

# South Africa and conflict-affected states

## Global Significance

**South Africa is a significant global actor due to its economic strength, its political identity and role, and its regional and international diplomacy. It has sub-Saharan Africa's largest economy (accounting for over a third of its GDP and some 40% of exports), and it is the dominant economy in the southern African region.<sup>1</sup> South Africa's growing status on the world stage was confirmed when it became the fifth country to join the 'BRIC group' in 2011.**

The unique political experience of South Africa has given it a special moral legitimacy. Furthermore, through its active international role since the end of apartheid in 1994 it has come to be regarded as a key player in the emergent African order and a key African actor in the international system.<sup>2</sup> So, there are high expectations of South Africa's role - though these are likely to differ between Western states and other strategic partners such as China. South Africa also has its own global ambitions, manifest in its wish to become a permanent member of the UNSC.

## Approach to conflict-affected states

South Africa has multiple identities: African leader, key member of the global South with a leading role in South-South relations, and bridge between South and North. These inform its international relations and how it engages in conflict-affected states. South Africa is also heavily influenced by the weight of its history, not just at home but also in its regional and continental relations.

***South Africa has multiple identities: African leader, key member of the global South with a leading role in South-South relations, and bridge between South and North.***

The cardinal principles of the African National Congress (ANC) – affirmation of human rights, justice, international peace, and democracy<sup>3</sup> – were

reiterated in 1994 and remain fundamental to South Africa's foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> In addition to national interests, key objectives of South Africa's foreign policy include consolidating its African Agenda, deepening South-South cooperation and expanding South-North relations. Another key element is engagement in the global system of governance,<sup>5</sup> including participation in multilateral bodies, such as the NAM and the G77.

South Africa promotes integration of the Southern Africa region and plays a key role in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). It has long recognised that conflicts threaten development in Africa.<sup>6</sup> It was instrumental in creating the New Partnership for Africa's Development, which enshrines the notion that without peace there can be no development.<sup>7</sup> Beyond Africa, it views South-South cooperation as a means to promote international development, and tripartite relations with the IBSA Dialogue Forum growing.<sup>8</sup> South Africa's relations with China and other rising powers like India are an increasingly important aspect of its international relations.

South Africa's foreign policy is grounded firmly in domestic concerns. In 2009, President Jacob Zuma stated that: "The main goal of government for the medium term is to ensure that our foreign relations contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to sustainable economic growth and development".<sup>9</sup> South Africa styles itself as the 'gateway' to Africa, but is threatened by the impact of instability and insecurity. The benefits of a peaceful continent include a more predictable investment environment and economic opportunities. Thus national interest "in preserving regional peace and stability in order to promote trade and development and to avoid the spillover effects of conflicts in the neighbourhood" is recognised as a factor in its engagement with conflict-affected states.<sup>10</sup>

South Africa is an emerging development actor. It uses the language of partnership rather than donor-recipient, being "committed to development partnerships around the world".<sup>11</sup> A Development Partnership Agency is finally being established,

which is expected to enhance engagement in international development policy. South Africa supports the MDGs, but they do not appear to feature prominently in official presentations of foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

South Africa has affirmed a strong commitment to engaging on conflict issues in the post-apartheid era.<sup>13</sup> In a 2011 White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy, the government committed to "continue to play a leading role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peace-building, and post-conflict reconstruction".<sup>14</sup> These objectives are equally prominent in official presentations; the Foreign Minister recently stated that South Africa's "focus on Africa has been on mediation, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction and development".<sup>15</sup>

South Africa supports conflict prevention in multiple ways, including direct bilateral engagement and through regional and international organisations. This includes involvement in the UN Peacebuilding Commission<sup>16</sup> and efforts to enhance UN-African Union (AU) relations on security and peacebuilding.<sup>17</sup>

South Africa has an impressive record of multilateral engagement on conflict-related issues, including the renegotiation of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the ban on anti-personnel landmines, the signing of the Rome Statute and support for the Arms Trade Treaty. South Africa has also taken an active role in developing new norms in international affairs, including those related to conflict, such as the R2P. It was instrumental in negotiating the AU's shift of position on R2P from 'non-intervention' to 'non-indifference'.<sup>18</sup> In addition, South Africa supports various continental bodies, such as the AU's Peace and Security Council, the African Standby Force, the Early Warning Centre and Panel of the Wise.<sup>19</sup> South Africa also plays a key role in regional peace and security through its participation in SADC.

