Zimbabwe in South Africa's Foreign Policy: A Zimbabwean View

Martin R Rupiya[1]

Introduction

South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe, although publicly reported as representing good neighbourliness, has travelled a tortuous route since the watershed elections of 27 April 1994 in South Africa. In the short intervening period, at least three phases can be identified that characterise the range of policy options that Pretoria has adopted. In the first instance, the perception in Harare was that the new ANC majority government assumed office *without a specific policy for Zimbabwe*. This was soon followed by a period of *brinkmanship and frustration*, spanning the years 1994–99. Finally, from early 2000, in response to the twin pressures of the international community's demand that South Africa adopt a hardline policy towards Zimbabwe[2] and the alarming deterioration in the socio-economic, political and security situation in Zimbabwe (which has increased the latter's dependence on South Africa), a twin-track policy of *constructive engagement* and *containment* was adopted. However, these are merely situational strategies, targeted at reacting to current events. What is needed is a long-term, mutually agreed policy or raft of policies, which recognise and respond to the subjective and objective realities in which the interests of the two countries intersect.

The main argument advanced by this chapter is that, since 1994, Zimbabwe has been of marginal interest to South Africa's foreign policy. Yet, because of the strong traditional links forged over the last century, Zimbabwe remains close to South Africa's domestic, as well as its regional and international interests. Against this consideration, it is strongly felt that South Africa cannot afford the luxury of a non-specific policy towards Zimbabwe; nor is a containment operation adequate. Put differently,

[1] DR MARTIN RUPIYA is a senior visiting fellow at the Centre for Africa's International Relations, based at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

[2] Some of the outlandish demands made by the North were for South Africa to mount a military operation against Zimbabwe or at a minimum, impose sanctions.

South Africa, burdened with the responsibility of rescuing dependent Harare, cannot afford future policy *unilateralism*.[3]

The perceived context of South African foreign policy towards Zimbabwe

From across the Limpopo, South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe since April 1994 has reflected an administration whose attention has been directed towards domestic and international concerns, giving little priority to regional considerations. In contrast, South Africa's regional neighbours, including Zimbabwe, had expected a resumption of relations that recognised the geopolitical importance of the historical, political, socio-economic and security links between the countries in the Southern African region.

In the case of Zimbabwe, in the early 1990s South Africa's most important economic partner in the region, there was a shared colonial history. In the early 20th century, attempts had even been made to declare the country a fifth province of South Africa. While this assimilation failed to materialise politically, Rhodesia's economy evolved as if it was the undeclared fifth province of the Union of South Africa. Political independence from Britain was established after 1922, when the Responsible Government came to power, managing an economy based on agriculture, mining, manufacturing and limited industrialisation that was intricately meshed with that of South Africa. After the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland broke up in 1963, South Africa provided the white minority regime in Rhodesia with a preferential Customs and Concessionary Tariff Agreement. The preferential tariff agreement, better known as the 1964 Customs Agreement provided opportunities for Rhodesia to export goods into the South African market, free from tariffs/customs duties. The range of goods included gold, ferroalloys-chrome and asbestos, tobacco, beef, cotton/textiles and even low-grade sun-dried Virginia tobacco. This allowed the growth of hotel, catering and service industries from South Africa which invested heavily in the then Rhodesia. In 1967, when the UN adopted economic sanctions against

3 On many occasions the South African government has been saddled with the responsibility of explaining and defending certain Zimbabwe policies to an already sceptical international community voicing concern over the actions of Harare. There must be a way in which the two countries can co-ordinate their actions more closely. For example, on the ongoing land reform programme, the South African government, while expressing its broad support, has pointed out some policy errors committed by Harare. The same is true of the 'social-welfarist spending spree by Harare during the 1980s', in the words of Deputy President Jacob Zuma, 'without paying too much attention towards the productive-sector'. The current artificial pegging of the Zimbabwe dollar to international currencies must be a further cause for concern in Pretoria.

Rhodesia, South Africa became the country's only source of trade, commerce and political recognition. In 1969, as the armed struggles in Rhodesia, Angola and Portuguese East Africa escalated, South Africa deployed troops in support of the minority regime in Salisbury. The net effect was to further entrench not only the economic linkages but also the social, security, cultural and sporting bonds between the two white regimes, which were to hold until 1980, when majority rule was established in Zimbabwe.

