

Oct 16 2012

Where to from here for South Africa's foreign policy?

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Disquiet is being expressed in global capitals about the current travails afflicting the **South African economy** and body politic. Convulsive strikes have been paralysing one of the country's central economic mainstays and leading export sector, the mining industry, while a violent truck drivers' strike has claimed at least one life. The public education system, among other key national sectors, is laboring under weak governance, with activists resorting to the justice system to compel government action. The political elite is preoccupied with an intra-party battle that was recently intensified by the official opening of the nominations process for the new leadership of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), to be elected in December at the party's elective conference. In all of this, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain distance between the country's domestic problems and its

international image. While previously, President Jacob Zuma was seen as a well-meaning, friendly, if uncommonly polygamous, leader in Western capitals, he is now more widely viewed as lacking in the leadership necessary to steer South Africa out of mounting domestic troubles.

For analysts of South Africa's foreign policy, the Zuma administration's record abroad has presented something of a dilemma. For, under Zuma's leadership, the country has become a fifth member of the imposing BRIC grouping, comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China. While this development was looked upon sceptically in places, it was widely considered nothing less than a coup. South Africa's elevation to a level on par with some of the world's most dynamic and influential economies, and two permanent UN Security Council members, represented a welcome foothold from which to launch aspirations for greater degrees of continental and global influence. The bruising battle resulting from South Africa's campaign for its candidate for African Union Commission Chair, former Foreign Minister, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, again produced victory, but the **cost** for the country's African diplomacy remains to be seen.

Yet, all of these efforts may represent the lurches of a dying body if the South African government does not get busy with governing. South Africa's BRICS membership will have no meaning if the country's growth remains at a lacklustre 3%. In fact, at the moment, South Africa faces a dire economic outlook as its currency loses ground against the major currencies, and the official unemployment rate remains at a stubborn 25%. Its **gross national product** (at \$408 billion) is still dwarfed by that of the smallest BRIC economy, India, at \$1.84 trillion. At the outset, some analysts, including Jim O'Neill, **expressed misgivings** about South Africa's membership of BRICs, based on its average economic performance. With the country's current economic woes, and serious losses and lasting damage (by way of diminished investor confidence) to one of its key industries, mining, these doubts are set to intensify.

In Southern Africa, if not always in the rest of Africa, South African policymakers have had the luxury of debating whether and how to use the country's superior economic influence, infrastructure, and the example of its democratic settlement since 1994. They have by and large opted for 'restrained hegemony', reluctant to upset the applecart of regional politics, and to be seen to be throwing weight around in light of the country's Apartheid past and the destabilisation policies of previous administrations. This influence, and the options it affords, may be rapidly diminishing due to the combined effect of a potentially declining South Africa, and growing competition from external actors, the BRIC protagonists among them. Some of South Africa's BRICS partners have better access to, and a higher volume of economic interactions with, some regional economies, such as Angola, than does **South Africa**.

More recently, President Zuma, addressing the UN General Assembly, called for a renewed global commitment to **'the rule of law'**. While multilateralism and the rule of law in international affairs have been longstanding themes in South Africa's foreign policy, these calls will sound increasingly hollow from a leader who presides over a country where 34 miners were killed by police during a strike, in an episode that sent shockwaves through South Africa and around the world, and where illegal, violent strikes and similarly animated service delivery protests continue unabated. South Africa's 'good international citizen' foreign policy is becoming increasingly incongruous. The very democratic settlement and leadership epitomised in the figure of the unrepeatable Nelson Mandela are in serious question. And, to the extent that these have provided the foundation of South

Africa's influence over the last 18 years, the African and global communities will have few options but to begin to re-evaluate this influence.

This would be a disastrous outcome for South Africa, whose policymakers over the last two decades have crafted a foreign policy strategy based on South African 'exceptionalism' – a formerly divided African country, proudly African, represented in the UN Security Council, rightly or wrongly recently anointed as an influential global economic power. South African international leadership brokered a deal between Scotland and Libya over the Lockerbie bombers; acted as a bridge between nuclear and non-nuclear nations in support of the extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995; spoke out against human rights abuses in Nigeria under General Sani Abacha; worked tirelessly to secure settlements in the DRC and Burundi; and, spirited the transformation of the moribund Organisation for African Unity into the African Union in 2000. While each of these actions may have their critics, there is no question that the presence of a stable, democratic economic powerhouse firmly located in the developing world, at the tip of Africa, has been an asset to the international agenda of Africa and the Global South in the last two decades. Africa and the world need a strong South Africa, and this, like charity, begins at home.

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