



associated with
UNISA | 
university
of south africa

OCCASIONAL PAPER 80



SA, Africa & the Global Balance of Forces: Combining Solidarity with Strategic Action

Author: Philani Mthembu and Francis Kornegay

July 2020

■ ABOUT IGD

The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

The IGD strives for a prosperous and peaceful Africa in a progressive global order through cutting edge policy research and analysis, catalytic dialogue and stakeholder interface on global dynamics that have an impact on South Africa and Africa.

3rd Floor Robert Sobukwe Building
263 Nana Sita Street
Pretoria South Africa

+27123376082

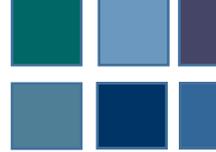
info@igd.org.za
www.igd.org.za

All rights reserved. The material in this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted without the prior permission of the copyright holder. Short extracts may be quoted, provided the source is acknowledged.

About the authors

Dr Philani Mthembu is Executive Director at the Institute for Global Dialogue. Prior to joining the IGD, he pursued a joint doctoral programme (*Dr. rer. pol.*) with the Graduate School of Global Politics, Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), and the School of International Studies at Renmin University, Beijing (China). The focus of his dissertation was on the rise of emerging powers as sources of development cooperation in Africa, for which he was awarded *Magna Cum Laude*. He co-founded the Berlin Forum on Global Politics (BFoGP), a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of academic, expert, and public understanding of global politics. While completing his Masters in International Relations at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, he headed the Academic Development Programme for first year students and was elected as the first independent candidate to the Student Representative Council (SRC). His recent publications include a single authored book titled 'China and India's Development Cooperation in Africa: The Rise of Southern Powers', and a co-edited book titled 'From MDGs to Sustainable Development Goals: The Travails of International Development'.

Mr. Francis Kornegay is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Global Dialogue. He is also a member of the JIOR international editorial board and a past fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars. He has Masters Degrees in African Studies from Howard University and in International Public Policy from the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins. Kornegay served two stints in the US Congress as a professional staffer, among other things, developing financial sanctions legislation on South Africa. He established the Research and Evaluation Unit for the African Development Foundation, an independent US agency. In South Africa, he served as the country director of the African-American Institute (AAI) and was involved in electoral support activities. Since then, among other things, he has focused on South-South co-operation issues on which he has written and published extensively.



Introduction

During its remaining tenure on the UN Security Council and as rotating Chair of the African Union, South Africa will have to engage decisively in the conduct of strategic geopolitical power diplomacy if it is to regain the ‘punching above its weight’ momentum on the international scene it once enjoyed. The challenge here is compounded by a global pandemic in the form of COVID-19 and South Africa’s weakened domestic economic predicament. All combined, these developments make 2020 something of a ‘do or die’ moment that, if not decisively acted upon, will place the country in a disadvantageous diplomatic position on the continent and internationally for years to come. This is because of the unfavourably aligned global balance of forces working against progressive internationalism and how this anti-progressive alignment is unfolding on the continent, including within SADC. South African foreign policy actors will have to contend with the interrelated diplomacies of Morocco, Israel and France interacting with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in navigating an international strategic landscape that has shifted to the right. They will also have to contend with Russia’s re-engagement with Africa and an increasingly confrontational relationship between China and the United States. Diplomats in Tshwane and abroad will thus have to ensure that the general shift to the right in the international strategic landscape does not entrench itself on the African continent, placing progressive forces on the defensive.

Such an environment is basically hostile to South Africa’s national interests within Southern Africa and Africa as a whole. It means that Tshwane and Luthuli House will have to quickly balance a diplomacy emphasising historical and contemporary solidarity with a more power-political posture of hard-nosed strategy and leveraging calculus in order to ensure that solidarity is backed up with material actions in line with the country’s strategic objectives. As such, this occasional paper attempts to sketch out the current global balance of forces in play and how they align with geopolitical dynamics within Africa itself. This is against the challenge of a prevailing South African diplomatic culture that fears coming across to neighbours in the region and beyond as ‘hegemonic’ when, in fact, what may be called for in this environment is the nuanced application of solidarity backed up by the smart use of power and carrot-and-stick diplomacy.

In order for South Africa to strategically navigate the changing geopolitical landscape, there is need for an assessment of the state’s capacity and the diplomatic tools available for implementing foreign policy priorities. This will enable a coordinated approach to international relations, especially on the African continent. This means ensuring that the manner in which the country’s social,



political, and economic resources are deployed aligns to the strategic objectives of the country. This has become increasingly important as strategic provinces and cities are sometimes governed by different political parties. In an environment of growing political competition at home, a multi-party and multi-stakeholder consultative process outlining South Africa's national interests and aspirational role in the world will have to take place. As the governing party, the ANC must lead this process at the political level in order to ensure better coordination amongst departments at the national and sub-national level involved in international relations.

