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Can South Africa regain its *gravitas* in Africa?¹

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South Africa finds itself in uncharted waters. The country is faced with the biggest leadership uncertainty in its history since the end of apartheid, as well as a rapidly changing international environment – in Africa and further afield. Participants³ at a roundtable event co-hosted by SIGLA, the Danish embassy in South Africa and the Royal Danish Defence College, in December 2017, agreed that South Africa's foreign policy is built on solid foundations. It still has a lot of capacity and experience thanks to the important role it has played in Africa in the past two decades. Yet much depends on the policy choices of the main actors that will lead the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the country going forward.

'Is South Africa retreating from the continent, or are we there but people are not seeing it?' This question by one of the foreign policy insiders at the roundtable event on 4 December is telling of the uncertainty that plagues South Africa's current role in Africa. Some analysts speak of 'disengagement', of chronic '*ad hoc-ism*' in South Africa's foreign policy and even 'schizophrenia'; at least from the perspective of outsiders. Unpacking these notions is crucial in order to trace the contours of possible scenarios for the future.

A history of successful mediation

South Africa has come a long way from the early days of its controversial military intervention in Lesotho in the late 1990's and its subsequent successful mediation in conflicts such as in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

At the time it was felt that South Africa had a lot to offer in terms of its own model of negotiations, power sharing and a peaceful transition to democracy after the end of apartheid that led to free and fair elections in 1994. There was a lot of expectation on the continent – and there still is in some cases – that this model could be replicated elsewhere where conflict exists. The example of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission has also been followed in various circumstances on the continent, but not always very successfully.

Experienced mediators, however, say it is crucial to understand that context is everything. What works in one country is rarely applicable in its entirety elsewhere. So, the notion of *ad hoc* or random implementation of the ideals of peacemaking on the continent might not be justified in all cases. Sometimes there is the political will, but the South African example just doesn't apply.

South Africa's limited success in mediating in Côte d'Ivoire in 2004 and 2005 is often cited as a case in point. Côte d'Ivoire simply wasn't South Africa's 'backyard' and South Africa didn't grasp the particular circumstances and forces at play in this important Francophone West African country.

In many instances, the institutional memory of the transition period in South Africa has been lost and the country hasn't been able to fully harness its potential to train and deploy mediators. This is despite the work of the mediation support unit in the Department of International Relations and Cooperation.

Mediating in crises is extremely complex and challenging, especially with the increasing involvement of non-state actors in conflict on the continent. Yet this is perhaps one area where South Africa can still make a difference, given its dwindling military capacity.

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) played a vital role in supporting South Africa's mediation efforts: in Burundi it was essentially to give VIP-protection to returning rebel leaders and in the DRC to stabilize the situation in the east of the country. South Africa has continued to be involved in the eastern DRC, currently as part of the United Nations (UN) Force Intervention Brigade. It has also, until recently, deployed troops as part of the UN Mission in Darfur.

Other South African institutions such as the Independent Electoral Commission have also been deployed across the continent to help with the organization of elections. The milestone elections in the DRC in 2006 are a notable example.

Researchers and commentators agree that South Africa no longer has the military capacity it possessed at the time. The momentum behind South Africa's peacemaking efforts on the continent, epitomized by former president Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance, seems to have been lost. The political will to mobilize resources to this end is no longer as strong as before.

Is SA still a gateway?

Despite its apparent loss of prestige and influence in Africa, some analysts believe that the constitutional and normative frameworks in place in South Africa are still of great value to the rest of the continent. Its capacity to overcome sharp societal divisions remains an example to other countries. 'People everywhere are hungry for solutions that triumph over ethnic differences,' said one analyst. South Africa's focus on multilateral solutions is also a major asset for its leadership role in the continent, he believes.

This argument clearly falls into a theoretical framework that looks at foreign policy through a normative lens. Others judge successful foreign policy by asking whether South Africa's role ultimately serves its own interests⁴.

