states are not interested in South Africa's development, but rather want to take its natural resources and never give anything back, Zuma told the Russian TV news channel RT in May 2015. Zuma believes things "*would never be the same*" with China, which has been heavily investing in Africa since the early 2000s, as the Chinese came to the continent "*as equals*."

Some NGOs claim that the Chinese government and the ANC government assist each other in obstructing or delaying the requests of critical NGOs to gain observer status at some UN structures for NGOs. These NGOs include Freedom Now, a US-based group supporting political prisoners of conscience, and Afriforum, a SA-based group supporting minority and civil rights.¹¹

On 25 November 2015, South Africa, along with 13 other countries, including North Korea, Sudan, Syria, China, Russia and Zimbabwe, voted against the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on Human Right Defenders. There were 117 votes in favour of the declaration, and 40 abstentions. It was argued that the resolution could be abused by leading Western nations as a pretext for intervening in the domestic affairs of developing countries.¹²

The Zuma government apparently assisted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in escaping a warrant for his arrest from the International Criminal Court in June 2015. At the ANC's NGC meeting in October 2015, the NGC took the decision to ask the ANC government to begin the process of withdrawal of its membership of the ICC.¹³ Again, discrimination by the ICC and Western powers against African countries was argued to justify policies that could obstruct international scrutiny of a government's record on human rights.

⁶ <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-22-sa-and-china-a-love-founded-on-state-control>.

⁷ <http://time.com/3601968/anc-south-africa-china-communist-party/>;
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/why-anc-following-example-chinese-communist-party>.

⁸ <http://www.cpifinancial.net/news/post/31624/south-africa-and-china-sign-ict-plan>.

⁹ <http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publication/zivilgesellschaft-unter-druck-globaler-widerstand-gegen-demokratie-waechst>;
<http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/news/media-made-in-china>.

¹⁰ <http://blog.unwatch.org/index.php/2014/04/01/shaky-road-to-important-peaceful-protest-resolution/>

¹¹ <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-13-diplomatic-fracas-breeds-over-ngo-freedom-now>

¹² <http://www.rdm.co.za/politics/2015/11/27/sa-votes-with-russia-north-korea-and-syria-against-un-human-rights-declaration>

¹³ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/world/africa/omar-hassan-al-bashir-sudan-south-africa.html?_r=0. Also see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/14/why-south-africa-is-wrong-to-leave-the-international-criminal-court> and <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-10-26-op-ed-how-africa-can-fix-the-international-criminal-court/#.VjOQ8JqBfmQ>.

Choosing Russia over “US-sponsored destabilisation”

Both domestic and foreign considerations play a role in the ANC’s policy towards Russia. *Business Day* editor Peter Bruce speculated in 2013 that ANC’s financial troubles would probably result in the party returning to its dependence on foreign funders, especially among non-Western powers.¹⁴ In 2014, reports emerged that the ANC was broke. The ANC denied the reports.¹⁵

During the same period, news emerged of a mysterious, but major personal deal on a nuclear energy programme concluded in Russia between Presidents Putin and Zuma. The nuclear energy deal was in contrast with energy and economic policies, including the National Development Plan. Major departments in South Africa were not involved in the opaque deal, reputed to be worth up to \$100 billion.¹⁶ Putin, a former KGB intelligence officer, used the opportunity to strengthen Russia’s policy to enhance its position in Africa and extend its influence in South Africa.¹⁷ When Zuma believed he had been poisoned in August 2014, it was to Russia that he allegedly went to get medical treatment.¹⁸ Tens of South Africa’s intelligence officials have also received training in Russia in recent years.¹⁹

The ANC discussion document claims there is a concerted effort to destabilise Russia:

The US does not appreciate the resurgence of China and Russia as dominant factors in the arena of international power relations. It has instead declared a cold war against these two emerging world powers ... Russia has not been spared the wrath of US-led Western imperialism. As with China, the Russian leadership is constantly being portrayed in the Western media and official discourse

¹⁴ <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2013/11/18/thick-end-of-the-wedge-zuma-is-pretty-well-untouchable-politically>.

¹⁵ <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-30-broke-anc-may-have-to-cut-jobs-for-comrades>; <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-31-anc-denies-it-is-broke>.

¹⁶ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/08/14/uk-safrica-nuclear-idUKKCNOQJ11T20150814>; “Jacob Zuma’s secret nuke stitch-up”, *Mail and Guardian*, 26 September 2014; “Less Russia, more speed” (editorial), *Financial Mail*, 4 September 2014; “SA denies corruption in Russia’s nuclear deal”, *Fin24*, 1 October 2014. For tensions involving the executives of the South African Nuclear Energy Corporation (NECSA) and alleged payments of NECSA funds to the ANC, see <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-02-27-energy-minister-shields-key-zuma-nuclear-ally>. Also see Andrew Feinstein, *After the Party: Corruption, the ANC and South Africa’s Uncertain Future* (Verso 2010).

¹⁷ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/en/blogs/africasource/russia-s-return-to-africa-an-update>.

¹⁸ <http://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/opinion/reliance-on-russia-goes-way-back-1.1903975>.

¹⁹ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Spies-trained-in-Russia-raise-double-agent-fears-20140831>.

as monsters abusing human rights. As with China, counter revolutionary demonstrations and marches are being staged and given huge publicity in the Western media in order to destabilize and/provoke the Russian government ... Whatever genuine concerns may exist within the Russian population and populations of former Soviet Union, there is a clear plot to exploit this in order to contain the rise of Russia globally. It is an encirclement strategy that seeks to isolate Russia in the manner that is being attempted on China as well ...

