

Quiet diplomacy in Zimbabwe: a case study of South Africa in Africa

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Among academic authorities and more popular commentators two interpretations of South African foreign affairs predominate. In one view, South African policy shifted abruptly in 1994, and since then has been prompted generally by idealist efforts to “promote” new kinds of democratically oriented “institutional architecture” in both continental and global governance and to promote “a collective search for a global re-distributive justice”¹. An opposed interpretation is to view South Africa’s external relations as motivated chiefly by “realist” concerns arising from acknowledgement of the instability of the international order and recognition of South Africa’s marginal status within it. From this perspective, South Africa’s priorities should be to align herself with powerful industrial countries and exploit her own status as a “sub-hegemonic” power on the continent. Advocates of both idealist and realist prescriptions disagree among themselves about the degree to which an ANC governed South African has conformed with one or other of these policy prescriptions.

In a recent treatment, James Barber presents a detailed exposition of the idealist vein in South African policy². Midway during the Mandela presidency, he notes, a series of reviews redefined foreign policy priorities. Support for human rights, a corollary of the president’s view that states should “define national interest to include the happiness of others”, remained a key goal. However an ANC research group assigned top status to efforts to reduce global inequalities. In future, South Africa would pursue its aims through multilateral initiatives though its government “would not always be able to act in ways to satisfy ...the African continent”. An agreement on foreign arms purchases signalled new recognition within official circles of the importance of military capability if South Africa was to exercise pan-African influence. In four different spheres, South African foreign policy began to acquire consistent characteristics that were to endure into Thabo Mbeki’s administration.

First, South Africa embraced its role as “a middle power”. Here it joins a group of medium size regionally dominant states that attempt to enhance their international standing by endorsing “multilateral solutions to international problems” through adopting “compromise positions” and adhering to conventions of “good international citizenship”. Viewed in this light South Africa’s vigorous participation in trans-national organisations makes good sense and it has reaped dividends. Its role in the securing of a treaty to ban the use of personnel mines is a case in point as might be in the future President Mbeki’s attempts to build new “south-south” groupings to limit the influence of northern trading blocs.

At the same time, Barber argues, South Africa has exploited its moral standing in the industrial world, a consequence of the international dimensions of the Anti-Apartheid struggle, to serve as a bridge between the north and the south. Accordingly, it invited Western representatives to attend meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement during its chairmanship of that body and it rejected third world injunctions to boycott the Davos talks. Tough bargaining extracted (arguably) important concessions for the southern African region from the five-year-long European Union trade negotiations. Despite its adoption of critical perspectives on many aspects of United States foreign policy, through the creation of a bilateral Commission South Africa maintained friendly relations with the US into the George Bush era.

In Africa, during the later years of the Mandela presidency, chastened by Nigerian censure of its “un-African” behaviour in calling for sanctions against the Abacha administration, officially South Africa assumed a self-effacing posture on the continent. This was in contrast to the aggressive expansion of its commercial interests, a development that evoked resentment in Kenya, Angola and Zimbabwe. South African politicians held back from playing an assertive role in the OAU. They stressed preventive diplomacy as their favoured means of conflict resolution. This failed badly when South African officials attempted to mediate between Mobutu and Laurent Kabila in 1997, in the short term detracting further from their influence in African affairs. In the longer term, though, beyond the period of Barber’s analysis, sensitivity to continental protocols may have paid off. During the Mbeki

¹ Garth le Pere, “Idealist actor on a disorderly stage”, *This Day*, 5 July 2004

² James Barber, *Mandela’s World: The International Dimension of South Africa’s Political Revolution*, James Currey, David Philip and Ohio University Press, Oxford, Cape Town and Athens, 2004.

presidency, South Africans have played a major role in designing the successor institutions to the OAU and Mbeki's colleagues have brokered political settlements in Congo itself and elsewhere.

