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CHAPTER 4

South Africa: Still an Ambivalent (Sub)Regional Leader?

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Since 1994, a stated commitment to Africa has become one of the distinguishing features of South Africa's foreign policy. Different from other regional powers like Brazil and India (that are also engaging with developing states outside of their region, particularly in Africa), South Africa remains focused, with minor exceptions, on Africa. Almost all of its development assistance, for example, goes to African states, and all of South Africa's peacekeeping activity has been limited to the African continent. In this sense, South Africa's role as essentially a regional power with global ambitions is underlined.

Although it has undergone minor changes, the emphasis on Africa has been a consistent foreign policy priority across all administrations since South Africa's democratic transition in 1994. While the Mbeki presidency is regarded as having been instrumental in driving the so-called African agenda through the launching of several initiatives like the African Renaissance and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), Africa has been a golden thread running through the country's foreign policy. Some have noted that there has been a slight shift under the Zuma administration to an increased focus on the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), especially China. However, this has not been at

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the expense of Africa, and the government has unswervingly argued that external partnerships with actors like China, or South Africa's membership of groupings like the BRICS, are aimed at advancing not only the country's interests but those of Africa as a whole.

At the same time, the African landscape has also changed since South Africa re-entered the international community in 1994. Then, due to a combination of historical and geopolitical convergences, it was the clear frontrunner to ascend to the position of a regional leader. Not least among these was its, at the time, unrivalled material preponderance, together with a moral authority accrued by its peaceful transition to democracy and the leadership of Nelson Mandela. Today, there are many more powerful African states who are increasingly viable contenders for the position, particularly the "lions on the move," as McKinsey's Global Institute refers to them (2010). As Mthembu (2017, 10) puts it, South Africa is "no longer the only game in town." This raises questions about the future of South Africa's status as both a regional power and a regional leader in the (Southern) African context. While concepts like regional power, regional hegemon, and regional leader are similar and often used as synonyms, it is important to recognise that there are nuanced distinctions between them. For the purposes of this chapter, it is assumed that being a regional power (based on Nolte's 2010 definition, which includes that a state should display the material, political, and ideological resources for regional power projection) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for regional leadership. It is argued here that leadership warrants additional features, including the political will to translate power into influence, as well as a level of acceptance by "followers" and the international community at large.

Before turning our attention to whether or not South Africa is still a regional leader, we need to engage with what South Africa's region entails. Here, it is useful to distinguish between two different spheres of influence: firstly, the African continent as the overarching region and, secondly, the Southern African region, often signified by the membership of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as a secondary or subregion. South Africa's role in both regions is discussed, and differences are highlighted where relevant.

In exploring South Africa's role as a regional leader, the application of role theory as an approach to foreign policy analysis helps us to shed light on the nature of the country's position in the region. It is useful to broadly distinguish, as Aggestam (1999, 18) does, between *role expectation* (has the role of leadership been conferred on South Africa by external actors? Is there an expectation that it will behave like a regional leader?), *role*

performance (does South Africa's foreign policy actions and behaviour reflect its regional leader role? What strategies has it employed in exerting influence in the region? How successfully has South Africa enacted the role of a regional leader?), and *role conception* (do South African government officials conceive of South Africa as a regional leader?). In addition, we can add a further category that can be termed *role correspondence* (to what extent does South Africa meet the criteria of a regional leader?)

Living Up to Expectations

Starting with *role expectation*, South Africa has undoubtedly been recognised as a regional leader by the international community. Evidence of this can be found in South Africa's membership of exclusive clubs like the Group of Twenty (G20) and the BRICS and the fact that its leaders have often been invited to multilateral fora of the advanced, industrialised countries (such as the Group of Seven/Eight [7/8] and World Economic Forum), where they are regarded as spokespersons not only for South Africa but for the African continent as a whole. The powerful countries in the West have also looked towards South Africa as a strategic state that should be at the forefront of resolving regional crises. While some might argue that, "by conferring regional leadership status on these states, the international community plays an important role in fostering recognition of this regional dominance amongst the otherwise recalcitrant neighbouring states" (Alden and Vieira 2005, 5), the other side of the coin—that international recognition may in fact undermine claims to regional leadership by South Africa—could be equally true. A close relationship with the USA and other Western leaders can, for example, be seen in a negative light by its African neighbours.

While South Africa's position has been recognised by the international community, recognition and acceptance by its African counterparts has been less than forthcoming. One need only look at the ongoing debate between the African states regarding which one should represent Africa, should the continent be given a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC), to realise that global recognition certainly does not equal regional recognition. This is partly due to the fact that, as Adebajo, Adedeji, and Landsberg already stated in 2007, "South Africa still struggles today to shake off an identity as a Western Trojan horse in Africa" (2007, 22). Focusing in particular on foreign economic policy, Nel and Stephen (2010, 74) hold that South Africa is a driver of the established

global hegemonic order in Africa. While South Africa's embrace of economic liberalisation assures that it is accepted as a reliable partner for Western states, this has at the same time contributed to South Africa's alienation in its region.

