

South Africa and Patchwork Governance. System Stabiliser or Antagonist?

Mzukisi Qobo

The global system has never been so fluid. It is marked by an absence of a leadership anchorage, and a profound sense of uncertainty and mistrust. That global era characterised by one political hegemon, the United States of America, and a tripolar global economy pivoted on the US, Germany and Japan, is disappearing. With the rise in influence of emerging economies in the early 1990s, and the growing confidence of a number of developing countries, the old pillars of global leadership are no longer steady, and the ideas that drove the system are in need of fundamental retooling.

Patchwork Governance

What has now emerged is a vast and complex network of political and economic powers that are assertive of their interests, but reluctant to fully assume leadership responsibility in a changing global system. The world is also witnessing the emergence of informal networks that are disconnected from each other, and are inward looking. Difficulties in global cooperation are evident from failing attempts to structuring a global trade pact to weak measures aimed at stimulating global economic recovery, to the elusive binding global architecture on climate change and to the absence of appropriate strategies to combat major catastrophes related to health, food insecurity, and broadly developmental challenges.

Global governance as we know it today has no pretension to shared normative commitments. With-

out sounding apocalyptic, it is fair to observe that competition and domestic policies driven by parochial considerations of powerful countries threaten to overshadow cooperation. Even though new global institutions such as the G20 Leaders Summit have been created in the wake of the global financial crisis, the proliferation of mini-multilaterals or small informal clubs such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia) have not necessarily helped to stem uncertainty. They have neither provided a firm grounding of shared values nor managed public goods in ways that inspire confidence.

It is against the backdrop of these global realities that external strategies of countries such as South Africa should be understood. In this short policy brief, I explore South Africa's involvement in this patchwork of governance that has emerged in the global system. I focus specifically on South Africa's involvement in the BRICS Forum that was established in 2009 (with South Africa joining in 2011) and the G20.

The Evolution of South Africa's Foreign Policy Thrust

South Africa's foreign policy has evolved quite significantly since the country became a democracy in 1994. The early developments saw the country showing greater inclination towards an idealistic

thrust, with emphasis on issues related to human rights and peace-building, based on its own remarkable political transition and its liberal constitutional framework. In addition, the history of international activism of the ruling party gave the new South African government a great deal of confidence in rising to the global stage.

In return, South Africa gained enormous amount of goodwill from the international community, and was patronised by the West as the engine of growth and progress for the rest of the African continent. It was also regarded as an enlightened and crucial voice speaking on behalf of the developing world.

Simultaneous with its negotiated political settlement, South Africa's political elites were knocking on the door of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). In 1993 South Africa became a signatory to the Marrakesh Agreement, and was one of the founding members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995. A spate of other bilateral trade and investment agreements mushroomed. This was largely to demonstrate South Africa's commitment to liberal internationalism, while at the same time hoping to attract foreign direct investment as a catalyst for growth and economic restructuring.

Consolidating democracy and social stability at home, and advancing internationalism abroad, pretty much summed up the new government's purpose for existence. South Africa's foreign policy was broadly pivoted on the following pillars: participation in the system of global governance, pursuit of South-South relations, maintenance of North-South relations, the African Agenda, achieving global peace and security and political and economic relations. There was normative consistency between the domestic political framework and South Africa's idealistic objectives in the global system. While these idealistic elements are still components of South Africa's foreign policy today, their position is cameo at best, as they are no longer the key preoccupations of policy makers.

South Africa's Self-Image as a Stabiliser

Since attaining democracy, the South African government has always viewed multilateralism as the best framework for limiting the dominance of bigger countries in shaping international relations in their own favour. Crucially, South Africa views its contribution in global affairs as that of a system stabiliser, while seeking to maximise gains for developing countries, with Africa as uppermost in its foreign

policy priorities. As a developing country member of the G20 and a co-Chair with France and South Korea of the Development Working Group, South Africa has played some role in shaping this development framework, although there is no evidence that the country really leads intellectually in these efforts.

Since South Africa is on the margins on issues related to financial regulation and macro-economic coordination, it has been giving primacy to issues affecting Africa's development and infrastructure development. According to President Zuma (speaking at the G20 Korea Summit): "South Africa participates in the G-20 summit within the context of contributing to and strengthening the multilateral system to ensure fair and effective responses to the challenges confronting world trade today." Apart from presenting itself as a system stabiliser and one of the champions of the reform of International Financial Institutions, outside of the Development Working Group, South Africa has no distinct set of measurable objectives.

South Africa and the West – From Friend...

South Africa's foreign policy has been experiencing a shift in the past decade. In the period beginning around 2002, especially mid-way through President Thabo Mbeki's first term of office, South Africa began to place stronger emphasis on Africa's renaissance, in a way that took South Africa's foreign policy to a new dimension rather than merely moralising on human rights as was the case under President Nelson Mandela. Yet still, active participation in global governance processes occupied an important space in South Africa's foreign policy for reasons of prestige and recognition by both advanced industrial and developing countries.

