
Original Article

South Africa's symbolic hegemony in Africa

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Abstract South Africa's position on the African continent is widely seen to be one of dominance and leadership. No longer subject to the international opprobrium, post-apartheid South Africa launched a visionary campaign built around the notion of an 'African Renaissance' to restructure continental institutions in line with its interests. This state-led effort was complemented by an aggressive commercial expansion by well-financed South African corporations to break into previously inaccessible markets across the continent. This populist depiction of South Africa is largely echoed in the scholarly literature on South African foreign policy towards Africa. But careful analysis of the South African foreign policy experience both in Africa and more broadly, suggests that these images are only partially realised at best and that they ignore a host of structural problems and outcomes. In particular, the case for South African hegemonic dominance over the continent is challenged by its material weakness and uneven record of foreign policy successes. Despite this, Pretoria is continually 'rewarded' with leadership positions in international groupings, such as BRICS, G20 and nearly consecutive terms on the UN Security Council. We argue that this constitutes *symbolic representivity* and poses a continuing set of foreign policy dilemmas for South Africa and an international community as South Africa struggles to fulfil its hegemonic role in Africa.

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Introduction

South Africa's position on the African continent is widely seen to be one of dominance and leadership. No longer subject to the international opprobrium accompanied apartheid, after the democratic transition in 1994 a politically



unfettered South Africa launched a visionary campaign built around the notion of an 'African Renaissance' to restructure continental institutions in line with its interests. This state-led effort was complemented by an aggressive commercial expansion by well-financed South African corporations to break into previously inaccessible markets across the continent. Even the South African media and telecommunications companies, SABC's Africa division, M-Net and MTN, sought to capture the African airwaves and audiences through their investments in the continent. All in all, the stage was being set for the exercise of substantive South African structural power over the rest of the African continent.

This is a populist depiction of South Africa that is largely echoed, albeit in somewhat different forms, in the scholarly literature on South African foreign policy towards Africa. For instance Daniels *et al* (2008) present the evidence for a South African 'invasion' of the continent, while Ahwiring and McGowan (1998) speak about South Africa as a 'benign hegemon' operating in Africa. Dlamini's unabashed celebration of a 'Pretoria-Abuja Axis' continental hegemony contrasts with critical theorists who underline the role that Thabo Mbeki's government played as a purveyor of neo-liberalism, a kind of 'comprador' for Western capitalism in Africa (Taylor *et al*, 2002; Dlamini, 2013). Other academics see in South African foreign policy the makings of a 'middle power' serving as an interlocutor between North and South or, alternatively, Africa and the rest of the world (Lee and Hamill, 2001; Schoeman, 2003). Indeed, South Africa's elevation in 2009 and 2010 as Africa's only member of the G20 and BRICS seemed to confirm its unique status (Alden and Schoeman, 2013). But careful analysis of the South African foreign policy experience both in Africa and more broadly, suggests that these images are only partially realised at best and that they ignore a host of structural problems and outcomes. In particular, when examined critically, the case for South African hegemonic dominance over the continent is challenged by a number of issues. Among them are:

- South Africa's weak material basis of power on the continent. This is reflected in anaemic domestic economy confronting a host of deep-seated structural problems and reinforced by its relative economic decline in comparison with much of the rest of continent where it now has less than 25 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP (versus over 50 per cent in 1994) (Alessi, 2013).
- A limited ability to translate many of the key features of South Africa's putative economic, financial and military preponderance over the rest of Africa into solid foreign and economic gains in cases as diverse as Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo and most recently the Central African Republic.
- Beyond the classic 'power fungibility' dilemma raised above, the failure of South Africa to successfully exercise influence over other African regimes which deliberately act against its core interests, best represented by the case of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe where Pretoria had substantive economic leverage at its



disposal but also visible in Swaziland where South African economic dominance is even greater.

Despite this weak record of effective leadership, Pretoria is continually 'rewarded' with leadership positions in international groupings, such as BRICS, G20 and nearly consecutive terms on the UN Security Council. Far from being a reluctant hegemon, South African history is marked by a drive to fulfil an ambition predicated on its 'manifest destiny' as Africa's leader (Alden and Schoeman, 2013).