This lack of acceptance and recognition by its neighbours and the broader African continent is significant, as any state's foreign policy is shaped in important ways by the regional dimension. This is especially pertinent for a state like South Africa that aspires to play a more significant role in global affairs as regional leaders can use their region as a base for projecting power in world affairs. At the same time, while regional cooperation can serve as an important stepping stone for the most powerful members to project their power globally, regional dynamics can also restrain these states' foreign policy options. The role of secondary powers is particularly important, as they can have a significant impact on the level of acceptance and legitimacy granted to the most powerful states in the region. According to Flemes, "Without the secondary powers' support, regional powers will not be able to construct the power base necessary to reach their foreign policy goals in regional and global affairs" (2008, 14). Moore (2015, 386) also reminds us that South Africa depends to a large extent on Africa for its international status. Its positions in multilateral forums (such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the UNSC, or the Group of 77) are a result of the lobbying and support of the African groups in these institutions. Similarly, South Africa's claims to international positions in groupings like the G20 and BRICS are wholly based on its perceived capacity to act as a regional manager of sorts and the champion of Africa's interests in global fora. This relates to what Prys (2008, 12) calls "the embeddedness of regions in the international system," which refers to a "two-way dynamic in which we have to consider not only external actors' impact on the region, but also the attempts of regional powers for instance to use their regional predominance as a stepping-stone to a broader global role while simultaneously trying to fend off external intrusion in their own regions."

Prys (2008, 9) also reminds us that while states are generally rather wary of being led by others, this does not rule out grudging acceptance based on pragmatic considerations. This seems to be an appropriate interpretation of the apparent suspicion that most African states have of South Africa's position as a regional power and their reticence in awarding it with leadership status, while at the same time reluctantly accepting its role as such. While they may not like it, other states in the region recognise the

value added of having South Africa representing Africa in international fora and taking responsibility for various regional initiatives. The result is that, "while rhetorical resistance exists, common statements at SADC summits show that South Arica's leadership status … is acknowledged among its neighboring states" (Prys 2008, 18). In sum, South Africa's position as a regional leader is "a product of international needs for African representation on the global stage, together with its own ambitions, rather than any regional consensus on South African leadership" (Alden and Schoeman 2015, 241).

Assuming the Mantle of Regional Leader

With regard to *role conception*, in other words the intention of actors, expressed through official statements and speeches, the "new" South Africa was, from the outset, at pains to establish itself as an African state whose future was inextricably entwined with the rest of the continent. As early as 1993, would-be President Mandela said, "South Africa cannot escape its African destiny." The notion that South Africa's prosperity cannot be achieved in the absence of development and stability in the rest of the continent is reflected in the prominence given earlier to what has become known as the "African agenda." It is also expressed in statements such as, "Regional and continental integration is the foundation for Africa's socio-economic development and political unity, and essential for our own prosperity and security. Consequently, Africa is at the centre of South Africa's foreign policy" (Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane in DIRCO 2013, 3).

Building South Africa's identity as an African state has been a deliberate strategy of the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC). From spearheading the idea of the African Renaissance to framing the 2010 Soccer World Cup as an African event, the South African government has tried hard to find acceptance as an African state. These efforts are, however, constantly being undermined by both the actions of ordinary South Africans, with repeated xenophobic outbreaks being a case in point, and official government policies. As Kraxberger and McClaughry (2013, 13) write, "it is clear to see that much of Thabo Mbeki's pan-Africanist vision has not resonated with ordinary South Africans." Similarly, Klotz (2006, 74) comments that what she calls the "territorial nationalism" expressed in the Immigration Act of 2002 "reaffirms the distancing of Africa in foreign policy, despite both international expectations placed on the new democratic state, and the pan-African rhetoric of 'renaissance.'"

Relatedly, because of the legacy of regional destabilisation by the apartheid state, South Africa has not always been explicit in communicating its claim to being a regional leader and has at times been guilty of sending mixed messages. This has led some commentators to refer to South Africa as a somewhat reluctant regional leader. Others, like Alden and Schoeman (2013, 112), argue that, "South Africa's foreign policy could be said to have one overarching aim that has endured from the period of white minority rule through to the onset of democracy and the present day: namely, the pursuit of global recognition as Africa's leading state." Supporting this position, a 1997 foreign affairs parliamentary briefing on South Africa's role in the world states:

