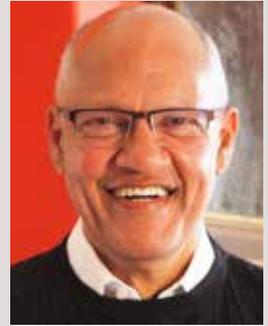


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Resetting South Africa's Foreign Policy

*Nelson Mandela had a clear idea of what South Africa's foreign policy should focus on. 'Human rights,' he wrote before taking power in 1994, 'will be the light that guides our foreign affairs.'*¹



This spirit not only called for an engagement with the world post-apartheid, but also a different way of doing things. It would allow South Africa to ‘punch above its weight’, to use Douglas Hurd’s famous phrase, in its foreign affairs, in shaping a new world centred on democracy, peace and human development.

Today, however, South Africa’s foreign policy is far removed from these noble goals.

Overall Pretoria exhibits an over-fascination with multilateral organisation to the exclusion of bilateral relationships. Old bilateral radical loyalties have endured. The problem is that half the countries that militarily supported the revolutionary struggle no longer exist (including Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and the Soviet Union) while some others have little to offer beyond posturing (Cuba, North Korea). The government seems to be unable to distinguish between the aim of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) grouping and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and between SADC and its bilateral members. While its politicians are always travelling, air miles do not register achievement or competency.

‘Brexit? We don’t know about it. We saw it on television. We heard it will impact negatively on trade and foreign relations, but we haven’t seen any evidence of that.’

The evidence is everywhere. In May 2016, in an interview with Al Jazeera, International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO) Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane started by explaining that when she was a child she had to carry a water can on her head, and that she now has a ‘hole in her head’. She made an impassioned defence of beleaguered President Jacob Zuma, saying she had ‘learnt so much from that man’.²

When asked if she had a favourite US presidential candidate and what impact she thought any of the candidates would have on relations with South Africa, she remarked that ‘[M]aybe my granddaughter, who happened to be named after me, will have a favoured candidate of another country. But as for my children, they are still concerned about their own country,’ she replied, adding: ‘For your information, SA is still as intertwined globally as it was.’ That is why people want to know what is happening on a daily basis and we answer all the questions.’ Not finished, in July 2016, she said in response to the British vote to leave the European Union: ‘Brexit? We don’t know about it. We saw it on television. We heard it will impact negatively on trade and foreign relations, but we haven’t seen any evidence of that.’³

Still, the rot has been a long-time setting in. In considering a brief history of South Africa’s post-apartheid foreign relations, this article seeks to answer the question: How might its foreign policy be reset to help South Africa regain lost ground, moral and otherwise, in the international community.

Foreign Policy Phases

The ‘honeymoon’ phase of Nelson Mandela’s presidency, between 1994 and 1999, was characterised by a rapid, threefold expansion of diplomatic missions. As the country moved quickly from isolation to integration, relationships were rebalanced from the apartheid era by the welcome early influence of the liberation movement’s internationalism and the emphasis on human rights, most vocally by figures like Kader Asmal and Albie Sachs.

As president, Mandela showed he meant what he said. When the Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine other individuals were executed at the time

of the November 1995 Commonwealth heads of state meeting in New Zealand, Mandela was shocked that his previous interventions had made no difference.⁴ He famously condemned the execution and supported Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth, pushing for an arms embargo. He made personal calls to the British and American governments. At his insistence, South Africa withdrew its High Commissioner from Abuja and convened a regional meeting of the SADC heads of state to put together a coherent plan of action, Mandela describing Abacha as 'a corrupt dictator in charge of an illegitimate and barbaric regime.' Finally, he demanded African unity behind international sanctions to isolate Nigeria.

That this unity was not forthcoming would not have come as a surprise to President Thabo Mbeki, once head of the ANC's department of international affairs, who drove the second phase, between 1999 and his recall from office in 2008. The sophisticated and urbane Mbeki, schooled in the realpolitik of exile, thought Mandela to be naïve. He became the inspiration behind New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and drove the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU). These were considerable if overly ambitious achievements.

