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From Policy to Practice: The Foreign Service Act and South Africa's Economic Diplomacy

MARUMO NKOMO

Recommendations

- Strengthen the Diplomatic Academy's role as a central pillar of professionalisation, with a focus on economic diplomacy competencies.
- Leverage the South African Foreign Service Act's collaboration mandate to build partnerships with universities, international training institutes, think tanks and intergovernmental organisations.
- Clarify and enhance diplomatic missions' economic mandates.
- Institutionalise coordination mechanisms between DIRCO and key economic departments.
- Develop specialised training tracks in areas such as trade, digital economy and regulatory cooperation.
- Align training and deployment with national economic priorities, including trade diversification and small and medium-sized enterprise development.

Executive summary

South Africa increasingly uses economic diplomacy to advance its trade, investment, industrialisation and development objectives. While considerable attention has been paid to the country's foreign policy ambitions, less focus has been placed on the institutional and legal frameworks through which these objectives are implemented.

This policy brief examines South Africa's Foreign Service Act 26 of 2019 as a critical component of the country's diplomatic architecture. It argues that the Act is the foundation for a more professional, coordinated and effective foreign service. However, its success depends on how it is operationalised, particularly through institutions such as the Diplomatic Academy.

The analysis is situated within an evolving global environment characterised by intensifying geo-economic competition, growing strain on the multilateral trading system and increasing reliance on economic leverage as an instrument of statecraft. In this context, economic diplomacy requires diplomats with expertise in areas such as trade negotiations, investment promotion, digital economy governance and regulatory cooperation.

The brief highlights the potential of the Diplomatic Academy to enhance skills development, interdepartmental coordination and collaboration with universities, think tanks, diplomatic academies and intergovernmental organisations. It concludes that strengthening institutional capability and professionalisation, and instituting specialised training, is essential if South Africa is to advance its national interests through economic diplomacy.

Introduction

South Africa's foreign policy has been widely analysed through the lenses of values, identity and geopolitical positioning,[1] mainly focusing on South Africa's international ambitions. Far less attention has been paid to the institutional and legal architecture through which these ambitions are executed.

The Foreign Service Act 26 of 2019 is a central, yet under-examined, component of this architecture. By providing a framework for the professionalisation, coordination and governance of South Africa's diplomatic system, the Act is a bridge between foreign

1 Adekeye Adebajo and Kudrat Virk, eds, *Foreign Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Security, Diplomacy and Trade* (I.B. Tauris, 2017); Lesley Masters, Jo-Ansie van Wyk and Philani Mthembu, eds, *Ramaphosa and a New Dawn for South African Foreign Policy: South African Foreign Policy Review*, Vol. 4 (Africa Institute of South Africa, 2022); Daniel D. Bradlow and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, eds, *Values, Interests and Power: South African Foreign Policy in Uncertain Times* (Pretoria University Law Press, 2020).

policy goals and their implementation. This policy brief argues that the effectiveness of South Africa's economic diplomacy and trade strategy increasingly depends on how this framework functions in practice, including through institutions such as the Diplomatic Academy.

As the global economic order changes, with intensifying geo-economic competition and growing strain on the multilateral trading system that has underpinned global commerce since the mid-20th century, diplomacy is becoming increasingly complex and technically demanding. In this evolving context, effective international engagement depends on both policy articulation and a professionalised foreign service with expertise in trade, regulation and economic governance. In sum, clearly defined strategic objectives and institutional capabilities are vital for a well-executed economic diplomacy.

The era of geo-economics: Shifting architectures of trade diplomacy

The rules-based trading system that emerged after the Second World War, initially under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and later institutionalised through the World Trade Organization (WTO), is increasingly under strain. While it continues to provide a framework for global commerce, there is growing evidence of fragmentation and uneven adherence to its core disciplines.

The WTO dispute settlement system – long regarded as the 'crown jewel' of the multilateral trading system – has seen significant disruption. Since its establishment in 1995, more than 600 disputes have been brought before the WTO, contributing to predictability and rule-based enforcement in global trade. However, the Appellate Body has been unable to function since 2019 due to the blocking of judicial appointments, with profound implications for the enforceability of multilateral trade rules. As a result, disputes are increasingly being 'appealed into the void', preventing rulings from becoming binding, and the number of new disputes has declined, signalling reduced confidence in the system.[2]

In parallel, some major actors are relying less on multilateral trade rules and dispute settlement mechanisms and are gradually shifting away from traditional instruments such as comprehensive free trade agreements and bilateral investment treaties. In their place, there has been a greater emphasis on more flexible, often less formal economic arrangements. The latter include framework agreements and issue-specific partnerships, in which economic leverage and strategic considerations play a more prominent role than binding rules. In policy discourse, this shift is framed as a move away from the post-war

2 Kristen Hopewell, "Unravelling of the Trade Legal Order: Enforcement, Defection and the Crisis of the WTO Dispute Settlement System", *International Affairs* 101, no. 3 (2025).

trade architecture towards a more strategic and interventionist model of trade policy, emphasising industrial capacity, enforcement and the use of economic leverage.

