South Africa in the UN Security Council 2011-2012

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- After a controversial first tenure as a non-permanent member in 2007-2008, South Africa is currently serving a second term on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). That first tenure saw South Africa controversially oppose: (a) the condemnation of human rights abuses in Myanmar and Zimbabwe; (b) the furthering of sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme; and (c) the inclusion of climate change on the Council's agenda.

- Against a background of sharp criticism of its performance, South Africa's current tenure on the Council will therefore likely be characterised by an attempt to restore its credibility in the West and domestically, while simultaneously sustaining its status as a leading state of the Global South.

- South Africa will try to represent Africa's collective voice on issues of mutual concern, coordinating with Nigeria and Gabon as an African »G3«. As chair of the Council's Working Group on Conflict Prevention in Africa, it will work with Nigeria to further streamline the relationship between the Council and the AU and will push for greater UN funding for AU peacekeeping missions.

- With regard to reform of the UNSC, South Africa is caught in a dilemma. It has a direct interest in becoming a permanent member, while simultaneously it has to abide by the common AU position. This position – the so-called »Ezulwini Consensus« – claims two additional non-permanent seats, as well as two permanent, veto-wielding seats for Africa and is therefore highly unlikely ever to be seriously considered.

Introduction

In late 2010, South Africa attained two highly sought-after foreign policy objectives, namely its inclusion in the BRIC (now BRICS) grouping of states (also including Brazil, Russia, India and China) and its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period 2011-2012. While the former achievement met with some puzzlement from commentators who question South Africa's economic fundamentals vis-à-vis the much larger BRIC countries, the latter achievement appeared far more prosaic, with the country being elected unopposed by 182 of the 192 member states of the UN General Assembly.

Nonetheless, South Africa's election drew considerable attention, not least due to its status as a prominent advocate of Africa and the developing world, its support for Security Council reform and its somewhat controversial tenure on the Council in the period 2007-2008. While it is generally true that non-permanent members enjoy limited scope on the Council compared to the P5 in relation to agenda-setting and ongoing issues, the current composition of the Council[1] appears to set the stage for a robust session which, by most accounts, would roughly approximate the membership of any potential expanded Council insofar as political heavyweights such as Brazil, India, Germany and South Africa are concerned.

Background: South Africa in the Security Council 2007-2008

South Africa's first tenure on the Council during the period 2007-2008 saw it initially benefit from a groundswell of support,[2] which the country used to further develop its complex and maturing foreign policy. As such, and along with its ambitions to one day obtain a permanent seat on the Council, South Africa strove (characteristically) to achieve more than other non-permanent members, and certainly more than its material capabilities would suggest it could achieve. This orientation saw the country's diplomats pursue the interrelated goals of further demo-cratising decision-making at the UN and challenging the three Western P5 members' perceived politicisation of the Council machinery. In pursuit of these goals South Africa controversially opposed, in league with Russia and China, the condemnation of human rights abuses in Myanmar and Zimbabwe, further sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme and the inclusion of the issue of climate change on the Security Council agenda.

While South Africa's ostensible justification for adopting the above positions was to respect the division of roles between the various UN organs, the immediate net effect was to advance the devolution of decision-making to more democratic (Southern-dominated) UN bodies, such as the General Assembly, UNHRC and IAEA. The desired long-term political payback of South Africa's strategy at the Security Council was, however, to successfully project the country as a leading emerging middle power and, in so doing, locate itself favourably in a global environment characterised by a rapidly changing balance of power dominated by the economic rise of the emerging powers. Nevertheless, the strategy was not without risks. On the one hand, South Africa's policy at the Security Council met with some sharp criticism domestically, and on the other it served to alienate to some extent the country's fellow democracies in the West. South Africa's current tenure on the Council will therefore likely be characterised by an attempt to restore its credibility in the West and domestically, while simultaneously sustaining its status as a leading Southern state.

