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South Africa and the 'African Agenda'

Chris Landsberg & Kwandi Kondlo

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the course of the past thirteen years (the last eight in particular) the idea of advancing the 'African agenda' became the central rallying cry of South Africa's regional and continental public policy strategies. The foreign policy elite in Pretoria engaged in deft and carefully calibrated geo-strategic diplomacy in the continent and abroad. Much time was spent on ensuring that it had reliable partners and strategic allies to help support and advance this agenda. Indeed, the success of the 'African agenda' depended upon the support of key allies in all sub-regions of the continent. Thus, it needed supporters and allies in North Africa; West Africa; East Africa and the Horn; Central Africa; and Southern Africa. South Africa needs to strengthen ties with countries such as Algeria, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, Mozambique, Botswana, and others to realise its agenda for Africa.

2. COMPREHENDING THE 'AFRICAN AGENDA'

The 'African agenda' is about charting a new strategic path in order to affect a turn-around in the continent's economy, politics, governance and development orientation. A key goal informing South Africa's vision of the new 'African agenda' is to position the country so that it becomes a critical player in shaping the development agenda of the continent. South Africa was key in the founding and establishment of the African Union (AU), and pivotal in negotiating the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

Through the 'African agenda', South Africa has positioned itself as a special 'middle ranked' power, a 'pivotal state'¹ and exemplar in Africa and the rest of the developing world. The manner in which South Africa's democracy was born, the trajectory of its economic development and governance, as well as its commitment to peaceful co-existence with neighbours, has given distinguished clout and status to the country. The country's geo-political and geo-strategic role further underpins its distinguished status. The rubric of an 'African Renaissance', with its Pan-Africanist pedigree, remains a central tenet of this 'African agenda'.

A key aspect of South Africa's foreign policy over the past decade has been to assume the role of peacemaker and negotiator in Africa, and a champion of Africa's interests abroad. Under the banner of 'the African agenda', the country wishes to be a progressive agent for change. This agenda roots the Republic firmly in Africa, and South Africa's African strategies have gradually become so ambitious and elaborate that it has come to punch above its weight. The Mbeki government (1999-) is pursuing a largely pragmatic foreign policy with a core concern being the articulation of an ambitious African posture, officially dubbed by it as the new 'African Agenda'. This posture seeks development, peace and security, democratic

1. A pivotal state is one that is so influential in a region that its internal development - or lack thereof - is so significant that it typically holds major implications for states in its proximity. It is one that in comparison to its neighbours is, ipso facto, a powerful state.

governance and economic growth. Under the banner of the 'African agenda', South Africa sees its own future as inextricably linked to that of the African continent. Just as the country is committed to peace, stability, democratisation and social development at home, so the 'African Agenda' commits it to the same in Africa. Indeed, the values to which the country aspires at home are the same values it hopes for in the rest of the continent. The 'African agenda' stresses 'good neighbourliness' and 'non-hegemonic' relations with fellow African states. It stresses the progressive articulation of modes of economic relations and the exchange of knowledge to offset the economic disintegration of the continent, but shuns the articulation of economic dominance based on exploitation and manipulation. Government foreign policy openly states that South Africa will use its relative strength for mutual benefit of all and not attempt to run roughshod over neighbouring states. A specific element is that South Africa seeks 'strategic partnerships' with African states in order to promote peace, stability and development. The country makes use essentially of diplomatic means and suasion to achieve its 'African agenda' objectives. It also does not hesitate to dispense economic largesse and engage in expansive peacekeeping operations so as to win confidence in, and support for, this agenda.

A major theme running through this Agenda is the promotion of 'democratic peace'.² This is the idea that democracies do not go to war with one another; that democracy is fundamentally more pacific than other forms of government. It is about the "building of stable democratic systems...to make a contribution to the challenge of peace, democracy, development and stability in the rest of our continent"³ and "the dream of peace and stability, of democracy and human rights" - these are all intertwined.

3. REGIONALISM AND CONTINENTALISM

3.1. African Union (AU)

The establishment of the AU arose from a strong need for continental integration, and South Africa was a key actor in its establishment. The Union made provision for the establishment of some 18 new organs.

With South Africa's influence, the AU moved to place an emphasis on the need to strengthen capacities and actions in conflict prevention, management and resolution, with special emphasis on African missions such as that in Burundi.⁴ Some of the areas through which South Africa sought to maximise its global prestige and influence were campaigning against illicit trafficking of light weapons, anti-personnel landmines, and child soldiers and

2. Landsberg, Chris, 'Promoting democracy: The Mandela-Mbeki doctrine', *Journal of Democracy*, July 2000.

3. This is a theme that runs through most of Thabo Mbeki's speeches on the African Renaissance and African affairs. See also <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki>, accessed 12 March 2007.

