



# Foreign-policy Positioning Through Multilateralism: South Africa in the UNSC

### RECOMMENDATIONS

UN reform, South Africa and Africa:

- When South Africa does not serve on the UNSC, it should seek to work closely with and provide support to the current African non-permanent members on the UNSC to drive important African issues.
- South Africa should review its various multilateral affiliations to align its foreign priorities in each forum more clearly. In this regard, the country should not overextend itself – having to carefully balance various, often conflicting agendas, which potentially renders the country's foreign policy ineffective.
- South Africa not only needs to clearly articulate its foreign policy to the public, but also to be consistent with normative commitments and what is pursued in practice internationally.

Cayley Bowland<sup>1</sup>

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN Security Council (UNSC) is the premier multilateral decision-making body responsible for international peace and security. As such, South Africa's re-election to the Council for a second term in 2011–12 signalled the recognition by its peers of the country's standing in international affairs. Simultaneously, this nod of approval was accompanied by high expectations from the international community and African states in particular. With South Africa's second term now over, it is worth assessing whether South Africa has met these expectations. Has South Africa's engagement on the Council been progressive, or has it fallen short by committing itself overambitiously in the multilateral arena? The policy briefing examines the current articulation of South Africa's foreign policy and the major moments during its second term on the UNSC. It is based on an analysis of voting trends in order to assess the performance of South Africa, and discusses the way forward for the country's UNSC reform agenda.

### INTRODUCTION

At the end of South Africa's second term as a non-permanent member on the UNSC, observers, both domestically and internationally, are taking stock of South Africa's performance, while seeking to identify long-term trends in the country's foreign policy. Following the announcement in 2010 of the country's success in securing a second term, the government stated that 'the re-election of South Africa to the UN's most powerful seat signals a global vote of confidence in the role the country continues to play in such areas as peace-keeping, security, human rights and economic development.'<sup>2</sup> Has the country lived up to these expectations and has its position reflected its stated foreign-policy goals and objectives in which the African Agenda is a dominant feature?

## THE ARTICULATION OF SOUTH AFRICA'S FOREIGN POLICY

South Africa's foreign policy is well articulated in official government documents – although in practice its application is more complex and at times difficult to decipher. Multilateralism is noted as one of the cornerstones of South Africa's foreign policy. Beyond membership of the UN, South Africa is also a member of the African Union (AU); the Southern African Development Community; the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa); the IBSA grouping (India, Brazil and South Africa), the Commonwealth; the Non-Aligned Movement; the Group of 20; and the Group of 77 and China. Certain key principles can be seen to have guided this multilateral agenda: the primacy of the African Renaissance and Pan Africanism, including the role of Ubuntu therein; increased South–South co-operation; the creation and diffusion of new norms, especially pertaining to reform of global governance structures; and the consolidation of relations with the North.<sup>3</sup> Important too, since 1994, human rights have been an overarching foreign-policy commitment of the South African government. However, in recent years the government has taken a more measured approach in the pursuit of a human rights agenda. As a result, the country has been widely criticised for being inconsistent in its approach to human rights. These inconsistencies were reflected in the country's voting patterns in the Security Council.

South Africa has also been criticised for being overambitious in what it can achieve through multilateral action. The result is that the South African government has a careful balancing act to play in managing often competing and conflicting agendas, while reconciling these with key foreign-policy priorities. Similarly, South Africa has to be aware constantly of the two-level game<sup>4</sup> in international relations, ie balancing its foreign-policy objectives with domestic-policy imperatives. In this vein, several initiatives in recent years have sought to garner greater domestic participation in foreign policy, including the announcement in 2011 of its desire to establish a South African Council on International Relations.

## KEY MOMENTS IN THE SECOND TERM

A pivotal moment in South Africa's second term was in January 2012, when the country presided over the Council. During its month-long presidency, priority was given to the African Agenda. On 12 January, South Africa convened a high-level debate entitled: 'Strengthening the relationship between the UN and regional organisations, in particular the AU, in the maintenance of international peace and security', which culminated in the unanimous adoption by the Council of Resolution 2033. In line with the UN Charter, this resolution focused on the importance of increasing and reinforcing relations between the UNSC and regional bodies, particularly the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC). This was the pinnacle of South Africa's Africa-focused engagement at the UNSC, and built on the country's efforts during its first term, where it had first mooted the proposal to strengthen UNSC–AU relations, which resulted in the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1809 in April 2008.