All of this helps shed light on the paradox of South African continental leadership, that is to say that despite its declining material base and uneven record, it is held by the international community to be worthy of leadership while among African governments its credentials are viewed with concern and even at times suspicion. This *symbolic representivity* of the region introduces substantive constraints on South Africa's ability to lead and has induced a number of strategies by the government aimed at off-setting these limitations. These are manifested variously as a preference for unobtrusive foreign policy actions and consensus-building strategies that underscore collective African support. Managing the tension between hegemonic intent, sublimated nationalism and consciously displaying policies as pan-Africanism is in fact the essence of contemporary practice of South African foreign policy in Africa (Nathan, 2005). And in those cases where South African foreign policymakers neglect to take serious account of African perspectives, as was demonstrated in the case of Nigeria in 1995 and Libya in 2011, the cost is measured in wholesale condemnation of its right to lead the continent.

Moreover, South Africa's solution to its material shortcomings has been to do so through the framework of partnership (or 'bandwagoning') with external powers, initially with reference to the G8 and New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) but more recently seeking out South partners to fulfil its historic mission to lead the continent. The establishment of the South African Development Partnership Agency will serve to strengthen and deepen partnerships with leading donor countries to fund South Africa's ambitious development goals for the continent. When called upon to lead, the South African instinct is to seek out external power resources to resolve the myriad of dilemmas confronting it in exercising leadership.

The argument of this article therefore is that, outside of a small number of states that form part of its 'near abroad', South African hegemony is neither complete in its material form, nor has it demonstrated consistent ability to exercise leadership even where it has the means available. But the key feature that is inhibiting South African foreign policy is less a *material* one as such but rather resides in the realm of the structured characteristics of its designation as a regional leader. *In short, it is a product of international needs for African representation on the global stage, together with its own ambitions, rather than any regional consensus on South African leadership and this fact is reflected in Northern-led initiatives such as the*



G20, as well as more recent Southern initiatives such as the invitation to join BRICS. The implications of this for South Africa's ability to fulfil the basic requirements of hegemonic power – providing public goods such as security or exercising financial management of the system – are consequential for its own standing, as well as that of the African continent. In particular, this suggests that competition with secondary and tertiary claimant states seeking international recognition is likely to continue to feature in intra-African politics as South Africa attempts to assert its authority in the region.

In order to elaborate upon this argument we will provide a short overview of concept of structural power and hegemony. This will be followed by an examination of the South African case considering the role of historical conjuncture and its relative material position within the region as an explanatory source for its global standing. Building on this we will illustrate how this status has been challenged both by the region and questioned by established powers. Finally, we will conclude with some thoughts on the implications that this situation holds for South Africa and the continent.

Structural Power and Regional Hegemony

The conceptual point of departure for this article is the scholarship on structural power. The originator and main proponent of the concept, Strange (1988), defines it as follows:

Structural power, in short, confers the power to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people or relation to corporate enterprises. The relative power of each party is more, or less, if one party is also determining the surrounding structure of the relationship. (p. 25)

Structural power is manifested in four dimensions – security, production (including trade), finance and knowledge – and states operate within frameworks formulated and led by a hegemon. More recent explorations of hegemony provide a more nuanced or 'toned-down' interrogation of the concept. The work of authors such as Burges on consensual hegemony (Burges, 2008; see also Burges, 2015) and Hurrell (2006) on the behaviour of 'second-tier states' in the international system provides further insight into the status and role of South Africa within the African continent and in the broader international system.

Burges follows Kindleberger in distinguishing between domination and leadership, defining 'consensual hegemony' as a form of leadership rather than domination (where the latter implies coercion), with leadership emphasising the importance of ideas as critical to the hegemonic project. These ideas constitute a vision for the system that the hegemon favours and it seeks the consent of other states in the



building of the envisioned system, while devoting resources to the project – intellectual, economic and security. The leadership provided by the predominant state results in the creation of a hegemony, but this is separate from the hegemon which leads the project: the hegemony becomes, in Burges' (2008) words, the 'constant', whereas the 'role of hegemon [shifts] between the embraced states depending on which participant is best able to coordinate and advance a specific aspect of the project' (p. 74). In this article we argue that South Africa has long sought to create a consensual hegemony on the African continent, with varying degrees of success and we seek to explain the reasons for its successes and failures.

