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Nuanced Balancing Act: South Africa's National and International Interests and its 'African Agenda'

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ABSTRACT

Since apartheid ended, much of South Africa's positioning on the world stage has been informed by what has been described as an Afrocentric approach to foreign relations. This paper examines the central question of whether or not the South African government's 'African Agenda' and the 'diplomacy of 'Ubuntu' articulated by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco), are realistic strategies that take adequate account of South Africa's national interests as related to the human and social wellbeing of its people as provided for in the preamble of the 1996 constitution.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
Brics	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
Dirco	Department of International Relations and Cooperation
NPC	The National Planning Commission
Sacoir	South African Council on International Relations
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

INTRODUCTION

Despite all the peripheral rhetoric, it is no secret that in the world of realpolitik, international relations are driven primarily by national interests. Based on this understanding that national interests, values and identity should be paramount in informing foreign affairs, the contiguous elements, firstly, South Africa's ability to assume a leadership role on the continent, and secondly, the nature of its foreign policy discourse, must be evaluated against the benchmark of actions that best serve the interests of the South African people. In the context of this paper the nature of South Africa's constitutional democracy is taken as a starting point in determining the interests of South Africa as a nation. The 1996 constitution is supreme and encompasses the recognition of international human rights law. The preamble makes explicit reference to the following values within historical context:

> We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to –
> - heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
> - lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
> - improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
> - build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

Questions can be asked as to whether an African Agenda pertaining to continental integration, and the diplomacy of *Ubuntu* as presented by Dirco, is a strategy that adequately takes into account South Africa's national socio-economic interests; and whether it advances the national values of dignity, equality, freedom, democracy and the rule of law as articulated in the constitution.

In supporting inter alia the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Peer Review Mechanism and the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the South African government seeks to work towards sustainable socio-economic development in Africa and to achieve political regional integration over the long term. The main problem appears to be that South Africa is trying to serve too many international agendas and thus is over-extended in its international engagements, which contributes to the lack of a clear foreign policy focus. International relations are by their nature complex, but South Africa's agenda in serving Africa or Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) or its machinations within any other multilateral forums, should be as consistent as possible with its identification as a democracy based on human rights and the rule of law. The underlying principle is that there should be synergy and connectivity between internal efforts of nation-building and the pursuit of global economic and geo-political agendas.

INTERNATIONAL AGENDAS VERSUS NATIONAL INTERESTS: THE NPC'S REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH AFRICA'S POSITION IN THE WORLD

The National Planning Commission (NPC) 2011 draft report argues that the formulation of foreign policy should be informed by principles that both reflect and support national interests. In other words, external relations ideally should be shaped by the democratic values set out in the South African constitution as mentioned above. The primacy of the constitution, human rights and the rule of law should be reflected in South Africa's international and regional agendas. It would not be in the best interests of South Africans for foreign policy not to reflect national values, and the sacrifice of these values should not be negotiable.