Meanwhile within its regional hinterland, in defiance to the reality of its overwhelming power and resources, South Africa has maintained a tactful discourse of equality in its relations with neighbouring states. Regional jealousies were accentuated by material grievances: after 1994 within southern Africa, regional industries often relocated southwards. Within the SADC group, sentiments arising from their exile experiences accentuated ANC leaders' concern to avoid being perceived as regional bullies or as imperialist proxies.

This perspective of South African foreign policy as characterised by essentially benevolent principles of southern solidarity contrasts sharply with a second set of views that stress continuities rather than ruptures with the apartheid era and that contend that policy remains constrained by realist conceptions of national interest. A new volume containing contributions from members of a study group supported by the University of Stellenbosch is representative of such arguments³.

In this vein, Thabo Mbeki's claims to "put people first" in its conduct of foreign policy are no more than rhetorical. South African democracy itself is limited to the barest kind of procedural polyarchy with no significant re-distributive or substantive content. Hence to expect any kind of policy process to engender popular participation would be naive. Though during the first years of the Mandela administration, an assertive parliamentary portfolio committee was willing to interact with civil society, with Mbeki's institution of a Policy Coordination and Advisory Service in the President's office, parliament's ability to influence policy was checked. Instead the most important external influences on policy makers are conservative think tanks such as the Institute for Security Studies, and international imperialist agencies. Indeed for one contributor to the Stellenbosch study group, Thabo Mbeki in his embrace of the Washington Consensus is the embodiment of "neocolonial/comprador trickery". In a slightly more subtle argument, there are two compelling explanations for a massive and economically debilitating arms purchase in 1999. These are the influence exercised by ex-guerilla generals in Thabo Mbeki's cabinet and political support for the local defence industry, a beneficiary of the arms contract's "offsets".

The dangers of such local influences are underlined by Peter Vale in his critical appraisal of "South Africa's post apartheid security system". Vale argues that too often, South Africa's relationships with its African hinterland are still influenced by "old security habits", by its predisposition for "constructing southern Africa and its people as an eschatological threat"⁴. He illustrates these contentions with references to the invasion of Lesotho and official mistreatment of immigrants but his more general criticisms concern South African willingness to assume a militarist role conferred upon it by global powers as a guarantor of regional security.

In general terms, then, "idealist" interpretations of South African foreign policy perceive its aims as potentially emancipatory and transformative. In contrast, those views that locate South African foreign relations in a realist tradition suggest that it is constrained by conceptions of national interest that are undemocratic and conservative, constrained by international and domestic hierarchies of power and wealth. This paper will explore the implications of both these representations of South African policy by focusing first on recent relations with Zimbabwe. To a very significant degree, South African engagement with Zimbabwe have been shaped by a wider range of official concerns reflecting broader concerns with South Africa's role in the continent. In its concluding sections, therefore, the paper will broaden its focus to consider the more general kinds of influence and status South Africa seeks in pan-African affairs.

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During the Mandela administration South Africa relations with Zimbabwe were affected by several sources of tension. South African anxieties about the impact of immigrants on local unemployment in 1996 prompted Joe Modise, the Minister of Defence to threaten to switch on the electric border fence. On several occasions Zimbabwean officials complained about delays in the renegotiation of trade

³ Philip Nel and Janis van der Westhuizen, *Democratising Foreign Policy? Lessons from South Africa*, Lexington Books, Maryland, 2004.

⁴ Peter Vale, *Security and Politics in South Africa: the Regional Dimension*, University of Cape Town Press and Lynne Rienner, Cape Town and Boulder, 2003, pp. 113. -

agreements to provide Zimbabwean exports with less restricted access to South African markets. Within the Southern African Development Community, South Africa found itself at odds with Zimbabwe over the reform of the SADC security organ which Robert Mugabe had chaired in since its establishment in 1996 and which he had used to legitimise Zimbabwean military commitments in support of the Laurent Kabila administration in the Congo as a SADC undertaking. The South African government was publicly critical of Zimbabwe's Congolese intervention.

