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The Search for Global-Regional Power: South Africa in Africa and the World

Karen Smith and Faith Mabera

INTRODUCTION

Three decades since South Africa's celebrated democratic transition in 1994, the country is navigating a markedly different regional and global landscape. The re-orientation of its foreign policy in the post-apartheid era was viewed as a crucial component of broader efforts to carve out a positive image and establish a venerable position within the international community. This chapter seeks to build on an earlier analysis (Smith 2016) of South Africa's international relations in a rapidly evolving and

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fluid international order. Starting from the assumption that South Africa is a leading developing state, this chapter will explore its foreign policy aspirations and identify some of the strategies used in pursuing them. It will look to discern patterns of continuity and change that have shaped both the normative, ideational, and material aspects of its foreign policy making and implementation. It will also reflect on how successful these strategies have been, and outline some of the challenges facing the country in achieving its national interests and influencing the international system of global governance. First, however, it is important to provide some conceptual clarifications about the regional and global role(s) South Africa has adopted or been assigned.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on definitions of regional powers (see Nolte 2010; Schoeman 2000), South Africa clearly qualifies, in the sense that it is dominant in a geographically restricted area and plays an active role in the region in terms of issues like security. The country is also often described—both by policymakers and scholars—as a middle power due to its position in the global hierarchy of power and its penchant for a specific type of multilateral behavior, including a tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international issues and to adopt compromise positions in international disputes (Nel et al. 2000: 45–46). The government recognized early on that “South Africa possesses the intrinsic capabilities to play the role of a middle power in global terms” (Department of Foreign Affairs 1996: 66). Relatedly, van der Westhuizen (2011: 209) contends, “If there is a single analytical framework that over the past 15 years or more has acquired a degree of consistent use amongst analysts of foreign policy, it is the notion that South Africa is an emerging middle power.” In this regard, Jordaan’s 2003 article, in which he distinguished between traditional and emerging middle powers, remains instructive. One important distinction is that, while traditional middle powers like Canada tend to be relatively weak in their regions, emerging middle powers are also regional powers. In fact, their global ambitions are largely based on their regional preponderance. In addition, while traditional middle powers tend to engage in appeasement, emerging powers can be characterized as reformists.

The term used in this volume, “leading developing nation” encapsulates these ideas of South Africa as a state that sees itself (and is seen by others) as a leader in its region, the developing world more broadly,

but also increasingly in the wider global arena. It is similar to the term “global regional powers of the developing world” developed by Nel and Stephen (2010) to refer to South Africa, India, and Brazil. They point out that while these states are regional powers in that they “identify with the interests of a distinct developmental ‘region’,” they also play a leadership role in global issues impacting developing countries, such as international trade negotiations (Nel and Stephen 2010: 73). South Africa’s foreign policy strategies must be seen in this context. While foreign policymakers have a predominantly southern African focus, the aspiration is for South Africa to influence international relations at the global level, in order to advance the interests of itself and its region.

Since its transition to democracy in 1994, the South African government has actively pursued greater international influence, aimed at advancing not only its own domestic interests, but also broader continental and regional goals. In this regard, the government likes to present South Africa as a state that shuns narrow self-interest in favor of longer-term ambitions aimed at promoting the greater global good through equity and development. This has been emphasized on numerous occasions. In a statement to parliament in 2001, then minister of foreign affairs Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma said

Our foreign policy ... is not only anchored in our domestic policy, but on this very fact and responsibility... that South Africa offers hope for all humanity. Thus, we cannot only strive for a better life for South Africans, but we have to contribute to the on-going struggle for a better world. That is what gives us a degree of moral authority in the world. (Dlamini-Zuma 2001).

