

# South Africa in the company of giants: the search for leadership in a transforming global order

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South Africa, the continental economic giant and self-appointed champion of African development, is at last finding its distinctive national voice. Emboldened by the invitation to join the BRICS grouping of major emerging economies, its membership of the G20 and a second term on the UN Security Council, Pretoria is beginning to capitalize on the decade of continental and global activism undertaken by Thabo Mbeki. Gone is the defensive posturing which characterized much of the African National Congress's (ANC) post-apartheid foreign policy, replaced by an unashamed claim to African leadership. The result is that South Africa is exercising a stronger hand in continental affairs, ranging from a significant contribution to state-building in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan to an unprecedented assertiveness on Zimbabwe. Yet there are lingering doubts within the country, across Africa and among elements of the international community as to Pretoria's ability to conduct a foreign policy commensurate with its new status.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, already there are signs that playing a greater international role carries with it unanticipated costs, complications and challenges: for example, the acrimonious process which saw a South African candidate eventually win the chair of the African Union Commission, and the fraught domestic and continental reaction to the government's position on Libyan intervention in 2011. In this regard, South Africa's newly assertive foreign policy remains constrained by three factors: the unresolved issue of the South African identity; a host of domestic limitations linked to material capabilities and internal politics; and the divided continental reaction to South African leadership. These factors will continue to inhibit the ability of South Africa to translate its international ambitions and global recognition into a concrete set of foreign policy achievements.

This article explores the reorientation of South African foreign policy to fit, support and reflect its increasing status as a credible leader of the South, capable also of global leadership, and the constraints that inhibit its ability to fully realize these ambitions. Specifically, it considers the relationship between South Africa's own identity and its regional and global leadership aspirations; the

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with foreign diplomats, April 2011. This feeling was echoed by a recent article in *The Economist* (24 March 2011) that referred to the country's foreign policy as 'being all over the place', followed by various references to South Africa's 'foreign policy dilemmas' in the wake of its stance on Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, putting the spotlight on the country's international and continental behaviour.

institutionalization of its BRICS-oriented foreign policy as reflected in, among other things, a new white paper on foreign policy, position papers on the BRICS by the Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry, and the establishment of the South African Development Partnership Agency, including its implications for South African leadership; and third, the domestic and external constraints facing South Africa's assertive foreign policy in fulfilling this complex set of regional and global ambitions.

## South Africa, the BRICS and the idea of regional leadership

South Africa's foreign policy could be said to have one overarching aim that has endured from the period of white minority rule through to the onset of democracy and the present day: namely, the pursuit of global recognition as Africa's leading state.<sup>2</sup> Though the basis of this claim has shifted over time, it has guided the foreign policy of governments as varied as those of Smuts, Vorster, Mandela and Mbeki. Even the long diplomatic struggle between the ruling National Party and the exiled ANC, in essence a competition between two rival visions of South African society framed as contesting normative claims for the international audience, centred almost exclusively upon strategies for gaining international recognition (and blocking the opposing side's efforts to do so). A series of significant and contested decisions, such as withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961 and re-entry in 1994, the suspension from UN agencies and subsequent return, the voluntary dismantling of the country's nuclear weapons in 1993, the bid for and holding of the football World Cup of 2010, and the successful hosting of a number of global summits since 1994, all speak to this underlying sentiment. It is in this context that the drive to achieve membership of the BRICS (alongside the country's key role in the G20 and its reappointment to the UN Security Council for the period 2011–12), and the accompanying elation experienced by the South African foreign policy establishment, must be seen.

Crucial to any South African claim to Great Power status is its position as a regional leader. This claim has deep roots, reflecting a varying discourse of power that has captured the imagination of South Africa's internationalist-oriented political leaders from the advent of Jan Smuts to the premiership almost a century ago to the long presidency of Thabo Mbeki and beyond. This internationalist bent within South African foreign policy is derived from a set of parallel if distinctively different impulses which inform approaches adopted by South African leaders towards fitting the country into the structure of an international system in a

<sup>2</sup> See the key scholarly works on the subject, starting with James Barber and John Barratt, *South Africa's foreign policy: the search for status and security, 1945–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Deon Geldenhuys, *The diplomacy of isolation* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1984); Scott Thomas, *The diplomacy of liberation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996); Chris Alden and Garth le Pere, *South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy*, Adelphi Paper 362 (London: Oxford University Press and International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003); Maxi Schoeman, 'South Africa as an emerging middle power, 1994–2003', in John Daniel, Adam Habib and Roger Southall, eds, *State of the nation: South Africa 2003–2004* (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2004); Chris Landsberg, *The quiet diplomacy of liberation* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004).

condition of flux.<sup>3</sup> For Smuts, the British Commonwealth, supplemented by the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations, provided the bedrock of a new international order emerging out of sustained global conflict.<sup>4</sup> Within that framework he envisaged expanding South African interests and even at times the country's territorial borders 'into the heart of the continent'.<sup>5</sup> Smuts's overly optimistic assessment of Africa's (and imperial Britain's) willingness to support his government's position was based upon the military and diplomatic role South Africa had played in support of Allied interests on the African continent in two world wars.

Taking office under very different domestic conditions in 1998 but, significantly, against a backdrop of global transformation, Mbeki promoted a South African internationalism that drew on the universalism of the same United Nations but sought to use it to overturn some of the key ideological tenets and policies of the previous minority governments.<sup>6</sup> Acting against the apartheid era presumption that South Africa was 'an island of European civilization' on the continent, Mbeki articulated a discourse of South African inclusion in Africa bolstered by his commitment to fostering an African renaissance and the advance of regionally based multilateralism.<sup>7</sup> In adopting this stance, along with a decidedly anti-imperialist discourse on questions like Zimbabwe, he sought to deflect any suspicion that an activist post-apartheid government would use its material power for coercive purposes in Africa.<sup>8</sup> Threaded into this new 'Africanist' narrative, however, was a notion that South Africa retained a unique status on the continent owing to the nature of its political transition and its economic inheritance as a middle-income developing country.<sup>9</sup> The related elements of moral purpose, continental institution-building and the promotion of developmental neo-liberalism were brought together in Mbeki's much proclaimed New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For the most comprehensive discussion of internationalism and South Africa, see Candice Moore, 'Governing parties and southern internationalism: a neoclassical realist approach to the foreign policies of South Africa and Brazil 1990–2010', PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers: six months that changed the world* (London: John Murray, 2001), pp. 97–9; William Hancock, *Smuts: the fields of force, 1919–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 16–17.