As Strange points out, there is no expectation of constant intervention nor is it a requirement of structural power to secure the compliance of states on every given issue. Rather she suggests that there are key intersects – 'bargains' – that reveal and highlight the underlining position of states within the system in relation to the hegemon (Strange, 1988, p. 31). The central point is that hegemonic powers exercise their authority selectively and do so in response to their perceptions of the level of necessity. And, while it is a nostrum of literature on power and hegemony that such a condition is always contested, the fact is that the foundational requirements of exercising power – that is the accruing of sufficient material capabilities and ideational sources to influence the behaviour of other actors and institutions – is never seen to be a total condition nor is it expected to be. It is relational, conferred and accepted through bargaining between states within a given system in which it operates.

The search of a second-tier state for hegemony (whether consensual or coercive) is always subsumed under the 'larger' hegemony over the global system, and influenced by counter-hegemonic struggles in the global system. In fact, as pointed out by Hurrell (2006), and discussed in the article by Lobell *et al*, second-tier states are usually involved in counter-hegemonic challenges, based on different conceptions of international order (p. 3), while also having to contend with regional challenges to or animosities in its quest for leadership and in this article we discuss South Africa's efforts to win the confidence and support of other African states for its vision of the kind of hegemony that it aims to build on the continent.

In the context of a unilateral post-Cold War system, where the United States occupied a seemingly unchallenged position of power and authority, the differentiated interests of Washington across the globe meant that it sought out like-minded regional managers to address the requirements of stability and order. The emergence of the international system as one of 'a hub and spokes', where the systemic guarantees at the centre are reinforced through a combination of global rules and norms articulated at international institutions and implemented by designated regional hegemony, became the preferred form for the exercise of hegemonic management (Neack, 2002). For a time, post-Cold war Africa, famously marginalised as a 'hopeless continent', seemed left outside of much of this process, yet the spectre of global terrorism and the resurgent importance of natural resources, placed the continent firmly back on the global agenda.



For post-apartheid South Africa, three conditions in particular contributed to the elevation of the country from international pariah to that of a putative regional manager. The first was the historical conjuncture of systemic change and the absence of a regional manager in Africa which provided the international impetus for its elevation to that status (see Lobell *et al*, in this volume). The second was its relative material power and perceptions of that power as seen internationally and within the region. Finally, the courting of international recognition of leadership by South African president Thabo Mbeki, who sought to partner with Western states to put in place a regional framework predicated on leveraging their power resources to meet the basic requirements of provision for public goods to the region.

Post-Apartheid South Africa's 'Hegemonic Moment'

The transition from apartheid pariah to celebrated democracy between 1990 and 1994 was slow in coming, giddy in its implications and overwhelming in its responsibilities for the new government. It offered the possibility that South Africa could at last achieve its 'historic mission', that is to say to play the leading role in continental affairs and through that, on the wider global stage (Barber and Baratt, 1990; Alden and Schoeman, 2013). While the complexities of integrating and restructuring the foreign policy institutions in government turned out to be far greater than anticipated, international rehabilitation nonetheless followed rapidly, with South Africa's position reinstated in a host of regional and international organisations from which it had been barred during the apartheid era, thereby indicating early international recognition of the country as an African leader.

On the economic front, statistics tell the story of the South African position *vis-à-vis* the rest of Africa. In 1994, the South African economy accounted for 50 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP, it was (and is) the continent's most industrialised economy, had a modern manufacturing capacity that produced everything from appliances and automobiles to cutting edge mining equipment and an atomic bomb. The financial sector was (and remains) widely admired for its innovation and probity while the Johannesburg Stock Exchange is the seventh largest in the world. All of this was matched by a modern physical infrastructure that – while neglecting the needs of the black majority (a fact largely and deliberately hidden from sight) – contributed to the impression that South Africa had no rivals on the continent. This was particularly true as far as the level of industrialisation and economic and infrastructure development was concerned. South Africa has consistently, since the early 1990s, contributed 70 per cent of Southern African Development Community's (SADC) GDP and 60 per cent of the region's total trade (see also Cheru, 1996; Lee, 2011) and, despite Nigeria rapidly gaining ground, South Africa still has the biggest economy in sub-Saharan Africa (Cox, 2013).