This stated commitment to an active and ambitious foreign policy has not been purely rhetorical. Soon after re-entering the international society of states in 1994, after years of isolation, South Africa took up leading positions in a number of multilateral institutions, both within the United Nations (UN) system and outside of it. On the African continent, it took the lead in transforming the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU), and started playing an active role in conflict resolution and norm leadership on the continent. At the same time, the decline in South Africa’s moral and diplomatic capital over the years due to a number of (geo)political, strategic, and operational factors has raised questions about its continued regional and global impact. Such critiques

have pointed to alternative characterizations with respect to its positioning in power hierarchy terms, making a case for it to be seen as an “awkward power,” defined as “a state with significant capabilities and influence, which defies neat categorisations onto the conventional power hierarchies, on account of its contested, neglected, or ambivalent international status” (Abbondaza and Wilkins 2022: 24). In the following section, we outline how these foreign policy ambitions and constraints have played out in practice.

SOUTH AFRICA’S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES: PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

A review of South Africa’s foreign policy trajectory across various administrations since 1994 paints a picture of both continuity and change. In the immediate post-1994 period, the administration headed by President Nelson Mandela (1994–1999) was mainly focused on re-orienting the post-apartheid foreign policy in line with South Africa re-admittance into the international community of nations. This was followed by the years under President Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008)—arguably the golden era of South Africa’s foreign policy—that saw a greater showcasing of South Africa’s regional leadership role, anchored on ideals such as the African Renaissance, Pan-Africanism, and the greater leveraging of African agency in continental and global affairs.

Under President Jacob Zuma (2009–2018), the country’s glowing international credentials dimmed considerably amid mounting domestic economic challenges, rampant corruption, and poor governance, coupled with foreign policy debacles at the regional and global levels. Beginning in 2018, the administration of President Cyril Ramaphosa opted to retain aspects of continuity with regard to the broader structure of policymaking and articulation of fundamental values. However, economic headwinds on the domestic front soon steered the Ramaphosa-led administration toward prioritization of domestic policies, based on an arguably distinctive reformist agenda. The growing emphasis on economic diplomacy complemented the government’s priorities in the economic sector, including economic recovery, infrastructure investment, and job creation, among others.

South Africa in the Global Arena

From the outset, the cornerstone of the new post-apartheid government's foreign policy was a commitment to multilateralism. This was expressed by then Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Aziz Pahad in 2007, when he said, "the importance of maintaining multilateralism has never been so pertinent ...[it] remains the most effective and efficient system for addressing global problems. In history no other form of inter-state cooperation has delivered the same results as multilateralism" (Pahad 2007). As a part of its commitment to promoting multilateralism alongside other like-minded countries, South Africa has endorsed the Alliance for Multilateralism, an informal network launched by France and Germany aimed at convening countries that are committed to defending and upholding the rules-based multilateral order and multilateral cooperation, based on the rule of law, on the UN Charter and international law (Alliance for Multilateralism 2019).

This underlines that, while it is no secret that South Africa is critical of the current multilateral system of global governance, it does not advocate for its dismantling but rather for its reform. While the country supports calls for reform of the decision-making powers of global organizations such as the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to make these institutions more representative, it is also a staunch defender of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, which it regards as cornerstones of a rules-based system of global governance. Its calls for reform are largely in response to what it views as contravention of the rules of the game on the basis of unilateralist action, especially by the USA. For example, many of South Africa's controversial votes while a non-permanent member of the UNSC (2007–2008, 2011–2012 and 2019–2020)—such as voting against condemning and imposing sanctions on states like Myanmar, Sudan, and Zimbabwe that stood accused of violating the human rights of their citizens—have retroactively been explained on the basis of procedural and institutional justifications: in other words, a desire to play by the rules of the game and force others to do so as well. This is rooted in a deep dissatisfaction with the way the USA and its Western allies are perceived to be disregarding the UN system and its rules through actions like the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and their inconsistent application of principles like the responsibility to protect.

