

# South Africa's Foreign Policy since the End of Apartheid: Continuities and Discontinuities

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## 1. Introduction

*Foreign affairs are determined by the relations  
between you and that particular country in the past and the present.  
And you look at it from your interest,  
the interest of your own country (Nelson Mandela) (Williams 2021: 557).*

Three decades after the end of the apartheid regime, South Africa's international standing has radically changed. Democratic South Africa has consolidated its ties with the countries of the North and today plays a key role in cooperation among Global South nations. Pretoria has also strengthened its ties with African nations, especially in Southern Africa.

This article examines the evolution of South Africa's foreign policy since the end of apartheid, aiming to highlight both the continuities and changes in the country's international relations across different presidential administrations over the past thirty years. This essay shows that the changes in South Africa's foreign policy over three decades have resulted less from sudden shifts and more from a gradual evolution involving all successive presidents. Each president has historically impacted the others in their efforts to advance South Africa's political and economic interests within an international context that has both imposed restrictions on Pretoria's actions and presented opportunities that the government has sought to capitalise on.

Today, there is a broad scholarly consensus that after the presidencies of Nelson Mandela (1994–1999) and Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), both of whom focused on advancing human rights, strengthening multilateralism and promoting peace and development in Africa (Habib 2009; Landsberg 2010), a significant shift occurred in South Africa's foreign policy during Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009–2018).

Soulé-Kohndou (2013: 5) noted that under Zuma, South Africa's foreign policy showed 'fewer signs of activism' when compared to that of Mandela and Mbeki. Hendricks (2022) pointed out that during the administrations of Mandela and Mbeki, South Africa repositioned itself as a 'good global citizen [and] a key continental actor'. However, during Zuma's presidency, 'South Africa's influence, credibility, and capacity for peace and security engagements on the continent declined'. Additionally, 'South Africa's attention shifted to [China and Russia] and from peace diplomacy towards economic diplomacy' (Hendricks 2022: 222–223). Landsberg and Van Heerden (2020: 27) wrote that Zuma's foreign policy marked 'a clear shift in the approach [compared to Mbeki's] to a more utilitarian, economic, interest-driven posture'. The political crisis that ultimately led to Zuma's downfall negatively impacted the country's external projection, as it weakened 'the government's capacity to engage effectively in foreign policy',<sup>1</sup> undermining both its identity and effectiveness (Nagar 2022: 68). Despite the hopes for renewal in South African politics that accompanied Cyril Ramaphosa's rise to the presidency in 2018 (Graham 2022: 48), the 'rupture' marked by the Zuma presidency in the country's foreign policy was not repaired.<sup>2</sup>

This consensus may produce a misleading narrative of a "golden age" of post-apartheid South Africa's foreign policy, followed by decline. As Zondi (2019: 17) pointed out, there is a risk of mistakenly interpreting "changes in style, practice, and emphasis [as] substantive changes in the ideological orientation of [post-apartheid South Africa's] foreign policy". More recently, Alden and Schoeman (2025: 79) have noted that the shift in South Africa's foreign policy under Zuma and Ramaphosa has primarily involved "declarative diplomacy" rather than the actual substance of its international political and economic relations. This article offers a historical analysis of the continuities and changes in South Africa's foreign policy implemented by the presidents who have succeeded one another since the end of apartheid. It examines South Africa's efforts to strengthen relationships with countries in the Global South, while also enhancing ties with nations in the Global North. Additionally, the article analyses South Africa's initiatives to promote peace and development across the African continent, with a particular focus on Southern Africa.

<sup>1</sup> The Unwinding of South Africa's Foreign Policy, in *Strategic Comments*, 23(8), 2017, i–ii.

<sup>2</sup> The State of Non-Alignment in South Africa's Foreign Policy, in *Strategic Comments*, 29(5), 2023, v–vii.



## 2. Principles and contradictions: Mandela's foreign policy

Much of the analysis regarding South Africa's foreign policy after apartheid assumes that the country was substantially isolated when power was transferred into the hands of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994. However, the reality is quite different. The lifting of the ban on the ANC and other political parties, along with Mandela's release from prison in early 1990, prompted many African and non-African governments to establish relations with the De Klerk regime. Their aim was to promote exports to South Africa and attract South African investments to their own countries (Graham 2012).

Western governments, by lifting economic sanctions, provided an incentive for De Klerk to continue his reforms. At the same time, they pressured the ANC to abandon the armed struggle and enter negotiations with the white regime (Landsberg 2004). The ANC was also urged to undergo an economic "conversion" by renouncing nationalisation and embracing market-oriented policies. In December 1991, US President George H.W. Bush conveyed to Mandela that if the ANC wanted to attract international investments to enhance the South African economy, it needed to take two important steps. First, the ANC should support lifting sanctions to demonstrate its commitment to preventing further damage to the national economy. Second, it should refrain from mentioning nationalisation as part of the economic measures it planned to implement once in government (The White House 1991).

When the political transition in South Africa began, the country had diplomatic relations with 27 nations (Telegram 14310/1994). By October 1994, this number had increased to 142. This significant change illustrates how the shift to democracy transformed South Africa's formal bilateral relations and enabled the country to join or rejoin numerous international organisations.

In his first speech to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in October 1994, Mandela (1994) outlined the foreign policy priorities of the new government, committing South Africa 'to ensure that democracy, peace, and prosperity prevail everywhere'. To achieve this goal, South Africa would work to strengthen the UN by promoting respect for human rights, 'the non-proliferation and destruction of weapons of mass destruction, and sustainable development' (Mandela 1994). Finally free from apartheid, South Africa aimed to actively promote economic development and security across Africa, particularly in Southern Africa (Mandela 1994).

During Mandela's presidency, South Africa strengthened its relationships with the countries of the North, although some tensions arose. At the same time, the government also worked to enhance its ties with the Global South. Historical factors and economic needs significantly influenced South Africa's foreign policy.

In the case of the United States (US), despite the establishment of a Binational Commission in 1995 and the strengthening of economic relations, with South Africa's beneficiary status under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) since 2000 and a rise in US Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows in the country from US\$289 million in 1995 to US\$1.1 billion in 1999 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] 2025), some disagreements developed between the two governments. South Africa opted not to participate in the African Crisis Response Initiative that the US launched in 1996. Furthermore, Pretoria's relationships with countries such as Libya and Cuba and its association with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, a legacy of the ANC's diplomacy during the liberation struggle, created tensions between South Africa and the US. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) military intervention in Serbia in 1999 also contributed to these frictions (Stremlau 1999).

