

Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction
in an Age of Global Contestation

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Chapter 11

South Africa's Vision of "A Better Africa and World"

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11 South Africa's Vision of "A Better Africa and World"

Liisa Laakso and Iina Soiri

Introduction¹

Transition from the apartheid regime to a democratically elected government in 1994 was a shift in South Africa's position in world politics. According to the new ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), "a democratic South Africa shall be non-aligned" (cited in Hendricks and Majozi 2021). Although the South African approach to world politics or the different views of it within the ANC have never been at the forefront of South African public debate (Siko 2014, 345), it has attracted scholarly attention. A common perspective has been that South Africa's international influence has relied on "soft power" rather than on the use of force or economic pressure. This has been explained by the country's domestic politics, its difficulties in addressing socio-economic inequalities in the country, and discontents related to them (Schoeman 2015, 438; Sidiropoulos 2014, 198). Many observers have noted the legacy of apartheid preventing South African potential to serve as a regional power and a role model for the rest of the continent (Black and Hornsby 2017; Hamill 2018).

The decision-making on South Africa's international relations is driven by the president in collaboration with the foreign ministry, Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). Reliance on individual leadership has led to inadequate inter-agency coordination (Muresan and Kornegay 2020, 76). Critics have noted that South Africa has "greater clarity on goals than on the best means of achieving them" (Nathan 2005, 371), neglecting "legitimacy in the eyes of regional citizens" (Zondi 2012, 4) and lacking "alternative visions, policies, and practices that can provide more sustainable solutions to current challenges" (Hendricks and Majozi 2021, 65). South African scholars have noted a decline in South Africa's international stature (Bradlow, Sidiropoulos, and Mpungose 2020, 9; Soko 2021, 42) and warned of "a disadvantageous diplomatic position" amidst the confrontation between great powers (Mthembu and Kornegay 2022, 371).

Following the theoretical framework of this volume (see Chapter 1) and building on previous research into South Africa's commitment to peace and security, equality, multilateralism, and inclusive global governance and power-sharing, we will examine its future visions of world order. Important documents in this regard include the African Union's (AU) strategic framework Agenda 2063, as

well as the foreign policy white paper *Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu* (South African Government 2011); the national development plan *Our Future – Make it Work* (National Planning Commission 2011); and the framework document *South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment* (DIRCO 2023).

Following the ANC's loss of its simple majority in Parliament in 2024 and the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU), it is useful to examine these developments from broader political perspectives. Foreign policy differences were not significant issues during the election campaign. In addition to the ANC, which retained the presidency, the coalition includes the Democratic Alliance (DA), which draws significant support from the white electorate, and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which is primarily supported by the ethnic Zulu electorate. The only topic related to international relations in the IFP election manifesto, for instance, concerned immigration, stricter border control, and the deportation of "illegal migrants" (IFP 2024, 12), while DA focused on trade relations including the US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the European Union's (EU's) Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) (DA 2024, 13). However, there are notable issues, particularly regarding South Africa's relations with Russia, where coalition members have sharply differing opinions.

Building a Fairer World: Non-Alignment and BRICS+

South Africa perceives itself as a victim of Western colonialism. A desire for an inclusive economic order shapes its approach to world politics. The first post-apartheid president Nelson Mandela, with his efforts to achieve a fair and just world, was seen as a new leader of the Global South (Mandela 1992; Rose-Innes 2020, 204). Soon, however, the post-Cold War developments and the drop of international development assistance – often under the practice of "conditionality" – raised discontent. Mandela's successor Thabo Mbeki called for "African solutions to African problems" and "African Renaissance", arguing the African states had to take responsibility for their own development without external interference.

At Mbeki's initiative, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Assembly of African Heads of State and Government adopted a strategy for sustainable development in the twenty-first century, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) for its implementation (OAU 2001). In its inaugural summit in 2002, the AU, the successor to the OAU, confirmed these decisions. While the headquarters remained in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Pretoria was designated to host NEPAD. African scholars soon criticised NEPAD for its neoliberal approach, aligning with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank programmes that aimed at controlling inflation and repaying debts but often resulted in higher unemployment, poverty, and economic polarisation. They also pointed out the unrealistic expectations of international development assistance to Africa, equivalent to the European post-World War II Marshall Plan experience (Olukoshi 2002). NEPAD, however, has stayed and appears both in the 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration celebrating the formation of the OAU/AU in 2013 (AU 2013, 2) and

the Agenda 2063 vision of “[a]n integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa” (AU 2015, 18).

