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# South Africa and Africa

By  
CHRIS SAUNDERS

This article examines aspects of the complex relationship between South Africa and the rest of Africa from the presidency of Nelson Mandela through those of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, showing how the relationship changed over time and exploring the influences that shaped South Africa's policy on and toward the continent—a policy that has largely been determined by the presidency rather than the Department of Foreign Affairs/International Relations and Co-operation. To understand the changing relationship between South Africa and the rest of the continent, it is necessary to consider, first, the history before 1994, then the dramatically altered situation that the transfer of power in South Africa brought about, Thabo Mbeki's interventionist approach to Africa in general, and Jacob Zuma's ambiguous involvement in continental affairs. The article concludes with some speculative thoughts on the role that South Africa may play on the continent in the future.

*Keywords:* South African foreign policy; Mandela; Mbeki; Zuma

South Africa's relationship with the rest of Africa has long been ambiguous. The country's apartheid rulers usually saw South Africa as separate from the rest of the continent, a white-ruled enclave increasingly threatened by hostile forces but with strong ties to the West. Today, some leaders in other African countries still view South Africa as being a country apart from the rest of the continent because of its large non-black African population and its special links to other parts of the world, now both West and East. South Africa does have by far the largest minority groups originally from out-

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side the continent, and the largest, most diverse, and most developed economy in Africa, with the continent's most significant manufacturing sector, which developed on the back of mineral exploitation. But since the transfer of power to the black majority in 1994, South Africa has identified itself as an African country, has asserted that its relations with other African countries lie at the center of its foreign policy, and has claimed to speak and act as one of the leading countries on the continent. The prime goal of the government's Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), proclaims its website, is to have "an African continent which is prosperous, peaceful, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and united," and DIRCO and government spokespeople make constant reference to South Africa's "African agenda."<sup>1</sup> The relevant chapter in the country's much-heralded National Development Plan (NDP), published in 2012 and subsequently confirmed as the centerpiece of government policy, begins, "We are Africans. We are an African country. . . . We are an essential part of our continent" (National Planning Commission 2012, 15).<sup>2</sup>

What is this "African agenda"? How has the relationship between South Africa and the rest of the continent evolved since the presidency of Nelson Mandela (1994 to 1999) and how may it change in the future? What leadership role should South Africa play on the rest of the continent? To explore such questions, this article examines mainly political aspects of the history of the complex relationship between South Africa and the rest of the continent since 1994. Though that relationship was shaped by a wide variety of factors, domestic and global, the South African presidents played a leading role, and so this article focuses on the three main presidencies since 1994 before concluding by considering aspects of the current relationship between South Africa and the rest of the continent, and suggesting how it may evolve in the future.

## Pre-1994

Until the end of the 1980s the relationship between apartheid South Africa and the rest of the continent was, mostly, an antagonistic one (cf. Rotberg 2002), though the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), born in 1910, brought together South Africa and the three British High Commission territories that ultimately became independent in the 1960s as Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. South African-ruled South West Africa was a *de facto* member of SACU before becoming a formal member when independent Namibia was born in 1990. The near neighborhood apart, however, most South African government policy-makers in the apartheid era believed that South Africa was somehow *sui generis*. Despite the attempts that were made to gain ties with certain countries in tropical Africa, there was no thought that "Africa," meaning the rest of the continent, should lie at the center of the country's foreign policy. In the early 1970s, the South African government engaged in a so-called outward policy, focused on developing friendly relations with key African countries (Nolutshungu

1975), but that ended with South Africa's invasion of Angola in 1975, and the Constellation of Southern African States that Prime Minister P. W. Botha proposed in 1979 never got off the ground. The 1980s saw South Africa attempt to destabilize a number of countries in southern Africa and fight a major war in southern Angola. It was only as this era ended in the late 1980s that the other Botha, Foreign Minister Pik Botha, began both to urge that South Africa should see itself primarily as an African country and to argue that South Africa should work with other African countries to solve problems without interference from outside the continent (Papenfus 2010, 626–58).