4. Landsberg, Chris & Mackay, Shaun, "The African Union: Political will and commitment needed for new doctrine", *Centre for Policy Studies, Synopsis*. Vol. 7, No 1.

campaigning for human security. The issue of human security is an interesting one: in its foreign policy, and through the AU and NEPAD, South Africa's policy-makers sought to move away from strict notions of militarily-defined state security to a greater emphasis on human security and social justice. This made for some important discussion and reflection. South Africa has been a key voice in favour of new modalities for resource mobilisation, such as better and more effective levels of aid to be channelled to Africa. South Africa and its African partners specifically campaigned for international support to enhance the continent's peace support operations capabilities.⁵

South Africa's 'African agenda' promoted adherence to democratic benchmarks and governance indicators set up by Africans and for Africans in order to benefit from the renewed focus on African ownership. It had, for example, been instrumental in setting up an African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to promote democratic conduct in Africa.⁶

3.2. SADC and Southern Africa

Given its commitment to ending Africa's international marginalisation, the 'African agenda' builds on a strong policy favouring regional integration and development. Regional Economic Communities (REC's) are seen as the building blocks and implementing agents of the AU. The "African agenda" favours sub-regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development Dialogue (IGAD), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECASS), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and others, being strengthened to promote the goals of regional integration, democratisation, peace and security, and accelerated economic growth. As such, a commitment to achieving regional economic development and building SADC, form key pillars of South Africa's 'African agenda'. South Africa's vision for SADC is one "of the highest possible degree of economic cooperation, mutual assistance where necessary and joint planning of regional development initiatives, leading to integration consistent with socio-economic, environmental and political realities".⁷

South Africa has long favoured a cautious and step-by-step approach towards regional development in southern Africa, and there is a huge stress on regional co-operation. Policy is based "on the principles of equity and mutual benefit", a denunciation of domineering and bossy postures towards the region and the belief that an emphasis on partnership and fairness would more effectively realise foreign policy goals. Since 2000, much effort and

5. Ibid.

6. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) workshop on Indicators, Benchmarks and Processes for the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), Cape Town, 7-8 October 2002.

7. Landsberg, Chris, "Building a regional society in southern Africa: The institutional governance dimension." Policy: Issues and Actors. Centre for Policy Studies, Vol. 15, No.1.

energy has gone into restructuring SADC,⁸ and Pretoria has pushed for the articulation of protocols, while stressing the implementation and operationalisation of such protocols, particularly those on free trade, Politics, Defence and Security Co-operation (as well as Finance and Investments).⁹ A great deal of focus was placed on boosting international investor confidence and attracting Foreign Direct Investment to the regional economy. This is in line with the commitment to create a free trade area, and a customs union, with the aim of establishing a SADC common market. SADC wishes to:

- establish a Free Trade Area by 2008;
- complete negotiations for a revised SADC Customs Union by 2010;
- establish a SADC Common Market by 2015;
- attain sustained economic growth of about 5% across the board, and an increase in intra-SADC trade to at least 35% by 2008; and
- increase manufacturing as a percentage of GDP to 25% by 2015.

The chances of these targets being met, however, are rather limited.

South Africa favours, and is pushing for the negotiation of Free Trade agreements between SADC and MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay); and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) is expected to continue with negotiations with the USA. South Africa has also promised to begin preparations for negotiating a SACU-China Free Trade Area.

A challenge for the 'African agenda' is the regional trade balance in favour of South Africa; it is often said that this economic and trade dominance undermines South Africa's position in the region. It is vital that South Africa strives for a trade regime and trade balance that addresses this inequity and disequilibrium.

3.3. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

The 'African agenda' posited a pivotal role for South Africa in crafting a socio-economic development plan for the continent. Pretoria's foreign policy elite, therefore, have been instrumental in articulating several modernisation developmental plans for the continent. Foreign policy actors sought to promote people-centred development and in 1999, South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria articulated the Millennium Development Recovery Programme (MAP), and later on, together with Senegal, these countries developed the New African Initiative (NAI). In 2001, these countries developed the New Partnership for Africa's

8. Bekoe, Dorina, "Peacemaking in Southern Africa: The Role and Potential of the Southern African Development Community (SADC)", Task Force Meeting, International Peace Academy and the Centre for Africa's International Relations. Johannesburg, October 2002.