During Mbeki’s term, South Africa adopted a role in advocating for debt relief for heavily indebted developing countries, for the World Trade Organization to prioritise development, and for easing patent protection on AIDS drugs (Jordaan 2012). After his presidency, Mbeki continued advocating for the reform of global financial governance institutions for instance as a chair of a panel on illicit financial flows and the promotion of tax justice under the AU and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA 2015).

Mbeki’s objectives to attract investments from the West faced criticism within the ANC, which had ideological roots in socialism and connections to the East (Siko 2014, 339–40). His successor, Jacob Zuma, responded by strengthening partnerships with Brazil, Russia, India, and China (Soko 2021, 47), and by lobbying for membership in the BRIC group (Alden and Schoeman 2013, 115; Bradlow, Sidiropoulos, and Mpungose 2020, 259). The group’s aims to reform international financial governance, establish inter-central bank agreements for smooth money transfers, and create a credit rating agency with a more tailored system for developing countries were particularly significant in this regard. The New Development Bank (NDB) opened its Africa Regional Centre (ARC) in Johannesburg in 2017, while the headquarters were located in China and other branches in Brazil, India, and Russia. The purpose of the ARC has been to support infrastructure development across Africa. However, by 2024, 13 of the 14 projects it has supported have been in South Africa, with the 14th being a joint project between South Africa and Lesotho, increasing South Africa’s dominant position in the region (Bradlow and Masamba 2024).

The BRICS group has remained central to President Cyril Ramaphosa’s foreign policy. There has been a renewed emphasis on the responsibility of wealthy countries to support the Global South in achieving a “Just Green Transition”, promoting resilient ecosystems, biodiversity, and climate change adaptation (DIRCO 2023, 11). A new area of collaboration emerged with South Africa’s active role during the COVID-19 pandemic, advocating for a WTO waiver on vaccine patents to facilitate global manufacturing and distribution of the technology.

The BRICS summit in South Africa in 2023 was regarded as a success for both South Africa and Africa. South Africa had actively advocated for expanding the group, and the decision to invite new members, including Egypt and Ethiopia, leading to the formation of BRICS+, reinforced its position within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). However, the question of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s possible attendance sparked diplomatic tensions due to the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant issued against him, ultimately leading to his absence from the summit.

The DA has raised concerns about the impact of BRICS+ cooperation on South Africa’s non-alignment. In early 2023, South Africa’s naval exercise with Russia and China off its east coast drew criticism in the US Congress. In 2024, Russian and Chinese warships participated in the South African Navy Festival, while Indian and Brazilian ships took part in a joint exercise there as well. This led to speculations

of a "BRICS+ exercise", despite the lack of any formal defence agreement within the group (Fabricius 2024). Reports on joint air force exercises with Russia have followed. Additionally, the United States has accused South Africa of supplying arms to Russia, a claim that South African officials have denied. These allegations have been particularly sensitive after US lawmakers have called for South Africa's removal from AGOA, which provides duty-free access to US markets. Following the change of regime in the United States, relations with South Africa have grown increasingly strained. The Trump administration views South Africa as a security threat, citing alleged mistreatment of the white minority and land rights, and the president has signed an executive order to halt all aid to the country.

The GNU, often described as pragmatic and "business-friendly", has placed particular emphasis on maintaining good relations with Western powers. Despite the ANC regime's anti-Western rhetoric, AGOA and the EPAs with the EU remain crucial for South Africa and the continent (Edwards 2021). Similar arrangements with China, within the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework, support South Africa's policies to promote economic diversification in the region, further reinforced by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Masters, Mthembu, and Van Wyk 2022). And indeed, when assuming the chairmanship of the AU in 2020, Ramaphosa, in line with his "New Dawn" vision of a fresh start, called for industrialisation to "pave the way for Africa's integration into the global economy as a player of considerable scale" (quoted in Edwards 2021, 456).

Call for Just International Institutions

The 2011 White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy identifies its core principles as pan-Africanism and South–South cooperation.

