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South Africa in the World

Navigating the Muddle of Middle Power Diplomacy

Closed Workshop Report: Hosted by the Institute for Global Dialogue and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, South Africa



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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, and catalytic dialogue and stakeholder interface on global dynamics that have an impact on South Africa and Africa.

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Introduction

This report reflects a closed-Chatham House rules workshop hosted by the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD), associated with UNISA, in partnership with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Office in South Africa, and took place during South Africa's G20 Presidency in 2025. The report explores the evolving contours of South African foreign policy within an increasingly volatile and fragmented global landscape, whereby there is a tension with how countries project their strength, and the need to be aware of the possibilities of how countries reposition themselves. For South Africa, this entails capturing the complex dynamics shaping its external engagements vis-a-vis the broader international system. Participants noted that while South Africa seeks to assert itself as a principled and active middle power, it does so at a time when the global order is undergoing rapid and uncertain transformation.

As traditional great powers confront both internal instability and external pressures, rising middle powers find themselves with an opportunity to help shape the emerging global order. These actors, South Africa among them, are increasingly called upon to balance the interests of both developed and emerging economies. This is a pivotal moment, marked by a turn toward transactional values and hyper-regionalization in order to shore up individual country stability, over broader multilateralism. Global institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are facing growing skepticism due to their perceived inability to address pressing issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and transnational insecurity. At the same time, rising political polarization within states is eroding their capacity to respond to these challenges, even as global competition for influence intensifies and power structures continue to shift.

In this fluid context, emerging players such as the Gulf states have stepped in to fill leadership vacuums, though often replicating older, dependency-driven models rather than forging truly transformative alternatives. While there is a growing desire within the Global South to reclaim agency and drive structural reform, this momentum must be understood not as a permanent solution, but as part of a complex, transitional phase; one that carries its own contradictions and risks of reproducing unequal hierarchies under new banners.

Within this landscape, South Africa's foreign policy faces both opportunity and constraint. A phrase fast-becoming a cliché.

As South Africa seeks to align its foreign policy more closely with national development goals, questions remain about its positioning and impact within a multipolar, transactional world order.

These dynamics raise several critical questions at the heart of this report:

1. **How are middle powers defined in the current geopolitical context, who are the new sets of powers, and can middle powers still play a role in shaping the global order?**
2. **South Africa seeks global transformation and reform of multilateral institutions, but given the superficial consensus that underpins fragile global stability, what relevance does this pursuit now have?**
3. **Which of South Africa's "club memberships"—such as BRICS or the G20—have the most strategic impact in shaping its approach to transactional politics and coalition-building in fragmented international spaces?**

Participants in the discussion emphasized the country's use of multi-vectoring strategies and the pursuit of strategic non-alignment, alongside tools such as international law, regional alliances, and soft power. Yet these ambitions are challenged by resource limitations, coalition politics, and an often incoherent articulation of national interest. The sustainability of think tanks and academic institutions that help shape foreign policy was also raised, with concern over declining funding and long-term viability.

Word Association Exercise



Middle power frameworks for 2025 and beyond

The question of what defines a middle powers¹ is increasingly relevant, particularly when examining broader issues of international relations and the evolving role of countries like South Africa. Traditionally, the concept of middle powers was applied to nations such as Canada and the Nordic countries. While not aspiring to superpower status, they exercised considerable influence on global affairs through their diplomatic, economic, and political engagements. These nations were able to shape international policy despite their relatively smaller size and limited military capabilities.

One key reflection that emerged from the discussion is the need to revisit and clarify the concept of a middle power within the current global system. The conversation highlighted the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways in which participants described the international system—using terms that reflect fragmentation, volatility, and uncertainty. This underscores the challenge of defining what constitutes a middle power in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex global architecture. What does it mean to be a middle power in the current architecture, where the international system is in a state of flux and within the context of systemic issues?

In the context of the present and future global landscape, however, the boundaries of what constitutes a middle power are becoming more fluid. The rise of emerging economies like Turkey, the Gulf States, and Indonesia has expanded the traditional understanding of middle powers. This raises the question of whether middle powers are still limited to established players or if new actors, especially those from the Global South, should be included in the category. For instance, in Africa, the definition of middle powers becomes even more complex. While countries like South Africa clearly fit the traditional model, what about other growing African powers? Are countries such as Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and perhaps Kenya also considered middle powers as they increasingly assert influence on the international stage?

This is a crucial point for the future of middle power frameworks. As these African nations rise in global prominence, it is important to examine whether the traditional middle power framework can adequately account for emerging players from regions outside of the West. In the context of 2025 and beyond, the role of middle powers will likely shift as these nations, particularly those in Africa, take on more significant roles in global governance and diplomacy.