> Perhaps, initially, because of our past experience and fear of being accused of maintaining a big brother syndrome, we did not see ourselves as playing a leading role in the region, but now we have come to understand that there is an expectation from Africa and the rest of the world that we have a role to play, a role of contributing to peace and stability in our continent and to the African Renaissance. Our perceived reluctance to have a 'hands on' approach to our region and to be pro-active in our continent, has to some extent been viewed by our neighbours and friends with a great deal of caution. (DFA 1997, 186)

The government's commitment to Africa is also evident in its budget allocation. While the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO)'s budget was cut by ZAR153 million in 2016, the single largest allocation of its budget (30%) went to Africa in 2015–2016 (du Plessis et al. 2016). Under the Zuma administration, South Africa has started taking a more forceful stance towards Africa. This was exemplified in the assertive promotion of South Africa's former Foreign and Home Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as the African Union (AU) Chair. The move surprised many on the African continent, as it showcased a disregard for diplomatic protocol in that South Africa essentially ignored an unwritten agreement that Africa's major powers would not put forward candidates for the position. This was seen by some as a shift in South Africa's approach to Africa, that is, indicating a desire to take up a more explicit leadership position on the continent.

Role Correspondence: Meeting the Criteria of Regional Leadership

Turning now to the question of the extent to which South Africa meets the criteria of a regional leader, I briefly explore South Africa's material (specifically economic and military capabilities), followed by its political, diplomatic, and ideational capabilities. This is based on the assumption, stated earlier, that leadership presumes power. In his chapter in this volume, Sören Scholvin provides some additional comparative figures that should be read in conjunction with this section. While material and other forms of power are a necessary condition of leadership, it is not a sufficient one. A powerful state must still be willing to don the mantle of leadership, and this role must be accepted by other states in the region and, arguably, the broader international community. This becomes obvious when one considers—as Scholvin does in his chapter—the rise in material power of other African states, with Nigeria's economic power and Angola's military power being two examples. This raw power still needs to be translated into influence and leadership, something which requires deliberate strategies and a confluence of factors.

The fact that South Africa was, for the longest time, the largest economy and most industrialised state on the African continent has been an important element in its regional power status. Ten years ago, South Africa's economy was growing at almost 6%, and trade with the rest of Africa was growing significantly. Eight years later, Nigeria officially became the largest economy on the continent, stripping South Africa of its number one position.[1] Fast forward to 2017, and the economy is in dire straits, with growth rates of close to 0%, and rating agencies like Standard and Poor's grading the country down to junk status.

While deepening trade and investment relations with Africa and extending regional integration remain key economic diplomacy objectives of South Africa's foreign policy, its economy has declined in comparison with the rest of the continent. In 2013 it had 25% of sub-Sahara's gross domestic product (GDP) compared to 50% in 1994 (Alden and Schoeman 2015, 240). Relatedly, the days when sub-Saharan Africa was a captive market for South African products and services are over, as the country faces increasingly stiff competition from both other African actors and external actors in its backyard. South Africa's economic woes have a significant impact on its status as a regional power as economic power is not just important as a measure in itself but has implications for military expenditure, among others.

During the apartheid era, the South African Defence Force was the most powerful on the continent, wreaking havoc in neighbouring states as part of its destabilisation campaign. Post-1994, the country was recognised for its military prowess and capacity to fulfil one of the ascribed expectations of regional powers, namely to provide regional stability and security. The new democratically elected government embraced this newfound status as Africa's chief mediator and conflict manager by becoming actively involved in conflict mediation and by contributing to peacekeeping operations on the continent. This is discussed further below.

Hamill (2014) writes about two developments in early 2014 that brought the "conventional wisdom" that South Africa remains Africa's "natural leader, its principal conflict manager" into question. The first was the leaking of the South African Defence Review, which described the operational capabilities of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) as being in "critical decline" and 24% underfunded. While, in terms of military hardware, South Africa is currently still in the lead (for example, it has 209 aircraft as compared to Nigeria's 98 and Ethiopia's 81), with 88,565 military personnel, it lags significantly behind Nigeria (130,000) and Ethiopia (182,500) (Clark 2016, 32). The logistical shortcomings were highlighted during a clash between South African soldiers and rebels in the Central African Republic in 2013, which lead to the death of 13 of the South Africans. The erosion of the country's military capacity poses a major challenge to its position as a regional power. We have also witnessed South Africa taking more of a back seat on emerging crises in the continent over the past few years. For example, with regard to the conflicts in Nigeria and Sudan, other countries and regional organisations have been stepping up to the plate.

In light of South Africa's undeniable material shortcomings, the question of other forms of power becomes pertinent. In this vein, Alexandroff (2015, 253) argues that, "once you 'drop down' from the so-called great powers, the driver explaining the presence, centrality and influence of the 'not-great-powers' in global governance is hardly power; instead their influence appears to be much more reliant on diplomacy." This is similar to the point made by Alden and Schoeman (2015, 243), that "the foundational requirements of exercising power—that is the accruing of sufficient material capabilities and ideational sources to influence the behaviour of other actors and institutions—is never seen to be a total condition nor is it expected to be."