Despite an economy faced with various challenges, the country still possesses various diplomatic assets to drive its overall foreign policy objectives. However, in order to increase the impact of the various diplomatic tools available, there will have to be better coordination at the national and sub-national levels, including how the country uses its development finance instruments through structures such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), the African Renaissance Fund (ARF) and various other government departments. It will also have to better coordinate the international relations work of provinces, cities, and various state agencies. This requires an approach that proactively works with non-state actors operating at track two and track three diplomacy to ensure that foreign policy and the strategic orientation of the country is discussed with a broader section of society. However, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, while consultation with scholars, NGOs, the private sector, and communities is important in the policy process, decisions ultimately have to be taken by elected officials. While going through a process of trimming the number of foreign representatives through Embassies, High Commissions, and Consul-General offices, the country still has a large diplomatic footprint in the world, and this can be used to good effect in navigating a global order that challenges many of the values and aspirations of progressive internationalism.

The Global Strategic Landscape: A Reactionary International

The global balance of forces, since at least 2016 when Donald Trump was elected US president, represents an international right wing anti-globalist ascendancy. The movement towards populism and right wing nationalism has unfolded as a trend transcending West and non-West and, in the process, has also been reflected in the state of the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS), in which progressive internationalist South Africa has witnessed some of its fellow BRICS members move to the right. While not yet explicitly affecting state to state relations, these trends do pose important questions for the ANC's international relations,



especially in terms of party to party relations as former allies have in recent years been removed from power. Despite some of the changes at a domestic level, BRICS remains of strategic value to South Africa, having already operationalised the establishment of the Africa Regional Center (ARC) of the BRICS New Development Bank. What needs to be explored is the capacity of South Africa to utilize the ARC, along with DBSA to finance strategic regional projects on the continent, especially in the SACU-SADC region. SA corporates will need to be more consciously involved in such a strategy, especially through the BRICS Business Forum. There is already an expectation that the NDB will eventually lend outside of BRICS countries, creating an opportunity for South Africa to lead a BRICS Africa Strategy, with the development finance of the NDB forming an important part of the operationalization of a BRICS-Africa Strategy.

In Europe, the traditional Centre Left Social Democratic Parties have also been struggling for some years now as right wing movements are increasingly on the ascendancy, also spurred on by the migration crisis. In the process, the European Union finds itself in a squeeze play between Trump and Putin, especially in an era where Trump's 'America First' approach has put it at odds with its traditional transatlantic allies in Europe. To compound matters, the Europeans are likely to be simultaneously seized with the matter of Brexit throughout the year, as the UK has vowed to not extend the transition period beyond December 2020.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu adds yet another dimension to this rightist alignment interacting with Tel-Aviv's axis with anti-Arab Spring Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE. This same status-quo threat perception in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi extended to their tensions with Qatar and its relations with Iran which earned Doha the assault on its security in the Trump-backed embargo against it by the Saudis and UAE. Turkey has come to Qatar's defense amid the untenable pressure of the Saudis and Emiratis who have also been forced on the retreat in their campaign against the Iran-aligned Houthis in Yemen. Now, however, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have shifted their attention elsewhere into the Maghreb and Northeast Africa along with Egypt, again in competition with the other non-Arab pro-Muslim Brotherhood power, Turkey.

In the Northeast African Horn, the democratic revolutions in Ethiopia and especially Sudan have earned the intense interest of the Saudis and Emiratis offset in Khartoum by the latter's accommodation of Ankara with a basing presence on Suakin Island. The fact that Ethiopia, in conjunction with the African Union, was able to navigate the current fragile democratizing transition in Sudan in spite of the anti-democratic regional pressures exerted by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE (in their backing of the military against the civilian opposition) is indication of some measure



of political will for countering such pressures. These pressures, however, also include leverage by the US linked to Sudan being taken off its State Sponsors of Terrorism List which, under the Trump administration, may be conditioned on Khartoum normalizing its relations with Israel. The assassination attempt on Sudan's new Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, goes to demonstrate the lengths that others are prepared to go in order to destabilise Sudan's democratic transition.

These dynamics surrounding Sudan's post-Bashir transition are further complicated by the Ethio-Egyptian tug-of-war over the future of the River Nile given Addis Ababa's progress on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The fact that Washington inserted itself into mediating on the GERD between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan while recently being rebuked by Addis for being biased toward Cairo further reflects the *US-Egypt-Saudi-UAE sub-alignment within the broader regional and global rightist alignment*. Yet, Beijing appears less committed if not strategically noncommittal in these dynamics as they play out in the Horn and elsewhere in Africa.