South Africa recognises itself as an integral part of the African continent and therefore understands its national interest as being intrinsically linked to Africa's stability, unity, and prosperity. Likewise, the 1955 Bandung Conference shapes our understanding of South–South cooperation and opposition to colonialism as a natural extension of our national interest.

(South African Government 2011, 3)

South Africa has played a leading role in continental institution-building, particularly within the AU. Examples include its support for the African Development Bank (AfDB), established by the OAU in 1964, and the pan-African Parliament, founded in 2004. As one of the AfDB's largest shareholders, South Africa has promoted the bank's vision of inclusive growth, focusing on youth employment, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. The pan-African Parliament lacks legislative authority but provides a forum to promote the ideals of democracy and good governance through participation in election observation missions and in drafting model laws, for instance (Nwebo and Fombad 2022).

South Africa's continental role has also been challenged. Nigeria, with its substantial economy and political influence, competes with South Africa, particularly

in West Africa, while Egypt leverages its strategic position in North Africa. Also significant is South Africa's long-standing dispute with Morocco over the status of Western Sahara. Within the AU, South Africa has supported the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic's claim to sovereignty over Western Sahara, a territory that Morocco considers part of its own (Bradlow, Sidiropoulos, and Mpungose 2020, 20).

In the Southern African subregion, South Africa stands without an equivalent. It has played a pivotal role in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), contributing to peaceful settlement of disputes as well as to the institution's development, including the establishment of the Organ for Politics, Defence, and Security. As the leading regional economy, South Africa is a key member of the Southern African Customs Union and the Development Bank of Southern Africa. It has committed substantial diplomatic efforts and financial resources to the development of the subregion (Moyo 2020, 116). It hosts a large number of immigrants from neighbouring countries, providing significant flows of remittances, both formal and informal, to their economies. However, a downside to this phenomenon is the growing xenophobia in South Africa, which has been exacerbated by the increasing unemployment rates in the country.

At the global level, South Africa has aligned itself with the Global South in advocating for greater influence in international financial institutions, especially the IMF and World Bank, as well as trade organisations like the WTO and the International Chamber of Commerce. A key platform for this advocacy has been the NAM originating from the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. South Africa also joined the G77, a coalition that has grown to include more than 130 developing nations. The original goal of these groups was a new international order transcending socialism and capitalism, and a unified stance against apartheid. Since then, their focus has shifted to sustainable development, with increasing demands for assistance from wealthy countries to support developing nations vulnerable to climate change.

Notable examples of South Africa's ability to promote its priorities in global governance include the high-level international events it has hosted: the World Conference against Racism in 2001, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, and the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference (COP 17) in 2011 (Alden and Schoeman 2013, 114). Important is also its active participation in initiatives such as the 1995 extension of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; the 1997 Ottawa Process, banning landmines; and the Kimberley Process of 2003, aimed at eliminating the trade in conflict diamonds. In December 2024, South Africa assumed the Presidency of the G20, becoming the first African country to hold that position, a milestone comparable to Saudi Arabia's experience in 2019, when it became the first Arab country to preside over the G20 (see Chapter 13).

As a member of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, South Africa has been involved in peace missions and post-conflict reconstruction across numerous African countries: Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Lesotho, Liberia,

Madagascar, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe (Hendricks and Majozi 2021; United Nations 2022). South Africa has also advocated for permanent representation and veto right for Africa in the UN Security Council (Paterson and Virk 2013). In 2007–08, 2011–12, and 2019–20 it has served as one of the three non-permanent members representing Africa (A3), which is expected to promote the AU's shared positions (Muvumba Sellström 2023). A case in point is the 2011 Security Council vote in favour of the resolution to intervene in Libya, which later faced sharp criticism from South Africa's Global South partners. President Zuma accused the West of misusing the resolution for regime change rather than protecting civilian lives (Glanville 2013, 339; Graham 2023, 294).