Despite past disagreements over sanctions between the ANC and the British government (National Archives of the United Kingdom 1993), Great Britain was a significant economic partner for South Africa during the second half of the 1990s. However, tensions remained, as exemplified by the case of Nigeria. In 1995, the British government declined Mandela's request for economic sanctions against the Sani Abacha regime (see below). Nevertheless, these differences did not prevent Mandela from making a triumphant state visit to Britain in 1996 (Telegram 8772/1996).

One of the most significant developments in South Africa's foreign policy during Mandela's presidency was the strengthening of relations with the Global South. A key decision in this process was the choice to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan and establish formal relations with China. The decision was made two years after Mandela's election. The South African president hesitated to cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan, a relationship inherited from the previous white government. This hesitation was due not only to the historically strained relations between the ANC and China during the liberation struggle, but also to the economic ties between Taiwan and South Africa (Alden 1997; Williams and Hurst 2018). Complicating matters further was the US\$10 million donation from Taiwan to the ANC for financing its 1994 election campaign (Van der Westhuizen 1998). After initially trying to maintain relations with both Beijing and Taipei, by the end of 1996 Mandela faced significant political pressure from China. With most leaders of the ANC supporting the recognition of Beijing due to strategic and economic factors, Mandela ultimately decided to formalise diplomatic relations with China at the expense of Taiwan (Williams and Hurst 2018).

The decision to establish diplomatic relations with China contradicts scholarly analyses that suggest Mandela's foreign policy was primarily focused on promoting and defending human rights on an international scale (Adebajo 2018; Landsberg 2000). As noted by Williams and Hurst (2018), the issue of human rights promotion was notably absent from discussions within the South African government and the ANC prior to their recognition of Beijing diplomatically, with economic considerations taking precedence.

Mandela also made efforts to strengthen relations with African countries. However, Pretoria encountered difficulties in turning its foreign policy principles into effective strategies and actions on the continent. This challenge arose not only from the ANC's delays in defining its foreign policy priorities (Graham 2012), but also from conflicting visions within the South African government between idealistic and pragmatic approaches. Additionally, some African and international actors resisted Mandela's activism on the continent.

South Africa's efforts to promote democracy in Africa faced significant challenges right from the start. The most notable case was Nigeria. After several months of 'quiet diplomacy' aimed at persuading General Sani Abacha's government not to carry out the death sentences of some arrested political and military leaders (Landsberg 2010: 105), Mandela publicly condemned Abacha in November 1995 following the execution of writer and political activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (Mandela 1995). During the Commonwealth Heads of State Meeting in Auckland, Mandela advocated for Nigeria's expulsion from the organisation. However, it was decided to suspend Nigeria from the Commonwealth instead, 'pending the return to compliance with the principles of the Harare Declaration' (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 1995: 10). Despite Mandela's call for economic sanctions against the Abacha regime, Western governments, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) did not support this initiative. South Africa found itself politically isolated on the African and international stage, and Abacha sarcastically commented that 'Mandela did not understand properly the complexities of modern diplomacy since he had been out of touch in prison for 27 years' (Telegram 12868/1995). Not only had Mandela hastily abandoned the pragmatic policy of 'constructive engagement' towards Nigeria conducted up to that point by Deputy-President Mbeki, but he had also failed to build a multilateral consensus around his stance, resulting in South Africa's political isolation (Van Aardt 1996: 113). This failure represented a pivotal moment for the foreign policy of post-apartheid South Africa, which would thereafter generally refrain from taking steps to support democracy in any African country without the backing of African diplomacy.

During Mandela's presidency, the South African government not only tried to support democracy, it also attempted to promote peace agreements in various African countries experiencing armed conflicts. These efforts, however, were largely unsuccessful. The solutions proposed by Pretoria, influenced by South Africa's own transition experience, centred on the establishment of power-sharing governments. Unfortunately, these solutions did not adequately consider the imbalances in power relations between the conflicting parties, their political goals, and the international support they received. (Shillinger 2009). Therefore, while in Mozambique, on the eve of the 1994 elections, the Frente de libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), confident of its electoral strength, flatly rejected the idea of forming a government of national unity with the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) (Telegram 10565/1994), in Angola, Mandela's insistence on including Jonas Savimbi in the government clashed with the determination of the government of the Movimento popular de libertação de Angola (MPLA) to militarily eliminate the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), and heightened political tensions between the two countries (Telegram 711/1995).

The challenges faced by South Africa in its conflict resolution efforts in Africa were particularly evident during the armed conflict in Zaire. Mandela's efforts between April and May 1997 to broker an agreement between Mobutu and Laurent Kabila ultimately fell apart due to both the military circumstances on the ground and the determination of neighbouring governments to remove Mobutu, who 'for years ... had blocked democracy and development in Zaire' (Telegram 84374/1997). Meanwhile, the US, which had officially supported South Africa's mediation efforts, privately assured Kabila of their willingness to establish friendly relations with the new government (Telegram 83420/1997), ultimately accepting Kabila's military takeover (Telegram 7471/1997).

The challenges faced by South African diplomacy in Africa pushed the ANC and the government to clarify the nation's foreign policy objectives and strategies. The aim was to enhance the government's effectiveness in international affairs and to prevent the dilution of its efforts, which could threaten its credibility. This process led to the development of a more pragmatic approach to South Africa's foreign policy, which committed the government to supporting democracy without harming South African trade interests and to promoting security in Africa through multilateral diplomacy (Republic of South Africa 1996). Since then, the South African government has consistently emphasised the importance of economic diplomacy and military security.

During the second half of the 1990s, although Pretoria faced several challenges in achieving its diplomatic objectives, South African companies significantly benefited from the normalisation of diplomatic relations with various countries across the continent. As a result,

trade increased and South African investments in Africa grew rapidly. The value of South African exports to other Sub-Saharan African countries rose from US\$2.3 billion in 1994 to US\$3.6 billion in 1999. Meanwhile, South African imports from Sub-Saharan Africa grew modestly, increasing from US\$0.5 billion in 1994 to US\$0.6 billion in 1999 (World Bank 2025).