Concurrently, the opening of diplomatic ties with the rest of Africa provided opportunities for South African business to expand beyond its borders as never before. The result was an outward investment push that saw South African mining and construction firms, retail, media and telecommunications giants and parastatals seek out investment opportunities and markets in the relatively untrammelled African environment. Within a short time, the area of historically recognised South African economic dominance – the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and to some extent the broader Southern African region – began to be supplemented with a growing presence in rest of the continent through the spread of South African consumer goods and the opening of branch offices by some in its corporate sector. Restraints on capital controls were only lowered for South African firms investing in the rest of Africa in 2002, so investment was still limited to the largest multinationals who were able to command sufficient internal capital reserves to finance investments abroad. At the same time, there was every reason to think that these preliminary forays abroad would continue and gather pace.

The first indications of a bid for regional leadership under an ANC-led government came at this unprecedented historic juncture. Having engaged in a year-long consultation process within government and civil society, South African foreign policy was officially placed on a different footing from the past, with the new areas of focus being, respectively, South African national development, Africa and the South (Alden and le Pere, 2003). Reflecting this re-alignment, the South African government successfully bid for a leadership role in a range of South-oriented international organisations, starting with hosting of the UNCTAD summit in 1996 and 2 years later chairing the Non-Aligned Movement in Durban (Alden and le Pere, 2003). Concurrently, at international conferences, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995, South African diplomats played a key role in facilitating agreements between the established nuclear powers and the developing countries.

South Africa's efforts to build a new continental system, based on its vision of an African renaissance, also required the country to become much more involved in peace and security issues. Its initial attempts to confine its peace-making efforts to the sphere of mediation, met with criticism, especially in the face of the large troop contributions made by many other smaller and poorer African countries. Leadership, the country had to learn, required not only ideas, but also other more tangible sources. Since the late 1990s therefore, South Africa's contribution to UN and African Union (AU) peace missions increased rapidly, turning it into one of the major African troop-contributing countries with a total of 2020 troops in 14 peace missions. These figures indicate a threefold increase in the numbers originally envisaged in the 1990s. However, analysts continue to point out that the country's defence budget is completely insufficient for the demands placed on its defence force in its quest to contribute to peace and security on the continent (Le Roux, 2012). 'Crude material power' may not be the sole determinant of hegemonic capacity, but soft power alone



(in the form of good ideas and other intangible goods) cannot sustain a would-be hegemonic project.

The contrast with the positive international reception for South African leadership and the African reaction to Pretoria's efforts was marked and is reminiscent of the position of Brazil (see Burges in this volume). At the SADC, which was originally founded in 1980 for the purpose of de-linking regional economies from South Africa, simmering rivalries between Mandela and Mugabe produced institutional paralysis over foreign and security policies (Nathan, 2012). Concerns about South African foreign policy activism were heightened by the SANDF invasion of Lesotho to reverse a military coup in 1998 and, as the newly established government in Kinshasa came under pressure in August the same year, Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibian forces launched their own invasion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As a result, SADC's involvement in regional security became mired in factionalism and internal disputes for several years, scuppering South Africa's vision for a regional security regime of its own making. At the continental level, Mandela's efforts to mobilise a sanctions campaign against the Nigerian military regime in the wake of the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and the Ogoni 9 was not even able to produce one vote of public support among African governments (Van Aardt, 1996).

There were, however, areas that did reflect a more assertive strain in South African foreign policy, namely the mediating role played in Burundi and the DRC. What was notable about these was the fact that they were framed around the promotion of a 'South African model' of negotiated power-sharing arrangements (and, in the case of Burundi, at the behest of an established mediator in the form of President Julius Nyerere), with the consensus of the parties involved. At the same time, further underscoring the imperative of consensus in order to achieve its foreign policy aims, equivalent efforts by Mandela to promote this approach in the Angolan conflict were roundly rejected outright by an angry MPLA.

Overall, during what has been characterised as the 'foreign policy of transition', the international community eagerly sought to integrate post-apartheid South Africa into global affairs. The response of African states was much more cautious, welcoming the change in regime but wary of the material power that South Africans wielded and, in the case of some individual leaders, the prestige accorded to the singular figure of Nelson Mandela.