Role Performance: Strategies to Exert Influence

Next, we turn now to *role performance* or how the South African state's foreign policy strategies reflect and support its regional leader role. The discussion follows the leadership typology laid out in the introductory chapter of this volume to include:

- multilateral leadership (involving institutionalisation)
- distributional leadership (the provision of public goods, both in terms of development and security)
- consensual leadership distributional (under which diplomatic/political leadership is included)
- ideational leadership

Finally, an additional leadership strategy that does not necessarily fall under any of the categories earlier is representational leadership and advocacy of regional interests. It was mentioned by Nolte (2006) as part of his conceptualisation of "regional leading powers" (*Regionale Führungsmachte*).

Multilateral Leadership

With regard to multilateral leadership, an important issue in this regard is institutionalisation. Under the Mbeki administration, there was a bold effort to revitalise and strengthen the continental institutional framework for regional and continental cooperation. Mbeki was instrumental in the drafting and adoption of the AU Constitutive Act in 2000 and subsequently in the creation and development of the AU's peace and security architecture. Together with Presidents Obasanjo of Nigeria, Bouteflika from Algeria, and Wade of Senegal, he constructed the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a comprehensive development plan based on African ownership and empowerment. He was also actively involved in the conceptualisation of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), dedicated to promoting good governance, human rights, and democracy on the continent. Mbeki expended much energy on this, travelling around the world to garner support and gain international recognition of South Africa's leadership.

Since the Mbeki era, the government has continued to champion regional integration both at the continental and subcontinental level. In

the field of economic integration, South Africa has joined forces with other African powerhouses Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya to boost intra-African trade through an Africa-wide Continental Free Trade Agreement (C-FTA), which forms part of the AU's Agenda 2063. In 2011, South Africa hosted the launch of the Tripartite-FTA (between SADC, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa [COMESA] and the East African Community [EAC]), which is an essential part of the larger C-FTA initiative. NEPAD has also led to several sector development frameworks such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), Africa-wide Capacity Development Strategic Framework, Consolidated Plan of Action for Science and Technology, and the Environment Action Plan.

Distributional Leadership

Despite its poor economic performance, South Africa continues to use economic instruments in its foreign policy towards the rest of Africa. Development assistance[2] is a case in point, with aid to neighbouring states as one of the cornerstones of the post-apartheid government.[3] Due to the highly fragmented nature of South Africa's aid regime, as well as the lack of information from different government departments and debates over what to include in calculations, it is very difficult to estimate the total amount of flows to the continent. According to Besharati (2013, 32) recent studies approximate South African development cooperation to be from 0.7% to 1% of the country's gross national income (GNI), which compares very favourably with traditional donors.

In discussing South Africa's financial assistance to its immediate neighbours, mention must be made of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU).[4] Its special revenue-sharing mechanism, which redistributes income from customs according to a formula that benefits the poorer countries, is meant to compensate for South Africa's economic dominance in the region (Besharati 2013, 18). Similarly, in SADC, South Africa provides 20% of the organisation's operational budget. At a continental level, South Africa has been committed to strengthening the AU as the main body tasked with security, development, and political decision-making in Africa. Besides being one of the five African member states which has contributed the most to the AU budget—15%—it also hosts and sponsors the AU's Pan-African Parliament. South Africa is also the biggest contributor

to NEPAD, hosting the NEPAD Secretariat and contributing ZAR35 million every year (Besharati 2013, 21–22).

Aside from the regional political institutions, South Africa has also played an important role in international financial bodies that provide support to Africa's development. It is, for example, the third-largest shareholder (after the USA and Japan) of the African Development Bank and the only African contributor of the African Development Fund (Besharati 2013, 22). When private sector activity is included in our discussion of South Africa's developmental role, immense strides have been made on the continent, with investments in Africa having increased from US $500 million in 2002 to US $2.9 billion in 2013 (Hengari 2014, 3).

Vickers (2016, 104–105) notes how South Africa has played an important role in promoting an alternative model for regional integration—namely developmental regionalism. This approach shifts the focus from addressing regulatory barriers to greater intra-regional trade to cross-border infrastructure development, market integration, and policy coordination. As part of its leadership in this regard, South Africa has been particularly active in driving integration in SACU and SADC through, among others, infrastructure and industrial policy initiatives. It has, however, also been involved in similar projects at the continental level, for example, through its chairmanship of the AU's Presidential Infrastructure Championing Initiative (PICI), which is dedicated to completing nine priority infrastructure projects throughout Africa. South Africa will also take a lead, together with Egypt and Kenya, in upgrading the current infrastructure and constructing the missing links of the dream African East Coast highway which, together with the planned free trade zones, will be an important step towards ensuring greater intra-African trade (Besharati 2013, 21).