9. Landsberg, Chris, "Building a regional society in southern Africa: The institutional governance dimension", op. cit., p. 5.

Development (NEPAD). South Africa and its NEPAD partners view themselves as interlocutors and they were key in negotiating a new partnership between Africa and the outside world.

NEPAD hopes to spur Africa's development after decades of failure as a result of the legacies of colonialism, the Cold War, bad governance, unsound economic policies and management and destructive conflicts.¹⁰ It is based on democratic values and principles. The NEPAD plan of action identified five critical issues as essential to bolstering Africa's development chances. These are:

- democracy, governance and peace and security;
- economic and corporate governance;
- infrastructure and information technology;
- human resource development (notably health and education); and
- agriculture and market access.¹¹

South Africa is host to the NEPAD Secretariat, and commits significant resources to its programmes and the operations of the Secretariat. In an effort to transform NEPAD into a truly developmental plan, South Africa and its partners worked hard to articulate NEPAD sectoral development programmes in the areas of: agriculture; science and technology; industrialisation; transport; environment; and regional economic integration. These sectoral strategies promote self-reliance, conflict prevention, management and resolution, political, economic and corporate governance, and the protection and promotion of democracy and human rights.

The country took almost exclusive responsibility for promoting NEPAD internationally as Africa's socio-economic development plan. In 2002, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution accepting NEPAD as the official development plan for Africa. Also in terms of international promotion of NEPAD, South Africa promoted it amongst MERCOSUR, the Gulf Co-operation Council states (GCC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Japanese development Initiative for Africa (TICAD), the China-Africa Co-operation Forum (C-ACF), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Also in line with the international dimension, NEPAD placed a huge stress on negotiating partnership and trade-off agreements with international partners; indeed, NEPAD is a trade-off strategy. Specifically, NEPAD continues to campaign for accelerated levels of official development assistance (ODA) to Africa, and aid that comes with fewer conditionalities and is more predictable. At the very least, it is expected that developed countries would live up to their promises of providing 0.7% of their GDP to aid. Debt relief and market access for

10. Bekoe, Dorina & Landsberg, Chris, 'NEPAD: African Initiative, New Partnership?' International Peace Academy (IPA), IPA Workshop Report. New York, 16 July 2002

11. NEPAD Secretariat. 'NEPAD at Work.' Summary of NEPAD Action Plans. Midrand, July 2002.

Africa's trading goods is another key dimension of this trade-off. Negotiations for freer and fairer trade are also key, and South Africa has placed a huge stress on the conclusion of the Doha round of trade talks. Africa seeks resources and assistance from the international community for peace-keeping and peace-making responsibilities.

3.4. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)

Given its commitment to democratisation as part of its Africa policy strategies, South Africa and its NEPAD allies introduced the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). The APRM is an instrument to which African member states sign up voluntarily and commit to comply with the principles, priorities and objectives of the AU Constitutive Act and other decisions of the AU and NEPAD. It is a mechanism for mutual learning and socialisation. It promotes democracy and good governance as 'hot political issues', and openly encourages adherence to these. South Africa is firm in the view that the APRM should make a link between governance, democracy, peace and security and development. For Tshwane-Pretoria, member states should comply with the APRM's provisions, and all African states should ideally sign up to the mechanism.

Because South Africa was such a key player in the articulation of Africa's emerging governance architecture, there were great expectations for the success of its own Peer Review process in 2005/2006.¹² Given that South Africa and other pivotal states like Nigeria and Mozambique have invested so much in the process, the very success and credibility of the APRM depends, to a great extent, on the review of these states. In September 2005, the Mbeki administration officially launched South Africa's year-long Peer Review Process. But the process started off with great animosity and tensions between the government and local civil society actors. Many South African NGOs were critical of what they saw as the 'controlled' nature of the South African process, charging that government, and the executive in particular, was seeking to dominate and dictate the process.¹³ In the end, the government took these criticisms seriously, reaching out to as many stakeholders as possible; it opened itself to dialogue and engagement on the process. South Africa's government commissioned four base study papers on political governance and democracy; corporate governance; economic governance; and socio-economic development. It also convened public meetings throughout the country and encouraged the citizenry to participate actively in the process.¹⁴ South Africa's parliament convened its own peer review process, and also stressed the need for public participation.

12. See Landsberg, Chris, "A Developmental Democracy? Democracy and Political Governance", Discussion paper prepared for Phase One of the South African APRM process, Johannesburg, January 2006, p.2.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. p. 3.

