

South Africa's Foreign Policy in an Era of Global Fragmentation: Trade, Geopolitics and International Law

25 May 2026

Time: 2:30pm – 4:30pm

Background

South Africa's development trajectory and that of the African continent navigates a geo-political and geo-economic landscape defined by rising conflict, competition, technological rivalry, and climate-driven restructuring which have profound implications for South Africa's socio-economic context.

The contemporary global order once anchored by predictability, trade liberalisation and order is undergoing profound structural transformation, shifting towards multipolarity, great power contestation, protectionism and pursuit of narrow nationalistic interests. Moreover, affecting the global economy is the accelerating impact of climate change, advancements in artificial change which represents a transformative force reshaping productivity, governance, and global competitiveness.

What is more, the contravention of international law has become an increasingly visible feature of contemporary international relations, reflecting both the erosion of compliance mechanisms and the politicisation of enforcement. Recent developments illustrate this trend, Notably- the United States' 2026 military operation in Venezuela, which resulted in the capture and transfer of President Nicolás Maduro, has been widely characterised by legal scholars as a violation of state sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force under the UN Charter, particularly in the absence of a United Nations Security Council mandate or a credible claim to self-defence. Similarly, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, including Israel's military operations in Gaza following the October 7 attacks, have generated sustained allegations of serious breaches of international humanitarian law, including violations of the principles of distinction and proportionality.

In parallel, unilateral military actions, such as the joint operations involving the United States and Israel in Iran, continue to raise questions regarding the legality of the use of force outside multilateral frameworks. Collectively, these developments underscore a broader pattern in which powerful states increasingly act without clear legal authorisation, thereby straining the normative authority of international law. In this context, South Africa has positioned itself as a vocal proponent of adherence to international law, utilising diplomatic platforms and international legal institutions to advocate for accountability and reinforce its role as a norm entrepreneur within a rapidly evolving global order.

Output

South Africa's foreign policy priorities have recently been advanced through (but not limited to) its successful 2025 G20 Presidency. On the horizon for the continued advancement of these foreign policy imperatives, is the chairship of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and two-year tenure on the African Union Peace and Security Council, reinforcing its role in shaping both global governance and continental stability. How do these advancements and positions mirror South Africa's national interests and domestic realities?

As part of an ongoing series of public policy engagements held jointly by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, this public symposium is an ongoing effort to bring international relations closer to different sectors of society including media, academia, students, think tanks, private sector, community organisations, political organisations, and the diplomatic corps.

This symposium accordingly provides a platform to critically examine these intersecting issues and to craft informed, forward-looking responses suited to Africa's contemporary realities. This symposium will consider the following questions:

- What is the role of emerging powers in safeguarding international law and the UN Charter?
- How should South Africa navigate intensifying geopolitical rivalry between major powers while preserving strategic autonomy?
- What strategies should Africa adopt to respond to rising protectionism, subsidy competition, and shifting global supply chains?
- How should South Africa translate leadership roles in global forums into tangible domestic economic gains (G20, BRICS, SADC)?
- How does Pretoria balance its normative leadership with its domestic economic interests?
- How can global engagements be better aligned with domestic growth, employment, and industrial objectives?

For more information, contact the SAIIA Events team at events@saiia.org.za

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