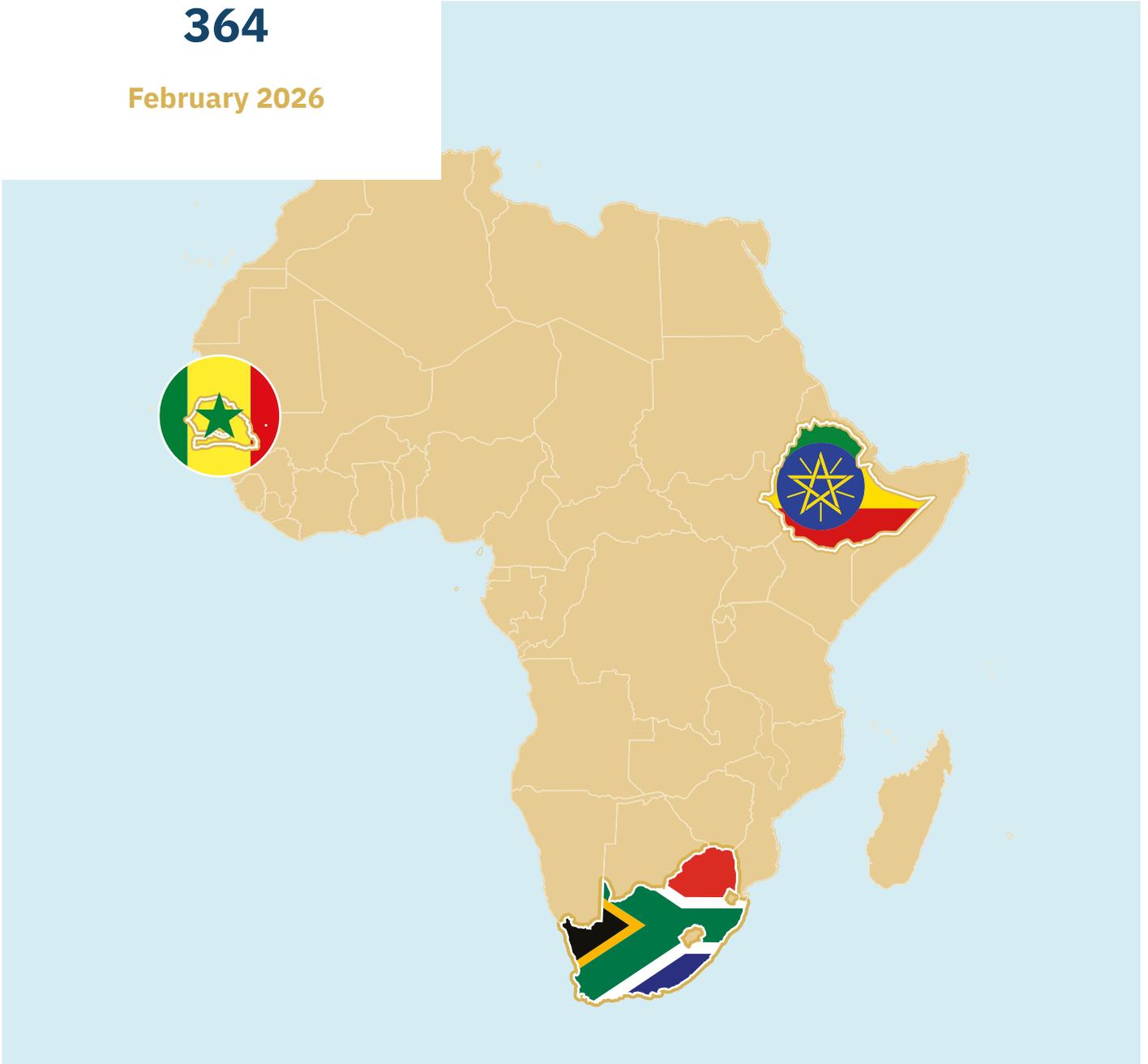


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Cautious Abroad, Assertive at Home? The Foreign Policies of Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa

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African perspectives
Global insights

Abstract

In the contemporary multipolar order, what forms of agency can African states exercise amid persistent structural constraints? This paper adopts a comparative perspective to examine the foreign policy strategies of Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa, contrasting their international engagement – namely, relations with non-African partners – with their regional foreign policy. Particular attention is paid to relations with neighbouring states or members of their own regional economic community. It argues that, at the international level, foreign policy is largely characterised by non-alignment, partnership diversification and hedging, resulting in a generally ‘cautious’ posture – with South Africa the partial exception. By contrast, at the regional level they tend to adopt more ‘assertive’ approaches. The analysis focuses on three illustrative cases: Senegal’s role in the 2016–2017 Gambian political crisis; Ethiopia’s claims regarding access to the sea, notably its MoU with Somaliland over the Port of Berbera and rising tensions with Eritrea over Assab; and South Africa’s participation in – and the failure of – the SADC mission in North Kivu, followed by a diplomatic dispute with Rwanda. Notably, the South African case diverges from the other two even at the regional level. Overall, the paper seeks to deepen understanding of African agency(ies), arguing that although regional and international foreign policy strategies may appear markedly different, they ultimately converge on a shared objective, ie, the pursuit of strategic autonomy.

Introduction

'Cautious abroad, assertive at home': could this description be applied to the foreign policy of African states? In the new multipolar era, what kind of agency can African countries exercise, given both their ongoing economic growth and the persistent structural limitations in their productive capacities? This paper seeks to analyse, from a comparative perspective, the distinct approaches to foreign policy adopted by three African countries: Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa. It juxtaposes their international foreign policy – that is, their interactions with international (non-African) partners – with their regional foreign policy, focusing especially on their relationships with neighbouring countries, or countries belonging to the same regional economic community (REC).

At least in their rhetoric, post-independence African governments have paid homage to the ideals of pan-Africanism but jealously guarded their hard-won sovereignty and territorial integrity. The African Continental Free Trade Area is expected to merge with economic integration efforts at the regional level through the corresponding RECs, although these are sometimes in tension with the AU's leadership. In this sense, it is worth recalling that relations of proximity between African states play a major role in regional economic integration and constitute key pillars of official foreign policy frameworks,¹ at least for the three countries under consideration.

At the international level, African foreign policy seems to be characterised by an increasingly refined balancing of rival global powers – including the US, Europe, China, Russia, India and the Middle East. The continent has become 'geopolitically polygamous', to use a term from *Foreign Policy* magazine (to describe Indonesia's international posture) that could be applied more broadly to Global South countries. This behaviour, which could be characterised as cautious, does not appear to apply equally at the level of regional foreign policy, particularly in bilateral relations with neighbouring states.

In terms of a theoretical framework, this paper draws on debates surrounding African agency, building on a growing body of academic and policy-oriented literature.² 'African agency' is a highly contested theoretical concept, generally understood as the capacity to act – purposefully, meaningfully and self-reflectively – from a position that, for most African states, remains structurally marginal within a world system organised around the distribution of material power (economic, military).³

1 Analysis from the author's PhD fieldwork in Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa.

2 See William Brown, "A Question of Agency: Africa in International Politics", *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 10 (2012): 1889–1908; William Brown and Sophie Harman, *African Agency in International Politics* (Routledge, 2013); Ronald Chipaike and Matarutse Knowledge, "The Question of African Agency in International Relations", *Cogent Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1–16; Jason Warner and Timothy Shaw, eds, *African Foreign Policies in International Institutions*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Amanda Coffie and Lembe Tiky, "Exploring Africa's Agency in International Politics", *Africa Spectrum* 56, no. 2 (2021): 243–253; Paul Henry Bischoff, ed., *African Foreign Policies: Selecting Signifiers to Explain Agency* (Routledge, 2020).

3 See Sofia Scialoja, "African Agency Revisited", *Development Cooperation Review* (2025).

Moreover, given the difficulty posed by the ontological question of 'Africa' as a unified actor, this paper adopts a plural conception of the term 'African agencies'. It begins by comparing the state agency of different countries – thus, explaining the empirical choice of a comparative analysis, which is directly linked to the theoretical problematisation of the notion of African agency(ies). The purpose of the paper is to compare and attempt to grasp certain elements of African agencies through a multi-level analysis of the foreign policies of the three selected countries. Its first aim is to understand how such agencies may manifest differently at the regional and the international level.

The multilevel analysis draws on the African foreign policy analysis literature,⁴ which distinguishes among several tiers of inquiry for understanding formulation and implementation. Recent scholarship – such as by Paul Henry Bischoff – focuses on factors (or typologies of signifiers)⁵ that illuminate African agency and that operate across different levels, from the domestic to the regional and the international. In this regard, the novelty of this paper lies in its examination of the differentiated approaches taken at regional and international levels, through a (nuanced) distinction between 'cautiousness' and 'assertiveness'. This makes it possible to capture more precisely the gradations and potential manifestations of African agency(ies).

These distinctions may be conceptualised as follows:

- **Very cautious:** A non-aligned stance articulated only weakly or ambiguously, with limited public justification.
- **Cautious but strategically articulated:** A clearly formulated and well-substantiated non-aligned position, often expressed through hedging behaviour.
- **Cautious yet active:** A posture characterised by mediation efforts and proactive diplomatic initiatives, while still avoiding alignment with major power blocs.
- **Assertive within recognised international frameworks:** A clearly defined foreign policy position grounded in established principles, ideational commitments or economic interests, and pursued primarily through multilateral fora, regional organisations or legally recognised instruments, including authorised military engagements.
- **Highly assertive, extending beyond recognised international frameworks:** A firmly held position that may be advanced outside – or at the margins of – established diplomatic, legal or multilateral channels, at times approaching a confrontational or risk-acceptant posture.

4 See Bischoff, *African Foreign Policies*; Brown and Harman, *African Agency in International Politics*; Warner and Shaw, *African Foreign Policies in International Institutions*; Gilbert M. Khadiagala and Terrence Lyons, eds, *African Foreign Policies: Power and Process* (Lynner Rienner Publishers, 2001); Stephen Wright, *African Foreign Policies* (Routledge, 1999).

