

SOUTH AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

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In this article attention will firstly be given to the general trends and characteristics of the study of international political economy and secondly to an interpretation of South Africa's foreign policy in that context. The consideration of specific relations with the European Community, the United States, East Asia, other developing countries, the middle east as well as with the southern African region are receiving much attention at this stage. One area which is relatively ignored relates to the tendencies in the international political economic relations between states and how it could have an impact upon South Africa's foreign policy.

Challenges to South African foreign policy relates to internal and external conditions or tendencies. The following two specific issues could - if taken as a whole - have a huge impact on South African foreign policy: Socio-economic conditions in South Africa and the region; and tendencies and developments in the international political economy.

In this article the two above-mentioned challenges will be analysed, whilst acknowledging the fact that foreign policy is essentially a mechanism for the nation-state to adapt to changes in its environment. In order for governments to survive and move towards their goals they have to balance the internal tensions and external demands to which they are subjected or risk failure and possible disintegration. Changes in foreign policy are most likely to occur when developments at home give rise to new needs and wants with respect to their environments.

In the subsequent sections of this article the internal and external pressure on the South African government will be addressed. Under internal pressure we refer to rising demands made by citizens in terms of socio-economic needs, and under external pressure to trends like the globalisation of the international

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economy as well as pressures related to international political economic shifts. Therefore it is necessary to outline the general pressures on the South African government in terms of the two dimensions we identified.

Marx (1995:2-3) refers to five factors which are of importance when trying to define the foreign relations needs of the new democratic South Africa. Firstly, there is a mixture between high levels of development in terms of infrastructure (congruent with first world standards) and a high level of underdevelopment in other sectors of the society. Secondly, there is a high level of unemployment, which is seen as a possible source of the high levels of crime in South Africa for which the government of the day does not seem to have any tangible solution. Thirdly, more than fifty per cent of the GNP of the country is generated by external trade - expansion of trade is therefore of great importance to South Africa. Fourthly, South Africa's strong economic position relative to the rest of Africa places it in a favourable position concerning further trade and economic ties with the continent. Lastly, there is an influx of illegal immigrants into South Africa which takes place due to the image of South Africa as the "power house" of the continent or at least the sub-region.

From the aspects outlined by Marx one can indicate that the biggest "obvious" need in the context of South African foreign policy is of an economic nature. This implies that South Africa needs to create internal conditions of stability (both politically and socially) to ensure that it can attain high levels of economic growth through foreign investment. In this sense South Africa would need to develop both short and middle-range objectives to improve the prestige of the country internationally. Holsti (1988:127) states that "increasingly in our era, prestige is measured by levels of industrial development and scientific and technological skills". Industrial development, as well as scientific and technological skills seem to be present in South Africa, but the constraints of social instability, crime and general structural imbalances seem to prevent foreign investors from looking at South Africa as a viable option for investments.

Against this background it seems as if the formulation of South African foreign policy must take place with the main idea of economic growth and stability in mind. The profound changes which took place in South Africa during the past few years (with which all of us are quite familiar at this stage) thus imply a major foreign policy redirection on the part of the government. Apart from this the nature of the international political economy must be considered in terms of South African foreign policy.

To understand the foreign policy needs of South Africa a political-economic analysis is essential - i.e. an analysis of different phenomena which lies at the crossroads between what is seen as politics and economics. This implies a sensitivity towards the ways in which politics and political decisions impact upon economic circumstances, as well as the way in which economic outcomes can shape and constrain politics on the other hand (Crane & Amawi 1991:3).

This critical link between politics and economics is becoming more important if one considers the global economic conditions under which South Africa must operate. These world conditions are characterised by the ten plagues of the "new world order": 1. Unemployment; 2. The exclusion of homeless citizens from the political processes of democratic states; 3. The ruthless economic warfare between the EU, USA, Asia and others which controls all other wars and forms of economic, social and political oppression; 4. The gross inability to come to grips with and thwart the inherent contradictions of the concept, norms and reality of the global free market system; 5. The starving of a great part of humanity through crippling foreign debt; 6. Military research still forming the basis of the bulk of scientific research taking place in the world; 7. The continued spreading of nuclear weapons by the same states who want to protect themselves from it; 8. Ethnic wars which lay claim to archaic spurs of nationality, sovereignty, territory, etc.; 9. The development of capitalist phantoms, like drug lords, war lords, states involved in these deals, and a growing malice of normal citizens; 10. Lastly one has to analyze the present state of international law which can't give expression to the needs arising from continued state fragmentation and global integration (Derrida 1994:81-83).