One claim by South Africa that does seem to serve national interest – and could include economic gains for the country - is to project itself as the 'gateway' to Africa. But a lot has changed since these claims were first made in the 1990's.

The question can be asked whether South Africa can truly continue to sell itself as an entry point to the rest of Africa or a 'bridge between Africa and the West'? Actors like China certainly do not need South Africa to do business on the continent.

Still, many analysts feel that South Africa, as one of the biggest investors on the continent, can do more to harness its huge business presence across Africa. Commentators believe more economic diplomacy and a 'social compact' between government, business and civil society are needed to strengthen South Africa's role and to make a difference.

In the African Union (AU) – created in 2002 largely through the leadership of Mbeki and a number of key African leaders – South Africa will always be a heavyweight. This is not least because it pays its dues and remains one of the biggest contributors to the AU budget.

Disappointingly, South Africa did very little to capitalise on the presence of former AU Commission chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma at the helm of the AU – a position South Africa fought very hard for in 2012. Some believe that before she stepped down after just one four-year term, South Africa could have made a 'deal' with the other member states and, for example, ensure leadership of a key AU department by fielding a South African for the position of Commissioner for Peace and Security. This didn't happen.

A contested foreign policy

As stated earlier, observers of South African foreign policy are often perplexed by these seemingly contradictory decisions by South Africa, characterized by improvisation rather than predictability. The South African position on Libya in 2011, for example, has come to epitomize these often puzzling policy decisions. After voting in favour of UN Resolution 1973 to allow for a no-fly zone over Libya, South Africa then did an about-turn and bitterly complained about the NATO military action to drive out former Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi.

Some analysts say, however, that much of this policy uncertainty can be blamed on the unique nature of South African foreign policy making. When taking power the ANC could not simply ignore the various forces and sectors of society that helped the struggle against apartheid such as non-government organizations, trade unions and foreign governments. Today policymakers in government also have to deal with the interests of the business community, while some remnants of the old apartheid system still linger. 'Our foreign policy is not unclear, but contested,' said one analyst. There are also sometimes clashes between what the ANC wants and the demands of a pragmatic foreign policy in the national interest. Sometimes decisions are only taken after much deliberation. 'When policymakers sit around a table, there is disagreement, just like we are sitting here now might disagree on what to do,' said an insider.

Trapped by vague international norms

South Africa's apparent disengagement from an ethical approach to foreign policy that seeks to be norm-setting, should also be seen within the context of

the complexity and uneven implementation of international norms and principles such as the much-vaunted Responsibility to Protect (R2P)⁵.

In some cases, South Africa suffers from a 'normative entrapment' because it had raised such high expectations but today no longer has the capacity to comply. 'Compliance doesn't come cheap,' said one researcher.

Some international treaties and instruments are deliberately vague to ensure consensus and others, like R2P never really morphs into a proper norm. There is also a degree of hypocrisy and double standards in the international community, particularly around the Rome Statute⁶. South Africa has consistently denounced these double standards.

Searching for the right partners

South Africa is also, as a middle power, at the mercy of the external environment. Some academics say that after 1994 the international community tried to 'domesticate' South African foreign policy, but didn't succeed. Others say that South Africa emerged from a honeymoon period, under former president Nelson Mandela, due to the tough stance that the European Union (EU) took during trade negotiations in the mid-1990's. South Africa then moved away from the 'Mandela-approach' and realized 'we have to look after ourselves because the rules are skewed'.

For a very long time, South Africa has been strongly influenced by Britain and British culture, which has been an 'intellectual hinterland'. Many of the country's top schools, for example are 'bits of England'. But over time this influence has drastically diminished and Britain's exit from the EU will speed up this process. South-South cooperation and the move closer to the BRICS-countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) is part of a process of redefining South Africa's identity internationally.

Membership of BRICS, however, has not been without its challenges and in a sense Russia, India and China has formed a clearly articulated triangle of common interests, while South Africa remains on the margins. Its economy represents only a fraction of that of the other BRICS members.