5 See, in particular, Bischoff, *African Foreign Policies*.

In terms of analytical framework, this paper adopts a most-different system design⁶ where the case studies selected – Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa – differ profoundly in several fundamental respects. These include geographic and geostrategic positioning within the continent, political systems, cultural contexts and historical legacies. Nonetheless, each can be regarded, albeit to varying extents, as a linchpin actor within its respective region.⁷ Thus, the idea behind the most-different system design is to assess whether cases with such divergent characteristics may nonetheless display similarities in the political outcome investigated, namely foreign policy. In this instance, the question is whether their regional and international foreign policy approaches diverge in a comparable manner. The fact of their being a linchpin actor in their respective regions makes the comparison more suitable.

In this sense, despite the differences between these countries, a central aim is to identify potential common trends in their foreign policy, in particular on the divergence between their approaches to international and regional foreign policy. This leads to the central research question: to what extent do Senegal, Ethiopia and South Africa exhibit a common pattern in the differentiation between their regional and international foreign policy strategies, and what implications does this have for understanding African agency(ies)?

It should be noted that the main focus of the paper is on regional foreign policy. The analysis principally examines the most recent administration of each country: Cyril Ramaphosa for South Africa (in office since 2018 and after May 2024 in a coalition government); Abiy Ahmed for Ethiopia (in power since 2018); and Bassirou Diomaye Faye for Senegal, in office since 2024, as well as Macky Sall's administration (2014–2024).

The methodology underlying the research is qualitative, monitoring press articles and academic works, and partially based on empirical research carried out during the author's PhD fieldwork in Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa. The latter consists of qualitative interviews with diplomats, officials from international and regional organisations and experts from academia and/or think tanks, conducted from 2023–2025 in all three countries.

6 A common academic definition of “most different systems design (MDSD)” is the one from Todd Landman: “MDSD compares countries that do not share any common features apart from the political outcome to be explained.” In this case, the political outcome consists of their foreign policy approach. See Todd Landman and Edzia Carvalho, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics* (Routledge, 2008).

7 South Africa is considered the hegemonic power in Southern Africa. Ethiopia serves as the cornerstone of the Horn of Africa and rivals Kenya as the leading economy of East Africa, and is also the region's most populous country. Senegal presents a more nuanced case: while it is the fourth-largest economy in the ECOWAS area and the second largest in the West African Economic and Monetary Union, it is often viewed as a pillar of stability in the Sahel. Additionally, thanks to its well-established symbolic capital in diplomacy, Senegal has a diplomatic reach disproportionate to its actual size.

The foreign policies from an international perspective

From an international perspective, the foreign policies of the three countries under consideration have notable similarities. In particular, the external strategies of all three appear to be patterns of non-alignment, pragmatism, hedging and the diversification of economic partnerships.

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Regarding non-alignment, it is noteworthy that all three countries have declared themselves non-aligned with respect to the war in Ukraine – ie, they have for the most part abstained from or were absent in UN General Assembly votes on the matter (see Table 1). This episode is here taken as a watershed moment, illustrating the absence of a global consensus around a (Western) hegemonic power, through which they signalled, at least politically, a refusal to pledge allegiance either to the Western bloc or to Russia.⁸ Nevertheless, to this initially non-aligned position – visible primarily in the UN General Assembly votes – one must add episodes of more explicit diplomatic activism on the part of Senegal and South Africa. In Senegal’s case, this includes the June 2022 meeting between presidents Vladimir Putin and Sall (then serving as AU chairperson), centred on potential solutions to the food crisis affecting African countries, particularly regarding the export of Ukrainian grain.⁹ It also includes Senegal’s subsequent participation in the African Peace Mission to Russia and Ukraine in June 2023. South Africa, for its part, played a leading role in the same delegation. This delegation focused primarily on the ongoing consequences of the war and articulated a 10-point plan proposed by the African side aimed at de-escalating the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Some observers have characterised these initiatives as instances of active non-alignment.¹⁰

8 A more in-depth examination and analysis of the positionings of these three African countries regarding the war in Ukraine, including a consideration of the stated justifications and the various nuances and differences therein, forms part of the author’s doctoral research.

9 Eddy Wax, “Senegalese President Buys Into Putin’s Promise to Free Ukraine’s Grain”, *Politico*, June 3, 2022.

10 Philani Mthembu, “Africa’s Peace Mission to Ukraine and Russia: Towards a Strategy of Active Non-Alignment?”, *Accord*, July 28, 2023.

TABLE 1 UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY VOTES ON UKRAINE RESOLUTIONS								
Resolutions ^a	A/ES-11/1	A/ES-11/2	A/ES-11/3	A/ES11/4	A/ES-11/5	A/ES-11/6	A/ES-11/7	A/ES-11/8
Ethiopia	Absent	Abstain	Reject	Abstain	Reject	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain
Senegal	Abstain	Approve	Abstain	Approve	Absent	Absent	Abstain	Abstain
South Africa	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Abstain	Approve

a The UN General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine address the following themes and were adopted on the following dates:

- **A/ES-11/1:** Aggression against Ukraine, withdrawal of Russian troops – March 2, 2022
- **A/ES-11/2:** Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine – March 24, 2022
- **A/ES-11/3:** Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council – April 7, 2022
- **A/ES-11/4:** Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the UN (illegal referenda in Donbas) – October 12, 2022
- **A/ES-11/5:** Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine resolution – November 14, 2022
- **A/ES-11/6:** Principles of the UN Charter underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine – February 23, 2023
- **A/ES-11/7:** Advancing a just and lasting peace in Ukraine – February 24, 2025
- **A/ES-11/8:** The path to peace – February 24, 2025.

Sources: Compiled by author from UN Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/?ln=en>

The contemporary debate on and meaning of non-alignment (referred to under various labels and formulations as ‘non-alignment 2.0’, ‘active non-alignment’ or ‘multi-alignment’) should be understood in the context of the historical principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the political imaginaries associated with the Bandung Conference of 1955.¹¹

11 Bandung articulated a series of principles – non-violence, anti-imperialism, sovereign equality of all races and nations, peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for the UN Charter – that shaped the subsequent institutionalisation of the NAM during the Cold War. As Elizabeth Sidiropoulos and Gustavo de Carvalho (2023) recall, this project imagined a world in which international relations would not be dominated by great-power rivalry but be grounded in justice, non-violence and autonomy. The NAM thus provided the historical and ideological foundation from which contemporary debates on “non-alignment 2.0” draw, even as today’s geopolitical configurations differ substantially from those of the Cold War. See Elizabeth Sidiropoulos and Gustavo de Carvalho, “The Global South and the Resurgence of Non-Alignment: An African Perspective”, in *Is Africa Turning Against the West?*, eds. G. Carbone and L. Ragazzi (ISPI, 2023). See also CVCE, “Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference of Bandung (24 April 1955)”. Accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/final_communique_of_the_asian_african_conference_of_bandung_24_april_1955-en-676237bd-72f7-471f-949a-88b6ae513585.html.

The main aim of the NAM during the Cold War was to function as a collective diplomatic platform, allowing newly independent states to avoid entanglement in superpower confrontation and to safeguard autonomy in a bipolar system. Its logic was thus group-based and premised on resisting incorporation into either bloc. This highlights the underlying 'group logic' that operated in parallel with the strictly bipolar structure of the Cold War.¹²

According to Sidiropoulos and De Carvalho,¹³ regarding the possible definition of contemporary non-alignment, it should first be differentiated from 'neutrality' (denoting a legal status adopted in the context of interstate war). Non-alignment today does not necessarily imply, as in the case of the NAM, a shared adhesive vision uniting a bloc of states – ie, a collective, institutionally-anchored logic. Rather, it denotes an individual foreign policy strategy, not necessarily coordinated collectively, characterised by its flexibility, issue-specificity and compatibility with active diplomacy. This distinction represents a significant and fundamental difference between past and present; nevertheless, the conceptual continuity between the two clearly persists. Thus, it should be noted that the non-aligned positioning adopted by various Global South countries on an issue such as Ukraine contributes to a shared trend, or at least conveys the appearance of bloc voting behaviour – as is evident when considering, for instance, the cases of Senegal, Ethiopia and South Africa.

The non-aligned political positioning appears to be mirrored in other areas of foreign policy, most notably economic diplomacy

The non-aligned political positioning appears to be mirrored in other areas of foreign policy, most notably economic diplomacy. Since the 2000s, African countries more broadly have increasingly forged partnerships with non-traditional actors (that is, beyond Western states and former colonial powers), with China at the forefront. More specifically, today, all three case study countries have a highly diversified range of economic partners and trade relations,¹⁴ as well as foreign investments. These dynamics are complemented by diplomatic relations in the strict sense, as reflected in the substantial diplomatic presence in Dakar, Addis Ababa and Pretoria.

12 Although the post-Cold War unipolar moment seemed to reduce the NAM's relevance – given the temporary absence of systemic rivalry – its principles persisted symbolically and normatively. Many Global South states continued to express their interests through the NAM and later through the G77, which has often reiterated Bandung's normative legacy: a preference for multilateralism, sovereign equality, developmental justice and reform of global governance. See Sidiropoulos and De Carvalho, "The Global South and the Resurgence of Non-Alignment".

13 Sidiropoulos and De Carvalho, "The Global South and the Resurgence of Non-Alignment".

14 In 2023, for example, the top three destinations for Senegal's exports were Mali, India and Switzerland, while the origins of its main imports were China, India and France. Ethiopia's top three export destinations were the US, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and China and its main imports came from China, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Regarding South African exports, the top three destinations were China, India and the US, and the main imports were from China, Germany and the US. See the [Observatory of Economic Complexities website](#). As part of the author's PhD framework, a more detailed analysis is provided of the evolution of trade among the three countries from 2000 to the present.