This also goes some way to explaining South Africa's controversial position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In opting for a position of nonalignment by choosing to abstain on a series of votes against Russia in the UN General Assembly, South Africa joined those countries that assumed a neutral stance in the broader geopolitical war, choosing not to take sides, although not taking a strong stance against Russia's war of aggression was interpreted by many as a pro-Russian position. South Africa, like a number of global south (GS) countries, viewed the war against the backdrop of the West's framing of it as a geopolitical conflict that pitted the USA and its NATO allies against Russia by escalating military, financial, and diplomatic support to Ukraine. This particular reading of the war raised concerns in the GS about the USA's motives in punishing Russia, even at the expense of prolonging the fighting and the suffering on the ground in Ukraine. Overall, in contrast with traditional materialist-based explanations of foreign policy, the South African position on Ukraine highlighted the continued importance of historical relations and loyalties in understanding a state's identity and subsequent foreign policy behavior (see Naude 2021).

A number of insights can be drawn from South Africa's third term on the UNSC in 2019–2020, which in turn have implications for its profile as a global-regional power. During its tenure, South Africa actively sought to strengthen cooperation with the other two African countries (namely Equatorial Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire) serving on the Council at the time, and collectively referred to as the A3, with a view to advancing a coherent African position on relevant agenda items, while also shaping Council deliberations and outcomes. An example of close coordination during this period was the A3 position regarding the political developments in Sudan in 2019 (that is, reports of atrocities committed by the transitional authority), which was not only in alignment with directives from the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) in Addis Ababa which suspended Sudan but also managed to circumvent Russian and Chinese opposition to the renewal of the UN's peacekeeping mission in Darfur later that year (Singh and de Carvalho 2020: 7).

In addition to advancing a coordinated A3 position, South Africa also worked to forge stronger links between the AU and the UN, particularly during its Council presidency in October 2019. Building on achievements during its previous two terms, such as the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2033 (2012) which affirmed the importance of a more effective UN-AU partnership in international peace and security, South Africa led a joint

consultative meeting between the UNSC and PSC laying the groundwork for more institutionalized working methods between the two councils (Singh and de Carvalho 2020: 11). Another affirmation of its global-regional role was South Africa's advocacy for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, evident in its championing of the adoption of Resolution 2493 (2019) which pressed for the "full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in all stages of peace processes." The fact that South Africa was the penholder of this resolution and that it was unanimously passed, despite some objections to the wording related to "full implementation," attests to the level of diplomatic activism that was needed to garner support for its adoption (Singh and de Carvalho 2020: 13).

At the same time, South Africa's foreign policy at the international level has continued to be criticized for its apparent ambiguity and inconsistency (Bischoff 2003; Black and Wilson 2004; Nathan 2005; Serrao and Bischoff 2010; Borer and Mills 2011; Landsberg 2012; Melber 2014; Black and Hornsby 2016). One could argue that the source of these contradictions can be found in South Africa's multiple identities as a state and the concomitant multiple interests it pursues. On the one hand, it promotes itself as, first and foremost, an African state that prioritizes the interests of the continent in its foreign policy. On the other hand, it is also a liberal democracy with what are perceived by some as "Western" values relating to the protection of human rights and democracy entrenched in its constitution. These two identities are the reason why South Africa has been criticized both for trying to impose Western ideas on African states and at the same time for not being critical enough of African states that commit human rights abuses (see, for example, Jordaan 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Berry 2022).

Relatedly, Monyae describes how, after 1994, South Africa embarked on a "more or less universalist foreign policy of embracing all and sundry, Western and non-Western countries alike" (2011: 140). South Africa's refusal to break off its friendships with what were perceived by the USA as rogue states, including Cuba and Iran, raised some eyebrows. In the early post-apartheid era, this strategy of multialignment or universalism perhaps best encapsulated South Africa's overall foreign policy strategy. While always showing a preference for South-South cooperation by playing a leadership role in institutions such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77), and promoting its relations with Africa in particular, South Africa has pursued a strategy of dual engagement with

the GS and the global north. Put differently, although advancement of the GS agenda has been highlighted as a strategic priority of its foreign policy engagements, South Africa has concurrently fostered beneficial relations with strategic formations of the Global North (NS) such as the European Union (EU), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Group of Seven (G7), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and in hybrid north–south groupings like the G20. Habib notes that “[t]his dual engagement in the worlds of the South and North enables South Africa to both fulfil its broader nationalist agenda and its narrower strategic orientation to engage with the intention of subverting existing structures of power so as to permit the emergence of a more equitable global order” (2009: 151).

