

# South Africa: ‘In Africa’ but still not ‘of Africa’?



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*Where does – and where should – South Africa stand in relation to the evolving international system? As the largest and most advanced economy in Africa, do its interests lie primarily in building its relationships with its continental fellow states? Or, do they lie mainly with the developed world of Europe and North America, which have been South Africa's (and most of Africa's) overwhelmingly dominant economic partners for many decades? Alternatively, as Africa's leading 'emerging market', albeit a rather small one by global standards, should it be throwing in its lot with China, India, Russia, Brazil and the other leading nations of the 'South'?*

In one sense, of course, the answer is “all of the above”. Sixteen years after South Africa ceased to be a pariah state, it is right and proper that it should have well-diversified links into the global political economy. However, that answer does not provide any guidance on how to address the many contradictory and inconsistent consequences to which such a course of action gives rise. Indeed, from a policy perspective, in which there is a paramount need to identify priorities, that answer is highly unsatisfactory: one simply cannot prioritise every relationship.

### Africa's prioritisation

The official position of the post-1994 ANC-led governments has consistently been that, while South Africa has many foreign policy ‘priorities’, Africa is the overriding priority. The website of the former Department of Foreign Affairs (now the Department for International Relations and Cooperation) notes that “(s)ince 1994 the South African government has regarded the Southern African region as the most important priority of its foreign relations. To illustrate the importance attached to this region, the first foreign policy document adopted by this government was in fact a Framework for Co-operation in Southern Africa, approved by Cabinet in August 1996”.<sup>1</sup> This position has been re-stated many times. According to the Department's 2010 – 2013 Strategic Plan:<sup>2</sup>

- the Vision is of “an African continent, which is prosperous, peaceful, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and united and which contributes to a world that is just and equitable”;
- the Mission is to promote “South Africa's national interests and values, the African Renaissance and the creation of a better world for all”; and
- while the “strategic... and overarching priorities” include the strengthening of South-South relations, relations with ‘Strategic Formations of the North’, Asia, the Middle East, the Americas and Europe, and participation in the global system of governance, pride of place is given to “continued prioritisation of the African continent” and “strengthening political and economic integration of the SADC [Southern African Development Community]”.

This vision has recently been described as emanating from “an underlying philosophy” that South Africa’s “destiny is inextricably linked to that of the region and the rest of Africa”.<sup>3</sup> However, no evidence has ever been adduced to demonstrate the validity of this assertion, nor have any benchmarks been offered that would permit it to be tested.

Thus, the interest-basis for this apparent pre-eminence for Africa is unclear, at best. The Department for International Relations and Cooperation’s Strategic Plan defines the country’s national values at length (as ‘principles’) – including commitments to promote human rights, democracy, justice and international law, conflict resolution, the “African Agenda”, and “economic development through regional and international co-operation”. However, there is no articulation, at this strategic level, of what constitute South Africa’s ‘national interests’, and therefore what foreign policy should seek to achieve on the country’s (and its citizens’) own behalf.

Of course, economic interests are not (and should not be) the sole focus of any country’s foreign policy. None the less, South Africa’s post-apartheid economic performance has been less than robust, and foreign trade, investment, technology transfers, tourism promotion and labour flows are all crucial elements in improving that performance. This reality renders the absence of any strategic reference to domestic economic interests in the ministry’s Strategic Plan particularly puzzling and worrying. Even more startling is that these interests are also almost completely absent from the elaborations in the document of foreign policy towards Africa. Indeed, amidst the plethora of references to African projects, programmes, commitments, frameworks, consultations and the like (and the associated endless appearance of bewildering acronyms), there is virtually only one specific economic policy reference over 5 pages of detailed text. That is the undertaking that, “(c)ontributing to Zimbabwe’s economic recovery, the South African Government will encourage the private sector to invest in Zimbabwe following the conclusion of the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement... which was signed in November 2009”! By contrast, the discussions on strengthening relations with all the other ‘priority’ geographic regions of the world do at least contain occasional references to possible sources of finance, investment, trade and tourism for South Africa.

