

Contemporary South African foreign policy: Public knowledge, beliefs and preferences

Summary

In this policy brief we analyse data from a 2013 survey of 2 739 South Africans on their interest in and knowledge of foreign affairs, views on the country's foreign policy goals, as well as foreign policy preferences. We find that public awareness of events outside South Africa is relatively circumscribed, suggesting the continued need for education strategies to improve public knowledge of foreign affairs. In the absence of knowledge, we find that ideological positions drive foreign policy preferences and that the public is polarised on many important foreign policy questions. We suggest that more research is needed to investigate differential public support for the policy direction government seeks to adopt, and that future work should focus on monitoring public perceptions of foreign policy, as well as perceptions of the benefits of foreign policy activities.

Introduction

During the apartheid period, the state discouraged the acquisition of foreign affairs knowledge among the South African public through propaganda campaigns and tight media controls. Twenty years after the end of apartheid, the country has emerged from isolation, becoming an engaged member of the international community and

participating actively in international fora and institutions, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, G20, G77 and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) among others. Regionally, South Africa plays a prominent role in the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, and since democratisation has adopted a consultative foreign policy approach rather than a confrontational one (Adebajo & Landsberg 2003; Ajulu 2009).

National policy documents suggest that South Africa's international engagements are shaped by both a commitment to multilateralism as well as a desire to build Global South solidarity and cooperation. The 2011 White Paper on Foreign Policy, entitled 'Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu' (DIRCO 2011), advocates pursuing an active engagement in world affairs, while building African unity and contributing to the economic, political and social renewal of the continent. The priorities identified (in order of importance) are:

- to accord central importance to the African continent;
- to work with countries of the South to address shared challenges of underdevelopment;
- to promote global equity and social justice;

- to work with countries of the North to develop a partnership for a better world; and
- to strengthen the global multilateral system (such as membership of BRICS).

The National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 (NPC 2013) underscores that such an approach is essential if the country is to achieve its national interests, which include addressing shared challenges of underdevelopment in the Global South, promoting global equity and social justice, and reforming international institutions of political and economic governance.

Determining attitudes towards foreign policy issues is important since attitudes are attached to domestic values, ideas and norms, and a disjuncture between these values and policy has the potential to render such policy difficult to implement or may result in forced policy change through the ballot box or mass protest (Siko 2014). In fact, in a chapter entitled 'Positioning South Africa in the World', the National Development Plan stresses that South African foreign policy – including the African Agenda on regional integration – should prioritise national interests, and consider how multilateral and bilateral global engagements can best serve the country.

To date, there exist relatively few comprehensive studies that examine public knowledge of foreign affairs in contemporary South Africa. Exceptions include the nationally representative surveys on foreign policy attitudes conducted by Nel (1999) and Van der Westhuizen and Smith (2013), as well as the qualitative study of elite opinion towards foreign policy by Siko (2014). In an attempt to provide further insight, the HSRC initiated a study of South African public opinion on world affairs and foreign policy with financial support from the Open Society Foundation's South African Foreign Policy Initiative (SAFPI). The aim of the study was to help fill this knowledge gap by providing an analysis of the level of public support for the government's foreign policy.

Data

A module of 20 questions on foreign policy issues was fielded in the 2013 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). The SASAS is a nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional survey that has been conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. Each survey round is designed to be representative of adults aged 16 years and older living in private homes across the country, irrespective of nationality. The 2013 SASAS round was conducted between October and December 2013 and consisted of a nationally representative sample of 2 739 respondents. The data were weighted using Statistics South Africa's Mid-Year Population Estimates as a benchmark. The data are thus representative of South Africans aged 16 years and older.

Interest in foreign policy

To gauge interest in world affairs, South Africans were asked how interested they were in news about the relations of South Africa with other countries. More than a fifth (21%) reported being very interested; 30% were somewhat interested; and almost two-fifths (38%) were either hardly

interested or not interested at all. The remainder either did not know (4%) or indicated that they did not follow the news (8%). To benchmark these findings, the data were compared with what has been observed in other countries.