However, since 1998 South Africa had also been active in attempting, with some success, to persuade western governments to provide financial backing for land reform in Zimbabwe, and in 2000 SADC mandated South Africa to set up an international fund for this purpose. South Africa itself agreed during a visit by Thabo Mbeki to Harare in February 2000 on an R800 million loan to Zimbabwe for the purchase of petrol and electricity. Later, the South Africans withdrew the loan proposal and instead offered to guarantee a Zimbabwean bond issue⁵. The South African minister of Land Affairs, presumably with presidential approval, visited Zimbabwe in April to identify lessons that South Africans could derive from Zimbabwe's "fast track" programme. In August 2000 Thabo Mbeki attempted to secure IMF and World Bank backing for compensation for expropriations and was successful in obtaining an IMF undertaking to reinstate its loan to Zimbabwe provided the government ended land seizures, a condition that was subsequently rejected. South African economic support to its neighbour included the 25 per cent reduction of electricity tariffs in December despite the huge debts owed by the Zimbabwe Electricity Authority to Eskom, the South African parastatal. In April, in conjunction with Sam Nujoma and Joaquim Chissano at the Victoria Falls SADC summit meeting, the SADC presidents offered public support for land reform provided the violence ceased and the war veterans were withdrawn: Thabo Mbeki also asked Robert Mugabe to end attacks on Britain while he tried to secure British finance to facilitate a more orderly land redistribution.

With the SADC declaring itself in support of the Zimbabwean authorities' takeover of commercial farms during 2000 and through 2001, though South African politicians, including President Mbeki, would express reservations about the treatment of white farmers they stopped short of unambiguous condemnation. As early as October 2000, Mbeki informed a business conference in Cape Town that he had twice informed the Zimbabwean public (during, presumably, visits to Harare) that land invasions would not be permitted in South Africa. The situation, he told delegates was "unacceptable". By February 2001, the director-general of the Presidency was expressing Thabo Mbeki's "deep concern" at Zimbabwean events. In March after a supposedly ground breaking meeting between the ANC and the Movement for Democratic Change, Mbeki's "softly softly" approach was under review, members of his staff were telling journalists. Mbeki himself had complained to Welshman Ncube, the MDC secretary general, about Mugabe's "broken promises", Ncube claimed afterwards. Mbeki also spoke about his fears that an economic implosion in Zimbabwe would drive millions of refugees into South Africa. In May Dlamini-Zuma conceded that the situation in Zimbabwe was "very critical" and that South Africans were "worried both as neighbours and as people who do a lot of trade with Zimbabwe". In June Mbeki complained to Tim Sebastian on BBC's *Hard Talk*, that Robert Mugabe "didn't listen to me". At the end of the year, prompted by business consternation that accompanied the fall in the value of the Rand, Trevor Manuel urged investors not to confuse South Africa "with that country to the north". These occasional expressions of alarm were insufficient to check a growing chorus of criticism both inside South Africa and elsewhere directed at the Mbeki administration's reluctance to confront the Zimbabwean authorities and use South African economic leverage to induce a return to the rule of law. The generally supportive posture towards ZANU-PF adopted by the ANC during the violent preliminaries of the June 2000 parliamentary elections attracted especially fierce censure. ANC MP Tony Yengeni led a parliamentary team of observers to Harare. Yengeni apparently spoke to Thabo Mbeki every day on the telephone and after the declaration appeared on television with Mugabe to upbraid western observers for attempting to impose their values in assessing African conduct of democracy. Later that year the ANC hosted a meeting near Johannesburg of southern African liberation movements. Amongst the issues reportedly discussed was the question of how liberation movements could resist their electoral defeat by parties with close ties to former colonial powers.