<sup>5</sup> Hancock, *Smuts*, p. 152. Barber and Barratt write: 'Smuts had always harboured expansionist ambitions to move north into Central and East Africa, and he believed that the Commonwealth would provide the instrument for achieving this' (Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's foreign policy*, pp. 18–19). Deon Geldenhuys covers the National Party government's apartheid-era foreign policy in *The diplomacy of isolation*, while Scott Thomas, in *The diplomacy of liberation*, examines the anti-apartheid diplomacy of the exiled ANC in that period.

<sup>6</sup> There is a vast literature on contemporary South African foreign policy. For the period leading up to the transition, see Chris Alden, 'ANC diplomacy', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 1:1, 1993, pp. 80–95; Landsberg, *The quiet diplomacy of liberation*. For the Mandela period, see James Barber, *Mandela's world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Maxi van Aardt, 'A foreign policy to die for: South Africa's response to the Nigerian crisis', *Africa Insight* 26: 2, 1996, pp. 107–19; Alden and le Pere, *South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy*; Schoeman, 'South Africa as an emerging middle power'; James Hamill and Donna Lee, 'A middle power paradox', *International Relations* 15: 4, 2001, pp. 33–56; Laurie Nathan, 'Consistency and inconsistencies in South African foreign policy', *International Affairs* 81: 2, 2005, pp. 361–72.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Thabo Mbeki, 'The African Renaissance, South Africa and the world', in *Africa: the time has come* (Cape Town: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1998), pp. 239–51.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Nathan, 'Consistency and inconsistencies in South African foreign policy'.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Mbeki, 'Europe and South Africa: an economic perspective', in *Africa: the time has come*, pp. 215–23.

<sup>10</sup> Alex de Waal, 'What's new in the New Partnership for Africa's Development?', *International Affairs* 78: 3, July 2002, pp. 463–75; Ian Taylor, 'The New Partnership for Africa's Development and the global political

Though clearly distinctive and historically conditioned, past forms of South African internationalism include elements that play into contemporary claims to the country's inclusion in the BRICS, the G20 and other international groupings. Unlike any of the other BRICS members, South Africa's Great Power claims are almost completely founded on its perceived ability to act as a regional manager and protector. The sources of that perception and power vary, with military means dominating during the twentieth-century world wars and, from the perspective of the western alliance, the Cold War; yet in more recent times the argument has shifted towards an emphasis on South Africa's weight as the continent's largest economy,<sup>11</sup> and its involvement in continental peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts. Underlying this is an assumption that certain dimensions of regional management, included under the rubric of 'soft power', are best accomplished through the able application of financial and managerial provisions. Whether the collective of country economic indicators—GDP, financial systems, investment capital, corporate presence, etc.—can genuinely translate into effective foreign policy for Pretoria is a matter of contestation. Given the tacit unwillingness (or, some say, inability) of the South African government to impose economic sanctions on Zimbabwe, this question of economic weight translating into regional management seems misapplied. At the same time, the notable expenditure of South African financial and political capital on the formation of institutions such as the African Union (AU), the NEPAD secretariat and the Pan-African Parliament, coupled with its central role in established subregional bodies such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), highlights Pretoria's efforts to demonstrate that it measures up to the requirements of being a capable regional manager.

Further bolstering South African claims to a privileged role as continental manager, which were especially pronounced in the aftermath of the UN's failures in the early 1990s in Somalia and Rwanda, is the expansion of the principle of 'subsidiarity' enshrined in Article 53, Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, which marks out regions as sites for 'joint undertakings' in the maintenance of the emerging global architecture of peace and security.<sup>12</sup> Though regional organizations are loosely charged with this task, South Africa's predilection for internationalism, its established recognition as Africa's only representative in global economic groupings ranging from World Trade Organization (WTO) 'green room' discussions to the convening of the G20, and even the prominence of its foreign policy and security studies research institutions all contributed to the international belief that South Africa is an essential player in any international arrangements regarding continental affairs.

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economy: towards the African century or another false start?', unpublished paper, University of Stellenbosch, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> It was for this reason that South African military forces were enjoined to play a role in the still-born British security architecture of the early Cold War, the Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO), though some doubters in London believed the status of its military to be 'deplorable': see Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's foreign policy*, pp. 56–8.

<sup>12</sup> Andy Knight, *A changing United Nations: multilateral evolution and the quest for global governance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 158–78.

**Table 1: The BRICS: a summary of economic indicators, with African comparisons**

	Surface area (million km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (millions)	Size of economy (US\$ billion)	Annual economic growth rate (%)	PPP per capita (US\$)
Brazil	8.5	204	2,170	7.5	10,800
China	9.6	1,300	10,090	10.3	7,600
India	3.3	1,200	4,600	10.4	3,500
Russia	17.0	139	1,477	3.8	15,900
South Africa	1.2	51	524	2.8	10,700
Nigeria	0.9	155	378	8.4	2,500
Africa	30.2	967	1,600	4.9	4,610 <sup>a</sup>

Source: Compiled from 2011 statistics provided by the African Development Bank, Statistics SA and the UN Development Programme.

<sup>a</sup> For sub-Saharan Africa the figure is US\$2,108.

It is in this context of an ongoing global power transition that South Africa's membership of the BRICS needs to be placed. The rise of the BRICS and South Africa's invitation to join the grouping, as well as its role in the G20 and BASIC,<sup>13</sup> and its second term on the UNSC, have much to do with the attempt of these emerging powers to find some space for flexing their muscles under conditions of western, and especially US, hegemony. Much is made of South Africa not really fitting into the BRICS configuration; as is illustrated in table 1, the country does not come anywhere near the other members' tangible power indicators in terms of territory, population size, size of the economy, and other related factors that mark the other four countries out as being 'special' and on their way to domination of the global economy within the next three to five decades.<sup>14</sup>

Yet it is in the BRICS as a *political* forum that South Africa finds its place. It shares the broad aspirations and objectives of these countries, and it uses international credentials still emanating and resonating from its transition from apartheid, and the perception of South Africa as the 'natural' or 'obvious' leader of the African continent, to justify its inclusion in the BRICS. Thus its BRICS membership becomes both proof of its status and an instrument for reinforcing this status. Indeed, in the buildup to South Africa's invitation to join the grouping, Pretoria engaged in a most intensive lobbying campaign of BRIC countries in 2010, to the point where officials from one of these characterized it as 'embarrassing' in its quest to prove its 'BRIC-ability'.<sup>15</sup> And, in another reflection of its singular foreign policy focus on international recognition, having secured an invitation by the Chinese in December 2010 to join the BRICS, the Pretoria government hastily launched an internal review to assess the actual gains that membership could provide

<sup>13</sup> Brazil, China, India, South Africa and the United States—the group that brokered the draft version of the Copenhagen 2010 climate change agreement.