¹ A middle powers “are influential states that sit below superpowers and great powers.” ([World Economic Forum, 2024](#)). Middle powers, with large economies and military size cannot overpower super powers but “still exert meaningful influence beyond their borders, often through diplomacy, coalition-building, and norm-setting” ([Atlas Institute for International Affairs, 2025](#)).

For a middle power to make use of its traditional features for diplomatic engagement, it is assumed that the country will have experience in;

- Serving as diplomatic mediators to act as bridge-builders, use soft power, engage in dialogue, and add to negotiations to shape international norms and agreements.
- Participating in multilateral engagements that are closely aligned to norm-driven interpretations within the topics of human rights, environmental sustainability or economic development.
- Setting norms in emerging and existing global issues like climate, nuclear non-proliferation, human rights whereby it is important to set or consistently implement international standards.
- Holding degrees of autonomy in relation to various actors, middle powers maintain and pursue an independent foreign policy.
- Pursuing regional influence to assert its practices globally, especially when dealing with cross-cutting issues, like security among others.

South Africa was highlighted as a strong example of a middle power, with concrete instances of its diplomatic capacity and leadership on key international issues, particularly in advancing African interests in global institutions and policy discussions. The discussion also emphasized the importance of regional support in strengthening a state's middle power status. While there was recognition that a country can act as a middle power even without broad regional backing, the consensus was that regional support significantly enhances a state's ability to influence global affairs. This is particularly relevant given the relational nature of middle power status, it is not solely determined by material capabilities, but also by a state's initiative, agency, and willingness to fill leadership vacuums in the international system.

Ultimately, middle power-hood is tied to active engagement and the capacity to lead on specific international issues, rather than size or traditional power metrics alone. There was discussion around whether South Africa can be considered an aging middle power, a term that invites critical reflection. The notion raises the question: does a middle power "age" in the literal sense, or do the attributable indicators, such as diplomatic influence, economic leverage, normative leadership, and regional credibility, begin to decline over time?

There is a perception that [emerging] middle powers have the capacity to challenge the status quo, however they themselves need to remain pragmatic actors which impacts on the potential and capacity of their interest to make various changes to their foreign policy approaches. Moreover, this makes an assumption that all middle powers will behave according to a collective moral code.

Middle Powers

Evolving Roles in Global Affairs



Redefining Middle Powers

The concept expands beyond traditional nations, embracing new actors from the Global South.

Africa's Emerging Leaders

Countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia join South Africa as influential players on the global stage.



Norm-Setting Role

Middle powers influence international norms in human rights, sustainability, and security issues.

Independent Diplomacy

These powers pursue their foreign policies while engaging with larger blocs for regional stability.



Active Engagement

Success hinges on active involvement and leadership on specific issues over mere size or power.



Future Frameworks

Middle power-hood is tied to active engagement and the capacity to lead on specific international issues, rather than size or traditional power metrics alone. However, emerging middle powers are seen as having the potential to challenge the status quo, but their need to remain pragmatic limits how far they can shift their foreign policy approaches.

Foreign Policy

Exploring South Africa's Strategies

Commitment

What is South Africa's commitment to implementing African solutions for its challenges?



Implementation

What works in the implementation of South Africa's foreign policy and what are the next steps?



Prioritization

Amid various commitments, what should South Africa prioritize in foreign policy?



Tools

What tools are currently used versus those desired for effective foreign policy?

Strategy

How will South Africa's foreign policy evolve to balance solidarity with strategic power?



Evaluation

What mechanisms are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of our foreign policy initiatives?



Adaptation

How is South Africa preparing for a changing global order and its impact on foreign policy?



Strategic Insights

South Africa's foreign policy must adapt to evolving challenges and priorities.

- Prioritize commitments
- Evaluate effectiveness
- Enhance communication

Principal Questions about South African Foreign Policy

Over the years industry specialists have raised several pointed questions that centred on issues of strategy, adaptability and communication.

