

## **Adrift in the World**

### **The Strange Evolution of South Africa's Foreign Policy**

South Africa's foreign policy has gone through multiple phases. Even the ANC period has seen little continuity.

SA's international standing peaked in 1945. It had been a key member of the Allies – the United Nations as FDR and Churchill referred to them – and this meant that SA was a founder-member of the UN. Smuts was a major world figure who had worked with Churchill, FDR, De Gaulle and Eisenhower.

After the war South Africa remained aligned with what became the NATO powers and co-operated with them – SA participated in the Berlin Airlift and also contributed to the UN effort in the Korean War. It also remained a key member of the Commonwealth.

Apartheid saw all this lost. South Africa left the Commonwealth, was under constant attack at the UN and even the Western countries participated in sanctions and boycotts against SA. And with the rise of first the Warsaw Pact powers and then the Afro-Asian bloc, the international environment changed much to SA's disadvantage.

Then came the great turning point of 1990-94. SA joined the OAU/AU and even presided over it. In Mandela SA again had a major world figure as President. It was also a major player within SADC. It became far more prominent at the UN, several times serving on the Security Council. SA rejoined the Commonwealth and it also took the initiative in launching major international initiatives- the World Conference Against Racism, Nepad and the Non-Aligned Movement.

#### **The brief "human rights" period**

On taking office Mandela announced that South Africa's foreign policy would be based on human rights. But Thabo Mbeki, who was largely running the government while Mandela played a mainly symbolic role, did not agree at all.

The key incident came in 1995 over the bloodthirsty regime of the Nigerian dictator, Sani Abacha, who had come to power by overthrowing the elected president, Mashood Abiola. Abacha had sentenced the former president, Olusegun Obasanjo to life imprisonment and had also imprisoned Abiola. Mandela, appalled, sent Mbeki and Tutu to intercede. Abacha feted Mbeki and they got on well. It was then announced that 43 "coup-plotters" had been shot by firing squad – a major massacre. To spare Mbeki embarrassment they were then re-defined as "armed robbers". Mbeki refused to comment.

On his return to South Africa Mbeki told Parliament that SA must avoid all criticism of Abacha and make no hostile moves or sanctions. Instead it should adopt a policy of "quiet persuasion" – ie. do nothing. Mandela allowed himself to be convinced and went along with this.

Then came the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Auckland, New Zealand in November 1995. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel laureate, was campaigning for sanctions against the Abacha regime and all attention was fastened on Ken Saro-Wiwa and 8 other Ogoni activists sentenced to death by Abacha.

Crucially, Mandela was on his own in Auckland, having left Mbeki back in SA. Mandela, who was only too conscious that he and his fellow Rivonia trialists might all have been hanged back in 1962, threatened to act against Abacha's action if the sentences were carried out. All 9 men were then hanged by Abacha.

Mandela was furious. "Quiet persuasion" had been made to look foolish and worse. He demanded Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth plus tough sanctions including an oil embargo. The white Commonwealth leaders had greatly feared that other African Commonwealth leaders might be reluctant to stand up against Abacha and were thrilled by Mandela's firm stand on human rights. They voted to suspend Nigeria from the Commonwealth.

### **Subverting the "human rights" policy**

Back in SA Mbeki got the Cabinet merely to say it wanted to see the restoration of democracy in Nigeria. There was no mention of suspending Nigeria from the Commonwealth or of sanctions.

Thereafter Mandela continued to badger John Major and Clinton demanding oil sanctions, Mbeki and Aziz Pahad simultaneously told other African states that SA would not call for an oil boycott, thus making it clear to them that Mandela was being undermined. Abacha denounced Mandela as a threat to African unity and he was publicly hanged in effigy at an Abacha rally. Mandela then tried and failed to get SADC to back an oil boycott – but Mbeki had quietly told SADC delegates that the ANC didn't support Mandela.