<sup>14</sup> Mzukisi Qobo and Mills Soko, 'Creating more walls than BRICS', *Mail and Guardian*, 7–13 Jan. 2011, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with BRIC diplomat, Pretoria, March 2011.

for the country.<sup>16</sup> There remains a lingering fear that the economic benefits that the BRICS, and especially China, might bring to South Africa are not clear or guaranteed. This is reflected in the ANC's 2012 international relations discussion document, which refers to the continent as a site of contestation between East and West and to 'neo-imperialist economic relations' with powerful countries, while the 2011 National Development Plan states that it would be important to 'investigate whether China's ascendancy will result in Africa's further marginalisation'.<sup>17</sup>

### **Institutionalizing leadership of the South in South Africa's foreign policy**

South Africa's inclusion in the BRICS, its leadership positions in a range of other international and continental forums, its pertinent role in peacekeeping and peacemaking on the African continent, and its levels of development and wealth compared to its African peers, together with its own domestic needs and objectives, have combined to re-energize its foreign policy community since late 2009. This revitalization has not altered the country's core foreign policy principles and objectives; rather, the search has been for ways in which to operationalize its enhanced standing in an internationally recognized leadership role. In other words, its conception of its own role is as a global player (which includes elements of mediator-integrator, bridge, anti-imperialist agent, developer, and regional leader and protector).<sup>18</sup> Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, conceives of South Africa's role as follows: 'We have defined ourselves as a progressive agent for positive change. In practice, we have assumed the role of peacemaker and negotiator in Africa, and a champion of Africa's interests abroad.'<sup>19</sup> On the basis of this conception and their evaluation of its performance, South African foreign policy decision-makers have, over the past three years, been intent on solidifying the country's international leadership role and giving greater expression to these self-prescribed roles in the course of its implementation of foreign policy. In this regard, the Mbeki legacy of international activism has been of fundamental importance in projecting an image of readiness and policy capacity to assume a leadership role. This commitment to regional and global engagement was given policy and institutional expression through a number of initiatives begun under Mbeki's presidency and continued by his successors.

The process of institutionalizing South Africa's claim to continental leadership began as part of Mbeki's wider project of international activism, pursued through constant engagement in the succession of G8 summits involving Africa starting

<sup>16</sup> Interview with former senior South African diplomat, Pretoria, 20 March 2012.

<sup>17</sup> 'Positioning South Africa in the world', *National Development Plan: Vision 30*, ch. 7, p. 17, <http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=154433>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Kal Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 14: 3, Sept. 1970, pp. 233–309. See also Stephen G. Walker, ed., *Role theory and foreign policy analysis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987); Philippe Le Prestre, ed., *Role quests in the post-Cold War era: foreign policies in transition* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, 'SA's aim: champion of Africa's interests abroad', *Sunday Independent*, 15 Jan. 2012, p. 6.



in 2000 at Okinawa, the prominent position taken by Mbeki in developing and financing the NEPAD initiative and South Africa's role in creating the African Union, as well as more specific activities such as offering to sponsor the peace negotiations between different Congolese parties in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Even those South African initiatives deemed—at least by some international and regional African actors—to have failed, such as Mbeki's promulgation of 'quiet diplomacy' in Zimbabwe and the attempted brokering of peace in Côte d'Ivoire, nevertheless were clear demonstrations of a desire to play a central role in regional management and the exertion of influence. The unexpected rejection of Mbeki at the ANC's Polokwane conference in December 2007 did not change substantially the international perspective on South Africa's claim to continental leadership, a claim also taken up by the Zuma presidency that took office in 2009.

A parallel internal process of institutionalization took off, belatedly, within the then Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in late 2008, when it produced a discussion paper on foreign policy with the objective of developing a white paper for submission to parliament, with the core objective of 'codifying' South African foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> After a tumultuous year which saw Mbeki ousted from office, an interim president put in his place and ultimately his rival Jacob Zuma elected president in 2009, attention returned once more to this process. During the course of 2010 a series of workshops and discussions were organized by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), as the DFA was renamed, with substantial participation of civil society.<sup>21</sup> Concurrently, the release of the South African National Development Plan (NDP) in late 2011 prompted the establishment of a ministerial task group within DIRCO in early 2012 to prepare recommendations for aligning the country's foreign policy with the NDP.<sup>22</sup> Produced by Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission, the NDP is heavily focused on domestic growth and economic diplomacy, paying scant attention to foreign policy objectives such as the promoting of an 'African agenda'. Running alongside this was the release of the ANC's 'international relations policy discussion document' in March 2012, which, while articulating the now conventional 'progressive internationalist agenda' as the basis for South African foreign policy, nonetheless asserted the centrality of 'domestic public policy that projects national values and interests'.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, throughout this domestic process the whole notion of the national interest featured prominently, in marked contrast to the administrations of

<sup>20</sup> It was a process that had faltered under Mbeki, perhaps reflecting the centralizing imperative that drove him to confer greater decision-making powers in foreign policy, as well as in other areas, on the Office of the Presidency. See Alden and le Pere, *South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>21</sup> These workshops included a two-day event at DIRCO in Pretoria in October 2010 at which a large number of senior DIRCO officials, as well as officials from other government departments, academics, researchers and civil society leaders were present. Discussions were based on contributions from DIRCO, government departments, academics and civil society representatives. Aspects of the draft white paper on foreign policy were later presented for further discussion at at least two universities: the University of Johannesburg in February 2011 and the University of Pretoria in April 2011.

<sup>22</sup> *National Development Plan: Vision for 2030*, <http://www.npconline.co.za>, accessed 7 Nov. 2012.