South Africa contributes troops for AU and UN peacekeeping missions. It is currently the 14<sup>th</sup> largest contributor of military and police to UN peacekeeping operations, deploying just over two thousand troops to MONUSCO, United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur and United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan.<sup>20</sup> This may seem relatively small given South Africa's international stature and expectations;<sup>21</sup> however, capacity constraints in the military have prevented it from taking on a bigger role while the killing of 13 peacekeepers in the Central African Republic led to controversy at home.<sup>22</sup> South Africa also engages in bilateral defence cooperation with other states, including arms exports, which has caused some controversy in relation to 'rogue regimes', notably in Libya.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, South Africa has initiated or been directly involved in numerous conflict prevention

initiatives, including in Burundi, the Comoros, the DRC, Ivory Coast, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. The moral capital and 'soft power' derived from its experience of liberation struggle and peaceful transition has been central to this engagement in that: "Africa and the wider world looks to South Africa as a key model for resolving intractable conflicts".<sup>24</sup> This has led to efforts to export the lessons of its transition, while mechanisms such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have attracted considerable external interest.<sup>25</sup> It is also worth noting the personal engagement of those involved in the liberation struggle in conflict resolution initiatives, with former Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki directly engaged in mediating various African conflicts.

South Africa has a mixed record in its conflict resolution efforts on the continent. Burundi "became a showpiece for... Mandela's power as a mediator and South Africa's new role as a peacemaker".<sup>26</sup> South Africa also helped facilitate the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and the 2003 Sun City agreement. Mbeki has led the AU mediation process on Sudan and South Sudan, including facilitating recent talks between the Khartoum and Juba governments that resulted in an agreement on oil and related economic matters in September 2012.<sup>27</sup> However, South Africa's role has not always been regarded as successful or consistent, as illustrated by divergent views on its policy of 'quiet diplomacy' with Harare.

This may be seen to reflect another aspect of South Africa's history, namely the ANC's anti-imperialist doctrine. Some argue that the post-apartheid governments' "privileging of anti-imperialism over human rights" helps explain Pretoria's policy regarding Zimbabwe and Darfur, for example.<sup>28</sup> South African reactions to the Libyan intervention can also be seen to reflect an anti-imperialist orientation.<sup>29</sup> Despite playing a leading role in promoting R2P, Pretoria has disappointed Western expectations in terms of its interpretation of the doctrine and support for its application in cases such as Sudan and Syria. South Africa has sought to implement R2P through political processes and negotiations, rather than through sanctions or use of force.

## Implications for addressing conflict in the post-2015 framework

South Africa's role is critically important in African terms, rendering engagement with Pretoria on this agenda imperative to the prospects for any post-2015 peacebuilding commitments. In principle, one would expect South Africa to be supportive. Conflict transformation is a core element of the country's identity. Its foreign policy has considerable overlap with the peacebuilding agenda, including its focus on preventive diplomacy, negotiated solutions and mediation. Its track record of support for peace

initiatives in Africa demonstrates its commitment to this agenda. Moreover, South Africa's active engagement in multilateral processes suggests it could be a key player in post-2015 debates. Given its leading role in conflict prevention in Africa, the government should be supportive of the commitment to include peacebuilding in the post-2015 development framework. Indeed, it may be willing to champion the cause and would do so with unique moral capital.

