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South Africa and SADC: Options for Constructive Regional Leadership

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Summary

Notwithstanding its economic and political dominance in southern Africa, South Africa is bound to the region in a relationship of interdependence. Pretoria's leadership in efforts to create a regional community where human development and security are within the reach of all citizens is therefore indispensable. While immediate post-apartheid administrations appeared to have embraced the leadership implications of this shared destiny, South Africa has gradually become less assertive in the exercise of its regional responsibility, with severe implications for SADC's development integration project. Since 1994 Pretoria has only intermittently, and reluctantly so, demonstrated leadership in SADC. This policy brief examines South Africa's engagement in SADC and makes the case for a dynamic and constructive leadership role founded on three pillars – a national development consensus; strong state capacity; and the ability to identify and tap into the agency of other potential regional champions of integration.

Introduction

Global Insight aims to provide members of the policy community with concise but trenchant analyses of topical issues. Comments and suggestions are invited.

On the eve of the millennium, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) launched an ambitious integration project, which promised to consolidate the gains of political liberation and fast-track human development in the region. Two decades down the line, most of the key institutions for regional integration are largely inefficient and progress towards human development in the region has been painfully slow. Many factors have been put forward to explain the lethargic state of regional integration and development in SADC. These include the lack of political will among member states to integrate for developmental purposes, differing levels of economic development and value

systems, as well as the endurance of colonial relations of dependence and exploitation. But, for some observers, the primary drawback to developmental regionalism in southern Africa has been the absence of reliable champions of the project. With the most developed economy in the region and a relatively democratic and stable political order, many have looked up to South Africa to assume this responsibility. However, since 1994 Pretoria has only intermittently, and reluctantly so, demonstrated leadership in SADC. This policy brief examines South Africa's engagement in SADC and makes the case for a dynamic and constructive leadership role founded on three pillars – a national development consensus; strong state capacity; and the ability to identify and tap into the agency of other potential regional champions of integration.

SADC's slow journey towards developmental regionalism

The transformation of the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC) into the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in the 1990s was accompanied by expectations of a new era of regional cooperation in southern Africa; one that would move beyond the regime security focus of SADCC and the Frontline States to engender greater convergence and subsequent integration of the development visions and strategies of the states in the region. The concept of developmental regionalism that underpinned this 'transition' suggested that improving the wellbeing of the people of southern Africa would henceforth be the *raison d'être* of regional cooperation efforts. Developmental regionalism is understood here as a development-focused integration agenda, which ensures that the benefits of integration are shared by all member states, and which has sustainable human development as its ultimate outcome. Over the years SADC has developed a set of policy instruments and has grappled with the corresponding imperative to weave an appropriate institutional framework that would deliver on its ambitious integration and development agenda. Following an amendment to its founding treaty in 2001, the institutional structure of SADC was reconstituted to allow the regional Secretariat to become the central organ

for strategic planning and management; coordination and harmonisation of member states' policies and strategies; as well as monitoring and evaluating the implementation of regional policies and strategies. In 2003, the priority areas for integration outlined in different SADC protocols were streamlined into a Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP), which has become the organisation's blueprint for socio-economic integration and development. A similar framework, the Strategic Indicative Plan for the Organ (SIPO) was adopted in 2004 and revised in 2010 to guide the implementation of SADC's protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, which was signed in 2001 partly in recognition that successful integration is contingent on peace, security and political stability in the region.

Despite this elaborate policy and institutional framework, the SADC region, as Garth le Pere puts it, 'continues to labour under the weight of distinct human development vulnerabilities',¹ suggestive of the slow progress towards development integration. According to the draft report of the mid-term review of the RISDP, there's a huge backlog in the implementation of agreed policies, programmes and strategies, so much that a number of important integration milestones and targets have already been missed and the prospects of meeting others remains very low. Where there has been some progress in implementation, this has been characterised by inefficiency, with a corresponding shift of focus from development and poverty reduction to economic liberalisation.² Moreover, while the SADC Treaty identifies the 'evolution of common political values, systems and institutions' as one of the objectives of the organisation,³ nothing could be farther from this goal than the current reality in the region. As Nathan Laurie argues, the absence of common values among SADC member states, coupled with an unwillingness to surrender part of their sovereignty to regional mechanisms, means that the dream of a security community, which is underpinned by the internalisation of democratic norms of governance, promotion of human rights and respect for the rule of law across the region has for the most part also been deferred.⁴ These shortcomings are also symptomatic of the fragility and incoherence that currently define SADC's institutional architecture. Caught between the profession of grand

ideals and an enduring aversion among most member states to the notions of shared and popular sovereignty, institutions such as the regional Secretariat, the SADC Electoral Advisory Council (SEAC) and SADC National Committees (SNCs), which are key to bringing about the kind of regionalism that SADC aspires to, have either been operating sub-optimally or simply fallen into disuse as is the case with the latter.