Such diversification and approaches in foreign policy can be understood through what are referred to as strategic partnerships.¹⁵ According to Zondi, these are a new form of partnership that emerged during and after the African Renaissance – an era characterised by ‘Africa’s rise in global stature and a shift in its image from a begging continent to a bragging one’.¹⁶ Zondi identifies seven key features of strategic partnerships, including areas of cooperation such as trade, geopolitical considerations, security and defence. Strategic partnerships may be viewed by the states concerned as a means of strengthening their international position without formally aligning with any particular power bloc, thereby ‘edging closer to the idea of soft balancing and buffering amid growing tensions among global powers’.¹⁷ In this sense, diversification at the economic and diplomatic levels is also reflected in more structural policy choices, intertwined with particularly deep bilateral relations – ie, strategic partnerships – with partners outside of Africa.

In Ethiopia’s case, for instance, the government has recently implemented economic liberalisation reforms under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the same time, Abiy has cultivated an exceptionally close relationship with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In parallel, Ethiopia has gained entry as a new member of BRICS, joining South Africa and Egypt as the only African states in the grouping, from January 2024.

This approach is thus marked by an effort to balance multiple partners. Although characterised by significant decisions that can be defined as manifestations of agency, it does not take a definitive side but rather continues to seek an equilibrium position.

The same can be said of Senegal. Despite its new government – led by Diomaye and Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko – breaking with its predecessor and initially adopting a more explicitly ‘sovereignist’ approach, it nevertheless appears to fall within the continuum of a foreign policy tradition. This is aimed at securing stable international recognition,

15 Zondi revises the “strategic partnerships” definition proposed by D. Geldenguys: “[S]ince the 1990s, states began displaying a preference for the term ‘strategic’ to depict bilateral relationships that are supposed to be deeper and stronger than ‘standard’ interactions, but usually without extending to alliances (understood as formal agreements for military cooperation in the face of common threats).” See D. Geldenguys, “The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between South Africa and Russia”, *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 37, no. 2 (2015).

16 See Siphamandla Zondi, “Africa’s Strategic Partnerships: Concept, Contours and Context”, in *Africa’s Strategic Partnerships with BRICS and other Emerging Countries*, eds. Siphamandla Zondi and Hellen Adogo (Fanele, 2025).

17 The seven features distinguishing the term “strategic partnerships”, as highlighted by Zondi:

- The specific terminology indicates a particular diplomatic relationship that holds significance for the countries concerned in relation to their foreign policy priorities, security interests, economic interests and global activities. “Strategic partnerships” suggest the elevation of relations beyond orthodox bilateral relations.
- The multiple areas of cooperation encompassed by the strategic partnerships, including economic, political, security and cultural aspects. Those areas of cooperation also include strategic areas such as security and defence, trade and geopolitics.
- Association between strategic partnership and mutual benefits and shared interests, with the establishment of overlapping goals, recognition of interdependence and maximisation of advantages.
- No rigid or permanent alliances, but flexible arrangements adapting to changing circumstances
- Strategic partnerships can be characterised by a greater depth and intensity of relations between countries (high-level dialogues, joint military exercises).
- Strengthening of the countries’ international positions without formally aligning with one particular bloc.
- Result of the re-emerging Cold War between the West and rising Eastern powers.

See Zondi, “Africa’s Strategic Partnerships”.

initiated under Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the diversification of partnerships, initiated by Abdoulaye Wade and strengthened by Sall. Similarly, the Pastef (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity) government has appeared, especially in the early stages, to pursue a policy of attracting foreign investment by fostering a favourable environment (at least, before the hidden debt crisis).¹⁸ Senegal has announced plans to renegotiate key economic contracts with major partners, while completing the gradual withdrawal of French troops begun under Wade. In this respect, even at the level of domestic political orientation, Senegal seems to be asserting its agency on the international stage while maintaining a degree of equilibrium. Dakar has also shown a marked interest in joining BRICS, thus aligning itself with Addis Ababa and Pretoria.

More generally, the international partners involved in this analysis can be seen as playing antagonistic or competing roles within the current configuration of the global geopolitical chessboard. The economic diversification policies of the three countries therefore may be understood as underscoring a pragmatic approach, in line with non-alignment, which promotes a course whereby they deliberately refrain from taking sides in potential global (im)balances. They are thus following an approach that can appropriately be characterised – as proposed by Zondi – as a form of soft balancing, and therefore as a cautious stance vis-à-vis various external actors.

South Africa departs slightly from what appears to be a common trend among the three countries under consideration

It should be noted that South Africa departs slightly from what appears to be a common trend among the three countries under consideration. Like the other two, it pursues a policy of non-alignment or hedging at the international level and a strong diversification of economic partnerships. Nevertheless, certain stances in South Africa's foreign policy can hardly be characterised as deliberately devoid of a clear position.

This dynamic is exemplified above all by South Africa's outspoken stance on the Israeli–Palestinian question, where it is heavily pro-Palestinian, particularly regarding the conflict

¹⁸ The “hidden debt scandal” was revealed by Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko during the campaign for the September 2024 legislative elections. The Sall administration was accused of manipulating the country's main macroeconomic indicators. Having been at the centre of public debate in Senegal for months, the “hidden debt” issue has effectively paralysed the economy, unsettling foreign investors and prompting major international credit rating agencies – Moody's in particular – to downgrade the country three times within a single year, a decision that was sharply criticised by Senegal's Ministry of Finance. The debt-to-GDP ratio reached 132% in November 2025, a record figure placing Dakar among the most indebted countries on the continent (based on the author's fieldwork in Senegal, October/November 2025). An IMF mission visited Dakar in October–November 2025 to assess Senegal's fiscal situation and discuss a possible new programme, stressing the need for greater transparency and more debt sustainability. The talks ended without a lending agreement, although discussions were described as constructive and set to continue (see IMF, “IMF Staff Concludes Visit to Senegal”, November 6, 2025).

in Gaza that began in 2023. The latter is another example – like the war in Ukraine – of a current high-level international crisis that can be used to examine the positioning of the three countries under consideration. On this issue, the three do not display similar positions.

Ethiopia's is an ambiguous stance, shaped, on the one hand, by a substantial Muslim population (approximately 40%) and, on the other, by a longstanding relationship with Israel. Ethiopia also recognises the state of Palestine. Senegal, a country with a large Muslim majority, has long defended Palestinian rights, serving for decades as chair of the relevant UN committee and repeatedly denouncing the ongoing conflict as genocide. It has joined the so-called The Hague Group, supporting the genocide case against Israel brought by South Africa at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Nonetheless, Dakar also maintains good relations with Jerusalem and cannot, on the Palestinian issue, be placed on the same footing as South Africa.

On the Palestinian question, Pretoria demonstrates a strongly resolute approach, and has done so for the past three decades

As is well known, South Africa brought a case against Israel to the ICJ in The Hague in December 2023 related to Israel's alleged violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. In this sense, South Africa, building on its struggle against apartheid and its historical ties with the Palestinian cause, presents itself as a possible advocate of an alternative narrative to the Western one, denouncing 'double standards and double measures'. In this case, therefore, to describe South Africa's foreign policy as cautious and balanced would be decidedly misleading: on the Palestinian question, Pretoria demonstrates a strongly resolute approach, and has done so for the past three decades.¹⁹ In addition, one must also consider its strained relationship with Washington – an especially complex matter for the African country given their significant trade and economic ties. Tensions have been further aggravated by President Donald Trump's return to power. Nevertheless, Pretoria's responses to Washington's pressures have been relatively mild and measured but firm, seeking to contain and manage the relationship

¹⁹ It should be underscored that, although South Africa's stance on Gaza – most notably its ICJ case against Israel – is widely regarded as a firm and resolute position, some South African analysts also categorise it as a form of non-alignment. In this interpretation, the term does not evoke non-alignment in the sense of edging, hedging or maintaining a balanced approach between competing blocs. Rather, it denotes a principled, self-defined position specific to the actor in question, one that is articulated independently and diverges markedly from that of other blocs, in this case standing in radical contrast to the position of the Western bloc (Fieldwork in South Africa by author, 2025).

with the US rather than exacerbate tensions.²⁰ This tension is due, among other factors, to South Africa's position on Gaza and the ICJ case, which it regards as non-negotiable.²¹

Furthermore, South Africa has consistently articulated principled positions on both Western Sahara and Cuba. Its diplomatic recognition of and sustained support for the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic stem from the historical bonds between the ANC and the Polisario Front. Likewise, Pretoria's opposition to the US embargo on Cuba²² and its inclusion on the list of state sponsors of terrorism is grounded in a legacy of cooperation established during the anti-apartheid struggle. This was a time when Cuba played a pivotal role in supporting liberation movements in Southern Africa.

In this sense, following the graduated spectrum of foreign policy approaches used to capture different manifestations of agency, the behaviour of South Africa at the international level can be seen as 'assertive, within recognised international frameworks' regarding Gaza. The approaches of Senegal, Ethiopia and South Africa regarding Ukraine and their general relations with external partners are more cautious, while also proposing active diplomatic actions (Senegal and South Africa).

Regional foreign policy and relations with neighbours

The central concern of this paper is regional foreign policy, with particular attention to an example of each country's assertive regional posture – a pattern that contrasts with their generally balanced international stance. In this sense, as stated in the introduction, the intention is to understand what this shift in approach (between regional and international foreign policy) implies for the concept of African agencies.

Senegal

In the case of Senegal, the focus here is on the country's role under Sall during the 2017 Gambian political crisis, in which Senegal, through ECOWAS, took a leading interventionist role to ensure the departure of Yahya Jammeh and the installation of President Adama

20 In recent US–South African relations, several episodes stand out: the expulsion of South Africa's ambassador to the US, Ebrahim Rasool; Trump's allegation of "genocide" against Afrikaners, reiterated during a meeting between Ramaphosa and Trump in the Oval Office; and Trump's statements that South Africa will "not be invited" to the next G20 summit to be held in Florida in 2026 – claims that Ramaphosa has firmly denied.