Visions and Profits – South Africa's Expansion into Africa

President Thabo Mbeki's imprint on the effort to promote South African leadership aspirations were distinctive and ambitious, setting the stage for their realisation through the development of a new ideology, a reworking of regional institutions in line with this vision and a reformulation of continental partnerships with the West. Framing his approach within a far-reaching vision of an African renaissance,



Mbeki sought to engage African (particularly Nigerian) and Western governments in a grand bargain that would raise aid and investment in return for adoption of neo-liberal policies and improvements in governance called the NEPAD.

The process of institutionalising South Africa's claim to continental leadership began as part of Mbeki's accelerating international activism through constant engagement in the succession of G8 summits involving Africa starting in 2000 at Okinawa, the prominent position taken by Mbeki in developing and financing of the NEPAD initiative, and Pretoria's seminal role in creating the AU. Most notably, the latter involved the inclusion of clauses on the suspension of governments illicitly coming to power and intervention to prevent forms of genocide and gross violations of human rights. These measures were bolstered by the aforementioned willingness to sponsor the peace negotiations between different Congolese parties in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and its involvement in peace efforts in, among others, Burundi, Sudan and Cote d'Ivoire. Even South African initiatives deemed to be a failure – at least by some international actors and regional African actors – such as Mbeki's promulgation of 'quiet diplomacy' in Zimbabwe and the attempted brokering of peace in Cote d'Ivoire (Piccolino, 2010) nevertheless were clear demonstrations of a desire to play a central role in regional management and the exertion of influence.

Coming alongside the South African efforts to develop policies and institutions that cohered with Mbeki's vision was the expansion of South African economic presences across the continent, providing the material conditions for the exercise of structural power. Examining the political economy of South African involvement with the continent more closely, it could be understood as operating within three concentric circles of economic engagement, with the first being defined by the geographic parameters of the SACU, the second SADC and the third being the rest of the continent (Alden and Soko, 2005).

With respect to the SACU, an entity established in 1910, South Africa's structural power was its greatest and exercised through financial control over the currencies of SACU members and its overwhelming capacity economic capacity. The revision of the 1969 financial arrangements that governed the allocation of revenue to the weaker members of SACU by the South African Treasury occupied several years of negotiation and was only completed in 2002. The SADC formed the next circle of engagement and here the position of South Africa was marked by movement of construction, mining and retail as well as smaller businesses in the region. Indeed, South African trade represented 68 per cent of the total regional trade in 2010 (Sandrey, 2013). The South African penetration of the Zimbabwean economy, which had been given further impetus with the unilateral decision to abrogate the long-standing bilateral trade agreement in 1996, effectively dismantled the Zimbabwean textile industry to the benefit of South African producers. Even at this early stage, this aggressive approach was not pursued nor was it successful everywhere. For instance, South African Breweries (SAB), which had been repelled in Kenya adopted a



cautious approach in its purchase of the smallest of Angola's three breweries which involved utilising local agents to disguise its bid.

Finally the remaining circle of engagement was the rest of the African continent where South Africa's commercial reach ranged from non-existent to being limited in scope, and in some cases was highly contested causing some states to even resort to 'soft balancing' in the name of national economic interests. On the one hand, by 2013 South African investment had increased its corporates' presence across the region to historical highs though it lagged behind investors, such as China, India, the United Kingdom and Canada in terms of the amount of capital invested (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013). This was exemplified in the case of Ghana, a region far removed from its traditional ambit of influence, which boasted over 80 South African businesses by 2012 (Republic of South Africa, 2011). At the same time, foreign and local competition and even resistance put constraints on South African economic penetration of this part of the continent. For instance, while cellular phone company MTN carved out a position in Uganda and Nigeria, Woolworths and Clicks opened branches in Ghana, and Standard Bank expanded its 'African footprint' to 18 countries, there were notable failures too. SAB's successful takeover bid of national breweries in Tanzania was contrasted with its highly publicised failure to do so in Kenya. At the same time, South African Airways managed to unite the divided Kenyan government and local business interests, which successfully fought a high-profile campaign to block the takeover of its national airline (Alden and Soko, 2005).

South African Hegemony and Its Discontents

While the institutional building blocks of regional hegemony, coupled to the expansion of South African corporate activism on the continent, may have been put in place during the Mbeki presidency, global recognition of South Africa's status as *primus inter pares* in Africa did not protect it from criticism. In fact, the two principal pillars of its claims to regional leadership – the articulation and implementation of a new continental vision for development and an economy driven by a robust private sector – became flash points which exposed the weaknesses of South Africa's capacity to play a hegemonic role. Linked to this was its conduct as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, which saw Pretoria take on positions at odds with both its Western backers and African states.