South Africa's Current Agenda in the Security Council: 2011-2012

South Africa's agenda during its tenure on the Security Council, like its broader foreign policy, is an ambitious one. As a standard bearer for Africa and the developing world and a diplomatic player with a coherent, albeit frequently confusing, foreign policy, South Africa will focus on a number of key issues. The country will, on an issue by issue basis, most likely coordinate its responses with the two other African members on the Council, its BRICS partners (all represented on the Council) and the Western states on the Council. In line with its broader for-

1. The current membership of the Council, in addition to the permanent, veto-wielding members (China, France, Russia, UK and US) includes elected members Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Columbia, Gabon, Germany, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Portugal and South Africa.

2. South Africa was elected to the Council by an overwhelming majority of 186 states in the General Assembly vote.

eign policy objectives,[3] South Africa will chair the 1540 Committee dealing with Weapons of Mass Destruction and Non-state Actors, as well as the Working Group on Conflict Prevention in Africa.

The African Agenda

South Africa's candidacy for its current seat on the Council was explicitly endorsed by Africa under the aegis of the African Union (AU) at its 14th Ordinary Session in early 2010. South Africa also enjoyed the support of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and as such has a mandate to represent Africa's concerns on the Council, along with the other members of Africa's »G3«, Nigeria and Gabon. Considering that African conflicts continue to dominate the Council's agenda, South Africa will shoulder considerable responsibility in representing Africa's collective voice on issues of mutual concern. As chair of the Council's Working Group on Conflict Prevention in Africa, South Africa will work with Nigeria to further streamline the relationship between the Council and the AU, specifically with the AU Peace and Security Council. On the issue of electoral violence and human rights violations in Zimbabwe, which may resurface on the Council, South Africa has declared that it will oppose any sanctions against Zimbabwe.

Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention

Peacekeeping, peacebuilding and conflict prevention are all major concerns for South Africa. As a major contributor to UN peacekeeping missions[4] South Africa (along with elected members such as Brazil, India and Nigeria) has a serious political stake in the success of UN peacekeeping missions. Being heavily invested in peacekeeping efforts in Africa, South Africa will push for greater UN funding for AU peacekeeping missions. On the issue of peacebuilding, South Africa was one of the co-facilitators of the 2010 Peacebuilding Commission Review and currently serves on the country-specific configurations or all six countries on the PBC's agenda. South Africa is likely therefore to take a lead role in issues related to peacebuilding.

Security Council Reform

On the issue of Security Council reform, South Africa can count on the support of the G4 members currently serving on the Council (India, Brazil and Germany), as well as some form of rhetorical support from China, France and the UK, which have backed an expanded Council – although this does not envisage further permanent, veto-wielding seats. South Africa's efforts in this regard will, however, probably yield disappointing results, for two reasons. The first relates to the unlikelihood of any meaningful change in the composition and structure of the Council going against the interests of the P5. The second concerns South Africa's commitment to the AU's »Ezulwini Consensus« of 2005 which demands the creation of two further non-permanent seats for Africa, as well as two permanent, veto-wielding seats for the continent. South Africa's dilemma in this regard is that, despite the impossibility of the AU position ever being seriously considered, it cannot break ranks without it losing its status as representative for Africa – the very rationale for its campaign to win a permanent seat on the Council.

Other Issues

In addition to the »big ticket« issues described above, South Africa is likely to continue its opposition to climate change appearing on the Council agenda despite its declared interest in combating climate change. This stance, overtly, is linked to South Africa's broader goal of opposing the »mandate creep« of the Security Council – referring to its tendency to encroach on the mandates of other UN bodies. South Africa's other goal during its tenure on the Council (in slight contradiction of its narrow interpretation of the Council's mandate in other areas) will be to raise the issue of development. South Africa considers development – broadly defined – to be a core component of both domestic and foreign policy and will use its seat to flag the link between underdevel-

3. South Africa prioritises disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control as a key feature of its foreign policy. However, South Africa simultaneously maintains an interest in ensuring that non-proliferation controls do not become a means through which developing countries are denied access to advanced technologies.