The gross inability to come to grips with and to thwart the inherent contradictions of the concept, norms and reality of the global free market system is the most challenging "plague" when one thinks about South Africa and its foreign policy. The interface between global economics and foreign policy is nothing strange, especially if one takes the pressures exerted by it on states into consideration. A continually globalising or expanding global market forces states to liberalise economies which can produce some of the ailments of the world as identified by Derrida. The question is, how to bring about the framework within which foreign policy must be formulated and understood.

At this stage it seems as if the economic imperative is the most important aspect South African decision-makers take into consideration in the development of foreign policy. Although many eyebrows lift in terms of South Africa's relations with some of the "outcasts" in global affairs, the bulk of foreign interaction seems to take place within the parameters of the global economic imperative. How to understand this global economic imperative is one of the main challenges facing south Africa.

One of the lessons to be learned when one studies the global economy is that the process of global economic integration (commonly referred to as globalisation) does not only need states to conform to liberalisation and free-market competition principles, it requires a general sensitivity towards the regional political and economic reality in which a country is situated. Marx (1995:4) remarks that foreign investment in South Africa is very important but that this government must take the conditions in the South African region as well as Africa as a whole into consideration. South Africa can no longer see itself as being an island of prosperity in a sea of poverty. Problems experienced in South Africa are also experienced in other Southern African and African states.

The common problems between Southern African states can to a great extent be understood within the framework of current transformations in the international system. Developments which can be noted relate to the challenges to state sovereignty and state autonomy (through global economic and social developments), which imply that any study of current relationships between states in the Southern African region needs to take into account that "to understand the emerging world, we must be less state-centric; we have to understand global dynamics in the context of pluralism; 'low politics' will become 'high politics', Western civilization will be increasingly challenged, and risks as well as possibilities will increase". (Hettne 1995:13).

A diminished state-centric view or study of not only relationships but also foreign policy must be embarked upon in this regard. The challenge to foreign policy will ultimately come with regard to the way in which the South African state can understand and confront current tendencies. To provide an outline of this it can be stated that "low politics" which are already transformed to "high politics" will only increase the pressure exerted on the state in terms of the need to consider closer regional links, while it must on the other hand try to ensure peace and internal stability. To some extent this conforms to the notion of a

double movement taking place in the world economy. For Karl Polanyi modern society is a result of market expansion, which forms the first movement, and a second movement is formed by a society which tries to protect itself from the disruptive and destabilising effects of the market (Hettne 1995:11).

If this double movement identified by Polanyi is studied by South African policy-makers it will also become apparent that two sets of variables, being the international and the regional, must be taken into consideration if the government is serious about development within the country as well as in the region. Stallings (1995:1) indicates that: "While not denying the role of domestic economic, political and cultural factors, we believe that recent analysis has seriously underestimated the relevance of international variables and overlooked the importance of geographical location." The international and regional variables will begin to make sense in terms of foreign policy if it is realised that the second movement identified has relevance for states in a specific region like Southern Africa, where they must work together on a closer basis to ensure an amount of protection from the ravages of the global market. This aspect is of special relevance because the economies of Southern Africa (including South Africa) are extremely vulnerable to the fluid nature of the global market.

It seems as if the government has taken note of some of these tendencies. It is indicated in the Foreign Policy Discussion Document (FRDP) that there are elements of opportunity and threat inherent in the trend towards bloc formation. According to this document it implies that if any particular issue presents an opportunity for South Africa to pursue the interests of the region (SADC) or the continent it must be pursued immediately.