21 An analysis of the countries' positions on Gaza and their bilateral relations with the actors involved (eg, the US), is part of the author's doctoral research.

22 In January and February 2026, President Cyril Ramaphosa and the ANC strongly condemned the current US blockade of Cuba, reiterating their solidarity with the Cuban people. The ANC stated that the US embargo represents a "continuation of decades of deliberate economic sabotage and strangulation." See Mahlengi Bhengu, "The ANC Statement on the Economic Blockade Against Cuba", *politicsweb*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/economic-blockade-against-cuba-condemned--anc>; Cyril Ramaphosa, "2026 State of the Nation Address", South African Government, February 12, 2026, <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/2026StateOfTheNation>.

Barrow. The aim is to understand how this case diverges from Senegal's traditional foreign policy approach, both at the international and at the African and regional level. In fact, since the post-independence period under its first president (Senghor), Senegal has been distinguished by a pronounced pan-Africanism, in line with the assumption that a medium-sized country can only benefit from deeper regional and continental integration. This is accompanied by the fact that Senegal's foreign policy is based on a tradition of prestige and mediation, which seems to be reflected primarily at the regional level.

Nevertheless, the case of The Gambia in 2017 is characterised by elements slightly different from the canonical ones. This analysis draws on the work of Vincent Foucher and Barka Ba.²³ These scholars have characterised Senegal's actions during the Gambian crisis as a demonstration of agency and power politics. Other commentators have interpreted the episode as a victory for African diplomacy and as evidence of ECOWAS's progress in the areas of peace, security and democracy. Yet, as Ba and Foucher argue, this is only part of the story: while the Gambian people and ECOWAS undeniably played a role, Senegal must also be recognised as a central actor in the operation.

Senegal's actions during the Gambian crisis as a demonstration of agency and power politics

The Gambia is one of the few states surrounded by a single country – in this case, Senegal – except for its narrow Atlantic coastline. This geopolitical configuration, a legacy of colonial partition between the British and the French, overlooked the fact that the territory had once been part of a cohesive political and cultural entity known as 'Senegambia', or the former kingdom of Gabu. Indeed, official discourse continues to emphasise the enduring fraternity between Senegal and The Gambia.²⁴ Senegal's foreign policy toward its immediate neighbours must also be understood within a logic of pure national interest. This national interest is tied to the very survival of the Senegalese state, its stabilisation and the preservation of its territorial integrity in the struggle against Casamance secessionism in the south of the country.²⁵

23 Barka Ba and Vincent Foucher, "Une agenceité forte: l'Etat sénégalais face à la crise gambienne de 2016-2017", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (2021).

24 Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Senegalese philosopher, professor at Columbia University, New York), interview by author, Paris, March 2023.

25 Vincent Foucher (Research Fellow, Sciences Po Bordeaux), interview by author, online, November 2023. In a broader perspective, taking as a starting point the role of the Casamance issue in Senegal's foreign policy towards its neighbours, it is worth referring to Vincent Foucher, "Pas d'alternance en Casamance? Le nouveau pouvoir sénégalais fa à la revendication séparatiste casamançaise", *Politique africaine* 91 (2003): 101-119; Vincent Foucher, "Senegal. The Resilient Weakness of Casamançais Separatists", in *African Guerrillas: Raging against the Machine*, eds K. Dunn and M. Boas (Lynne Rienner, 2007), 171-197; Vincent Foucher, "Wade's Senegal and Its Relations with Guinea-Bissau: Brother, Patron or Hegemon?" (Occasional Paper 132, SAIIA, 2013).

More specifically, in January 2017, after weeks of resistance, Jammeh (who had seized power in a 1994 coup) was forced into exile. His eventual departure, peaceful but reluctant, came only after the intervention of the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG), following his refusal to recognise the December 2016 electoral victory of Barrow.²⁶

Relations between Dakar and Banjul had already deteriorated by 2015, amid disputes over transit, tariffs and the construction of the Senegambia bridge crossing the Gambia River. During the 2016 elections, much of the opposition, encouraged by Senegalese state support, coalesced around Barrow, the candidate of the United Democratic Party. Dakar reportedly provided both financial and political backing, urging for safeguards against electoral fraud. When the crisis broke, Senegal quickly deployed its diplomatic influence, becoming the first to condemn Jammeh's rejection of the results and the main advocate of a hard line within ECOWAS. Senegalese diplomats repeatedly evoked the possibility of recourse to force; thus, Dakar positioned itself as the main advocate of coercive measures within ECOWAS. Leveraging favourable dynamics in the organisation, Dakar assumed a decisive role at the UN Security Council, where it then held a non-permanent seat, serving as penholder on the Gambian crisis.²⁷

Senegal also shaped the operational side of the intervention. According to Ba and Foucher, planning of the ECOWAS mission was largely driven by Dakar, in coordination with Paris – where Dakar also appears to have assumed a leading role. Senegal contributed the largest share of troops (3 000 out of roughly 3 800) and financed its own participation. The deployment of ECOMIG at the peak of the crisis ultimately convinced Jammeh that military intervention was inevitable, compelling him to step down and leave the country.²⁸

The Gambian case exemplifies how Senegal went on the offensive, deploying strategies of (hard) power within its immediate environment

This intervention, which consolidated the relationship between Dakar and Banjul, held several benefits for Senegal. At the level of its own existential national interests, the deployment of Senegalese troops in Gambian territory under the ECOWAS mandate enabled operations against Casamance separatists based across the border. Beyond security concerns, Dakar also ensured the completion of the bridge linking the two countries, the penetration of Sonatel (Senegal telecommunications services operator) into the Gambian market and the conclusion of a fisheries agreement.²⁹

26 The reconstruction of events likewise draws on Ba and Foucher, "Une agenceité forte".

27 Ba and Foucher, "Une agenceité forte".

28 Ba and Foucher, "Une agenceité forte".

29 Ba and Foucher, "Une agenceité forte".

According to Ba and Foucher, the Gambian case exemplifies how Senegal went on the offensive, deploying strategies of (hard) power within its immediate environment. Their analysis helps to clarify the nature of Senegal's relationship with France in relation to this event. Their relationship was hierarchically inverted, with Dakar rather than Paris taking the lead. Indeed, Senegal's ability to install and sustain a friendly and dependent regime in Banjul, and to extract benefits from it, recalls the practices of French African policy.³⁰

Thus, Senegal's foreign policy toward The Gambia during the 2017 electoral crisis departs from its usual approach as a mediator, primarily at the regional level, and as a country at the international level, where it is increasingly balanced and non-aligned. The same holds true for its conduct toward Guinea-Bissau.³¹ Dakar's behaviour toward its neighbours – countries that, it should be underlined, are much smaller and carry significantly less regional and international weight – was therefore forceful and assertive, at times verging on emulating the French model of patronage. Nevertheless, the Gambian case fits within what is described in the graduated spectrum of foreign policy approaches as 'assertive, within recognised international frameworks'. In this instance, Senegal's interests are strategic and economic – and, above all, pertain to national security.

A different example from the Gambian one, and which more closely reflects the actions normally associated with Senegal, is the recent case of mediation with the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES), which have all undergone coups and wanted to leave ECOWAS. It is worth noting Senegal's seemingly prominent regional role in the early months of the new administration, in 2024. This is specifically related to its mandate to mediate between the AES countries – Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso – and ECOWAS towards their potential reintegration into the regional community. Particular attention has been paid to the designation of Diomaye as mediator for the – ultimately unsuccessful – dialogue with the AES. The mediation had initially been presented as an instance of agency in Senegal's regional positioning, particularly of the new Pastef government, which is regarded by some as a bridge between a democratically elected regime and anti-imperialist military juntas. Yet, the mediation effort with the AES can be assessed in a more cautious way, and not primarily because of the failure of Dakar's mediation. This failure is attributable less to its own shortcomings than to the determination of the AES countries to withdraw from ECOWAS. There was little realistic prospect of success. Still, Dakar was designated by ECOWAS as the most plausible candidate in the region, primarily on account of its reputation as a mediator. Other potential candidates such as Nigeria and the coastal West African countries were excluded owing to tense relations and jihadist threats in northern Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo linked to the neighbouring AES countries.³²

30 Ba and Foucher, "Une agenceité forte".

31 See Foucher, "Wade's Senegal".

32 Mainly based on conversations and/or interviews with experts, in particular from a debate organised by the author in February 2025 with Medhi Ba (Jeune Afrique) and Mamadou Lamine Sarr (University Cheick Hamidou Kane), hosted by Luiss Guido Carli University (Rome).

In this sense, Diomaye's mediation with the AES can be read as an affirmation of Senegal's image as a good mediator, but not as a particularly assertive gesture or as evidence of pronounced leadership in the realm of regional foreign policy. Thus, in terms of the graduated spectrum of foreign policy approaches as potential manifestations of agency, here the regional posture of Senegal, unlike the Gambian case, is 'cautious, but active'. It presents itself as a regional mediator both thanks to its current, and rather distinctive, domestic political configuration compared to the rest of the region and to its established reputation.

Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the analysis concentrates on Abiy's recent push for access to the sea, particularly the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed with the self-declared but largely unrecognised breakaway state of Somaliland. The regional implications of this claim are briefly explored, as are the subsequent diplomatic tensions with neighbouring Somalia. The same claim to access to the sea is contributing, through the issue of access to the Port of Assab, to the deterioration of Ethiopia's relations with another neighbour, Eritrea.

The MoU – announced in January 2024 by Abiy and Somaliland's then president Muse Bihi Abdi – reportedly would lease some 20km of Somaliland's coastline to Ethiopia. This includes (exclusive) access to the port and potential naval base of Berbera. In exchange, Ethiopia offered possible recognition of Somaliland as a sovereign state, as well as a stake in Ethiopian Airlines. Mogadishu promptly rejected the MoU, declaring it illegal and a violation of Somalia's sovereignty.

