Policy Brief

South Africa’s Presidency of the UN Security Council: What to make of it.

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This policy brief examines South Africa’s presidency of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in January 2012, with a focus on Pretoria’s agenda to strengthen the strategic partnership between the Council and the African Union (AU). It notes that given the unease of the permanent members of the UNSC over the idea of sharing power with regional actors, much still has to be done by South Africa and other AU member states to give real meaning to Resolution 2033, which commits the Council to enhancing its partnership with the AU. In particular:

• The South African Government should show greater leadership in promoting coherence in the way the AU responds to peace and security threats on the continent.

• The AU should strengthen its mechanisms for coordinating the positions and decisions of its Peace and Security Council (PSC) with the African non-permanent members of the UNSC.

• AU member states should make use of their bilateral engagements with the non-permanent members of the UNSC, as well as multilateral forums such as BRICS, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the EU-Africa strategic partnership to promote the peace and security vision of the continent and bring greater coherence between the agenda and approach of the UNSC and that of the PSC.
Introduction

South Africa held the presidency of the UN Security Council (UNSC) during the month of January 2012, taking over from Russia. Its presidency inevitably coincided with heightened global concern over the spiralling crisis in Syria, leaving Pretoria with the responsibility of providing a climate for international consensus on an appropriate response to the situation in Syria. In the context of the revived power play among the permanent members of the UNSC, South Africa chaired a debate on the Syrian crisis and voted for the Arab-League initiated and Western-sponsored resolution, which was vetoed by Russia and China. However, the highlight of South Africa’s UNSC presidency was the debate and resolution on collaboration between the United Nations and regional organisations. This was part of an effort by Pretoria to shift the Council’s focus from emergencies to discussing ways of pro-actively dealing with deep-seated systemic challenges that give rise to conflict. The Council’s thematic debates on the broader Middle East question and the Rule of Law formed part of this strategic focus. This policy brief examines South Africa’s approach in its January 2012 presidency of the UNSC with a specific focus on the idea of strengthening cooperation between the Council and regional organizations.

SA’s Strategy for its 2011-2012 UNSC tenure

The UN Security Council has become more and more divided along west-versus-east lines, with Russia and China standing up to the western powers that have dominated the Council’s choice of actions in the past decade. While this has made the role of smaller powers that serve as non-permanent members a little awkward, as they have to often choose between the two power blocs just as during the Cold War, the power struggles have also created opportunities for middle and smaller powers to wedge a space for themselves by occupying the largely vacant space for consensus solutions. This relates to the willingness to champion consensus on long-term and structural questions thought to give rise to the flare up of conflict in various parts of the world, and issues considered to be vital ingredients of permanent solutions to common problems frequently served before the Council.

South Africa’s experience in the UNSC in 2007-2008 taught it major lessons about the dangers of getting too involved in these power struggles both in that direct attempts to stop power play drain a smaller country’s energy and also because it limits its ability to point the Council to real challenges faced by smaller states in their own regions. Hence, the country’s approach to its second tenure is to strengthen its ability to independently decide its course of action and to concentrate stronger on long-term and structural questions relating to how the Council could shift its focus from mere crisis response to setting a stronger framework for dealing with whatever conflict that may arise in future.

South Africa seems focused on boosting its credibility as a bridge-builder and a driver of consensus positions designed to strengthen the framework for expanded understanding of the responsibility to protect through independent thinking on international security matters before the Council. In the process, it exercises its option to support or oppose the plans of either side of the divide in the Security Council. But in doing so, it wants to avoid being seen to be involved, wittingly or unwittingly, in power struggles between the west and east within the Council. It seems to have easily broken ranks with the major global south powers on a number of occasions, including voting alongside the west on the Libyan and Syrian resolutions than with the east. Yet, in its strong criticism of western powers over their use of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to engineer a regime change in Libya, as well as their use of the UN to take sides in the conflict in Cote d’Ivoire during the 2011 post-election crisis in that country, it sided with the global south.

At the top of South Africa’s agenda to restructure the UN’s approach in dealing with global peace and security challenges has been the idea of strengthening relations between the UNSC and regional organisations like the AU. The drive for an enhanced UNSC-AU strategic partnership was equally an important part of South Africa’s strategy during its first tenure in the UNSC in 2007-2008. But, this focus was largely overshadowed by the controversy generated around its votes against western-sponsored resolutions on Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Iran and others, all meant to stop the apparent abuse of the Council by the permanent three (the US, UK and France) to serve their own national interests. In this sense, South Africa’s fights against hegemonic interests...
in the Council’s decision-making system overshadowed its broad focus on the important principle of setting a framework for a mature collaboration between the Council and global regions on security matters.

It seems, therefore, that in approaching the second tenure South Africa decided to focus even stronger on this latter principle, the strengthening of the role of regions in the responsibility to protect regime. In the wake of South Africa’s re-election into the UNSC for a second term, the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, underscored this focus when she declared that “South Africa will continue in its efforts to promote and enhance the Security Council’s cooperation with regional organizations, particularly the African Peace and Security Council”. According to the Minister, following through on this resolve was central to bringing greater coherence to the way both bodies respond to peace and security threats in Africa, while also enhancing South Africa’s peace support efforts on the continent.