<sup>23</sup> African National Congress, 'International relations discussion document', March 2012, pp. 7, 25, <http://www.anc.org.za/docs/discus/2012/internationalb.pdf>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

Mandela and Mbeki.<sup>24</sup> South Africa's national interest, as defined during the various discussions and workshops, is focused not only on its material objectives, which require the country to manipulate its external environment as far as is possible to promote domestic imperatives, but also on its external role conceptions, and particularly on that of being an anti-imperialist agent. At a heads of mission conference in July 2011, DIRCO Minister Nkoana-Mashabane referred to the country's continued role as 'bridge builder' and its role perception of being part of 'progressive forces globally working for a better and just world order'.<sup>25</sup> In answer to a parliamentary question on the benefits of BRICS membership, President Zuma also referred to the country's BRICS membership as strengthening 'our position as a gateway to Africa'.<sup>26</sup>

The need to break US and western hegemony features prominently in the discourse, but so does the rider that South Africa does not want to see one hegemon supplanted by another—a veiled reference, perhaps, to China and China–South African relations in the African context. The point to be made here, though, is that South Africa sees its membership of the BRICS as a means of promoting its presence and role globally, and as confirmation of its status as a global player, a status which requires it to behave like an emerging big power. In part, this conviction that it belongs in the company of the other BRICS is based on its experience and track record in peacebuilding on the continent (in Burundi, the DRC,<sup>27</sup> and South Sudan), combined with a sense of frustration that while South Africa has in many instances underwritten the costs of peace, stability and post-conflict reconstruction, it is external powers that have actually reaped the benefits.<sup>28</sup> This has led to a sense that the country needs to define its national interests clearly and publicly.

An important strand in South Africa's newly assertive foreign policy is its joining the company of global donors, with a very specific focus on Africa. This imperative, which is directly linked to the 'rebranding' of the DFA as DIRCO, reflects the desire on the part of Pretoria—shared by its BRIC counterparts—to bring its foreign policy institutions closer in line with the activities of other emerging powers. Although it does not have pockets anything like as deep as

<sup>24</sup> Reflecting upon the Mandela and Mbeki periods, one respected analyst went so far as to say: 'It is argued ... that South Africa conducts itself as if it did not have interests or as if values are more important than interests': Siphamandla Zondi, 'The interest-versus-human rights debate in context: an overview', in *Reconciling national interests and values: a dilemma for South Africa's foreign policy?* (Pretoria: Institute for Global Dialogue, 2011), p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> M. Nkoana-Mashabane, 'Remarks by Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Ms Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, on the occasion of the O. R. Tambo Dinner during the Heads of Mission Conference, Velmore Conference Centre, 14 July 2011', <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2011/masho715.html>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>26</sup> 'Parliamentary question: presidency: benefits of BRICS', 24 March 2011, <http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?view=article&catid=86%3>, accessed 8 June 2011.

<sup>27</sup> On Burundi, see Kristina Bentley and Roger Southall, *An African peace process: Mandela, South Africa and Burundi* (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2005). For a comprehensive overview and discussion of South Africa's role in peacemaking and state-building in the DRC, see Maud Dlomo, 'South Africa's post-conflict transitional diplomatic effort in the DRC: lessons learnt, 1990–2009', Master's diss., University of Pretoria, May 2010. See also John Stremlau, 'South Africa's greatest diplomatic success: the Democratic Republic of the Congo's turn to democracy', in Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, ed., *South African yearbook of international affairs 2006–2007* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2008), pp. 245–52.

<sup>28</sup> Dlomo, 'South Africa's post-conflict transitional diplomatic effort in the DRC'.



certain other emerging donors, most notably its BRIC peers, some estimates place South Africa's total bilateral and multilateral spending on donor assistance above the UN target of 0.7 per cent of GDP<sup>29</sup>—no mean feat for an African country. Its donor role is seen to be of increasing importance: in 2010 Nkoana-Mashabane announced the establishment of the South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA), which will become operational after the passing of the SADPA bill in parliament. What is particularly interesting about South Africa's approach to donor assistance is its intention to be a 'development partner'. This term has two meanings. It indicates that, on the one hand, South Africa wants not 'merely' to be a donor, but to forge development partnerships with donor and recipient countries; and that, on the other hand, it wants to use its comparative advantage in terms of its knowledge and experience of working in and being part of the continent as a conduit for traditional and emerging donors, in a kind of triangular partnership between itself, donors and recipients. A good example is the tripartite agreement between South Africa, Vietnam and Guinea focusing on food production and security in Guinea.<sup>30</sup>

Running in parallel with this idea is the notion of South Africa as 'gateway' to the continent, a view favoured by both South African corporates and the government in the belief that the country serves as a secure platform for foreign investors interested in exploring economic opportunities in the rest of Africa. South Africa's self-identification as a lodestar for international business activity—based on its internationally recognized financial systems, its business-friendly environment and its (sometimes questionable) knowledge of the rest of the continent—defies its limited experience in some parts of Africa but remains an important expression of a deracialized account of its exceptionalism in the African context.<sup>31</sup> Using these twin approaches to donor involvement and commercial opportunism in a manner that emulates the BRIC countries' unashamedly mercantilist approach to foreign and economic diplomacy, South Africa is intent on promoting its material and ideational interests—on the one hand opening up opportunities for South African businesses in Africa, on the other acting out its role conceptions as regional leader and protector, mediator–integrator and bridge.

## **Challenges for South Africa's global foreign policy**

Despite South Africa's increasing confidence, its new-found membership of BRICS and its emphasis on demonstrating its credentials as a regional and global player, it is facing several constraints in implementing its foreign policy and acting out its various role conceptions. These constraints are found in the structural weakness of its domestic economy, the attendant concerns with its institutional

<sup>29</sup> Brendan Vickers, 'Towards a new aid paradigm: South Africa as African development partner', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25: 4, 2012, special issue on 'Rising states, rising donors: the BRICS and beyond'.

<sup>30</sup> 'Media advisory', Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Pretoria, 20 July 2011, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/2011/tripcoop0719.html>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>31</sup> See Chris Alden and Mills Soko, 'South Africa's economic relations with Africa: hegemony and its discontents', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43: 3, 2005, pp. 367–92.

capacity, and persistent questioning of the legitimacy of its claims to represent the African continent.

South Africa's status as a BRICS country is closely tied to economic assessments of power; yet there are some disturbing signs that the South African economy's capacity to sustain this position is diminishing, including in relation to other emerging markets. There are even perceptions that South Africa's claim to be the continent's leading economy is under threat. According to Standard Chartered, Nigeria's rising middle class and oil revenues are likely to enable that country to overtake South Africa in total GDP terms by 2023.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the Nigerian economy seems to be in an ascendant phase, South Africa is battling to sustain economic growth. Some analysts have even warned that South Africa is 'falling behind [other African countries] in terms of relative competitiveness due to increasing structural constraints'.<sup>33</sup>

Domestically, the country faces huge development challenges, of which the high unemployment rate is just one. Out of a population of over 50 million, only 12.7 million have jobs, and social welfare payments place a heavy burden on the public finances: an estimated 13.8 million South Africans receive such payments, while only 5 million pay taxes. The country's shrinking tax base, under pressure from its unemployed masses who constitute the core voter support of the ruling party, may over time completely undermine the country's ability to pursue its ambitious foreign policy goals, even though these goals are, at least on paper, aligned with its domestic needs and interests.

