

South Africa's response to the Ukrainian crisis

By Elizabeth Sidiropoulos

■ Executive summary

South Africa did not join in the chorus of condemnation against Russia's annexation of the Crimea, instead adopting a position that in part mirrored language used by Russia to explain its actions, but in other ways reflected key principles of South African foreign policy. Together with its fellow BRICS members, South Africa opposed the imposition of sanctions and was critical of suggestions that Russia might be excluded from the G-20 Summit in Australia later in the year. Non-interference in the internal affairs of states and the inviolability of borders have been central organising principles of African affairs since decolonisation. South Africa's approach must be understood in the context of a desire to see the balance of forces change to reflect the rise of emerging powers. The West's unilateral actions since the end of the cold war have not sat well with the South African government. Civil society elements aligned to the ruling tripartite alliance have condemned what they perceive as Western propaganda against Russia and the West's involvement in stirring unrest in Maidan Square, Kiev. Furthermore, from a realpolitik perspective, South Africa accords its alliance with the BRICS states high priority. Yet, as a relatively small country, it is in South Africa's interests to encourage adherence to a set of global rules that are respected by all.

African principles of international relations

Although a Western construct, sovereignty was warmly embraced by newly independent states in Africa and Asia after the Second World War. When the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was established in 1963 it adopted the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of states and the inviolability of the borders that had been drawn up by Europeans in 1884. These borders had been drawn with scant regard for realities on the ground, but the newly independent states thought that the alternative might be too terrible and messy to contemplate. The OAU's successor, the African Union (AU), has maintained the principle of the inviolability of borders.

Ironically, Europe's borders have been far more fluid in the last 100 years than those in Africa, with the most notable recent examples being the break-up of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. The successors to these states – some forged through war, others through mutual agreement to separate – were recognised by the international community. Ideally, in a world governed by

a set of international rules, wars should not be the preferred means for revising borders.

African countries contain multiple ethnic groups speaking many languages. Many of the current fault lines – such as in Mali, for example, where the Tuaregs in the north want a homeland, Azawad – reflect colonial anomalies, and in most instances the dismantling of existing states or their partitioning in Africa is likely to open a Pandora's box. Better to uphold territorial integrity while pushing for states that are well-governed, democratic and protect all who live there, irrespective of race, ethnicity or creed.

South Africa on Crimea

Since 1994 South Africa has also been a strong proponent of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and, in line with the AU, has adhered to the principle of the inviolability of borders. Further, it has opposed regime change imposed on countries by external powers and encouraged negotiation among warring parties to

arrive at a settlement. The case of South Africa's reaction to Crimea thus stands in contrast to these two principles.

Many in the West no doubt expected that South Africa's own espoused principles of non-intervention in internal affairs, preference for negotiated settlements over unilateral actions, and respect for democratic institutions might have placed it on the side of the West in condemning Russia's actions in Crimea.

The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) issued a statement on Sunday March 2nd 2014 urging "the protagonists in the stand-off to settle the crisis through dialogue", consistent with its own foreign policy that favours and promotes the peaceful resolution of conflicts. With the exception of the recent deployment in the Central African Republic, South Africa has deployed troops only under a United Nations (UN) or regional organisation mandate. Insisting that parties to conflict sit together to negotiate a settlement has been its preferred modus operandi. While the limits of this approach have sometimes become apparent (the Democratic Republic of Congo is still not at peace), South Africa seeks to avoid situations where escalation makes the outcome much worse – which was essentially the country's view of the consequences of NATO's intervention in Libya.

South Africa also abstained on the UN General Assembly resolution on the territorial integrity of the Ukraine on March 27th 2014, after the referendum in Crimea. Russia's other BRICS partners did the same. Russia, of course, voted against the resolution, which was passed with 100 votes in favour. The next day South Africa issued a statement calling on "both the Russian Federation and Ukraine to engage in dialogue and cooperation in the interest of the stability of the broader region". It went on to say (emphasis added):

South Africa is of the view that the escalation of hostile language, the imposition of sanctions and counter-sanctions, the use of threat of force and violent actions do not contribute to the peaceful resolution of the situation and the economic stability of Ukraine and the region.

South Africa encourages the various parties to strengthen all diplomatic efforts to produce a sustainable and peaceful solution, including through appropriate international fora. *It is essential that a political path be supported by a united, cohesive international effort towards a negotiated political settlement reflective of the will of the people aimed at establishing a democratic pluralistic society, in which minorities are protected.*

However, by that stage the situation on the ground had changed dramatically: Crimea had been incorporated into Russia and eastern Ukraine was in turmoil. A negotiated political settlement was very far away.