A study by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2007 using this same question regarding interest in foreign relations found that, in general, at least two-thirds of the public in 15 countries tended to be somewhat interested or very interested in their country's relations with other nations. This ranged from lower levels in countries such as Russia, Poland and India (all around 67%) to highs in countries such as the US (84%) and Australia (92%). With only about half of the surveyed South Africans indicating that they were somewhat or very interested, South Africans on average exhibited relatively low levels of interest in international affairs, slightly below that of other developing countries.

Knowledge of world events

In order to evaluate individual knowledge of foreign affairs, South Africans were asked to rate their level of knowledge about events in Africa and the world. Approximately a quarter of the respondents reported that they lacked any knowledge; nearly a third (30%) stated that they were not very knowledgeable; and over two-fifths (44%) indicated that they were either somewhat or very knowledgeable.

To test the accuracy of this measure of foreign affairs knowledge, a series of objective questions were designed.

These questions were administered in the form of a quiz, and included questions on Zimbabwe, peacekeeping in Africa, revolution in Egypt and South Africa's foreign partnerships (Table 1).

Around a quarter of the respondents got none of the questions correct; two-fifths got between one and two correct; and a third got either three or four correct (mean = 1.7).

More than half the adult population demonstrated knowledge of regional issues, but barely a third were able to answer correctly questions about the world outside the southern African region. Those South Africans who reported high levels of knowledge on the subjective measure also scored well on the objective questions. Most received news about events in Africa and the world from television news on local channels such as SABC or eTV (63%), newspapers (40%) and the radio (30%). Only a small minority of adult South Africans obtained foreign affairs news from international news channels such as CNN or BBC (11%) and the internet (12%).

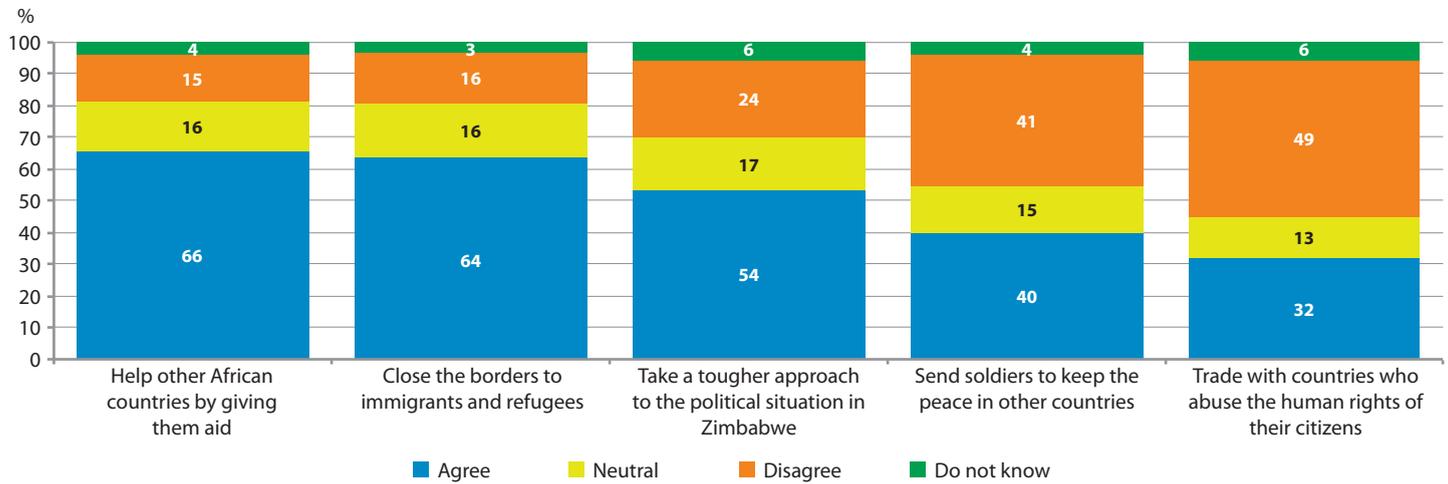
Foreign policy preferences

The South African public is divided on many important foreign policy issues (Figure 1). A good example is international peacekeeping missions, which the South African Defence Force has been involved in under United Nations and African Union command in a number of countries, including the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Two-fifths (40%) of the public supported dispatching soldiers to other countries on