South Africa's use of the language of 'human security' suggests it recognises the need to go beyond the mere 'absence of violence' to address 'key drivers of conflict'. In terms of the *Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals* set out in the New Deal, South Africa affirms support for 'legitimate politics' – although it may have its own interpretation of what this means. It supports 'security' – including civilian protection – and 'justice' – informed by its own truth and reconciliation experience. In terms of 'inclusive, responsive, fair and accountable' states, South Africa's official support for democracy might conflict with the actual conduct of its relations with other states. South Africa's active role in regional and international bodies would also help to address the 'regional and global factors that fuel conflict'. Lastly, South Africa's training of civil servants from conflict-affected states could link to the peacebuilding and statebuilding agenda, as well as being a good illustration of intra-continental peer learning.<sup>30</sup>

***South Africa's role is critically important in African terms, rendering engagement with Pretoria on this agenda imperative to the prospects for any post-2015 peacebuilding commitments.***

If South Africa could be persuaded to take up, and even champion, peacebuilding commitments, it might also play an influential role in the evolution of this framework with new actors. This includes China, which recently declared its engagement on security and peace under the FOCAC process. In the case of Sudan–South Sudan, for instance, Mbeki already has a brokering role in support of the AU with external partners like China. More broadly, Pretoria seeks to connect South and North, and it is well positioned to do so with regard to conflict prevention. It has the potential to play a constructive role helping the agendas of other 'emerging powers' and more established ones to cohere. It is worth noting that South African civil society groups and think tanks would likely support and also be able to advocate for peacebuilding priorities.

***If South Africa could be persuaded to take up, and even champion, peacebuilding commitments, it might also play an influential role in the evolution of this framework with new actors.***

Nevertheless, South Africa's history and politics may complicate it taking a direct role in promoting the peacebuilding post-2015 agenda. Its anti-imperialist orientation and the priority given to pan-African solidarity may mean that South Africa privileges relations with states that are not "inclusive, responsive, fair and accountable". This could inhibit its supportive engagement with this agenda. Furthermore, despite strong overlap with some of the priorities, challenges may arise from South Africa's wish to have a distinctive role unencumbered by any potentially sensitive or compromising association with what is perceived to be a Western-led process. Furthermore, as well as facing severe domestic challenges and political uncertainty, South Africa's capacity to play a leading role should not be over-estimated, since there is a growing recognition that it is "overstretching itself diplomatically".<sup>31</sup>

For these reasons, the modalities for negotiating South Africa's engagement in and ownership of the process will be critical. In conclusion, there are good reasons to suggest South African support for the post-2015 peacebuilding agenda, but crucially it is subject to the process pursued.

## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

**Saferworld** – 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT, UK  
Registered Charity no 1043843  
Company limited by guarantee no 3015948  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 4646 | Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647  
Email: [general@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:general@saferworld.org.uk)  
Web: [www.saferworld.org.uk](http://www.saferworld.org.uk)



<sup>1</sup> For details, see IMF, 'South Africa: 2012 Article IV Consultation - Staff Report, Informational Annex, Debt Sustainability Analysis, Staff Statement, Public Information Notice', 23 August 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Alden C, le Pere G, 'South Africa's Post-Apartheid Foreign Policy – from Reconciliation to Revival?' (IISS Adelphi Paper 362, OUP, 2003), pp 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> ANC, 'Foreign Policy Perspectives in a Democratic South Africa' (Johannesburg, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> South Africa's Department for International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) Strategic Plan 2010-2013.

<sup>5</sup> Pretoria affirms support for 'a rules-based international system that is governed by international law'.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the 2011 White Paper notes that 'Peace, stability, and security are essential preconditions for development.'

<sup>7</sup> See [www.nepad.org](http://www.nepad.org). See also General Assembly 67 session, Item 64 (b) of the provisional agenda, 'New Partnership for Africa's Development: progress in implementation and international support: causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa', 27 July 2012 (A/67/205–S/2012/715).

<sup>8</sup> Codified, notably in the Medium Term Strategic Framework of 2009, this includes: continued engagement with organisations of the South, such as the NAM, the G77 plus China, and others; implementation and monitoring of all IBSA trilateral forum agreements and action plans, as well as ensuring that sectoral agreements deliver tangible results that reach and benefit the citizens of all three countries; engagement with and support of efforts by the AU and UN aimed at finding a lasting solution to conflict situations on the African continent, as well as conflicts elsewhere. For a full analysis, see Landsberg C, (2010) *The Diplomacy of Transformation: South African Foreign Policy and Statecraft* (Johannesburg: Pan Macmillan).