The notion of sea access, a rhetorical element revived by Abiy from earlier foreign policy traditions, draws on imperial symbolism and historical narratives portraying Ethiopia as a former maritime power (for example, during the Aksumite Kingdom). After the loss of the Eritrean coast in 1993, when that state won its independence, Ethiopia became a landlocked country and the sea-access claim was dormant for a few decades. In fact, one of the most significant differences, if not the single greatest one, between Abiy's regional foreign policy and that of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) lies precisely in this emphasis on access to the sea. Despite Abiy's emphasis on the novelty of his Medemer vision,³³ built theoretically on synergies and regional cooperation, it is not far removed from the shift in perspective introduced by former prime minister Meles Zenawi. This view positions the country as one no longer encircled by enemies but rather held within the possible embrace of friends.³⁴

33 The "Medemer" philosophy was initially articulated by Abiy Ahmed in his *Medemer* books. Rooted in the Amharic concept of "synergy", it emphasises unity and collaboration as pathways to peace, economic development, social cohesion and shared prosperity among diverse communities. See Abiy Ahmed (PhD), *Medemer*, medemer.et, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://medemer.et/>.

34 Senior IGAD official, interview by author, Addis Ababa, December 2024.

Several factors help explain Abiy's claim to access to the sea. First, the government needs to divert public attention from the lack of internal security caused by the war in Tigray and its aftermath, marked by internal conflicts, insurgencies and kidnappings perpetrated by the Fano militia in the Amhara region and rebel groups in Oromia. Hence the attempt to channel Ethiopians' attention toward a national cause, drawing also on elements of nation-building, much as with the use of powerful symbols in the construction of national identity. For example, the Battle of Adwa (the 130th anniversary of which was commemorated in March 2026 and with its memorial inaugurated in February 2024 in Piassa by Abiy, although conceived under the previous government), or the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD, completed in September 2025, again under Abiy's government but initiated by Meles).

In this regard, sea access has been articulated – most notably through the publication of *The Grand Strategy of the Two Water Bodies* – as a core component of Ethiopia's Grand Strategy for state survival. One dimension concerns securing access to the Red Sea; the other relates to the politics of Nile waters, including the GERD. In this framework, the two water bodies are presented as critical sources of national security challenges.³⁵

The sea-access issue is hardly trivial: it reflects the structural challenge of managing a landlocked country of almost 140 million people – Africa's second most populous country, with demographics still on the rise. This situation inevitably generates serious vulnerabilities in terms of access to goods, particularly given that most of Ethiopia's maritime trade depends on the Port of Djibouti. This dependence has been accompanied by tensions over import and export tariff rates and by the poor condition of infrastructure (which has improved with the construction of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway). Furthermore, from the Ethiopian geopolitical and military standpoint, access to Berbera – or, as discussed below, to Assab – would augment Addis Ababa's geostrategic significance in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, underscoring an interest that extends well beyond commerce.

The reaction from Mogadishu, coupled with the absence of multilateral support, turned the MoU into a real blow for the region. It triggered an escalation in tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia that culminated in the forging of a tripartite agreement explicitly shaped by Egypt, Somalia and Eritrea's shared hostility toward Ethiopia. Egypt threatened Ethiopia with the prospect of a naval blockade in the event of the Berbera agreement's implementation. This tripartite coalition should also be understood, from the Egyptian perspective, as a response to another central issue in Ethiopian foreign and domestic politics: the GERD. The dam was inaugurated in September 2025 in the presence of Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and, predictably, in the absence of both Egypt and Somaliland. In this regard, as stated at the September 2025 UN General Assembly by the Egyptian representative, the construction of the GERD, as well as Ethiopia's claims to sea access, whether through Somaliland or Eritrea, are denounced by Cairo as a violation

35 See Institute of Foreign Affairs, "Publication launch of *The Grand Strategy of the Two Water Bodies*", X, post, March 7, 2024; Dareskedar Taye, "[What Is Inside Ethiopia's Grand Strategy?](#)" (IFA, February 2024).

of international law. Egypt views the GERD and other potential dams on the Blue Nile as an existential threat.³⁶ The possible construction of a second dam on the Nile by Ethiopia would likely trigger a forceful – if not outright military – reaction from Egypt.

The escalation of tensions in the Horn of Africa was defused toward the end of 2024 through Turkey's mediation, which facilitated dialogue between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu. This process resulted in the Ankara Declaration of December 2024 in which Somalia acknowledged the benefits of facilitating Ethiopia's secure maritime access, provided that such arrangements uphold Somalia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The discussions also included Ethiopia's troop contribution to the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) – forces that Hassan had sought to replace with troops from other African states. ATMIS was replaced, in January 2025, with the AU Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Still, at least 2 500 Ethiopian soldiers form part of this mission; indeed, as stated in the AU communiqué of December 2025, Ethiopia has made further contributions to the deployment of units in AUSSOM – unlike Egypt.³⁷

Following the Ankara Declaration, a series of technical negotiations began in early 2025. These, however, appear to have stalled after the first round and have not had any concrete outcomes yet. The situation has thus become somewhat frozen. The practical implications of the Ankara Declaration remain undefined. It should entail purely commercial access to the sea for Ethiopia, necessarily to the south of Cape Guardafui in Somalia, while the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland – never formally withdrawn – still lingers as a potential option, albeit currently on hold.

The scenario has evolved radically with Israel's recognition of Somaliland on 26 December 2025. This development, shaped primarily by Tel Aviv's strategic interests in the Red Sea, signals the alignment of global and regional actors into two distinct – if not clearly defined – groupings.³⁸

Ethiopia, for its part, given its prior intention to recognise Somaliland and its close relations with the UAE, appears to align itself with this axis (to which India could also be added).³⁹

36 See UN, "Egypt, First Right of Reply, UN General Debate, 80th Session", *YouTube*, September 28, 2025.

37 See AU, "Communiqué of the 1317th meeting held on 15 December 2025, on Consideration of the Situation in Somalia and Operations of the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM)", December 24, 2025. More precisely, the communiqué "commends the countries that have deployed additional troops in Somalia on bilateral arrangement basis, as a short-term measure, particularly the Republic [of] Uganda and Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, for their continued commitment and sacrifices" and "welcomes the readiness of Egypt to finalize the deployment of its contingents".

38 The 21 Arab, Islamic and African countries constituting the Cross-Regional Group of Countries on Israel's Illegal Recognition of the Somaliland Region of Somalia stated their rejection and condemnation of this move. The group includes Somalia, Djibouti, Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Iran, Qatar and Jordan. To those countries should be added the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (see Somalia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://web.mfa.gov.so/>). Other countries, including South Africa (see South Africa, Department of International Relations & Cooperation, "South Africa Reaffirms Commitment to Somalia's Sovereignty and Regional Stability", December 29, 2025), and international or regional organisations such as the AU, the EU and the Arab League have condemned the move (see Muktar Ismail, "The Geopolitical Ripple Effects of Somaliland's Recognition", *Ethiopia Insight*, January 12, 2026).

39 For a comprehensive analysis of the interests at stake among the different actors in the Red Sea and the Horn regarding Somaliland, see Federico Donelli, "Israel's Recognition of Somaliland: Strategic Logic and Regional Implications", Orion Policy, January 13, 2026.

Nonetheless, the lack of a clear Ethiopian position at this juncture could indicate – contrary to how it might have been interpreted in 2024 – a more cautious stance with regard to the Somaliland issue. In this sense, the analysis according to which Ethiopian foreign policy at the regional level may be considered assertive is scaled back precisely at the moment when the Somaliland issue takes on a more international dimension. In the first months of 2026 Abiy hosted, in Addis, both Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who reiterated the need to respect Somalia’s territorial integrity, and Israeli President Isaac Herzog.⁴⁰

The situation thus becomes both more favourable and more complex for Addis Ababa, confirming the region as one of the world’s geopolitical hotspots, pending clarification on how the Trump administration will position itself on the matter. The latter has not condemned the move by Tel Aviv and Hargeisa and has offered to mediate the dispute over the Nile between Egypt and Ethiopia. The US is proposing a commercially oriented agreement (specifically regarding electricity exports), addressing Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi directly,⁴¹ and publicly criticised the construction of the GERD during the Davos Summit in 2026, while presenting inaccurate information about the dam.⁴² Any further rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Tel Aviv could also be interpreted in this light, namely as a potential form of Israeli support aimed at exerting pressure on Washington on the Nile issue.

Ethiopia’s first move in signing the MoU, despite the heightened tensions it provoked across the Horn, can also be interpreted as a tactical step toward what seems to be, according to several experts, its original strategic objective: regaining access to the Port of Assab. Assab is often portrayed in Ethiopian discourse as the country’s ‘natural’ maritime outlet. While this status was formally established by the UN in 1951, Ethiopia lost access with Eritrea’s independence in 1993 and was permanently excluded following the 1999 border war. This shaped an enduring perception of Assab as both a lost entitlement and a strategic imperative. However, while much speculation may surround Addis Ababa’s ambitions regarding Assab, at a practical level the port’s infrastructure seems obsolete and has not been used for years. (According to international principles of territorial integrity, of course, a unilateral claim to access Assab would constitute a clear violation of Eritrea’s sovereignty.) This would imply a substantial investment in infrastructural development, the feasibility of which remains uncertain.

40 “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Israel’s Recognition of Somaliland Benefits Nobody”, *Reuters*, February 17, 2026; Michael Masrie, “Ethiopia: Why Israeli President Herzog’s Addis Trip Matters”, *The Africa Report*, February 26, 2026.

41 See Trevor Hunnicutt, “Trump Offers to Mediate Egypt–Ethiopia Dispute on Nile River Waters”, *Reuters*, January 16, 2026.