For South Africa, this evolving landscape presents both challenges and opportunities. As an open, export-oriented economy, with total trade averaging 55–65% of GDP in recent years, the country is highly dependent on stable and diversified market access.[3] At the same time, its structural strengths are important sources of leverage in a competitive global environment. These include a well-established constitutional and legal framework that supports regulatory certainty for investors, a significant and diversified industrial base and a substantial stock of foreign direct investment.[4]

South Africa's endowment of critical minerals adds a further strategic dimension. According to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Africa has significant reserves of minerals essential for the global energy transition. South Africa, in particular, has the largest known reserves of manganese globally, the majority of global reserves of platinum group metals and notable deposits of chromium and other industrial minerals. These resources are critical inputs for technologies such as electric vehicles, hydrogen fuel cells and renewable energy systems. As major economies seek to secure reliable supply chains for these materials, partnerships with resource-rich producers such as South Africa are likely to become increasingly important, enhancing the country's potential leverage in shaping future trade and investment arrangements.[5]

At the same time, the changing global landscape underlines the need to diversify trade relationships and deepen engagement with a broader range of partners. China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030), for example, places increased emphasis on boosting domestic consumption, expanding market access and supporting higher levels of imports as it transitions toward a more demand-driven growth model.[6] It has also announced that it will implement zero-tariff treatment on 100% of tariff lines for imports from 53 African countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations, expanding duty-free market access across the continent.[7] These developments illustrate how major economies are using market access as a strategic instrument of economic diplomacy, while creating new opportunities for African exporters to integrate more deeply into global value chains.

In this context, the ability to effectively utilise trade intelligence tools and dynamic capabilities for trade negotiations has become an important component of economic diplomacy. Platforms developed by the International Trade Centre, including Trade Map,

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3 Jamieson Greer, "Why We Remade the Global Order", Press Release, Office of the US Trade Representative, August 7, 2025.

4 US Department of State, "2025 Investment Climate Statement: South Africa", accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-investment-climate-statements/south-africa.

5 UN Trade and Development, Introduction and Chapter 2, "Overview of Battery Raw Materials", in *Commodities at a Glance: Special Issue on Strategic Battery Raw Materials*, No. 13 (UN, 2020), pp. 1–3, 6–13; Edgardo J. Pujols Vazquez, "South Africa", US Geological Survey, National Minerals Information Center, accessed July 14, 2026, https://www.usgs.gov/centers/national-minerals-information-center/south-africa.

6 Arendse Huld, "China's 15th Five-Year Plan: Key Insights for Foreign Investors", *China Briefing*, March 13, 2026.

7 "China to Implement Zero Tariffs on Imports from 53 African Countries", *Reuters*, February 14, 2026.

Market Access Map and the Export Potential Map, provide detailed insights into global trade flows, tariff regimes and untapped export potential across markets. A working understanding of these tools enables policymakers and negotiators to identify priority sectors, assess competitive positioning and target new markets. In an environment where diversification is both an economic necessity and a strategic imperative, such data-driven capabilities reduce overreliance on a narrow set of trading partners and support more resilient and adaptive trade strategies.[8]

Taken together, these dynamics show that the practice of economic diplomacy is becoming more complex, more strategic and more technically demanding. This, in turn, reinforces the importance of a professionalised foreign service, supported by institutions such as the Diplomatic Academy, that can equip officials with the skills needed to operate effectively.

Foreign policy ambition and economic diplomacy

South Africa's foreign policy continues to reflect a developmental orientation, with a growing emphasis on economic outcomes. Key priorities include:

- diversifying trade and investment partnerships;
- strengthening regional integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area;
- maintaining an active role in multilateral institutions such as the WTO, G20 and BRICS; and
- promoting industrialisation and inclusive growth through international engagement.

These priorities signal a shift toward economic diplomacy as a central pillar of foreign policy. Diplomatic missions are increasingly expected to support trade promotion, investment facilitation, regulatory cooperation and market access.