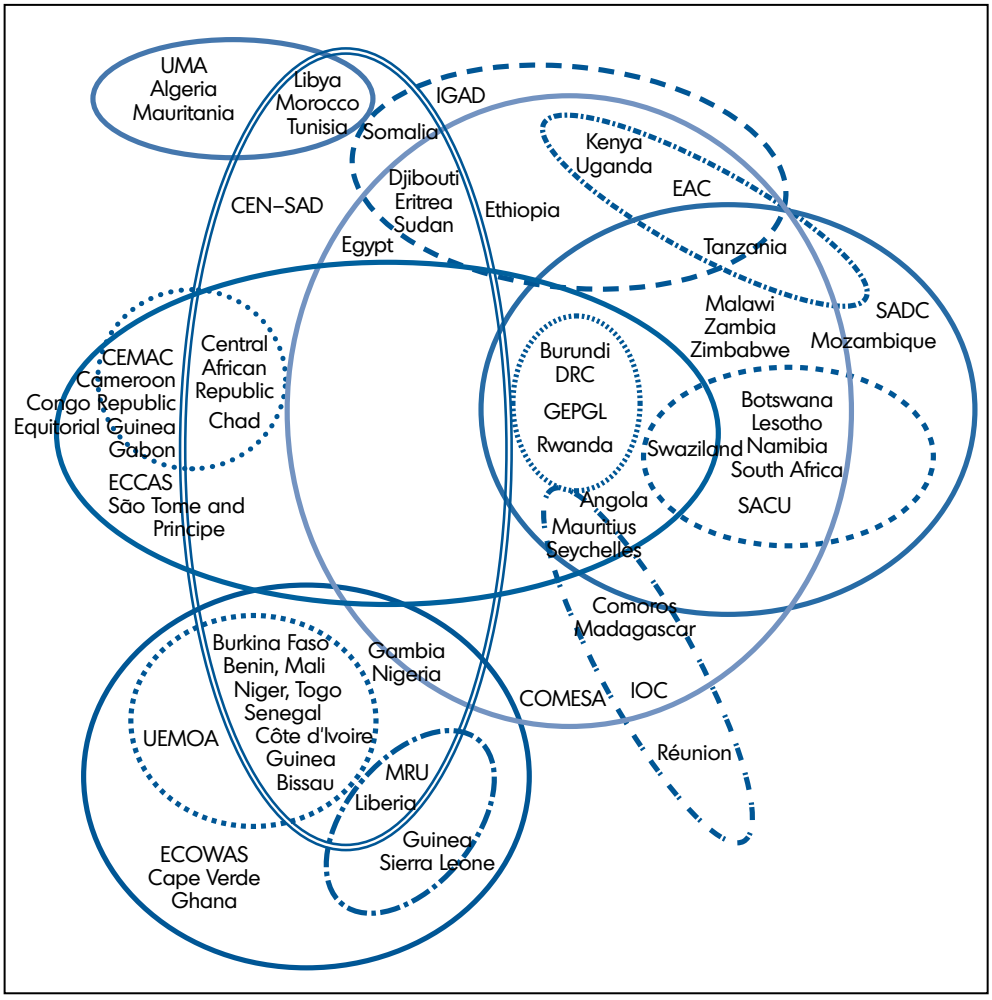
The NPC draft report poses some complex questions as to what precisely is meant by their mandate to assist in writing a 'new story' for South Africa (referred to as 'Vision 2030').[1] The three main concerns emerging from the report are that South Africa needs to grow its economy; reduce poverty; and improve the quality of life for South Africans – the 'better life for all' principle embodied in the preamble to the 1996 constitution. These imperatives were also covered in detail in President Zuma's 2012 state of the nation address.

The NPC recommends in chapter seven of the NPC Draft Plan, *Positioning South Africa in the World*,[2] that in order to achieve its objectives South Africa must honestly re-evaluate its regional and global positioning to ensure that foreign policy objectives are helping South Africa to achieve its constitutional vision of a better life for all. Furthermore, national interests should play a central role in any decisions concerning political and/or economic integration, and the wellbeing of South Africa's people *should come first*. To this end, the report states that domestic realities must trump 'political ambitions [and] notions of solidarity' in informing debates on African integration.[3] Despite its title referring to 'the world', the focus of the chapter is almost exclusively on economic diplomacy in the context of Africa and regionalism, with very little reference to the complexity of South Africa's myriad global interests. It would be preferable to include in the analysis the entire range of international interactions so as to understand the broader context of South Africa's place in the world.

The report suggests that South Africa's 'position in the world' must be re-examined in order to clarify its current international relations and to untangle the 'spaghetti bowl' of regional formations in Africa (see Figure 1).

Failing such a process, confusion and a lack of focus will continue in matters of global and regional importance to the country. By over-extending itself in international relations, South Africa may well be burning more bridges than it builds. This is especially evident in attempts to reconcile its membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC), AU and Brics, which pursue agendas that are at times antithetic to one another. For instance, South Africa's vacillating stance at the UN on interventions in Zimbabwe, Iran, Libya and Syria does not always sit comfortably with a human rights agenda and is seen by some as pandering to the wishes of its more authoritarian Brics partners, China and Russia. The failure to censure African dictators in the AU similarly does not send out strong signals to the global community that South Africa values human rights as much as it does socio-economic development for its own sake. This is not an endorsement of US-like hegemonic

Figure 1: Regional formations in Africa



Source: National Planning Commission, National Development Draft Plan, 11 November 2011, p. 218.

pursuits of democracy and human rights, but a reminder of the fact that there should not be a total disconnect between the social compact and international relations.