4. South Africa is currently the fifteenth largest contributor of peacekeepers to various UN missions. Interestingly, the country also has the distinction of having deployed the largest number of female peacekeepers of all UN members.

opment and threats to international peace and security. On the ongoing topic of the Iranian nuclear issue, South African officials have so far avoided any firm commitment as to whether South Africa will continue its opposition to further sanctions on Iran. Nevertheless, South Africa's commitment to strengthening the role of other UN agencies[5] vis-à-vis the Security Council, and its commitment to propagating the peaceful use of nuclear power, particularly in the developing world, does imply a probable continuation of its policy.

Resolution 1973

In arguably the greatest test so far of South Africa's current tenure on the Council, the country's ambassador to the UN, Baso Sangqu, voted in favour of Resolution 1973, approving a no-fly zone over Libya and authorizing »all necessary measures« to protect civilians in the current crisis in Libya. While South Africa's vote led to many commentators speculating that South Africa was seeking to make amends for its previous showing on the Council by prioritising human rights, others were puzzled by the seeming snub with regard to the BRIC nations, who all abstained. So uncharacteristic of South Africa's recent record was the vote that rumours rapidly began circulating about South Africa having »cut a backroom deal« with the US in the anticipation of earning its support for a permanent seat on the Council for South Africa. Further puzzlement was fuelled by intense criticism of the country's »yes« vote by sections of the ruling African National Congress, as well as the turnaround by South African leaders mere days after the resolution was passed when they criticised NATO for overstepping the mandate of the resolution.[6]

While Resolution 1973 did little to clarify South Africa's diplomacy at the Security Council, the actions of its diplomats point to important continuities and changes in its foreign policy. First, South Africa's position on the Libya issue mirrored that of the other African members of the Council (Nigeria and Gabon) following an AU call for a resolution to the crisis without mentioning any opposition to a no-fly zone. Indeed, the key step in the direction of South Africa's »yes« vote was the call by the Arab League for the establishment of a no-fly zone. This points to a continuity in South Africa's policy vis-à-vis the Security Council: that is its promotion (where possible, and on a case-by-case basis) of a broadly defined African position.[7] Viewed differently, however, South Africa's approval of the resolution points to a possible fundamental change in foreign policy under the Zuma administration. While South Africa's foreign policy under former president Thabo Mbeki steadfastly upheld the notion of state sovereignty, even in the face of clear human rights violations, foreign policy under Jacob Zuma appears more fluid, with tentative signs pointing to a harder line towards human rights abuses.

Conclusion

Many of South Africa's policies vis-à-vis the Security Council can best be viewed as a microcosm of its broader, fundamental foreign policy goals. While this is true for most, if not all, states, the combined effects of South Africa's ambitions on the international stage and its obvious material constraints create a distinct and complex approach to the Council. South Africa's chief foreign policy goal is to be accepted as a regional and continental leader and a major emerging power. To achieve this, South Africa requires the implicit support of Africa and the maximum possible following among states internationally (regardless of their commitment to human rights and democracy) on over-arching issues of common interest to the South. Hence South Africa's sometimes difficult relationship with the (primarily Western) status quo-oriented powers and its advocacy in the Security Council of issues such as African solutions to African conflicts, Security Council reform and defence of the sovereignty of weak Southern states.

The practical necessity of a vehicle to project South Africa's leadership status within Africa and the South renders the UN machinery crucial to South Africa's self-projection. This consideration will largely define the country's approach to its tenure on the Council. This will, however, as in the past and in other areas of its

5. In this particular instance, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

6. This was despite the resolution clearly authorising »all necessary means« to protect civilians.

7. South Africa's advocacy of an »African agenda« is central to its diplomacy in the Security Council. As alluded to elsewhere, South Africa alone cannot be considered a major player on the world stage, but needs to be recognised as far as possible as a representative for Africa, advancing the interests of the continent. Practically speaking, South Africa attempts to cultivate this image through regular briefings to the AU and SADC on the issues on the UNSC agenda.

foreign policy, be tempered by South Africa's relatively weak economic base, its contested leadership position in Africa and its sometimes strained relationship with the established Western powers. The extent to which South Africa succeeds in balancing the various strands inherent in its foreign policy will, therefore, largely determine the outcome of its contribution to the Council.

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