The strengthening of economic relations was particularly evident between South Africa and its Southern African neighbours. South Africa became a member of the SADC in August 1994. Although South Africa and the other SADC member states expressed their intention to pursue a model of regional integration based on the principles of equity, mutual benefit and balanced development, they were unable to reach an agreement on an industrialisation strategy for the SADC and resolved to establish a free trade area (Pallotti 2004). To this end, in 1996, the SADC countries adopted a Protocol on Trade; however, negotiations for its implementation progressed slowly. Within this context, between 1994 and 1999, the value of South Africa's exports to the non-Southern African Customs Union (SACU) SADC countries increased from US\$1.9 billion to US\$2.8 billion. In contrast, South Africa's imports from these countries decreased from US\$0.5 billion in 1994 to US\$0.4 billion in 1999. This decline in imports was largely due to a significant drop in Zimbabwe's exports to South Africa (World Bank 2025).

These trends deepened economic polarisation and fuelled political tensions among SADC member states. While South Africa's pursuit of national economic interests in Southern Africa was relatively successful, normalising political relations with the region's countries proved to be more difficult.

The conflict between South Africa and Zimbabwe arose from a disagreement over the structure and authority of the new regional security mechanism established by SADC in 1996 after extensive discussions (Southern African Development Community 1994; Southern African Development Community 1996). President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe advocated for a mechanism with broad powers of intervention under his leadership. In contrast, Mandela declined to make any commitments until the powers and decision-making processes of the new regional security mechanism were clearly defined (Southern African Development Community 1995). Thus, the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS) established by the SADC in June 1996, remained inactive until 2001.

Political tensions among SADC member states escalated dramatically with the outbreak of the "second rebellion" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) during the summer of 1998. While South Africa sought to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict, the governments of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe deployed their armies to support the government of Kabila. This intervention marked the beginning of a war that officially lasted until 2002.

In September 1998, the deployment of armies from South Africa and Botswana to restore order in Lesotho added complexity to the regional political and military landscape. Although this military intervention was carried out at the request of the Lesotho government, it highlighted significant improvisation (Williams 2019) and led to accusations against South Africa of intervening militarily when its economic interests were perceived to be threatened (Likoti 2007). South Africa should have waited for the Mbeki presidency to see a partial resolution of the interstate tensions experienced in Southern Africa during the second half of the 1990s.

### **3. Africa and the world: Mbeki's foreign policy**

Once he became president, Mbeki strengthened some of the trends he inherited from Mandela's foreign policy. He particularly focused on expanding ties with countries in the Global South and enhancing South Africa's presence in Africa, while maintaining friendly relations with governments in the North. Although there were some differences between Mandela's and Mbeki's foreign policy, these differences did not affect the overall objectives (Olivier 2012); instead, they primarily involved changes in the strategies used to achieve these goals. Mbeki's strategies were often more pragmatic and in some instances, more effective than those of his predecessor. This effectiveness can be attributed to the president's direct involvement in decision-making and the management of foreign policy. Mbeki also reorganised the cabinet system, worked to clarify the vision for foreign policy and made efforts to build a consensus within multilateral institutions regarding South Africa's foreign policy objectives, as evident in the process that led to the establishment of the African Union (AU) (Van Nieuwkerk 2006). The similarities between Mandela's and Mbeki's foreign policies are not surprising, as Mandela had entrusted Mbeki, along with Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo, to manage foreign policy during his presidency. Mandela typically intervened only when it was necessary to make strategic decisions (Williams 2021).

Interest in strengthening relations with the Global South did not come at the expense of those with the Global North. During Mbeki's presidency, the South African government maintained friendly ties with both the US and Great Britain. However, there were some political disagreements with these countries, particularly concerning the 2003 Iraq War and the Zimbabwe crisis, which will be discussed further

below.

South Africa positioned itself as a bridge between Africa and the Global North (Landsberg 2012). The dialogue initiated by Mbeki with the G7 governments regarding the African debt led to the approval by the OAU in October 2001 of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), of which Mbeki was the main architect. NEPAD committed African governments to promoting democracy, implementing market reforms, and taking greater responsibility for security management in Africa, all in exchange for increased international aid. The limited financial support from the G7 countries and political resistance within the AU hindered the effectiveness of NEPAD in both political and economic terms.

Following in Mandela's footsteps, Mbeki strengthened South Africa's ties with China. In April 2000, Mbeki and Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed the Pretoria Declaration on the Partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa. This declaration committed both governments to work together to 'create a new international political and economic order' and to enhance trade and investment between their countries by establishing a Bi-National Commission (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China [MFAPRC] 2002). Despite the ambitious political goals of this partnership, which was declared 'strategic' in 2004 (Department of International Relations and Cooperation [DIRCO] 2004), South Africa's interest in its relationship with China remained primarily focused on economic aspects (Telegram 8915/1996; Department of Foreign Affairs [DFA] 2005).

Trade and investment flows between South Africa and China increased rapidly; however, several critical issues also arose. From 1997 to 2008, the stock of Chinese FDI in South Africa rose from US\$9.6 million to US\$2.9 billion. During the same period, South African FDI in China grew from US\$51 million to US\$3.1 billion (UNCTAD 2025). Trade between the two countries was notably unbalanced. Between 1999 and 2008, South Africa's exports to China grew significantly, increasing from US\$271 million to US\$4.3 billion. During the same period, imports from China rose sharply, from US\$820 million to US\$9.9 billion. As a result, China maintained a substantial trade surplus with South Africa. Moreover, while most South African exports to China consisted of raw materials, the bulk of Chinese exports to South Africa were manufactured goods, which had a negative impact on certain sectors of the South African economy (World Bank 2025).

Mbeki expressed concerns about the economic imbalances with China. He warned that 'the relationship between Africa and China risks becoming an unequal relationship, similar to that which developed between African countries and colonial powers'. Mbeki added that 'China cannot just come here to extract raw materials and sell us manufactured goods' (Mail and Guardian 2006). This imbalance in economic relations between South Africa and China would continue to be a source of concern for subsequent South African presidents.

Regarding South-South cooperation, after the unsuccessful attempt to establish a "G8 of the South", Mbeki advocated for closer collaboration between Brazil, India and South Africa. This initiative took shape in June 2003 with the adoption of the Brasilia Declaration. The formation of IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) led to a fragile coordination of the three countries' positions within multilateral institutions. In 2004, the IBSA Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation was established, albeit with a very limited budget (Alden and Le Pere, 2024). Despite initial expectations, by the end of the decade, IBSA began to experience a decline. This downturn was largely due to the contradictions in its ideological vision and the growing appeal of a forum involving China and Russia for both India and Brazil. This dynamic ultimately led to the formation of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) in 2009, with South Africa joining the group in 2011.

