

South Africa's Foreign Policy: A Bric Without Straw?

In this paper I propose to briefly examine South Africa's foreign policy since 1994 and the advent of the Government of National Unity (GNU). The contradictions that inevitably attended the government's attempt to carve out a productive and responsible role in the post cold war order (such as it was) will be analysed and special attention paid to the country's membership of the BRICs group of significant actors on the international stage.

In a famous 1994 *Foreign Affairs* article, Nelson Mandela, the President in waiting asserted that "human rights would be the light that guides our foreign policy".¹ Yet there was also a clear recognition that increasing links with Western states was crucial to produce the investment and trade essential to promote growth, employment and provide resources for raising the living standards of the impoverished black majority.

Expectations were high – both at home and abroad – that these two objectives of foreign policy could be pursued in tandem: the government, has for example, engaged in a variety of peace-keeping and peace-building initiatives in, inter alia, Angola, Burundi, Mozambique and the Sudan. On the other hand, liberals such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Judge Richard Goldstone publicly expressed their disappointment with the government's negative voting record at the United Nations Security Council and its Human Rights Committee (HRC) over issues such as Burmese military government, the Darfur issue and in the Sudan. Then again, there was a refusal to support UN proposals for sanctions against Zimbabwe and Iran.

Yet another contradiction emerged between economic dependence on the rich northern states for trade and investment and the pressure to offer a lead in the search for 'African solutions to African problems' via South Africa's key role in the African Union (AU) the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). These twin objectives of foreign policy had to be reconciled somehow: appearing to be the West's African poodle was clearly unacceptable.

South Africa's record as a defender of human rights has, therefore, been mixed. Like many states, the leaders of which pin their colours to an ethical mast as a matter of ideological principle, the constraints at times outweigh and complicate the incentive to be consistent and avoid accusations of double standards. In South Africa's case ties of gratitude to friends in the anti-apartheid struggle – for example Libya, Cuba and Algeria – overrode concern for human rights derelictions and provoked fierce argument over, for example, the morality of arms sales to these regimes. Another issue which provoked fierce debate arose over which China to recognise – Taiwan or The People's Republic. In all these cases principle clashed with pragmatism and the latter won.



Jack Spence, OBE is a British academic and has been a Professor of Diplomacy at the Department of War Studies, King's College London since 1997. He has lectured at a variety of Universities in Britain, South Africa and the United States and was Professor of Politics and Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Leicester. He was employed as Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. In 2002, Spence was appointed to the Order of the British Empire for teaching services to the Ministry of Defence.

Foreign Policy Under Mbeki

On the other hand, both Mbeki administrations showed a sensible preference for soft power instruments of mediation, good offices and other forms of conflict resolution. These diplomatic techniques were employed to good effect in recurrent crises in, for example, The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Great Lakes region and Côte d'Ivoire. In part, of course, this particular thrust of policy was dictated by a realistic acknowledgement that military intervention, peace enforcement as distinct from peace-keeping were commitments beyond the country's limited military and economic capability. No doubt failure in Nigeria and Lesotho taught a salutary lesson: Mbeki, too, might have recognised the danger of being bogged down in Africa's intractable conflicts where the parties are often warlords, militias and/or rapacious criminal gangs who derive benefit from the continuation of a conflict rather than the creation of a stable political order via third party intervention. And even creating a 'stable political order' in conflict-ridden Africa seems peculiarly difficult: truces often give way to renewed fighting followed by yet another cease fire and attempts at diplomatic resolution. Too often, the cycle repeats itself and would-

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be conflict resolvers find themselves on a treadmill with no lasting prospect of peace, let alone post-conflict reconstruction. Thus South Africa inhabits a rough continental neighbourhood; the existence of frail, collapsing and failed states – very often the object of ameliorative intervention – makes the use of orthodox diplomatic and military instruments profoundly difficult. The best that can, therefore, be achieved is short-term band aid, patchy solutions.

Yet nowhere – in South Africa's case – was the tension between liberal incentives and real or apparent constraints better illustrated than in the Zimbabwean example. This prolonged crisis – it could be argued – was the test case of South Africa's capacity to enhance its reputation for decisive action in defence of human rights. It was (and is) after all, the regional hegemon with the means – via a combination of sanctions and coercive diplomacy to force the pace of change in Zimbabwe. Certainly, many in the West assumed that the Mbeki government had the primary responsibility and the means for the task.

Reliance on 'quiet diplomacy' had little effect in the short to medium run and the Mbeki government's refusal to openly criticise those responsible for the crisis, not to mention the extraordinary behaviour of official South African delegations which – on electoral monitoring visits to Zimbabwe – found little if anything to criticise. Rightly or wrongly, South Africa's reputation was tarnished by its government's failure to adopt a more proactive role. A precarious Government of National Unity (GNU) was established early in 2009 and no doubt Mbeki and his colleagues would claim credit for their strategy of waiting on time and circumstance to provide change however uncertain its implications for the future might be. In the last analysis, however, South Africa's performance in the Zimbabwean crisis demonstrated that liberation solidarity with Mugabe would inevitably trump human rights.