In addition Mbeki kept putting pressure on Mandela to give up the notion of a human rights-based policy. Meanwhile Wole Soyinka held a conference of anti-Abacha Nigerians in Joburg. Mbeki quietly sabotaged the conference by withholding entry visas for most delegates. I attended the conference and can attest to the fact that the delegates were furious with Mbeki but regarded Mandela as a hero. For Mandela's stand had made him immensely popular in Nigeria, where the Abacha regime was widely hated.

Mbeki kept up the pressure on Mandela, who finally gave way. In June 1996 SA formally restored full relations with Nigeria and dropped its hard line. This was the end of the human rights-based foreign policy, which had lasted just eight months. This was taken as a green light by Abacha, who had Mrs Abiola murdered that very day. Abiola himself was murdered shortly thereafter.

But Abacha died of a heart attack in June 1998. If only Mandela's line had been held SA would have scored a huge international victory, consolidating its leadership in Africa and earning the admiration of the world's democracies. An enormous chance was thus missed.

Mandela had given a glimpse of an alternative human rights based diplomacy. Had this been pursued not only would SA have taken a tough anti-Mugabe line in 2000-1 – which would doubtless have been enough to lead to the installation of a democratic regime in his place. Such a policy would have transformed SADC: democracy could have been made a condition of membership, with SADC becoming a democratic bloc, thus fulfilling the promise of SA's democratic revolution.

## **The Mbeki period**

Mbeki, the ANC's great international relations expert, had subverted Mandela's human rights-based policy, for he had an immensely ambitious programme of his own, built around the central idea of the African Renaissance. This was, however, based on a faulty and wishful version of history according to which Africa had been held back only by colonialism. Now that all Africa was free, he argued, it would gallop ahead almost automatically – provided it could be at peace. Wars were, Mbeki thought, merely due to the vestiges of colonialism – a most unrealistic notion.

The truth was, of course, that before colonialism Africa had been riven by conflict. Colonialism forcibly extinguished these conflicts and established a lengthy period of peace – perhaps the longest Africa had ever known. With the end of the *pax colonial* conflicts had mushroomed. Mbeki's peace-making efforts, creditable though they were, did not change that.

## **Nepad**

The discredited OAU was scrapped to make way for the African Union whose central programme would be Nepad – aid and investment flows of \$64 billion a year into Africa from the rest of the world. This immensely ambitious programme depended on the goodwill of the major Western powers, the only possible source of such large capital flows.

Mbeki had managed to get himself invited to several G8 meetings where he put the Nepad case. The idea was that only with such large capital inflows could Africa modernise and take up its rightful place in the world. The G8 leaders – especially Clinton, Bush and Blair – were not unreceptive. Should Nepad come to pass then Mbeki would greatly consolidate his position as the *de facto* leader of Africa, particularly since he might be in a position to help direct some of these capital flows.

At the same time, however, Mbeki wanted to advance a radical Third World agenda. He wanted to be the leader of the global South – and to that end re-launched the long defunct Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which he chaired. He also wanted to turn the ANC's struggle against racism into a global crusade – hence the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). He launched the Pan African Parliament too – with South Africa paying handsomely for all these initiatives.

## **Zimbabwe, the fatal issue**

But the most important issue was Zimbabwe. As soon as Zimbabwe blew up – during and after the election of 2000, with Mugabe's violent campaign against the MDC opposition and his simultaneous land invasions - Mbeki summoned the liberation movements of southern Africa to a secret meeting in Johannesburg. There he told them that the rise of the MDC and the West's sanctions against Mugabe were part of a larger Western imperialist offensive against all the liberation movements. He then sided strongly with Mugabe under the thin disguise of "quiet diplomacy".

Mbeki's initiatives were largely anti-Western. The NAM inevitably saw a festival of anti-colonial and anti-Western rhetoric while the WCAR saw a walkout by Israel and the US over its overt anti-semitism and threats of similar action by several other Western powers. Both

were dead ends: NAM did not continue and the WCAR movement faded into obscurity, while the AU continued to depend on Western subsidies.