Like Mandela, Mbeki deemed it essential for South Africa to pursue an active policy in Africa. The adoption of NEPAD was just one aspect of Mbeki's ambitious African agenda. His ideological emphasis on the African Renaissance, coupled with his belief that promoting security in Africa was crucial for South Africa's own economic development (Van Nieuwkerk 2012), motivated Mbeki to take a leading role in the establishment of the AU, which was officially inaugurated in Durban in 2002.

In October 1998, the South African government adopted the White Paper on Participation in International Peace Missions (South African Government 1998), after which Pretoria began actively engaging in various peacekeeping missions across Africa. Alongside deploying troops, South Africa also took part in diplomatic efforts aimed at finding negotiated solutions to various armed conflicts on the continent. These efforts yielded mixed results; they were successful in the DRC, but less effective in the case of the Ivory Coast (Akindés 2009).

Mbeki's African policy not only built on Mandela's objectives, but his approach to economic integration in Southern Africa also aligned with Mandela's presidency. It was not until the signing of the Trade and Development Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) with the European Union (EU) in 1999 that the South African government intensified negotiations to establish the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA). The trade liberalisation process with the EU, outlined in the TDCA, had several implications for South Africa. One significant consequence was the loss of tax revenue, which impacted the SACU, whose member countries were not involved in the negotiations with



the EU (McCarthy 2003). This factor contributed to the adoption of a new formula for distributing tax revenue among SACU countries, benefiting the BLNS (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Eswatini) countries, as part of the revised SACU agreement of 2004. Secondly, during the negotiations for the SADC FTA, Pretoria sought to protect its industries, especially in textiles and clothing (Qobo 2005). South Africa offered to open its market to exports from non-SACU SADC countries before those countries liberalised access to South African exports. However, the South African government also insisted on implementing rules of origin that would favour its own manufactured goods in regional trade (Telegram 94921/2000; Lee 2003; Hentz 2008). As a result, trade imbalances between South Africa and other Southern African countries persisted, while SADC proved unable to promote the diversification of the region's productive structures. Between 2000 and 2008, South Africa's exports to the non-SACU SADC countries grew significantly, increasing from US\$3.1 billion to US\$8.9 billion. At the same time, imports from these countries also rose sharply, climbing from US\$0.3 billion to US\$4.4 billion. Despite this growth in imports from the non-SACU SADC countries, South Africa maintained a favourable trade balance of US\$4.5 billion. Moreover, more than half of the exports from the non-SACU SADC countries to South Africa came from Angola and primarily consisted of oil (World Bank 2025). The stock of South African FDI in the SADC countries rose from US\$1.1 billion in 1999 to US\$7.1 billion in 2008 (UNCTAD 2025).

From a political perspective, tensions among the countries of Southern Africa decreased during Mbeki's presidency. A turning point occurred with the political and economic crisis that engulfed Zimbabwe since 2000. On the one hand, Mugabe, increasingly isolated internationally and lacking financial resources, was compelled to seek support through regional diplomacy, particularly by engaging with South Africa. On the other hand, Mbeki viewed the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, as too weak to govern (Telegram 94921/2000). As a result, Mbeki adopted a policy of "quiet diplomacy", refraining from publicly criticising the Zimbabwean regime. He aimed to mediate between Mugabe and Western governments, with the support of the SADC, seeking to restore democracy and promote the implementation of a peaceful land reform in Zimbabwe in exchange for the resumption of development aid to the country. However, he was not successful (Pallotti 2013). The US and the EU imposed economic sanctions on the Zimbabwean regime, further isolating it internationally and prompting Mugabe to strengthen ties with China (Youde 2007).

In 2007, the SADC appointed Mbeki to facilitate dialogue between the South African government and the opposition in Zimbabwe. However, after the 2008 elections, which were marred by violence and ultimately won by Mugabe, the South African president proposed the establishment of a power-sharing government. In September 2008, a Global Political Agreement was signed, and a Government of National Unity was formed in 2009. Mbeki's decision to favour a compromise solution instead of advocating for new elections had significant consequences, not only in Zimbabwe, where the South African government 'allowed intransigent authoritarians to cling to power after losing elections, while the true victors scrambled for what little remained at the state's table' (Moore 2010: 753), but also at both the continental and regional levels, as it signalled South Africa's commitment to prioritising stability over democracy. It is no coincidence that both the Strategic Plan 2000–2005, adopted by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2001, and the Strategic Plan 2005–2008, adopted in 2005, only marginally addressed the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights in Africa (DFA 2001, 2005).

Overall, Mbeki adopted a more structured foreign policy than Mandela did. Mbeki's foreign policy was guided by an ambitious vision of South Africa as a leader for reform among African nations and as a bridge between Africa and the North. Mbeki also emphasised South-South cooperation and strengthened South Africa's ties with China. Mbeki took a pragmatic approach to supporting democracy on the international stage, often influenced by political and economic factors. In the following paragraph, we will explore how Zuma further embraced this pragmatic approach.

#### **4. Continuity or discontinuity? Zuma's foreign policy**

Some scholars have argued that there was a significant shift in South Africa's foreign policy during Jacob Zuma's presidency, which followed Kgalema Motlanthe's brief term from September 2008 to May 2009. They have emphasised that under Zuma, South Africa strengthened its relationships with countries in the Global South and officially joined BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The government shifted its focus away from ambitious plans for reforming African multilateral institutions and prioritised its national economic interests above all else, with negative repercussions for South Africa's external image and influence (Hendricks and Majozi 2021).

By emphasising his intention to use foreign policy to strengthen South Africa's economic development (Landsberg 2010), Zuma remained consistent with the ideological framework that had guided the foreign policies of Mandela and Mbeki. This approach would later be adopted by Cyril Ramaphosa as well. More broadly, Zuma's foreign policy closely aligned with Mbeki's, as evidenced by the government's official documents.

DIRCO's (2009) Strategic Plan for 2009–2012 reaffirmed the importance of the African continent in South Africa's foreign policy. It also expressed the government's commitment to accelerating the implementation of NEPAD. Like the official documents from the previous administration, the plan emphasised that relations with countries of both the North and the South 'will continue to be utilised to identify opportunities for strengthening the cooperation for the socio-economic development of South Africa' (DIRCO 2009: 16).