On the other hand, the very name African National Congress (ANC), adopted in 1923 by what had until then been called the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), suggested that the organization that was to emerge as the leader of the resistance to apartheid had long wished to associate itself with the rest of the continent. In the 1920s, this association was influenced by the Pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey. When forced into exile in the 1960s, the banned ANC initially had its main base in what was then Tanganyika, later moving its headquarters to Lusaka, Zambia, and its military wing to camps in Angola. It received crucial support from the Liberation Committee of the main continental body, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which helped to fund the ANC's armed struggle. In its decades of exile, the ANC forged close ties not only with the governments of a number of independent African countries, but also with liberation movements that later came to power in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Namibia (Thomas 1996; Ellis 2012; Southall 2013a). As the ANC itself approached power in the early 1990s, and began to think about what foreign policy it would adopt when in government, it was, not surprisingly, deeply influenced by its past interactions with African countries and with the OAU (South African Democracy Education Trust 2013, esp. 249–76).

While the ANC was based in exile, its diplomacy was largely anticolonial and anti-Western in its orientation (Thomas 1996), because of its links to the Soviet Union, which provided it with the means to conduct its armed struggle, and the refusal of Western countries to take significant steps against apartheid. But as the ANC moved closer to power in the early 1990s, in what was then the new post-Cold War era, it sought to build ties with Western countries. Mandela published an influential article in the United States-based journal *Foreign Affairs* in which he stated, partly from personal conviction, but also to secure broad international approval, that when the ANC became the government of the new South Africa it would place human rights at the center of its foreign policy (Mandela 1993). In early 1994, officials of the apartheid government joined leading members of the ANC on a visit to a number of countries in tropical Africa to develop a new set of postapartheid relations with those countries (Graham 2011). This visit eased the transition from the old order to the new, for despite the dramatic shift in South Africa's relations with the rest of the continent that the transfer of power made possible, and the enthusiasm for a new relationship with other African countries among many former apartheid bureaucrats, there were also continuities between the old order and the new (Landsberg 2010a).

## The Mandela Presidency, 1994–1999

Within months of Nelson Mandela being sworn in as president, South Africa had become a member of both the OAU and the main regional body in southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC). SADC had its roots in the Front Line States and the Southern African Development Co-ordinating Conference (SADCC), both formed in opposition to apartheid South Africa (Khadiagala 1994, 2012). Like the OAU, SADC included states of vastly different geographies and economies. From the formation of the OAU in 1963 there were those who questioned the value of having a continental organization, given Africa's great diversity.<sup>3</sup> SADC—the headquarters of which remained in Gaborone, Botswana, even after South Africa joined—included countries that were not near neighbors of South Africa, such as Tanzania, Malawi, and Angola, which in the 1990s continued to be wracked by civil war. Lesotho is entirely surrounded by South Africa, and Swaziland was then, and continues to be, ruled autocratically by a hereditary monarch. In 1998, South Africa supported the addition to SADC's membership of the very large Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), despite its distance from South Africa and despite its being so undeveloped that some have called it only a notional state (Herbst and Mills 2013). Though most people in the various SADC countries spoke a Bantu language, these countries' very different colonial experiences had left their peoples speaking different European languages. There was a long history of people moving across the region—the diamond and then the gold mines in South Africa had attracted labor from what is now Malawi, from southern Mozambique, and from the territories adjacent to South Africa that Britain led to independence in the 1960s—but no common set of values that could bind such a diverse region together. While some SADC countries had emerged from colonialism peacefully, others had had to endure bitterly fought armed struggles and postindependence civil wars. In the case of Angola, civil war continued until 2002.

The relative strength of the South African economy meant that South Africa became SADC's most important member and a leading member of the OAU. South Africa was known internationally for having passed through a "miraculous" transition from apartheid to liberal democracy relatively peacefully, and for the generosity of spirit that Mandela showed as president, beginning in 1994. Though Mandela's inspirational leadership and South Africa's remarkable Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave the country great moral standing and a role on the world stage, other southern African countries remained concerned about South Africa's overwhelming economic dominance in the region and suspicious of its intentions, for they could not immediately forget apartheid South Africa's aggression in the region. Therefore, the regional role that the new South African government could play after 1994 was limited, and it was sensitive to the need not to assert its power as the regional hegemon. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, who had become a leading figure in SADCC, now saw Mandela usurping his role in SADC. From the time that South Africa joined the regional organization in 1994 there were tensions between it and other SADC members

(Nathan 2012), though relations between South Africa and the other countries in the region and beyond varied greatly from country to country. The ANC was conscious of owing a debt to other African countries, particularly those in the southern African region, for supporting its struggle against the apartheid regime.