South Africa’s Presidency and the UN-Regional Organisations debate

South Africa’s stated top priority to promote collaboration between the Council and regional organisations especially the AU inevitably became the key focus of its presidency of the Council in January 2012. During the debate that South Africa initiated in the second week of January, President Jacob Zuma underlined the country’s gripe that although 70% of the Council’s agenda year on year is on Africa, the continent was not represented on a permanent basis on the Council. While he accepted that the matter of permanent seats was still in discussion, he argued that in the meantime the Council has to strengthen its coordination with the AU and its Peace and Security Council (PSC) in overcoming these African problems on the basis of a stronger space for African-led solutions. In his reasoning, regional organisations are closer to conflict situations and also have a better understanding of conflict issues.

In appealing for greater collaboration between the UNSC and the AU, South Africa appeared to have struck the right chord within and outside the Council. It did not only promote an agenda that the AU would back, but also responded to the findings of an assessment report by the UN Secretary-General, which among other things underscored the significant contributions regional organizations, most notably the AU, have made to the work of the UN in maintaining global peace and security. The statements of individual member states which took part in the debate also pointed to a near-universal recognition, at least in principle, of the critical role of regional organizations in the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.

Not surprisingly, the resultant Resolution 2033, unanimously adopted by all Council members, committed the Council to take ‘effective steps’ to enhance its relationship with African regional and sub-regional organizations. Among other stipulations, the resolution called on the UN Secretary-General to maintain close consultations with the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), while also encouraging “the improvement of regular interaction, consultation and coordination, as appropriate between the Security Council and the African Peace and Security Council on matters of mutual interest”.

Can the AU PSC carve out Africa as its exclusive sphere of influence?

In the wake of recent crises in Africa, this development is both timely and commendable. However, a close examination of the debate and resolution of the UNSC on the subject suggests that much still needs to be done to translate commitment to real action on the ground. On the surface, Resolution 2033 appears to be generous in its recognition of the AU’s claim of a superior understanding and interest in African peace and security issues, and the corresponding call for African initiatives and processes to be prioritised in the Council’s responses to conflict situations on the continent.

However, when placed in the context of the often acrimonious relationship between the UNSC and the PSC members, the resolution under-estimates the fundamental political and strategic obstacles that its implementation will come against. The promised Council support and encouragement for ongoing technical and operational cooperation between different organs of the UN system and the AU will depend on the extent to which the UNSC and the PSC learn to genuinely work for human security. Paragraphs five and six of the Resolution encourage enhanced, appropriate and regular interaction, consultation and coordination between the
UNSC and the AUPSC, but says that this will only occur on the basis of “their respective authorities, competencies and capacities”. This is a rich statement given underlying disagreements about the AU mandate in areas where the UNSC is involved. Some permanent seat holders of the Council are sceptical of the idea of an exclusive mandate for the AU PSC on African affairs, for in their view African crises that threaten international security are not solely the mandate of the AU.

What this resolution underscores is the continuous unease by the UNSC, in particular its five permanent members, to share its much coveted mandate over the responsibility to protect doctrine, including intervention in serious conflicts and violence. This reluctance to concede power to the AU in Africa is apparent in the statements of the permanent representatives of the US and UK, both of whom were quick to stress the primacy that the UN Charter confers on the Security Council on matters of peace and security. In the words of the US representative, Susan Rice, “the Security Council was not subordinate to other bodies or to regional groups’ schedules or capacities”.

The Council’s resistance to devolve part of its mandate is rationalised by pointing at two alleged weaknesses associated with regional organizations, in particular the AU. The first is inadequate capacity and resources to speedily intervene in conflict and crises. It depends on western funding for the full and efficient operationalisation of its peace and security architecture. The second has to do with perceptions amongst western powers that the AU’s decision-making processes, which are based on consensus, are too cumbersome and make it very difficult for it to respond expediently to crisis situations on the continent.

These observations are by no means unfounded. But they are not necessarily put forward out of genuine concerns about weak regional security capacity, given that they are not used in order to push for additional measures to strengthen the AU’s capacity but to by-pass it in times of crisis. Existing partnerships between the UN and the AU suggests that where there is convergence in the strategic and political visions of both organizations, the resource and capacity deficit attributed to the African peace and security architecture can be incrementally addressed through genuine, coordinated and sustained assistance from the UN and other international partners. The assertion that the AU is at times slow to act because of political paralysis cannot be used to make a case against the sharing of the burden for maintaining peace and security in Africa between it and the UNSC. This is because the charge applies as much to the UNSC as it does to the AU. Ironically, the increasing role of African regional and sub-regional organizations in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts like in Somalia is partly motivated by the reluctance of the UNSC to take the lead in critical conflict situations, brought about by the national interest calculations of its permanent members and the political tug-of-war generated among them. The on-going standoff between Russia and China, on the one hand, and the US, France and the UK on the other hand, over the crisis in Syria bears testimony to the vulnerability of the UNSC to the same political gridlock that the AU is accused of.