- What is South Africa's commitment to African solutions?
- What works in foreign policy implementation, what is next?
- Amid the many commitments, national platforms and institutions, what takes priority?
Can we start to prioritize?
- What tools do we have versus what we want to use?
- When will South Africa's foreign policy evolve in a sense of remaining committed to principles of solidarity, however, also in a more explicit strategic use of material power to achieve its objectives?
- What other mechanisms are in place for evaluating the effectiveness of our foreign policy initiatives?
- What are we preparing for in terms of this global order that's in a state of change, and how does that then contextualize what South African foreign policy is responding to?
- Is there an ability for South Africa's foreign policy, policy makers and also at the implementation level, to inject a level of coherence and also breach a capacity ambitions gap?
- Is there a plan to upskill the Department of International Relations and Cooperation to meet the needs of our ambitious foreign policy?
- In terms of responding to governing imperatives, the new reality of coalition politics, and what that means for foreign policy, but also adaptability in the sense of its different terrain, both locally and internationally.
- Can South Africa be more strategic about its foreign policy and how foreign policy serves national interests?
- How can South Africa be more successful in communicating its foreign policy messaging, domestically and globally?
- So even though we are confronted with these very difficult questions, how do we see tomorrow?

These questions remain consistent among industry experts.

Evaluating Effectiveness of Foreign Policy Initiatives

A key challenge in assessing South Africa's foreign policy lies in the absence of robust mechanisms for evaluating its effectiveness. While the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) has often highlighted South Africa's role in multilateralism, peacebuilding, and promoting African solidarity, there is limited evidence of how the internal structured monitoring and evaluation tools can be shared with think tanks and academics to measure whether these initiatives deliver tangible outcomes. Performance indicators and impact assessments exist within government structures, DIRCO included. However, the ability of think tanks and academics to provide sustained, high-quality support to government structures on foreign policy is under significant pressure due to a shrinking funding environment.

While there is an expectation that these institutions continue to offer access and expertise as a public good, this creates a vulnerability for the South African government, one that cannot be addressed easily. Participants felt that South Africa needs to prepare for the evolution of the global order. Issues such as climate change, global inequality, technology-driven disruption, and shifting trade patterns demand a forward-looking strategy. South Africa must consider not only how to navigate these changes but also how to leverage them in support of domestic development goals. This requires a sharper articulation of long-term foreign policy objectives that align with national priorities.

Another important consideration is the role of legacy principles—such as non-alignment, the pursuit of human rights, and South-South cooperation—in shaping South Africa's external engagements. These principles, rooted in the country's democratic transition, continue to guide South Africa's foreign policy. However, their application in today's rapidly shifting global order requires careful adaptation. The challenge is to balance continuity with pragmatism, ensuring that values-driven diplomacy does not undermine strategic or economic interests.

Looking ahead, there is an intense demand from think tanks and universities for South Africa to put forward its priorities in an unapologetic manner. Understandably, intensifying geopolitical competition requires a degree of generalised logic to foreign policy and participation in global governance institutions. But there is a desire to see how South Africa intends to make use of its positioning within groupings such as BRICS and the G20, and institutions like the African Union, and the United Nations.

Finally, the effectiveness of foreign policy will depend heavily on institutional capacity. Upskilling the Department of International Relations and Cooperation is a necessary step, as

the demands of twenty-first century diplomacy require expertise in areas such as digital diplomacy, economic negotiation, and climate diplomacy. Building institutional resilience through professional development, recruitment of specialised talent, and modernised systems of operation will enable South Africa to engage more effectively in complex international arenas.

Upskilling in South Africa's Foreign Policy

South Africa's ambitious foreign policy engagement on the global stage necessitates a well-resourced and capable foreign service. To support its wide-ranging diplomatic objectives that include multilateral engagements and peacebuilding efforts to economic diplomacy and advocacy for global reform, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) must be adequately staffed and equipped. The department currently adopts a generalist approach to diplomacy, prioritizing broad-based training over the development of area or thematic specialists. While this allows for greater flexibility in deployments, it may limit the depth of expertise required to effectively engage in complex or region-specific issues.

As South Africa expands its diplomatic footprint, the balance between generalist versatility and specialist knowledge becomes increasingly critical. The department faces ongoing challenges in aligning its diplomatic capacity with the scope of South Africa's international engagements. DIRCO's human resources capacity has been under pressure due to limited recruitment, budgetary constraints, and a lack of consistent professional development. While the department emphasizes a generalist approach to diplomacy, allowing diplomats to serve in various regions or multilateral platforms, this has come at the expense of developing deep, area-specific expertise.

The need for a more strategic investment in building a skilled, well-resourced, and regionally knowledgeable foreign service is becoming increasingly urgent. However, this can also create pockets of excellence that place immense pressure on highly skilled individuals. In such cases, a small number of highly skilled individuals are tasked with managing critical portfolios, often shouldering disproportionate responsibility without adequate institutional support. This not only leads to burnout and inefficiencies but also creates vulnerabilities in the system when those individuals are unavailable or move on. To avoid over-reliance on a few experts, South Africa must adopt a more sustainable model, one that builds broader institutional capacity, strengthens knowledge transfer, and fosters a pipeline of well-trained diplomats with both generalist and specialist skills.