In addition to the lack of common values and the will to part with a measure of state sovereignty, the slow pace of regional integration in the SADC has also been blamed on differing levels of economic development and capacity, which on the one hand has encouraged the emergence of winners and losers from the integration process, and on the other hand creates disincentives for cooperation on the part of the latter group of states. For some, nothing better explains SADC's failures than the abandonment, or better still the adulteration, by the region's ruling elite of the pan-African ideals of liberation and self-reliance. As Elling Tjonneland points out, most of these challenges are not unique to SADC, nor are they insurmountable. Overcoming these obstacles would require at least three conditions – the ability to provide benefits and compensation to weaker and poorer member states to enable them to cope with the costs of transition; strong regional institutions to drive cooperation and assist weaker states; and above all dynamic leadership to provide resources, incentives and direction to the integration project.⁵

The focus on development-oriented integration dictates that leadership in this context should not only come from member states or governments. The private sector and civil society groups also have an important leadership role to play, particularly in ensuring that there is no deviation from the common agenda and the benefits of integration are shared by all the citizens of the region. Nevertheless, because regional integration is built primarily around nation-states, the role of state-champions in SADC's integration project cannot be over-emphasised. More importantly, while countries such as Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe have in the past provided regional leadership and still display the potential to continue to do so, there is no gainsaying that any leadership constellation that would successfully drive SADC's integration project must directly or indirectly

have South Africa at its core. As southern Africa's *de facto* economic and political power, South Africa's leadership in SADC is indispensable for realising the organisation's developmental goals. But how has Pretoria engaged with SADC so far?

South Africa in SADC: Hegemony without leadership

South Africa's dominance in southern Africa, most notably in the economic sphere, is undisputed. South Africa accounts for 60% of SADC's total trade and about 70% of the region's GDP. It is also the country in the region with the most diversified economy and therefore critical to SADC's drive towards developmental regionalism.⁶ South Africa's relationship with the region comes with mutual benefits. As the figures above reveal, South African businesses enjoy unparalleled access to and dominance in regional markets. In varying degrees, the economies of other SADC member states also benefit from employment opportunities, skills transfer, tax revenues and global linkages as a result of the business activities of South African firms. This suggests a measure of interdependence between South Africa and the region, and prospects for mutual benefits from a successful integration scheme. Arguably, this incentive motivated South Africa's initial engagement with SADC. According to the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), 'since 1994 the South African government has regarded the Southern African region as the most important priority of its foreign relations'. It goes on to disclose that the importance South Africa attaches to the region motivated the immediate post-apartheid administration to adopt, as its first foreign policy document in August 1996, a 'Framework for Cooperation in Southern Africa'.⁷ South Africa's vision for the region, according to the Framework, 'is one of the highest possible degree of economic cooperation, mutual assistance where necessary and joint planning of regional development initiatives, leading to integration consistent with socio-economic, environmental and political realities'.⁸

Consistent with DIRCO's argument, South Africa played an active role in SADC in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and was crucial in efforts to revamp the

organisation's institutional framework with a view to aligning it to a more rationalised agenda. However, Pretoria has subsequently become reluctant to assume a more prominent political leadership role in SADC; a posture that has been blamed mainly on an enduring sensitivity to regional fears of domination. For example, since the late 1990s, and until recently, there has hardly been a South African national among the staff of the SADC Secretariat.⁹ This has worked to undermine regional integration in two ways. First, it has created a strategic vacuum in the leadership constellation in SADC, which no other state in the region is either willing or able to fill. Second, it is worth underlining that Pretoria's unwillingness or inability to lead SADC does not in any way detract from South Africa's economic hegemony in the region. South African companies continue to penetrate and dominate southern African markets, and in some instances their operations have worked to undermine the developmental objectives of SADC's integration agenda.¹⁰ Thus without a demonstrable political commitment to championing the institutions and processes that would produce equitable outcomes from regional integration, Pretoria's non-assertiveness in the wake of an integration process that is gradually succumbing to the logic of economic liberalisation, inadvertently reproduces the very perceptions of domination and exploitation it seeks to mitigate.