Southern solidarity and Western hypocrisy

Nevertheless, there is also a different narrative at play. South Africa regards its membership of the BRICS as a significant diplomatic coup, considering it as grouping with a Southern identity that brings together major emerging powers from Eurasia, Africa and Latin America, despite the fact that Russia is not a member of the global South. It would be more correct to describe the BRICS as a counter-poise to the West (largely represented by the U.S. and Europe). In this context South Africa, like the other BRICS, has preferred to disassociate itself from the West's "neo-imperialist" agenda – it has been highly critical of U.S. unilateralism in the past, especially in Iraq. The country was also opposed to the way in which NATO (and the Arab League) interpreted UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya as supporting "regime change", arguing that the fallout from this intervention is now plaguing Mali and the Sahel region. While still a member of the UN Security Council in 2011-12 and concerned to avoid a Libya-style embroilment, South Africa opposed the stronger measures the West wanted to take against Syria. After the overthrow of Egyptian president Muhammad Mursi in July 2013, South Africa and other African countries were critical of the West's equivocation on whether this constituted an unconstitutional change of government, seeing it as Western hypocrisy regarding democracy and constitutional government.

South Africa's commitment to constitutional democracy and the manner of its transition in the early 1990s had created an impression among most Western states that the "Rainbow Nation" shared their values, world view and approaches. However, over the years South Africa has aimed to self-identify with Africa and the global South, thus revealing underlying tensions. This has often meant that it has steered away from publicly criticising fellow African states and other developing countries. It has also been opposed to sanctions, seeing them as counterproductive. Its position on Ukraine should be seen in this light, ironic though this might be.

The debate in South Africa

At the global level, South Africa has chafed against the actions of the P-3 (the U.S., France and Britain). It has been uncomfortable with U.S. and European Union (EU) political conditionalities and the "democracy promotion" agenda in Africa and elsewhere. Although the statements by DIRCO on Ukraine have not been polemic, it is in the realm of civil society that some of the perceptions referred to above become more apparent.

The public debate on Ukraine has been mixed, although it is important to emphasise that such debates about places far away occur among a small section of the population. Many of the mainstream media have tended to adopt a harsh critique of Russia's actions in Ukraine. However, elements of civil society historically aligned with the progressive and anti-apartheid movement in South Africa

have traditionally opposed Western “imperialism”, both political and economic. Thus, commentators from these formations have taken the Russian line, using similar terminology in describing what happened in Kiev’s Maidan Square, Crimea and eastern Ukraine. This includes characterising the interim government in Kiev as fascist and as a junta. They have emphasised that the West’s insidious support for the Maidan protesters was the first breach of the non-intervention principle. Some among these civil society movements have highlighted that the support for democracy provided by the U.S. over the last several years in fact constituted an attempt to remove those opposed to Ukraine’s attempts to join the EU (and possibly NATO). They have also been critical of the Western media outlets’ reportage on the crisis and the South African media’s reliance on these outlets, bemoaning the fact that the latter ignore *Russia Today*, preferring Western propaganda.

It is not the purpose of this brief to interrogate the specifics of the stand-off between Ukraine and Russia. Supporters of Russia will argue that the West’s indiscretions were such that Russia’s response (and that of its supporters in Ukraine) was justified; opponents will say that Russia’s response was disproportionate and that it is up to Ukrainians to determine their future orientation. What is clear, however, is that the process by which Crimea was annexed has set in motion a potential precedent that may boomerang on multi-ethnic states like Russia. What would Russia’s response be if Chechens decided to hold a referendum in the manner in which the Crimean one was conducted in an attempt to exercise their right to self-determination?

Clearly, the South African government, in determining its response, had to consider a number of issues. Although relations between the new South Africa and the Russian Federation were neither side’s priority after 1994, this changed after South Africa joined the BRICS. South Africa’s

careful response was aimed at not upsetting its fellow BRICS member. However, South Africa should have been more forthright in condemning the role played by Russia though its clear military involvement (albeit not officially confirmed) and the unilateral changes to the borders of a sovereign state in the manner in which it was done. South Africa’s credibility as an advocate of certain values and processes is eroded by adopting equivocal positions; after all, the country’s soft power lies in building legitimate and accountable processes for resolving conflicts.

Where are we headed?

The implications of the Ukrainian crisis will be far-reaching. The annexation of Crimea has overturned the post-cold war order in Europe in a way that Russia’s occupation (but not annexation) of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 did not – although that was the first shot across the bows of the old order. For Europe and the U.S., the message should be clear: Russia will not countenance any further “incursions” into states that have formed part of its “near abroad” and which it sees as providing a buffer against NATO. Russia is much more willing to play for high stakes in its near abroad than Europe or the U.S. If Russia’s approach is coupled with China’s much more strident actions in the seas around it, then the much-touted multipolar world may well be more unstable as the major powers vie for regional dominance and enhanced national security. The ability of the UN Security Council to play a crucial role in conflict resolution may be limited further to those wars where great powers have no direct interest – which in some ways would be reminiscent of the cold war period. For a small country like South Africa, which emphasises the importance of creating a rules-based global order, the multipolar period is likely to be a more problematic one to navigate, making it difficult for the country to contribute towards crafting global frameworks that are applicable to all and protect smaller states from the strong.

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