South Africa and the Global South

South–South Cooperation

As noted above, there is a long history underlying the commitment to the GS that policymakers still draw on. An important facet of South Africa’s economic diplomacy agenda is a stated commitment to a fair and equitable international economic order that accommodates the interests of the GS. In this regard, South Africa has taken up a global activist role in forums such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) where it has championed the interests of developing countries. For instance, in 2020, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa and India put forward a waiver proposal for the temporary suspension of intellectual property rights related to Covid-19 diagnostics and therapeutics, a move intended to allow developing countries to produce vaccines and equipment without breaching WTO regulations under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement. Since then, discussions on the proposal have been gridlocked mainly due to opposition from a number of developed countries on the grounds that it would undermine pharmaceutical innovation (Erasmus 2021). Despite this, the position of South Africa at the forefront of the fight for access to vaccines speaks to its solidarity with the GS as a cornerstone of its foreign policy.

The African Agenda

While south–south cooperation plays a central role in South Africa’s foreign policy agenda, the country remains focused, first and foremost, on Africa. Almost all of its development assistance, for example, goes to

African states. Consisting mostly of concessionary loans and grants, South Africa's development assistance to African countries has been channeled largely via the African Renaissance Fund (ARF)—the most visibly structured component of its development cooperation. The ARF is aimed at shoring up the African agenda through programs such as the provision of humanitarian assistance, promotion of democracy and good governance, socioeconomic development and integration, and the prevention and resolution of conflict (Department of International Relations and Cooperation [DIRCO] 2022b). Some of the activities that the ARF has been involved in include the provision of humanitarian aid amounting to ZAR100 million (US\$5.5 million) to South Sudan in 2021, an allocation of ZAR 5.6 million (about US\$306,000) in 2022 in support of facilitation of the Lesotho Peace Process, provision of Covid-19 vaccines to 26 African countries in 2021, and programmatic support to training and capacity-building for the AU women empowerment project in 2021 (*ibid.*). In this sense, South Africa's role as essentially a regional power with global ambitions is underlined.

As a cornerstone of South Africa's foreign policy, its regional approach remains unchallenged. However, ironically, the country's position in the region remains a contested one. No consensus has been reached about whether South Africa's role is best described as that of a hegemon or partner in Africa (Destradi 2010; Solomon 1997; Tshaba et al. 2022). One of the defining features of a regional power is its role in managing security in its region, and South Africa has committed a substantial amount of resources to various efforts to address conflict on the African continent. In 2020, South Africa assumed the chair of the AU with a view to advancing the African agenda as a core tenet of its foreign policy, guided by the continental strategic priorities as outlined under Agenda 2063. As a part of its broader peace and security agenda, the AU's theme in 2020 was "Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development." In this regard, President Cyril Ramaphosa hosted the 14th Extraordinary Summit on Silencing the Guns which resulted in the decision to extend the implementation of the roadmap for a period of ten years, from 2021 to 2030, in addition to a provision for the conduct of periodic reviews every two years. South Africa also played a leading role in multilateral and bilateral efforts aimed at resolving some of the continent's ongoing conflicts. A case in point was President Ramaphosa's mediation role as part of the AU's initiative to address the conflict in Ethiopia that broke out in November 2020 between that country's federal

government and forces aligned with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front. Furthermore, South Africa is a member of the AU Committee of Five on South Sudan which played a major role in facilitating the establishment of the Transitional Government of National Unity in South Sudan in 2020 (Republic of South Africa, Government Communication and Information System 2021). In the southern African region, South Africa's commitment toward peace diplomacy was reflected in its contribution to the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) that was deployed in July 2021 in response to the evolving violent extremist threat in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province (Club of Mozambique 2021).

