

“South Africa’s moral authority and willingness to play an active role in the world gave it unique leverage with both the global North and the South.”

## South Africa’s Emerging Soft Power

ELIZABETH SIDIROPOULOS

**A**frican nations do not often come to mind as primary agents of soft power. Africa’s marginalization in the global economy, its own internal conflicts, and the autocratic regimes that ruled many of its countries until the end of the Cold War all limited the cultivation of soft power.

### Soft Power Revisited

*Eighth in a series*

Yet the democratization that swept through the continent in the 1990s sowed the seeds for the current decade’s optimistic “African Rising” narrative. Africa is the next frontier of growth, with unsaturated markets, abundant natural resources, and a growing middle class. Once a continent of poverty and war, Africa is now a region of infinite possibilities with many competing suitors. Conflicts persist in places such as the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa, but many states boast strong economic growth, albeit with slow improvement in living standards.

Soft power is the ability of a nation (or a multinational organization) to achieve desired outcomes without the use of hard force because, as Joseph Nye says, others admire its values, emulate its example, and aspire to its level of prosperity and openness. Soft power helps to shape the preferences of others and set agendas. Nye, the American political scientist who coined the term, also emphasizes that soft power is not normative but purely descriptive: It is based on what states do, not what they say, and can be used for good or bad purposes.

Some of the newer actors in Africa, particularly China, recognize the utility of soft power in advancing their interests on the continent. China has embarked on a robust public diplomacy and outreach effort, using as vehicles its considerable

diplomatic presence, its media, and its Confucius Institutes (which promote Chinese language and culture). Its language of building relationships of equals and mutual benefit resonates strongly with African states, in contrast with the aid-recipient role Africa has had in its relationship with the global North. Some of China’s influence also emanates from economic incentives. The rhetoric of the China-Africa relationship disguises a very real power asymmetry, but China’s phenomenal development since it began reforming its economy is attractive to Africans. The “Beijing Consensus” (if there is such a thing) looks like a better proposition to African leaders than the Washington Consensus and its associated policy conditions.

Africa’s history has influenced the continent’s perception of hard power. The hard power of Western states brought colonialism and delayed national liberation. Postcolonial Africa has frowned on the use of hard power by external players, even though its states have become involved in both interstate and intrastate wars. Africa’s regional and continental institutions prefer to eschew military or economic coercion in dealing with recalcitrant leaders, except in the face of unconstitutional regime changes.

On the continent, setting aside external actors, South Africa is probably the country with the best claim to the exercise of soft power, as defined by Nye: through its culture, its political values, and the legitimacy of its foreign policy. Nigeria may have Nollywood (cultural reach through its film industry), and its economy may have overtaken South Africa’s as the largest in Africa, after the April 2014 rebasing of its gross domestic product calculations; however, Nigeria still has some way to go in rivaling the South African story.

### FROM PARIAS TO PARAGON

Before 1994, South Africa could hardly have been considered a proponent of the use of soft

---

ELIZABETH SIDIROPOULOS is the chief executive of the South African Institute of International Affairs, based in Johannesburg.

power. Its policy of destabilizing its neighbors to counter the supposed “total onslaught” of liberation movements and the Frontline States (a group of southern African nations opposed to the apartheid regime) stemmed from a belief that hard power was necessary to defeat the enemy. As a pariah state in the international community, apartheid South Africa exerted no power of attraction, either for its cultural or its political values. The National Party government was perceived as an illegitimate regime, and its foreign policy could hardly be considered legitimate either.

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa’s approach to international relations has been characterized largely by a desire to use the legitimacy and credibility developed through its peaceful transformation into a democratic state as a means of influencing others and the shape of the international order. Again, soft power is achieved not by what states profess in their public statements, but by what they and their citizens do in practice. South Africa’s active and robust civil society engagement, as well as its sophisticated and successful private sector, is also an element of the country’s attraction.