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A similar lack of clarity over strategic objectives was – at least until recently – also strongly evident in South Africa’s post-1994 trade policies. The 2001 Global Economic Strategy (GES), published by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), also devoted most attention – and accorded the highest priority – to Africa. The GES asserted that South Africa needed to respond to Africa’s economic marginalisation by providing the economic content for the African Renaissance ‘vision’.<sup>4</sup> Again, however, it added no flesh to these bones by way of identifying policy issues to be addressed or objectives to be achieved. Confusingly, it ranked South Africa’s global trading partners in (descending) order of importance as ‘strategic partners, strategic countries and priority countries’ – a procedure that led to some counter-intuitive results – while asserting that the Renaissance concept “determines that all African countries be regarded as strategic”.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, the GES appeared to have been quietly shelved at a relatively early stage, but for several years it remained the only publicly available formal policy statement

covering the broad spectrum of South Africa's international economic relations. Happily, too, the DTT's more recent, and annually updated, Medium Term Strategic Framework document offers a more cogent and balanced approach. The 2010–2013 version identifies South-South trade as a dynamic and rising strategic objective “with the view to boosting and diversifying South Africa's exports”. However, seizing the new investment and trade opportunities offered by South-South trade should not be at the expense of maintaining the country's “market share in the developed world, with whom our links are mature”.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the International Trade Development sub-programme “is responsible for designing and implementing policies that promote South Africa's integration into the global economy, in a manner that supports national development objectives”.<sup>7</sup> Even so, Africa – and particularly the fostering of regional integration – remains a prominent objective of the strategy.

### Rhetoric vs reality

This near-obsession with Africa notwithstanding, the evidence that actual practice in the post-apartheid years has matched the rhetoric is sparse, at best. With respect to South Africa's ‘near abroad’, the record includes:

- the dysfunctional state of South Africa's relations with its partners – Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland (BLNS) – in the century-old Southern African Customs Union (SACU);
- the serious lack of progress, after 16 years, towards real regional integration in the Southern African Development Community (SADC);
- the 6-year long – and hitherto unproductive – negotiations, together with BLNS, Angola and Mozambique, for an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU; and
- South Africa's bizarre – and hugely counterproductive – stance of ‘non-engagement’ in the 10-year-old catastrophe of Zimbabwe.

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More generally, the much-touted prediction that South Africa – the ‘gateway’ to Southern Africa – would be the ‘engine of growth’, not only for the region, but also for much of sub-Saharan Africa, has not been borne out. Instead, in as much as the sub-continental economy enjoyed a rare spurt of growth in the middle of the last decade, a significant share of the credit is due to China, and not to South Africa which has lagged embarrassingly behind. This situation presumably constitutes a severe disappointment for those – and there were many of them

– who believed that the end of apartheid, the cessation of the white minority regime's military, political and economic destabilisation of its neighbours, and the advent of peace in most of the region, would in themselves set in motion the train of spreading development and rising prosperity in Southern Africa, with South Africa as the motor.

These observations are not intended to provide the trigger for yet another examination of the reasons for South Africa's dismal economic record, but they do raise two other pertinent questions:

- First, why has South Africa's post-1994 involvement in the region seemingly been so unproductive?
- Second (and the logically prior question), what was the source of the article of faith that presented – and still presents – South Africa as the prime agent of economic stability and prosperity in the sub-continent?

The answer to both questions arguably lies in the fact that the nature and dynamics of South Africa's relations with its neighbours have long been widely misunderstood, leading in turn to the formulation of misconceived policies. The source of the problem is that, during the apartheid era, and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the situation in Southern Africa was misread by many scholars. Explaining this assertion requires first a brief digression by way of some (inevitably rather 'potted') history.

## Historical context

Most academic attention to South Africa's relationship with the rest of Africa, and especially with the 10 countries south of the Congo, has focused on the 'dark days' between the late 1950s – when the majority of African countries began to attain independence from their European colonial masters, and continental opposition to apartheid began to gather steam – and the advent of majority rule in South Africa in 1994. During those long years, South Africa dwelt in a diplomatic wilderness in Africa and its economic relations with the rest of the continent became highly politicised, being almost routinely viewed – on both sides – as instruments of foreign policy. In addition, the region was increasingly destabilised by a number of direct and proxy military conflicts, which also drew in extra-regional forces. However, understanding the effects of this turbulent period and, hence, the implications for policy following their removal, requires an appreciation of the fundamentals of the political and economic relationship between South Africa and its neighbours.