Though it was conscious not to be seen to be either a continental or a regional bully, the new government nevertheless asserted that Africa was its main foreign policy priority. The number of South African embassies in other African countries quickly increased from four under apartheid to twenty-one (Pfister 2000). Mandela had pressing problems to face at home, including threats from right-wing elements unhappy with the country's abandonment of apartheid, but he told the OAU in Tunis only a month after coming into office that the new South Africa intended to play a leading role on the African continent, though he provided no specifics.<sup>4</sup> The first foreign policy document adopted by the new government, a "Framework for Co-operation in Southern Africa," approved by the cabinet in August 1996, held out a vision for the southern African region of "the highest possible degree of economic cooperation, mutual assistance where necessary, and joint planning of regional development initiatives, leading to integration consistent with socio-economic, environmental and political realities" (Department of Foreign Affairs 1996). When he visited Tanzania in 1996, Mandela said that his presence there underlined "the centrality of Africa and Southern Africa in the foreign policy of [South Africa's] new democracy" (Barber 2004, 171).<sup>5</sup>

Though the new South Africa soon realized the limited effectiveness of both the OAU and SADC, it paid its dues to both, hosting a SADC summit meeting as chair of the regional organization in 1996, and signing most of the relevant protocols. Mandela, striding the global stage, sometimes seemed to forget African countries that had supported the ANC's liberation struggle or had hosted it in exile, but he cultivated relations with President Muammar Qaddafi's Libya in particular, in part as a source of funds for the ANC's election campaigns. South Africa agreed to requests from the OAU and then the successor African Union (AU), as well as from the United Nations (UN), to contribute to peacekeeping missions elsewhere on the continent and, when asked, was willing to mediate in a number of conflict situations. Despite his immense moral authority, Mandela was often unsuccessful in his conciliation efforts elsewhere on the continent. In 1996, he failed to prevent the Nigerian military junta led by President Sani Abacha from executing the activist Ken Saro Wiwa. Elsewhere, he applied the South African experience of a government of national unity to situations in which it was not appropriate. For example, his attempt to broker a peace deal between then-President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire/Congo and his rival Laurent Kabila came to naught, while South Africa's attempts to bring about reconciliation between the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) led by Jonas Savimbi only aroused the hostility of the MPLA government.

When war escalated in the DRC in 1998, Mandela did not join Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe in sending South African troops there, but that year the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF), with a few Botswana

troops in tow, was sent into Lesotho to prevent its government from being overthrown, and only retrospectively was this operation called a SADC effort. Although the intervention itself was inept, its goal was achieved, for the situation was stabilized and the intervention was followed by a lengthy mediation by South Africa to bring into effect a revised electoral system that combined the “first past the post” one inherited from Britain with proportional representation. This reform eventually made possible a peaceful transition to a coalition government in Lesotho in 2012 (Saunders 2013). South Africa’s unilateralism was also shown in 1998 when it ignored the concerns of the other members of SACU and signed a bilateral Trade Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) with the European Union (EU). Overall, the record of the Mandela presidency in relation to other countries in Africa was a mixed one that did not measure up to the lofty ambitions that it espoused. While Mandela sought to use soft power, drawing on his immense moral authority, as president, he increasingly handed over aspects of work involving other African countries to Thabo Mbeki, his deputy. In his most successful personal intervention in tropical Africa, Mandela mediated the internal conflict in Burundi—another African country far from South Africa and in which South Africa had no obvious direct interest (Daniel 2006)—after vacating the presidency.

