FEATURE REVIEW

Caught between two worlds: understanding South Africa’s foreign policy options

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The Diplomacy of Liberation: The Foreign Relations of the ANC since 1960
Scott Thomas, 1996
London: IB Tauris
333 pp, £39.50 hb

Apartheid’s Last Stand: The Rise and Fall of the South African Security State
Chris Alden, 1996
London: Macmillan
333 pp, £45 hb

The New is Not Yet Born: Conflict Resolution in Southern Africa
Thomas Ohlson & SJ Stedman with Robert Davies, 1994
Washington DC: Brookings Institution
322 pp, £15.50 pb

From Isolation to Integration? The South African Economy in the 1990s
A Handley & Greg Mills (eds), 1996
Johannesburg, SAIIA
241 pp

South African foreign policy has been characterised by a lack of direction since the country’s first non-racial elections in April 1994. Two visions of the country’s place in world politics have been competing for supremacy: the ANC’s internationalism and the Department of Foreign Affairs’ neo-realism. This clash has led to a persistent confusion, which cases such as the agonised debate over recognition of Taiwan, the Nigerian imbroglio over Ken Saro-Wiwa’s execution, and the sale of arms to Syria only confirm. Four recently published works provide some fascinating insights into the issues raised by the current debate over the ‘new’ South Africa’s external relations and their implications for the region. Thomas and Alden help explain how this debate emerged. Scott Thomas examines the ANC’s foreign policy in exile, while Chris Alden concentrates on the regime’s response in the form of the National Security State (NSS). The other volumes consider how the debate might be resolved. Ohlson et al. illustrate the
way in which the NSS’s principal weapon—destabilisation—continues to hinder regional development. Finally, the edited collection from the South African Institute of International Affairs focuses on the economic options available to the country.

In looking at the origins of the debate Thomas provides us with a fresh analysis of the traditional ANC attachment to what might be termed ‘internationalism’, that is, non-alignment, support for radical regimes and a commitment to distributive justice. In a 1993 issue of Foreign Affairs, Nelson Mandela articulated a more nuanced version of that creed when he argued that, henceforth, South Africa would pursue policies based on the primacy of human rights, democracy, peace (including more effective arms control), and the role of the republic within Africa. That approach, with its roots in the Freedom Charter, has a lasting appeal for many ANC members. Evidence of this can be seen in the warm welcome recently afforded to prominent representatives of Iran and the PLO. Central to the ANC conception of international relations is the notion of South Africa as a southern state. Related to that is an implicit bid for supremacy within Africa as the continent’s leading industrial and military power, and therefore the principal candidate should an African seat be created on the UN Security Council. Unlike other previously sacrosanct principles, such as nationalisation, which were watered down during the transition in the bid to win international respectability, the ANC’s distinctive approach to international affairs has proved more durable. Perhaps this is so because it represents for many the ANC’s credentials as a liberation movement, rather than its new status as just another party, albeit the dominant one.

The Diplomacy of Liberation has, deservedly, aroused considerable interest since its first appearance as an LSE dissertation. It complements previous standards, such as Peter Walshe’s The Rise Of African Nationalism in South Africa and Gail Gerhart’s Black Power in South Africa, which examined the internal influences on the ANC, by analysing the movement as a successful non-state actor within mainstream international relations. In so doing Thomas also serves to balance the classic works on South African foreign policy by Deon Geldenhuys, James Barber and John Barret which looked at the question from the position of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). The originality of approach is bolstered by Thomas’s thorough scholarship and the result is an important contribution to both South African studies and international relations. Thomas identifies the ANC’s External Mission as having three priorities; to facilitate the armed struggle; to isolate South Africa culturally, economically and politically; and finally to gain recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the South African people.

Whatever its success in achieving the first and last of those objectives, the ANC’s diplomats waged an extremely effective international propaganda campaign which placed Pretoria under increasing pressure. It did so through the formation of a ‘broadly based international support network, a transnational anti-apartheid coalition’ which was gradually able to mobilise public opinion to effect the economic and cultural sanctions of the 1980s. Indeed, if the revolutionary tradition of international relations is to have any future, it needs to re-activate this alliance of Western groups. Recognising that public ignorance in
the West of the scope and nature of apartheid had to be overcome, the ANC set out to cultivate and develop anti-apartheid groups. Thomas also emphasises the close relationship which the External Mission had with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and their reliance on Soviet Bloc support.

What is refreshing about the *Diplomacy of Liberation* is the importance which its author affords to previously marginalised influences on the ANC such as the role of religious activists or its difficult relations with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). In this way Thomas is able to sketch a much more subtle picture of the way in which the ANC attempted to isolate the apartheid regime. Thomas shows that, although the ANC had an exaggerated faith in the power of international organisations, the External Mission can be counted a success simply because it allowed the movement to survive. Without the energetic activities of the ANC’s diplomats it hardly seems likely that a group under such intense military pressure from the South African Defence Force (SADF) could have continued. Thomas not only provides us with an invaluable account of the External Mission but also shows the difficulties which an idealist perspective on international relations provides. The ANC’s fervent espousal of the rights of non-state actors and a foreign policy based on non-alignment now sits uneasily with the duties and prerogatives of a government, especially one which is also a regional superpower.