Following Union in 1910, political relations between South Africa, a self-governing British dominion, and most of its regional neighbours, who were British colonies or protectorates, were conducted mainly via London. At various times, four of South Africa's immediate neighbours – namely the three then protectorates of Bechuanaland (now Botswana), Basutoland (Lesotho) and Swaziland (collectively 'BLS'), together with self-governing Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) – faced the unsolicited and generally unwelcome proposition of formal incorporation into South Africa. However, local opposition helped preclude British approval for these advances. None the less, the three protectorates were formally joined with South Africa in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) from 1910, albeit with an unambiguously junior status in respect of institutional and policy matters. Meanwhile, South-West Africa (Namibia) experienced effective incorporation by South Africa for more than seven decades from the end of World War I, and was treated de facto as part of SACU.

On the economic front, South Africa's relations with Africa were conditioned by a combination of three factors:

- The constraints of geography: most of the states south of the Equator are landlocked, causing them to be reliant on coastal countries – mostly South Africa – for access to the sea.
- The colonially determined characteristics of economic development, based primarily on commodity exports, strongly reinforced the 'radial' structure of the regional transport network, emphasising access from the hinterland to ports rather than inter-state commerce.
- The accidents of geology, which had favoured the Witwatersrand – and, to a much smaller extent, the Copperbelt in Northern Rhodesia and Katanga – with massive deposits of valuable minerals.

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Within these exogenous constraints, regional economic relations were comprised (broadly) of four components:

- South Africa's gold, diamond and coal mines relied to a significant degree on recruitment of unskilled migrant workers from the wider region, which benefited from the associated wage remittances. There was a small reverse flow from South Africa into the region, limited mainly to white-collar and professional workers.
- Most exports from and imports into the neighbouring states were routed abroad via South Africa. This traffic generated revenues for South Africa through the provision of transport and other infrastructural services, and associated financial and other business and professional services. While undoubtedly profitable for South Africa, and correspondingly expensive for the neighbours, this was the lowest-cost – and, hence, economically the most efficient – route available to the latter.
- In addition, South Africa's own farms and factories supplied a wide range of manufactured exports – including consumer goods, fuel, and transport and other equipment – to many of the neighbouring states.

In return, the neighbours supplied some agricultural products, raw materials and minerals (the latter especially from the Copperbelt), albeit in markedly smaller volumes.

- Investment by South African companies, including food, clothing and footwear retailers, and mining companies – and, later, construction companies and financial services – generated jobs and incomes for the neighbours and profits for South African shareholders. Countervailing flows of capital or of earnings were again very limited. However, South Africa's banks and other financial institutions benefited from acting as repositories for household savings from the region and the sale of insurance products, while contributing to the development of the neighbours' own financial sectors.

Intra-regional commerce was facilitated by the fact that most of the countries in the region – Mozambique and Angola were the exceptions – were part of the sterling area.

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### **Analytical frameworks<sup>8</sup>**

Against this background, how did the regional context come to be misread? Constraints of space preclude a detailed and rigorous examination of the issues, so some rather crude characterisations will have to suffice. There have been two main schools of thought about the region:

#### ***Benign 'interdependence'***

Some scholars – usually of the 'right' – saw the region essentially as a functionally coherent geo-economic and (at least in the first half of the 20th century) geo-political space. The constituent parts of the region were bound together in a state of mutually beneficial and benign 'interdependence'. The unifying impulses were provided by the dominant actor, South Africa, by virtue of its twin roles as supplier of goods, services and capital, and as purchaser of labour services and raw materials. The essence of this thesis was that economic self-interest impelled the neighbouring states towards cooperation with South Africa; this, in turn, would help create the

conditions – institutional and behavioural – for closer political cooperation, if not integration, presumably largely on South Africa's terms. In the second half of the century, this supposedly happy state was being progressively undermined by the growing racially-based political conflict between South Africa and its neighbours, which was obscuring the underlying benefits of interdependence.