### The Mbeki Presidency, 1999–2008

In his most famous speech, delivered to the South African Parliament in 1996, Thabo Mbeki identified himself as “an African,” which meant, in part, his identifying with all who lived on the continent (Mbeki 1998). Favoring an interventionist approach on the continent, Mbeki was more of a Pan-Africanist than his predecessor. In calling for an African Renaissance, he explicitly drew on the famous speech delivered at Columbia University in 1906 by Pixley Seme, who six years later was the main founder of SANNC (Odendaal 2012). Mbeki took over as president of South Africa in 1999 with a determination to promote his own version of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah’s pan-African dream. He pushed ahead rapidly with a highly ambitious African agenda that involved the transformation of the OAU, much criticized for its lethargy, into what he hoped would be a more active AU; and the introduction of a raft of new continental measures to improve governance on the continent. These included the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), “a mutually agreed instrument voluntarily acceded to by the member states of the AU as an African self-monitoring mechanism,”<sup>6</sup> and the New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). Though he wanted to reduce the role of Western powers in Africa, Mbeki saw NEPAD as a means to attract new funding that would help to develop Africa as a whole. He played a major role in the creation of the Pan African Parliament, which was then given a home in South Africa, and in designing the AU’s Peace and Security Council as a key part of the new continental African security and institutional architecture. With his eyes fixed on such continental schemes,

Mbeki tended not to accord special priority to the southern African region, seeing it as but one part of his broader African agenda (cf. Pottinger 2009; Glaser 2010).

For a time, Mbeki's proactive role on the continent seemed to be strikingly successful: he forged a close relationship with President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, and after addressing Rwanda's security fears, he brought together the parties to the conflict in the DRC at an inter-Congolese dialogue held in South Africa that ushered in a new dispensation for that war-ravaged country (Khadiagala 2006). South Africa deployed a force in Burundi to safeguard the return of political exiles to that country, after which a power-sharing deal was reached between the rebel forces and the government, thanks in part to the efforts of Jacob Zuma, Mbeki's deputy president (Bentley and Southall 2005).

Mbeki was criticized for his "quiet diplomacy" toward Zimbabwe, his favoring Mugabe against the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and his failure to criticize the human rights abuses committed by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government (e.g., Adelman 2004; Hamill and Hoffman 2009; Southern African Liaison Office 2013),<sup>7</sup> but he did encourage a process of dialogue that led in September 2008 to the signing of a Global Political Agreement (GPA) between the ruling ZANU-PF and the two MDC formations. The GPA provided for the formation of a so-called unity government, at the cost of President Mugabe remaining in office.

By the time that Mbeki was forced to resign as president, shortly after the signing of the GPA, many of his initial hopes, including the APRM and NEPAD, had largely been dashed, as resources from outside the continent failed to materialize and processes to enhance accountability within Africa had little effect; states could too easily ignore the criticisms made in the APRM review reports (e.g., Cilliers 2011).<sup>8</sup> And despite all the talk of "African solutions to African problems" and the idea of creating an African Standby Force to deal with continental conflicts, African leaders recognized that the UN would need to remain in charge of most peacekeeping missions in Africa, in the absence of the necessary funding and capacity in Africa itself. As one of the five components of the African Standby Force, a SADC brigade was launched with some fanfare in August 2007, in Lusaka, Zambia. South Africa's role in that force was crucial from the start, but although the SADC brigade was initially supposed to be operational by 2010 (Saunders 2012), as of 2013 it remained bedeviled by many problems, not least of which was interoperability among its component parts. The new target date for it to be operational is 2015. Both during his presidency and after, Mbeki made a number of attempts to mediate in the conflict in the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), but these were unsuccessful in part because of his bias toward the incumbent ruler and because he aroused the ire of Nigeria, which did not appreciate South African involvement in a region in which it was the hegemon. For all of Mbeki's many failings, however—and it may be argued that he was much too ambitious in what he tried to bring about on the continent (e.g., Glaser 2010)—more than any other postapartheid president of South Africa he had a vision of his country playing a leading role in a revived Africa.