With an African government in place in Harare, Pretoria intensified its policy of destabilisation in the economic and security spheres of Zimbabwe. This policy extended to other Southern African independent states and lasted until 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. These countries, which had barely managed to withstand the South African onslaught, expected relief when the apartheid regime was displaced. The long-standing 1964 Customs Agreement between the two countries came to an end and it has never been resuscitated. After its lapsing in 1992, an invisible wall of legal restrictions exacerbated the landed costs of industrials, manufactures and agricultural produce from enterprises that had emerged in an environment of sanctions and were used to a sheltered, monopoly environment with little or no competition. Occurring at a time when Zimbabwe had just abandoned the social-welfarist path it had adopted in 1980 to embrace the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), this development had a devastating effect on the fledgling economic revival in Zimbabwe, which relied on market liberalisation, exports and especially its traditional economic linkages with South Africa.[4]

We therefore need to acknowledge that, even as the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) was taking place, Zimbabwe was engaged in *a silent war* with the white minority regime that was being divested of political power in Pretoria. This undeclared policy emanated from the substantial influence retained by the white-dominated bureaucracy, the media and business. Against this background, Zimbabwe had a particular interest in the coming to power of the African majority in South Africa in 1994, because it was assumed this would translate into benefits in the traditional policy areas of trade, commerce, security and politics.

Realpolitik, however, presented a different scenario. Since 1994, in all the three phases through which Zimbabwe's relations with South Africa have passed, they have failed to provide a common policy platform for the sustainable development of the two states, or the region.

4 Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR), *Skillshare Zimbabwe*, 3.

The era of tension and frustration: 1994–99

President Nelson Mandela came to power in April 1994 at the head of a government of national unity that included the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the National Party. The main preoccupation of his administration appeared to be establishing internal stability and re-engaging South Africa with the international community.

There appears to have been no deliberate policy in South Africa for re-engaging with Zimbabwe. The adverse impact of the lapsed 1964 Customs Agreement in 1992 continued to undermine Zimbabwe's efforts at economic revival. Within an economic environment characterised by globalisation and economic liberalisation, the balance of trade disparities between the two countries escalated to reach by 1998, R13 billion against R3 billion in favour of Pretoria. In November 1998, Zimbabwe imposed a 100% tariff in order to protect the local industrial base, which was fast becoming de-industrialised. Mandela was forced to acknowledge that something had to be done in order to address the imbalance.[5]

In January 1999, President Mandela and his deputy, Thabo Mbeki, visited Harare and allowed some goods in on the quota system. However, as Edmore Tobaiwa, an economic commentator, said, 'the all important preferential trade agreement that had lapsed in 1992 was not going to be resuscitated'.[6] The main reason for South Africa's lack of movement on the issue was said to be the robust resistance of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), which feared job losses. South Africa appears to have set its sight on restoring domestic business confidence while seeking to re-establish its links with European trade areas.[7] In this environment Cosatu had begun to feel the effects of liberalisation in the textile and manufacturing areas. Meanwhile, South Africa was Zimbabwe's largest trading partner, accounting for 13.1% of trade, followed by the UK with 9.3%, Japan with 8.4%, Germany with 6.5% and China with 5.9%.[8]

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that Zimbabwe was continuing to miss the targets agreed to with the IMF and World Bank in 1990. These included trimming the large civil service, cutting back on public expenditure in health, education and social support and rapidly privatising the 57 identified parastatals. By 1999, only six parastatals had been privatised; there were restrictions in banking and finance with

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[5] Nyoni N, 'Zimbabwe shifts sights to Northern neighbours', *The Financial Gazette*, 7 January 1999.

[6] *Financial Gazette,* 7 January 1999.

[7] See *OECD/ADB 2002, African Economic Outlook*, pp.268–71.

[8] Heritage document, 'Major exports and trading partners: 1995–2000 data', p.1.

tight foreign exchange controls in place; and a high level of price controls.[9]

In 1999, the IMF and the World Bank suspended aid to Harare. This left Zimbabwe in desperate need of a level economic playing field, both regionally and internationally.

The foreign minister of Zimbabwe, Dr Stanley Mudenge, wrote at the time: [10]

> Zimbabwe's foreign policy objective, fundamentally seeks to safeguard and enhance the security and prestige of the country and quality of life…create an environment…challenge…formulate series of policies and principles…that create an international environment…guarantee global interactions beneficial to national interests [such as] prime investment, food aid and balance of payments support. [For the policy to succeed] it needs friends, such as the EU, US and the Scandinavian countries for social services, health and education [support].

However, faced with a closed South African economy and a rupture with the international financial institutions (IFIs), Zimbabwe still required to export in order to secure foreign exchange for major imports such as fuel, electricity and spare parts. The country therefore decided to target trade in tobacco, timber, beef, horticulture and other products in the East Asian markets of China, Malaysia, and Indonesia; and in Libya on the African continent. Harare's new drive appeared to be underpinned by political considerations. Meanwhile, Zimbabwean industries were continuing to haemorrhage, while unemployment levels escalated. By the end of 2002, the Zimbabwe economy had been regressing by a staggering 14% a year since 1998, and was saddled with an inflation rate topping 198%. Furthermore, the country's external debt stood at $5 billion and was rising,[11] while 75% of its population had been living below the poverty line since 2000. The nation's currency had also collapsed against other major currencies.