Another defining feature of a regional leader that is linked to its provision of public goods relates to its role in managing security in its region. This was perhaps one of the first leadership tasks that the newly democratic country was expected to take up. Not only was South Africa's own negotiated settlement[5] seen as a model for other countries to emulate, but its adoption of a constitutional democratic political system and liberal economic policies were regarded by the (Western) international community as worthy of emulation. South Africa subsequently committed a substantial amount of resources to various efforts to address conflict in the African continent.[6] It has been involved in mediation in, among others, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, and Sudan and has

served in 14 international peace operations on the African continent (Lotze et al. 2013, 1). South Africa's peacekeeping activities are more often than not accompanied by post-conflict reconstruction assistance, including institution building, support with elections, and so forth. Notably, unlike other emerging powers, South Africa has only been involved in peacekeeping on the African continent—underlining the very strong regional dimension of its global ambitions. Regarding the geographic extent of South Africa's leadership, its mediation in the DRC signalled the country's emergence as a regional power outside of the SADC subregion (Landsberg 2002, 180).

Its interest in creating and maintaining peace is, of course, not purely motivated by normative considerations—although these undoubtedly play a role—but also by the perceived political and economic benefits to South Africa's own national interests, not least of which is creating stable markets on the continent. To this end, peacekeeping forces have been deployed to states where South Africa has clear existing or prospective commercial interests, notably Sudan, the DRC, and the Central African Republic.[7] In addition, Lotze et al. (2013, 2) also point out that South Africa's involvement in peace operations is a reflection of its own self-image as an African power in the global arena and that such operations can be seen as a foreign policy instrument that supports its ambition to play a leading role in multilateral forums. These initiatives have not been welcomed by all—many African states have viewed South Africa as wanting to behave like a big brother and in some cases as a proxy for the West in its promotion of democracy and human rights. This has resulted in some challenges for South Africa—it being a fine line between being perceived as a well-meaning leader versus an unsolicited meddler or hegemon, intent on imposing its own ideas.

Relatedly, as Akokpari (2017, 24) notes, South Africa's record of conflict management and peacemaking has been increasingly tarnished. He notes that although South Africa was instrumental in creating the AU's peace and security architecture, it has pursued foreign policy positions contradictory to AU positions and also seems less committed to contributing to peace and security on the continent. An early case in point is Mbeki's quiet diplomacy towards Zimbabwe, where South African mediation failed to achieve the SADC and AU objectives.[8] This was followed in 2010 by South Africa's continued support for the Cote d'Ivoire's incumbent President Gbagbo, who refused to cede power while the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the AU agreed that he

had lost the presidential election to Ouattara. Similarly, during its second term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC in 2011, South Africa was perceived to undermine regional efforts to resolve the crisis when it voted in favour of Resolution 1973, in direct contradiction with the AU's collective position.

Consensual Leadership

South Africa continues to exert political and diplomatic leadership both at the subregional and at the continental level. For example, in 2014, when the South African government presented the country's APRM report to the African Peer Review Forum, it underlined the continued legitimacy of the APRM and set an example for other states to follow suit. The country's election to the AU Peace and Security Council for a two-year term also signals Pretoria's commitment to ensuring peace and security on the continent.

However, in other cases its influence in the region also seems to be in decline. President Zuma's more assertive national interest-driven foreign policy has made relations with other African states more complicated, and even smaller states in its immediate neighbourhood do not simply follow South Africa's lead. Even Swaziland has resisted Pretoria's efforts to introduce political reforms, despite being almost entirely economically dependent on South Africa.

While South Africa played an instrumental role in setting up the AU, it is also losing power in Addis Ababa. As noted earlier, the controversial nomination and eventual election of Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as AU chair was strongly opposed by Nigeria, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya. This inability to gain support for its candidate from outside of Southern Africa is indicative of South Africa's inability to build cross-regional coalitions to advance its interests.

More recently, major policy decisions have also not gone South Africa's way. At this years' AU summit, Chadian Foreign Minister Moussa Faki Mahamat was voted in as the new AU chair, beating South Africa's preferred candidate, the Botswana Foreign Minister. To add insult to injury, Morocco was also admitted into the AU, against South Africa's wishes, and was supported by Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Swaziland. This followed months of lobbying by South Africa and Algeria to block Morocco's re-entry and set various conditions to Morocco's return. They were, however, not successful. In the words of one commentator, the fact

that 39 countries displayed their unconditional support for Morocco's return to the organization demonstrates that the continent is about to bid farewell to an African Union hijacked by Algeria and South Africa. (Bennis, 2017).