## The Zuma Presidency, 2009–

Having ousted Mbeki from the presidency of the ANC at the organization's 2007 Polokwane conference, Jacob Zuma took over as president of South Africa in 2009. When he did so, many commentators expected him to withdraw from the kind of continental engagements that Mbeki had supported (e.g., Landsberg 2010b). Zuma chose Angola as the first African country to visit as president. The ANC's armed wing had been based there, and Zuma sought to improve relations with President Eduardo dos Santos's regime, for relations with Angola had been strained under both Mandela and Mbeki.<sup>9</sup> Zuma seemed keen to emphasize the ties between the ANC and the other former liberation movements that had fought armed struggles and were now ruling southern African states. Besides the MPLA in Angola, these were the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia, and ZANU-PF, though the ANC had not had close ties with the last during the liberation struggle.<sup>10</sup> The view that some expressed, that SADC was little more than an "old boy's club" of veterans of armed struggle, aiming to protect the interests of those in power in the countries of the region, appeared to be further validated when the SADC heads of state agreed to suspend, then disband, SADC's own tribunal, after that body ruled against the Zimbabwean government in a celebrated land case involving white farming rights. The chief judge of the tribunal was then very critical of South Africa for not using "its power as the SADC's largest state and its 'moral authority' to prevent the tribunal from being emasculated."<sup>11</sup> But by then the country's moral authority had dissipated, not least because Zuma had come into office after numerous corruption charges against him had been dropped in a highly dubious manner (e.g., Southall and Daniel 2009).

The xenophobic attacks in South African townships in May 2008, which led to the deaths of more than sixty people, further damaged South Africa's reputation in the eyes of Africans to the north. South Africa had received a very large number of refugees from other African countries, especially from Zimbabwe but also from as far away as Somalia, and reports on the manner in which such refugees were treated in South Africa were often extremely negative. This was another example in which South Africa squandered the goodwill that other African countries had initially had toward the ANC (based on its struggle in exile against apartheid and its actions in its first years in government). There can be no doubt that South Africa's concern with peace and stability elsewhere on the continent was driven in part by the realization that instability elsewhere was likely to increase the flow of refugees to South Africa, and that there was a limit to the number of refugees the country could absorb when so many of its own citizens were unemployed and impoverished.

Like the other states in SADC, South Africa remained opposed to any transfer of national sovereignty to the regional body, wishing to ensure that its "national interests" remained paramount at all times,<sup>12</sup> but South Africa was ready to use SADC in its own interests: in 2011 Zuma persuaded all the other SADC

countries to back what he presented as a SADC bid to elect South Africa's Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as chair of the AU Commission, the key post in the continental organization. South Africa continued its campaign until it was successful, despite the antagonism that it aroused elsewhere on the continent (e.g., Handy and Kjeldgaard 2011, 2012).

By the time Dlamini-Zuma was eventually elected in Addis Ababa in July 2012, Zuma had scored what he and DIRCO presented as another coup, by having South Africa admitted as a member of the Brazil-Russia-India-China (BRIC) group of countries. He achieved this in part by presenting South Africa as the "gateway" to the rest of Africa and as a country that was in some way the natural leader of Africa and one able to speak on behalf of the continent as a whole. Becoming a member of BRICS emphasized South Africa's special position on the continent—it was the only African country also to be a member of the G20—but naturally aroused animosity elsewhere. When the fifth BRICS summit, the first to be held in Africa, took place in Durban in March 2013, South Africa tried to downplay its special role, choosing as the theme of the summit "BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation" and inviting leaders of other African countries to interact with its BRICS partners.<sup>13</sup> But South Africa's special relationship with China—which has become South Africa's single most important trading partner—further fuelled tension between South Africa and other African countries, those vying for Chinese attention and those more critical than South Africa of China's intentions in Africa. For example, the vice president of Zambia, Guy Scott, was reported to have made some very disparaging remarks at the beginning of May 2013 about South Africa and its pretensions to represent Africa on the global stage (Smith 2013).

Though he did so in a more ad hoc fashion, Zuma continued much of Mbeki's Africa policy. He succeeded Mbeki as chief "facilitator" for Zimbabwe, though with less focus and attention to detail. His efforts to persuade the Zimbabweans to make the GPA work met with little success, and he was unable to secure the necessary reforms that would have enabled a free and fair election to take place in that country in July 2013 (e.g., Zondi and Bhengu 2011). He agreed that South Africa should play a role in mediation in Madagascar after the coup that took place there in 2009 and South Africa was able to help persuade both leading figures to agree that neither would contest the first postcoup election, initially scheduled to take place in July 2013 but postponed. No SADC or AU sanctions were imposed on Madagascar, however, to ensure that the terms of the roadmap drawn up to return that country to constitutionalism were respected.