In its *South African economic update* released on 20 July 2011, the World Bank pointed to a failure to attract sufficient investment to fuel growth of the South African economy at the level required to ensure sustainable economic development (6–7 per cent annually, as opposed to around 3 per cent for 2011).<sup>34</sup> This failure is attributed to insufficient savings, rising risk perceptions, and structural impediments such as poor transport infrastructure and a continuing failure to integrate the country's 'two economies'—a highly industrialized and developed formal economy, and an underdeveloped, largely informal economy operating in the spatially separated black townships. To these impediments the World Bank added the phenomenon of more contentious labour relations than found in other emerging markets, with South Africa's trade unions—of which the largest federation, COSATU, is a member of the governing tripartite alliance—simultaneously pushing for higher wages and putting pressure on the government not to succumb to calls for less stringent labour market regulation.

<sup>32</sup> 'Oil: Standard Bank plans multi-billion dollar investments in Nigeria', *Daily Independent*, 27 June 2011, [www.nigeria70.com/nigerian\\_news\\_paper/oil\\_standard\\_bank\\_plans\\_multi\\_billion\\_dollars\\_inves/355732](http://www.nigeria70.com/nigerian_news_paper/oil_standard_bank_plans_multi_billion_dollars_inves/355732), accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Sure Kamhunga, 'SA in danger of losing status as gateway to Africa—business experts', <http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/Content.aspx?id=165376>, 21 February 2012, accessed 7 Nov. 2012.

<sup>34</sup> World Bank, 'South Africa economic update 2011', 20 July 2011, [www.worldbank.org/wb/slideshows/south-africa-economic-update](http://www.worldbank.org/wb/slideshows/south-africa-economic-update), accessed 12 Nov. 2012. For 2012 the growth forecast remains a modest 3 per cent. See SACCI *Monthly Data Dashboard March 2012*, <http://www.randtrustblog.co.za/south-africas-gdp-growth-2012>, accessed 7 Nov. 2012.

Compared to China, a key BRICS partner whose economic performance is largely due to rapid growth in manufacturing, South Africa is experiencing deindustrialization, with manufacturing's contribution to gross national product (GNP) having dropped from 30 per cent in the 1980s to less than 15 per cent by 2009. The economy remains heavily reliant on the production of natural resources, but even in the mining sector there are problems. In other countries with a heavy emphasis on mining, such as Australia, Canada and Indonesia, mining has been growing annually at 15–17 per cent over the last decade; in South Africa, though, growth in the mining sector has been declining by 1 per cent per annum.<sup>35</sup> The continuing public debate about nationalization of key sectors of the economy, such as the mining industry, and the redistribution of land, driven by the powerful ANC Youth League (though finding wide resonance within the party as a whole), suggests an element of uncertainty that is unattractive to foreign investors, thereby further impeding already sluggish growth.

The problem of South Africa's relatively weak institutional capacity is another major challenge to its ability to deliver a robust foreign policy befitting its newly enhanced global standing. Under Zuma, the presidency has returned much of the control it once exercised over foreign policy back to the foreign ministry, but DIRCO officials still find it difficult at times to lay claim to all relevant aspects of foreign policy. The country's hosting of the COP-17 climate change conference, a flagship international event, in 2011 saw turf battles between DIRCO and the Department of Environmental Affairs which threatened the very image of responsibility and coherence that Pretoria is seeking to cultivate.<sup>36</sup> Although interagency rivalry is a ubiquitous feature of government and governing, COP-17 was viewed as a crucial expression of the country's ability to play a leadership role in issues of global governance and to demonstrate South Africa's ability to act as a facilitator and bridge-builder between North and South. The success of DIRCO Minister and COP-17 President Nkoana-Mashabane in rescuing the Durban talks in the last minutes of the summit highlighted South Africa's bridge-building abilities, while also confirming DIRCO's primacy in conducting the country's high-level international relations.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the depth of institutional knowledge in DIRCO and other ministries can be painfully thin, with individuals tasked to handle broad portfolios with only limited information or background. In consequence, one sees elements of overlap, bureaucratic infighting and ad hoc reactivity in the policies emerging from different wings of government. For example, the national intelligence service exercised a leading role in setting out in a public forum its assessment of what constitutes the South African national interest;<sup>38</sup> it has also provided policy advice on specific issues arguably outside its

<sup>35</sup> 'Grondverdeling onrealisties' [Redistribution of land unrealistic], *Beeld*, 28 July 2011, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Yolandi Groenewald and Mmanaledi Mataboge, 'Cloud over preparations for COP17', *Mail and Guardian*, 29 July–4 Aug. 2011, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Khadija Patel, 'While COP17 hailed "a success", SA slammed as mediator', <http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2011-12-12-while-cop17-hailed-a-success-sa-slammed-as-mediator>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Moe Shaik, 'Conceptualising South Africa's national interest', presentation at the University of Pretoria, 6 April 2011. At the time of the presentation, Shaik, a former South African ambassador, was director of the State Security Agency Foreign Branch in the Department of State Security.

natural domain, such as climate change. Such interventions, alongside the impact on foreign policy matters of other ministerial bodies ranging from the National Planning Commission to the Department of Trade and Industry, continue to contribute to a perception of a national foreign policy at times at odds with itself.

The lack of capacity extends beyond DIRCO to the Ministry of Defence, where poor planning, lack of funding, obsolete or inappropriate equipment, discipline issues and incomplete transformation inhibit the ability to field an effective force either in conventional military terms or in the area of peacekeeping.<sup>39</sup> Speaking in 2009, Minister of Defence Lindiwe Sisulu declared that the expectations of greater South African involvement in peacekeeping were undermined by the deteriorating military infrastructure and loss of skilled personnel.<sup>40</sup> These dire conditions have recently been confirmed in a comprehensive report of the Defence Review Committee on the defence capabilities and needs of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF).<sup>41</sup>

These problems confronting foreign policy go beyond intragovernmental rivalry to reflect an ongoing struggle by ANC party apparatchiks and other groups, notably COSATU, to ensure that the government's foreign policy reflects their own concerns. Matters were not helped by the heating up of the succession debate: though Zuma secured an impressive majority in favour of continuing his leadership at the December 2012 ANC national conference, the bitter battle leading up to the vote not only exposed significant rifts in the party but it sapped the requisite political energy and took attention away from issues of government. In fact, commentators point to a power battle between Luthuli House (ANC headquarters) and the presidency, with Luthuli House making it clear that the president serves only as long as the party allows him to and therefore that the party heavyweights actually formulate policy, with the presidency expected to toe the line. This internal debate came to a head in March 2011 when confusion over South Africa's position and subsequent vote on UNSC Resolution 1973 on Libya met with severe criticism from senior figures within the ANC's National Executive Committee, the ANC Youth League and the South African Communist Party, adding force to the view that Pretoria is not always well prepared for difficult decisions to be made (we return to this point below).