42 See Trump’s speech in Davos on January 22, 2026, during a meeting that included el-Sisi (*Ethiopian Standard*, “Trump Says He Will Try to Bring Egyptian, Ethiopian Leaders Together over GERD”, *YouTube*, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/O9XGIdaycwQ>). Trump made various erroneous claims regarding alleged US financing of the dam – it is an established fact that the GERD was financed by Ethiopia, primarily by Ethiopians themselves through domestic resources and private funding, including contributions from the Ethiopian diaspora, some of whom live in the US.

The aftermath of the recent Tigray war, where the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) fought alongside the Eritrean Defence Forces, derailed this sea access to all intents and purposes. It was rumoured that Abiy and Isaias had initiated negotiations over access to Assab during the 2018 peace deal. However, Asmara was excluded from the [Ethiopia–Tigray peace agreement](#) (Pretoria agreement) in November 2022, which, among other things, damaged relations between the two neighbours. The situation in Tigray, along with its entanglement with the Assab issue, remains opaque, marked by alleged alliances between parts of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), parts of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF, which has undergone an internal split, resulting in the formation of the Tigray Peace Forces [TPF], accused of aligning with the federal government and based in Afar) and Eritrea, and by the fluid and complex dynamics of conflicts throughout Ethiopia, including the current Fano⁴³ insurgency in Amhara region. Relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea seem unpredictable and marked by continuous escalation. This escalation is reflected in reciprocal accusations concerning violations of the Pretoria Agreement, related to the management of internally displaced persons and the demilitarisation of contact areas by both sides. In January 2026, the Ethiopian police reported the seizure of 56 000 rounds of ammunition allegedly sent by Eritrea to the Fano militia in Amhara, a claim that Eritrea rejected as a fabrication aimed at justifying the outbreak of war.⁴⁴ It was compounded by the build-up of troops and heavy weaponry by the ENDF along Tigray’s southern border and by Eritrean forces along the northern border.⁴⁵

Ethiopia appears to have prioritised its national strategic interests at the risk of trespassing on the pursuit of consensus and multilateral cooperation in the Horn

The situation is thus highly complex. It is compounded by the intersecting relations between Ethiopia, the other Horn of Africa countries, African countries in a somewhat wider circle – primarily Egypt – and other international stakeholders (most notably the UAE). While Addis Ababa’s objectives and current position regarding its claim to

43 “Fano” refers to Amhara ethnic militias. They were originally allied with the federal army under Abiy during the Tigray war (2020–2022). Clashes between Fano and regional/federal government forces began to spread in March 2022 and intensified in April 2023, following the government’s announcement of the disbandment of regional special forces. A state of emergency in Amhara region was declared in August 2023. See Acled Data, “Ethiopia / Actor Profiles”, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://acleddata.com/profile/ethiopia-actor-profiles>.

44 See Dawit Endeshaw, “Ethiopia Accuses Eritrea of Arming Rebels in Escalating War of Words”, *Reuters*, January 25, 2026.

45 In late January, the TPLF and the TDF launched operations to assert control over contested territories in the southern and western parts of the region. Several violent incidents have been reported between the TDF and the ENDF along the Tigray–Amhara border, as well as between the TPF and the TDF along the Tigray–Afar frontier, alongside multiple ENDF drone incursions in central Tigray. According to ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data), this wave of violence had no precedent since November 2022. See Jalale Getachew Birru, “Fresh Clashes Renew Fears for a Return to Conflict”, ACLED, February 2, 2026.

access to the sea remain unclear, the move represented by the MoU with Somaliland in 2024, as well as the claim to Assab, can be considered as ‘highly assertive, extending beyond recognised international frameworks’. Abiy reaffirmed the existential quality of the issue several times, for example in June and September 2025, stating that ‘if there is any Ethiopian who believes that Ethiopia will forever remain a geographic prisoner, that person is a dead one’.⁴⁶ In fact, Ethiopia appears to have prioritised its national strategic interests at the risk of trespassing on the pursuit of consensus and multilateral cooperation in the Horn. It is difficult to predict whether there will be a concrete outcome in the future regarding access to the sea.⁴⁷

Beyond these political vicissitudes and tensions, a clearer analysis should also consider the practical dimension of the matter, namely the feasibility of port development at the infrastructural level. This appears to be underway in Berbera through DP World, but not in Assab. Conversely, it should be underlined that maritime access, at least in commercial terms, does not necessarily imply exclusivity, but rather diversification through multiple ports – including regular commercial agreements with ports such as Djibouti itself and Lamu (Kenya). The historical and cultural symbolism represented by Assab must also be taken into consideration. Although Berbera may prove more advantageous in practical terms, the idea of access through Assab aligns with a more powerful domestic political narrative within Ethiopia.

Although Abiy’s claim to access to the sea differs from the somewhat milder rhetoric employed by the previous administration, the harshness of relations among Horn states is, in the end, nothing new. In fact, the Horn of Africa (much like Ethiopia itself) has consistently been marked by transitions between violent regimes, as well as by tensions and conflicts among neighbouring states. What is of greater interest is differentiating this dynamic from the foreign policy pursued by Addis Ababa at the international level – the

46 Speech by Abiy at the launch of *Medemer*. See Asad Cabdullahi Mataan, “Ethiopia’s Abiy Vows End to ‘Geographic Prisoner’ Status”, *Coasimada*, September 19, 2025.

47 The data on Ethiopia is based on wide-ranging material, including extensive fieldwork, conversations and interviews with Ethiopian foreign policy experts, scholars and national officers in Addis Ababa, conducted in 2024 and 2025, and monitoring of newspapers articles and research articles written by Ethiopian/Somaliland experts and international researchers and journalists (some are listed below, the main national newspapers include the *Addis Standard* [Ethiopia], *Daily Sabah* [Türkiye] and *Hiiraan Online* [Somalia]). Material of this kind, despite its rigour, is read as partially biased and therefore the data reported is systematically cross-checked with reports by international media outlets (*Reuters*, *AFP*, *Bloomberg*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Arab Weekly*). A few sources of the first kind: Gulaid Yusuf Iddan, “Ethiopia’s Strategic Triple Play: How Assertive Diplomacy on GERD, Somaliland MoU, BRICS Membership Reshapes Horn of Africa Power Dynamics”, *Addis Standard*, July 18, 2025; Dahilon Yassin Mohamoda, “Red Sea Reckonings: Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Unraveling of Pretoria”, *Ethiopia Insight*, July 16, 2025; Yonas Nigussie, “Strategic Reversals: Abiy’s Miscalculation and the Tigray–Eritrea Realignment”, *Ethiopia Insight*, August 20, 2025; Federico Donelli, “Djibouti and Ethiopia–Somaliland’s Memorandum of Understanding”, Orion Policy Institute, February 15, 2024; Abtamy Tahir Mohammed, “From Lost Cause to National Agenda: Ethiopia’s Bold Move to End Landlocked Isolation, Secure Coastal Gateway”, *Addis Standard*, March 10, 2025; Gulaid Yusuf Iddan, “From GERD to Red Sea: Ethiopia’s Strategic Future Amid Regional Power Politics, US Pressure”, *Addis Standard*, August 13, 2025; Emirates Policy Center, “Ethiopia–Somalia Rapprochement and Its Potential Geopolitical Implications”, *Addis Standard*, March 29, 2025; Adam Daud Ahmed, “Ethiopia’s Maritime Gamble: Seize Opportunity with Somaliland’s Offer or Yield to Somalia’s Pressure?”, *Addis Standard*, March 6, 2025; Negera Gudeta, “From Anchor to Adrift: Ethiopia’s Foreign Policy Loses Influence Amid Internal Turmoil, Regional Tensions”, *Addis Standard*, May 20, 2025; Seble Getachew, “Ethiopia’s Sea Access Strategy: From Geopolitical Challenge to Economic Necessity”, Institute of Foreign Affairs, October 2, 2025; Terefe Biruk, *Ethiopia’s Red Sea Politics: Corridors, Ports and Security in the Horn of Africa* (Rift Valley Institute, March 2025); Adam Daud Ahmed, “Diversification Over Dependency: Why Ethiopia Should Fast-Track Berbera amid Djibouti’s Ban on Multimodal Operators”, *Addis Standard*, January 27, 2026.

task this paper seeks to undertake. In this light, the MoU with Somaliland was initially perceived as highly assertive and even bordering on reckless, albeit framed as serving strong national interests grounded in geostrategic considerations. With regard to this latter point, it must be noted that, at the level of security and the geopolitical balance of the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean, the claim to access to the sea for purely commercial purposes is fundamentally altered when accompanied by the ambition to establish a military naval base.

South Africa

At the regional political level, South Africa's background is markedly distinct from the two other case studies considered here. Emerging from the apartheid regime, Pretoria was only belatedly integrated and included in African multilateralism, much later than its neighbours and other AU members. At the same time, however, it entered as a state with an economy and capacities far superior to the rest of the continent, which has rendered its relations with other African countries rather complex.

At the regional political level, South Africa's background is markedly distinct from the two other case studies

The literature and debates surrounding South Africa's regional foreign policy, its mediation efforts and its broader role in Africa after 1994 are extensive. These range from analyses of South Africa as an 'emerging middle power' and regional hegemon to work on its African Renaissance-inspired 'African Agenda', as well as its much-debated 'quiet diplomacy' and its evolving role as mediator and norm entrepreneur in African conflicts.⁴⁸ This paper outlines a few examples of its regional posture to assess how South Africa's foreign policy can be characterised at the regional level.