Despite this list of achievements, 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 and able—in terms of capacity—to contribute to peace and security on the continent. As a case in point, an evaluation of the effectiveness of SAMIM in fulfilling its core mandates with respect to regional security and stability (Dzinesa 2023: 214), points to a number of questions about South Africa's ability to effectively make use of military diplomacy as a key instrument of its foreign policy in the region, especially given the discernible decline of the South African National Defense Forces in recent years due to a number of operational and strategic constraints. South Africa's peace diplomacy, which includes its participation in international peace missions, is a key aspect of its regional leadership role, hence a reduced capacity to leverage its material capabilities in the service of foreign and security interests in its near abroad will lead to a reconsiderations of its strategic goals.

FOREIGN POLICY DRIVERS

A History of Struggle

South Africa's motivations for pursuing regional and global ambitions are based on a mix of instrumentalist and normative considerations. One of the initial stimuli for taking a leading role internationally was the country's history of struggle against apartheid, and the role of the international community in supporting the liberation movements. This is reflected in the following statement:

The values that inspire and guide South Africa as a nation are deeply rooted in the long years of struggle for liberation. As a beneficiary of many acts of selfless solidarity in the past, South Africa believes strongly that what it wished for its people should be what it wishes for the citizens of the world (DIRCO 2011: 11)

In addition, high international expectations of the newly democratized state put a heavy burden on the African National Congress (ANC) leadership to take on a regional leadership role in southern Africa and, in particular, to be instrumental in creating much-needed continental peace and stability. The then vice president Thabo Mbeki recognized this when, in 1995, he stated,

There are also expectations from Africa that South Africa should make significant contributions towards peace and development on the continent. South Africa's problems cannot be worse than those experienced by other African countries. Despite our own limitations and problems, it is our objective to make a significant contribution to ensuring peace, democracy, respect for human rights and sustained development. These principles are fundamental to our foreign policy. (Department of Foreign Affairs 1996: 7)

This is tied to notions of exceptionalism, which have become a part of South Africa's own national identity construction, based on the idea that the country's unique history and peaceful transition to democracy somehow justifies and even entitles South Africa to play a global role. This identity has been reinforced by the international community that, following South Africa's transition to democracy, anointed it as a model African democracy, and a promoter of human rights and democracy. As deputy minister of foreign affairs, Aziz Pahad said at the time, "a leadership role... has been imposed on South Africa" (quoted in Adebajo et al. 2007: 29). As a result, South Africa's leaders were invited to multilateral forums of the advanced, industrialized countries (such as the Group of Eight and World Economic Forum), where they were regarded as spokespersons not only for South Africa but also for the African continent, and the developing world in general. Powerful Western states like the USA have also looked to South Africa as a "pivotal state" that is expected to be at the forefront of resolving regional crises. Similarly, the EU entered into a strategic partnership with South Africa in 1997, calling it a "leading nation and a peace broker in the region" and noting that

this meant, “South Africa is therefore a natural partner to Europe on the African continent and on a global level” (Prys 2008: 24). Kornegay (2011: 203) notes that “non-African interlocutors have tended to relate to South Africa as the continent’s ‘chief negotiator’ at the diplomatic negotiating levels of global ‘club governance’.” This recognition has enabled it to punch above its weight in terms of the influence it has been able to exert in global multilateral institutions, far beyond what one would expect of a state with its limited capacity.

At the same time, during its fight for liberation from the apartheid system, the now ruling party developed strong ideological ties with other non-Western states (including the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba) that supported it in its struggle against the National Party apartheid government. As with most African liberation movements, the rhetoric of the organization was characterized by a strong anti-imperialist worldview. The legacy of this history is still reflected in some of South Africa’s foreign policy behavior, often to the discontent of Western powers.