While Mbeki's approach emphasised a greater assertion of African ownership of its destiny, it contrasted with his epic foreign policy failure over Zimbabwe, where party-to-party ties trumped human rights and South Africa's national interest. When Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe let loose the war veterans, and worse, on the white farmers and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) after he lost the referendum for a new constitution, Mbeki's government did nothing. In the face of the violence led by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in the run up to the 2002 elections rendering it neither free nor fair, Mbeki closed his eyes to widespread human rights violations. He suppressed the damning report of SADC Parliamentary Forum Observer Mission led by former Ambassador Sam Motsuenyane and Judges Dikgang Moseneke and Sisi Khampepe for a decade, until the *Mail & Guardian* won a lengthy court battle to secure its release in November 2012.⁵ They had declared the elections unfree and unfair.

South Africa hit a new low in the years under President Jacob Zuma, who engineered the recall of Mbeki, during which time it has sought to cement its place in the ideological 'South' and away from close ties with traditional trade and investment partners, with little to show for it in terms of jobs and investments. Membership of BRICS provided little, perhaps only opportunities for rent seeking and, in the case of the nuclear power option vigorously pursued with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a self-enriching potential deal of extraordinary proportions.

Under Zuma's watch, despite the dedication of considerable resources, and despite his earlier positive peace-making role on Burundi, little progress has been made in Zimbabwe. His government continues to take the side of a despotic government against Zimbabwe's long-suffering people, who have started to protest anew. Despite greater willingness to deploy military resources, efforts have been undermined by chronic intelligence failures and a lack of sound reasoning behind them in the first instance, such as the fiasco of the Battle for Bangui in the Central Africa Republic

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in March 2013, resulting in the deaths of 13 South African paratroopers. Most extraordinary of all, by protecting Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity, Zuma no longer pretended to honour international law and the treaties to which South Africa is signatory. Instead, his government announced South Africa's intention to withdraw from the ICC and moved to repeal the domestic legislation that internalised its obligations.

The reasons why our achievements have been so feeble and our failures so dramatic are complex, but it can be distilled in foreign affairs, as it can be for most other portfolios of government, to the fact that the ANC conflates the interests of the party with that of the nation. The ANC has defined itself as a liberation movement entitled to govern in perpetuity rather than a political party competing in a democracy. The ANC has failed to complete the transition it once led in the early 1990s which was abandoned after Nelson Mandela left office. It has chosen instead to follow power rather than moral purpose, blurring boundaries between family, political and party interests on the one hand and public obligations on the other.

According to the ANC, 'They have vowed in Washington that there will be Russia or China to challenge the US hegemony' since 'The US does not appreciate the resurgence of China and Russia as dominant factors in the arena of international power relations. It has instead declared a cold war against these two emerging world powers'.

It has hollowed out the state, cannibalising the civil service and repopulating it with cadres. South Africa's foreign policy serves little national purpose, pivoting more towards the interests of certain factions in the ANC and the clique, in and out of government, that surrounds President Zuma. It has used diplomatic postings as pay-back for politicians and others. Our democratic credentials and values, South Africa's most notable global 'brand', have been undermined by cavorting with autocrats from Zimbabwe to the Central African Republic to North Korea, to no clear national advantage. The ANC's National General Council 2015 foreign policy discussion document is in this regard a clear statement of the party's world view.⁶

As 'a revolutionary national liberation movement which is an integral part of the international revolutionary movement to liberate humanity from the bondage of imperialism and neocolonialism', the document declares the ANC's staunch support for China and Russia and its opposition to the 'imperialist' and 'aggressive' US. It defines a world through the prism of its radical roots, citing Lenin's observation that 'revolutionary scientific theory is the weapon to make us judge and define the methods of struggle correctly.'

From the ANC's vantage, 'The sudden collapse of socialism in the world altered completely the balance of forces in favour of imperialism. It ushered in a new world hegemonic era of global socio economic agenda of capitalism and free market imperatives'. This has to be undone. According to the ANC, 'They have vowed in Washington that there will be Russia or China to challenge the US hegemony' since 'The US does not appreciate the resurgence of China and Russia as dominant factors in the arena of international power relations. It has instead declared a cold war against these two emerging world powers'.