Chris Alden focuses on the position of the DFA which, in contrast to the ANC’s idealism, remains one of (neo) realism. This involves an identification with South Africa’s traditional Northern partners on cultural, political and economic grounds. The DFA’s analysis identifies South Africa’s national interest as residing primarily in as close an integration as possible with the West. Rather than seeing radical change to the international system as possible the DFA remains convinced that South Africa’s lack of capabilities mean it remains severely constrained. Therefore the pragmatic policy is to remain a reliable, if junior, member of the Northern club. After some initial talk of re-orientated priorities, the DFA largely continued with *plus ça change*. This was seen most visibly in the allocation of resources for new diplomatic missions. After the enforced isolation of the apartheid era there was an understandable eagerness to establish new missions, especially in previously closed African states. This soon evaporated under budgetary pressure and the normal priorities were reasserted as resources remained concentrated in Western Europe and North America. A similar story is perhaps unfolding with other cherished ANC ambitions such as a democratic input into foreign policy formation and affirmative action recruitment. Neither has made an appreciable difference to South Africa’s stance. Those ANC cadres appointed to the diplomatic service appear to have fully imbibed the DFA’s conventional wisdom. Part of the reason for the ANC’s lack of direction in foreign policy, and therefore that of the Government of National Unity (GNU), can be explained by the importance placed on domestic reconstruction. Indeed, the ANC before April 1994 and the GNU since have been quite clear that the imperatives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) are the key determinants in foreign policy formulation.

Alden’s particular focus in *Apartheid’s Last Stand* is to examine Pretoria’s response to the mounting unrest which characterised the Republic after 1976.
The work looks at the notion of an NSS and its links to modernisation theory. It combines an incisive analytical treatment alongside a thorough account of recent political history and succeeds on both the specialist and general level in accounting for the ubiquitous influence of the security forces in policy making. It too compliments other standards such as Kenneth Grundy’s *The Militarization of South African Politics* and Annette Seegers’ *The Military and the Making of Modern South Africa*.

PW Botha’s Total Strategy, based on the work of strategists such as André Beaufre and JJ McCuen, was predicated on the existence of a total onslaught upon the South African state by the Soviet Union and its regional proxies. That assault in turn had to be met by the mobilisation of all the state’s resources and a campaign of carefully balanced reform and coercion. As Alden shows the Total Strategy contained an irreconcilable internal tension since the reform process had a dynamic of its own which was susceptible to being taken over by the liberation movements. He reaches a perceptive judgement about the role of PW Botha in the movement from grand apartheid to the ‘new’ South Africa initiated by the release of Nelson Mandela, by arguing that the NSS had initiated ‘far reaching reforms [which] had substantially and irrevocably altered the South African landscape’. Another important point which the author makes is to show the devastation which the Total Strategy caused internally within South Africa and to its neighbours. The future possibilities open to the region cannot be grasped without understanding the impact in human and structural terms which destabilisation caused. Thomas and Alden illustrate with great clarity and perception the forces which have influenced contemporary South African foreign policy. Both works have a twofold significance; they not only serve as the standards within their own frame of reference but also provide valuable insights into the way in which South Africa’s recent past is continuing to shape its future.

That debate over continuity and change has profound implications not only for South Africa but also for the region. As Ohlson et al show, the country dominates Southern Africa by any index so it is less a question of that continuing but rather which form it will take—interdependence or a relatively benign neglect in which a *cordon sanitaire* is attempted to prevent migration and disease. If the latter is followed then the very viability of several states, for example Lesotho, is called into question. So rapid has been the collapse of the ANC’s revolutionary tradition that it now appears to be little but a quaint memory. The structural constraints of the post-communist international political economy have deflated the millennial expectations of all but the most fervent. Although, as Greg Mills indicates, the clarion call to fundamental change is becoming muted, the GNU is still faced with a choice as to where it places its influence—North or South.