The contested legitimacy of South Africa's position as a leader of Africa on the global stage remains a divisive subject on the continent, and constitutes a third challenge facing its foreign policy ambitions. South Africa's claim to a continental and global role is not necessarily supported by its neighbours: indeed,

<sup>39</sup> Guy Oliver, 'Analysis: South Africa: paper tiger of African peacekeeping operations', 6 Jan. 2012, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/94597/Analysis-South-Africa-paper-tiger-of-African-peacekeeping-operations>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Emmanuel Nibishaka, 'South Africa's peacekeeping role in Africa: motives and challenges of peacekeeping', Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Southern Africa, no. 2, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Draft South African Defence Review, 12 April 2012, [www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=163572](http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=163572), accessed 13 Nov. 2012; see also Philip de Wet, 'From bully boys to wimps: the decline of the SA's military', *Mail and Guardian Online*, 4 May 2012, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-05-04-lack-of-funds-leaves-sa-vulnerable>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012; Peter Kagwanja, 'An encumbered regional power? The capacity gap in South Africa's peace diplomacy in Africa', occasional paper (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2009), pp. 1–36.

some African countries view its self-perception as a bridge, regional leader and protector with suspicion—a problem faced elsewhere on the globe by its BRICS partners. South Africa was severely criticized for its involvement in AU attempts to solve the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in the first months of 2011. The AU appointed former president Thabo Mbeki as AU mediator, a move that angered West African states, especially Nigeria, which, as the leading member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), found Mbeki's intervention meddling and at odds with its own approach to the crisis. Despite Mbeki's status as representative of the AU, Nigeria and several of its neighbours regarded both Mbeki as mediator, and the general stance of the South African government on the issue of Côte d'Ivoire, as 'fuelling [the] Ivorian crisis',<sup>42</sup> first and foremost by pushing South Africa's ideas and undermining their own efforts at solving the crisis. Similarly, South Africa's position as the only African state in the G20 has drawn criticism from other African states.<sup>43</sup> Most strikingly, the bid to oust AU Commission President Jean Ping in favour of a South African candidate contravened organizational conventions for leadership succession, raising the hackles of Francophone Africa in general and of West African states in particular. At the time of the first vote at an AU summit in Addis Ababa in early 2012, a senior African diplomat at the AU commented that South Africa's 'arrogant stance in Africa' was resented by many African countries and that should there be any talk of permanent African representation on the Security Council, 'Africa would not vote for South Africa'.<sup>44</sup>

While Pretoria was able to secure support for its bid for the AU Commission presidency from member countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), this blatant foreign policy assertiveness served to stoke African concerns about the broader intentions of South Africa on the continent. Even South African analysts conceded that the AU bid had damaged the country's relationship with a number of African states, not least Nigeria.<sup>45</sup> Subsequent tensions between the two countries in early 2012 proved beyond a doubt that South Africa's continental leadership aspirations would not go unchallenged by Nigeria.<sup>46</sup> However, South Africa (and its SADC partners, most notably Angola and Zimbabwe) doggedly kept up their campaign for a South African to head the continent's most important position, and in mid-July 2012 South Africa's former foreign minister and then minister of home affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, eventually triumphed over the incumbent, Jean Ping, in a marathon four-round election. Although South African political leaders and commentators were careful

<sup>42</sup> 'Côte d'Ivoire: South Africa is fuelling Ivorian crisis—Ecowas', *Vanguard*, 8 Feb. 2011, <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/201102090037.html>, accessed 7 Nov. 2012. Other commentators put the case even more harshly: see e.g. 'Jacob Zuma's reckless attempt to undermine ECOWAS' authority in the Ivory Coast', published online by *Newstime Africa* on 10 Feb. 2011, <http://www.newstimeafrica.com/archives/16131>, accessed 7 Nov. 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with DIRCO official, Pretoria, 3 Aug. 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, 14 July 2011. The diplomat is quoted on condition of anonymity.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with former senior South African diplomat, Pretoria, 20 March 2012.

<sup>46</sup> See James Kimer, 'Nigeria—South Africa diplomatic spat highlights growing regional rivalry', <http://www.nigeriaintel.com/2012/03/09/nigeria-south-africa-diplomatic-spat-highlights-growing-regional-rivalry/>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

to emphasize that Dlamini-Zuma's election was a victory for the southern African region and for women (she is the first woman to hold such a senior position on the continent), and moreover that she would serve Africa, not South Africa, as new chair of the Commission, others complained of South Africa's 'bulldozing tactics' and accused the country of 'buying votes'.<sup>47</sup> The underlying rivalry for African leadership between South Africa and Nigeria also received much attention in the Nigerian press after Dlamini-Zuma's victory, with Bolaji Akinyemi, a former Nigerian foreign minister, referring to an 'unacceptable defeat for Nigeria's status and policies in Africa' and calling for Nigeria to 'fight off this leadership challenge'.<sup>48</sup>

Such negative perceptions of South Africa on the continent, while not new, point to a continuing obstacle for the country: that of being *accepted* by its continental peers as leader and leading nation. Achieving such acceptance remains one of the major challenges for the country in realizing its Great Power ambitions. Although other BRICS members are also not perceived as the obvious leaders in their respective regions (though their *power* credentials are not in doubt), South Africa's claim to its membership of BRICS (and other international forums) rests heavily on another source, namely, that it is speaking and acting on behalf of the African continent. It therefore has to find strategies and tactics that will convince its continental peers that it is worthy of, and generally accepted as, the continental leader.