Towards a constructive leadership role for South Africa in SADC

It is evident from the preceding discussion that it is not in the interest of either South Africa or the region for Pretoria to continue sitting on the fence amidst crippling challenges to SADC's integration project. South Africa's leadership in SADC is indispensable. But to argue for a strong leadership role for South Africa on the basis of its economic dominance in the region is not to assume that raw economic and financial power naturally translates into the capacity to lead. Leadership in this context requires enormous intellectual capacity, a well-articulated development vision and strategy, as well as unwavering political will and diplomatic influence. Arguably, South Africa has over the years not invested enough or capitalised on available opportunities to develop these

attributes. **First**, given its troubled history, South Africa has never enjoyed sufficient domestic consensus on its development trajectory, with the government, opposition parties, the private sector, labour, and other segments of society coalescing around different and sometimes competing development priorities and strategies. In this context, the influence of dominant market forces and not government policy seems to determine the extent to which the ideas of socio-economic transformation and people-centred development, which pervade official rhetoric, are actualised. This in itself reflects the inherent limits to South Africa's democratisation project, where although processes of political and economic empowerment have evolved fairly differently, the economic inequities of the past, which remain largely unaddressed, continue to undermine meaningful political participation and social cohesion. South Africa's regional engagement and broader foreign policy has not been immune to the influence of this highly unequal and contested domestic terrain. If anything, the fading momentum within the South African government to champion a people-centred regional integration agenda, even as the country increasingly positions itself as the economic gateway to Africa, has resonance with the domestic inertia to resolutely transform South Africa's political economy. A constructive leadership role for South Africa in the region hinges on a commitment to democratise economic power at home, a development model that will then be exported and championed in the region through SADC.

The **second** precondition flows from the first and speaks to the capacity to translate the domestic project of transformation into a regional development project. Political will aside, a number of South Africa's grand foreign policy visions have failed to materialise because of weak state capacity. This is not an argument that the South African policy machinery is devoid of intelligent, skilled and experienced personnel or that it is underfunded. The point here is that these resources have often not been harnessed strategically and intelligently in pursuit of identified priorities. To some extent, weak governmental capacity reflects unhealthy state-society relations in South Africa, which at times allows for the selection of foreign policy choices and the allocation of public resources with little accountability. The kind of leadership that South

Africa is expected to play in the region comes with the ability to rationalise the use of available state resources (both human and material) through effective systems of coordination, accountability and regeneration. This would be crucial in streamlining the often competing priorities of different government departments and rallying them around the integration agenda. Strong state capacity would also ensure that South Africa has reliable and sustained representation in regional bodies and capitals to promote its vision for the region. This brings us to the **third** point, for in essence, the agency of the South African state alone cannot be sufficient to drive the regional integration process in SADC. The success of Pretoria's regional leadership will depend as much on the ability to tap into the complementary agency of other potential regional champions as it will on leveraging the country's inherent capacity. Here, efforts and resources would have to be invested in building coalitions with likeminded states, while also creating strategic linkages with elements of the private sector and civil society that share the regional development vision, in order to benefit from their comparative advantages as non-state actors.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

South Africa's economic dominance in southern Africa is uncontested. However, it is also true that a relationship of interdependence binds South Africa to the region. As such, Pretoria has an indispensable leadership role to play in efforts to create a regional community where human development and security are within the reach of all citizens. It is in this context, and on the basis of the analysis contained in this brief, that the following recommendations are made to reposition South Africa as a leading champion of development, peace and security in the southern African region:

- ***The South African government needs to reprioritise SADC in its foreign policy***, first by ensuring that other foreign policy priorities do not undermine SADC's development vision but instead reinforce it, but also by dedicating sufficient resources in pursuit of this vision. Related to this is the imperative to rationalise the foreign policy machinery for optimum performance.
- ***South Africa also needs to be resolute in dealing with the apartheid legacy of economic dispossession and inequality within its borders***, in order to strengthen its development vision and strategy, ensuring that it enjoys broad domestic consensus.
- ***Options should be explored to use the mechanisms of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) as a catalyst for greater development integration in the region***, including the option of gradually enlarging SACU, albeit without undermining the financial interests of the BNLS countries, by offering initial membership to other SADC countries with the economic potential to bring in additional revenue to the union in order to assuage the concerns of existing SACU members.
- ***It is also important that South Africa's regional development project be democratised***, by allowing parliament, civil society and the private sector to play a greater role in articulating the regional agenda and monitoring its implementation.
- ***South Africa could also contribute to engendering popular ownership of SADC's integration agenda throughout the region*** by encouraging greater development-oriented cooperation among the region's parliaments, sub-national governments and civil society organisations.

Notes and references

- 1 Garth le Pere, Assessing the SADC Summit in Maputo, SAFPI Policy Brief No.8, September 2012, p.1.
- 2 SADC, Draft Report of the Independent Midterm Review of the Regional Indicative Development Plan 2005-2012, May 2013, pp. 281-283.
- 3 SADC, Treaty of the Southern African Development Community, August 1992, Article 5 (1b).
- 4 Laurie Nathan, 2013, Synopsis of Community of Insecurity: SADC's struggle for peace and security in southern Africa, *African Security Review*, vol.22, no. 3, 181-189.
- 5 Elling N. Tjonneland, 2013, Making sense of the Southern African Development Community, *African Security Review*, vol.22, no. 3, 190-196.



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