

South Africa: The Fate of Good Hope

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The Fate of Good Hope

What are South Africa's key foreign policy tenets, and what is its vision for the international order? How does Pretoria aim to contribute to translating that vision into practice? What enables and constrains South Africa's foreign policy? How do internal and external developments influence its regional and global stature?

Julia Hammelehle

In 2024, 30 years after the end of apartheid, South Africa experienced a “second transition.”¹ Following years of political disillusion and economic decay in the country, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its absolute majority in parliament, forcing it to form a coalition government for the first time. As this Government of National Unity succeeded in aligning parties across political and ethnic lines and keeping radical parties out, the country hopes for a new dawn. Pretoria continues to aspire to an international leadership role. Given South Africa's regional political and economic weight, coupled with unique soft power derived from its history of democratic transition and reconciliation, Pretoria has long been perceived as Africa's “natural leader” and international moral exemplar.² Over the past decades, however, this status has dwindled: material and soft power have declined, an inconsistent track record on human rights and the implementation of international law has undermined South Africa's “moral high ground,” and growing anti-Westernism has weakened its role as a bridge-builder between countries of the so-called Global South and Global North.³

Between Transformation and Revisionism: South Africa's Vision for the International Order

South Africa's foreign policy guidelines over the past three decades reflect its strong commitment to promoting democracy, human rights, international law, and multilateralism as an “external corollary” of its history of democratic transition and struggle against apartheid.⁴ Yet they also illustrate the second



“[T]he international community cannot proclaim the importance of international law and the importance of the UN Charter in some situations and not in others as if the rule of law only applies to a select few.”¹²

Naledi Pandor, then–South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, BRICS dialogue with developing countries, June 11, 2024



“South Africa’s policy of active non-alignment is not reactive but an affirmative agenda. It is not about being neutral or abstaining from world affairs, but putting forward a unifying agenda through dialogue to achieve peace [...]”²³

Ronald Lamola, South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, parliamentary budget vote debate, July 11, 2024

foreign policy tenet that goes back to the ANC’s history as a liberation movement: a deep-seated distrust of the West, particularly the US.⁵

Pretoria’s stance on global institutions, meandering between reform and rejection, mirrors the two pillars. South Africa’s commitment to multilateralism and the UN as its “centerpiece” has remained at the core of its foreign policy declarations.⁶ And its involvement within global bodies has been substantial, for example, it has been a non-elected member of the UN Security Council three times in under 15 years and is currently pursuing a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.⁷ Pretoria has consistently coupled engagement with demands for reform. For South Africa, the “unrepresentative and biased nature” of global institutions perpetuates structural inequalities and allows the West to use them for its own priorities “at the expense of the developing world.”⁸ Experiences over the past decades have strengthened this perception: Pretoria has denounced Western promises of global governance reforms as “empty,”⁹ the vaccine distribution during Covid-19 as “vaccine apartheid,”¹⁰ and the application of international law such as in Iraq, Libya, or currently in Gaza as selective.¹¹

The public’s views on multipolarity reflect the wide criticism of the current international order (Figure 1.4). Frustrations about Western policies and more pronounced anti-Western sentiments of President Nelson Mandela’s successors have triggered South Africa’s shift from engagement within global institutions to bodies outside them – and partners outside the West.¹³ In the case of the International Criminal Court (ICC), South Africa’s stance has shifted from ardent support to near exit. Under President Jacob Zuma, the country’s withdrawal from the ICC was only halted by the South African High Court. Zuma’s successor, President Cyril Ramaphosa, only refrained from further withdrawal attempts after a back-and-forth.¹⁴ In contrast to South Africa’s former success as a bridge-builder between countries of the Global North and South and a driver of joint global policies, under Ramaphosa, Pretoria has continued Zuma’s tilt toward non-Western powers, BRICS in particular.¹⁵ While South Africa asserts that it sees BRICS not as “anti-West” but as a “development platform,”¹⁶ this is difficult to sustain as Beijing and Moscow increasingly use the format for revisionist aims.¹⁷ Pretoria’s homage to BRICS as a body that “embraces progressive ideals and seeks [...] a more inclusive, equitable, and development-oriented world” seems hollow in light of the revisionist geopolitical and coercive economic approaches of members such as China, Russia, or Iran.¹⁸ For some observers, South Africa’s focus on BRICS illustrates that in its choice of partners, opposition to the West takes precedence over democracy, international law, and human rights.¹⁹

South Africa's stance on Russia's war against Ukraine also illustrates its skew toward anti-Westernism. Rhetorically, Pretoria asserts its position of "active non-alignment," declaring its refusal to "align with any of the global powers" while pointing to its historic commitment to the principles of the UN Charter and dialogue and negotiations.²⁰ Its actual policies, however, reveal a persistent sense of loyalty toward Russia due to the Soviet Union's support of the ANC's anti-apartheid struggle and a "peculiar interpretation of non-alignment as anti-Western."²¹ South Africa echoes Moscow's narrative of the invasion, portraying the war as a contest between Russia and the West and a reaction to US provocation.²² Its joint naval exercise with Russia during the war's first anniversary is difficult not to interpret as siding with Moscow.