South Africa’s soft power stems from two domestic factors: first, the nature of its political settlement, constructed internally rather than dictated or crafted from the outside; and second, the nature of the subsequent constitutional order. A subsidiary element of this soft power is the stature of the nation’s first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela. South Africans were again reminded of the global impact of his message and his appeal when he died last December. His personality and what the world understood him to represent—reconciliation with intractable enemies in the interests of peaceful transformation—are inextricably associated with the world’s image of postapartheid South Africa.

The nature of the country’s political settlement was inclusive, with the participation of political parties across the spectrum. It was driven by internal protagonists rather than external mediators. Parties recognized that they had to make compromises to arrive at a settlement, and although there were significant hurdles along the way, all major political actors stayed the course.

The outcome was a free and fair electoral process in April 1994, under an interim constitution.

It resulted in a government of national unity in which the victor, the African National Congress (ANC), and the vanquished, the National Party, as well as the largely Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party, both participated. They also established a process to determine the truth about apartheid-era crimes on both sides of the conflict, which would form the basis for reconciliation. These were the key aspects of the political settlement that transformed South Africa from a pariah to an engaged global citizen. The achievement was so incredible at the time that many called it a miracle.

The parliament elected in 1994 was tasked with drafting the final constitution, which was adopted in 1996. With a Bill of Rights that protects both political (first generation) and socioeconomic (second generation) rights, this document is still regarded as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. In addition, the constitution provided for independent state institutions to support constitutional democracy: They would be subject only to the constitution and the law, and

were to exercise their powers without fear, favor, or prejudice.

These processes conferred on South Africa a moral authority that few other countries enjoyed in the twentieth century. This moral authority was embodied by Mandela,

who had been imprisoned by the apartheid state for 27 years, yet was still able to forgive his jailers and to preach and practice reconciliation. In the run-up to the 1994 elections, South Africa also voluntarily gave up its nuclear military capability.

The processes that created democratic South Africa formed the bedrock of how the country acts in the international arena. It favors negotiation and inclusivity, and paradoxically (given the role that sanctions played in its own transformation) opposes the use of sanctions unless authorized by the United Nations. South Africa rejects the strong-arm tactics of traditional powers in Africa, and has been at the vanguard of opposition to French influence on the continent.

## PRINCIPLED POLICY

In the heady days of the “miracle transformation,” the new ANC government believed that the principles that underwrote the domestic system were equally important in the international domain. The 1990s were also the post–Cold War

---

*Pretoria has used the soft power of moral authority to help forge international agreements and bridge divides.*

---

period, when the dominant global view was that Western democracy and the market economy had triumphed. The ANC's initial approach to international affairs reflected a degree of idealism. It declared that the first principle of South Africa's foreign policy would be human rights, because democracy was the only way of addressing intractable conflicts.

However, for the ANC, human rights encompassed both political and socioeconomic rights, in the same way that the constitution provided for the latter as well. In ANC study group documents from 1993–94, the party stated that it aimed through its foreign policy to reclaim the country's African identity by focusing on the continent, and that it would “resist any pressure or temptation to pursue its own interests at the expense of the rest of southern Africa.”

A global Southern identity was the second pillar of the ANC's foreign policy. Party documents from that period spoke of the need to ensure that “the position of the South is not prejudiced in the world economy.” In the 2000s, South Africa also began adopting a stronger anticolonial and anti-imperial rhetoric in its foreign policy pronouncements, which resonated with some in the developing world and added to its allure.

Of course, the global North and South both saw in South Africa's foreign policy the elements that appealed to them. Europe and North America saw a kindred spirit in its commitment to advance human rights, but often adopted a narrower definition of political and civil rights. This led to disappointments when South Africa took positions contrary to the West's on matters such as a 2007 UN Security Council resolution on Myanmar condemning the regime's actions against civilians. The developing world and Africa considered its Southern identity as a reflection of solidarity with their cause of fighting against an unequal global system, and especially Africa's marginalization.

Underpinning the ANC's foreign policy was a commitment to multilateralism, to supporting international institutions as key players in resolving conflicts peacefully, and to working toward greater economic fairness and human rights. More than other states featured in this *Current History* series on soft power, the South African government promotes its foreign policy as advancing not only the nation's interests but those of the continent, too. In this narrative, its foreign policy is driven not by a narrow, exclusivist conception of national interest but by a desire to be a force

for good in Africa. This perspective is not uncontested among African states.