South African policy-makers must grapple with these very difficult issues as outlined above in a context where states are not only forced to play the global economic game of growth, investment and social upliftment - but where there are continuous challenges directed against it from within and outside of the country. Boyce (1977:6) states that "a new state's" foreign policy will to a great extent be dictated by the internal dynamics in that country. This has relevance regarding the domestic changes which took place in South Africa over the past six years (especially after the 1994 elections). Whether South Africa can be defined as a new state is debatable, but the change from the apartheid government to a democratic state to a great extent implies the creation of a new state. If South Africa is to be seen as a new state, the internal dynamics do to a

certain degree dictate the policies which must be formulated in terms of external relations or its foreign policy. The challenge of the domestication of international politics must be taken into consideration by South African policy-makers. The state must assume the role of improving the material well-being of its citizens. The satisfaction of the claims made by citizens has also become a major source of the state's legitimation and of a government's continuation in office. Therefore it is obvious that the South African government's foreign policy must be influenced by the internal conditions of underdevelopment.

If the South African government is to be influenced by this, one must take the following remark made by Hanrieder (1991:145) quite seriously: "This led to an intensive flow of interactions, of social demand-and-supply communications between state and society, through which politics and the bureaucracy rather than the market have become the major agents for social change and the redistribution of wealth and power." In this regard the sources of South African foreign policy can be traced to internal dynamics, although critics of the ANC government's foreign policy hold that no real concrete policy has been developed over the past two years. In this context it can be indicated that the bulk of overseas visits made by Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and other government ministers has been with the sole purpose of boosting South Africa's image as a country with sound economic credentials, which can only be profitable for overseas companies to invest in.

The most difficult question in terms of South African foreign policy which comes to the fore relates to the two main tendencies outlined in this section, namely international and regional dynamics and the internal pressure on the government to comply with the needs of its citizens.

In the next section we will shortly give attention to possible ways in which the South African government can try to address these pressures by clearly identifying what limits are imposed on conventional foreign policy behaviour through internal social as well as international economic pressures.

Stallings (1995:8-9) indicates that the globalisation of production makes it increasingly difficult for third world nations to gain access and to develop their own high-technology industries. The global economic pressure exerted on the South African government will to a great extent imply that the behaviour of the state (in terms of its foreign policy) will gradually begin to reflect a turn towards economic agreement with current tendencies. The basis of this argument is

found on the level where it is argued that the performative domain in international politics is not dominated by politics (political agreements and diplomatic bargaining) any more, but that in reality access to the performative domain runs via the economic route.

Further constraints upon the South African government and its foreign policy are the terms laid down since the mid 1980s for the economic performance of third world governments. They differ from the developmentalism of the 50s and 60s as well as approaches to development during the 70s. These constraints are taken together under a consensus called either neoliberalism, neoconservatism or neo-orthodoxy, with three main elements namely macro-economic stability, a reduced role of government in the economy, and a greater openness to the outside world (Stallings 1995:12).

The South African government in formulating its foreign policy must be open and sensitive to the image the country portrays in terms of its economic situation. It can also be added that the globalisation of production implies much more fluidity in the market - wherein transnational corporations (TNCs) have become the major agents in global capitalism. The risk profile of a country becomes very important in terms of efforts to attract foreign investments. Frey (1986:66-7) identifies three main types of causes for the risks facing a country: "economic causes, arising from changes in property rights (such as nationalization, forced increase of the share of domestic stock-owners or forced sale); a lack of foreign exchange as a consequence of natural catastrophes (such as droughts); political causes arising within the recipient country, which may be legal (such as government crises, work disputes and strikes, revolutions, secessions or *coups d'etat*); political causes emanating from outside the recipient country, such as intervention by external powers, blockades, border disputes or a full-scale war". According to an argument developed later in this article the rise and development of the information age make the task of the South African government to control the image of the country in terms of the risk profile extremely difficult.