According to the document not only is the United States intent on destabilising the Chinese (on three fronts: environmental, human rights, and through building an 'anti-China alliance of Asian satellite states') and the Russians (again through



human rights issues and by encircling Russia, viz Ukraine), but this ‘sponsored destabilisation [is] unfolding in the streets of Latin America including in Venezuela which the US has strangely declared a threat to its “national security”, in the Middle East and in African countries with the sole intention of toppling a progressive democratically-elected governments. This has a bearing on the nature of conflict and the scourge of terrorism we see in the world today’.

If it were not so serious, it would at least be ironical (given Nelson Mandela’s commitment to human rights), if not ludicrous.

Such polemic is not unprecedented. Cavorting with radical causes abroad has, until recently, been a relatively cost free means of ensuring the ANC’s ideological purity and maintaining its revolutionary spirit, necessary even to pursue a cautious and even conservative economic policy back home. Now foreign policy has been streamlined into a more deliberate, consolidated anti-Western position. And instead, to its great shame, South Africa fails to protect civilian populations elsewhere, from Libya to Syria.

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Finally, the government’s use of analogue and antiquated diplomatic methods, and the metrics of movement and summitry, pay disservice to those officials committed to representing the country along with the taxpayers who support them.

A Ten-Point Plan

Dean Acheson famously proclaimed that Britain had lost an empire but not yet found a role. South Africa lost apartheid as its leitmotif, for or against, but has not yet found a role. It remains anxious to play a role in the world, and especially on the African continent.

To realise this ambition, and fulfil South Africa’s post-apartheid promise, three strategic thrusts stand out:

- First, there is a need to ground foreign policy in the national interest as defined in our Constitution: to fight poverty, protect the nation against threats, and advance human rights values abroad.
- Second, South Africa must support its most powerful and persuasive brand in leading the support of democracy and human rights first, and foremost, on the African continent.
- Third, to borrow a phrase from Chatham House, the government should strive to create the conditions for excellence in thought leadership. As the late Lord Howe put it, ‘Thinking about and perusing opportunities and alternatives is of the essence in arriving at the right direction for advance.’⁷ A substantial refocus and enhancement of the resources of DIRCO is fundamental to the successful conduct of foreign policy in today’s world, as is better integration especially with the Departments of Labour, Defence, and Home Affairs. South Africa is blessed with an active civil society and dynamic business sector, its economy one-fifth of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa’s.⁸ It has to learn to use and integrate these formidable diplomatic tools better.

South Africa will maintain no more than 75 staffed foreign missions, and would aim to reduce its overseas diplomatic staff to no more than 500. Missions should be dynamic and the embodiment of cutting-edge diplomatic thinking, technology and practice.

Indeed, there is little point in having 140 missions abroad and 2,500 staff (including 800 at foreign missions) gobbling an annual budget of over R5 billion if there is uncertainty about which business is worth supporting and whether party or country or political ally comes first.

A ten-point plan to better serve the national interest abroad can be achieved if we do the following:

Focus our Missions: We recommend the creation of a four category list of diplomatic missions, (a) ‘Core Partners’ numbering 25 (made up of those in the SADC region, and elsewhere where South Africa enjoys priority political or trade and investment ties); (b) 50 ‘Tier Countries’ (where micro-missions or Non Resident Ambassadors – NRAs – can operate); and (c) the remaining ‘Friendship Nations’ (where NRAs operate). A fourth category will include multilateral memberships. South Africa will maintain no more than 75 staffed foreign missions, and would aim to reduce its overseas diplomatic staff to no more than 500. Missions should be dynamic and the embodiment of cutting-edge diplomatic thinking, technology and practice.

Create a Non-Resident Ambassadorial (NRA) Corps: Following Singapore, South Africa should create a new NRA corps of 100 visiting Ambassadors, drawn from retired diplomats and retired top civil servants, leading business people, community leaders and retired politicians. These NRAs would cover one or a maximum of two countries. These would be unpaid posts, though all costs would be met when NRAs travel to the country of appointment, usually twice a year. There would not generally be any resident embassy staff, except if it were a step towards posting a resident ambassador. This will be a cost-effective means of ensuring representation in countries that are not a first order priority for South Africa, without the need to establish costly overseas offices with overpaid and underworked diplomatic staff;

Invest in the promise of the African Union (AU): South Africa should invest in the AU’s stand-by brigades and the logistics that are required to see these from

being a paper promise to a practical reality. This requires working out what African countries need and seek the appropriate support from partners. The confusing double standard and dual practice that has some African nations working with key enablers such as the USA, France and Britain while others refuse to do so must be brought to an end.