One such strategy is its establishment of SADPA, which, as noted above, has been conceptualized and designed not only to coordinate and focus the country's aid activities, but also to facilitate triangulation, enabling South Africa to become a kind of development assistance 'broker', emphasizing partnership, rather than the more traditional relationship of donor and recipient, as a key principle in its efforts to promote regional development. For South Africa, such development aid, largely focused on infrastructure development, would be a practical way of realizing its foreign policy principles and reinforcing its self-conception as a bridge and a regional leader and protector (a kind of 'Africa first' approach), while at the same time investing in opportunities which might also benefit South Africa's domestic economic needs and aspirations. So, for instance, the South African-owned Southern African Development Bank made a loan to Angola in 2011 to support the development of road infrastructure. The project will ensure a more sufficient supply chain for diamond mining and will link part of Angola more effectively with other parts of the southern African region. Angola, though, is somewhat cautious about South African involvement which, it fears, might in the longer term benefit South Africa in the mine-to-market supply chain.<sup>49</sup> South Africa's relationships with the rest of Africa, therefore, on which its claims

<sup>47</sup> 'SA will need to build bridges at the African Union', <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-07-16-sa-will-need-to-build-bridges-at-the-au>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012, and 'African leaders divided after AU vote', <http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/African-leaders-divided-after-AU-vote-20120716>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>48</sup> 'Nigeria's bloody nose at the African Union', SAFPI, 18 July 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201207180435.html>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>49</sup> 'Diamond mining in Angola: enter China and South Africa', Polityorg.za, 21 July 2011, <http://www.polity.org.za/article/diamond-mining-in-angola-enter-china-and-south-africa-2011-07-19>, accessed 7 Nov. 2012.



to continental and international leadership depend, present it with a difficult balancing act.

This balancing act goes beyond merely reconciling domestic interests with continental ideals and aspirations; it also encompasses difficult choices between South Africa's various foreign policy principles. Often, and as pointed out by many analysts of the country's foreign policy,<sup>50</sup> tension develops between the country's 'African agenda'—including its need to win or retain the continent's approval and acceptance—and its commitment to the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Zimbabwe is perhaps the prime example of the conundrum that often faces the country, especially when the issue at hand also tests its commitment to pan-Africanism and independence from traditional northern Great Powers. The South Africa-brokered governing pact (Global Political Agreement or GPA) between the ruling Zanu-PF party and the two versions of the Movement for Democratic Change is increasingly moribund, with the military widely seen to be in charge, and lukewarm, if not actively opposed, to the conditions set by the agreement. Zuma's deliberate shunning of Mugabe at SADC meetings over the past two years has made it clear that at this stage South Africa intends to support the restoration of the rule of law, even at the risk of alienating its pan-Africanist constituency at home and abroad. Whether the removal of Mugabe is the objective of Zuma's drive for an internationally monitored election in the country remains open to debate.<sup>51</sup>

Even in relations with smaller countries directly within its ambit, South Africa exhibits contrary impulses in using foreign policy tools in such a way as to promote its core principles. In early July 2011 South Africa announced a R2.4 billion bail-out loan to Swaziland, the last remaining hereditary monarchy in the region and a country with an abysmal record on human rights and democratization. A first tranche of the loan was aimed at stabilizing the Swazi economy, but the next two tranches, initially due in 2012 and 2013 respectively, were made conditional on a range of fiscal changes that some alleged would encourage Swaziland in the direction of a constitutional democracy. At the same time, the disclosure that the South African government had approved arms sales to the value of R 11 billion to Swaziland in 2010—including arms, ammunition and riot control equipment—cast a shadow over its conduct.<sup>52</sup>

Setting such political conditions in the case of bigger countries, such as Zimbabwe—or Libya, as when in early 2011 Zuma attempted to force Gaddafi to agree on peace talks with Libya's Transitional National Council—is much more difficult. In addressing these complex issues South Africa needs to engage in coalition-building across the continent, a process that has proved in the past to be subject as much to the whims of individual leaders as to the application of

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Nathan, 'Consistency and inconsistencies in South African foreign policy'.

<sup>51</sup> 'South Africa and US ready to turn the knife on Robert Mugabe', *Zimbabwe Mail*, 30 March 2011, <http://www.thezimbabwe.com/zimbabwe/7680.html>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>52</sup> 'Statement on negotiations with Swaziland', SA Treasury, 27 Aug. 2012, [politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71656?oid=322471&sn=detail&pid=71656](http://politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71656?oid=322471&sn=detail&pid=71656), accessed 1 Dec. 2012; Guy Lamb, 'South Africa arms Swazi government ahead of crackdown on pro-democracy protests', Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 15 April 2011.

broad-based principles found in the AU constitution. Moreover, as Pretoria has discovered to its chagrin, the mere promotion of liberal values can open it up to profound criticism as a proxy for western interests.<sup>53</sup>

The impact of all these constraints on South African foreign policy leadership is most evident in its conduct at the level of regional and international institutions. For instance, despite its international leadership credentials and its membership of some of the most important southern (and other) groupings, South Africa is still battling to strike a balance between its role conceptions as an independent actor and as a bridge and mediator–integrator. Its voting behaviour in the UN Security Council is proof of its lack of experience as a big player, its failure to come to some agreement with its BRICS allies on voting on Resolution 1973, establishing a no-fly zone over Libya, serving as just one especially acute example. Neither its BRICS allies nor its AU peers took kindly to this decision, which created discord and embarrassment within the ANC and DIRCO; once again South Africa was portrayed by some as a lackey of the Americans, and lambasted by others as vacillating and not being able to make decisions to which it would keep.<sup>54</sup> South Africa's claim to conduct itself as an independent actor within the Security Council (an assertion aimed at distancing itself from the West, rather than from all members of the Security Council) ought to be tempered much more by consultation and the development of genuine understanding of the rules of the game. Its second term on the Security Council comes at a time when this body has a unique composition, with all five BRICS countries serving on it and, importantly, with Nigeria as a non-permanent member, and this constellation should be utilized as an opportunity to build cohesion and unity among the BRICS and to strengthen South Africa's 'Africa agenda'. South Africa's deviant vote not only showed a certain level of naivety and inability to 'make sound policy decisions on the hoof',<sup>55</sup> but also put the country in a humiliating position when the AU started criticizing NATO's interpretation of Resolution 1973 and calling for a 'humanitarian pause' to provide opportunity for negotiations. An inability to fully understand the politics and workings of the Security Council, perhaps most crucial of which is the importance of coalition-building with like-minded states, and the need to pursue constant consultation with other players such as the AU, seriously detracts from South Africa's efforts to play an international leadership role.