The idea of African renaissance as promoted by Mbeki took a more defined shape in the form of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) framework that was agreed upon by African leaders and adopted in 2001 as the basis for forging cooperation with advanced industrial economies in the North. It promised good governance in return for more infusion of foreign direct investment into the African continent. In South Africa's thinking, it was important to build strong relations with Western countries, as they possessed material resources in the form of development assistance, investible capital and technology. Alongside this developmental framework was also the idea that Africa would liberalise its politics, build its institutions, and set into motion multiparty forms of democracy.

So, normatively there was a gradual, albeit reluctant acceptance of Western normative preferences regarding democracy and “good governance”. These efforts culminated in the discussions between G8 leaders and African leaders in Gleneagles in 2005, with the ideas set out in the NEPAD document providing the basis for courting Western commitment to Africa, as well as the basis for future collaboration between the two.

Other African countries did not quite buy into this framework fully, seeing it as South Africa’s pet project. The global financial crisis that erupted in 2007 shifted the G8’s attention to a crisis management mode. With the G20 established at the Leaders’ Summit, the G8 began to take a secondary place in global cooperation, with Africa also receiving much less attention than was previously the case. South Africa’s foreign policy began its own drift. In the absence of fresh ideas about its purpose in the world, South Africa began to look for friends in the emerging economies.

... to Foe?

Foreign policy gravitated away from cajoling Western countries, towards strengthening ties with new friends in Asia and Latin America. Russia also became the new darling of South Africa’s foreign policy. The sharp turn in South Africa’s foreign policy to assume a hostile attitude towards the West occurred after President Jacob Zuma became leader of the party in 2007. Zuma would view formations such as the BRICS as important forums on which to cast his own foreign policy legacy.

Countries such as China and Russia would be given more attention at a bilateral level, especially on diplomatic and commercial relations. The African National Congress (ANC) enjoys party-to-party relations with the Chinese communist party on the one hand, and with United Russia – the party led by President Vladimir Putin – on the other. With Russia, South Africa is deepening commercial relations, especially in the area of nuclear technology. The highly secretive nature of the agreement between South Africa and the Russians in the latter part of 2014 has raised disquiet in South Africa, and with concerns that procurement procedures could be flouted to give the Russians a front run vis-à-vis other potential contenders.

On a similar note, South Africa appears to have sold its soul to Chinese interests. Among others this seems manifested in the fact that the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) is

said to have blocked the efforts by the Dalai Lama to apply for a visa to attend a meeting of Nobel Peace Laureates in South Africa in September 2014.

South Africa’s closeness with these two countries holds the danger of its foreign policy being socialised into their geopolitical and commercial interests. The common thread that seems to hold them is their apparent anti-Western perspective and a desire to create a counter-hegemonic bloc. The ANC’s international relations discussion document (2012) makes some strong remarks against the West. It lamented the dominance of smaller countries by the West. In this document, the ANC argued for ‘exclusive multilateralism’ pursued through the BRICS and other similarly structured club arrangements, with like-minded countries. ANC document casts the G20 as “becoming a legitimating platform for the G8 and failed economic orthodoxy ...”.

Recommendations: The Future of South Africa’s External Relations

There is a need for South African policymakers to understand that the world is more complex than the lens that perceives sharp binaries between the West and the non-Western world. The country should consciously pursue its interests in a pragmatic manner, while retaining its role as an honest broker on global policy issues. It needs to also offer transformative ideas that could help re-define the future of global governance. Balancing its membership of the BRICS with building bridges with countries and groups that it has normative affinities with, such as those that are members of MIKTA, is a better strategy for South Africa than focusing exclusively on one group that is driven by geopolitical considerations. MIKTA, for example, places premium on human rights, democracy, and development. The West also remains an important source of investment, technology, and policy learning.

However, western countries need to be aware that they can no longer act as if they are still fully at the helm of the global system. They should cooperate with emerging economies such as South Africa on the basis of mutual respect and genuine commitment to give space to new influential voices in global decision-making processes. Pulling back from contesting leadership of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank would demonstrate enlightened self-interest on the part of the West. Such a move would compel rising powers to taken on more responsibility for global governance and own the norms that underpin it. Finally, the West, as Kupchan counsels, “must embrace a strategy and set

of principles that succeed in forging a consensus between the West and the rising rest.” Practically, this could mean launching a semi-structured dialogue that takes place regularly between the G7, the BRICS and the MIKTA to identify a few common sets of values and interests over which to sustain a dialogue about managing global transformation. This could help inspire confidence and trust, both critical in deepening global cooperation.

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* The paper expresses the personal opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the view of its employer or the publisher

Recommended Reading

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