A first and more recent example that appears to undermine a positive assessment of South Africa's regional foreign policy is the deployment of South African troops through the SADC mission in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the ensuing diplomatic fallout with Rwanda. This episode should be situated within the

48 See, regarding quiet diplomacy: Chris Landsberg, *The Quiet Diplomacy of Liberation: International Politics and South Africa's Transition* (Jacana, 2004); on regional hegemony: Chris Landsberg and Jo-Ansie van Wyk, eds, *South African Foreign Policy Review*, Vol. 1 & 2 (Africa Institute of South Africa, 2010 and 2015); on an "ethical" vs "pragmatical" approach: Laurie Nathan, "South Africa's Post-Apartheid Foreign Policy: Constructing a Democratic, Developmental and Human-Rights Orientated State?", in *Foreign Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, eds. Adekeye Adebajo and Kudrat Virk (I.B. Taurus, 2018); on regional security architecture: Anthoni van Nieuwkerk, "South Africa and the African Agenda", *South African Foreign Policy Review*, Vol. 1 (AISA, 2010).

broader context of South Africa's relationship with the DRC, which joined SADC at then president Nelson Mandela's initiative in 1998. South Africa's relationship with Rwanda has seen generally good diplomatic and cooperative ties – for instance in the fields of human resource development, higher education and military capacity building.⁴⁹ Yet there are also recurrent tensions, including South African accusations of Rwandan espionage by Ramaphosa and the expulsion of Rwandan diplomats reportedly implicated in the murder of Patrick Karegeya in Johannesburg.⁵⁰ Pretoria's involvement is underscored by the prominent role played by the Mbeki administration in previous Congolese conflicts, particularly as mediator in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, which culminated in the Sun City Accords that ended the Second Congo War (1998–2003).⁵¹

This stance has generated friction with the mission's purported purpose, or at least with the expectation that it should present itself as neutral. Its deployment was meant to be supported by the integration of the UN Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and to complement the Luanda Process facilitated by Angolan President João Lourenço. Conceived as a peacekeeping mission, it increasingly resembled a peace enforcement operation in support of the Congolese government, and thus not a neutral endeavour.⁵²

More specifically, the troops deployed by South Africa formed part of the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), which was established at the end of 2023. In January 2025, following two days of intense fighting with M23 militia while attempting to prevent the capture of Goma, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) suffered the loss of 13 personnel, drawn from both the SAMIDRC contingent and MONUSCO. These losses triggered an escalation in rhetoric between presidents Ramaphosa and Kagame, whose relationship was already strained.⁵³ Ramaphosa blamed Kigali, holding it responsible for supporting the M23 rebels through the Rwandan Defence Forces. Kagame in turn accused Ramaphosa of distorting the facts, saying that 'South Africa is in no position to take on the role of a peacemaker or mediator'.⁵⁴

Thus, in March 2025, SADC announced the conclusion and phased withdrawal of its military mission in eastern DRC. After its deployment in December 2023, SAMIDRC failed to contain the M23 insurgency. Militarily, the force was overpowered by M23 and Rwandan troops. In this sense, the mission's greatest failure lies in its lack of (military) capacity – a deficiency that, given South Africa's leading role, can be projected directly onto the

49 Former South African ambassador, interview by author, Pretoria, April 2025.

50 See S. Sanderson, "DRC Crisis: What Does It Mean for South Africa?", *DW*, April 2, 2025.

51 See Paul Natulya, "Lessons from the Inter-Congolese Dialogue for the DRC Crisis", African Center for Strategic Studies, April 15, 2025.

52 Former South African ambassador, interview by author, Pretoria, April 2025.

53 See Stephanie Wolters, "What Are the South Africans Doing in Eastern DRC?", SAIIA, May 26, 2024. The tensions between Kagame and Ramaphosa date back several years, notably to Rwanda's alleged targeting of political dissidents residing in South Africa, which severely damaged bilateral trust. These grievances resurfaced when Kigali reacted strongly to South Africa's decision to deploy troops to North Kivu under SAMIDRC without prior consultation with Rwanda. Kigali denounced the deployment as an act of aggression, formally objecting to it before the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council. Although Rwanda's diplomatic push did not succeed – both institutions eventually endorsed the mission – the episode accelerated the deterioration of relations between the two governments.

54 See Paul Kagame, "I Held Two Conversations", *X*, post, January 29, 2025.

SANDF. Politically, it was a victim of weak cohesion within SADC, as several members were reluctant to fund an operation misaligned with their national interests.⁵⁵ In February 2026, South Africa announced the withdrawal of its troops from the UN mission in DRC (MONUSCO), which includes around 700 South African soldiers.⁵⁶

The mission's greatest failure lies in its lack of (military) capacity – a deficiency that, given South Africa's leading role, can be projected directly onto the SANDF

The interests that appear to have driven South Africa to engage in this operation are both economic and symbolic in nature. First, given its historical background and close ties with Kinshasa, South Africa appears to have sought participation because of the DRC's membership in SADC and for the prestige associated with assuming the role of peacekeeper. It was also trying to preserve its regional reputation,⁵⁷ even though it did not possess the necessary military capacities.⁵⁸ Second, South Africa has an interest in the strategic management of Congolese infrastructure (Inga Dam, Lobito Corridor) and the related mining sector (even if there are no big South African-run mines in that region), particularly in light of new regulatory frameworks that entail greater state intervention by Kinshasa. Thus, Pretoria has economic – related to trade – and financial stakes in preventing a collapse of the Congolese state; however, the DRC does not rank among its foremost strategic priorities.⁵⁹

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It is also noteworthy that some South African experts and former diplomats of the Mbeki era, Thabo Mbeki himself included, hold views that diverge from the official pro-Congolese

55 See Paul-Simon Handy, "Anatomy of SADC's Failure in Eastern DRC", *ISS Today*, March 20, 2025.

56 "South Africa to Withdraw Its Troops from UN Peacekeeping Mission in Congo", *Reuters*, February 8, 2026.

57 See Sanderson, "DRC Crisis". In particular, this passage is the result of an interview with Stephanie Wolters (Senior Research Fellow at SAIIA). See also Handy, "Anatomy of SADC's Failure".

58 Interviews with South African foreign policy experts and former diplomats, April–May 2025, Pretoria.

59 See also Handy, "Anatomy of SADC's Failure"; Sanderson, "DRC Crisis".

line. For this group, the rift between Kagame and Ramaphosa, and the fact that South Africa has taken DRC President Felix Tshisekedi's side, constitutes one of the 'biggest mistakes' in South African foreign policy. They attribute the problems in North Kivu, including the clashes with M23 militias, primarily to Kinshasa's domestic governance failures and its mismanagement of ethnic minorities, although they do acknowledge Kigali's interference. This is significant, given that it was the Mbeki administration that mediated the successful bilateral agreement between Rwanda and the DRC in 2002.⁶⁰

As a result, South Africa was excluded from subsequent negotiations and dialogue on the issue, with the US instead assuming the lead, up to the peace deal signed under Trump's aegis between the DRC and Rwanda (a meeting that was not attended by the M23 rebels).⁶¹ US involvement in the region, along with the exclusion of South Africa from the special envoy's recent tour of East African countries,⁶² could be interpreted against the backdrop of the increasingly tense bilateral relations between Pretoria and Washington. This represents an instance of South Africa's diminished influence and prestige as a mediator and regional actor. It attempted to play a role in a situation where its initial approach could hardly be described as assertive – since, at least at the official level, it was a contribution to a SADC mission – and which ultimately resulted in a reputational setback.

This example of South Africa acting cautiously in regional foreign policy should be situated within broader reflections on the country's role in Africa in the post-apartheid era. While it has at times been treated as a latecomer with limited experience, several African states have found themselves in a situation of relative asymmetry, given South Africa's hegemonic status. This asymmetry risked fostering a patronising relationship, particularly considering Mandela's foreign policy, which purportedly centred on the promotion of human rights and democracy – an agenda that could be perceived as intrusive and naive. In response, South Africa appears to have adopted a distinct approach to regional foreign policy, often referred to by experts as 'quiet diplomacy', namely the practice of conducting much of its work behind closed doors. Examples include Somalia, with the Eldoret and Mbagathi negotiation processes (Kenya, 2002); Burundi, with the Arusha Agreement (2000) and the Rome negotiations (up to 2003); and Sudan, with the Naivasha peace agreement of 2005 that addressed the Sudanese civil war.⁶³

The most notable example of its quiet diplomacy is the case of Zimbabwe, where South Africa pursued discreet mediation in order to promote dialogue rather than publicly condemning Robert Mugabe's regime. This was particularly the case under Mbeki's administration in 2007 and 2008 with the negotiations leading to the Global

60 Analysis based on interviews with former South African diplomats, as well as participation in a Q&A between Thabo Mbeki and UNISA students; Pretoria, March–May 2025.

61 See Trevor Hunnicutt, "Congo, Rwanda Leaders Affirm Commitment to Trump-Backed Peace Deal", *Daily Maverick*, December 3, 2025.

62 Former South African ambassador, interview by author, Pretoria, April 2025.

63 Analysis based on the author's PhD fieldwork in South Africa (2025), more specifically on interviews with two former South African ambassadors.

Political Agreement. Pretoria's stance toward Harare during this period was widely criticised as a betrayal of South Africa's moral standing and founding principles.⁶⁴

By focusing on South Africa's neighbourhood policies – namely its relations with its immediate neighbours, whose internal instability and tensions with Pretoria, as in the case of the DRC, can have a direct negative impact on South Africa's national interest – it becomes clear that the country has maintained a consistent presence and undertaken significant action. Illustrative examples include South Africa's role in the 2024 Maseru Facilitation Declaration and subsequent SADC preventive missions to Lesotho to address the country's electoral crisis, in which Pretoria has substantial interests, notably in water management.⁶⁵ Likewise, South Africa has played a central role in the SADC Mission in Mozambique, deployed in 2021 in response to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado province. This mission faced significant challenges in terms of sustainability and effectiveness before its drawdown in 2024. South Africa's presence (through SADC) in Mozambique has been judged by some experts to be as much of a failure as its involvement in the DRC, since both have ended inconclusively.

