South African Foreign Policy under the Ramaphosa Government

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Summary

Cyril Ramaphosa has safely secured his position as President for another five years and South Africans are now pinning their hopes on him to clean up the government and restore the country’s international reputation. He ordered a review of foreign policy earlier this year and announced a renewed pivot towards Africa, so it appears that, in the Ramaphosa Presidency, African interests will again be at the forefront of the country’s international agenda. President Ramaphosa intends to achieve his administrative and domestic goals through the use of international relations with a focus on economic diplomacy.

The successful implementation of South Africa’s foreign policy objectives will depend on whether the government can clean up its departments, especially the Department of

Key Points

- In many ways, foreign policy under President Cyril Ramaphosa resembles the “African Renaissance” agenda of the Thabo Mbeki presidency.
- South Africa is seeking to once again become an influential leader on the African continent and to promote its economic diplomacy.
- Southern Africa and the wider Indian Ocean region remain the top foreign policy priorities for Pretoria.
- The country’s foreign policy still lacks clarity, definable goals and objectives, however.
International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), and ensure that diplomats are effectively pursuing a foreign policy focused on economic diplomacy. Despite the hopeful sentiments surrounding President Ramaphosa’s election victory, it does appear that foreign policy will remain stagnant and the practices that have shamed South Africa for much of the past two decades will persist.

Analysis

When the African National Congress (ANC) won power in 1994, the party sought to renew South Africa’s image and reintegrate it into the international community. Its foreign policy was founded upon the pillars of: human rights; respect for justice and international law; the advancement of African interests; and regional and international economic co-operation. Under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first democratic government pledged its commitment to a human-rights based foreign policy, expressing solidarity for oppressed peoples around the world.

South Africa has now seen three presidential periods of foreign policy, each characterised by a particular preoccupation. Under Nelson Mandela, South African foreign policy promoted multilateralism. During the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, the emphasis was on pan-Africanism; under the always controversial Jacob Zuma, it took on a pronounced strain of anti-Westernism. These variations in direction have given South African foreign policy a reputation for being ‘erratic’ and, sometimes, even violating not only its own underpinnings, but also the Constitution.

The South African Government has attracted local and international criticism about its perceived failure to actively condemn human rights abuses around the globe. One example – and one particularly close to home – was the “quiet diplomacy” approach, which was adopted in dealing with the brutality inflicted upon the people of Zimbabwe under the rule of Robert Mugabe. Although the rationale for that stance was that Mugabe might be more responsive to quiet but intensive behind-the-scenes lobbying, rather than approaches made under a media spotlight, the reality was that it accomplished very little and, arguably, reduced South Africa’s standing in the international community.

Venezuela provides another example of South Africa’s apparent stance (or, it might be claimed, the lack thereof), on international human rights violations. Having been fraudulently re-elected, President Nicolas Maduro has used deadly force against his own people, who are protesting against his repressive regime. South Africa, though, is backing Maduro’s increasingly dictatorial government and once again is effectively choosing to support rulers who disregard human rights and democratic values. It is still unclear if the recent review of foreign policy means that it will be any different during the new Ramaphosa presidency, but the potential for more of the same is certainly high.

At the forefront of President Ramaphosa’s foreign policy review is the rekindling of the “African Renaissance” sentiment and, with it, South Africa’s potential to once again become an influential leader on the African continent. The African Renaissance was popularised during Thabo Mbeki’s presidency. He encouraged South Africans to embrace an African identity and sought to promote the continent’s political, economic and social renewal, in an
attempt to reintegrate Africa into the global economy. At the core of Mbeki’s renaissance was concern about the continent’s position within a rapidly globalising world economy. In short, therefore, the African Renaissance came to be defined as Africa’s political renewal and economic reintegration. The revival of the African Renaissance sentiment under President Ramaphosa appears to hold the same connotations. He has frequently reasserted his intention to grow the economy and expand South Africa’s soft power presence, by pursuing key leadership positions and agendas, both on the continent and internationally.

South Africa will assume the Chair of the African Union (AU) from 2020 and has asserted that the African Renaissance will be the driving force of its term in that position. There will be a particular focus on strengthening regional economic communities (Recs): the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the Pan-African Women’s Organization (PAWO) and programmes such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

The review panel tasked with assessing the strengths and weaknesses of South Africa's current foreign policy trajectory acknowledged that the country has not lived up to its earlier promises. It conceded that: ‘The country has not sufficiently played the role it was expected to play or should have played in engaging a number of international issues.’ The panel urged the new administration to forge strategic alliances with specific African countries and to ensure that its other critical relationships – essentially economic in nature – are not neglected.

The need to leverage technology as a means of improving efficiency and effectiveness formed an essential part of the proposed new foreign policy path. The panel acknowledged that globalisation has perpetuated, if not exacerbated, the divide between developing and developed countries, but also pointed to its potential to accelerate regional, continental and global economic integration and development. In line with that acknowledgment, economic diplomacy was emphasised as a means of optimising South Africa’s economic potential and the use of its abundant natural resources. In the South African context, economic diplomacy can be defined as policies and activities that promote trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), tourism and technology transfers to South Africa. Its aim is to positively position the country in the world through imaging, branding, marketing and public diplomacy, both domestically and internationally. South Africa’s economic diplomacy still requires a more specific definition, however, with distinctly expressed priorities.

Interestingly, and in something of an about-turn from the Zuma years, the panel advised a degree of caution in relations with the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), while strongly encouraging the need to reconnect with the notion of the African Renaissance. It stressed the need to clearly identify South Africa’s national interests and its foreign policy objectives and how best to achieve them, while also recapturing its lost moral authority and reacquiring strategic global influence. The advice about exercising greater caution in dealings with the BRIC countries appears to be aimed more towards China and Russia, as they continue to gain a more significant influence and foothold on the African continent.