The NPC's draft plan suggests that a more consistent, less ambiguous approach to international relations could be achieved by adopting the principle that the national interest is paramount at all times.

The draft also states that there must be open dialogue in South Africa about its needs and interests in the light of available choices for regional formations.[4] Rather than adopting a blindly ideological Pan-Africanist approach the country must assess, consider and calculate risks. The report also recommends a critical examination of South Africa's role as a political leader in the region and globally. It further questions what South Africa's global positioning might mean in terms of realpolitik, and whether current regional and global strategies – including the African Agenda – serve to fulfil the constitutional mandate of building a better life for South Africans.[5] Finally, the report questions whether, in developing South Africa's diplomatic and trade relations, an African Agenda would help or hinder the achievement of a new vision for the country.

There is no definitive 'fix-all' answer, but it is clear that a delicate balancing act is needed to ensure that South Africa's place in the world is reflective of its commitment to constitutionally embedded domestic priorities and imperatives.

THE 'AFRICAN AGENDA'

According to the Dirco, South Africa's foreign policy priorities are:[6]

- according central importance to its immediate African neighbourhood and the wider continent;
- working with countries of the South to address shared challenges of underdevelopment;
- promoting global equity and social justice;
- working with countries of the North to develop a true and effective partnership for a better world; and
- strengthening the multilateral system.

As mentioned, the overarching principle is referred to as Afrocentricity in foreign relations. In its second term (2011–2012) as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, South Africa has been the driver of the 'African Agenda' on the world stage, culminating in the unanimous adoption of UNSC Resolution 2033 to 'strengthen cooperation' between the UN and the AU.[7] Resolution 2033, initiated by South Africa, stresses the importance of establishing a more effective relationship between the UNSC and regional bodies, in particular with the AU Peace and Security Council.

The African Agenda has seldom been clearly defined or articulated and can portray several meanings owing to the fact that the continent is not homogenous and that there are divisions even within the AU itself, as depicted in differing views on interventions in Ivory Coast and Libya. Nevertheless, the idea of such an 'agenda' seems to be the basis for a strategy through which South Africa wishes to be seen primarily as an integral part of Africa, its interests inseparable from those of the rest of the continent:

> '… [O]ur foreign policy posture moves from a premise that there is an inextricable link between our future and that of Africa – for the greater good of our continent'.[8]

There have been other African agendas before this one. The Pan-Africanist 'grand idea' of the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, for example, aimed to achieve full continental integration into a United States of Africa. South Africa never propagated the Gaddafi vision, preferring to pursue the less ambitious aim of strengthening institutions such as the AU, in order to implement policies that entrench democratic norms and principles, and other purported 'shared African values', across the continent. This objective was reflected in former South African president Thabo Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' initiative. Again, however, it should be noted that there is no consensus on what constitutes African values.[9] The AU Commission has made an attempt at concretising African values in its 2009-2012 Strategic Plan. The third pillar of the Strategic Plan includes values such as good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, response to humanitarian situations,

intra-African solidarity, gender equality, respect for African culture and protection of African cultural heritage.

Problems have been highlighted, such as the appointment of dictators to the highest offices of the AU, raising legitimate questions about commitment to the 'shared values of good governance, democracy and respect for human rights.'[10]

Put very simply, South Africa's official position rests on three focal points. The first is to work towards greater African integration, using as a basis, SADC; the second is to give Africa a voice in world affairs through the AU; and the third is to become actively involved in South-South multilateralism, in particular the Brics group of nations.

The strategies adopted by South Africa as illustrated above need to be critically assessed in order to determine if continental integration and multilateral engagement within Brics are supportive of or inimical to national interests. Reasons for the stalling of integration efforts at regional level include conflicts of trade interests; lack of consensus on values; the absence of political will; protection of national sovereignty; and the reluctance of larger, more powerful nations to help ease the financial burdens of their smaller, poorer neighbours at the expense of their own economic growth. Despite the opportunities for development and growth, African states tend to be reluctant to commit their limited resources to supporting regional organisations that in truth function less well than they should.

