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South African foreign policy in a disorderly world: Will the centre hold?

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In his state of the nation address on 14 February 2013, President Jacob Zuma re-iterated the same themes that have formed the essential leitmotifs of South Africa foreign policy since 1994, echoing the same emphases and priorities of his predecessors, Presidents Mandela and Mbeki. He talked, inter alia, about contributing to a stronger African Union, supporting efforts to build a more stable and peaceful continent, building the pillars of South-South cooperation (through BRICS), and strengthening North-South relations, particularly with the US, Europe, and Japan. President Zuma has inherited a strong foundation in South Africa's international engagements and external relations, a foundation held together by the mortar of its moral capital and political stature.

The country's foreign policy over nearly two decades since its democratic transition is, arguably, one of the most successful and inspiring areas of post-apartheid public affairs and has been built on the paradoxical legacy of the apartheid state and the liberation movement. Its activist agenda since 1994 has been premised on a belief in the compatibility of human rights, democracy, solidarity politics and its own development needs. This is buttressed by multilateralism as the strategic anchor for pursuing foreign policy goals and implicitly, by the enduring notion of South Africa's presumed status as one of the de facto leaders of the African continent.

In terms of the country's dramatic rehabilitation from international pariah to bastion of African democracy, the primary challenge during President Mandela's era was repositioning South Africa on the global stage. Of particular importance was full representation and membership in international and regional organisations, establishing a global diplomatic presence, and transforming its instruments of foreign policy and the language of diplomacy. Of course, all these processes were greatly facilitated by Mandela's own international reputation and larger-than-life persona.

Yet one of the enduring dilemmas for the government has been how to balance the calculus of financial, commercial, political and defence interests with its role as moral crusader on behalf of worldwide human rights, social justice and democracy. In the view of critics at the time, the absence of conceptual coherence between these poles and an underlying strategic framework caused the Mandela foreign policy to 'lean all over the place'. There were also other constraints that inhibited and circumscribed South Africa's ambitious foreign policy agenda in southern Africa, Africa and globally. These included a pressing need for financial resources and investment; limited institutional capacity due to difficulties experienced in transforming key foreign relations and security institutions of the state; continuing misapprehension on the part of its officials about the complexity of Africa's political terrain and the content of its international relations; and persistent ambiguity over the nature of South Africa's identity as an African country.

President Mbeki was to provide a steadier compass by reshaping the contours of foreign policy with a stronger sense of purpose and vision and by giving

further substance to closer engagement with multilateral partners in Africa as well as with developing and developed countries. He invigorated South Africa's foreign policy in terms of a broader continental and global agenda that conformed in the first instance with the requirements of a developing country in the world's most impoverished continent. In global terms, South Africa is a medium-level country with a medium human-development ranking. Moreover, income inequality, and levels of poverty and unemployment continue to be among the highest in the world and seriously impair its growth and development prospects.

Secondly, and linked to the President's vision of an 'African Renaissance', was his effort to engage more earnestly and vigorously with the forces of globalisation as a means for improving South Africa and Africa's growth and development opportunities as well as those of developing countries more generally. For improved policy coordination and effective implementation of his initiatives, President Mbeki also consolidated the instruments of foreign policy through a reworking and clustering of government decision-making structures.

The crucible upon which South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy would be judged was in the regional and continental contexts. The southern African region—thought to be the area where South Africa could readily exercise its influence—has proven to be a much more problematic theatre of operation than expected. While South Africa has made great strides in promoting positive trade and development agendas, this has been somewhat compromised by the challenges that come with continuing authoritarian and repressive tendencies among governments, some post-war reconstruction challenges, fragile peace and democratic transitions, mounting levels of poverty, sluggish economic growth, and the tragic effects of the HIV/Aids pandemic. Whereas concerns about human rights and democracy featured quite prominently in the immediate post-apartheid period, recourse to SADC—despite its formal commitment to these issues—has tended to circumscribe substantive action in support of these values. For example, the diplomatic approach towards Zimbabwe has underscored the limitations to overtly challenge the non-interventionist norm in SADC, while at the same time holding fast to the maxim that the problems in that country must be resolved by Zimbabweans themselves.

At the continental level, Africa has faced its own economic conundrums and political paralysis stemming from decades of misrule, resource wastage and corruption, civil wars, and environmental degradation. In terms of its 'Africa Agenda', South Africa's diplomacy has sought to reconstruct and promote a new institutional architecture to address such problems. Central to this thrust has been the establishment of the African Union (AU) as the governance custodian and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) as its socio-economic blueprint. South African participation in these continental initiatives inspired leaders of developed countries to give unprecedented attention to President Mbeki's messianic idea of an 'African Renaissance'.