Although successes are notable, South Africa has faced other more contentious moments during its second term – in particular the country's voting on Resolution 1973 and Draft Resolution 612 regarding Libya and Syria respectively. South Africa voted in favour of Resolution 1973, which imposed a no-fly zone over Libya's airspace and tightened the already existing sanctions on the Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi regime. During the Security Council session, South Africa's permanent representative, Ambassador Baso Sangqu, stated that:<sup>5</sup>

the Security Council has responded appropriately to the call of the countries of the region to strengthen the implementation of Resolution 1970 (2011), and has acted responsibly to protect and save the lives of defenceless civilians, who are faced with brutal acts of violence carried out by the Libyan authorities.

This position implied a human rights imperative – yet South Africa considered the intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which included aerial attacks and thousands of air strikes<sup>6</sup> over Libya, as a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the resolution. The other two African countries on the Council at the time, Nigeria and Gabon, also voted in favour of Resolution 1973, showing a united African

position within the Council. Yet the other BRICS countries abstained from the vote. South Africa's aberrant vote highlights the precarious balancing of South Africa's various multilateral memberships, with their conflicting demands. Although the choice to vote in favour of the resolution was widely criticised by some quarters in South Africa, it is arguably the subsequent backtracking by government on this decision which reflected most poorly on the country's foreign policy. In the weeks that followed it became clear that the three African countries on the Council had been united in their voting decision. However, the AU as a whole did not have a united stance on the Libyan crisis, a point that made South Africa's decisions more contentious. This highlights an important issue – although the AU has adopted the Ezulwini Consensus,<sup>7</sup> which states the continent's position on UNSC reform, African states are rarely united on UNSC decisions. It also underlines the need for African states to build a more cohesive strategy to ensure unity and effectiveness when contentious African issues come before the Council.

The Security Council failed to pass Draft Resolution 612 on Syria. Resolution 612 was meant to condemn the actions of the Syrian government against its people and included international action against the Syrian government, including sanctions. Although this situation and proposed resolution appeared similar to that of Resolution 1973, South Africa abstained from voting on this occasion. Ambassador Sangqu stated that, although troubled by the humanitarian situation in Syria, South Africa was:<sup>8</sup>

concerned about the sponsors' intention to impose punitive measures that would have pre-judged the resolution's implementation. We believe that these were designed as a prelude to further actions. We are concerned that this draft resolution not be part of a hidden agenda aimed at once again instituting regime change, which has been an objective clearly stated by some.

This response was clearly a result of the problematic implementation of Resolution 1973. In the case of the Syrian crisis, South Africa took the route of quiet diplomacy, which involved attempted negotiations with President Bashar Assad within the IBSA framework. Although in many ways the variation in

voting between Resolution 1973 and Draft Resolution 612 would appear to signify inconsistency within South Africa's voting on the Council, it highlights a more profound question – at what point in an internal conflict should methods of quiet diplomacy be abandoned in favour of hard force or tougher sanctions? This is a question that the South African government appears to grapple with continually.

In analysing this area of South Africa's foreign policy, it is useful to reflect on the overall articulation of human rights as a pillar of the country's foreign policy. During its first term on the UNSC, South Africa made two more controversial decisions on the Council – specifically in voting against the failed draft resolution on Myanmar in 2007 and the failed draft resolution imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2008. Both these decisions were criticised widely as being inconsistent with the country's stated commitment to human rights. When viewed together with the Syrian vote, a pattern emerges of shying away from the use of tough sanctions despite clear human rights abuses.

Overall, it would thus appear that the South African government places priority on dialogue in conflict situations through mediation and negotiation rather than the use of force. Although this could be viewed as inconsistent with a human rights agenda, it also illustrates the recurring difficulty in managing competing priorities in the articulation of its foreign policy.