South Africa finds the establishment of its hegemonic vision for the continent under constant challenge. While NEPAD won convincing support from the G8 countries, culminating in commitments made at the Gleneagles summit in 2005, core elements like the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) – which linked aid and investment provisions to assessments of performance – remained controversial with many African governments. Its goal of having NEPAD as a separate institution alongside the AU was thwarted by an AU decision to subsume NEPAD under the



auspices of the continental organisation, thereby largely undermining the independence of NEPAD and neutering its monitoring mechanism, the APRM. South Africa countered by driving an aggressive campaign to have its own candidate elected to the chairpersonship of the AU and succeeding despite heavy criticism from several African countries, including Nigeria. Some of its voting positions as an elected member of the UN Security Council further estranged it from its continental peers (this was especially the case when South Africa voted in favour of Resolution 1973 on Libya in 2011) and also from Western states when it refused to vote in favour of sanctions against Zimbabwe during its first term on the Security Council. Its second-tier position that requires Western support for its development goals for the continent is often in conflict with its vision for a changed international system.

Concurrently, since coming to office in 2009, President Jacob Zuma has embraced a more assertive foreign policy explicitly rooted in national interest that has further complicated relations with many African governments. Bolstered by South Africa's selection as Africa's only representative on the G20, and in late 2010, the invitation to join the BRICS, Pretoria began to take a more forthright approach to regional concerns. However, the more assertive foreign policy approach towards Zimbabwe, with Zuma deliberately shunning Robert Mugabe at SADC meetings and pushing for free and fair elections, did not produce the expected changes in that country. Indeed, in the aftermath of Mugabe's re-election, friction over South African political interference and dominance of their economy has only escalated (Lee, 2012; Business Reporter, 2013; Ncube, 2013). Even Swaziland's embattled monarchy, despite overwhelming dependency on South Africa, has so far been able to defy Pretoria's efforts to introduce political reforms even to the extent of turning down needed economic assistance.

As far as the material basis for its hegemonic position on the continent is concerned, South Africa's economic position *vis-à-vis* the rest of the continent is also weakening. Nigeria is, at least as far as crude GDP growth is concerned, on the rise resulting in speculation that Nigeria might in the foreseeable future eclipse South Africa's 'big economy' status on the continent (O'Neil, 2014). It is also clear that early expectations of South Africa as *the* gateway to Africa are overrated. China and India have shown that it is not necessary to move into the continent through South Africa: several African countries have sufficient expertise and resources to fulfil gateway positions.

Moreover, within the context of South Africa's structural power position in SACU, Pretoria has found it increasingly frustrating to provide the kinds of benefits expected from SACU members. The country contributes 98 per cent of the pool of customs and excise duties shared between SACU members, but it has little say in the way in which the revenue is spent. There are strong indications that South Africa wants a portion of these revenues to be set aside for regional integration and development and that it wants to place some restrictions on how SACU revenue is spent, (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013) pointing to a more assertive approach to its neighbours.



Moreover, South African business expansion into Africa is not necessarily a meaningful expression of hegemony, even if it is a component of it. Complicating the picture of South Africa on the march northwards is the countervailing trends of continental investment into South Africa and domestic drivers that have encouraged capital flight and/or reinvestment outside of the country. As African economies began to experience accelerating growth from 2002 onwards, South Africa's outward expansion was complimented by a steady movement of African firms into the South African economy. Ghana's international agriculture firm Fruitis purchased land in Mpumalanga province and marketed its products in South Africa while Nigerian banks EcoBank and Guaranty opened up branches across South Africa.

Moreover, the push to gain access to the African market was sometimes conducted by South African firms that were intent on reducing their exposure to the vagaries of the South African environment. The de-listing of major South African multinationals like Anglo-American and SAB from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, the shifting of capital abroad and the opening up of businesses outside of South Africa, were all strategies that reflected concerns with the possibility of nationalisation of assets or the rising cost of doing business in the stagnant South African economy. Furthermore, the friction and at times hostility between the South African state and its business community, riveted by lingering racial animosities and fears of government interference, argued against the collusion of state and industry (see also Shaw, in this volume). Few companies turn to the Department of Trade and Industry for export support or advice nor do they expect assistance, causing leading South African analysts to bemoan the absence of a 'South Africa Inc' (Alden and Soko, 2005).