Climb the Heights of Global Governance: South Africans must be committed to ensuring its top citizens are positioned within multilateral bodies. Equally there must be commitment to the restructuring of the United Nations, recognising however that reform requires consensus both between both the current Permanent 5 as well as aspirant, new permanent members.

This demands rejoining and reaffirming our commitment to the ICC, not leading Africa's resignation from this body, set up as it was to protect citizens from the impunity of leadership.

Support and Consolidate Democratic Processes: South Africa's most powerful brand is forging democratic practice in an authoritarian environment both as a principle and because democracies are statistically more reliable and prosperous partners. We should be the champions of such practice and human rights compliance by calling problems and violations where they exist, not ignore or keep silent about them, as it happens with the BRICS. This demands rejoining and reaffirming our commitment to the ICC, not leading Africa's resignation from this body, set up as it was to protect citizens from the impunity of leadership. Putting the interests of citizens at home and abroad at the centre of our concerns can also be achieved by strengthening election observer missions, not least by refusing to participate unless these missions we are able to be in the host country at least for one month prior to the election. Reports should be publicly released immediately after the missions are done, and members selected for the courage of their convictions. And two new institutions should be created:

- **A National Democratic Institute (NDI):** Funded by government, but where the political parties in Parliament nominate staff on a pro rata basis. This way an NDI can be representative of the society it is representing and the democratic interests it is promoting; and
- **A Fragile State and Peace Building Unit:** Given that 23 of the 28 fragile states worldwide are in Africa, this is continental imperative. The CAR episode illustrates this is a practical necessity. Staff should be recruited from within Africa and farther afield, both from a variety of government (military, diplomatic, developmental) and non-governmental sectors. This is one area where we could put the lessons learned often harshly elsewhere in Africa and farther afield and turn these into positive practice, and where South Africa could excel. In this, however, we must remind ourselves that our ability to deliver development aid and humanitarian assistance is only often necessary because of political failure, and reflects on our ability to prevent the political failure in the first instance.⁹

Join this up in Government: The 2013 CAR episode is a costly reminder of the chronic failure of intelligence. Rather than establishing government clusters as a bureaucratic formality, as the ANC has done, there is a need to instil the practice of liaison and accountability as a reflex action within and between government departments. Similarly, the cost of South Africa's visa policies, mired in a toxic cocktail of opacity and xenophobia, must be integrated with our national interests of economic prosperity reliant as it is on the inward flow of skills, technology

and capital. The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) increasingly resembles a welfare not warfare agency. By the admission of the government's own 2015 Defence Review,¹⁰ the SANDF 'is in a critical state of decline'. Better equipping it with the resources necessary for national defence and peacekeeping duties requires a focus on enablers (including transport ships and aircraft) and an appropriate division of finances towards operational rather than personnel costs.

There is a need to aggressively seek to forge bilateral trade agreements. South Africa should aim to increase the number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) from the three (EU, EFTA and SADC) currently enjoyed. After Brexit, the UK is an immediate priority.

Develop a Health Security and Diplomacy Strategy:

The Ebola crisis is a reminder that health is a critical aspect of security and, like trade, of growing importance in diplomacy, military and intelligence cooperation. Embassies today require trained health attaches who must know the health burdens of the regions in which they operate. Embassies must have a database of universities and colleges in Africa offer courses to staff up the growing investments in disease control and prevention. This demands the provision of education and training to diplomatic attaches in health diplomacy and security and the subject's

inclusion in the matrix of responsibilities of diplomatic representatives. This would ensure a global platform that draws on the expertise of our health science community, private sector and non-governmental organisations in preventing and controlling infectious diseases.