⁵ R W Johnson suggests that the original loan agreement was made to "shore up" Mugabe before the constitutional referendum and was retracted as a consequence of the government's defeat in the poll. Subsequently it became clear that the government would not underwrite a Zimbabwean bond for this would harm South Africa's credit rating (R W Johnson, "South Africa's support for Mugabe", *Focus*, 21, March 2001).

By the end of 2001, South African attempts to shape developments in Zimbabwe had moved into a higher gear. Minister Dlamini-Zuma joined her counterparts from Australia, Britain, Nigeria, Jamaica, Kenya and Zimbabwe at a Commonwealth instigated meeting in Abuja in September 2001. The Accord signed at this meeting committed the Zimbabwe government to ending farm invasions, restoring law and order and itself honouring court judgements and respecting human rights. Australia, South Africa and Nigeria undertook to ensure Zimbabwean compliance with the agreement.

Three months after the signing of the accord, continuing land seizures and state instigated political violence persuaded the president's brother, Moeletsi Mbeki, a prominent businessman with investments in Zimbabwe, to urge for a tougher approach north of the Limpopo. Moeletsi Mbeki was unusual amongst black South African notables for his contention that the land issue did *not* lie at the heart of the Zimbabwean crisis, a position that had become an orthodoxy in government circles. This advice went unheeded by a ministerial SADC delegation that visited Harare in December. In its final communique on 12 December 2001 it found itself able to "welcome the improved atmosphere of calm and stability", suggesting that "violence on the farms had reduced significantly, and that the few reported incidents were being dealt with under the criminal justice system". Shortly afterwards, the ANC despatched its own delegation to Harare for talks with leaders of the ruling party. It is unlikely that ZANU-PF officials viewed its arrival with much apprehension, for even before the delegation's departure, its leader, Mosiuoa Lekota, pronounced himself to be "deeply satisfied" with the explanations he had been given for the Zimbabwean government's decision to ban the presence of foreign poll monitors during the forthcoming presidential election.

In an interview on 11th January 2002, President Mbeki expressed his conviction that contestants in the election would accept the outcome of the poll with equanimity, an oblique comment on a public statement by General Vitalis Zvinashe, the supreme commander of the Zimbabwean armed forces, who implied that the army would not accept an electoral victory by "anyone with a different agenda that threatens the very existence of our sovereignty". A SADC presidential meeting in Malawi in a closed session subsequently warned Robert Mugabe to control Zvinashe: this was after a telephonic appeal from the British prime minister to President Mbeki for "a more robust approach". On January 21, the day after police had broken up an MDC rally with tear gas, Thabo Mbeki visited Harare for talks with Obasanjo and Mugabe. The leaders posed in garlands for a photo opportunity but made no statement about their discussions. On his return to Johannesburg, though, Thabo Mbeki told a press conference that "the instability has gone on too long. The levels of poverty and conflict are increasing, and if you add to that a fraudulent election, this has to be avoided". On February 14, the first members of a fifty person official South African government group of election monitors arrived in Harare, headed by Sam Motsuenyane, to begin three weeks of campaign monitoring before the poll on March 9th. Meanwhile, in Johannesburg, the ANC's secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe accused Tony Blair of leading an international offensive to remove Mugabe from office. Motlanthe warned that "if it is possible for Tony Blair to say elections in Zimbabwe can only be free and fair if one party wins, then they can do the same here in South Africa". The ANC was opposed to the use of sanctions against Zimbabwe and urged ZANU-PF and the MDC to work together to address the issues, he added. During a visit to Sweden, in response to journalists, Thabo Mbeki professed himself unconcerned about the reports of rising levels of electoral violence in Zimbabwe despite Motsuenyane's expressions of alarm about attacks on MDC offices and meetings witnessed by members of his own team: many people had died in the run-up to South Africa's election but even so "the elections took place and everybody said they reflected the will of the people of South Africa and were free and fair".