The notion that 'foreign policy (...) is an important component in South Africa's strategy for development' was also central to the white paper titled "Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu", which was adopted by the government in 2011 (Government of South Africa 2011b: 10). The white paper committed the government to strengthening partnerships with countries of the South and North 'to reform the global architecture' and 'to position [South Africa] to take advantage of high growth economies' (Government of South Africa 2011b: 18, 24). The underlying idea was that economic growth in South Africa would not only reduce poverty within the country, but also generate positive political and economic effects throughout Africa as a whole (Government of South Africa 2011b). Although the White Paper aimed to offer clear guidance for South Africa's foreign policy, it was somewhat vague about the priorities that the government would pursue internationally. Furthermore, it failed to explain how economic growth could help reduce poverty in South Africa and benefit the broader African continent (Le Pere 2017).

Similarly, the Strategic Plan for 2011–2014 reaffirmed South Africa's commitment to enhancing the security and development of the African continent. It highlighted the need for international governance institutions to be more responsive to the needs of developing countries. The plan also committed the government to enhancing relationships with countries in both the North and the South to further South Africa's development needs and priorities (DIRCO 2011).

The economic relations with Western countries showed continuity with the foreign policy of the Mbeki administration. Political relations, which had begun on a cordial note, were negatively impacted by the conflict in Libya. Despite Zuma's state visit to London in March 2010 and the establishment of the South Africa–US Strategic Dialogue the following month, the outbreak of the conflict in Libya in February 2011 strained relations between South Africa and Western countries.

Under pressure from Washington and possibly confident in the support of Western nations for the AU's initiative aimed at restoring peace in Libya (De Waal 2013; Landsberg and Van Heerden 2020), South Africa voted in favour of Resolution 1973, which was approved by the United Nations Security Council on 17 March 2011 (US Department of State 2011a).

The military attack on the Gaddafi regime, which began immediately after the adoption of Resolution 1973 by France, Great Britain and the US, and was later supported by NATO, took Zuma by surprise. This situation highlighted the 'naivety of the South African president in assessing the aims of the Western powers in Libya' (Marchal 2018: 366). While political divisions within the AU hampered and weakened the effectiveness of African diplomatic efforts in Libya (US Department of State 2011b; Kasaija 2013), the governments of the US, Great Britain and France did not extend even 'symbolic support for the AU's efforts' (De Waal 2013: 372). In the weeks following the military intervention against Gaddafi, Zuma accused London, Washington, and Paris of 'abusing' the Security Council resolution to pursue 'regime change through political assassinations and foreign military occupation' (UNSC n.d.).

Afterwards, relations between South Africa and the US improved. During his visit to South Africa, American President Barack Obama remarked that 'the United States views South Africa as a critical partner' in both commercial and political-strategic contexts (The White House 2013). In contrast, relations with Great Britain faced another setback when London announced the termination of its development aid programme for South Africa (Large 2018).

Zuma also strengthened ties with emerging powers. Notably, South Africa's entry into BRICS in December 2010 was a significant diplomatic achievement for Zuma. The move not only reinforced South Africa's status as the 'leader of the African continent' on the international stage (Alden and Schoeman 2013: 115), it also positioned the country to advance its 'normative and economic objectives' globally (Alden and Schoeman 2025: 75).

On one hand, being included in BRICS would enable South Africa to help 'transform global governance in the interest of the South' (DIRCO 2011: 15). On the other hand, Zuma emphasised the economic significance of BRICS, stating that 'South Africa and the future prosperity of the African continent are increasingly linked to the economies of BRICS, and this forum can play a crucial role in addressing our development challenges' (South African Government 2011a). While acknowledging 'the developed North's continued dominance' in international economic relations, Zuma highlighted 'the rising importance of the emerging powers of the South and their value for a developing economy like ours' (South African Government 2011a). DIRCO's Strategic Plan for 2015–2020 also emphasised that 'the growth of the South African and the African economy is increasingly linked to emerging economic powers' (DIRCO 2015: 19).

However, concerns were raised about Pretoria's ability to influence the actions of the BRICS, given the significant disparities in economic, political and military strength between South Africa and the other BRICS countries (Kornegay 2012). There is also a persistent misunderstanding regarding the development model that South Africa intends to promote in Africa, as it positions itself as a self-proclaimed "gateway" for BRICS on the continent. During Zuma's presidency, the South African government actively pursued a policy of commercial expansion throughout Africa while encouraging investment from its companies. The value of South African exports to other Sub-Saharan African countries increased from US\$10 billion in 2009 to US\$24.4 billion in 2018. During the same period, South African imports from Sub-Saharan Africa rose from US\$4.75 billion in 2009 to US\$11 billion in 2018. Thus, South Africa's trade surplus increased from US\$5.3 billion in 2009 to US\$14.4 billion in 2018, while the bulk of Sub-Saharan African exports to the South African market continued to consist of raw materials (World Bank 2025).

Some scholars highlighted the risk that increasing trade with the BRICS could worsen the structural imbalances in African economies. As Besada et al. (2013: 8) noted, 'increased market access for the BRIC nations to Africa could have detrimental consequences for the rest of the region, which has yet to develop its industrial base. It risks entrenching asymmetrical patterns of trade, thereby keeping the economies in the region dependent on commodity exports'. Despite official commitments by the BRICS nations themselves (China-Africa Business Council 2024), the economic growth experienced by most African countries over the past twenty-five years has largely been driven by international demand for raw materials (UNCTAD 2022). In the case of China, the value of its exports to Sub-Saharan Africa rose from US\$35.3 billion in 2010 to US\$56.3 billion in 2018, and further to US\$76.8 billion in 2022. Meanwhile, the exports of Sub-Saharan African countries to China increased from US\$45 billion in 2010 to US\$54.3 billion in 2018, and then to US\$58.4 billion in 2022. As a result, the trade surplus that Sub-Saharan Africa previously enjoyed shifted in favour of China. Additionally, three-quarters of African exports to the Chinese market continue to consist of raw materials (World Bank 2025). Furthermore, the BRICS countries have exhibited significant political divisions among themselves and have been largely ineffective in advocating for reforms in multilateral institutions that better address the needs of developing countries (Bond 2015).