Table 1: Foreign affairs quiz results, 2013

Knowledge of:	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Don't know
Zimbabwe 2013 election	61	7	32
2013 Egypt protests	32	20	48
BRICS member countries	31	15	53
Death of Central African Republic peacekeepers	51	12	37

Figure 1: Foreign policy preferences, 2013



peacekeeping missions, while an almost equal share (41%) disagreed and most of the remainder adopted a neutral position.

The country was also polarised on economic issues. Almost half (49%) of the adult population did not support trading with countries that are known to abuse the human rights of their citizens, while less than a third (32%) voiced support for such trading. Division is also evident on the government's relations with Zimbabwe. More than half (54%) of all South Africans thought the South African government should take a tougher approach to the political situation in Zimbabwe, while a smaller share (24%) of the population disagreed. Greater consensus was found in relation to support for closing national borders and giving aid to other African countries.

In order to understand popular foreign policy preferences in the country, respondents were read a list of possible foreign policy goals for the state and were asked to say whether they thought these should be very important, somewhat important or not important at all (the design of these questions was informed by work done by Holsti 2009 and Wittkopf 1990).

Analysis of their responses revealed two clear ideological camps: those who favoured humanitarian foreign policy

positions and those who were more protectionist in outlook. This disparity was not influenced by economic factors or knowledge of world affairs, and seems rather to be driven by other determinants, such as societal values (a trend that has been observed in North America; see Brewer and Steenbergen 2002).

Humanitarians: Individuals who support a foreign policy based on an ethic of active compassion, an approach in line with ubuntu philosophy and support for international cooperation and human rights.

Protectionists: Those who believe in a foreign policy informed by the need to protect the country by limiting contact with the outside world and pursuing the narrow national self-interest regardless of international law.

Those who favoured humanitarian positions were more supportive of helping other African countries by giving them aid and disapproved of trading with countries that were known to abuse the human rights of their citizens. Protectionists were less in favour of foreign ventures and were found to be less willing to agree that South Africa should contribute soldiers to peacekeeping missions. They were also more inclined to believe that the government should close the borders to immigrants and refugees. It is

therefore evident that individual attitudes towards foreign policy preferences are driven by the ideological position of the respondent.

Evaluations of government performance

On the performance of the South African state in meeting its foreign policy goals, there is a degree of discontent. Only half of the adult population was satisfied with the way the government is growing the national economy. More than a quarter (29%) was dissatisfied and the remainder (21%) gave a neutral response. A marginally larger share (52%) of the public was satisfied with how the state has promoted democracy and human rights in other countries, as well as with the role of South Africa in building political and economic unity in Africa. Substantial minorities of the public (19% and 18% respectively) were dissatisfied with the performance of the government in these areas.

Those South Africans who were located in the middle and upper class were found to be more critical of the government's foreign policy performance than were those in other class groups. This may reflect a distrust of the national government and the political elite which is often expressed by these groups. Separate analysis showed that those

who did not trust national government and political leaders were also more likely to express dissatisfaction with the performance of the government in national affairs. This suggests that institutional trust is associated with how the public view the nation's performance in foreign affairs.

How do South Africans rate government's performance in key foreign policy areas, such as promoting continental economic and political integration? Those with a humanitarian outlook rated the government's performance more positively than those with protectionist views, who tended to respond unfavourably. This suggests that ideological positioning has an important relationship with how South Africans perceive the performance of their government in the international arena.

Conclusion

The survey results presented in this policy brief characterise the South African public as being relatively ill-informed about international affairs. The foreign policy scholar Ole Holsti (2009) argues that the public can, and should, play a role in shaping foreign policy and advocates that the public should be educated on, and encouraged to take an interest in, world affairs. The South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) should adopt a diversified strategy to engage and educate the public on the importance of world affairs. The majority of South Africans receive news about world events from conventional media sources – local television, newspapers and radio – which suggests that the department's efforts should at the very least utilise these sources.