## AFRICAN AGENDA

South Africa's international relations have changed over the past 20 years. Many would describe the Mandela presidency (1994–99) as a honeymoon period, when South African moral authority was high and the human rights agenda was dominant. The African Renaissance best describes President Thabo Mbeki's years in office (1999–2008), when the country actively pursued an “African Agenda,” accelerating its involvement in regional issues. In this period, anticolonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric became more prominent. Under President Jacob Zuma (2009–14), there has been a perceived increase in economic imperatives, reduced focus on peace building, and a more assertive stance on African issues, seen most visibly in the successful candidacy of former Foreign Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma for the chair of the African Union (AU) Commission.

While South Africa's foreign policy has undergone normalization from the idealism of the early days to the reality of everyday trade-offs, Africa, the global South, and multilateralism remain central threads running through its narrative and its actions in the international realm. Pretoria's preferred instruments for advancing these priorities have been consensus building, dialogue, and negotiations, while avoiding resorting to force—manifestations of the imprint left on the ANC leadership by South Africa's internal conflict resolution. Constructing bridges between positions that seemed irreconcilable has also proved a strong national trait.

Furthermore, many civil society actors, building on their experience in the transition to democracy, have taken part in diplomatic initiatives in Africa. The trade union federation, COSATU, became involved in raising awareness of human rights abuses in Swaziland, the last absolute monarchy in sub-Saharan Africa, although the government was far more cautious.

The South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the research firm Ipsos recently undertook a qualitative survey of foreign diplomats in South Africa and Addis Ababa (the headquarters of the AU) on their perceptions of South Africa's foreign policy, and especially its African Agenda, which the government consistently emphasizes as the cornerstone of its international

relations. The substance of the African Agenda is not often understood outside of South Africa and the foreign diplomats stationed there (respondents in Addis Ababa confused it with the AU's long-term developmental vision, Agenda 2063). Its key components, as articulated in various government documents and in practice, are peace, security, and conflict resolution; strengthening continental institutions; ensuring that Africa's development concerns and challenges are voiced in global forums; and advancing economic initiatives that will help Africa's development.

The central role played by inclusive negotiations in South Africa's own political settlement has influenced the mode of its engagement in conflict resolution from Burundi to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. It has deployed peacekeeping troops, played a crucial role in bringing parties to the negotiating table or keeping them there, and worked with regional and continental bodies in the postconflict rebuilding of societies.

Survey respondents noted that negotiation is considered a permanent and unbending principle of South African diplomacy. While this is mostly seen as a positive strategy in conflict resolution, some respondents (mainly from outside Africa) cited perceptions that Pretoria pursues negotiation indiscriminately, and is reluctant to use hard power even in a humanitarian crisis.

Clearly, a smart power approach (balancing hard and soft power) requires an assessment of a situation's context to determine the best tools to secure a desired outcome. For South Africa, military intervention is truly a last resort, often perceived as adding to the problem it is intended to solve. This was illustrated by the international intervention in Libya in 2011. South Africa voted in favor of imposing a no-fly zone but soon objected to the way the resolution was implemented by NATO and the subsequent chaos the intervention precipitated in the Sahel, including in Mali.

In the DRC, South Africa pushed for a UN peace-enforcement deployment in the east in 2013 to counter rebel incursions. But its overall approach to the DRC conflict since the mid-1990s has promoted negotiation among all internal parties as the most sustainable avenue for a settlement, and it has applied many resources to this end, drawing on both civil society actors and the government to help with capacity building.

South Africa backed the construction of legitimate and accountable institutions to support

Africa's regeneration, mirroring its own new constitutional order. Recognizing the power of building coalitions and networks to advance the African Renaissance agenda, the government under Mbeki constructed partnerships with key African states such as Nigeria, Algeria, and Senegal to restructure the Organization for African Unity into the African Union in 2002. The aim was to make it a more effective body (although many challenges remain).

The adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) as a continental plan for growth and good governance was advanced in the same way, by a group of key African states that championed it within the continental bodies. Good governance in 2003 was spun off from Nepad to become the responsibility of a separate institution, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). For the first time on a continental level, this process emphasized the responsibility of African states to establish and nurture systems of good governance. In a sense, it sought to remove the need for externally imposed political conditions.

The APRM was a homegrown mechanism to assess states that joined voluntarily on their political, economic, and corporate governance, as well as their socioeconomic development. It was regarded as a remarkable innovation at the time and was launched with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, it has now lost much of its initial luster, becoming in some cases an empty exercise.

## VOICE OF AFRICA

Over the years, external actors have conferred a continental leadership role on South Africa by virtue of its dominant economic position, its strong democratic character (which many in the West saw as creating an affinity with their own political values), and its actions in forums where it is often the only African voice (such as the Group of 20). Although the government is frequently at pains to emphasize that it does not speak on behalf of Africa, but rather that it feels obliged to convey African concerns in international bodies, this approach imbues its foreign engagements with a greater degree of legitimacy.

South Africa succeeded at lobbying the Group of Eight industrialized nations for a hearing on African issues. The continent became a permanent agenda item starting in 2000 at the summit in Okinawa, Japan, and Mbeki attended every summit until his resignation in 2008, together with other African leaders. Africa has two observers

(the AU and Nepad) at the Group of 20, in which South Africa is a full member. During its two stints on the UN Security Council, South Africa was instrumental in pushing for more regular engagement between the Security Council and the African Peace and Security Council. At a 2013 BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit in Durban, South Africa arranged talks among the BRICS and a number of African leaders, including the head of the AU Commission.

Clearly, these initiatives help to enhance South Africa's image in its neighborhood, and its leverage. However, they are also greeted with skepticism: Some respondents to the SAIIA survey said Pretoria seeks leadership within Africa as a stepping-stone to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, while others remarked that there was little evidence to show that it was advancing African issues within the BRICS.

South Africa's role in economic development has been twofold—creating with other countries an economic blueprint for Africa through Nepad and related infrastructure and agricultural initiatives; and promoting its own economic strength through increasing private sector investment in the rest of the continent. The Nepad Planning and Coordinating Agency is constrained in its operations by limited capacity, although South Africa hosts it and is an important contributor. Pretoria also champions the creation of a free trade area encompassing three regional economic communities. These grand plans run the risk of joining the list of other failed economic initiatives.

While it is not without its detractors, the South African private sector has helped transform economies, especially with its dominance in the retail and services sectors. Respondents to the survey in Addis Ababa testified to the view that its investments in Africa contributed to the continent's empowerment. In addition, because of its well-developed economy, some felt the country should lead in articulating a common African economic perspective. There was a caveat, however, expressed by many in Addis Ababa: a perception that South Africa sees its own economic interests as trumping those of other African states.

The government will soon establish a South African Development Partnership Agency (SADPA), which has the potential to make “development

diplomacy” one of the most important components of its soft power armory. SADPA is designed to be a streamlined channel for the country's international cooperation efforts. Development diplomacy comprises actions in the international domain that focus on promoting regional integration, help institutionalize accountable governance regimes, and resolve conflicts in ways that accrue both material and less tangible soft power benefits.

The underlying motivation of South Africa's belief in building strong multilateral platforms is that global rules for all states protect smaller states in the international system from the abuses of the strong. For its size, South Africa has made a point of being active in various multilateral organizations. More critically, it has played the role of consensus- and bridge-builder in global negotiations. While being careful to keep Africa united in global forums, Pretoria has used the soft power of moral authority to help forge international agreements and bridge divides.

South Africa made key contributions to the UN Mine Ban Convention and the review of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Its government, civil society, and business sectors all played critical roles in facilitating the establishment of the Kimberley Process to eradicate the sale of blood diamonds. South African diplomats chaired the 2011 climate change negotiations in Durban, and worked hard to ensure a good outcome by talking with the Indians late into the night to bring them to the table. In negotiations on the Global Partnership on Effective Development Cooperation, South Africa has adopted a more consensual view that differentiates it from India and China. Its stance in many of these forums is pragmatic and constructive rather than oppositional or contrary.