The globalisation of capital, the saliency of TNCs and the risk profile of a country become the most important aspects to be taken into consideration in terms of foreign policy at this stage. An added difficulty identified by Gereffi (1995:105), relates to the interpretation of the third world position in the world economy as a core-periphery relationship. According to this kind of understanding peripheral nations will supply raw materials to centre nations - which

will be converted into commodities to be sold back to periphery nations at a profit. Gereffi argues that this interpretation ignores the industrialisation which has taken place in some third world nations - especially Asian nations which can soon be classified as industrialised nations.

This kind of oversimplistic approach to understanding the position of South Africa in the global economic hierarchy must most certainly be avoided. The Foreign Policy Discussion Document highlights the growing gap between North and South. According to this document the lowering of trade barriers and tariffs are only benefiting the North given its strong industrial base and its wealthy consumers. Ultimately this leads to a widening of the gap between the North and South (FPDD 1996:12-14).

One very important aspect which must be addressed in the analysis of challenges to South African foreign policy in the new era is the impact of the information age on a state's foreign policy. Any state is much more prone to judgement from others than ever before, the reasons for this being manifold, such as global surveillance through news networks like CNN, Sky News and others; the easy accessibility of information by means of which any investor, government official or private person can learn a lot about the internal conditions of a country; and the fact that any development or event of great magnitude in a country is immediately world news and can no longer be concealed by governments.

In an analysis of South African foreign policy on the basis of internal and external challenges the availability of information has quite a big impact. The South African state must therefore be responsive to:

- a. the opinion of citizens as well as their attitudes towards government;
- b. internal events - especially how these events get reported on by the global news networks, e.g. Pagad, crime and issues relating to economic development in the country;
- c. regional and global developments - to understand in which way they impact upon the country;
- d. regional and global opinion about the country; and
- e. the impact of the spreading of information about the country in general.

The above-mentioned considerations must be studied within the context of what one can call the theoretical, ideological and even religious frame of reference within which reporting takes place. Abrahams (1996:6) indicates that:

"Within the sphere of the publishing of news, the notion of neutral theory - and value-free information - is blatantly false. Correct understanding in this case, too, is dependent on the theoretical background in terms of which the item of news is articulated." Policy-makers must therefore be sensitive to the way in which items of news regarding South Africa is articulated. The articulation of news, views and arguments about a country or specific situations in a country can have grave consequences for a country in the short as well as long term.

The impact of the information age is therefore of a multifaceted nature. Traditional diplomacy and foreign relations will to a great extent be inadequate to deal with the image which is projected of a country through global media. An example which can be cited relates to growing uneasiness with regard to South Africa's internal conditions. The editorial column of *The Economist* (12-18 October 1996) raises some important questions with regard to South Africa after Nelson Mandela has made certain "blunders", e.g.: "He has stood by incompetent lieutenants out of stubborn loyalty, while dismissing another (not incompetent) merely for challenging his authority. He has taken cash for his party from a casino tycoon, who had previously admitted paying the head of an apartheid homeland to secure gambling rights." The concerns raised in this article also address the attitude of the ANC government with regard to its outright majority in the national assembly which is beginning to raise its head: "It is hard to envisage the ANC out of government. Electorally, it has no need to listen to its critics. And it may already be showing, albeit in small ways, the arrogance of unfettered power: an apparent readiness here to tolerate incompetence, an apparent reluctance there to pursue corruption" (*The Economist* 1996a:15).

What the above-mentioned examples imply is that the South African government is in these cases not dealing with a certain government's opinion, but rather with items of news and the way in which it is projected to millions of readers and viewers around the world. Government cannot under these circumstances trust traditional channels of diplomacy and foreign policy implementation only to rectify the images which are reported. These reports will force the government to make some tangible effort to rectify these images - or at least to ensure that wrong or biased reporting can be rectified.

It seems as if the aspects raised above has not been thought about by the present government. In a discussion document on foreign policy released by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in July 1996 an extremely short section

deals with the electronics revolution and the information super-highway. Reference is only made to the speed with which government leaders can contact one another, as well as the impact it can have on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy in general. It is also indicated that the electronics revolution and the information super-highway can pose particular challenges in the field of inter-governmental relationships especially in the African context where it can be utilised as a tool for preventive diplomacy and the process of peace-making (DFA Discussion Document 1996:12).

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