*Washington’s sponsored destabilisation is not limited to Russia and China. We see it unfolding in the streets of Latin America including in Venezuela which the US has strangely declared a threat to its ‘national security’, in the Middle East and in African countries with the sole intention of toppling progressive democratically-elected governments. This has a bearing on the nature of conflict and the scourge of terrorism we see in the world today.*²⁰

Anti-US bias and the US African Command

Other indicators of a strong anti-US attitude emerge periodically. In September 2014, Kebby Maphatsoe, the Deputy Minister of Defence and Veterans, called Public Protector Thuli Madonsela a CIA agent because of her continued investigation of the Nkandla scandal involving President Jacob Zuma. The US Ambassador was present and lodged an official complaint.

Peter Fabricius of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) commented:

*[A]t least [Maphatsoe] did new members of the diplomatic corps a favour ... Many diplomats still arrive in the country under the naïve impression that they are coming to serve in the land of Mandela, a rather idyllic rainbow nation in love with itself and the entire world. Maphatsoe’s crude suggestion ... would have been a wake-up call, alerting them to the sort of ideological sentiment that still runs beneath the surface here, and sometimes emerges.*²¹

When the news broke in early June 2015 that the hosting of the FIFA World Cup in South Africa in 2010 may have been obtained through a \$10 million bribe to FIFA officials, a similar response emerged from ANC circles. Peter Bruce, senior journalist at *Business Day*, wrote:

It’s just crazy for Sport Minister Fikile Mbalula, even by his own colourful standards, to insist before the media that the government did not pay a \$10m bribe to Warner and, at the same time, chal-

²⁰ NGC Discussion Documents, op. cit., p. 162.

²¹ <http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/acronymia-nervosa-the-cia-and-the-icc>.

lenge the FBI to produce evidence that they did. What if the Americans oblige?

The government's defensive reaction seems at least partly motivated by an improbable conspiracy theory that the arrests and warrants out for FIFA executives are an American plot to embarrass our new ally, President Vladimir Putin, and to take the shine off the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018, or to have the 2022 Qatar cup moved to the US. Mbalula sounded plausible at times addressing the media on Wednesday, but repeatedly spoiled the effect by drifting off into incoherent but presumably revolutionary swirls at Imperialism.

The anti-US position of the ANC has implications for the US Africa Command on the African continent, as is apparent from this excerpt from the NGC discussion document:

The campaign to engage all [African Union] member state [sic] on the continent not to host these military bases continue [sic]; however, the question that should be posed is whether this is still preventable because in certain places on the continent AFRICOM has already established its footprint in the form of training soldiers and other newly devised mechanisms? The ANC has to deal with these realities and develop new strategies to take this campaign forward.²²

In the document, the ANC leadership also reaffirms its ideological roots:

The ANC is a revolutionary national liberation movement which is an integral part of the international revolutionary movement to liberate humanity from the bondage of imperialism and neo colonialism.²³

Foreign patrons and factional agency

Currently, the ANC's foreign policy discourse is quite compatible with that of Russia or China. The ANC document does not celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall a quarter of a century ago. Instead, the ANC document actually laments "the sudden collapse of socialism in the world [that] altered completely the balance of forces in favour of imperialism." This new imperialism has "plunged humanity in a perpetual socio-economic crisis," and the United States stands accused of "effectively using its aggressive foreign policy to advance its national interests."

As *The Economist* concludes in its review of the study of the ANC in exile by the prominent scholar in African Studies, Professor Stephen Ellis,

The real message of Stephen Ellis' history of the African National Congress (ANC) in exile – painfully and palpably obvious between the lines – is how the conspiratorial past affects the ruling party to the present day. It makes uncomfortable reading, for it goes some way towards explaining why President Jacob Zuma, a former head of the ANC's intelligence service in exile, and his comrades now running South Africa find it so hard to embrace the notion that a diversity of opinion and tolerance of dissent must be at the heart of any functioning, decent democracy.²⁴

The tone of ANC statements on Western policies is largely critical.²⁵ Often, this occurs to cover internal weakness and failures in governance, to compete with internal rivals or to find scapegoats. The factionalised ANC is now more reliant on Russia and China as foreign patrons. However, the agency of the ANC's own factions should not be underestimated.

Policy-makers and bureaucrats will continue to try and improve the conditions of South African trade with China and Russia.²⁶ Domestic political dynamics, rather than foreign alliances, will continue to drive many of the policies that shape the environment of foreign business and NGOs in South Africa. In future, the contests and realignment between political factions may periodically also generate different responses than the policy positions preferred by China and Russia.

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See also:

<http://www.ascleiden.nl/research/themes/africas-global-connections>

<http://www.ascleiden.nl/research/projects/africa-world-rethinking-africas-global-connections>

²² NGC Discussion Documents, op. cit., p. 176.

²³ Ibid., pp. 160, 185-186.

²⁴ <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21569372-how-conspiratorial-past-affects-present-day-good-guys-were-often-bad>. Also see Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990* (Hurst, London, 2012).

²⁵ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201508251340.html>;
<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-08-20-ancs-future-foreign-policy-all-roads-lead-to-china/#.VeCrx5rALmQ>;
<http://time.com/3601968/anc-south-africa-china-communist-party/>.

²⁶ <http://www.citizen.co.za/888205/south-africa-eahead-of-focac/>