But while civil society has a pivotal role to play in this process, some of these groups can also be criticised for the manner in which they cast aspersions on the APRM process, labelling it an exercise in “self congratulation” and “legitimisation”.¹⁵ This conduct only served to polarise South African politics. Civil society cannot expect merely to sit in judgement over government through this process. While the APRM has accorded NGOs rights and privileges, these groups also had a major responsibility to help consolidate South Africa’s APRM process and to address the enormous political, socio-economic, and developmental challenges faced by South Africa and the broader African community of states. Civil society actors must ‘dirty their hands’ and engage both the state and its citizens - especially the poor - to gauge their views on the state and health of democracy and governance thirteen years into South Africa’s liberation. NGOs and the broader civil society should promote a “holistic approach to development” which “requires systemic attention”.¹⁶

4. SOFT DIPLOMACY

The ANC-led government has sought to balance international expectations and its own fear of dominance in the southern African region. Thus, while many outsiders viewed South Africa as a hegemon - some sort of regional superpower in the sub-region and more broadly on the continent of Africa - the ANC-led government was quick to denounce such ideas. Instead, it believed that the Republic’s status and prominence in Africa and in world affairs more generally would be enhanced by not reinforcing, but by downplaying this power.

The approach adopted by South Africa’s policy-makers suggested that the best way to gain status and enhance its reputation was to reassure its neighbours that it did not harbour any threatening or aggressive intent. Instead, it chose to portray a strategic and defensive non-threatening military posture. The belief was that such a posture was the best route to enhancing security and confidence within southern Africa and beyond. South Africa’s defensive military strategy is based on both a strategy of deterrence and effective military capability. That is why, between 1997 and 1999, the country entered into arms trade deals worth more than R 30 billion. (The arms deals unleashed a storm of criticism by civil society and parliamentary opposition actors at home. Many critics argued that Pretoria faces no real military threats in the post-apartheid, post-Cold War context; that the overhaul of its military may send the wrong message to the smaller neighbours and this could trigger a new arms race in southern Africa.) The strategy of deterrence, however, does not extend to an offensive military posture on the continent.

15. Such aspersions came from individuals such as Ross Herbert of the South African Institute of International Affairs.

16. Landsberg, Chris, “A Developmental Democracy? Democracy and Political Governance”, op. cit., p. 2.

While South Africa was at pains not to be seen as the 'bully' in political, diplomatic and military terms, it was nonetheless seen as the economic 'bully' in the region.¹⁷ It enjoys skewed trade relations with the rest of the SADC region that have greatly undermined the Republic's political democratisation project in the region. The country's economic expansion into the continent has been both private sector-driven and government-promoted. Trade with the rest of Africa jumped 328% between 1993 and 2003.¹⁸ For example, of South Africa's R 20.3 billion trade with the member states of SADC in 1999, R 17.7 billion was exports to the region. This is an imbalance of almost 7:1.¹⁹ Total trade with Africa in 2001, excluding the Southern African Customs Union, amounted to \$856 million in imports and \$3.7 billion in exports, an imbalance of nearly 5:1.²⁰ Clearly this unfair economic advantage has the potential to undermine the agenda that South Africa seeks to promote for the continent, because it can easily be asserted that the Republic seeks to push this agenda in order to maintain this advantage. Indeed, there have already been accusations that South Africa uses its political role in the continent to advance its business interests.²¹

5. PUSHING FOR NEGOTIATED SOLUTIONS AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNMENTS

It is almost trite to suggest that South Africa's worldview and quest for international influence and prestige is heavily influenced by the experience of its transition from apartheid to democracy. Foreign policy was predisposed towards 'quiet diplomacy' and preventive diplomacy, notably the settlement of disputes through negotiations. Both the Mandela and Mbeki governments emphasised the need for regional reconciliation, following decades of tension and destabilisation by the apartheid state. Until 1999, the ANC-led government ruled out the military option in international affairs and the preferred strategy was that of brokering peace pacts amongst belligerents in conflict situations. Such pacts were often promoted along the lines of South Africa's own so-called 'miracle', the Government of National Unity (GNU) of 1994. This approach has been followed through into South Africa's 'African Agenda'.

17. Ibid; Even as far afield as east Africa, Kenya feels threatened by this country's economic penetration, while in turn being unable to gain access to South African markets. Countries such as Zimbabwe and Kenya complained in the past about the fact that South Africa runs a trade surplus with them (into the tens of millions of Rands).