Shifts in the External Environment

An assessment of contemporary South Africa’s foreign policy has to take stock of notable shifts in both the external as well as internal environment and how these have influenced the orientation and implementation of its international relations. At the global level, pivotal changes include the emergence of a multipolar order, the deepening of strategic rivalry between major powers, and the contested capacities of global governance institutions to effectively deliver public goods and address transnational challenges. Closer to home at the regional level, the geostrategic value of Africa has risen in recent years, driven by improved macroeconomic conditions, economic growth, favorable demographic trends, and enhanced investments in sectors such as internet communications technology, agribusiness, and energy. The result has been a growing presence of foreign powers in Africa—including China, Turkey, Russia, and India, among others, whose activities have been underpinned by a broad array of interests and imperatives. Despite the fluidity that has characterized its regional and global environment, the fundamental principles of South African foreign policy have remained determinedly resolute. This was affirmed by Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Naledi Pandor when she noted:

Since 1994 democratic South Africa has been a principled exponent of advancing the African Agenda and contributing to the maintenance of global peace and security, as well as building a better world. Whatever the emphasis and variance on the theme, the integrity of this grounding framework has remained intact over more than two decades of democratic South Africa. (Pandor 2020).

In the face of a changing global landscape, South Africa's place in the world has been consistently framed by its identity as a champion of Pan-Africanism, solidarity with the GS, and a shared African destiny. Additionally, South Africa's foreign policy has been driven by a normative approach, informed by values and provisions enshrined in its constitution (including the promotion of human dignity, advancement of human rights and freedoms, promotion of the rule of law and democracy, non-racialism and non-sexism). Linked to this, South Africa has also positioned itself as an avid defender of multilateralism, the rules-based multilateral system, and an advocate for reform of global governance institutions. Its membership in groups such as the NAM, BRICS, and the G77 underscores its close affinity with the GS, and its support for related causes pertinent to development, support for struggles for liberation and self-determination, UN reform, human rights, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, among others.

The Domestic Context

South Africa's foreign policy has not remained static over the years but has evolved in line with the complex interlinkages between the global and domestic contexts. At the domestic level, South Africa's economic and political trajectory in the 2020s is markedly different from the environment that existed during its democratic transition in 1994, and this has had a major impact on its international relations.

Three decades after apartheid, the positive economic outlook of the first years of the democratic transition has given way to grim economic realities characterized by slow growth, pervasive inequality, and high levels of structural unemployment. In addition to the prevailing economic challenges, widespread corruption and state capture that were particularly acute during the Jacob Zuma administration (2009–2018) catapulted domestic priorities to the top of the government's policy agenda. Consequently, the administration of President Cyril Ramaphosa, who came to

power in 2018, has positioned economic diplomacy as a core priority of foreign policy engagements, stylized as “a New Dawn” informed by a tenor of reform and revitalization under new leadership. This was highlighted during Ramaphosa’s maiden State of the Nation speech in 2018 in which he laid out a long laundry list of priorities, including elements such as promoting foreign direct investment as a way of stimulating economic growth, enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of state institutions, and leveraging economic diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy. The emphasis on domestic exigencies not only underlines the intricacies between foreign policy and domestic policy but also the expanding discourses that frame foreign policy as a part of public policy, which in turn has a bearing on engagement with domestic constituencies.

A pertinent question that arises regarding foreign policymaking has been the extent to which the president influences the formulation and effectuation of South Africa’s foreign policy. South Africa’s presidents have played a central role in the foreign policy machinery, albeit to varying degrees across the various administrations since the democratic transition. As noted above, the Mbeki administration has often been labeled as the golden era of South Africa’s foreign policy on account of the degree of rationalization and formalization that was lent to the country’s post-apartheid foreign policy agenda. Moreover, President Mbeki’s markedly “hands-on” approach to foreign policy decision-making pointed to the key role he played in advancing the country’s international relations. According to Masters (2012: 37), over the years, a discernible approach to foreign policymaking has taken shape wherein the president continues to occupy a predominant role but with greater involvement of a plurality of foreign policy stakeholders, including government departments, parliament, and various consultative groups representing business, academia, and civil society.