South Africa's relationship with the ICC is another example of the diplomatic challenges it has faced in supporting international institutions. As the first African country to sign the Rome Statute in 1998, South Africa paved the way for other African nations to join the ICC. However, in 2016, South Africa decided to withdraw from the court after declining to enforce an ICC arrest warrant for Sudan's former president, Omar al-Bashir, who was visiting the country. This decision followed the AU call for collective withdrawal, because ten of the ICC's 11 investigations at the time had focused on African countries: Burundi, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Kenya, Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and there were preliminary examinations of cases in Gabon, Guinea, and Nigeria. South Africa, alongside the AU, was concerned about the bias targeting African leaders only. The AU ultimately did not proceed with the withdrawal due to a lack of consensus, and the DA challenged South Africa's withdrawal. In 2017, the South African High Court ruled in DA's favour. Nonetheless, the ANC continued to advocate for leaving the ICC (Chipaike, Tshuma, and Hofisi 2019; Isike and Ogunnubi 2017). In 2023, following the ICC's arrest warrants for Putin over the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, President Ramaphosa suggested that South Africa might consider withdrawing from the treaty to allow Putin to attend the upcoming BRICS summit in South Africa. Ultimately, this did not materialise, as Putin did not attend the summit.

This is the context for South Africa's decision in 2023 to accuse Israel of genocide before the International Court of Justice, the top court of the UN, the rulings of which are binding for all UN member states. The Court determined in 2024 that Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip could be considered genocide and ordered Israel to ensure food supplies to Gaza, and halt its offensive in Rafah. Although Israel continued with its offensive, South Africa received broad international support, particularly from the Global South. Namibia, for instance, reminded Germany, which had criticised South Africa for its action, of the 1904 Herero and Namaqua genocide, advising it to learn from its own history. It was thus not surprising that South Africa welcomed the November 2024 ICC arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on war crimes and crimes against humanity. According to South Africa's Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, Ms Thembi Simelane, this was "a vindication of South Africa's position" (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 2024).

Normative Leadership or Solidarity with the Global South

For South Africa, non-alignment embodies both a normative stance and a form of solidarity with the Global South. Non-alignment is a complex and multifaceted ideology. Initially rooted in the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements, it has since evolved into a vision of multipolarity. South Africa's role within this framework has yielded mixed results and reactions.

The end of apartheid raised a lot of expectations for South Africa to become a normative leader for the world and Africa in particular (Bradlow, Sidiropoulos, and Mpungose 2020, 1). Mandela appealed to Sani Abacha, Nigeria's military Head of State, to grant clemency to Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Niger Delta activist, and condemned his execution in 1995. He was a vocal critic of Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, once a celebrated liberation fighter, ANC supporter, and 1986–89 chair of the NAM, due to his repression of the Zimbabwean opposition. These criticisms prompted a backlash from other African leaders, which Mandela was fully aware of, but which did not deter him. On Mugabe, with whom Mandela never even met face to face, he is quoted having said: “[T]he trouble with Mugabe is that he was the star – and then the sun came up” (Smith 2014).

Ambivalence followed Mandela's term. Rather than criticising Southern governments that violated democracy and human rights, Mbeki adopted a “quiet diplomacy” approach (Soko 2021, 43). In 2008, he turned a blind eye to the rigged re-election of Mugabe as president, which was condemned by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga, and others. Instead, Mbeki sought to facilitate a peaceful power-sharing transition in Zimbabwe through SADC (Mashimbye 2022). Zuma, in turn, encouraged Sudan's al-Bashir to leave the country before the South African Court ruled that he needs to be extradited. During Ramaphosa's terms, similar caution has characterised South Africa's approach to the atrocities committed by the Myanmar government against the Rohingya minority.

Mbeki's motto “African solutions to African problems”, as resistance to Western pressures on African political choices, has been shared by his successors. One example is Biden's invitation to South Africa to attend the US Summit for Democracy in 2021 (see Chapter 2), which Ramaphosa declined. International Relations and Cooperation Minister Naledi Pandor commented on South Africa's decision not to attend the event: “The [invitation] letter says things like, ‘America, a country that has always supported human rights’. Really?” (quoted in Fabricius 2021).

In the UN votes condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, South Africa has not taken a stand. In the eyes of Western observers, it has passively been “sitting on the fence”. In the East and South, it has given a neutral response to the great-power “campification” (see Chapter 3 on China) for the benefit of “multi-alignment” (Ishmael 2023, 17). In his attempt to be a bridge-builder and mediator, Ramaphosa, along with leaders from Egypt, Senegal, Congo-Brazzaville, Comoros, Uganda, and Zambia visited both the Kremlin and Kyiv in 2023. However, their efforts yielded no tangible outcomes or solutions to the interrupted grain exports that had caused food shortages in Africa.