South Africa's apparent about-turn on its vote in support of Resolution 1973 also highlights another problem with which the country is wrestling, namely its relationship with Europe and North America (alternatively referred to as the 'West' and the 'North'). South Africa is clear on the imperative to prioritize relations with southern actors in pursuit of its foreign policy principles and objectives. However, in the case of these traditional partners, South Africa often refers to 'North–South dialogue', thereby drawing a clear distinction between its orientation towards

<sup>53</sup> van Aardt, 'A foreign policy to die for'.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. 'South Africa's foreign policy: all over the place', *The Economist*, 24 March 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Sean Christie, 'SA at the UN: do they jump or are they pushed?', *Mail and Guardian Online*, 6 May 2011, <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-06-do-they-jump-or-are-they-pushed>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

the North and towards the South.<sup>56</sup> More than a point of rhetoric, this perspective is given periodic expression in diplomatic disputes between Pretoria and western capitals on issues as diverse as the war in Afghanistan, European Partnership Agreements and conduct at the UN. In the view of South African officials, collaboration with the West, as in voting for Resolution 1973, often proves that western countries, and especially the three permanent members of the Security Council (P3), the UK, the US and France, cannot be trusted. During an address at the South African Institute of International Affairs in Johannesburg on 29 July 2011, the Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Ebrahim Ebrahim, commented that South Africa had voted for humanitarian intervention in Libya, but what it got was a push for regime change. As a result, he said: 'Many countries, including South Africa, feel betrayed by Western powers on resolution 1973 and would be very much reluctant to support any resolution sponsored by the United Kingdom, the United States and France on Syria.'<sup>57</sup> This feeling of betrayal was echoed by Thabo Mbeki, who declared in a newspaper interview published on 31 July 2011 that 'Africa has lost faith in the UN', accusing the UN of being controlled by the West ('contemptuous people', according to Mbeki) and claiming that this western control 'would lead to the powerful nations [the West] installing leaders they preferred, to run the continent'.<sup>58</sup>

Another lost opportunity for South Africa to demonstrate leadership in the reform of key international institutions was its failure to build a coalition, in conjunction with its BRIC allies, in support of a southern candidate for the position of managing director of the IMF in June 2011. Backing for Mexico's Agustín Carstens varied from lacklustre to non-existent, while the AU statement calling for a 'non-European, particularly an African' to be selected elicited no response whatsoever.<sup>59</sup> A similar situation was played out in the nomination process for the World Bank presidency in March 2012. Three African countries, including South Africa, supported the nomination of an African candidate—Nigeria's Finance Minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala—but again, there was no concerted effort to lobby for support within the global South. Whereas the North, and especially the P3 and their closest allies, have over time developed a *modus operandi* to allow a certain level of 'power sharing' in the international political sphere, emerging power groups such as the BRICS have not yet managed such agreements in any meaningful way; nor do they seem likely to do so in the foreseeable future. Rather, as emerging powers these countries seem more intent on pursuing their own national interests to their own advantage, and so fail to develop purposeful

<sup>56</sup> See e.g. 'Budget vote speech: Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Honorable Ms Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, National Assembly, 31 May 2011', <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2011/masho531.html>, accessed 7 Nov. 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Lecture by Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Ebrahim I. Ebrahim, on the occasion of the Speakers Meeting at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), 22 July 2011, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2011/ebrao722.html>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Nkululeko Ncana, 'Mbeki: Africa has lost faith in the UN', *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 31 July 2011, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> 'Appointment of the new IMF managing director—time for a long overdue change—time for an African', African Union Statement, Department of Economic Affairs, 8 June 2011, <http://au.int/en/dp/ea/content/appointment-new-imf-managing-director-time-long-overdue-change-%E2%80%93-time-african-union-statement>, accessed 13 Nov. 2012.

joint actions. South Africa, furthermore, seems to be torn between aligning its positions with its BRICS allies and pursuing an African agenda.

Working out a way of cooperating with the West in an environment of trust and a measure of mutual respect has long been a core challenge for South Africa. It is notable that other BRICS countries have strong commitments to engage in formal dialogues with the United States and the EU, reflecting the close economic bonds and even strategic interests they share (especially in the cases of India and Brazil). Even where cooler relations prevail, the Chinese and Russian governments are able to frame concerns around contemporary disputes (for example, the Dalai Lama or the invasion of Georgia) in such a way as to ensure that other important dimensions of their relations with the West are unaffected. The South African tendency to view international politics in Manichaeian terms causes it to imbue global actors with a moral quality in a manner that is often misconceived, leading to heated reactions such as those voiced by Mbeki and Ebrahim above. Leadership, whether in Africa or on the broader global canvas, requires a more tempered view of international politics and an acknowledgement that all states can be expected to define their foreign policy first and foremost in terms of national interest.

## **Conclusion**

South African foreign policy has achieved much in fulfilling its long-standing historical ambition to be recognized as Africa's leading power and its progressive internationalist aims to play a key role in the South. Positioned within the leading international groupings and forums, Pretoria now has a unique opportunity to give expression to South African perspectives on a range of pressing international issues. Demonstrating that it has the capacity to mobilize domestic resources and manage the requirements commensurate with this elevated standing will continue to pose challenges, not least because South Africa's status on these bodies is intimately tied to its role as a representative of African concerns. Coming to terms with the fact that emerging and traditional powers alike pursue narrow national interests and support universal values in the course of diplomacy will inevitably flow from South Africa's extended exposure and position among this company of giants.

This will involve recognizing that South Africa, too, is expected to articulate its national interest accordingly and, as a result, engage in the time-honoured vote-trading that is characteristic of UN Security Council conduct, and that this will invariably draw criticism from other African states as well as possibly tarnish its own sense of its moral credentials (which in any case are routinely castigated at home and abroad). In this sense the means by which South Africa has achieved global standing as Africa's representative in global politics promises to pose continual dilemmas that test its best efforts to reconcile its own concerns with the impulse to serve as a bridge-builder, facilitator and protector for the region. In cases such as those of Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire and Libya, the clash between established regime interests and broadly held principles of solidarity and human rights

will expose this conundrum time and again. But, by giving reasoned expression to a coherent and well-articulated foreign policy that reflects the concerns and values of the national body politic, South Africa hopes to be better able to speak authoritatively on issues affecting the continent and also to retain international confidence in South Africa's readiness to act as a global leader.

An assertive South African foreign policy aiming to play a South-based leadership role in the transforming global system will need to manage varied and pressing issues. These include structural conditions at home, questions of identity, and the difficult balancing acts between African and global leadership aspirations, and between these aspirations and the realities of low economic growth, continuing poverty and lack of employment opportunities, especially for its youthful population. Addressing these harsh realities while pursuing its international ambitions remains the core challenge for the country.