In addition to the dynamics outlined above, national interest is a key driver of foreign policymaking and implementation. After decades of debates and equivocation, in August 2022, the DIRCO launched “The Framework Document on South Africa’s National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment” (DIRCO 2022a). The document defines South Africa’s national interest as “the protection and promotion of its national sovereignty and constitutional order, the well-being, safety and prosperity of its citizens, and a better Africa and world.” By ensuring a greater degree of coherence between a clearly defined national interest

and the values and principles that underpin its foreign policy orientation, the national interest framework document is expected to strengthen consistency and predictability in South Africa's international relations, something which has been visibly absent and heavily criticized both by internal and external commentators. The extent to which this will be realised, given the inconsistencies in the document, remains to be seen.

While such a document provides an important foundation for foreign policy, its effective implementation is also determined by the existence of capable, functional, and professional foreign service corps. Besides a lack of resources, the practice of privileging political appointees in key diplomatic posts above professional career diplomats has been detrimental to effective foreign policymaking. Kornegay's assessment (2011: 209) that, in terms of budgetary allocation, quality, and training of staff, South Africa's foreign service does not reflect that of a leading regional power still rings true. Relatedly, the tension between different government departments regarding who should lead with regard to foreign policy—particularly tangible between DIRCO and the Department of Trade and Industry when it comes to matters of economic diplomacy and trade policy—persists. In this regard, in June 2020, President Ramaphosa signed into law South Africa's Foreign Service Act 26 of 2019 (Republic of South Africa 2020), aimed at enhancing the professionalism, efficiency, and accountability of the country's foreign service, as well as creating more synergy across the various levels of governments in the conduct of international relations. How the developments outlined above have been manifested in the execution of foreign policy is what we turn to next.

ASSESSING SOUTH AFRICA'S FOREIGN POLICY ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

South Africa has undoubtedly made great strides in its foreign policy achievements since 1994. Not only did it successfully re-enter the society of states after decades of isolation, but it made a grand entrance by taking up leadership positions in organizations like the NAM, and subsequently representing Africa in various global forums. South Africa's election to the UNSC as one of the non-permanent representatives of the African continent for 2007/2008 and again in 2011/2012 and 2019/2020 was regarded as a nod of approval by both its African counterparts and the international community at large. Because of its participation in institutions of global governance, together with recognition by the international

community as a regional leader, the country has been able to exert influence far beyond its material status on many issues.

It is true that the country has exerted influence on developments on the continent, particularly in terms of peace and security through its role in the reconstruction of Africa's institutional architecture, and through its stated promotion of African interests in international forums. Yet, questions remain about the extent to which the rhetoric of solidarity and representation has delivered in terms of policy outcomes or impact. Relatedly, in the regional context, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where its influence is strongest, acceptance of South Africa as a legitimate regional leader remains largely absent.¹ This highlights the weakness behind an essential element of South Africa's foreign policy strategy, namely that of claims to representation. South Africa has built its post-apartheid foreign policy largely on the back of its claim to represent not just its own citizens, but also the sub-Saharan African region, the African continent, and sometimes even the GS as a whole in multi-lateral governance. Linked to these claims, South Africa also purports to be promoting a global cause, namely striving to bring about the reform of what it perceives to be an unjust, inequitable, global order. This is another way of justifying its increased international influence, that is, by claiming that it is acting not just on behalf of its own interests or those of Africa, but in the interests of all the world's poor and marginalized states and people. For some observers, (see, for instance, Spies 2022: 215), South Africa's stated solidarity and affiliation with Africa and the Global South have amounted to little more than optics feeding into the West-versus-the-Rest-discourse.