## MORAL AUTHORITY

Miracles and honeymoons do not last forever. Twenty years into its democracy, South Africa's participation in real-life continental and global talks has necessitated a pragmatic approach to trade-offs, leaving some international players disappointed. Its own domestic challenges—huge inequalities, corruption, and a state straining to deliver on its commitments—have blemished the country's early appeal, which depended on its

---

*The processes that created democratic South Africa formed the bedrock of how the country acted in the international arena.*

---

ability to transform into a democratic and developmentally successful state.

In the SAIIA survey, some foreign diplomats stationed in South Africa emphasized that it needed to sort out its own problems before it tried to sort out Africa's. In addition, the survey found that South Africa's credibility as a representative of Africa derived from its prosperity and the promotion of its core constitutional values. It would erode that moral authority if the government were to champion good governance on the continent, through such vehicles as the APRM, while it was domestically perceived as evading accountability. Furthermore, violent xenophobic attacks against foreigners in South Africa in recent years also undermine its official position as a guardian of African interests.

South Africa's inclusive narrative generates enormous expectations, especially within Africa, about its style of interaction and the pursuit of its national interests. Many African survey respondents have found its proclaimed consultative approach inadequate for a country claiming to advance Africa's interests. Respondents in Addis Ababa regarded Pretoria's wielding of power ambivalently, criticizing its perceived lack of (broad) consultation with others.

For example, South Africa recently pushed through a proposal to establish an African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises, a temporary intervention force. All the member states had agreed to reject the initial proposal, but South Africa tabled it again at an AU summit, and it subsequently passed. Some respondents saw this as independent action bordering on isolationism. While it may reflect an inner strength and a foreign policy that follows its own principles regardless of undue external influence, it risks being perceived as showing underdeveloped intermediation skills, and lack of awareness of intra-African dynamics.

In East Africa and the Horn, by contrast, some expressed the view that South Africa dealt with countries in a way that persuaded them to cooperate, rather than humiliating them. Its regional power status in Africa means that it will never escape the ambiguity of being perceived as a big brother or a benevolent boss, as some described it in the survey.

At the global level, South Africa's continued ability to influence agendas and processes will depend in large measure on whether it plays a constructive role in moving debates forward.

In this it will need to carefully balance anti-imperialist rhetoric against the West with a more moderate and considered interaction in international arenas, to avoid alienating important global players.

## NON-STATE ACTORS

Lastly, the government should not be remiss in recognizing the role of other domestic actors in projecting the country's soft power. Key among them is the private sector. Its record in Africa has been mixed, but it has also learned from its more than 20-year presence elsewhere on the continent. South African companies' ability to act as engines for economic development in places where they have invested is not always sufficiently appreciated. In thinking through the concept of soft power projection, the government should develop mechanisms with companies to enhance their developmental impact on the continent.

The nongovernmental sector (including academic and policy institutions) has also been active in the rest of the continent. Its groups have acted both as models for similar institutions in other countries and as catalysts for mutual peer learning on topics from policy engagement to organizational sustainability and citizen engagement with government. After all, the strength of soft power emanates not only from the state but from the attractiveness of the country's general cultural milieu. The recipients of soft power are not only governments but citizens, too.

Given South Africa's middle ranking as a global player, its influence and moral suasion must come largely from soft power. It will achieve this through not only public diplomacy but leading by example in both the political and economic domains. The nation's particular history has made its political values, as enshrined in the constitution, far stronger than its economic model, which has battled to address rampant unemployment and growing inequality.

South Africa's moral authority and willingness to play an active role in the world have given it unique leverage with both the global North and the South. How this leverage will evolve over the next decade depends on the extent to which the nation is able to marshal its collective talents and resources, so as to ensure that its considerable powers of attraction are not squandered by its internal challenges and slow responses to the evolving African and global landscapes. ■