During Zuma's presidency, as was the case under Mandela and Mbeki, relations between South Africa and China faced some challenges. While the two countries elevated their relationship to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2010 and increased military cooperation, the South African president expressed concerns about trade imbalances with China (Financial Times 2012). Additionally, Chinese investments in South Africa primarily targeted the mining sector (Alden and Wu 2014). As Rob Davies, South Africa's Minister of Trade and Industry from 2009–2019, wrote, despite attempts 'to address the structural deficit in our bilateral trade [and] to promote more value-added sales [of South African products] to China, as well as [Chinese] investments in value-added production' in South Africa, these efforts achieved 'limited results' (Davies 2021: 124). Despite these challenges, South Africa successfully leveraged its relationship with China to enhance its image as a bridge between Africa and emerging powers. For instance, it hosted the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation in 2015. However, bilateral political dialogue with China failed to extend beyond the collective positions expressed by BRICS, with a significant emphasis remaining on economic cooperation (South African Government 2015).

Some scholars have argued that the 'loyalty to the BRICS grouping' has had a negative impact on the foreign policy of South Africa (Jordaan 2024: 192), particularly regarding the government's support for democracy and human rights on the international stage. In fact, the actions of both the Mbeki administration (2006–2007) and the Zuma government (2010–2011) within the UN Security Council were marked by 'inconsistency' and 'contradictions' (Graham 2015: 89). South Africa's hesitance to embrace strict multilateral frameworks that enforce respect for democracy and human rights can be partly understood as a reaction against selective military interventions by Western nations. This reluctance culminated in 2016 when South Africa withdrew from the International Criminal Court, a decision that was later overturned by the South African Supreme Court of Appeal. Additionally, the South African government has tended to prioritise political compromises to restore stability in crisis-affected countries such as Zimbabwe and Madagascar, as well as in conflict zones like Sudan.

Although strengthening relations with African countries was a priority for Zuma, some factors undermined South Africa's prestige and influence on the continent. These included recurring waves of xenophobic violence within South Africa and the political controversies surrounding the election of former Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as Chairperson of the AU Commission in July 2012 (Alden and Schoeman 2013; Le Pere 2017; Nagar 2022; Vandome 2022).

This should not lead to a neglect of the continuities in the policies towards Africa between the Mbeki and Zuma administrations. Although Zuma did not put forward ambitious plans or projects to reform African multilateral institutions, South Africa remained politically engaged within the AU. In addition, the South African military participated in peacekeeping operations across the continent, including missions in the DRC and Sudan.



Just as had occurred with Mandela and Mbeki, some of Zuma's diplomatic and military initiatives in Africa turned out to be failures. In addition to the debacle in Libya, the decision to send additional troops to the Central African Republic in January 2013 to support President François Bozizé's regime was a setback for the South African government. This effort ended in failure, as the government had to withdraw its military contingent following the deaths of some South African soldiers and the fleeing of Bozizé from the country.

Concerns have been raised from various sources suggesting that the military intervention in the Central African Republic was aimed at advancing the economic interests of certain groups and individuals associated with Zuma (Mail and Guardian 2013a; Vandome 2022), further illustrating the decline of South Africa's foreign policy. It is, however, important to note that even during Mbeki's presidency, some of South Africa's diplomatic and military initiatives were partially linked to economic objectives (Qobo 2010). Mbeki's policy in the DRC was motivated, in part, by a desire to open the Congolese market to South African goods and businesses (Khadiagala 2009). In Sudan, the focus was also on the country's oil fields (Nathan 2009). Additionally, some analysts interpreted Mbeki's policy of 'quiet diplomacy' toward Zimbabwe as being driven, at least in part, by commercial interests (Sachikonye 2018: 167).

The military intervention in the Central African Republic and the diplomatic failure in Libya both underscored two significant issues. Firstly, they revealed 'the inability of South African diplomacy to fully understand a crisis with its complex regional politics' (Marchal 2018: 368). Secondly, they highlighted Zuma's tendency toward decision-making improvisation and the centralisation of strategic decisions related to South African foreign policy in his hands and a small group of advisors (Van Nieuwkerk 2012). This centralisation of power is a trait Zuma shared with both Mandela and Mbeki (Landsberg and Van Heerden 2020).

Even at the regional level, Zuma's presidency mirrored the policies of previous administrations. In the name of "national interest", South Africa opposed the proposal to deepen economic integration among SADC countries through the establishment of a customs union after the creation of the SADC FTA. This opposition stemmed from the fact that such a proposal 'would have required the decommissioning of a policy tool important for industrial development - tariffs' (Davies 2021: 108). In 2015, South Africa supported the adoption of a regional development cooperation agenda by SADC that prioritised industrialisation. This agenda marked a clear shift away from the trade-driven integration approach that the SADC had pursued over the previous two decades, aligning more closely with the vision of economic transformation advocated by the Zuma administration (Southern African Development Community 2015; Davies 2021). During Zuma's presidency, the structural trade imbalances between South Africa and non-SACU SADC countries worsened. The value of South African exports to non-SACU SADC countries increased notably, rising from US\$7.2 billion in 2009 to US\$11.1 billion in 2018. In contrast, the value of exports from non-SACU SADC countries to South Africa increased modestly, rising from US\$2.3 billion in 2009 to US\$2.9 billion in 2018. During this period, Angola accounted for over 40 per cent of non-SACU SADC countries' exports to South Africa, primarily consisting of raw materials (World Bank 2025). The stock of South African foreign direct investment in SADC countries reached a record US\$30.3 billion in 2018 (UNCTAD 2025).

Politically, Zuma focused on normalising relations between South Africa and other Southern African countries, particularly addressing the tensions that had existed with the Angolan government during the presidencies of Mandela and Mbeki. In August 2009, Zuma made his first official trip as president to Luanda, Angola. During this visit, Zuma emphasised the historical bonds of solidarity between the ANC and the MPLA, which were established during the struggles against colonial and racist regimes. Zuma called for the strengthening of economic ties between South Africa and Angola and signed a series of bilateral cooperation agreements (South African Government 2009). In the subsequent years, both investment and trade between the two nations increased significantly, although a large portion of Angolan exports to South Africa consisted of oil (Sachikonye 2018; World Bank 2025).