The current limitations within DIRCO's human resource capacity have significant implications for the coherence and effectiveness of South Africa's foreign policy. Without a broad and well-supported diplomatic corps, efforts to maintain strategic consistency are undermined, as policy execution becomes uneven and overly dependent on individual expertise rather than institutional strength. This also weakens South Africa's ability to uphold its principled commitments to solidarity while advancing its strategic interests, as there may be insufficient depth to engage meaningfully across diverse regions and issues.

Furthermore, the projection of material power—essential for achieving foreign policy goals—is limited when there is inadequate capacity to translate resources into sustained diplomatic influence. Lastly, South Africa's role as a middle power in shaping the global order depends on its ability to participate effectively in multilateral platforms and build coalitions, which becomes increasingly difficult without a larger, well-trained, and regionally knowledgeable diplomatic workforce. Strengthening DIRCO's institutional capacity is therefore essential to achieving a coherent, principled, and impactful foreign policy.

Multi-Vectoring in Foreign Policy and long-term thinking

Multi-vectoring in foreign policy, where countries aim to reduce geopolitical dependence on any one actor, is viewed as a positive and strategic approach. For South Africa, this includes; 1) maintaining a strategic balance between competing powers like the US, Russia and China, 2) diversifying diplomatic and economic ties across multiple regions, 3) preserving autonomy over decision-making, and 4) responding to global change and remaining flexible.

The discussion highlighted the shifting global power dynamics resulting from increasing U.S. disengagement, particularly from multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. In this context, the European Union is emerging as a more proactive actor, notably increasing its defense spending and adopting a more assertive foreign policy posture. Several participants noted that this transition opens space for South Africa to revitalize its relationship with Europe, especially as the EU positions itself as grouping of middle powers committed to multilateralism and global governance. A significant aspect of the EU's evolving foreign policy is its strategic focus on climate change, which not only informs its external engagements but also shapes its budgetary priorities, including defense. The EU has shown particular interest in South Africa's climate change bill and broader legislative efforts, viewing them as key areas for deeper cooperation. However, there were also critical reflections on the EU's actual influence, with concerns raised about its declining global power and limited effectiveness in shaping

international climate governance. These trends underscore the complex interplay between environmental diplomacy, strategic interests, and the reconfiguration of global leadership.

The crisis of consensus and the need for a forward-looking approach to foreign policy was also discussed, with more emphasis on the importance of translating big picture principles into practical tools and strategies. This includes the need for long-term thinking in foreign policy to inform day-to-day actions and the need for more detailed and flexible planning to address both long-term goals and immediate challenges.

National Interests, Domestication and Democratization of Foreign Policy

Global conditions will squeeze the South African economy by; 1) protectionist measures potentially reducing the demand for South African exports, 2) investors would seek safer markets during global uncertainty, the rand weakens, making imports more expensive and weakening the rand, 3) general geopolitical instability can trigger oil and food price spikes that raises inflation, 4) South Africa is already struggling with debt, weak growth, and governance concerns, exposing it to higher interest rates. Overall, South Africa's domestic conditions are set to feel tougher.

The democratization of foreign policy and the involvement of the masses is imperative. The speakers highlighted the importance of engaging with diverse perspectives and views for a more inclusive and participatory approach to foreign policy.

Conclusion

South Africa's position as a leading middle power on the continent is increasingly being challenged. The gap between South Africa and other African countries is no longer as wide as it was 20 years ago. Countries like Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Kenya are asserting themselves more strongly on regional and global platforms, competing for similar roles and influence. As a result, South Africa can no longer rely on its previous status or be assumed to be the natural "gateway to Africa." This competition forces South Africa to reassess its comparative advantages and to be more strategic in identifying where it adds the most value on the international stage.

At the same time, the effectiveness of middle power diplomacy often depends on regional support. While it is possible for a country to act as a middle power without strong backing from its neighbours, such support greatly enhances its legitimacy and reach. In South Africa's case, strengthening regional relationships could be key to regaining momentum and expanding its influence.

There is also a broader question of how countries like South Africa define their international role and contribution. Influence is not determined by size alone—it also depends on the ability to lead on key issues, to act with consistency, and to take initiative when leadership is lacking globally. While some states, such as those in the Gulf, are willing to act alone when necessary, middle powers like South Africa often achieve more through collaboration, but must also be prepared to act independently when required. The challenge going forward is to sharpen strategic focus, improve alignment between ambition and capacity, and reinforce credibility in both regional and global forums.