Another issue in which South Africa has not been able to gain the support of fellow African states this year relates to the International Criminal Court (ICC). South Africa has been pushing for a collective withdrawal from the ICC, but the statement released at January 2017's AU summit was watered down, with many states expressing their reservations.

Ideational Leadership

All the earlier examples also reflect the challenges to South Africa's ideational leadership[9] which, in the past, formed a significant aspect of the country's leadership role. South Africa has acted as both a norm entrepreneur and a norm advocate, by setting a good example. The founding documents of the AU, such as the Constitutive Act as well as the APRM, are indicative of South Africa's role in norm promotion through the inclusion of references to good governance, democracy, and the protection of human rights. It was also instrumental in the inclusion of an innovative clause in the AU Constitutive Act, which authorises member states to intervene in a fellow member state in the case of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. This constituted a 180 degree turn from the Organisation of African Unity's unshakeable insistence on the protection of sovereignty at all costs and is also a forerunner of what would be become known as the responsibility to protect. As discussed later, however, despite championing these principles in theory, South Africa often falls short when it comes to implementing them and condemning their violation by other African states.

Today, South Africa often appears to be a follower rather than a leader. For example, South Africa's recent announcement that it will withdraw from the ICC appears to conform to its Africa First agenda. It is, however, important to note that South Africa used to be a firm supporter and advocate of the ICC among African states. It seems that it was pressure from other African governments that led to the legal and political embarrassment Pretoria faced in 2015 after allowing Sudanese President al-Bashir, who has an outstanding arrest warrant from the ICC, to visit the country for an AU summit.

This is equally true in terms of its promotion of human rights. Once regarded as a role model for human rights on the African continent, South

Africa became the first country to enshrine gay rights in its constitution. Internationally, South Africa has taken the lead in calling for global acceptance of gay rights, and in 2011, its leadership was considered critical to pass a UN Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution to recognise gay rights as human rights. In July 2016, however, in a vote that surprised many, the South African delegation abstained on a key vote in the HRC to appoint an independent watchdog on sexual orientation. This was in line with the position of other African states, not one of whom voted in favour of the resolution. In cases like this, South Africa often justifies its positions on the basis that it must show solidarity with the rest of Africa. This is not what is expected of true leadership, which should take risks. These examples could, however, also be interpreted as part of a deliberate strategy by South Africa to avoid being seen as promoting ideas that are not in line with the beliefs and interests of its regional counterparts, as this could undermine its claims to leadership. As contended in the earlier section, South Africa is in the unenviable position where many of its foreign policy ambitions depend on its claim to represent Africa in various international fora. It therefore has to walk a fine line to avoid alienating other African states.

Another area in which South Africa, given its unique history and the struggle against apartheid, was expected to exhibit normative leadership was in democracy promotion. As Clark (2016, 35) however notes, "South Africa has generally seemed insouciant about the decline of African democracy; it has rarely if ever made an issue of the death of democratic regimes on the continent." The government's lack of action with regard to the threats of democracy in Zimbabwe and its tolerance of another neighbour—Swaziland's—authoritarian monarchy are cases in point. South Africa arguably realised early on that, in a continent with diverse political systems, it would not be in its interests to try to impose any one particular form of governance too assertively. This inaction on the issue of democracy also reflects a similar unwillingness to speak out against human rights abuses on the continent, something which is characteristic of intra-African diplomacy. It has been explained by, among others, Tieku (2012), who argues that the roots of African solidarity lie in the nature of African societies and states, which is communal rather than individualist.

Similarly, with regard to the potential to promote a particular economic ideology aimed at promoting economic development in Africa, Clark (2016, 38) claims that South Africa has been "distinctly nonhegemonic."

This is partly due to the heated domestic debates about the preferred economic model for a state like South Africa.

Representational Leadership

South Africa has built its post-apartheid foreign policy largely on the back of its claim to represent not just its own citizens but the sub-Saharan African region and at times the African continent. South African leaders have consistently emphasised that they speak on behalf of Africa when they have attended meetings of, for example, the G20, as the only African state. The problem, of course, is that South Africa has never been given a mandate from the AU or any other regional organisation to officially represent it. The country's membership of the BRICS grouping has also been justified on the basis that it represents the interest of all of Africa in this forum. This was underlined in 2014, when South Africa hosted the BRICS summit under the theme "BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation." The extent to which its BRICS membership will bring the much-touted economic benefits to South Africa and the continent is, however, increasingly being questioned.