Zuma continued—and gave greater emphasis to it than Mbeki had—the drive to link SADC to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the East African Community (EAC) in a tripartite free trade area, which is supposed to come into being by 2015.<sup>14</sup> A consensus politician who was reluctant to take issue with his peers, Zuma dismissed the criticisms of those who wanted South Africa's foreign policy to be based primarily on human rights. He went along with SADC's decision in effect to destroy the very tribunal it had set up (Nathan 2012).<sup>15</sup> In early 2013, there was some evidence that he was adopting a more proactive and interventionist stance toward the rest of Africa,

though the suggestion by Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman that “the defensive posturing which characterized much of the African National Congress’s (ANC) post-apartheid foreign policy” was being “replaced by an unashamed claim to African leadership” is overstated (Alden and Schoeman 2013, 111; cf. Fabricius 2013b). At the end of April 2013, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, the minister of international relations and co-operation, did, however, say that because South Africa was an integral part of the African continent, it had to say “yes to preventive diplomacy. . . . When it is called upon to intervene, [South Africans] will always be there.”<sup>16</sup>

South Africa wished to project an image that it was a responsible member of the international community, not least in the hope that doing so would help it to secure a permanent seat on a reformed and enlarged UN Security Council. But in its two terms as a nonpermanent member of that council (2007–2008 and 2011–2012), its voting record was much criticized. It refused to support resolutions targeted at rogue states, and though it voted for a resolution approving all necessary measures to prevent the Libyan government from suppressing civilian opposition, it then became a strong critic of the NATO operation there on the grounds that NATO wanted regime change (Centre for Conflict Resolution 2013). South Africa was again critical of external intervention on the continent when French troops helped oust the incumbent in the Ivory Coast. While there was clearly no alternative to French intervention in Mali in March 2012 to prevent a possible rebel advance on Bamako, in its aftermath Zuma engaged with the rulers of both Nigeria and Algeria to determine what steps could be taken to avoid further external intervention (e.g., Mbeje 2013), and he then gave stability as the prime reason for South Africa’s own intervention in the Central African Republic (CAR).

Additional South African forces were sent to the CAR in January 2013 at a time when the autocratic leader of that country, Francois Bozizé, under pressure from rebels, asked for help. There was speculation that this intervention, supposedly based on a Memorandum of Understanding that provided for South African help in training a CAR military force, was intended to keep France from sending troops to the CAR, as it had to Mali. Perhaps Zuma feared that instability in the CAR might spread into the DRC next door. If there were economic reasons for the intervention, it was not clear what they were. The return of the bodies of thirteen South African National Defence Force (SANDF) soldiers from the CAR in March 2013 raised new doubts among South Africans about what their country was doing in distant tropical Africa, and led to many questions being asked—among a public mostly ignorant about the rest of the continent—about what South Africa’s role in Africa should be.

After the SANDF deaths, the remaining South African forces were withdrawn from the CAR, at the request of the Economic Community of Central African States. But not long afterward, South Africa readied one thousand troops to go, with forces from Malawi and Tanzania, to the eastern DRC as part of an activist international intervention force under UN authority (e.g., Fabricius 2013a). When President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria made an official state visit to South Africa in early May 2013, he and Zuma agreed to work together on issues

affecting the continent as a whole. If such united action were to become effective, it would be likely to increase the fears of other sub-Saharan countries of the dominant role that these two giants might play on the continent.

## Toward a Conclusion: What Should South Africa's Leadership Role Be on the Continent?

Through its involvement in numerous countries, from the Darfur region of the Sudan to Lesotho, South Africa has arguably done more than any other African country since 1994 to promote peace on the continent. South Africa's role in the rest of Africa, nevertheless, remains controversial and contested. As a member of SADC, it should work within its structures, including its Standby Force. If it intervenes unilaterally, either in the southern African region or farther in Africa, such intervention is likely to be seen, as that in the CAR was by some, as an unwarranted move by the "big brother from the south." To counter any perception elsewhere in Africa that it is pushing itself forward as a self-elected continental leader, South Africa will need to be careful to act only when asked to, and, wherever possible, with others.<sup>17</sup> While South Africa may wish to offer its resources to help promote stability, development, and democracy elsewhere, this can best be done as a member of SADC or of the AU. Instead of continuing its divisive campaign for its own permanent seat on the UN Security Council, South Africa should argue for a permanent seat for Africa on the council. South Africa has long since lost the moral capital that it accumulated under Mandela, and whether a successor to Zuma can regain at least some of the country's former moral prestige remains to be seen.