The legal basis for this role is not new. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations recognises the promotion of economic relations between states as a core function of diplomatic missions.[9] What has changed, however, is the scale and complexity of this function. The increasing sophistication of global trade, investment and regulatory frameworks has expanded the technical demands associated with economic diplomacy.

8 International Trade Centre, "Market Analysis Tools: Trade Map, Market Access Map, Export Potential Map", accessed June 23, 2026, https://marketanalysis.intracen.org.

9 UN, *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations* (1961), Article 3.

In this context, the challenge is no longer whether diplomacy includes economic engagement, but whether diplomatic institutions are equipped to deliver on this mandate. The effectiveness of these efforts ultimately depends not only on strategic clarity but also on the state's capacity to deploy skills, coordinate across institutions and act credibly in international engagements.

The Foreign Service Act through an institutional lens

The Foreign Service Act can be understood through three key dimensions: professionalisation, coordination and governance.[10]

Professionalisation

The Act establishes a unified foreign service with standardised systems for recruitment, training and deployment.[11] This is a key step toward strengthening institutional capability.

A central component of this professionalisation agenda is the Diplomatic Academy. As the primary institution responsible for training and capacity building within the foreign service, it should equip officials with the skills needed in modern diplomacy.

In this context, the evolving nature of economic diplomacy raises the question of whether current training frameworks sufficiently support the development of specialised expertise in areas such as trade negotiations, digital economy policy and regulatory cooperation.

The Foreign Service Act is an often-underutilised avenue to address this challenge. In establishing the Diplomatic Academy, the Act empowers it to cooperate with institutions of higher learning and other experts, both within South Africa and internationally, to pursue its objectives.[12] This creates a flexible platform through which the Academy can draw on external knowledge systems to strengthen the foreign service.

In practical terms, this creates space for structured collaborations with universities, particularly in areas such as international trade law, digital economy governance and public policy, enabling the development of accredited or modular training programmes aligned with emerging diplomatic needs. It also enables partnerships with the diplomatic

10 South Africa, Foreign Service Act 26 of 2019.

11 SA, Foreign Service Act, Sections 3(1), 4(3), 7(1).

12 SA, Foreign Service Act, Section 7(2).

academies and training institutes of key trading partners, which can support exchange programmes, joint courses and exposure to comparative practices.[13]

Equally important is engagement with specialist think tanks and research institutions, which can provide policy-relevant insights, scenario analysis and access to the latest research on global economic trends. Collaboration with intergovernmental organisations, including those involved in trade, development and regulatory cooperation, can enhance practical training through exposure to real-world negotiation processes, dispute settlement systems and multilateral policy dynamics.[14]

Taken together, these collaborative mechanisms position the Diplomatic Academy as a hub within a broader knowledge ecosystem, capable of integrating academic, policy and practitioner expertise. This is particularly important in the context of economic diplomacy, where the pace of change requires continuous learning and adaptation beyond traditional diplomatic training models.

Coordination

The Act seeks to enhance coordination across government departments operating abroad, with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) playing a central role.[15]

In practice, economic diplomacy requires close collaboration between DIRCO and departments responsible for trade and industrial policy, communications and digital technology, finance, agriculture and the environment, among others. While the Act provides a basis for coherence, challenges remain in ensuring:

- alignment between diplomatic missions and sectoral priorities;
- consistency in external economic messaging; and
- effective integration of line department expertise within missions.

The Diplomatic Academy can play a supporting role by fostering a shared understanding of policy priorities across departments and promoting a common training platform for officials. This can be operationalised through interdepartmental training programmes,

13 For instance, memoranda of understanding with leading academies such as the following: Brazil Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Rio Branco Institute (Diplomatic Academy)", accessed June 23, 2026; Brazil Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Diplomatic Career", accessed July 14, 2026, https://www.gov.br/mre/en/access-to-information/adm_manag/work-at-itamaraty/diplomatic-career; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China Foreign Affairs University: Diplomatic Training System", accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.cfau.edu.cn; US Department of State, "Foreign Service Institute", accessed June 23, 2026.

14 See World Trade Organization, "Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC)", accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/teccop_e/ittc_e.htm; World Intellectual Property Organization, "WIPO Academy", accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.wipo.int/academy/en/.

15 SA, Foreign Service Act, Section 3(3)(b).

joint curricula co-developed with economic departments and policy-oriented workshops that bring together diplomats and sectoral experts to align external engagement with domestic policy priorities.

Governance

The Act introduces clearer frameworks for conduct, discipline and performance management within the foreign service, which help maintain institutional integrity.[16]

In economic diplomacy, governance is closely linked to credibility. Consistency and professionalism in international engagements are essential for building trust with trading partners and investors. A well-governed foreign service strengthens South Africa's position as a predictable and credible economic partner. Training and professional development, including through the Diplomatic Academy, are integral to sustaining these standards over time.