## VOTING TRENDS ANALYSIS

In examining South Africa's success in attaining its objectives during its second term on the UNSC, it is instructive to analyse the voting trends in the Council during this period.<sup>9</sup> Africa takes primacy over the rest of the world in terms of the number of resolutions adopted or considered for adoption by the UNSC. During South Africa's second term, of a total 120 resolutions, 80 related to the African continent – a significant 67%. These resolutions covered issues such as renewals of existing peacekeeping missions (Sudan, Central African Republic, Guinea Bissau, Burundi, Libya, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC, and Western Sahara); new peacekeeping missions (Libya and South Sudan); extension of the Panel of Experts' mandates (Sudan); and sanctions (Liberia, Eritrea, the DRC, Libya,

Somalia, Eritrea and Côte d'Ivoire). The dominance of African issues on the UNSC agenda has provided the South African government with an opportunity to promote the African Agenda and to realise the reform objective within the Council. Most notably, the inclusion onto the Council's agenda of several resolutions involving more general Africa concerns related to peace and security in Africa,<sup>10</sup> such as protecting the rights of children in armed conflict and the promotion of peace and security in Africa, can be seen as an achievement for South Africa.

It is also interesting to note the trends in the specific nature of these resolutions. Of the 120 resolutions, 80 either extended or renewed a peacekeeping force or a Panel of Experts' mandate, a staggering 67%. Further, 18 resolutions were passed involving sanctions regimes in various countries, such as Liberia, Eritrea, the DRC, Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire and Libya. This shows a strong orientation within the Council agenda towards the promotion of peace through support for peacekeeping missions and the Panels of Experts. Given that most conflict situations that appear on the Council's agenda relate to the African continent, it seems valid that South Africa should push for increasingly structured relations between the UNSC and the AU.

## CONCLUSION

South Africa has succeeded in achieving some of its goals within the Council during its second term – especially the promotion of the African agenda. Resolution 2033 is particularly notable in this regard. However, although this resolution was a success for South Africa within the Council, it will undoubtedly be its implementation in the actual relationship between the UNSC and the AUPSC that will testify to the true foreign-policy success of South Africa in this regard.

Importantly, more than just successes or failures, this analysis has highlighted various foreign-policy challenges facing the South African government, as well as divergent bloc alignment patterns that emerge when the country's two terms are viewed together. It appears that South Africa's multiple multilateral

partnerships have resulted in competing opinions and priorities and are a point of concern when considered in the long term. South Africa's second term showed clearly how precarious the foreign-policy balancing act can be at the multilateral level.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Cayley Bowland is a former KAS-SAIIA scholar on the SAFPAD programme, and is completing a Master's degree in International Relations at Wits University.
- 2 Mthembu J, 'Re-election to the UNSC signals a vote of confidence in SA's role as Global Diplomatic Player – ANC', 13 October 2010, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=6486>.
- 3 See, for example, South Africa, Department of International Relations and Cooperation, White Paper final draft, Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu. Pretoria: Government Printer, 2011, <http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=148482>.
- 4 Putnam R, 'Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games', *International Organization*, 42, 3, 1988, pp. 427–60.
- 5 UN, Official record of the 6498<sup>th</sup> meeting, Department of Public Relations, News and Media Division, New York, 17 March 2011, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6498](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6498).
- 6 Amnesty International, *Annual Report 2012: The State of the World's Human Rights, Libya*, [http://files.amnesty.org/air12/air\\_2012\\_full\\_en.pdf](http://files.amnesty.org/air12/air_2012_full_en.pdf).
- 7 The Ezulwini Consensus refers to the common African position that was adopted by the AU on 8 March 2005 in Addis Ababa. The position was adopted after a *Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change* was presented to the AU.
- 8 UN, Official record of the 6627<sup>th</sup> meeting, Department of Public Relations, News and Media Division, New York, 4 October 2011, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6627](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6627).
- 9 This data was obtained from an independent analysis of the resolutions passed during the period under review. See the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, 'United Nations documentation: Research guide', <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/scact.htm>.
- 10 See Resolution 2056 and Resolution 2068; in 2011 see Resolution 2018 and Resolution 1998.

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