This all climaxed at the CHOGM at Coolumb, Queensland in March 2002. The SA Observer mission had said the recent Zimbabwean election had been “legitimate” (a verdict openly laughed at by many), but the Commonwealth Observers said the opposite. Blair, backed by the white Commonwealth leaders, demanded Zimbabwe’s suspension. Mbeki used the race card to round up African votes to stop that. Blair, extremely irritated, told Mbeki “Remember, you can have Zimbabwe or you can have Nepad but you can’t have both”.

Mbeki’s bluff was thus called. He had audaciously tried to mobilise Western support for Nepad while simultaneously attacking the West in other forums. In exile the ANC had got away with this sort of contradictory behaviour but for an ANC government the rules were different.

The Canadian PM, Jean Chretien, then phoned Mbeki – Canada was hosting the next G8 – to warn him that G8 would refuse to work on Nepad with any African leaders who supported Mugabe’s denial of democracy in Zimbabwe.

Mbeki was furious, calling Blair a white supremacist and accusing all Western leaders of being imperialists who wanted to impose leaders on Africa. But no one in G8 was listening. Moreover, Mbeki’s Aids denialism had completely undermined his image and credibility.

So Nepad was another dead end. It lives on as a sub-committee of the AU but it has nothing to do. Capital flows to Africa came in as either bilateral aid, bilateral loans or private investment. None of it went through Nepad.

So in the end Mbeki’s initiatives all failed. His only “success” was that the Zanu-PF regime totters on in Zimbabwe, bankrupt, under sanctions and presiding over a ruined country.

**R.W. Johnson\***

End of Part One. Part Two completes the story.

\* based on a talk initially given to the South African Institute of International Affairs in Cape Town, 13 February 2023.

## **Adrift in the World**

### **The Strange Evolution of South Africa's Foreign Policy (Part Two)**

#### **Zuma and Ramaphosa**

Jacob Zuma had no interest in the African Renaissance, Nepad, NAM or the WCAR and South Africa was no longer welcome at G8 or G7 meetings. Ironically, however, it was under him that South Africa's membership of G20 and BRICS (which it joined in 2010) became more important and lasting landmarks than anything Mbeki had achieved. The G20, though founded in 1999, was something of a dead letter until it commenced annual summits in 2008. In 2009 it declared itself the primary venue for international financial and economic co-operation.

President Ramaphosa's period has been one of drift, internally and externally. Crucially, however, he aligned South Africa with Russia in the Ukraine war, refusing to condemn Russia's open defiance of the UN Charter. Just as Mbeki had tried to camouflage his policies under bogus slogans like "quiet persuasion" and "quiet diplomacy", Ramaphosa has tried to pass this off as a bogus neutrality. It seems likely that neither he nor the ANC as yet understand the damage this has done to their international standing.

The optics of Russian ships, despite international sanctions, calling at the Cape and conducting naval exercises with South African and Chinese warships off Durban – on the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to boot – have deeply shocked the Western countries which are South Africa's major foreign investors and trading partners. This will be reinforced in August when the BRICS Summit takes place in South Africa. Pictures of Putin and Xi Jinping being fawned upon by the Pretoria government will go round the world.

#### **BRICS dilemmas**

South Africa will face difficult choices as Chair of the BRICS Summit. Barack Obama's memoirs revealed a picture of President Zuma slavishly following China's lead and the real heart of BRICS is the Russo-Chinese alliance. Ramaphosa will doubtless do what the Russians and Chinese want, a stance which will further undermine his "neutrality".

The first issue is the applications for membership of BRICS by Algeria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Argentina, and perhaps Cuba and Venezuela. In addition invitations to join BRICS have been extended to Indonesia, Senegal, the UAE, Kazakhstan and Thailand. Ten of these states are Muslim, several are major oil producers and several are rogue states, so BRICS is likely to change its character fundamentally. Almost all these new states are bigger or richer than South Africa, so whatever happens SA will become much less significant in an enlarged BRICS.