Like Mbeki, Zuma also prioritised political stability in Zimbabwe over the restoration of democracy. As a result, he refrained from applying pressure 'to move [Mugabe and] ZANU-PF into a co-operative mode' (Moore 2010: 753), hoping that the agreement signed in 2008 would be fully implemented. However, this approach disadvantaged the opposition, allowing Mugabe and ZANU-PF to easily win the July 2013 elections (Rupiya 2020). Despite evidence presented by various parties of irregularities committed before and during the elections, both South Africa and the SADC endorsed the results (Mail and Guardian 2013b; Aeby 2017). Furthermore, South Africa did not impose sanctions in response to the 2017 coup that ousted Mugabe and brought Emmerson Mnangagwa to power, nor did it respond to the violence and irregularities that marred the 2023 elections (Moore 2022).

The political crisis that intensified during the Zuma administration in South Africa, as confirmed by the Zondo Commission's findings, likely shaped the perspectives of many scholars and observers on the country's foreign policy. In fact, several trends from the foreign policy of previous administrations were further strengthened. These included a strong emphasis on economic diplomacy, particularly in Africa and Southern Africa; an effort to strengthen South Africa's role in South-South cooperation and its ties with China, while also

maintaining friendly relations with Western countries; and a preference for promoting political stability over encouraging respect for democratic practices in Africa. In contrast to Mbeki, Zuma did not put forward a clear vision for improving and reforming cooperation among African nations. His foreign policy in Africa was hindered by his failure to recognise the seriousness of domestic crises and the complex regional and international implications they carried.

## 5. A new dawn? Ramaphosa's foreign policy

High hopes for political renewal both domestically and internationally followed Zuma's resignation in February 2018 and Ramaphosa's election as president.<sup>3</sup>

Ramaphosa quickly embraced many of the priorities that had shaped the foreign policy of previous administrations. In his first State of the Nation address, delivered shortly after his election, Ramaphosa stressed his government's commitment to promoting free trade across Africa. He highlighted the importance of implementing both the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) and the Continental Free Trade Agreement to 'open market access opportunities for South African export products and contribute to job creation and the growth of South Africa's industrial sector' (South African Government 2018a). Regarding collaboration with BRICS, the new government would focus primarily on an economic agenda, giving 'priority to the promotion of value-added trade and intra-BRICS investment into productive sectors' (South African Government 2018a). As a result, the Strategic Plan 2020–2025 committed DIRCO to 'ensure that South Africa prospers by becoming a catalyst and operating as a networking agenda for South Africa Incorporated' (DIRCO 2020: 18). In its bilateral relations with the countries of both the North and the South, the focus would be on the economic benefits that South Africa could gain (DIRCO 2020).

In 2023, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) addressed the criticisms that had been directed at the government in previous years regarding the excessive fragmentation of its international objectives and the lack of coherence between South Africa's foreign policy and the national priorities of economic growth and job creation (Qobo 2010). To address these challenges, DIRCO adopted the Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest, which aimed to enhance coherence in South Africa's foreign policy, aligning it with the country's economic development goals. The document stated that 'a key objective of South Africa's foreign policy will be the promotion of economic diplomacy through mutually beneficial trade and investment relations' (DIRCO 2023: 8). Pretoria would also promote peace in Africa, 'an indispensable requirement for the security and stability of South Africa' (DIRCO 2023: 14), and democracy, but 'in a spirit of cooperation, as opposed to imposition, paternalism or dominance' (DIRCO 2023: 15). Within an international context characterised by the rise of new powers that did not seem able 'to challenge normative and institutional arrangements that have characterised the world order since after the Second World War', the South African government would also try to establish 'balanced partnerships with countries of both the North and the South in order to pursue its interests' (DIRCO 2023: 25). These priorities aligned with those of Ramaphosa's predecessors.

In the early years of Ramaphosa's presidency, South Africa maintained cordial relations with Western countries. However, tensions arose following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and South Africa's decision to abstain from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution passed on 2 March 2022, which condemned Russia's military aggression and called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory.

Ramaphosa's stance on the issue, similar to the position taken by Zuma in 2014 regarding the annexation of Crimea, not only took into account the historical ties between the ANC and the Soviet Union and the internal dynamics within the ANC, but also reflected both his belief that 'the war could have been avoided if NATO had listened to the warnings from its own leaders and officials over the years, which indicated that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region' (South African Government 2022), and his ambition to strengthen South Africa's position among the BRICS and non-aligned countries (Van Nieuwkerk 2024: 110). Additionally, Ramaphosa believed that maintaining neutrality between the parties was essential for South Africa to promote 'a peaceful solution through dialogue' (South African Government 2023b). Hence, the clash between the position expressed by South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor, who at the outbreak of the conflict was quick to call for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, and the emphasis placed by Ramaphosa on the need to immediately start negotiations between the belligerents (Sunday Times 2022).

The South African president adopted a cautious approach, using language that 'displayed tacit support for Russia but not for the invasion as such' (Brosig 2024: 760). This stance aligned with the publicly expressed positions of the BRICS nations. Additionally, in June

<sup>3</sup> South Africa's Foreign Policy under Ramaphosa, in *Strategic Comments*, 27(2), vii–ix. IISS.

2023, Ramaphosa participated in an AU peacekeeping mission, which proposed a 10-point plan to resolve the conflict. However, this plan was rejected by both the Ukrainian and Russian governments. South Africa faced significant international criticism and was even accused by the US ambassador in Pretoria of supplying weapons to Russia. In general, Ramaphosa's efforts to maintain a 'policy of non-alignment' regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine were contradictory and ineffective (South African Government 2024b). This was primarily because Ramaphosa's stance was caught between advocating for the 'principle of respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states and peoples' and failing to explicitly demand the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory (South African Government 2023a).

In December 2023, South Africa accused Israel of committing genocide against the population of Gaza before the International Court of Justice. This accusation drew strong criticism from some Western governments, but also garnered broader international support for South Africa compared to its stance on Russian aggression against Ukraine. Historical and political factors played a crucial role in motivating South Africa to advocate for the rights of the Palestinians in Gaza. On the one hand, as previously mentioned, the ANC established relations with the Palestinian leadership during its struggle for national liberation. Since 1994, South African presidents have consistently supported the Palestinian cause in international fora (Jeenah 2015). On the other hand, the South African government viewed, with some irritation, Israel's diplomatic and economic activism in Africa over the past decade, which aimed, among other things, to diminish African support for Palestinian political demands (Gidron 2020).