This claim to represent Africa can be seen as a double-sided strategy. On the one hand, it is what gives South Africa access to international groupings and leadership positions that are far beyond its reach were it to be judged purely on its own merit. On the other hand, through its memberships of these groupings, South Africa lobbies for support from its African counterparts, on the basis that it represents them in these fora. The extent to which it has successfully championed broader African interests in multilateral fora like the UNSC, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the G20, and the BRICS has been varied. While, for example, as a non-permanent member on the UNSC, South Africa consistently placed issues of concern to Africa on the agenda, such as the debate about greater cooperation between the AU and the UN in maintaining peace on the continent, in other fora such as the WTO, it was less clear that South Africa was not simply promoting its own interests, sometimes at the expense of less developed African states.

Challenges to Exercising Leadership

Finally, we turn to the challenges undermining South Africa's successful role enactment. Besides material limitations, a lack of regional recognition and domestic constraints is perhaps the most pertinent. Despite all of South Africa's efforts, the relationship between it and the rest of the continent, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, where its influence is the strongest, remains tense. A recent study done by Schoeman et al. (2017) confirms the perception that South Africa enjoys little respect and legitimacy from the rest of Africa. Through a round of interviews with senior AU officials conducted in Addis Ababa, they found that there was an increasing lack of trust in South Africa's motivations. Specifically, despite often touted claims that it uses platforms like the G20 and BRICS to promote opportunities for all of Africa, the suspicion is that its own economic interests always enjoy priority. It is also perceived to be a bully trying to promote its own agenda at the expense of that of the rest of Africa. As the authors point out, while some of these claims are disputed by South African diplomats and government officials, they remain widespread perceptions in Africa. While South Africa's ability to provide public goods is welcomed, there remains suspicion about its longer-term intentions. Overall, its leadership is marked by grudging acceptance, based on recognition by other states of the utility of Pretoria's leadership.

In addition to a lack of acceptance, South Africa's domestic predicaments present perhaps the greatest challenge to its leadership potential. Twenty years after its transition to democracy, the country is beset by seemingly intractable domestic problems. These range from an economy in dire straits, rampant poverty, unemployment (currently at 27.7%, according to StatsSA 2017), high levels of crime and corruption, and violent service delivery protests. All of this is further compounded by a government in crisis, factionalism in the ruling party, and an overall lack of effective leadership. The reports on state capture by the public prosecutor Thuli Madonsela in 2016 and the State Capacity Research Project in 2017 have highlighted the extent to which private interests[10] have influenced the South African government's decision-making processes. The 2017 report documents how the Zuma-centred power elite "has built a symbiotic relationship between the constitutional state and the shadow state" in order to execute what the report calls a "silent coup" (2017, 2).

Part of South Africa's expected leadership role in Africa was to promote good governance, including democracy and human rights. This was easier

to do in the heady days following the end of apartheid, when South Africa was regarded as a role model of democracy. In recent years, its own struggles with consolidating its democracy have made this increasingly challenging. The liberation party's grip on power is increasingly weakening, as evidenced in last year's municipal election results. While some see this as a positive sign of a democracy being consolidated, the response by the ANC has been to tighten its grip on power, as was displayed again during the annual opening of parliament, when the army was brought in as a show of force and to protect the increasingly embattled senior ANC leadership from opposition parties and the protesting masses. With the tripartite alliance[11] continuing to be divided, the outcome of this year's ANC national conference will be a major factor in determining the course that SA takes over the next few years—both with regard to domestic policy but also in terms of its position in Africa. These intra-governmental divisions also extend to the broader society, with South Africa still lacking a unified national identity. This makes it very difficult for the country to promote a coherent identity and accompanying foreign policy regionally, and internationally.

Besides the constraints outlined earlier, another reason for Pretoria's waning influence is a lack of strategic vision and leadership within government regarding the Africa strategy. While the importance of Africa continues to be emphasised in speeches and policy documents, this is not backed up by concomitant policies. Instead, there is an obvious deficiency in terms of tactical thinking about strategic African partners – in other words, which states South Africa should focus on developing deeper relationships with for economic, political or security reasons. There is also no concerted soft power strategy towards Africa. While South Africa might no longer possess the material capabilities to unilaterally influence debates on the continent, "it should not underestimate the utility of being known as a soft power that champions the interests of those who are often unheard or ignored on the global stage" (Mthembu 2017, 13). As has been argued before (see Smith 2011), soft power is an important instrument in the quest for regional recognition and acceptance. Unfortunately, while some of South Africa's influence in both regional and global affairs has undoubtedly been due to the moral authority it accrued from its peaceful transition to democracy, coupled with the international stature of Nelson Mandela, this soft power resource has been in serious decline. In addition, there has been no concerted soft power or accompanying public diplomacy strategy focused on Africa.[12] This is particularly short sighted, given the importance of this region to South Africa's foreign policy as well as the challenges

associated with a lack of regional legitimacy. This could undermine Alden and Schoeman's (2015, 251) assumption that South Africa will continue to be regarded as a regional power and rewarded with leadership positions in international groupings despite the challenges outlined earlier and based on what they call its "symbolic representivity."