In this context we should also note the refusal to support UN proposals for sanctions against Zimbabwe and Iran (the latter for violating nuclear safeguards). One perceptive explanation for this departure from Mandela's initial emphasis on a human rights based foreign policy is offered by *The Economist* arguing that "South Africa's ambivalent sense of identity, with one foot in the rich world, where its main



economic interests continue to lie, and the other in the poor one, with which many of its people identify".²

This quotation gets to the heart of the dilemma facing South Africa in the external realm. And to be fair to its post-1994 leadership one must acknowledge that much of the criticism emanating from Western commentators about the country's failure to observe consistently ethical standards assumes that the human rights criteria employed as a measuring rod are universally accepted.

By contrast, many governments in the North and the South claim, for example, that the doctrine of liberal intervention in defence of human rights is a peculiarly and exclusively Western one. For these critics, human rights are less about constitutional freedoms (speech, association, religion, etc) and much more about meeting human needs in terms of food, shelter health and land provision. In other words, South Africa's refusal to take public issue with President Mugabe of Zimbabwe on the latter's treatment of his people and the government's behaviour at the UN on human rights issues may be explained in terms of a clash of human rights cultures between the West and the Third World (including South Africa rather ambiguously).

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South Africa: A BRIC too far?

South Africa's membership of the so-called BRICS grouping strikes an anomalous note in the current lexicon of international relations. There is clearly a qualitative difference between the founder members – Brazil, India, Russia and China – and the late newcomer. The former with the possible exception of Brazil enjoy great power status measured in terms of capacity to defend and assert key global national interests; all have significant military capability including – apart from Brazil – a nuclear component and all measure themselves against their arch rival, the United States.

True, Russia and China have UN permanent seats on the Security Council with the right to veto resolutions deemed damaging to their interests; all five are – in varying degree stable polities, though each faces formidable problems of domestic political economy; all five seek to maintain, and indeed enhance a hegemonic role in their several regions.

The BRICS do share one major interest, namely a belief that for too long the international agenda has been dominated by Western priorities and capacity for action on issues such as the protection of human rights; defined in Western terms; humanitarian intervention under the guise of the responsibility to protect doctrine; the role of the Bretton Woods financial institutions; the failure to reform the UN Security Council; and, perhaps most importantly, what should constitute the nature, scope and substance of good governance and its relevance for non-Western polities in terms of both structure and political process.

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This list of grievances (and it is by no means exhaustive) is the subject of major debate among both academic and political elites scattered across the globe. Indeed, there is BRICS consensus on the need to reform existing international institutions such as the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. There is, however, an explicit acknowledgement that these demands for change are not uniformly shared to the same degree by all five BRICS; some resonate more clearly with particular governing elites more

than others. One wonders, for example, how far Russia and China would wish to see a dilution of Security Council membership possibly cutting across their interests in maintaining a highly privileged and influential position from say Indian or South African membership. It seems reasonable to acknowledge a BRICS aspiration to alter the global balance of power especially when it appears to tilt profoundly against their interests in key international financial and political structures. However, this reformist aspiration is unlikely to result in a revolutionary upheaval in the structure and process of international relations. In this context one perceptive observer has argued that "the legacy of the past plays a critical role in shaping the evolution of global economic governance. Large and powerful international organisations are 'sticky'; they are hard to reform but they may be even harder to abolish or replace.... Second, both the fund and the bank remain extremely useful institutions for powerful governments and other transnational actors who have a strong interest in the continuation of their global roles.... The Bretton Woods Institutions are likely to not only endure but to continue to play major roles in global economic governance for the foreseeable future"³ What is likely (and this can only be a guess on my part based on past international experience) is slow, piecemeal haphazard reform with governments always at the mercy of the contingent and unforeseen.

Nevertheless, one might view the role of the BRICS either as a powerful collective lobby for collective change or a group wholly concerned with simply holding their own in a world full of uncertainty and competing claims. At present their role is largely confined to meeting together on a regular basis to explore real possibilities of co-operation and the articulation of a common interest in confronting Western dominance in a host of key institutions. There is certainly no denying the collective demand for significant change.



A second major difficulty confronting South Africa's foreign policy makers is how to reconcile dependence on Western economies for trade and investment and essential for crucial improvement in black living standards with the aspiration to be a major standard bearer in the self-perceived anti-imperialist struggle between the rich north and the poor south especially as the issue concerns African prospects for economic advancement and political stability. Certainly, South Africa has a 'rectitude base' but it is relatively fragile as compared with more well developed niche players (eg the Scandinavian states, Canada, Ireland, Switzerland, and the Papacy) assuming more limited ambitions via the employment of soft power techniques such as mediation and good offices. Thus, what gives these states legitimacy and recognition despite their relative size and lack of hard power and military capability is their reputation for good governance and impressive economic performance.

Future Prospects

Thus South Africa might be described as a state in perpetual search of a role in which all these aspirations can be satisfied in coherent policy making. These include an ambiguous emphasis on human rights; productive economic relations with the West; a role as a major contributor to peace-keeping operations; global spokesman for African aspirations on the G20 stage; a leadership role at the UN earning a permanent seat on the Security Council in due course; a benign hegemonic role in the southern African region.