China appears similarly on the side lines as one moves further from Africa's northeast, west into the Maghreb. Here, the internationalized civil war in Libya has become the epicentre of these resource motivated alignment/counter-alignment dynamics overshadowing that other bone of regional contention affecting the integrity of the AU, Western Sahara. However, the same Franco-Moroccan regional calculus informing intransigence in resolving Western Sahara in a manner satisfactorily addressing AU self-determinative and regional integrationist imperatives are interrelated with the dynamics surrounding the Libyan conflict. The geopolitical power-struggle over Libya replicates Syria in as much as it comes down to 'point-counterpoint' between Russia and Turkey with Egypt now threatening war with Ankara over its military aid to the UN-backed GNA – all in violation of the UN arms embargo. Meanwhile, these various actors are making mad dash scrambles for allies, clients and influence in sub-Saharan Africa within an AU landscape partitioned at the Saharan Sudano-Sahelian fault-line dividing the North African Maghreb from the rest of the continent.

All these dynamics add layers of complexity to South Africa's strategic calculus, challenging the ANC and government to come up with strategies of navigating a changing geopolitical landscape in the various diplomatic tracks. In such a changing landscape, where even traditional allies are taking positions not in line with South Africa's interests, solidarity on its own will not be enough to ensure the success of South Africa's foreign policy. Indeed solidarity will have to be backed up with material action, leveraging from the country's various diplomatic tools at a political and economic level.



Implications for South Africa: Towards a Proactive Strategic Engagement

In the absence of a proactive strategic engagement on the part of South Africa, right-wing *international South* augmented by right-wing *international North* will continue to rapidly make headway in their economic and 'soft power' diplomacies throughout Africa, including in South Africa. Given the adopted policy resolutions of the ANC's 54th Conference, the country has had to navigate coordinated moves by Morocco and Israel, with the Saudis and UAE more focused on the Horn-Red Sea nexus. These forays present incredibly high-stakes in 2020 against the backdrop of a US November election, the outcome of which, may have major bearing on post-AGOA African Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) prospects already under pressure from the Trump-Uhuru Kenyatta US-Kenya FTA initiative. Adding more urgency to this picture during South Africa's AU chairmanship tenure is the prospect of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) succeeding it in 2021 amid DRC receiving prime strategic targeting by Israel whereas, in spite of all invested by SA in DRC going back to the Nelson Mandela presidency, there seems reportedly little to show for it in terms of inter-African balance of forces favorable to Tshwane. Perhaps prospect of an Israel-influenced DRC chairing the AU might be mitigated by the 'troika' mechanism of continuity that will enable South Africa to retain post-chair influence depending on who the other troika member is likely to be and how close they are diplomatically aligned with South Africa.

The fact that a South African, Wamkele Mene, was chosen as Secretary-General of the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) headquartered in Accra is a positive reflection of South Africa's continuing clout on the continent, especially in beating back a late bid by Nigeria to place one of its own as inaugural CFTA secretary-general. But, with Morocco and Israel spearheading a diplomatic offensive on the continent with, among other things, the aim of mobilizing anti-self-determination momentum against the Sahrawis and the Palestinians, thus running counter to Tshwane's aspirational progressive internationalist agenda, there is need for some stock-taking on which AU member states are among the more diplomatically and geopolitically reliable in South African efforts to promote a pan-African agenda of continental strategic autonomy in navigating the diverse range of external pressures vying for geopolitical-economic leverage within the hyper-fragmented inter-African landscape.

Within the SACU-SADC sub-continental region, the allied liberation movement democratic regime in Namibia would appear especially strategic as Windhoek is a member of SACU as well as SADC amid a history of allied relations with SWAPO going back to the liberation struggle. Non-SACU SADC members Zimbabwe and Mozambique, both heavily interdependent with, as well as dependent on, South Africa, fall within this post-liberation orbit as well. Moreover, South Africa has an increasing

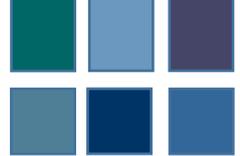


regional security interest in resolving Mozambique's quasi-Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado province (where Russian actors have become heavily involved) threatening to expand the African Indian Ocean littoral Islamist terror threat from the Somali Coast southward into SADC.

Within SADC, Morocco has sought to influence Zambia to de-recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) through Rabat's economic diplomacy, although Zambia quickly denied it had derecognized Western Sahara, instead stating that Morocco's rejoining of the AU gave an opportunity to resolve the decolonisation of Western Sahara. Lesotho was also in a similar position, with reports claiming it has de-recognized SADR, before clarifying its position amidst domestic pressure. Eswatini has also been a target for Morocco's economic and political diplomacy in recent years, placing a challenge for South Africa in how to enforce the SADC and AU position on Western Sahara now that Morocco is part of the AU, and thus bound by its positions. The manner in which the relationship between Morocco and South Africa evolves will thus remain of great importance to the changing geopolitical landscape in Africa.