Conclusion: Taking Stock of South Africa's Regional Policy

So, what does all this mean for South Africa's continued status both as a regional power and as a regional leader, as well as for potential contenders like Angola or Nigeria? To answer this question, it is important that we return to a point made at the outset: namely that it is important to distinguish between the role of a regional power and leader. While these two are clearly similar and often intertwined, they are not synonymous. It is, for example, possible that a state is the preeminent power in a particular region—in terms of its economic and military might—but that it does not have the political will to translate that power into influence.

In a 2015 study on power and influence in Africa, the Institute for Security Studies employed the Hillebrand-Herman-Moyer index (which includes a measure of demographics, economics, and military but also technology and diplomacy) to examine the changing power capabilities of Africa's so-called big five: South Africa, Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. The conclusion was that South Africa's power will stagnate at best, or decline. Essentially, Nigeria is currently seen as punching below its weight, while South Africa continues to punch above. The authors, Cilliers et al. (2015, 22) note, "only a very determined foreign policy and credible leadership could make up for the associated deficit in (forecasted) capabilities." This alludes to the question to what extent diplomatic and ideational influence are dependent on economic power. While there seem to be contenders for the position of regional power (based purely on material considerations), whether South Africa has a future as a regional *leader* depends on how much emphasis is placed on these material aspects of regional leadership.

Ultimately, however, our assessment of South Africa's continued leadership role will depend on how we define its region. It is essential that we disaggregate South Africa's position in Southern Africa—particularly in the SADC region—from its role on the continent as a whole.[13] While

Pretoria seems to be more committed to and successful in exercising leadership in the SADC region, it could be argued that this is more the result of geographical and historical factors rather than a deliberate strategy. At the same time, it is losing influence even here—if we consider, for example, South Africa's waning political influence in Zimbabwe. In spite of this, as well as the rise of contenders for the position of a regional power (albeit currently only based on material capabilities), it is likely to remain the regional leader in the SADC region for the foreseeable future, based on credits built up in the past. Its loss of influence is, however, in economic, political, and ideational terms, more acute at the broader continental level. Nevertheless, for the time being, it remains in a prominent position, arguably predominantly on account of its representational leadership. This, despite the fact that its followers are all but enthusiastic. South African foreign policymakers cannot, however, afford to sit back and watch the situation unfold, for if South Africa loses its claim to regional leadership in Africa, this would also mean that the basis for its inclusion in the global system of governance is terminated.

Notes

1. There was, however, some questioning as to the accuracy of these new figures, which were largely based on a rebasing of Nigeria's GDP. The unreliability of such comparisons is also due to fluctuations in foreign exchange rates. In 2016, South Africa again officially overtook Nigeria as the largest African economy, due to an increase in the exchange rate value of the rand, which subsequently increased the US dollar value of the South African GDP.
2. For a comprehensive overview of South Africa's development assistance activities—both past and present—see Besharati (2013).
3. One of the first things the ANC did when it assumed power was to forgive the debts of Swaziland, Mozambique, and Namibia, each valued in the neighbourhood of ZAR 1 billion (Besharati 2013, 1).
4. Created in 1910, SACU members are South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, and Swaziland.
5. For an exploration of how South Africa's own negotiated transition has influenced its regional conflict resolution strategies, see Williams (2015).
6. For more on this, see Miti (n.d.).
7. The assumption is often that regional powers take on a position of leadership to advance their own interests. However, questions have been raised

about the extent to which South Africa has been able to translate its investments in Africa—through the provision of public goods, for example, into tangible benefits. Increasingly, there is criticism that while South Africa has partly footed the bill for, as a case in point, the peace process in the DRC, other states—particularly emerging powers like China—are deriving the greatest benefit from the establishment of peace and stability.

8. For a discussion of South Africa's policy of quiet diplomacy towards Zimbabwe, see Lipton (2009).
9. For a differentiation between different types of ideational leadership—intellectual, entrepreneurial, and implementation—see Geldenhuys (2010).
10. At the heart of the allegations of state capture is the fraternal relationship between President Jacob Zuma and the Gupta family, three naturalised brothers of Indian origin who have built an expansive business empire on the backs of government contracts since their arrival in South Africa in 1993.
11. This is an alliance between the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).
12. See Smith and van der Westhuizen (2015).
13. Interestingly, Clark (2016, 33) highlights the geographical limitations to South Africa's continental leadership, arguing that "[i]ts capability for regional or subregional hegemony would have been increased considerably if the country had been physically situated elsewhere on the continent." This, he argues, is because "South Africa's peripheral location in relation to the geographic center of continental Africa certainly limits its ability to respond in a military fashion to crises around the continent" (Clark 2016, 42).

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