However, despite all the risks involved South Africa is a leading champion of the 'African Agenda' that, among its other objectives, aims to end the marginalisation of the continent from the rest of the world. One way of doing this is to use Brics as a platform to raise the African voice, although it is not always certain if this is the most effective mechanism for achieving this particular aim. Each Brics member country has its own regional agenda and economic and geo-political interests to protect. There is also the new 'scramble for Africa' to consider, which has resulted in intense competition amongst Brics members for natural resources in Africa. The foreign exploitation of these resources can be damaging to the continent and does not necessarily advance the interests of Africans. On the other hand, if governed well by Africans, it is a good opportunity for development on the continent.

In promoting its African Agenda, South Africa has proclaimed itself both the leader and bridge-builder on the continent and, through its membership of Brics, the primary 'gateway' to Africa. This stance is at best questionable, even though it was successful in securing the chairmanship of the AU Commission in July 2012.[11] Given the challenges of unilaterally adopting a political and economic leadership role in Africa (a role that could equally be fulfilled by Nigeria for instance) and the lack of clarity on how central the values of democracy and human rights are in this process, it would be preferable to adopt a more nuanced approach with respect to global and continental priorities. This would mean positioning national interests at the *centre* of the debate rather than using the interests of Brics or Africa (or for that matter the AU) as a yardstick, especially with respect to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This nuanced approach can be glimpsed in what Dirco calls a 'diplomacy of Ubuntu' that foregrounds common humanity, interdependence and interconnectedness.

CARVING A NICHE THROUGH A NEW DIPLOMACY OF 'UBUNTU'

Dirco has also argued that a spirit of participation is an integral part of the existing African Agenda. This spirit can be realised through a 'New Diplomacy of Ubuntu':

> The values that inspire and guide South Africa as a nation are deeply rooted in the long years of struggle for liberation. As a beneficiary of many acts of selfless solidarity in the past, South Africa believes strongly that what it wishes for its people should be what it wishes for the citizens of the world.[12]

However hubristic, this value-based approach establishes the core of all South Africa's diplomatic relations. In addition, the preamble to the May 2011 Government White Paper on Foreign Policy (*Building a Better World: the Diplomacy of Ubuntu*)[13] alludes to a 'new' strategy: The argument is that South Africa's distinctively Afrocentric foreign policy is founded on the uniquely African philosophy of Ubuntu. In this sense the African Agenda – and indeed all international policy – should be informed and shaped by values of dignity, equality and freedom as well as Ubuntu. The term is only fleetingly defined (less than one page of a 36-page document). The final paragraph, however, briefly highlights the general context:

> In conclusion, South Africa's greatest asset lies in the power of its example. In an uncertain world, characterised by a competition of values, South Africa's diplomacy of Ubuntu, focusing on our common humanity, provides an inclusive and constructive world view to shape the evolving global order.[14]

In an attempt to render Dirco's strategy less opaque, the policy states that the 'philosophy' of Ubuntu reflects the idea that people affirm their humanity when they affirm the humanity of others. This approach should inform South Africa's actions within multilateral forums including the UN, AU and Brics by presumably ensuring a more collaborative environment that emphasises participation and consultation. Dirco further posits that South African foreign policy should be framed by respect for common humanity and the diversity of nations. The policy defines Ubuntu in this particular context as the 'recognition of the interconnectedness and interdependency of humanity'. In addition, because Ubuntu is described as an Afrocentric, 'people-centred' philosophy, government is trying to ensure that its global agenda, and those agendas determined in multilateral forums, are more transparent and that diplomats and other national representatives remain accountable to South Africans for decisions taken in the global arena. To illustrate the emergence of a diplomacy of Ubuntu, the minister of international relations and cooperation referred to a developing spirit of participation in international affairs:

> [T]he world is experiencing the practical necessity of making the philosophical paradigm shift from 'power to partnership' in international relations. In short the world is experiencing and discovering 'Ubuntu' or as OR Tambo put it … 'an expression of the unity of purpose among concerned compatriots … as equals … engaged in a common endeavour to create a better future for us all'.[15]

This should be understood not only as a partnership between states but also, importantly, as a partnership between a state and its people through a social compact.