Implications for economic diplomacy

The Foreign Service Act impacts South Africa's economic diplomacy in several ways. First, it reinforces the role of diplomatic missions as platforms for economic engagement, requiring a shift in how their performance is conceptualised and assessed.

Second, it highlights the importance of skills alignment. As trade is increasingly shaped by services, digitalisation and regulatory frameworks, South Africa's foreign service must be equipped to engage effectively in these domains. This places the Diplomatic Academy at the centre of economic diplomacy, as the institution responsible for developing the technical, analytical and negotiation skills required.

Third, it underscores the need for integrated policy delivery, linking domestic regulatory frameworks with external engagement strategies.

Gaps and tensions

The implementation of the Act reveals a number of tensions that may limit its impact:

- a balance between centralised diplomatic management and the need for specialised expertise;
- the continued reliance on generalist diplomatic models in an increasingly technical policy environment;

16 SA, Foreign Service Act, Section 11.

- potential gaps between the Act's framework and its operationalisation; and
- the need for stronger alignment between training systems and evolving economic diplomacy requirements.

These dynamics suggest that the Act, and the institutions that support it, should be viewed as enabling frameworks that require continuous adaptation.

Extended policy recommendations

To strengthen the contribution of the Foreign Service Act to economic diplomacy, the following measures are proposed:

1. **Strengthen the Diplomatic Academy's role as a central pillar of professionalisation, with a focus on economic diplomacy competencies:** This could include expanding dedicated training programmes in trade law, digital economy governance and negotiation practice, including the development of *sui generis* joint training programmes delivered in partnership with intergovernmental organisations, universities and think tanks.
2. **Leverage the Act's collaboration mandate to build partnerships with universities, international training institutes, think tanks and intergovernmental organisations:** Formalising such cooperation through memoranda of understanding, including with diplomatic academies in jurisdictions with recognised expertise in specific domains (such as trade negotiation, digital regulation or industrial policy and languages), would enable the Academy to access specialised knowledge, facilitate exchange programmes and incorporate comparative international practice into its training frameworks.
3. **Clarify and enhance diplomatic missions' economic mandates:** This may involve integrating economic diplomacy performance indicators into mission reporting frameworks and strengthening coordination between diplomatic staff and sectoral experts from economic departments.
4. **Institutionalise coordination mechanisms between DIRCO and key economic departments:** Practical steps could include regular interdepartmental planning processes, joint training programmes and the use of shared analytical tools to ensure coherence in external economic engagement.
5. **Develop specialised training tracks in areas such as trade, digital economy and regulatory cooperation:** This could take the form of modular, career-linked training pathways, complemented by externally accredited short courses and joint certification programmes delivered with partner institutions and international academies.

6 **Align training and deployment with national economic priorities, including trade diversification and small and medium-sized enterprise development:** This would require closer coordination between foreign policy training and industrial policy objectives, as well as the use of data-driven tools to identify priority sectors and markets.

Taken together, these measures would support the development of a more professional, coordinated and capable foreign service, aligned to the demands of contemporary economic diplomacy.

Conclusion

South Africa's foreign policy ambitions are well established. The central challenge lies in effective implementation. The Foreign Service Act provides the foundation for a more coherent and professional diplomatic system, but its impact depends on how it is operationalised, particularly through institutions such as the Diplomatic Academy.

This challenge must be understood against the backdrop of the evolving global economic order, marked by intensifying geo-economic competition and growing strain on the multilateral trading system. In this environment, economic diplomacy becomes a central instrument through which states pursue trade, investment and development objectives, placing a premium on technically skilled diplomats capable of navigating complex economic and regulatory frameworks.

Addressing this requires a deliberate focus on institutional capability, including strengthening the role of the Diplomatic Academy; leveraging partnerships with universities, think tanks and intergovernmental organisations; and developing specialised training and coordination mechanisms across government.

In a global environment where foreign policy is increasingly defined by economic outcomes, the effective operationalisation of the Foreign Service Act will be central to ensuring that South Africa is equipped to navigate and shape the global economic landscape.

Author

Marumo Nkomo

is a Chief Director at South Africa's Department of Trade, Industry and Competition. He previously represented South Africa as a diplomat at the Permanent Mission of South Africa to the World Trade Organization in Geneva, has held senior positions in government and academia and has worked in the private sector.

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339–2021 • Fax +27 (0)11 339–2154
www.saiia.org.za • info@saiia.org.za