Despite these tensions, Ramaphosa has endeavoured to maintain friendly relations with Western countries, which, in 2023, held 86 per cent of South Africa's FDI stock, amounting to US\$96 billion (UNCTAD 2025). However, Trump's return to the White House in 2025 has significantly impacted relations between the US and South Africa. The approval by the South African parliament of the Expropriation Act 13 at the end of 2024 was followed by controversy triggered by Elon Musk, which led to Trump signing an Executive Order on 7 February 2025. The order accused the South African government of attempting to 'seize agricultural property from ethnic minority Afrikaners without compensation' (The White House 2025). Additionally, it claimed that South Africa was undermining US foreign policy by attacking Israel at the International Court of Justice and trading with Iran. As a result, the Executive Order suspended all American aid to South Africa (The White House 2025). Despite Ramaphosa's efforts to ease tensions with Washington (Eligon 2025), the situation escalated in March 2025 when the US expelled South African Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool. Furthermore, the imposition of a 30 per cent tariff on South African exports to the US market in August effectively nullified the AGOA agreement. These actions not only strained US-South African relations, it also prompted Ramaphosa to advocate for closer integration with countries in the Global South (South African Government 2025).

Although the BRICS global governance reform agenda has seen limited effectiveness, Ramaphosa has emphasised that South Africa's main benefit from collaborating with BRICS is the opportunity 'to have a strategic relationship with China' (South African Government 2023a). In September 2024, the partnership between the two governments was elevated to an 'all-round strategic cooperative partnership' (South African Government 2024a).

Despite recognising that 'We export to China what we extract from the earth; China exports to us what it produces in its factories', Ramaphosa rejected accusations of 'new colonialism' regarding the Chinese presence in Africa, reaffirming the policy of collaboration with Beijing established by his predecessors (South African Government 2018b). Ramaphosa viewed trade with China as a growth opportunity for Africa and urged Beijing, through its investments, to support the industrialisation of both Africa and South Africa (South African Government 2018b). However, economic relations between China and Africa continue to face significant contradictions, including trade imbalances and issues related to debt sustainability (Carmody et al. 2020; Carmody et al. 2021). This is also true for the economic relationship between China and South Africa (Shoba and Mlambo 2024).

At the African level, Ramaphosa has continued the efforts of his predecessors. While the South African military has remained engaged in peacekeeping missions, Ramaphosa actively coordinated the fight against COVID-19 among African governments during his tenure as Chairman of the AU from 2020–2021. However, Ramaphosa chose not to take decisive action to support democracy within the AU, accepting the outcomes of contentious elections in countries like Tanzania and Ivory Coast instead.

Like his predecessors, Ramaphosa also supported trade liberalisation in Southern Africa through the establishment of TFTA, which includes the SADC, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the East African Community. Trade imbalances in Southern Africa have continued to deepen. In 2022, South Africa's trade surplus with non-SADC countries reached a record US\$13 billion (World Bank 2025). Politically, Ramaphosa favoured pursuing compromise solutions in crisis situations, aiming to restore stability, even when it meant compromising democratic principles, as seen in the recent case of Mozambique (Fabricius 2024; DIRCO 2025).

Regarding military involvement, Ramaphosa has actively endorsed the deployment of the SADC Mission to Mozambique (SAMIM), which was withdrawn in 2024, and the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), which was deployed in 2023 and is currently in the process of withdrawal. However, this has drawn criticism, with some accusing him of acting primarily out of economic interests (Bond 2023). Furthermore, although these interventions indicate progress in military cooperation among SADC member countries, they have not achieved their intended objectives.

Several factors contributed to this outcome. Both missions were launched at a time when the political crises in Mozambique and the DRC had already reached a critical point. Second, the offensive approach taken by both SADC missions hindered the search for inclusive solutions to the conflicts (Verelst and Minde 2025). Third, the political divisions among African governments weakened the effectiveness of military action. In Mozambique, there was a lack of coordination between SADC troops and the Rwandan military contingent. In the DRC, SADC member countries and Rwanda found themselves on opposing sides, with SADC forces fighting against the M23 rebel movement, which was supported by Rwanda. Lastly, the number of troops and equipment provided to SADC missions was insufficient, given the severity of the ongoing conflicts (Dzinesa 2023).

Ramaphosa's foreign policy has largely aligned with that of previous South African presidents. He has focused on strengthening ties with emerging countries, particularly within the BRICS group, to promote South Africa's economic and political interests. Additionally, Ramaphosa has worked to consolidate relationships with Western countries, which are crucial sources of investment and trade for South Africa. However, it remains to be seen whether recent tensions with the Trump administration will ease or lead the South African government to further strengthen its political and economic cooperation with the BRICS nations.

## 6. Conclusion

In the three decades since the end of apartheid, the South African government has greatly expanded its diplomatic relations both bilaterally and multilaterally. Whereas the previous white regime maintained ties with a limited number of countries, democratic South Africa has formalised and strengthened relationships with nations in the Global South and emerging powers, particularly China. It has also generally maintained cordial relations with countries in the Global North, although it remains to be seen how relations with the United States will evolve during Trump's second presidency.

The evolution of South Africa's foreign policy after the end of apartheid has been a gradual process, influenced by the country's economic needs as well as the international relations developed by the ANC during its national liberation struggle. The significant continuities in foreign policy across different presidencies, as emphasised in this article, question the notion of a rupture between Mandela's and Mbeki's foreign policy on one side, and Zuma's and Ramaphosa's on the other. The analysis presented in this article indicates that the foundations of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy were established by Mandela and Mbeki. Subsequently, Zuma and Ramaphosa have continued to advance along a path that had already been set, consolidating the trends started by previous presidencies. As a result, the key objectives of the foreign policy have remained constant, although the methods for achieving these goals have evolved in response to changes within South Africa, as well as at the regional and international levels.

South Africa is currently an influential voice in the Global South; however, its foreign policy contains significant contradictions that undermine its effectiveness. Firstly, Pretoria has not yet ensured that its international relations contribute to a more inclusive model of economic development both domestically and globally. The growing economic relations with China highlight this issue, given their contradictory impacts on South Africa specifically, and Africa as a whole. Secondly, it remains unclear how South Africa will promote security in Africa, a priority shared by various presidencies since 1994. Without a commitment to strengthening democratic institutions at the national level, South Africa's efforts to address the root causes of violence on the continent may continue to prove an elusive goal.

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