Had this conflict not intervened, however, and come to dominate regional relations, it might have been noticed that there was a separate, albeit related, trend, also under way in the region, and which would, of itself, have demonstrated the fundamental flaw in this 'functionalist' argument. This trend was the rising desire on the part of the newly independent black-ruled states for national self-determination and increased economic sovereignty in the face of the highly unequal pattern of regional development in the region. The crucial flaw was that, while economic cooperation does indeed generate some of the necessary conditions for political cooperation, it does not – as the thesis assumed it did – always create sufficient conditions. This fact had already been amply demonstrated in the region. Thus:

- BLS had continuously, and ultimately successfully, resisted political incorporation into South Africa, despite their continuing functionalist cooperation on economic matters
- The Southern Rhodesian settlers had also successfully resisted incorporation into South Africa as a fifth province (and, decades later, during UDI and the ensuing international economic sanctions, the Rhodesian government had firmly defended its political independence from South Africa, despite its considerable economic dependence)
- The Central African Federation, formed in 1953 between Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi), collapsed within a decade despite considerable advances in economic integration
- Only slightly further afield, the East African Community of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania similarly failed despite considerable commonality of economic interests.

In short, there is no inevitability that common economic interests will lead to an ever-widening commonality of political interests. To put it another way, the determinants of the political 'terms of trade' between countries are not necessarily the same as the determinants of their economic terms of trade.



However, as the descent into violent racially-based conflict was seemingly in process of obliterating all recognition of the mutual benefits of economic cooperation in the region, some proponents of interdependence continued to hope that, if and when a means could be found to bring an end to the highly destructive conflict, these benefits would become evident once again. The more the region's policy-makers could be persuaded of the merits of free(r) trade, the greater the benefits that would accrue to all.

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This line of thought – pejoratively dubbed 'economistic' by some of its critics – probably lay behind the apartheid government's desperate (but ultimately unsuccessful) efforts, even at the height of the regional conflict, to entice the neighbours into joining its proposed 'Constellation of Southern African States' (CONSAS). South Africa began by trying to 'buy' its highly reluctant neighbours' political cooperation in CONSAS by offering them extensive economic benefits. The neighbours' rejection of these blandishments was perceived by Pretoria as being politically 'irrational'. As the combination of internal and external developments raised the political stakes ever-higher (for both sides), South Africa's need to exercise political influence over the region increased and its functional approach to incorporation gave way increasingly to a coercive approach. But even this did not work, because the belief that threatening the neighbours' economic interests would induce them to adopt more 'rational' political stances failed to take account of the fact that the potential economic benefits on offer were not judged a sufficient reason to surrender their political independence.

### ***Malign 'dependency'***

Other scholars – the majority, and usually of the 'left' – analysed the problem from a very different perspective. South Africa was – and, since the minerals revolution, always had been – a malign hegemon, in whose clutches the neighbours were caught in a state of inescapable and impoverishing 'dependency'. This dependency was both political and economic in character, effectively narrowing

the neighbouring governments' policy space and options. The deeper the dependency, the greater the desire to escape it; but the more they tried to escape, the closer South Africa would bind them. In the first half of the century, the common colonial interest had undermined any effective effort at resistance, but this had been at the price of accepting the emergence of gross inequalities in living standards across the region. The rising tide of African nationalism, expressed through the demand for political independence, brought the first real challenge to the 'one-sided' and 'unnatural' dependency relations in the region – relations that were 'obstructive of economic liberation'.

Moreover, the further the conflict escalated and the more violent it became, the more bitter the state of dependency tasted. The neighbours – including BLS, who shared formal institutional and other relations with South Africa through SACU (and a common monetary zone) – saw themselves increasingly as the 'frontline states' in the wider international struggle against apartheid and white domination. In 1980, nine of them – Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (and joined a decade later by Namibia) – formed the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) dedicated explicitly to the reduction of their collective 'dependence' on South Africa.