In an "interim statement" after the poll, Motsuenyane's mission endorsed the propriety of the election's outcome, noting that the opposition had participated actively, "thus legitimating" the process, stressing the "overall peacefulness of the voting days", maintaining that officials "discharged their work satisfactorily" and that the observers themselves had helped to ensure that "tensions and conflicts" during campaigning "remained at a minimal level".⁶ Official missions from Nigeria and the OAU concurred with the ANC's characterisation of the presidential poll as a "convincing majority win" in which "the people of Zimbabwe have spoken"⁷ but the Commonwealth team, led by a former Nigerian head of state, noted the "high level of politically motivated violence" and the disenfranchisement of thousands of citizens.

⁶ Interim statement by SAOM on the Zimbabwean presidential elections, 13 March 2002.

⁷ ANC statement on the outcome of the Zimbabwean elections, 13 March 2002.

After attending Robert Mugabe's inauguration on March 17th 2002 Obasanjo and Mbeki travelled to London to meet the third member of the Commonwealth troika, John Howard. On March 19th the troika called for a one year suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. The suspension itself would be symbolic in character: Mbeki would not agree to sanctions and insisted that the suspension should be accompanied by promises of food aid. In September it was agreed that Zimbabwe's suspension should be extended until the Commonwealth Head of Government's (CHOGM) meeting in Abuja in December 2003 when it would be reviewed. On this occasion, both Mbeki and Obasanjo again resisted John Howard's efforts (supported by the British government) to institute sanctions by Commonwealth countries, including the cessation of trade, sporting links and diplomatic connections.

Press reports suggest that Mbeki was opposed even to a formal suspension, though former British cabinet minister Peter Mandelson told journalists that Mbeki "did not capitulate to northern pressure" and that he and the Nigerian president had decided on suspension before leaving Harare on the 18th. Mbeki was anxious to win support for the New Partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD) at the G8 summit in Toronto in June and so was willing to "move toward world opinion on Zimbabwe", Mandelson claimed. In London, before attending the Commonwealth troika discussions, Mbeki met the Canadian prime minister, Jean Chretien, who told him, apparently, that G8 cooperation over NEPAD would depend on African consent to some kind of action against Harare. Only after the announcement of Commonwealth sanctions did Mbeki confirm his acceptance of the Zimbabwean poll as legitimate. At this stage in off the record briefings to journalists, Mbeki and his staff were suggesting that he was cooperating closely with the British and the Americans in a "good cop-bad cop" strategy in which the South African president would maintain the friendlier relationship with Harare; understood from this perspective, respecting Mugabe's electoral mandate could be interpreted as a corollary of playing such a role.

Through 2003, encouragement of dialogue between ZANU-PF and the MDC became the main focus of South African official engagement with Zimbabwe, though a South African parliamentary portfolio committee found time in April to visit Zimbabwe to learn from Zimbabwean experience in reorganising communal land. In July, during George Bush's visit to Pretoria, diplomats told reporters that the South African president had informed his visitor that Robert Mugabe had undertaken to step down at the ZANU-PF Congress in December. Mbeki had apparently discussed the succession issue with Mugabe in April though he subsequently denied telling Bush anything of the kind. South African strategy, apparently, was to support moderates within the ruling party and the MDC: to this end South African officials in the President's Office, including Frank Chikane were in regular contact with the MDC's Welshman Ncube and were attempting to "isolate" Morgan Tsvangirai⁸ whom Mbeki blamed for the slow progress in talks between the two parties⁹; in this context encouraging speculation about a ZANU-PF leadership renewal made sense. Meanwhile the South African Council of Churches began its own programme of shuttle diplomacy between Zimbabwean groups and obtained an assurance from ZANU-PF and the MDC that they would cooperate with Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane. During the year South Africa continued to take a protective stance towards Zimbabwe internationally. In April a South African motion at the United Nations Human Rights Commission blocked an effort by the European Union to obtain a UN condemnation of Zimbabwean abuses and in September, Thabo Mbeki noted that "technically" Zimbabwe was no longer suspended from the Commonwealth. During a visit to France in November, the day after confrontations in Harare between riot police and trade unionists protesting against fuel price rises, Mbeki told his hosts that the inter-party talks were continuing to make progress and insisted that no one should try to "import solutions from South Africa or anywhere else in the world"¹⁰.