This bleak picture in Zimbabwe was to be compared with a rand that was rising steadily against international currencies, and increasing economic integration within the other countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Business and trade relations between Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique as well as the traditional Southern African Customs Union (SACU) members of Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Lesotho soared, leaving Zimbabwe increasingly isolated.

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9 Zimbabwe, The 2002 Index of Economic Freedom. The Heritage Foundation, pp.2–4, at *http://cf.hertage.org/index/country.cfm?ID=161.*

10 Kaluya V, 'Zimbabwe pays price for Mugabe's self alienation', *New Analysis*, 12 April 2002.

11 The country's gross domestic product stood at $6 billion.

The second important area to suffer from a lack of policy cohesion between Pretoria and Harare during the Mandela era was the notion of regional security. In 1992, the SADC meeting in Windhoek expressed its satisfaction with the negotiations taking place in South Africa, and called for the formal abolition of the Front Line States. In its place would be yet another security mechanism in which the new South Africa would take its rightful place. In 1996, in Gaborone, a proposal for the establishment of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security was tabled. However, differences of interpretation emerged between Harare and Pretoria based on whether or not the Organ would operate as part of the SADC Secretariat bureaucracy or remain separate, and answerable only to the Summit. In order to overcome this policy disagreement, a subcommittee was established to find common ground. In the intervening period, the region established a troika arrangement, appointing Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe to act as leaders in responding to regional security problems.

As fate would have it, the region's security was to be tested during this period. The most significant episodes that occurred during Nelson Mandela's term of office included the question of SADC involvement in Zaïre/Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Lesotho constitutional crisis. In 1996–97, Zimbabwe joined the land-based coalition supporting Laurent Desiré Kabila's campaign to shoot his way into Kinshasa. This was contrary to the diplomacy initiated by President Mandela on the SA Navy ship *Outeniqua,* seeking a negotiated power-sharing solution. Two years after he had ousted Mobutu, Kabila formally approached SADC, an organisation that the DRC, then Zaïre, had joined in 1997, for military assistance against the rebel armies threatening his rule. Again, differences in response were to be noted between Pretoria and Harare. While, in Zimbabwe's view, its intervention on Kabila's behalf in August 1998 had been timely and justified, the adverse economic impact of subsequent events in the DRC on small countries such as Namibia and Zimbabwe further exacerbated the latter's social and political difficulties.

Efforts to transform the old Front Line States into the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security that had begun in 1992 reached a stalemate at the Malawi SADC summit of 1997. This followed the 8 September 1997 letter by President Nelson Mandela informing Zimbabwe — the then chair of the Security Organ — and other member states that South Africa would vacate the chairmanship of SADC if a position was taken to have a separate Organ operate in parallel with the former post, 'even this was by majority decision'. This letter followed a consultative meeting held in Harare in August, by SADC officials and ministers, in preparation for the Malawi summit. When it became clear that the recommendations being proposed did not materially change the structure and *modus operandi* of the FLS, then the bombshell from Pretoria was released.

However, the differences of interpretation on the role, function and political control of the Organ have made the operations in Congo and Lesotho open to national interpretation of how states employed the authority of the Organ. Sadly, this has left SADC without a credible security and defence mechanism. This is unfortunate, especially in comparison with the earlier harmonised foreign, security and defence policies adopted by white minority regimes in Pretoria and Salisbury before 1980.

The two liberation heroes, Mandela and Mugabe, failed to establish a good working relationship during Mandela's presidency. Consequently, this period was characterised by *brinkmanship* and *frustration.*

Unilateralism, dependence and containment, 2000–02

By early 2000, Zimbabwe's economic malaise had caused increased job losses and social and political strife, resulting in the emergence of a labour-based political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). However, the MDC committed the tactical error of allowing its agenda to be 'hijacked by the international concerns and media, local white businesses and commercial farmers as well as the petit black bourgeoisie,' in the words of Patrick Bond.[12] The lack of judgement displayed by the emerging political opposition, the MDC, in allowing core participation of white farmers and business diminished its credibility as it opened itself up to accusations by Zanu–PF of being a white-front organisation.

The constitutional referendum held in February 2000 reflected a swing away from the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (Zanu–PF). The referendum results rejected the preferred government position. This was a signal to the government to adopt more radicalised policies that included documented, state-sponsored and politically-motivated violence. In the parliamentary elections of June 2000 the ruling party defeated the opposition by a mere five seats. This trend of hard-fought elections was to continue in the presidential election of March 2002 and elections for the local urban councils in which the opposition appeared to enjoy greater support. The common thread in all of these was the capacity and willingness of the state to use force in order to achieve its political objectives. The internal political strains were exacerbated by the government's hardline approach, resulting in an even more polarised society.