What should SA and the AU do to operationalise the normative agenda of Resolution 2033?

It can be inferred from the debate and resolution on the partnership between the AU and the UNSC that even with the growing recognition of the indispensability of regional organizations in contemporary efforts to contain the scourge of insecurity, there is still little appetite among the permanent members of the UNSC to translate this recognition into a structured and mutually reinforcing partnership with regional organizations like the AU. This explains why cooperation between the UN and AU on matters of peace and security has failed to move beyond ad hoc and largely operational support and coordination to a commitment towards an institutionalised partnership at a strategic and political level.

In its 2008 report, the joint AU/UN panel on modalities for support to African Union peacekeeping operations strongly recommended, as a precondition for tackling lingering challenges to cooperation between the UN and the AU, the need for the UNSC to establish a framework to facilitate convergence in the strategic and political visions of the Council and the AU in a systematic manner. However, not much has been done since 2008 to give effect to this recommendation or the presidential statement and resolution that preceded it, underlining a trend in which the UNSC’s pronouncements have had very little impact on efforts to enhance its relationship with the AU. The absence of political will on the part of
key members of the UNSC to strengthen the Council’s relationship with the AU is also underscored by the fact that annual consultations held between the Council and the PSC are presented by the Council not as meetings between itself and the PSC, but as meetings between the PSC and individual members of the Council.

In this context, Resolution 2033 could become just another empty pronouncement unless South Africa and the AU resist the temptation to view the resolution as a fait accompli and instead embrace it as an opportunity and incentive to work in a concerted manner to push forward its normative agenda. The 9 January 2012 report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on the partnership between the UNSC and the AU already identified a number of concrete measures that could be undertaken to enhance the partnership both at the strategic and operational levels. It is the responsibility of countries like South Africa to provide the necessary political and diplomatic leadership in ensuring that the recommendations of the AU Commission are followed through. Given that a number of frameworks already exist for operational cooperation between the UN and the AU on peace and security issues, the focus here should be on using Resolution 2033 as an opportunity to strengthen political consensus on the principle underpinning the resolution. This would, however, require a strong commitment from the African leadership to address internal challenges such as the continuous disharmony between the AU and the RECs.

At the strategic and political level, it is highly inconceivable that, in its current design, and given the vested interests of its permanent members, the UNSC would commit to any strategic partnership with the AU, or any regional organization for that matter, that is seen to be diluting its mandate on maintaining global peace and security. An alternative approach would be for AU member states to strengthen and coordinate their diplomatic engagement with permanent members of the UNSC separately, with a view to developing a common strategic vision on peace and security in Africa and secure diplomatic support for African priorities and initiatives. This could take the form of supplementing the annual meetings between the PSC and the UNSC with sustained consultations and high-level dialogue through other mechanisms such as BRICS, the Forum for China African Cooperation and the EU-Africa strategic partnership.

Policy considerations

To the South African Government:

- The South African Government should show greater leadership in promoting coherence in the way the AU responds to peace and security threats on the continent. This would strengthen its call for African initiatives and perspectives to be prioritized in UNSC responses. A strong African voice can only result from a continent-wide coalition, buttressed by the convergence of purpose among Africa’s leading states. South Africa thus needs to buttress its efforts in the chambers of the UN Security Council with a diplomatic push in Africa that seeks to generate consensus on the continent’s priorities.

To the African Union and its member states:

- The AU should strengthen its mechanisms for coordinating the positions and decisions of the PSC with the African non-permanent members of the UN Security Council. Consideration should be given to an arrangement that makes provision for the membership of African representatives in the UNSC to overlap with membership in the PSC. This could help bring greater coherence between the decisions and positions of the PSC and the behaviour of African non-permanent members of the UNSC, with a better chance of influencing the direction of the Council on African affairs.

- AU member states should make use of their bilateral and multilateral engagements with external partners, most notably the permanent members of the UNSC, to promote the continent’s peace and security vision. While the Permanent Five may not be disposed to commit to a formal protocol on how the UNSC relates with the AU, for fear of diluting their global power, it is still possible to influence their behaviour and decisions on a case-by-case basis. Existing mechanisms through which African states and their external partners
negotiate their mutual interests should be used to promote greater coherence between the agenda and approach of the UNSC and that of the PSC.

- The AU should establish or strengthen mechanisms for sustained dialogue with regional organizations with which it shares similar peace and security concerns, especially the EU, the Arab League, the Indian Ocean Rim Organization and so forth. This would contribute in engendering a common understanding of the threats in the region, while also considering the interests of all actors in formulating policy responses. This shared understanding and vision would facilitate the process of harmonizing the responses of the UN and AU to crises situations similar to that which took place in Libya in 2011.

Notes


2 See transcript of debate and resolution on enhancing the partnership between the UNSC and the AU at: http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10519.doc.htm


4 Refer to transcript of debate on enhancing the partnership between the UNSC and the AU for the remarks made by the ambassadors of the US and UK before and after the adoption of Resolution 2033.

5 See UN Security Council Resolution 2033 of 12 January 2012

6 Ibid.

7 See transcript of debate and resolution on enhancing the partnership between UNSC and AU.


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