South Africa's membership of BRICS was predicated on its claim of representing the African continent, but it has not done enough to 'sell BRICS to Africa'. It also has to 'sell Africa to the BRICS'. But, as said earlier, BRICS-countries like China or India don't really need South Africa to build links with the rest of the continent.

The danger of weak regional organisations

One possible value add by South Africa is its role in maritime security⁷. South Africa currently chairs the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and is increasingly focusing on maritime security with initiatives like Operation Phakisa. South Africa has, however, not yet signed the AU Maritime Strategy, known as the Lomé Charter⁸. Outside partners are in fact often skeptical of this agreement. According to one researcher: 'Africa's maritime plans are often a long unimplementable wish list'.

The South African navy does, however, play a key role in maritime cooperation in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Many of these regional organizations and cooperation frameworks do suffer from institutional weakness and need significant reforms in order to ensure their effectiveness. The lack of clarity in the relationship between the AU and Regional Economic Communities such as SADC, for example, is a key weakness of the continental structure⁹. The AU is often paralysed by the claims to ‘subsidiarity’ of regions who believe that they are best placed to handle local issues.

This has been the case in the troubled Zimbabwe that has been handled by SADC, notably in the period from 2008 up to the 2013 elections. Following the resignation of former president Robert Mugabe in November 2017, after 37 years in power, there is an expectation that South Africa and SADC will have an important role to play. Civil society organizations and the opposition in Zimbabwe are concerned that the new government under President Emmerson Mnangagwa, that includes a number of former military strongmen and stalwarts of the ZANU PF-party, will continue Mugabe’s legacy of undemocratic practices.

Civil society is, for example, calling upon SADC to ensure free and fair elections in Zimbabwe take place in mid-2018. Given SADC’s track record and the solidarity amongst former liberation movements in power in the region, this is certainly not guaranteed. Zimbabwe-experts lament that the non-engagement of South Africa in bringing stability to Zimbabwe has been extremely costly and regrettable.

Two possible future scenarios

How South Africa’s foreign policy pans out in the next few years and whether it will follow a rules-based, ethical foreign policy, depends a lot on what direction the ANC will take after December 2017¹⁰.

Some analysts believe that a scenario that sees deputy-president Cyril Ramaphosa take over as ANC president, and eventually president of the country, will lead to a return by South Africa of a more rules-based engagement with the international community and the continent. Ramaphosa is likely to invest more in research and development, for example, which would increase South Africa’s soft power internationally.

A Ramaphosa-presidency is also likely to improve South Africa’s image in Africa. Better governance, the fight against corruption and ending cadre-deployment in government institutions such as DIRCO, will see South Africa once again take the lead and be seen as an example to follow.

South Africa is likely to remain a member of BRICS, but will have a more balanced approach and be less hostile towards the EU – still by far South Africa’s biggest trading partner. South Africa could, under such a scenario,

remain in the International Criminal Court and there is likely to be less of a dissonance between foreign policy and South Africa's constitutional obligations.

In contrast, if Dlamini-Zuma wins the ANC presidency, many of the domestic policies in place under President Jacob Zuma are likely to continue, with the same politicians. Dlamini-Zuma is seen as much more favourable to radical socio-economic change and has shown during her time at the AU that she is decidedly anti-Western in her approach. In many ways, she is ideologically close to former president Mbeki, under whom she served as foreign minister.

Some analysts say that Dlamini-Zuma's presidency would be rejected by African countries because she was 'really not liked' in the AU.

Arguably, however, South Africa could under Dlamini-Zuma recover some of its leadership status that was lost in the last few years. While she was unpopular amongst many officials in the AU, particularly those from Francophone Africa, as well as amongst the AU's partners and donors, she did create her own networks and solid partnerships during her time at the AU.

As president, Dlamini-Zuma would be in a position to spearhead some of her continent-wide initiatives such as those promoting gender equality, rural development, regional integration and self-financing of the AU. She could deploy significant resources and use the expertise within DIRCO to carry out her policies, even though they might not be popular across the spectrum. Dlamini-Zuma is known for shunning the media and is not likely to work as well with big business interests on the continent as would Ramaphosa.