South Africa's unwillingness to condemn Russia stems from the experiences of the past. The Soviet Union supported the struggle against apartheid. In the 2020s, Russia has emerged as a vocal critic of colonialism and neo-colonialism (see Chapter 15) – a rhetoric that resonates strongly across Africa. However, the same loyalty applies to Ukraine, too, though with a stronger tone from DA representatives than from the ANC. As part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine played a significant role in educating Africans for independence and in the struggle against apartheid. A notable example is a Ukrainian diplomat, who had served on the UN Special Committee against Apartheid, having his name added to the wall of Freedom Park in 2024, which was established in response to the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

China, South Africa's largest trading partner and the driving force behind BRICS+, also positions itself as a counterforce to Western colonialism. FOCAC has an important role, as it has evolved to a network of funds, institutions, programmes, and conferences for trade, infrastructure, development, and people-to-people exchanges between China and Africa (Huan and Deng 2021). However, frequent reports on corruption, environmental degradation, and poor labour conditions, as well as the trade deficit – China's imports of finished goods and products greatly exceed Africa's largely raw material exports – complicates its image there (Shoba and Mlambo 2024).

Conclusion – Africa Rising: A Vision of Hope

What appears as a difficult balancing act between normative principles, solidarity, and pragmatic international cooperation gives content to South Africa's role as a bridge-builder. South Africa wants to advocate partnerships all over the world, not confrontation (DIRCO 2023, 25). According to the government, the bridge-building approach is "followed in order to seek realistic and achievable solutions". This also involves "the role that civil society can play in partnership with the governments of the world, especially in the context of seeking solutions to the divergent views that often characterise international negotiations" (Government Communication and Information System. n.d., 5).

The Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its advancement in a Global Environment identifies *ubuntu* as a key value. The Bantu philosophical concept emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals with their societal and physical environments. South Africa applies it for practical policies to signify interdependency, listing objectives such as human rights, peaceful dispute resolution, transitional justice, and international law and norms through multilateral institutions (DIRCO 2023).

Bridge-building and *ubuntu* make the South African world-ordering vision future-oriented. In spite of its emphasis on the injustices of the past, South Africa has been consistent in its view that Africa's role in the international community will grow in the coming decades. Since the mid-1990s, Africa has experienced economic growth, yet eradication of poverty remains a challenge. The continent has a youthful population that needs to be engaged. According to the NEPAD Planning

and Coordinating Agency, “[t]he youth bulge (the percentage of the population aged 15–29) peaked at 48 percent in 2005 and is projected to decline slowly to 34 percent by 2063” (Moyer et al. 2018, 13). Africa is likely to begin reaping the benefits of this “demographic dividend”, when the working-age population exceeds the dependent population, from the mid-century onwards (Cilliers 2021, 80). Growing per capita income would allow investments in human capital and infrastructure fulfilling the vision of Africa becoming a “global powerhouse” as outlined in the AU Agenda 2063 (AU 2015).

While the normative and human rights dimensions are central to South Africa’s vision of world order, tensions have also grown. Botha (2023, 124) notes that South Africa has recognised the importance of youth in its approach to African politics and international relations; however, this recognition has not yet translated into concrete, sustainable action or clear impact. Researchers have called for a more active role for South Africa in global governance for the provision of global public goods (Bradlow, Sidiropoulos, and Mpungose 2020, 21). As the most advanced economy on the continent and its most prominent investor, it has to invest in the building and implementation of AfCFTA. This is particularly strategic in climate change negotiations and discussions on just green transition, as well as in the fast pace of technological change (Graham 2022, 54).

Although the ANC has maintained control over foreign policy, GNU has brought important contestations to the forefront, giving a renewed meaning to the concept of the “Rainbow Nation”. South Africa has been a challenger of the world order status quo and governance. But for its aims to build continental and global institutions for a better future, the key question is how prepared it is to face the challenges ahead. This ambition also tests South Africa’s commitment to a rules-based international order, as it must balance this with its critical trade relations with the existing and emerging world powers.

Note

1 We are grateful to Henning Melber for his valuable comments.

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