In addition to the ANC's political orientation, economic interests have driven South Africa's shift to emerging powers – BRICS and China in particular.²⁴ However, as a small, open economy with historically close ties with the West, economic pragmatism has also moderated Pretoria's stance toward Europe and the US. Europe has remained South Africa's most important trading partner (Figure 9.1), and in recent years, the US has accounted for its fastest-growing export market.²⁵ A US Congress bill that calls for a review of South African–US relations due to Pretoria's foreign policies has put South Africa's preferential access to the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) into question. While the Biden administration renewed Pretoria's access to the program in December, under President Trump, the future of AGOA is uncertain, and trade relations might from now on be tied to how countries align with US geopolitical interests, particularly vis-à-vis China.²⁶ Eager to preserve its access to the US market, Pretoria has been trying to soften tensions with the US.²⁷

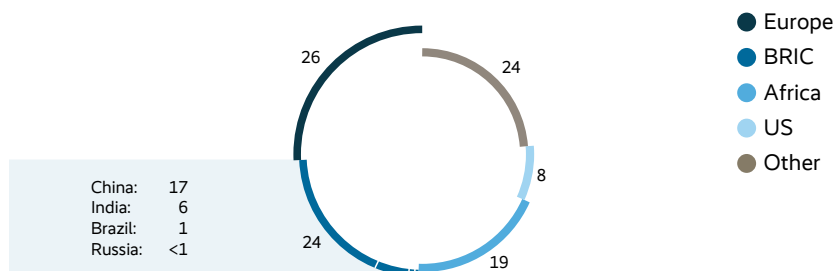


"South African officials have made a miscalculation by aligning themselves with Russia and China. [...] My hope is that they choose otherwise."²⁸

Jared Moskowitz, Member of the House of Representatives, US Congress, March 21, 2024

Figure 9.1

South Africa's trade relations with selected countries/regions, 2023, percent of total goods traded



Data: South African Revenue Service. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

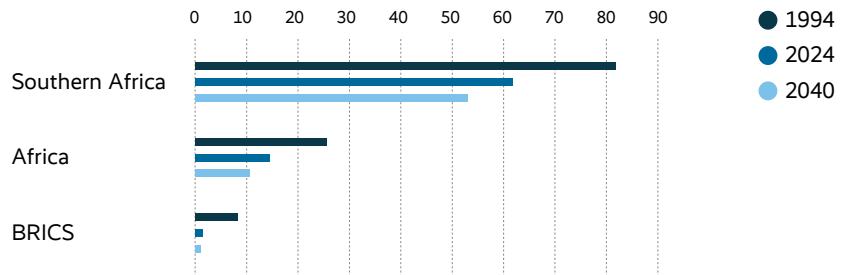
Power Shifts: Opportunities and Constraints for South Africa's Foreign Policy

As anti-Westernism has increasingly overshadowed Pretoria's commitment to international law and multilateralism, South Africa's international stature as a bridge-builder and normative force has dwindled. Its decline in hard and soft power, coupled with its contested role on the continent and domestic democratic discontent and economic woes, have further constrained the country's international position.

While being Africa's leading economy, South Africa faces major economic challenges and a declining relative weight on the continent and globally. In 2024, South Africa is set to account for the largest nominal GDP among African countries, surpassing Egypt and Nigeria.²⁹ In 2023, it accounted for around 13 percent of Africa's GDP and attracted 10 percent of the continent's foreign direct investment (FDI).³⁰ In Southern Africa, Pretoria is the economic heavyweight with a share of GDP and FDI inflows of around 60 percent.³¹ Yet, while still substantial, South Africa's relative economic clout in Africa is declining. And compared to the world's economic powers and its BRICS peers, its GDP is just a fraction – and is expected to further decrease (Figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2

South Africa's share of GDP of selected groups of countries, 1994, 2024, 2040, percent



Data: Allianz; IMF. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

South Africa has significant economic strengths, such as a rich endowment with critical minerals central for clean energy and digital technologies. It accounts, for example, for around 70 percent of global platinum and around 40 percent of manganese and chromium production.³² Yet South Africa suffers from economic woes, including electricity shortages, deficient infrastructure, and endemic corruption.³³ In contrast to other middle-income countries, growth has been anemic since the global financial crisis in 2008.³⁴ South Africa's

unemployment rate of around 30 percent is among the world's highest, more than one out of five people live in extreme poverty, and inequality is at staggering levels.³⁵

The economy's brittle state significantly limits Pretoria's resources for diplomacy and the military – the foreign and defense ministers have both recently announced new budget cuts despite already-strained resources and defense spending at a mere 0.7 percent of GDP in 2023.³⁶ While Pretoria retains the largest defense budget in sub-Saharan Africa, its share of regional spending has dropped from 27 percent in 2011 to 14.5 percent in 2023.³⁷ Two decades of underfunding have left their mark, leading to a stark contrast between the government's ambition to play a pivotal role in regional peacekeeping and the limitations of its forces.³⁸ In South Africa's current deployments in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, the troops are "floundering."³⁹

