

Global Turbulence and Regional Leadership: POST-SONA DIALOGUE ON SOUTH AFRICA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN 2026

13 February 2026 | 11:30–13:20 | Pepperclub Hotel, 167 Loop St, Cape Town

*Partners: South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), Southern Africa Liaison Office (SALO),
Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD)*

The event is in person, with live streaming on SAIIA's YouTube Channel

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

President Ramaphosa delivers the 2026 State of the Nation Address on 12 February against the backdrop of critical inflexion points in global affairs. South Africa's foreign policy orientation faces unprecedented complexity: strained relations with Washington following disputes over land reform and the International Court of Justice case against Israel, a transformative G20 presidency concluding amid heightened geopolitical tensions, and an evolving multilateral landscape where the rules-based international order confronts what UN Secretary-General António Guterres describes as the encroaching 'law of the jungle.'

The 2025 SONA emphasised human rights, peace, and multilateralism as foundational pillars, with South Africa's G20 presidency championing 'Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainable Development'. Yet the year's foreign policy engagements produced mixed reactions. The withdrawal from the Democratic Republic of Congo peacekeeping mission following the deaths of 14 South African soldiers raised questions about regional commitment. Navigating non-alignment amid the Ukraine-Russia conflict tested diplomatic relationships. While principled positions on the ICJ case earned admiration from supporters in the Global South and beyond, they also triggered domestic pushback on South Africa's foreign policy choices.

Looking ahead, South Africa's successful G20 Johannesburg Summit provides momentum, but also raises expectations. The country assumes the SADC chairship in August 2026, and its engagement at COP31 in Turkey and the 18th BRICS Summit in India will shape how Pretoria maintains continuity with its international obligations. These foreign policy challenges intersect with deeper structural questions about democratic governance and regional integration that two SAIIA publications, to be launched at this event, directly address: 'Reframing Democracy in Africa' ([Policy Briefing 316](#)) by Karabo Mangena and Deon Cloete, and 'Digital Public Infrastructure Futures' ([Policy Insights 171](#)) by Litha Mzinyati and Deon Cloete.

This interactive dialogue, convened by SAIIA, SALO, and IGD, brings together analysts and experts to assess how South Africa's international relations agenda features in the 2026 SONA and to interrogate the country's foreign policy posture at this critical juncture. Moving beyond diplomatic rhetoric, the event aims to generate actionable insights to advance national interests while championing African development and global governance reform.

OBJECTIVE

To generate informed debate on South Africa's foreign policy trajectory following the 2026 SONA, producing actionable insights on navigating the following challenges:

- To critically assess the coherence and strategic clarity of South Africa's foreign policy as articulated in the 2026 State of the Nation Address, particularly considering geopolitical tensions, strained bilateral relations, and pressures on the rules-based international order.
- To evaluate how South Africa balances national interests, constitutional principles, and non-alignment while engaging in contentious global issues such as peacekeeping withdrawals, the Ukraine–Russia conflict, and the ICJ case against Israel, including domestic and international responses.
- To identify actionable pathways for advancing South Africa's international agenda (including African development, reformed global governance, and multilateral leadership), through upcoming roles in the G20 legacy, SADC chairship, BRICS, COP processes, and AfCFTA implementation.

FORMAT

The event employs a format that prioritises dynamic, peer-to-peer engagement over traditional presentations. Speakers will be seated at a central roundtable, engaging in moderated dialogue whilst the audience surrounds them. This salon-style arrangement encourages organic exchange, allows for audience interjections, and mirrors the kind of candid policy discussions that shape foreign policy behind closed doors. The event includes a fireside chat featuring SAIIA researchers who will discuss key findings from the two publications being launched.

PROGRAMME

Time	Session
11:00 – 11:30	Registration and Refreshments
11:30 – 11:40	Welcoming Remarks Philani Mthembu , Executive Director, Institute for Global Dialogue Molly Dhlamini , Board Member, Southern Africa Liaison Office Gustavo de Carvalho , Senior Researcher, South African Institute of International Affairs
11:40 – 11:55	Keynote Addresses Zane Dangor , Director-General, Department of International Relations and Cooperation (TBC) Supra Mahumapelo , Chairperson of Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation, Parliament of South Africa (TBC)
11:55 – 12:10	Fireside Chat: SAIIA Publication Launch <i>Discussion of key findings from two new SAIIA publications:</i> 'Reframing Democracy in Africa' (Policy Briefing 316) 'Digital Public Infrastructure Futures' (Policy Insights 171) Participants:

	<p>Karabo Mangena, Political Science Researcher, SAIIA Litha Mzinyati, Researcher, SAIIA <i>Moderated by: Isabel Bosman-Burnett, SAIIA</i></p>
12:10 – 13:10	<p>Interactive Dialogue <i>Navigating 2026: South Africa's Foreign Policy Between Principle and Pragmatism</i></p> <p>Participants: Sanusha Naidu, Senior Research Fellow, IGD Lwazi Somya, Manager: Policy, Advocacy, Stakeholder Engagement and Senior Researcher, SALO Gustavo de Carvalho, Senior Researcher, SAIIA</p> <p><i>This session welcomes audience participation throughout.</i></p>
13:10 – 13:20	<p>Reflections and Closure</p>