On the international stage, South Africa's standing among key Western governments is fading. When George Bush declared on a state visit to South Africa in the early 2000s that Thabo Mbeki was his 'point man' on the Zimbabwe issue, it was an endorsement of faith in South Africa to present a Western case in the African setting. By June 2008, the United States and the United Kingdom used the G8 Summit to publically castigate the South African position. Pretoria's voting record during its two-term tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council added further to their dismay (Discussions with Western diplomats in Pretoria, 2011, 2012, 2013). In fact, the invitation to join the BRICS grouping in December 2010 and the subsequent outcry over Pretoria's support for UNSC Resolution 1973 on NATO intervention into Libya marked a further shift away from its Western orientation. In turn, South Africa has increasingly sought to strengthen its international ties by moving closer to emerging global South powers, both to avoid over-dependence on Western support for its continental vision, and to tap potential resources coming from fast-growing economies, such as China. South Africa's push for the establishment of a BRICS development bank is predicated on the expectation that it would provide access to resources for continental development which would reinforce its leadership position, as well as its vision for the continent. On the part, though, of other BRICS



members, there does not seem to be the same measure of enthusiasm for South Africa's plans.

For secondary and tertiary competitor states like Nigeria and Kenya, the space for movement and pursuit of their own economic and foreign policy interests is widening further (see Shaw in this volume). Discourses of 'African authenticity' will continue to feature in their criticism of South African positions of continental issues ranging from trade and development to regional security and UN reform while the courting of international opinion based on their relative gains in material power will be aimed at competing and diluting Pretoria's legitimacy.

Conclusion: Symbolic Representivity

The South African case as a 'second-tier power' reminds us that the distribution of power across the international system is more than a function of material capability but rather reflects contingencies derived from the perceived requirements for the maintenance of order in line with leading states. For instance, the elevation of France and the Republic of China as permanent members on the newly created United Nations, enervated allies of the British and the United States, were the product of the need and contingencies of a particular historical moment. Neither could operate effectively without the resources and support of their 'patrons'. In the case of South Africa, the 'hegemonic moment' came in the midst of a withdrawal of Western interest in Africa during the early post-Cold War years, and remained salient when the continent started to rise in the wake of renewed interest in its natural resources. Both Mandela and Mbeki were masters at utilising contingency to position South Africa as continental leader in the eyes of the world, and to put Africa back on the global agenda. Elevated in standing, the difficulties experienced in meeting the requirements of providing public goods to Africa in response to both international and region pressures are manifold.

The implications of South Africa's symbolic representivity rather than substantive hegemony over Africa is that it is always conditioned by a need to work in partnership with external powers to achieve its foreign policy aims. Under Mbeki this was expected to happen by forging a 'new partnership' with G8 countries for African development. In the wake of the financial crisis and shifting economic trends towards East Asia, the South African government shifted its focus towards China. Much of the debate surrounding the BRICS development bank turns on the question of winning BRICS support for employing Chinese finance towards fulfilling much the same agenda: the delays in bringing the institution into being are suggestive of constraints in this alternative source of support.

The means by which South Africa has achieved global standing, as Africa's representative in global politics, promises to pose continual dilemmas that challenge its best efforts to reconcile its own concerns with the impulse to serve as a bridge



builder, facilitator and protector for the region. Matters like Zimbabwe, Cote d'Ivoire and Libya, where there is a clash between established regime interests and broadly held principles of solidarity and human rights will expose, time and again, this conundrum. In a sign of emerging realism, South African foreign policy commentators are beginning to acknowledge that acting effectively in Africa requires accepting that it may be subject to intense criticism from elements in the continent. Although some may say that such criticism is a normal feature of the exercise of leadership (which it is), in the South African case it carries much more existential meaning. For should South Africa, in its pursuit of an assertive foreign policy, continuously lose the support of the continent or its somewhat precarious economic circumstances falter, the international community's own enthusiasm for it may diminish. It is upon this soft clay that the very basis of this putative hegemon's global standing rests.

About the Authors

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