The establishment of the South African Council on International Relations (SACOIR) is a recent development that indicates a move towards enhanced participation of South Africans in the

state's foreign policy processes. 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 be involved in the development of South Africa's foreign policy. SACOIR's 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 (see Bohler-Muller 2012).

In order to open debate on foreign policy in post-apartheid South Africa, it is necessary to evaluate popular support for key decisions taken by the current administration on foreign policy. Although many participants lacked knowledge of world events, almost all were able to express preferences on foreign policy issues. The findings indicate that, despite significant domestic challenges in terms of unemployment and service delivery, popular support can be found for an outward-looking foreign policy in the country. Despite this, government should be cognisant of protectionists' fears when perusing a more humanitarian foreign policy position.

Significant importance is attached by national policy-makers to South Africa's role in global affairs (as foreign policy scholars have noted; see Landsberg 2010 and Melber 2014). This position is reflected in the country's National Development Plan and in DIRCO's White Paper on Foreign Policy, which argues that an active international role is essential if the country is to achieve its national interests. Given this

importance, there is a need to develop empirical evidence on public evaluations of foreign policy. Future research is required to better understand and investigate differential public support for the role that DIRCO seeks to adopt. The HSRC is working with the Open Society Foundation in a collaborative effort to provide a more detailed examination of the results presented here. Future work should focus on monitoring public perceptions of foreign policy actions, as well as perceptions of the benefits of foreign policy activities in the period preceding 2013.

Policy implications

1. *Awareness of world affairs among the South African public is relatively circumscribed.* Interest in world affairs among the South African public is lower than in other developed and developing countries, and many South Africans were not able to answer questions about events outside the country. These results confirm those of other studies (Nel 1999; Van der Westhuizen & Smith 2013) and suggest the continued need for DIRCO to further invest in and promote a greater awareness of foreign affairs among the wider public. Embarking on awareness-raising activities presents the challenge of affordability, especially given that such endeavours are unlikely to yield quick wins but produce steady, incremental progress towards an informed public. Despite such challenges, DIRCO has managed to make important recent strides in this regard – for instance, through the establishment of and experimentation with Ubuntu Radio and *Ubuntu* magazine.
2. *Ideological positions drive foreign policy preferences.* South Africans are polarised on important foreign policy questions such as peacekeeping and establishing international trade with countries

that abuse human rights. Individual attitudes towards foreign policy positions are mainly driven by the ideological position of the individual. South Africans who adopted a protectionist position were more dissatisfied with government performance in key areas of foreign policy and expressed strong preferences about the direction foreign policy needs to take. In making policy decisions, DIRCO should consult the public to ensure that the diversity of voices on such matters is effectively captured and considered. The decisions ultimately taken are unlikely to find favour across the ideological spectrum. Nonetheless, this should not dissuade decision-makers from adopting a communicative approach. Instead, the public voice should be heard, informed policy decisions made based on these democratic inputs, and feedback provided to the public about the reasons underlying these choices. It also needs to be acknowledged that in a context where specific foreign policy issues, such as border control or peacekeeping missions, continue to polarise the public, it is going to be more difficult for the government to pursue and effectively implement a foreign policy agenda. In such cases, citizen engagement and communication assumes increasing priority. This will require an adaptive and differentiated communications strategy, which may require refinements to the prevailing mode of policy planning in relation to foreign policy (Siko 2014).

3. In response to the preceding points, it is advisable that SACOIR is instituted and becomes operational. As a consultative forum, this body will bring together non-state actors and government experts in order to guide the development of South Africa's

foreign policy. This would enable wider consultation and participation.

4. *Additional research on public attitudes towards foreign affairs is needed.* Work on foreign policy beliefs and preferences remains in its relative infancy in South Africa and the continent as a whole. More research is required to investigate differential public support for the policy direction that DIRCO seeks to adopt, and how this support evolves over time. Similarly, there is a need for greater investment in collecting data with which to better understand citizen views on foreign policy matters across the continent, and bilateral and multilateral partners should be encouraged to lend support to such initiatives.

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