In short, Dlamini-Zuma is likely to focus on long-range objectives, while Ramaphosa will deal more pragmatically with the tasks at hand that are in South Africa's interest.

Huge challenges ahead

Whoever takes over the ANC and the country from 2018 and after the 2019 general elections, will thus make a huge difference to the foreign policy trajectory in the short term. Whatever trajectory he or she chooses to follow, it is clear that many fundamentals are already in place for South Africa to play a significant role in Africa and internationally.

Over the longer term, analysts note that there are many other challenges such as addressing 'global apartheid' and the huge global wealth gap. South Africa can play a significant role in this endeavor, by not only interacting with African elites, but by attempting to impact on the lives of all the continent's citizens. To do this, it has to define its place in the world and a clear direction for its foreign policy.

Questions to be asked going forward is what strategic networks is South Africa going to build on the continent and internationally in order to make an impact and carry out its foreign policy objectives? How is the African Agenda evolving given the power shifts on the continent and in the AU? Lastly, what tools will

South Africa have to continue to carry out its foreign policy ideals, especially within an unstable domestic environment?

Endnotes

¹ The Policy Paper derives from a Round Table discussion held in Pretoria and funded by the Royal Danish Embassy in South Africa. Professor Thomas Mandrup, Extraordinary Professor to SIGLA, Stellenbosch University, organised the event.

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³ The roundtable was held under Chatham House rules. Participants were from a wide range of think tanks, universities and policy organizations. These include: the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA), at Stellenbosch University, the Institute for Global Dialogue, the Institute for Security Studies, ACCORD, University of Pretoria, University of South Africa, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Johannesburg and Good Governance Africa.

⁴ For more on the discussion around norm-setting and national interest see Vale, P. (2015) Why it's time South African foreign policy must be driven by ideas (again) at <https://theconversation.com/why-its-time-south-africas-foreign-policy-was-driven-by-ideas-again-50407>

⁵ For more on this debate see Bizos, A. (2015) SAIIA Policy Insights 17 June 2015: 'To Protect or Intervene? Contesting R2P as a norm in South Africa's foreign policy' <http://www.saiia.org.za/policy-insights/to-protect-or-to-intervene-contesting-r2p-as-a-norm-in-south-africas-foreign-policy>

⁶ South Africa first announced its intention to withdraw from the International Criminal Court in 2016 and confirmed this decision on 6 December 2017

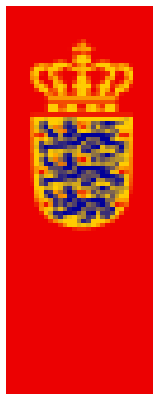
⁷ For more on maritime security see articles by SIGLA Research Fellow Bueger, C. & T. Edmunds. 2017. Beyond sea blindness: A new agenda for maritime security studies. *International Affairs* Vol 9 No 6. Pp. 1293-1311. Also see ISS researcher Timothy Walker: ISS Policy Brief 8 February 2017: *Reviving the AU's maritime strategy* at <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/reviving-the-aus-maritime-strategy>

⁸ For more on the Lomé Charter see Oladipo, O. (2017) 'Cooperation as a tool for enhancing state capacity to fulfill obligations of the Lomé Charter' at: <http://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/cooperation-tool-enhancing-state-capacity-fulfill-obligations-lome-charter/>

⁹ Clarifying the relationship between the AU and the RECs is a key recommendation of the AU reforms proposed by Rwandan President Paul Kagame and adopted by the AU Assembly in January 2017.

¹⁰ The ANC elective conference, where a new leader was to be elected to replace President Jacob Zuma, was scheduled to start on 17 December 2017.

For more on the ANC elective conference and scenarios going forward see Cilliers, J. (2017) Fate of the Nation – 3 scenarios for South Africa's future, Johathan Ball, Cape Town. A summary of some its findings can be found here: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-anc-turn-south-africas-economy-around>



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