An alternative thesis points to South Africa's reluctance – particularly under the Zuma and later the Ramaphosa administrations – to become involved in African affairs. According to some experts, South Africa's unwillingness to assume a leadership role has disappointed the AU and other African states, especially those outside the Southern African region. In this sense, Pretoria has lost a significant degree of influence on the continent over the past 15 years. Its reluctance to assume a leadership position, often ascribed to its pre-apartheid history and its apprehension about appearing as a hegemonic power, may be regarded as an overly sensitive and clumsy reaction.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The agency demonstrated by the three African countries under study – particularly at the regional level – is largely characterised by a bold approach, which in this paper is differentiated as either 'assertive' (operating within a recognised international framework) or 'very assertive' (extending beyond established international frameworks).

The analysed behaviours – ie, Senegal's stance toward The Gambia; Ethiopia's toward Somaliland, Somalia and Assab (Eritrea); and, to some extent, South Africa's toward the DRC – can be seen as aimed at securing economic interests vis-à-vis the other country. (This should be understood as a contributing factor, and not necessarily the primary one.) In this regard, the assertive behaviour tends to converge with genuine intentions

64 See Victora Graham, "How Firm the Handshake? South Africa's Use of Quiet Diplomacy in Zimbabwe from 1999 to 2006", *African Security Review* 15, no. 4 (2006).

65 See Peter Clotey, "Lesotho Leaders Sign Agreement to End Political Feud", *Voice of America*, October 2, 2014. Gugu Selela and Sibongile Gilda, "Lesotho: Elections Are not Enough", *ISS Today*, January 29, 2015.

66 Analysis based on interviews with South African foreign policy experts.

toward regional integration and cooperation. A particular emphasis should be placed on the notion of pure national interest. This is the case with Ethiopia's claim to access the sea, which has been employed, among others, as a means of rallying public opinion fragmented by internal conflicts. The same holds true for Senegal, given the delicate role played by neighbouring Gambia and Guinea-Bissau in its stabilisation and internal security, particularly in relation to Casamance. South Africa functions as a partial counter-example, owing to its cautious and only partly effective approach to regional stabilisation. However, this assessment does not extend to all recent examples of its regional foreign policy (as with the case of Lesotho).

At the international level, a different trend seems to emerge. The state agency of African countries – at least some of them – seems to be shaped by qualitatively different elements, such as non-alignment and extraversion, understood as the outward-oriented strategies used to engage external actors in pursuit of national interests. In this sense, drawing on the concept as developed by Sidiropoulos and De Carvalho, non-alignment may first and foremost be understood as an individual strategic foreign policy choice⁶⁷ rather than a collectively coordinated position. In the same vein, a state's strategy concerning structural policy choices becomes intertwined with its strategic partnership relations (particularly in the case of Ethiopia). In this respect, foreign policy strategy at the international level has been characterised in this report as cautious, although it may at times also take an active form, particularly in instances of diplomatic mediation.

TABLE 2 CONTRASTING INTERNATIONAL POSTURE AND REGIONAL BEHAVIOUR

	International posture		Regional behaviour	
	Position on international matters (Ukraine, Gaza)	Diversification of partnerships (normal bilateral/strategic)	Regional behaviour (in general)	Regional behaviour in the selected events
Senegal	Ukraine: Non-aligned or neutral (no clear differentiation), mediation regarding economic consequences + African peace mission <i>(cautious, but with diplomatic activity)</i> Gaza: clear position but good diplomatic terms with Israel <i>(cautious, but active)</i>	Diversification started in the 2000s <i>(cautious)</i> New boost with the new government on renegotiations of contracts (but not radical), changing narrative about France (Thiaroye massacre, French military base in Dakar) but not at economic level <i>(cautious, but changing)</i>	Active mediation (eg, between ECOWAS/AES) <i>(mediating)</i>	Strong influence in the REC (ECOWAS) operation with military intervention/troops deployments, related to economic interests and national security <i>(assertive, within regional recognised framework)</i>

67 Sidiropoulos and De Carvalho, "The Global South and the Resurgence of Non-Alignment".

	International posture		Regional behaviour	
	Position on international matters (Ukraine, Gaza)	Diversification of partnerships (normal bilateral/strategic)	Regional behaviour (in general)	Regional behaviour in the selected events
Ethiopia	<p>Ukraine: Non-aligned <i>(cautious)</i></p> <p>Gaza: ambiguity <i>(very cautious)</i></p>	<p>Improved diversification of strategic partnerships since 2000, increased since 2018 with Abiy (examples include structural policy changes connected to the UAE, IMF) <i>(cautious, but active)</i></p>	<p>Strong presence in AU peacekeeping operations (ATMIS, AUSSOM) <i>(active, within a regional recognised framework)</i></p>	<p>Potential unilateral recognition of Somaliland, diverging from broader regional political frameworks; followed by hesitation after Israel's recognition of Somaliland</p> <p>Possible escalation towards armed confrontation with Eritrea, driven by economic and geostrategic interests</p> <p>Access to the sea: framed domestically in terms of national cohesion as well as strategic and economic imperatives <i>(very assertive, beyond regional/international recognised framework, then more cautious; risk of war)</i></p>
South Africa	<p>Ukraine: Non-aligned, offered mediation (African peace mission) <i>(cautious, but active)</i></p> <p>Gaza: strong position (International Court of Justice [ICJ] case against Israel) <i>(assertive, within international recognised framework)</i></p>	<p>Diversification of economic partnerships since 2000s</p> <p>Political tensions with the US (Afrikaners issue, G20, also related to ICJ case against Israel) <i>(cautious, yet exhibiting explicit diplomatic and bilateral tensions)</i></p>	<p>Quiet diplomacy, closed-door mediations <i>(cautious, but active)</i></p>	<p>Participation in SADC/UN mission in North Kivu (can be related to economic interests), diplomatic tension with Rwanda <i>(active, but following a cautious approach that failed)</i></p>

Source: Compiled by author

Table 2 summarises – drawing on the nuanced gradation between ‘very cautious’ and ‘very assertive’ – the different elements presented at the international and the regional level.

Bearing in mind that different examples of foreign policy are based on innate national interests, it is interesting to see how, although the two approaches – regional and international – differ, both pursue the same objective, namely the consolidation of ‘strategic autonomy’.⁶⁸

Hence, the assertive approaches adopted by the case study countries in their regional and neighbourhood dynamics (or, in the case of South Africa, at the international level, in particular regarding Gaza) exemplify specific forms of African state agency when applied to individual contexts. This warrants a shift in terminology, suggesting the possibility of using and interpreting the term in the plural form – thus, ‘African agencies’.⁶⁹ South Africa – the most important of the three countries (primarily in terms of economic weight) – appears to pursue a balance between regional and international foreign policy. This differs from the other two case studies, which are more assertive at the international level and more cautious at the regional level. The South African approach does not necessarily seem to follow an advantageous logic – given the failure in the DRC – but rather reflects a dynamic rooted in the country’s foreign policy legacy and tradition.

In this sense, it would be worth exploring the extent to which outcomes tied to the traditional foreign policy framework and legacies from the colonial and post-colonial period of the three cases influence approaches. For example, as noted in the discussion on Senegal, in the case of the Gambian crisis Dakar appears to emulate the French paternalistic approach. With regard to its claim to sea access, Addis Ababa reinscribes itself within a millenary imperial tradition. In the case of South Africa, the hesitation surrounding regional policy is linked to the ambiguity of the evolution of the Africanist approach of Mandela and Mbeki under subsequent ANC administrations, as well as to the need to avoid assuming an overly dominant posture within its region. This ambiguity is compounded by an unwillingness to play a hegemonic role so as not to emulate former colonial powers. However, even if one considers the example of the ICJ case against Israel, one could argue that, while highly visible, the action itself did not produce any significant tangible consequences for the Palestinian population. This raises the broader debate over whether effects at the symbolic level – those that shape global public opinion – should be treated as second-order consequences in light of the absence of concrete outcomes. This question is, of course, difficult to resolve.

These differing approaches – in terms of both their modalities and their outcomes (whether intended or not) – help to shape the possible definition and meaning of African agency(ies). In this sense, the concept encompasses a wide array of highly diverse modalities, not necessarily aimed at producing a tangible result and thus potentially

68 Based on the author’s fieldwork. The discourse revolving around “strategic autonomy” is particularly present in the Ethiopian discourse (interviews with Ethiopian analysts).

69 See Scialoja, “African Agency Revisited”.

expressed through actions of a predominantly symbolic nature. Yet, in all cases, such agency is directed primarily toward enhancing strategic autonomy and advancing national interest – understood here in a broad sense, including the demonstration of a particular ideology, ethical stance or historical legacy grounded in solidarity, as exemplified by the South African case.

With a view to broadening the scope of this analysis, it would be valuable to investigate further how regional and international relations are not two separate compartments, but rather shape one another. Strengthened bilateral ties at the international level – such as those between Ethiopia and the UAE – may undermine regional multilateral relations, producing a geometry of overlapping and intersecting alignments. These are often based on bilateral arrangements, as exemplified by the relations between Horn of Africa states and Middle Eastern actors. Furthermore, as previously noted regarding the characterisation of the degree of assertiveness represented by Ethiopia's regional foreign policy on access to the sea, Addis Ababa, following Israel's recognition of Hargeisa, has not thus far adopted a particularly assertive stance, but rather a cautious one. Ethiopia's behaviour on the issue appears to shift from assertiveness to hesitation as the stakes increase and the number and scope of actors involved become progressively broader and more global. Here the linkage between regional and international politics is strengthened.

Similarly, one could ask to what extent the failure of South Africa's potential mediating role in the North Kivu conflict is linked, given the recent US-backed peace deal signed between Rwanda and the DRC, to the deterioration of relations between Pretoria and Washington. This deterioration would then affect not only South Africa's multilateral and bilateral engagements but also its influence at the regional level in Southern Africa.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine the positioning of these three countries with regard to the current war in the Middle East, which pits Iran against Israel and the US. In this respect, although the outcomes of the three countries' positions may differ from those adopted towards Ukraine and Gaza, it would be worth assessing whether they follow the same underlying logic and strategic approach outlined above.

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