In effect BRICS seems to be en route to becoming a new version of the Non-Aligned Movement, a loose grouping of mainly Third World states bound together only by a general anti-Westernism. NAM's non-alignment was always somewhat bogus for it included many Communist states – China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Similarly, the Russo-Chinese alliance – of two authoritarian autocracies – dominates BRICS. Its fundamental anti-Westernism is often expressed through a hostility to the dollar's position as the world's key reserve currency and there is talk of BRICS having its own currency.

This is nonsense. The troubles of the Euro have shown how difficult it is to have a common currency for economically disparate states. But Europe's economic diversity is very slight compared to that of BRICS. If one takes the period 2008-2021 the growth rates in GDP per capita of BRICS states are as follows: China +138%, India +85%, Russia +19%, Brazil +4%, SA -5%.

Such figures make a common currency unthinkable. If SA has any sense it will not consider such a proposal. Moreover, China accounts for 72% of current BRICS GDP. But even the Remnibi won't become a reserve currency unless China agrees on a great deal more transparency and ceases to manipulate its currency.

### **Fading illusions**

SA continues to nourish wholly unrealistic ambitions of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In fact Germany, Japan, India and Indonesia are all ahead of it in the queue and SA's siding with Russia would almost certainly now bring a Western veto in any case.

Meanwhile SA's international standing is losing heft all the time as its economy becomes comparatively less and less important. Its troubles over electricity, ports, railways and corruption have all hurt its image. It has lost its claims to special moral status.

If ANC loses its majority in 2024 the general impression abroad will be that this is a deserved setback after all the failures. The danger is that SA – and the whole ANC project - will then be labelled a failure. This will have complex results.

All round the world this will be taken as a defeat for black people. The Mandela period raised hopes sky-high and the complete failure of the whole African nationalist project would be a huge disappointment. (In the US South Africa was seen, so to speak, as the country where Martin Luther King became President.) The ANC will doubtless claim that any failure was due to the apartheid inheritance. That will get a hearing, but the fact that the ANC will have had thirty years in power – a whole generation – will mean that, inevitably, the ANC will be blamed for having let black people down: a painful, though not unjust verdict.

Failure has few friends and doesn't even generate much interest. People are attracted by the heroic myth of resistance, symbolised by Mandela. But it's not enough. There is still some celebration of Toussaint l'Ouverture in Haiti, who led the only successful slave rebellion in history. But no one is interested in contemporary Haiti because it is a complete failure. That failure even diminishes the memory of Toussaint.

### **The dangerous relationship with Russia**

However, the really dangerous development of the recent period has been the growing relationship with Russia. In a way this is the culmination of the anti-Westernism which has been the only consistent theme in South Africa's foreign policy at least since 1996. Latterly we have seen Deputy President David Mabuza making endless trips to Russia for unspecified "health reasons". President Zuma too went there for medical treatment and tried to push through a mega-deal to buy Russian nuclear reactors. Any such deal would be prodigiously corrupt: corruption is a way of life both in Russia and South Africa.

Ironically, the dangers in this relationship have become all the greater because both Russia and South Africa are in decline. Russia's economy and population are both falling, Putin has become something of a leper internationally and even his oligarchs, now under sanctions, are fleeing their homes in the West, losing their yachts etc. Russia has lost its foreign reserves, is now barred from all manner of sporting and other contacts, and so on. However, this makes Russia's South African alliance even more important to Putin and he will not easily give it up.

Similarly, the ANC is weaker now than at any time since 1994. Its support is in free fall, down to 37% in some polls and almost certainly still falling. If it loses power it loses its patronage and further decline would then be certain. The ANC remembers that the USSR was by far the biggest supporter of the ANC during the Struggle. And Russian help comes without any political or moral conditions. So the weaker the ANC becomes the more it will look to Russia to prop it up. Already the ANC, panicked by the electricity crisis which is costing it votes, has appealed to BRICS for help. Effectively this means appealing to Russia and China.