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[12] Bond P, 'Zim–SA and the power politics of bourgeois democracy', *Monthly Review*, 54, 1.

During this period, relations between the political elites in Pretoria and Harare were discussed by President Mbeki in the BBC television programme *Hard Talk*. He revealed that there was no consultation between the two. Meanwhile, Harare's political, economic and security conditions became further mired in controversy as South Africa led the rest of the region into the US market under the preferential Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).[13] (AU Southern African states except Zimbabwe are members of AGOA.) This is likely to result in even further disparities between the two states. Preliminary evidence has shown that the South East Asian countries lack the investment capacity to make an impact in Zimbabwe, and its cosy relations with Libya appear to have faltered owing to Harare's inability to pay for the required fuel and oil. Furthermore, the US, Britain and the EU have also applied sanctions not only on the political leadership in Harare but, much more significantly, on the defence and security forces of the country.[14] What this means is that there is an urgent need to bring the economic policies of Harare and Pretoria into alignment. Zimbabwe is also experiencing mass emigration of professional skills. Another source of immediate concern is that Zimbabwe has been unable to manage predictable grain and rainfall deficits, which are likely to have serious consequences for both the country and its neighbours.

Regional developments in the area of conflict resolution have implications for the differences of interpretation between Pretoria and Harare alluded to above. Mandela and South Africa have led the way in hosting peace initiatives for the crises in Burundi and the DRC. President Mbeki has acted as one of three appointed Commonwealth interlocutors (with Nigeria and Australia) on the crisis in Zimbabwe. Even in this forum, at least publicly, South Africa has continued to side with Zimbabwe while working behind the scenes to find a solution. The quiet diplomacy that South Africa has decided to undertake with Zimbabwe is 'no policy' and the country needs to move beyond this, so as to deflect outside criticism at South Africa's lack of engagement, or close engagement with Harare, which gives the public impression of acquiescence.

13 'SACU gears up for talks With US on Free Trade Agreement', *Business Day,* 10 January 2003; *Daily News,* 'Africa cheers Bush Trade Act Extension Plan'.

14 Since June 1999, the US and the EU imposed sanctions on the Zimbabwean military, suspending provisions or access of spares, ammunition, information and human resources in the armed forces staff exchanges. These have remained in place since.

Analysis

The following are some suggestions on the way forward in the critical areas of politics, the economy and security. What are the two macro-economic policies that both the South African and Zimbabwe governments are sensitive to? The neo-liberal notion of keeping/retaining state power and employing the same to achieve set goals. On the one hand there is South Africa's policy of establishing a framework around which public and private business takes place, versus Zimbabwe's style of elbowing out interests in order to create space for state enterprises to operate. The latter style, time and time again, has proved inefficient, characterised by corrupt practices and increased costs on delivery of goods and services. Perhaps the time has come for both Pretoria and Harare to harmonise their macro-economic policies. Available evidence on macro-economic policy suggests that Zimbabwe will be able to operate within a neo-liberal environment if political space is created for private and civic organisations and state participation shrinks, even though Bond argues that, in the emerging democracies of Zimbabwe and South Africa, 'state control appears crucial for power politics, social reproduction and capital accumulation'.[15] Both strategies have advantages and disadvantages.

At the security level, differences of interpretation have been allowed to prevent the resuscitation of the common foreign, security and defence policy based on white racial interests that existed between Pretoria and Salisbury from 1890–1980. Surely the two African majority governments now in power can reach a similar, mutually beneficial arrangement, designed to respond to 21st century defence and security threats facing the two nations and the SADC region?

Conclusion

In 1994, South Africa did not have a specific policy for Zimbabwe. Events have since forced Pretoria to take stock and acknowledge the impact that this had on the latter. A start has been made in the form of the Bi-National Commission (BNC). Whereas previously the BNC was led by the deputy foreign ministers of each country and convened once a year, the BNC is now chaired by their foreign ministers, and scheduled to meet every six months (although they appear to be convening more frequently). It is hoped that the ongoing dialogue will enable both states to emerge with mutually reinforcing policies, designed to benefit the people of both countries, but there are hindrances caused by differences in approach to political conduct, economic policy and security. While this chapter has tried to offer pointers towards preferred policy options in each of the fields

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[15] Bond P, *op. cit.*

identified, it remains the work of practitioners to take this process further by recognising the inherent advantages of implementing a range of crafted policies designed to bring back national and regional peace, economic stability and security.