A recent development in South Africa, namely the establishment of the South African Council on International Relations (Sacoir), indicates a move towards enhanced participation of the people in the state's foreign policy processes seemingly in line with the notion of Ubuntu adopted by Dirco. Sacoir was created as a domestic advisory council on international relations to further Dirco's objective of maximising domestic participation in such matters. It is meant to serve as a consultative forum in which non-state actors and government experts can participate with Dirco on the development and implementation of South Africa's foreign policy.[16] Its main objectives are:

- to provide a platform for generating public debate on foreign policy;
- to provide a consultative forum for regular review of South Africa's foreign policy; and
- to advise the minister of international relations and cooperation.

To date there has been no indication as to how Sacoir is to be constituted or how it will operate.[17] Lessons could perhaps be drawn from the Brazilian government's Human Rights and Foreign Policy Committee, set up to foster, monitor and evaluate Brazil's international commitment to human rights and the rule of law. The committee comprises representatives of the state and of civil society and non-governmental organisations, which work to maintain the centrality of human rights in Brazil's foreign policy and practices.[18]

Bringing South Africans to the international relations table in the spirit of Ubuntu will no doubt help to encourage debate on the African Agenda, not least on whether, or how, it serves the best interests of the nation for South Africa to prioritise the African continent above all else. The active and substantive participation of civil society and the private sector in the formulation of international relations may change that game by further entrenching thinking around the interconnectedness of national interests and international agendas, thereby deconstructing the false dichotomy between the two.

CONCLUSION

Given that there is an obvious overlap in relations within and between the UN, AU and Brics, the defining principle for action should be the best interests of South Africa's people. Rather than continuing to send confusing and conflicting signals on foreign affairs, described by a South African analyst as 'a little bit of this and a little bit of that' foreign policy,[19] South Africa's international strategy should conform to the core principle that it is representing its people and reflecting their values to the world – the constitutionally entrenched values that should consistently inform all domestic and foreign actions of the state. South Africa should not merely follow the lead of the AU or its Brics partners if it is in conflict with national interests or would fail to enhance the political and socio-economic wellbeing of South Africans.

There is no doubt that a stress on African voices and interdependence, human dignity, the centrality of people, and Ubuntu could help to counterbalance moral and material, old or new imperialism in international relations. South Africa is moving in a desirable direction in attempting to bring civil society into foreign policy decision-making. The

creation of Sacoir is one way of ensuring this. As the late French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault cautioned, however, state institutions will always formulate and construct new power relations, although attempts can and must be made to resist their power. This struggle to limit the sway of institutions applies especially in the elitist and hierarchical domain of international relations, regardless of whether the institutional and political power is exercised through the mechanisms of the Security Council, or through regional bodies such as the AU or the Arab League vying to extend their regional influence and control.

In commenting on the open antagonism between for instance Russia and the US during the Security Council debate on the Syrian intervention, the Pretoria-based foreign policy analyst Siphamandla Zondi points out that the struggle for global power can be a risk for Africa if the continent remains a mere passive spectator, and once more becomes the battleground of a 'Cold War logic' of West versus East and North versus South. If, however, serious attention is paid to 'firming up the agenda for an independent, efficient and relevant [AU]',[20] Africa would be in a position to move beyond hierarchical dichotomies of power and negotiate for itself the best of both worlds. In that way it could shift the locus of power from individual states to regions and multilateral associations. In Zondi's view it follows that if South Africa wishes to give a lead in providing Africa with a voice in international affairs, it should contribute towards 'new sources of reason and consensus globally' in order to avoid the repercussions of another scramble for Africa's resources as the struggle for world political and economic dominance intensifies.[21]

Once again, however, the question should be asked as to whether a strong AU and an African agenda would be of any real value or significance to the lives of ordinary South Africans, or whether the pursuit of continental and regional integration merely serves a political ideology that is not necessarily reflective of national interests. There is no hard and fast rule here, except to ensure that South Africa's foreign relations and priorities do not stray far from its domestic commitments to democracy and the values underpinning political and socio-economic rights. It is not necessary to sacrifice the national vision as encompassed in the constitution in the pursuit of global recognition and influence. The diplomacy of Ubuntu as articulated by Dirco has the potential to balance these national, continental and international interests in a manner that benefits all South Africans.

ENDNOTES

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