The regional legacy of apartheid forms the framework for the work by Thomas Ohlson, SJ Stedman and Rob Davies, *The New is Not Yet Born*. The authors (one of whom, Davies, is currently an influential ANC MP and a distinguished scholar in his own right) are under no illusions as to the task confronting Southern Africans; they put the cost of destabilisation at around $90 billion. As they point out, *The New is Not Yet Born* is an attempt to explore the genesis, resolution and prevention of regional conflict. Given the enormity of the
problem, and building on the work of theorists such as Barry Buzan and William Zartman, they emphasise the interdependent nature of security and the importance of developing security institutions. While acknowledging the severely asymmetrical distribution of resources the authors insist that solutions are possible. They argue that the bitter lessons of the past decade have created a consensus: ‘with only a few exceptions, the peoples of Southern Africa and their leaders share one norm: the need for peace’. Ohlson et al. contend that, building upon that norm, substantial, if slow, change is possible. They identify the construction of stronger states and civil societies as the key to reconstruction. In addition they urge the creation of a regional institutional framework which would embrace a more inclusive form of security in which issues such as migrants and AIDS would be addressed. This latter point is understandably vague given the problems facing the region. For example, 7.5 million people have been displaced in Angola and Mozambique through war. Rather than advocate grand schemes based on an inappropriate model such as the EU, the authors sensibly advocate the path of multilateral agreements on issues of shared concern such as water resources, crime and migrant labour. They recognise that in some instances even bilateral arrangements will represent considerable progress on the status quo. Despite their emphasis on the importance of civil society Ohlson et al. avoid the current fashion for deifying it as they recognise the equal importance of developing thatScarcest of African commodities—a strong state.

The New is Not Yet Born does not contain any especially new or bold ideas; it is rather a well crafted work which cogently charts the troubles the region has experienced and the pragmatic options now open to it.

Equally pragmatic in its analysis and prescriptions is a collection from Africa’s premier foreign-policy thinktank, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). Edited by Greg Mills and Antoinette Handley, From Isolation to Integration? was the result of a meeting held during July 1996 in Johannesburg on South Africa’s place in the global economy. A high profile and rather eclectic group of academics, politicians, diplomats and bankers has provided some important reflections on the South African economy. In keeping with its Western orientation the authors tend to be from the developed world; noticeable by their absence are contributors from the region. The SAIIA seems to have identified international political economy, rather than more traditional areas, as its new focus. To this end the Institute has attempted to analyse the South African economy and the path it should follow. The inevitable unevenness of a conference volume is reflected in From Isolation to Integration? with carefully detailed papers being followed by some rather brief and imprecise responses. However, all the contributions are interesting and relevant and some, such as those by Jeffrey Herbst and Philip Spies, are excellent. There are also some unlikely bedfellows, such as the architect of ‘constructive engagement’ Chester Crocker and Jeremy Cronin, deputy secretary general of the SACP. The consensus which emerges from this volume is solidly neoliberal. In a perceptive forward Greg Mills argues that: ‘Though the foreign policy options of South Africa may be hazily cloaked in the rhetoric, inter alia, of the “North–South” divide and in reconstituting the world order, essentially the challenge is to try to develop its domestic economy in a manner consonant with international
consensus’. To achieve this the GNU needs to incorporate ‘liberal–democratic reforms’ and ‘deregulation, privatisation and the careful management of fiscal deficits which will open the country up to foreign investment’.

A recurring theme throughout the volume is the lessons to be learnt from the dynamic economies of Latin America and Southeast Asia. Despite the interesting parallels drawn by Brian Absolum, Jorge Heine and especially Antoinette Handley, the prospects of the country emerging as an ‘African Tiger’ seem slighter than some of the contributors suggest, principally because the authors tend to treat the Republic in isolation from its region. As Ohlson et al. argued, any South African economic policy which adopts a unitary approach is flawed because borders are no longer impermeable and the poverty and instability which characterises the region deeply affects the Republic. Without a more integrated approach which incorporates a limited, yet significant, amount of regional uplift, hopes for a strong domestic South African economy are likely to be disappointed. Whatever the human and economic potential of Southern Africa, the Republic remains inextricably linked to it and attempts to create some kind of island economy are doomed to failure. The real challenge the GNU faces, and is yet to answer, is how to help stabilise the region while simultaneously achieving the necessary growth rates of around 6% which would make an impact on the country’s chronic unemployment. Willem Bosman, the DFA’s Director of Regional Economic Organisations, emphasises this by pointing to the problems inherent in renegotiating the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), since this would ultimately involve free movement of labour, an outcome which ‘South Africa…will find it hard to live with’. Overall the volume is a valuable resource which provides a stimulating overview of the economic prospects not only of South Africa but of the wider region.

At present South African foreign policy appears disorganised and confused. Despite its rhetoric, in practice the GNU appears to have forsaken its revolutionary desire for a radical revision of the international status quo in favour of the orthodoxy of the ‘Washington Consensus’ identified in Mills and Handley. Yet the maverick nature of Nelson Mandela’s interventions into foreign policy and the preoccupations of domestic reconstruction mean that South Africa has still to offer a viable vision of its role within Southern Africa which would avoid the historic poles of hegemonic dominance or indifference to which it has been prey. In the meantime, sadly, the most dynamic South African actor on the continental stage remains Eeben Barlow’s mercenary organisation Executive Outcomes, with its ‘successful’ interventions in Angola and Sierra Leone.