How then does membership of the BRICS grouping help to reconcile these broadly defined at times contradictory objectives of foreign policy? True, there have been some combined initiatives: these include periodic Summit meetings at which there

was, for example, success in the establishment of a New Development Bank and also a Separate Contingency Reserve arrangement to help states with balance of payments difficulties.

After persistent lobbying, South Africa was delighted at the invitation to become a BRIC member late in 2010. Its new partners no doubt took the view that an African representative was required and South Africa, despite a declining economic performance and growing internal dissent at the slow delivery of basic social goods (housing, electrification, clean water, efficient schools and medical facilities) seemed a better bet than say, Nigeria.

Yet to a disinterested observer the BRICS grouping may seem an artificial construct. It was, after all, the brain child of Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs who, interestingly enough took exception to South Africa's admission on the grounds that states such as Indonesia, Mexico, and Turkey "all had stronger claims".⁴ Indeed, as Johnson has emphasised in his highly critical account of South Africa's economic and political failings since 1994

South Africa thus entered BRICS in a state of complete naivety, apparently unaware that each of its members had its own reasons for joining ... reasons which had nothing to do with developing Africa, let alone promoting South Africa's ambitions to act as the midwife of such development, to be Africa's representative on the UN Security Council ... The Alliance is peculiarly ideological. South Africa does little trade with Russia, while the other three BRICS members are all major trade competitors.⁵

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At best South Africa is a 'middle power' as compared with the great power claims of its partners. Thus its very presence, influence and resource base seems disproportionate in comparison with the advantages enjoyed by BRICS colleagues. Indeed one can only conclude that South Africa regards membership as giving its government status and influence in global politics; that association with more powerful BRICS will have a 'spillover' effect with South Africa basking in the reflected glory of the group's achievements.

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And it could be argued that a decisive and continuing impact by the BRICS will not be easily achieved. The group lacks the cohesion, the multi-lateral and mutual commitment of an orthodox military alliance as a means of providing and maintaining security in the face of so-called 'new' global threats eg. terrorism; international crime; failing and collapsing statehood; climate change; nuclear proliferation; states of concern; the prevalence of civil war. Several of these threats require, inter-alia, a highly sophisticated capacity for intelligence sharing by like minded states. Is this likely, indeed possible with a loose grouping such as the BRICS? And what contribution in intelligence terms could South Africa make with respect to countering international terrorism?

Secondly, all five BRICS have major domestic preoccupations. All have to cope with population growth, massive job creation and a crucial need to raise living standards in line with popular expectations. These commitments must set limits

to what can be done by way of maximising and sustaining international pressure for major institutional reform both at home and abroad. Indeed, could the BRICS combine to promote a sanctions programme if required to push the case for change in international forums? This – to my mind – would be a Herculean task for governments which are hard pressed with many policy commitments. And in this context it will be difficult if not impossible to organise a BRICS wide trading regime governed by diplomatic negotiation via a bureaucratic structure capable of operating over five continents. We should also bear in mind the great variation in the political and social culture of the five BRICS. Some approximation here is surely essential as the example of the history and development of the European Union amply demonstrates.

Thirdly, the international system is undergoing profound change: much will depend on the way in which China and the USA relate to each other in the coming decades; India and Russia will seek to establish their influence both in their respective regions and further abroad. We may well see the emergence of a new balance of power with the four major BRICS constituting alternative poles in that balance, but requiring subtle diplomacy to maintain a reasonable semblance of international order.

What contribution, if any, will South Africa make to this complex structure is open to question. No-one doubts its capacity to play a regional hegemonic role. But does it have the capacity to play a role comparable to the global ambitions of its BRIC partners? Indeed, in the event of completing claims to support from rival BRIC states at odds with each other on key global issues, South Africa might find itself with difficult choices. Certainly, its electorate and radical groups within it may well come to feel that an excessive concern with grandiose foreign policy ambitions is no substitute for failure to make significant progress on economic and social issues at home.

Oh for a latter day Bismarck or Henry Kissinger!

The recent electoral losses in three major urban areas and the ANC's total vote falling below 60% would seem to confirm the priority of domestic concerns over foreign policy achievements and future expectations with the 'big beasts' of the BRIC constellation. It seems reasonable to conclude that on wider global issues South Africa will remain a supplicant for dollops of aid and general economic assistance, a camp follower rather than a 'mover and shaker' unlike its weightier BRIC partners.

NOTE

- 1 Mandela, N., 'South Africa's Future Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No.5, 1994, p.86
- 2 The 'see no evil foreign policy', *The Economist*, 15/21 November 2008, p.65,66
- 3 André Broone, 'Bretton Woods For Ever? The Endurance of the IMF and the World Bank', *Dialogue*, King's College London, Issue 13, 2015, pp 2-4.
- 4 See a highly critical discussion of these issues in R W Johnson's book, *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2015, pp.193-220
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.197