The apartheid government's response was both determined and brutal. In varying degrees, all of the SADCC member countries were subjected to political and economic arm-twisting and intimidation from Pretoria, and most were subjected to military attacks ranging from small-scale targeted incursions by South African forces, through logistical and material support for their own dissident guerrilla forces, to full-blooded invasion. Moreover, by destroying, or supporting the destruction of, important elements of the regional transport infrastructure that might have offered alternatives – albeit very expensive alternatives – to the use of South African-controlled facilities, Pretoria's escalating use of force merely reinforced the sense of dependency and the determination to escape it. The cumulative toll in economic and human terms across the SADCC countries during the 1980s was severe (although in some cases arguably matched by the self-inflicted damage caused by manifest political incompetence and maladministration on the part of the governments concerned).

This line of analysis was presented in a variety of guises, but it was deeply ideological at heart, being predicated

on the assumption/belief that the ultimate source of the problem was capitalism. Moreover, in most formulations, dependency operated not only at the regional level, where white-owned capital at its 'centre' (South Africa) had ensnared and exploited the populations and resources in its 'periphery', but also at the global level, where it was shaped by capitalist-driven imperialism. As the 1980 Lusaka Declaration – the founding statement of principles for SADCC – put it, Southern Africa's dependence on South Africa

is not a natural phenomenon nor is it simply the result of a free market economy. The... [SADCC states] were, in varying degrees, deliberately incorporated – by metropolitan powers, colonial rulers and large corporations – into the colonial... structures centring ... [on] South Africa ... Southern Africa is fragmented, grossly exploited and subject to manipulation by outsiders ... Our urgent task now is to ... liberate our economies from their dependence.<sup>9</sup>

How would the region look when this liberation from dependency had been achieved? It is not clear that dependency theorists ever seriously addressed this question. Broadly, there were two (potential) answers. The one relied on SADCC's stated intention to end its members' dependency through a policy of 'collective self-reliance'. At one level, this policy could be consistent with a programme of gradual regional economic cooperation and integration among its members to create an entity capable of negotiating on (more) equal terms with South Africa (or, indeed, any other prospective partner). In practice, it would have required, at the minimum, the fostering of intra-regional trade based on a new regional transport network – these objectives were much discussed, but little progress was ever made either on the trade or the transport infrastructure front.

However, the proponents of collective self-reliance, some of whom were key SADCC advisers, had in mind a more radical approach. What they advocated was a state of 'self-sufficiency', in the sense of progressively withdrawing from the global economy, eschewing foreign capital and foreign trade (which, by definition, were dependency-inducing), orienting domestic production towards the local population's consumption needs, and allocating productive resources through politically determined non-market criteria. Some SADCC members, including Mozambique and Tanzania, had already travelled down this (or a similar) route – with disastrous consequences – and it was very fortunate for the rest that they did not follow the example.

The second 'answer' involved an interesting intellectual leap, through which dependency theorists largely succeeded in escaping the need to envisage the future of regional relations in a post-dependency scenario. The trick was not to assert (too loudly) that the enemy was capitalism, but rather that it was apartheid. Since it was also an article of faith that apartheid was sustained by capitalism, it was sufficient to imply that the region would be liberated from dependency when apartheid was defeated. Moreover, the possibility that the post-apartheid South African economy would be fundamentally capitalist in nature was not widely addressed (if at all), since it was further assumed that majority rule in South Africa would produce a socialist government.

### Post-apartheid policy

Briefly put, the implication of the foregoing discussion is that neither of the two main schools of thought about political and economic relations in the region was particularly well-placed to offer coherent, realistic and forward-looking policy advice. Instead, early policy statements appear to have been based primarily on two (rather soft) moral and political pillars, namely:

- that South Africa owes a huge debt to Africa in general, and the region in particular, on account of the sacrifices made and hardships endured in supporting and sustaining anti-apartheid forces; and
- because of the history of South African domination, there was a need to avoid being perceived as the continental – and, especially, the regional – bully.