<sup>9</sup> State of the Nation Address by JG Zuma, President of the Republic of South Africa, Joint Sitting of Parliament, Cape Town, 3 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> 'White Paper on South African Participation in International Peace Missions', p 20, South African Department of Foreign Affairs, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> 'Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu', White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (13 May 2011), p 11.

<sup>12</sup> These are incorporated into South Africa's Medium Term Strategic Framework 2009-2014. For a summary, see 'An overview of South Africa's progress in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): The governance and administration cluster perspective', Presentation to Parliament, 6 September 2011.

<sup>13</sup> DIRCO, 'Strategic Plan 2009-2013' (DIRCO, Pretoria, 2009), p 7.

<sup>14</sup> 'Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu', White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (13 May 2011), p 20.

<sup>15</sup> Public Lecture by Minister Maite Nkoana Mashabane at the Department of Political Science, University of Pretoria, on 'A Vision for South Africa's Foreign Policy – Now and Beyond', 11 September 2012.

<sup>16</sup> For example, South Africa was a co-facilitator of the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture (July 2010; see UNSC Resolution 1947 (2010)) on the effectiveness of the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

<sup>17</sup> South Africa is committed, for example, to deepening the partnership between the UN Peacebuilding Commission and AU's Policy Framework on Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development. See DIRCO Strategic Plan 2010-2013.

<sup>18</sup> This Act underlines military intervention as the last resort and emphasises diplomatic, peaceful measures such as dialogue, as the best option in conflict situations. It also embraces conflict prevention, intervention, and post-conflict reconstruction.

<sup>19</sup> See Murithi T, Mwaura C, (2010) 'The Panel of the Wise', in *Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture: promoting norms, institutionalizing solutions* eds U Engel, JG Porto (Ashgate, Farnham), pp 77-90.

<sup>20</sup> According to UNDPKO, 'Monthly Summary of Contributions', as of 30 September 2012.

<sup>21</sup> That is, below Senegal, Ghana, Egypt, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Ethiopia.

<sup>22</sup> South Africa's Department of Defence noted problems, for example, with shortage of specialist staff; see the DOD Annual Report 2010/2011, p 126. See Emmanuel Nibishaka, 'South Africa's Peacekeeping Role in Africa: Motives and Challenges of Peacekeeping', Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Report 02/2011.

<sup>23</sup> See 'SA did sell arms to Libya: NCACC', DefenceWeb, 28 February 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Bentley K, Southall R, (2005) *An African Peace Process: Mandela, South Africa and Burundi* (Cape Town: HSRC Press), p 12.

<sup>25</sup> Kagwanja P, (2009) 'An encumbered regional power? The capacity gap in South Africa's peace diplomacy in Africa', Democracy and Governance Research Programme Occasional Paper 6, (HSRC Press, Cape Town), p 4.

<sup>26</sup> Curtis D, (2007) 'South Africa: 'Exporting peace' to the Great Lakes region?' in *South Africa in Africa: The Post-Apartheid Era*, eds A Adebajo, A Adedeji, C Landsberg, (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville), pp 253-273.

<sup>27</sup> See Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of South Sudan and the Government of the Republic of the Sudan on Oil and Related Economic Matters, Addis Ababa, 27 September 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Nathan L, (2012) *Community of Insecurity: SADC's Struggle for Peace and Security in Southern Africa* (Ashgate, Farnham), p 80.

<sup>29</sup> See Thabo Mbeki, 'Reflections on Peacemaking, State Sovereignty and Democratic Governance in Africa', Dullah Omar Eighth Memorial Lecture, Community Law Centre, Uwc, Bellville, 16 February 2012. Among other things, he noted: '...these powers will intervene in our countries in pursuit of their selfish objectives, legitimising such intervention by presenting themselves as 'friends of Africa', intent to give us the gift of democracy, human rights, peace, good governance and progress, regardless of our wishes'.

<sup>30</sup> DIRCO's Diplomatic Academy runs training programmes on post-conflict reconstruction and development for civil servants from countries like South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Burundi and Rwanda.

<sup>31</sup> National Planning Commission, 'National Development Plan 2030: Our future - make it work' (15 August 2012).