An Afro-optimist scenario for Africa's future sees development and democracy spreading through the continent; an Afro-pessimist one anticipates continuing and increasingly serious crises arising from poor governance, competition for scarce resources, the adverse effects of climate change, food insecurity, and other factors. Given Africa's great diversity, elements of both scenarios are likely. While some South African businesses have flourished in other African countries, such as the mobile-phone giant MTN in Nigeria, others have found the environments difficult and have withdrawn (e.g., Daniel and Lutchman 2006). Such stories of success and failure are likely to continue, but a network of organizations—from, say, the Association of African Universities to the Association of African Central Banks—now link people across the continent, and the fact that students from across most of sub-Saharan Africa now study at universities in South Africa creates networks that tie South Africa to other countries on the continent.

A working group that DIRCO set up in 2010 to help define South Africa's national interest has to date failed to come up with any consensus on what it is.<sup>18</sup> Any country may of course have various national interests, and they are likely to change over time. According to the minister of international relations and co-operation, the cornerstone of South Africa's foreign policy toward the rest of the African continent, as elsewhere, is the country's domestic interest

(Nkoana-Mashabane 2013). Central to the policy is the need to grow the size of the market for South African goods. Instability elsewhere, especially in the southern African region, is not in South Africa's interests, not least because it is likely to increase further the flow of refugees southward. Though South Africa remains committed to working through the structures of SADC, that body has so far proved ineffective in dealing with problems of governance in member-states. It has not produced any clear strategic policy on what to do about undemocratic regimes, whether in Zimbabwe, Swaziland, or Angola. Even if instability, or foreign intervention, in North Africa does not have any direct consequences for South Africa, South Africa needs to be concerned with all of Africa because it is seen as part of the continent in the global imagination, and negative developments anywhere in Africa affect South Africa's image as an African country. That may well, however, be insufficient justification for South Africa contributing troops to, say, the AU mission in the Darfur region of the Sudan.

South Africa does contribute to development on the rest of the continent in many different ways. South African companies such as MTN and Shoprite cater to middle-class needs in many African countries. In May 2013, Eskom, South Africa's national power company, agreed to be the anchor client for hydroelectric power that will be generated from the still-to-be-constructed Grand Inga dam in the DRC, promising to buy 2,500 megawatts of the initial 4,800-megawatt output. The Development Bank of Southern Africa, based in South Africa, has now agreed to help finance the project (Norbrook 2013). Zuma has himself been involved, on behalf of both the AU and SADC, in promoting a number of continental infrastructural projects, of which the best-known is the north-south corridor to link the port of Durban in South Africa with the Copperbelt in the DRC and Zambia, with a spur to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.<sup>19</sup>

Will South Africa develop a clearer strategic vision than it has had for its future relationship with Africa? There is all too little expertise on the rest of Africa in South Africa. The government authorities in South Africa are not nurturing what knowledge there is, and the demise of South African think-tanks that have worked in other African countries does not bode well for the future.<sup>20</sup> In conclusion, let me set out some elements of a possible approach for South Africa. The South Africa government should not view any intervention by the West—recently in Libya, the Ivory Coast, and Mali—as imperialist and, therefore, against African interests. The ideas from the Cold War era about the world that linger on in the ANC-SACP-COSATU tripartite alliance should be jettisoned. South Africa should give priority, more than it has to date, to its neighboring countries; it should strengthen SACU by, *inter alia*, renegotiating the revenue-sharing formula; it should stand firm for free and fair elections without violence in Zimbabwe and for democratic reforms in Swaziland;<sup>21</sup> it should persuade SADC to resurrect its tribunal, and ensure that the SADC Standby Force is operational by 2015. It should recognize that Nigeria will take the lead in promoting development and stability in West Africa, Chad in Central Africa, Kenya in East Africa, and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. Nigeria and Kenya are already challenging South Africa's claim that it is "the gateway" into the continent, and South Africa

should accept that it is but one among a number of major countries on the continent. There is no reason why all fifty-five African countries should speak with one voice, let alone why South Africa should be that voice.<sup>22</sup>