Energise and Focus the SA Development Partnership Agency on Africa: The Africa Renaissance Fund has been used to assist Cuba following its hurricanes and to fund AU and SADC observer missions. While security and peace has a development dividend, job creation programmes by way of establishing improved business conditions is central to African security, including in South Africa. This Fund will be devoted towards such a purpose. This should include strengthening a programme of sponsored visits to South Africa by business, media and opinion-formers, given credence to the role of such diplomacy in, as an American book once put it, winning friends and influencing people.

Consolidate the African Development Bank: The AfDB is the premier continental development institution. This reality should be a priority, not the establishment of potentially conflicting development banks within the BRICS. South Africa needs to make one thing work, and work properly.

Invest in Economic Growth and Trade: It is said that, in the modern world of diplomacy, ambassadors are the equivalent of restaurant waiters who occasionally are allowed to sit down. Meant by this today, is that heads of state do the heavy lifting in modern diplomacy and ambassadors are really super trade attaches.¹¹ In South Africa and elsewhere, punting domestic companies and their products and our country's considerable tourist virtues abroad is a priority national interest issue because it creates jobs, boost revenues and generates prosperity. There is a need to aggressively seek to forge bilateral trade agreements. South Africa should aim to increase the number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) from the three (EU, EFTA and SADC) currently enjoyed. After Brexit, the UK is an immediate priority. This must be part and parcel of a wider national trade strategy. In this there is a need to recognise the costly diversion of activity to the ubiquitous trade summits. Global summitry is not the bread and butter of national prosperity. Realising the promise of free trade regimes in Africa requires harnessing and collaborating with

business, and instilling the 'full package' of reforms necessary for to free up flows, including of capital, goods, labour, technology. South Africa should aim to become the 'Singapore of Africa' in terms of expediting trade flows and speed of customs' clearance, aiming to be the fastest at least among middle-income countries. It should seek a global trade round, but aim to negotiate – with our allies and rivals – and extract concessions, not simply posture. In line with the need to devote minimal resources to trade regimes, Pretoria needs to negotiate as many FTAs 'virtually'. The methodology should be to use technology to negotiate and meetings only to initial agreements.

Wars cannot be solely waged by the military. Trade cannot solely be pursued by businesspeople. To punch above our weight, to use that expression again, diplomats need to have boxing gloves and be fit for task.¹² This requires integrating the appropriate tools of foreign policy across government.

In all of this, there is an imperative to put people first. To ensure that the rest of the world sees a great country, the interests of South Africans – not just one political party – must be the overall objective of foreign policy, geared to seeking to provide prosperity, security and peace for all. And in so doing, the interests centre not only in material advancement, but also in the democratic principles and solidarity that were once applied in making post-apartheid South Africa a reality.

NOTE

- 1 Nelson Mandela, 'South Africa's Future Foreign Policy' *Foreign Affairs* 72, 5 (1993) pp.86-97, accessed at <http://www.anc.org.za/content/article-nelson-mandela-foreign-affairs-vol-72-no5>.
- 2 At <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/nkoana-mashabanes-bizarre-interview-a-spectacular-mess-20160530>.
- 3 See <http://www.bdlive.co.za/world/europe/2016/07/04/brexit-we-dont-know-about-it-says-maite-nkoana-mashabane>.
- 4 Matthew Graham, *The Crisis of South African Foreign Policy* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015) p.140.
- 5 John Matisonn, *God, Spies and Lies* (Cape Town, Missing Ink, 2016) p.375
- 6 At http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabelo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf.
- 7 At <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2010-07-01/debates/10070128000649/ForeignPolicy>.
- 8 See <http://data.worldbank.org/?locations=ZG-ZA>.
- 9 See the debate in the House of Lords involving Lord Patten of Barnes and Lord Wright of Richmond, at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldhansrd/vo051208/text/51208-06.htm>.
- 10 See <http://www.dod.mil.za/documents/defencereview/Defence%20Review%202015.pdf>.
- 11 For a most readable account from the inside, see Tony Leon, *The Accidental Ambassador: From Parliament to Patagonia* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2013).
- 12 At <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldhansrd/vo051208/text/51208-06.htm>.