### **The West watches**

This evolution is watched closely by the Western powers. Already in April 2022 the US Congress passed (by 419-9) its Act to Counter Malign Russian Activities in Africa. In the debate on the Act it was common cause that the US should use both aid and trade to discourage Russian penetration of Africa – and to punish African states that sided with Russia. Most African states have taken note. On Ukraine Africa voted 27-1 to condemn Russia with 17 abstentions. South Africa was one of the seventeen but its actions since then have been far from neutral.

In addition the ANC now has a major financial interest in the Russian connection. Chancellor House, the ANC's investment arm, has a 22% share in the United Manganese of Kalahari mine owned by the Russian oligarch, Viktor Vekselberg, who is close to Putin. The ANC is badly squeezed for money and its income from this mine is crucial to its organisational survival. In addition, the ANC's biggest donor, Patrice Motepe (Cyril Ramaphosa's brother-in-law) jointly owns the Nkomati nickel mine with a major Russian corporation, Norilsk Nickel. The resulting ANC dependence on Russian goodwill already gives Putin considerable leverage over the ANC.

Also mentioned in the Congressional debate on the Act to Counter Malign Russian Activities was Russia's expertise in election interference and its use of proxies to bribe candidates in the last Madagascar elections.

Naturally, the activities in Africa of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group of mercenaries has drawn much attention, as also Prigozhin's NGO, AFRIC which provides election observers/monitors who, for example, pronounced the Zimbabwean election to be free and fair, despite contrary verdicts by most other observers.

### **Enter the EFF**

On 25 January *Vzgliad*, which is edited from inside Putin's office, carried an article, "Liberal opposition as directed by the US is undermining friendship between Africa and Russia". This was a headlong attack on the Democratic Alliance as the agent of American imperialism in attacking Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. This made it clear that Russia sees the DA as its enemy and will see it as a major objective to prevent the DA coming to power

via a government coalition with the ANC. Russian interference in South Africa's election in 2024 must be more likely than not.

For Moscow the preservation of its alliance with South Africa will depend on the ANC finding a coalition partner which supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That is to say, the EFF. Already the ANC and EFF are co-ordinating their strategies at local level but there will now be strong Russian encouragement for an ANC-EFF coalition at national level.

The EFF has clearly understood that the ANC's dependence on Russia may give it the final assistance it requires to gain a share in national power – for Julius Malema the necessary preliminary en route to his becoming President. This was apparent in the SONA debate when Malema's chief lieutenant, Floyd Shivambu, argued that South Africa's only hope of solving the electricity crisis was a deal with the Russian nuclear energy company, Rosatom. (Already during the Covid-19 crisis the EFF had demanded that South Africa procure and distribute Russian's Sinovac vaccine.)

During his speech Shivambu also referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as their "necessary military operations in Ukraine". The hope, clearly, is that Russia will help shoe-horn the EFF into a coalition government with the ANC after 2024.

This was a signal which Russia will not have missed: the EFF not only supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine but will push for large and lucrative commercial deals with Russia. However, Western ambassadors will have noticed it too and will doubtless have reported it to their respective foreign ministers.

It would be surprising if this did not result in a major Western demarche to warn Ramaphosa that there would be very serious consequences if the ANC invited overtly pro-Russian forces into the government, especially given that the EFF also demands the sweeping nationalisation of all foreign investments in South Africa.

At the very least AGOA (America's favourable trade concessions under its African Growth and Opportunity Act) would be on the line but so would much else. The withdrawal of AGOA alone would destroy the South African motor industry, resulting in vast new unemployment and, quite possibly, the fall of the government.

It is extremely doubtful that Ramaphosa realised what he was getting himself into when he stopped Naledi Pandor from issuing what would have been a quite routine condemnation of Russia's unprovoked aggression in Ukraine. From then on there has been a gathering slide towards a major international confrontation. Russia could now become a major factor in South Africa's internal politics. The ANC has conducted its foreign policy as if only ideology mattered but vital national interests are now at stake.

**R.W. Johnson\***

\*based upon a talk originally given to the South African Institute of International Affairs in Cape Town, 13 February 2023.