18. Quoted in a joint publication by the Centre for Conflict Resolution, the Centre for Policy Studies, and the African Centre for Development and Strategic Studies. "South Africa in Africa: The post-Apartheid decade." Seminar report, November 2004, p. 22.

19. J. Daniel, V. Naidoo & S. Naidu, "The South Africans have arrived: Post-apartheid corporate expansion into Africa." J. Daniel, A. Habib & R. Southall (eds.). State of the nation: South Africa 2003-2004. Human Sciences Research Council, 2003: p 376.

20. Quoted in "Business Day", 17 April 2002.

21. See for example a joint publication by the Centre for Conflict Resolution, the Centre for Policy Studies, and the African Centre for Development and Strategic Studies. "South Africa in Africa: The post-Apartheid decade." Seminar report, November 2004, p. 22.

As early as 1994, President Mandela sought to broker 'inclusive' peace deals in Angola, stave off a *coup de tat* in Lesotho, and prevent a civil war in the DRC through peace diplomacy. Even Nigeria, which had been in the vanguard of the African anti-apartheid offensive, became a target of South Africa's international public policy objective of democratisation. Pretoria preferred a 'quiet diplomacy' posture towards Nigeria. In Burundi South Africa sought to strengthen the Arusha Process and Deputy President Jacob Zuma played a key facilitation role in backing the efforts of Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela. One of its key policies was to ensure the ceasefire of June 2004. South Africa provided specific training to Burundi to provide an internal protection unit for members of the interim government while soliciting support for the deployment of an international peacekeeping force.²²

The Zimbabwe question forced itself onto the agenda in about 1999 and South Africa opted for a strategy of 'quiet diplomacy'. Mbeki tapped into his strategic relationship with Nigeria's Olesegun Obasanjo to cajole Mugabe in the direction of a negotiated end to the Zimbabwe crisis. Pretoria encouraged peaceful, free and fair democratic elections in March 2002, through participation of election observers under the auspices of the SADC Parliamentary Forum and the multi-sectoral South Africa Observer Mission (SAOM). The country also assisted both a political rapprochement between the MDC and ZANU-PF in order to ensure peace and stability, as well as an economic recovery in Zimbabwe.

South Africa also supported and encouraged the Sudan Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) peace process and the Egyptian/Libyan Initiative; it however favoured the IGAD process as key.²³ Foreign affairs officials stressed the importance of realising the Horn of Africa UN Settlement Plan for Western Sahara and South Africa again supported multilateralism by defending the IGAD-led peace process aimed at bringing an end to the 18-year old Sudan civil war. As the chair of the AU, Mbeki participated in negotiations to end the civil war in Liberia, which resulted in the departure into exile of former President Charles Taylor in August 2003.²⁴ The Mbeki administration backed up its interventions with troop commitments. It has large numbers of troops with the UN in the DRC and small contingents in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Liberia. The Republic is listed by the UN as the 8th largest troop contributing country, and has spent over R350m a year on these operations.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to highlight the strategic conundrum that South Africa faces in its interactions with the continent. On the one hand it is a continental powerhouse, especially economically, and on the other, it is resented or regarded as an unwelcome hegemon on the Continent. This tension plays itself out even more significantly with South African business.

²² Quoted in "Business Day", 17 April 2002.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

For so many years the private sector in South Africa has had to play in its own increasingly incestuous pool. With the impact of sanctions, South African business had nowhere else to go to spend its capital accumulation. Since the advent of democracy, these restrictions have been lifted and as South African business confidence has consequently burgeoned, and white South African business leaders have gradually embraced transformation and Black Economic Empowerment at home; so South African business has at first gradually, and now increasingly dramatically, set out to conquer the continent's markets.

Government's key challenge here is to encourage this expansion, necessary to achieve the growth and prosperity of its own economy, while ensuring that its business sector does not become, or is perceived to be, a neo-colonial power in the continent. This dilemma is a reality over which the government has less control than it would like: its carefully constructed and nuanced diplomatic position of 'quiet leadership' is being increasingly threatened and undermined by the aggressive dominance of South African companies in other parts of the Continent, and it cannot easily, if at all, exercise any direct influence or control over this. The challenge is as follows: how to ensure that SA business (which remains primarily in the hands of the white population in South Africa), does not undermine the policy position and diplomatic practice that the South African government has so assiduously and sensitively cultivated over the years.

As we head for 2009, the year that will culminate in the transition from the Mbeki government to a successor administration, one thing seems reasonably clear to predict: the African agenda in particular will be subjected to more continuity, and less change. The emphasis is likely to be on refinement and implementation, not wholesale policy overhaul.