Beyond SADC, Abiy Ahmed's democratic but fragile regime in Ethiopia welcomes Tshwane's diplomatic support which should also serve as an important factor in Addis' Nile tug-of-war with Egypt over the GERD in offsetting the apparent US 'mediating' tilt toward Cairo. As AU chair, SA needs to be more mediating interventionist in offsetting the US role which has hit a road block with Ethiopia charging Washington with inaccuracy in its information in terms of showing bias toward Egypt. For example, might there not be some middle-ground in the timing of Ethiopia's filling up the GERD? Perhaps, Khartoum might be the SA focal point in depolarizing the Addis-Cairo stalemate. Elsewhere in the region, South Africa is heavily invested in stabilizing South Sudan during Ramaphosa's AU Chair tenure so that a major expanse of Horn political geography preoccupies Tshwane's 2020 agenda. Eventually, South Sudan and a democratized Sudan might be re-federated within an expanded East African Community.

Such preoccupations are critically geostrategic within the context of stabilizing the eastern and Southern African wing of the CFTA within the 'Cape to Cairo' COMESA-SADC-East African Community Tripartite FTA. In the process, this economic geography of fledgling trade integration should inform what needs to become another critical focus for South Africa in how it addresses the challenges of the global rightist alignment penetrating much of sub-Saharan Africa, including the SACU-SADC region and interacting with the cultivating of allies in continental affairs focused on accelerated regional integration and upholding existing AU positions on Western Sahara and Palestine.



The Strategic Importance of Regional Integration

In a very real sense, amid the global democratic/anti-democratic revolution-counterrevolution dynamics manifest within the geopolitical affairs of a fragmented Africa subjected to an unprecedented 'scramble' for the continent's resources and markets, South Africa can only defend against such pressures by accelerating the pace of regional integration within the SACU-SADC boundaries of subequatorial Africa in which South Africa is the epicenter. Embarking on such a southern pan-African journey within the 'Cape to Cairo' wing of the CFTA, means 'battening down the hatches' in terms of a regional geopolitical consolidation of forces within the SACU-SADC region wherein South Africa begins the protracted leveraging of its *objective* hegemony into the constructing of a closer and more integrated regional community, which may eventually progress into a regional political federation thereby limiting the scope of maneuver by external powers into the affairs of a major portion of the continent. This will require that senior respected diplomats be consistently deployed to Southern Africa to demonstrate the importance the country places in the region.

Indeed Southern Africa can be seen as constituting part of South Africa's core interests in its geopolitical calculations as incursions into this region that act against the country's foreign policy interests hurt its core ability to exercise agency in international relations. This should not be interpreted as a naked geopolitical power play as much as a more nuanced strategy of applying material actions and resources to solidarity efforts and ensuring a cohesive and expanded geopolitical community comprising greater Southern Africa.

Now, of course, there should be any number of ways to speed up regional integration 'at their own pace' given the strategic economic and resulting geopolitical leverage South Africa enjoys over SACU and SADC member states, yet chooses not to exert. This is largely due to the notion of not wanting to appear 'hegemonic' or come across as the region's 'Big Brother' when in fact such inhibitions only prolong the stagnating predicament of a major political geography within the fragmented African landscape and emboldens those with opposing interests to South Africa. Indeed, much of the rest of SACU and SADC have arguably become adept at exploiting these peculiarly South African inhibitions to their advantage in their understandable ambivalence regarding South Africa and how they relate to this country as the most developed on the continent. Further integration would ensure that the region evolves into a highly integrated Southern African community, with SACU as the catalyst. This would transform SACU into a 'community union' that, through accession mediated by a regionalized African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), evolves into an expanding political community encompassing non-SACU members of SADC as well.



Conclusion

Only through a consolidating of African balance of forces within the continent generally, and Southern Africa in particular, will South Africa empower itself to better navigate the external pressures emanating from the currently aligned global balance of forces that, at this point in time, are not as favorable to South Africa as they once were. Whether South Africans can muster the geopolitical, let alone the political imagination to take the country's post-apartheid transition to the next pan-African level of regional political integration remains to be seen.

This will require a more strategic approach in navigating power dynamics within the region, Africa as a whole as well as globally. This does not necessarily mean abandoning principles of solidarity or adopting a cheque book diplomacy approach. However, it does require coming to terms with how 'solidarity' on its own is woefully insufficient as a tool of statecraft in the exercise of diplomacy and navigating South Africa's ambivalent relations with much of the rest of Africa. It means overcoming the self-imposed feelings of guilt over a history of Southern African destabilization about which Afrikaner nationalism must be held to account. The currently unfavorable global balance of forces in their present alignment coupled with South Africa's difficult economic predicament means that a more creatively hard-nosed approach to the rest of Africa and the rest of the world is urgently required.