The claim to represent Africa can be seen as a two-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 where it to be judged purely on its own merit. On the other hand, through its memberships of groupings like BRICS and the G20, South Africa lobbies for support from its African counterparts, on the basis that it represents them in these fora. For example, South Africa's insistence that its membership of the BRICS is aimed at promoting BRIC–Africa relations and is in the interests of all African states could be interpreted as yet another attempt to make its participation in this grouping more acceptable to the rest of the continent. Getting buy-in from other African states for its international activism, which it almost always justifies on the idea that it represents all of Africa, has been a constant battle.

Analysts like Alden and Schoeman (2015) suggest that the country's regional leadership role is undermined by its material weakness and uneven record of foreign policy successes. Their explanation for why, despite these shortcomings, South Africa continues to be given leadership positions in international bodies, including the UNSC and the G20 is that this is due to "symbolic representivity" rather than substantive hegemony; in other words, "it 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). Moreover, South Africa was, for the longest time, the largest economy and most industrialized state on the African continent, and this has been an important element in its regional power status. The serious structural economic problems accompanied by the concomitant growth in material power of regional competitors will have a significant impact on its future claims to regional leadership and representation (see Smith 2018). At the time of going to press (December 2023) South Africa instigated proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alleging that Israel's conduct in the Gaza Strip was in violation of its obligations under the Genocide Convention. Some have praised South Africa's leadership on this issues, which highlighted the inaction and apparent unwillingness of Western governments to stop the carnage in Gaza, viewing it as constituting a welcome return to a Mandela-era value-based foreign policy informed by a commitment to human rights. Others have dismissed it as selective and performative activism by a state that has lost much of its moral high ground, and remains silent about instances of genocide on its own continent, such as Sudan. It remains to be seen what the impact of this initiative will be on the country's foreign policy and its international reputation in the longer term.

CONCLUSION

The South African state continues to face a number of obstacles in achieving its foreign policy objectives. As noted above, despite its claims to representation, recognition as the legitimate leader of (sub-Saharan) Africa remains lacking. In addition to regional contestation, South Africa's domestic problems present perhaps the greatest challenge to its regional and global influence. Thirty years after its transition to democracy, the country is associated with high levels of inequality, violent crime, and

systemic corruption, seemingly intractable infrastructural problems, and a government in crisis as a result of factionalism within the ruling ANC party. These governance challenges also impact the country's foreign policy establishment and the goal of ensuring that the latter contributes to the achievement of its domestic developmental goals.

South Africa's ability to punch above its weight in the post-1994 international system was arguably strongly based on the reputation it was able to build because of its peaceful negotiated transition to democracy, the symbolism of the anti-apartheid struggle, and the gravitas of then-president Nelson Mandela. In recent years, this reputation has been severely tarnished, as a result of the prioritization of so-called pragmatic considerations at the expense of a more normative foreign policy. This is at the heart of the criticism of the country's foreign policy ambiguity or inconsistency (see, e.g., Nathan 2005; Serrao and Bischoff 2010), that is to say, the perceived vacillation between a stated emphasis on human rights and democracy, and a foreign policy that is in practice overriding based on ideological considerations and what some see as a disregard for human rights. In trying to pursue numerous and sometimes contradictory agendas through different foreign policy strategies, South Africa finds itself overextended and accused of inconsistency. At the same time, the South African case shows us that states are able to pursue two or more (sometimes apparently contradictory) strategies simultaneously. This relates to the position, often assumed by the government in defense of its actions, that while South Africa's foreign policy ambiguity is often highlighted as a major impediment, it could also simply be understood as an inescapable outcome of foreign policymaking in a complex, multi-lateral international setting, and could even be seen as an advantage. A multi-pronged foreign policy approach of ambiguity that allows for ad hoc decision-making based on what policymakers perceive to be in the national interest at any given time might just be the only possible strategy for a state that is still struggling to come to terms with its identity and its national interests. The changing global reality characterized by shifts in polarity and fluid geopolitical dynamics highlights the imperative of a pragmatic foreign policy that is attuned to the external environment, while not losing sight of fundamental values and principles that have shaped its unique identity.

NOTE

1. A study 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.

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