Demographics fuel Pretoria's declining weight. South Africa's population of 64 million is the continent's sixth largest, but just about half the size of Egypt's and Ethiopia's and less than a third of Nigeria's. By 2040, Nigeria's population will exceed South Africa's by more than a factor of four due to higher growth rates.⁴⁰

Declining material power challenges South Africa's regional and international position. Even more significant is Pretoria's loss of its once formidable soft power. Xenophobic violence against other African nationals has eroded its standing on the continent,⁴¹ spurring the perception among some that South Africa "remains a state apart," considering itself more advanced than its African peers.⁴² Pretoria's trade and economic policies, seen by some as favoring national rather than regional interests, or its push for the chairmanship of the African Union in 2012 against established procedures added to persistent suspicions about its hegemonic aspirations in Africa.⁴³ South Africa's moral authority further declined in light of its "instinctive" solidarity with and defense of states under Western pressure, even when these states were charged with gross human rights violations.⁴⁴ Examples include Pretoria's reactions to crises such as in Zimbabwe and Darfur.⁴⁵ The rampant corruption and populist style of government under the Zuma presidency have added to Pretoria's eroding authority.⁴⁶

Domestically, the public's disillusion about corruption has been a major driver in the steep decline in satisfaction with democracy.⁴⁷ Approval of the country's direction hit a low point before the 2024 elections, with a mere 13 percent



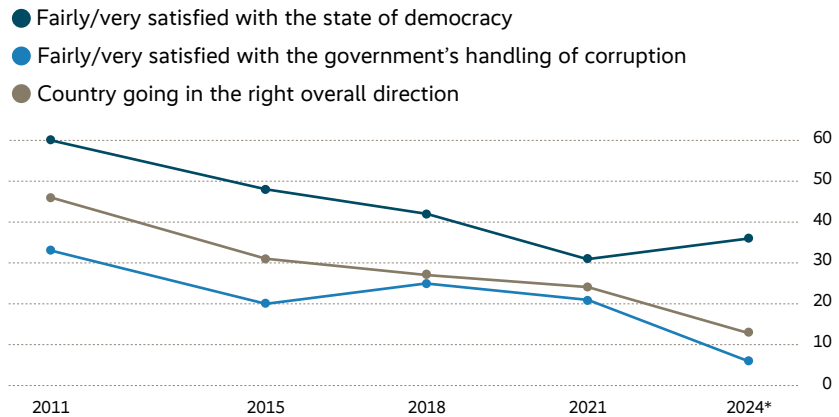
"We are citizens of one country and yet we occupy different worlds, separated by high walls and great distances."⁵¹

Cyril Ramaphosa,
South African President,
presidential inauguration,
June 19, 2024

indicating that they see their country on the right track (Figure 9.3).⁴⁸ Persistent inequality, with race as a key factor, has further fueled democratic disengagement and rising polarization.⁴⁹ Economic decline, corrosion of democratic institutions, and rising populism along ethnic lines have fed into a downward spiral.⁵⁰

Figure 9.3

South Africans' views on the state of democracy, corruption, and the overall direction of the country, 2011–2024, percent



*Results from 2011–2021 are from face-to-face Afrobarometer surveys, whereas the 2024 survey was conducted by phone. Given the differences in methodologies, distortions may occur.

Data: Afrobarometer. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

On to the Middle Ground?

The outcome of the 2024 general election initially raised fears that South Africa would continue down that road of populism and economic decline.⁵² Voter turnout was at a record low; staunchly populist parties came in third and fourth, accounting for around a quarter of votes.⁵³ With the formation of the Government of National Unity, fears turned into hope.⁵⁴ While frictions among and within coalition parties will persist, the first months of the term have run relatively smoothly, improving the country's prospects.⁵⁵ Economic pragmatism and a more centrist cabinet could help bring about a more "middle-of-the-road foreign policy."⁵⁶ However, to revive South Africa's international stature and potential as a regional and international bridge-builder, the ANC will need to reflect on its long-held foreign policy beliefs and recommit to reform rather than revisionism. South Africa's G20 presidency this year provides an opportunity to make the country's domestic "second transition" also a moment of transition for its foreign policy.

Key Points

- ① Given South Africa's regional political and economic weight and its unique soft power derived from its history of democratic transition, Pretoria has long been perceived as the “natural leader” of the African continent and an international moral authority.
- ② This status has, however, declined. As anti-Westernism has risen under Mandela's successors and overshadowed South Africa's commitment to international law and human rights, the country's international stature and potential as a bridge-builder between the Global North and South have dwindled.
- ③ South Africa's loss of hard and soft power, coupled with a contested regional position and a fragile domestic situation, has further constrained its international leadership role.
- ④ Economic pragmatism and a more centrist coalition might provide an opening for a more moderate South African foreign policy. Yet to revive Pretoria's international position, the African National Congress will need to reassess long-held foreign policy beliefs and recommit to its declared principles of democracy, international law, human rights, and multilateralism.

Quotations originally in British English have been adapted to American English. In some cases, stylistic adjustments were made to quotes.

Endnotes

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