South Africa should, therefore, recognize its limitations and, in the words of its National Development Plan, “focus on what is practically achievable, without over-committing to possibilities of regional and continental integration.” Foreign policy should be regularly evaluated to “secure and promote national interests” (National Planning Commission 2012, 243), which include the tackling of unemployment, inequality, and poverty at home. At the same time, issues such as climate change may need to be addressed regionally or continentally.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.dfa.gov.za/departement/index.html>.
2. DIRCO said its mission was to promote “South Africa’s national interests and values, the African Renaissance and the creation of a better world for all.” See [www.dfa.gov.za/departement/index.html](http://www.dfa.gov.za/departement/index.html).
3. For a recent strong critique of the pan-African vision of the OAU and the AU, see Zachary (2011).
4. Citing Mandela’s speech, Frank Chikane, a minister in the presidency under both Mandela and Mbeki, has recently stressed what he sees to be the continuities between the two presidencies. See Chikane (2013).
5. Barber’s (2004) book provides the best account of Mandela’s policy toward Africa and the region in chapters 14 and 15, but compare also the 418 items listed in Pfister (2000); Adebajo, Adedeji, and Landsberg (2007); Blumenfeld (2010); and Landsberg (2010a).
6. See <http://aprm-au.org>.
7. Mbeki’s deputy minister of foreign affairs has written recently of the need to consider the real world rather than human rights; see the preface in Landsberg and van Wyk (2012, vii). Mbeki echoed Mugabe in characterizing the MDC as Western puppets, seeking to reintroduce colonial rule. In a letter to Tsvangirai on November 22, 2008, Mbeki wrote, “It may be that, for whatever reason, you consider our region and continent as being of little consequence to the future of Zimbabwe, believing that others further away, in Western Europe and North America, are of greater importance” (Chikane 2013, 30).
8. For a recent strong critique of NEPAD as a neoliberal project based on market fundamentalist principles and an endorsement of the global capitalist order, see Makgetlaneng (2013, esp. 75 and 84).
9. President Jose Eduardo dos Santos reciprocated by making, in December 2010, his first state visit to South Africa since 1994.
10. The former liberation movements continue to meet, most recently at Freedom Park in March 2013: *Weekend Argus*, 9 March 2013. The ANC worked with ZAPU, not ZANU, in the 1960s and 1970s.
11. See, for example, <http://www.safpi.org/news/article/2013/selfish-jz-allowed-mugabe-kill-sadc-tribunal>. Cf. Nathan (2012).
12. Laurie Nathan has argued that this reluctance to transfer sovereignty to the regional body stemmed in part from the fact that sovereignty, acquired relatively recently through a process of decolonization, remained fragile. See Nathan (2011).
13. See [www.brics5.co.za](http://www.brics5.co.za).
14. It was agreed in 2008 to form such a free trade area, which would bring together twenty-six countries. It was argued that this would expand South Africa’s market from 50 million to 600 million and, therefore, give it a market similar in size to that of some of its BRICS partners. But the free trade agreement that SADC in theory implemented in 2008 did not do much to increase South Africa’s market, not least because Angola and the DRC were not involved in it.
15. The tribunal began work in Windhoek, Namibia, in November 2005. The government of Zimbabwe rejected its judgment in the case of *Mike Campbell v. the Republic of Zimbabwe*, which challenged the expropriation of agricultural land in that country by its government, and refused to compensate the farmers concerned. See Nathan (2012).

16. *Business Day*, 30 April 2013.
17. Cf. editorial in *Mail and Guardian*, 9 May 2013.
18. Cf. Landsberg and van Wyk (2012) and email to this author from Dr. Eddy Maloka, 2 May 2013. Roger Southall concludes a section of *New South African Review* 3 on South Africa and the wider world by saying that no one can doubt that the country's "national interest" is now that of the ANC (Southall 2013b, 296). There has certainly been a massive conflation of the ruling party with the country.
19. See <http://www.icafrica.org/en/topics-programmes/north-south-corridor/>.
20. IDASA, which had reinvented itself as a think-tank with African expertise, closed its doors in March 2013, and at the same time there were plans to merge the Africa Institute of South Africa, based in Pretoria, with the government's Human Sciences Research Council.
21. On Swaziland, the ANC has on occasion, in championing such reforms, moved ahead of the government.
22. Fifty-four if Morocco is excluded; Morocco is not a member of the AU.

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