As the earlier discussion makes clear, there has been little by way of refinement of these 'theological' stances. The policy implications of the first stance were – and still remain – entirely open-ended, and are reflected in the 'scatter-gun' approach that sees South Africa undertaking a wide range of initiatives and interventions across the continent, but with no articulated rationale or evident strategic focus. This judgement is in no way invalidated by the possibility that some of these activities may actually be very worthwhile. Collectively, however, it is hard to adduce any evidence that, even after 16 years of effort, they have contributed significantly to the Department for International Relations and Cooperation's 'vision' of a "prosperous, peaceful, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and united" continent. Nor is there any basis for claiming that they have contributed to the Department's 'mission' of furthering South Africa's national interests, since these have never been adequately defined.

As for the second stance, as recently as 2005, its policy implications were explained by the DTI's Director General, Tshediso Matona, as follows: "South Africa's economic strategy in Africa was guided by asymmetry and the country needed to make bigger concessions in trade and economic dealings with African partners".<sup>10</sup> Again, however, this claim generates no metrics by which it can be evaluated. However, the policy stance itself can be tested, even if only qualitatively, by public perceptions. There is enough casual evidence in the public domain to suggest that South Africa's treatment of its SACU (and its SADC) partners falls short of the 'no bullying' standard.<sup>11</sup>

In any event, when apartheid was ended in 1994, two of the basic facts of life in the region were:

- South Africa had already ceased its hostile stance towards the region (and had conceded independence to Namibia), but was still the overwhelmingly dominant economic power.
- SADCC's members had already undertaken (in 1992) a complete volte face. They had abandoned their dependency-reduction doctrine – which had effectively been their *raison d'être* – and had invited South Africa to join them, in due course, as a full member in a new, expanded and development-oriented Southern African Development Community (SADC) with a highly ambitious regional integration agenda.<sup>12</sup>

South Africa did join SADC in August 1994, after briefly contemplating the alternative of joining COMESA (the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) instead. Whether, in doing so, the government was fully conscious of the structural weaknesses of the organisation it was joining is not clear, but they were manifold.

Not the least of them was the members' reluctance to share their sovereignty. Despite reviews and attempted reforms, SADC remains in many respects an ineffectual organisation with no binding objectives, and it is at least an open question whether South Africa derives much more in the way of benefits from its membership than it already does from its bilateral relations with most of the individual members of SADC. Moreover, despite its good intentions, South Africa has found it difficult to contain its hegemonic instincts.

Ironically, by embracing a programme that leads through a Free Trade area to a Customs Union, and on to a Common Market, Monetary Union and, by 2018, a Single Currency, the former adherents of the dependency hypothesis appear to have embraced wholeheartedly the 'economistic' interdependence argument that for so long they contemptuously dismissed, yet without recognising its deficiencies.

## Conclusion

What, then, is South Africa doing in Africa? Why does it continue to accord the continent such high priority in its foreign policy? What are its aims and, more especially, what are its basic national interests, in Africa? After 16 years, we are no closer to getting coherent answers to these questions than we were in 1994. However, as this article has sought to suggest, the fundamental problem is twofold: first, there is no clarity regarding the essence of South Africa's international political agenda in Africa; and, second, despite a century of tension – at times, outright conflict – there is still no coherent understanding among South Africa's policy-makers of the relationship between the politics and the economics of regional cooperation and integration.

## NOTES

- 1 See <http://www.dfa.gov.za/foreign/Multilateral/africa/sadc.htm>
- 2 See <http://www.dirco.gov.za/departement/strategic%20plan%202010-2013/strategic%20plan%202010-2013.pdf>
- 3 Amos (2010), p 128
- 4 DTI (2001), p 1
- 5 DTI (2001), p 5 (emphasis added)
- 6 DTI (2010), p 7
- 7 DTI (2010), p 27
- 8 This section of the paper draws heavily on Blumenfeld (1991)
- 9 Quoted in Blumenfeld (1991), p 67
- 10 Quoted in Amos, *op cit*, p 128
- 11 See, for example, Amos, *op cit*, p 127
- 12 Interestingly, the objective of "promot(ing) self-sustaining development on the

basis of collective self-reliance" still features in Article 5 of the SADC Treaty! See <http://www.sadc.int/index/browse/page/52>

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