Connecting the Middle East, Africa and East Asia with Europe and the Americas, the Indian Ocean region has emerged as the theatre of twenty-first century geopolitics. The Indian
Ocean carries half of the world’s container ships, one-third of bulk cargo traffic, two-thirds of oil shipments and is home to around 2.7 billion people. The region is large and, in addition to South Africa, comprises a very diverse group of countries: Australia, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Madagascar, Somalia, Tanzania, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Seychelles, Comoros, Iran, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Thailand, Maldives, Malaysia and Yemen.

The Indian Ocean region remains a top priority on South Africa’s foreign policy agenda, given that a high percentage of the country’s trade is transported via the Indian Ocean. Forging regional partnerships is therefore vital to ensure the security of sea lanes and to support larger strategic interests. The most significant regional organisation is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), an inter-governmental organisation formed in 1997 to foster regional economic co-operation among twenty-two member states and nine dialogue partners. In 2017, South Africa assumed the role of Chair of IORA for a two-year period.

Promoting the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, stability and development has been the theme of South Africa’s time as Chair. Maritime safety and security, enhanced disaster risk management, and sustainable and responsible fisheries management, have been prioritised as the three main objectives. The priorities identified by South Africa appear to be playing to its strengths as it positions itself as a strong maritime state, taking advantage of its strategic position adjoining the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. This is occurring at a time when ocean health is being prioritised in regional and global policy agendas.

South Africa’s relationship with Australia, which, despite significant people-to-people links, is largely economic in character, has been shaped by the potential for investment by Australian companies. South Africa is Australia’s largest export market in Africa, with two-way trade in goods and services totalling $3.6 billion in 2017. South Africa is also Australia’s most significant investment partner in Africa, with bilateral investment approaching $15 billion in 2017. Australia is committed to the promotion of ethical and corporate social responsibility, using safe, sustainable, environmentally-friendly development policies, which provide just benefits for the local population in South Africa. Australia maintains a High Commission in Pretoria, while South Africa is represented in Australia by a High Commission in Canberra. South Africa’s foreign policy objectives aim to continue strengthening its political, economic and strategic engagement and co-operation with Australia.

**Implementation of Foreign Policy**

South Africa’s diplomatic and consular missions implement the government’s foreign policy directives to enhance its international profile. They also serve as strategic mechanisms for the achievement of national interests. In so doing, South African diplomats currently face numerous obstacles and limitations in trying to implement the government’s foreign policy objectives.

One such limitation is insufficient budget allocation to achieve departmental priorities. Closely related to that is the mismanagement of departmental funds. Without adequate resources and finances, South African diplomats are severely constrained in their work. Under the previous Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, Maite Nkoana-
Mashabane, DIRCO not only underperformed in achieving its strategic objectives, it also mismanaged millions of rand. Unauthorised expenditures amounted to approximately 34 million rand ($3.39 million). No action was taken against the accused officials and Ms Nkoana-Mashabane has since been allocated another ministerial post. A better alignment of strategies with resources, a reallocation of those resources to more urgent priorities and strong legal action against those who misuse government funding, would all greatly assist the diplomatic corps.

A second problem is the limited availability of appropriate human resources. South Africa is currently experiencing a dramatic skills shortage, which is severely affecting the successful implementation of the government’s foreign policy directives. To achieve the government’s strategic priorities, requires a recruitment process that targets the required skills. Suitable training must also be provided, to ensure that employees are capable of implementing government directives and achieving the country’s foreign policy objectives.

A third limitation is the lack of coherence and co-ordination in South Africa’s foreign policy. Although the foreign policy review calls for a return to the African Renaissance and putting African interests first, these objectives cannot be achieved with inadequate inter- and intra-departmental co-ordination on multilateral issues and institutions. Public diplomacy strategies and programmes that enhance the understanding of South Africa’s foreign policy for all stakeholders, including national and international audiences, must be implemented to ensure the successful achievement of the government’s objectives. Presently, the implementation of South Africa’s foreign policy is difficult, due to the lack of clarity, definable goals and achievable objectives.

Before Pretoria can achieve any of its foreign policy objectives, South Africa’s international credibility needs to be restored. It has been just over a year since the State of the Nation Address in which President Ramaphosa stated that DIRCO and the country’s diplomats would be the driving force behind his international agenda. The priority for the current Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, has been to clean up DIRCO’s poor financial management and instil a system of good governance that holds people accountable for their actions. If the government is serious about promoting and extending its economic diplomacy, then a greater focus needs to be put on building up DIRCO’s institutional capabilities and ensuring that its diplomats have the technical skills and know-how to do so.

For Pretoria to be successful in achieving its foreign policy objectives will also require better co-ordination across government, to develop a shared approach to external relations. Building strong government-business relations, by clarifying the terms for the country’s strategy, will aid the stalled economy and help to foster a clearer direction in foreign policy. To clear the way for South Africa to contribute to, and profit from, a changing global system, while simultaneously shaping the foundations of progressive multilateralism and playing a leadership role on the African continent, domestic institutions such as DIRCO and the Department of Home Affairs also need to be fixed. By addressing these limitations, the Ramaphosa Government will be better able to use its foreign policy and international relationships to generate economic value, achieve its foreign policy objectives and somewhat restore its credibility.
Until the government deals with the domestic issues that are affecting the country's foreign relations, however, Pretoria will only have limited success in achieving its foreign policy objectives.

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