The G-8 Action Plan for Africa (adopted at Kananaskis, Canada in 2002) was in large measure a result of Mbeki and other African leaders' advocacy at G-8 summits, starting at Cologne, Germany in 1999 with debt relief and thereafter, broadening the ambit of engagement on the basis of the Action Plan. At the bilateral level, President Mbeki also forged close links with South Africa's main trading partners, especially the US and EU but increasingly with China, Brazil, and India with whom high-level bi-national commissions were established. It should be borne in mind that forging and nurturing the diplomatic interface with these emerging powers very much served as the incubators for South Africa shaping and then joining the India, Brazil, and South Africa Forum (IBSA). Quite crucially, this logic later informed and was elaborated in South Africa joining the BRIC club (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). The high-water mark of this achievement will be President Zuma hosting his counterparts for the first BRICS summit to take place in South Africa in March 2013. In terms of developing a new South-South axis of cooperation, President Mbeki elevated South Africa's commitment to and solidarity with other developing countries to another important foreign policy priority. Their marginalisation and increasing poverty in the global system has been and continues to be of particular concern. All three presidents, for example, have been outspoken about the role of the World Bank and IMF in perpetuating crises and poverty among developing countries. Moreover, their undemocratic structures and practices have militated against more open, fair, and participative forms of global governance.

Restructuring UN Security Council and the reform of the UN system have also been critical multilateral themes and have weighed heavily in South Africa's foreign policy discourse. Several emerging powers such as Brazil, Turkey, India and others can justifiably lay claim to a permanent Security Council seat but

how this plays out in Africa will be particularly interesting since South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt have made no secret of their ambitions to also hold a permanent seat on behalf of the continent. South Africa's alliance with emerging powers such as IBSA and BRICS has augured well for cooperation in other multilateral forums such as the World Trade Organisation. It has also joined the G20 (a mix of developed and developing countries) which is an important portent for shifting the balance of power globally such that the developed countries can no longer steer global issues and concerns unilaterally.

Under the Mbeki and Zuma presidencies, South Africa has hosted an increasing number of international events, ranging from major UN conferences to sports tournaments. The exceptionally well-hosted and managed 2010 Soccer World Cup and the recently completed Africa Cup of Nations tournament are emblematic of the continuing imaging and branding success of SA Inc.

South Africa's multilateral agenda has very much been driven by a collective search for a form of global 'redistributive justice' that both widens and deepens the range of engagements started during the Mandela era. However, the terrain which South Africa has chosen for cultivating its foreign policy objectives is not an easy one. Several challenges persist and are the crucible which continues to test South Africa's foreign policy resolve and capability. As an avowedly continental power, can South Africa provide more assertive leadership in strengthening regional and continental security, especially as far as peace-keeping and conflict mediation is concerned? Events in Mali and elsewhere have immediately occupied newly-appointed Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as Chairperson of the AU Commission. Given their unsteady and highly politicised geneses as well as resource constraints, can South Africa really rely on the AU and Nepad to drive the pan-African security, growth and revival agendas? Is South Africa's faith in the ethical foundations of multilateralism a sufficient base from which to address the North-South divide and the growing gap between rich and poor countries? And can South Africa's global governance reform discourse succeed in a world where the realist dictates of asymmetric power and influence still hold strong sway, and where unilateral militarism by the US is still practiced with impunity?

These challenges must be posed against the backdrop of South Africa as a country that is still undergoing a daunting transition, exacerbated and scarred by poverty and inequality as the National Development Plan and its diagnostic assessment bears eloquent testimony to. However, what is truly remarkable about South Africa—in contrast with other post-transition regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America—is its unusually strong commitment to play an activist role on the global stage as a 'norm entrepreneur'. This acute sense of global mission for a better world and a better Africa is a product of its own successfully navigated transition from the cusp of an impending apocalypse.

As President Zuma navigates the ship-of-state through what is bound to be stormy and turbulent waters at home and abroad over the rest of this and his next presidential tenure, we would do well to remember those values which have inspired the country's transition and its place on the global stage, notwithstanding what the prophets of doom now presage about its depreciating moral and political currency.

It, therefore, still matters a great deal how South Africa sustains a world-view driven by the ambition to do good in the world and how it promotes the belief that the coin of idealism still holds value in a disorderly, mercurial, and increasingly disenchanted world. While these imperatives might be difficult to hammer out on the pragmatic anvil of means and ends, they provide South Africa with the normative centre for dealing with the cold and often intractable realities of African and international politics.

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