By this stage Mbeki seems to have committed himself to persuading his peers at the CHOGM meeting that was to be held in Abuja in December to revoke Zimbabwe's suspension. South African government representatives denied after the CHOGM meeting that they had actively lobbied for Zimbabwe's readmission but South Africa's support for the Sri Lankan foreign minister's campaign for election to the Commonwealth secretary general's position was generally interpreted as an effort to secure a Commonwealth leadership more sympathetic to South Africa's Zimbabwean policy. Both with respect to this election and the decision on maintaining Zimbabwe's expulsion, the African vote was divided, with two SADC members, Botswana and Mauritius, joining Kenya and the West Africans as well as a majority of other Commonwealth states in maintaining the suspension.

⁸ "Mbeki steps up the pressure", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 25 July 2003.

⁹ "Mbeki following own agenda", *Zimbabwe Standard*, 21 July 2003

¹⁰ "Mbeki defends quiet diplomacy on Zim", *Financial Gazette*, 21 November 2003.

On his return from the Abuja meeting, Thabo Mbeki expressed his displeasure at its decision in a long "Letter from the President" in the ANC weekly on-line newspaper. Here he suggested that the original decision to suspend Zimbabwe's Commonwealth membership was wrong based as it was on an election observers' report to which the Zimbabwean authorities "had never been given a possibility to respond to". He observed that at CHOGM "the land question in Zimbabwe was not discussed". Given British reluctance to finance land purchases "a forcible process of land redistribution perhaps became inevitable". Quoting Ngugi wa Thiongo's notion of "a reality turned upside down" in which "imperialism has distorted the view of African realities", Mbeki then observed how "in the interest of kith and kin, the core of the challenge facing the people of Zimbabwe (land)... has disappeared from public view". "Its place", he continued, "has been taken by the issue of human rights". This concern with human rights was spurious, Mbeki implied in his letter, for human rights were being treated "as a tool" for overthrowing Zimbabwe and rebuilding it in ways wished by those "who are richer and more powerful than we are"¹¹.

After delivering this broadside, the president once again visited Harare where as well as speaking to Robert Mugabe, he also met for the first time Morgan Tsvangirai in a hastily convened encounter, not originally scheduled. Mbeki disconcerted reporters at Harare airport when he told them that "President Mugabe can assist us in the problems we have in South Africa", a remark that South African government spokesmen later glossed as tactically motivated flattery, in line with "diplomacy to ensure that Zimbabwean continue to listen to us". Talks between the MDC and ZANU-PF were at a fruitful stage with near consensus on constitutional issues, South African officials insisted, though they conceded their disappointment that neither side were prepared to acknowledge their contact with each other publicly. At about this time presidential staff began referring to a June deadline against which South Africans would work to secure ZANU-PF commitment to leadership change. In June 2004, a ZANU-PF delegation led by John Nkomo, rumoured to be the ANC's preferred figure for the party leadership succession, visited Johannesburg and met Thabo Mbeki and other senior ANC leaders at Lutuli House. Leadership renewal was not on the discussion agenda, though, it seems. After the meeting, the visitors claimed that the ANC had promised to send ZANU-PF a team of electoral strategists. ANC Secretary General Kgalema Motlanthe denied any such undertaking, though he conceded that his organization has given ZANU-PF "a standing invitation" to study the South African party's electoral tactics in any future visits.

The expiry of Thabo Mbeki's June deadline with no significant progress in evidence of either succession plans or ZANU-PF/MDC commitment to political cooperation may have prompted an unusually critical briefing by a South African foreign affairs spokesman in July. Minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma had attracted press criticism for supporting the non-tabling at an African Union meeting of a report on human rights violations in Zimbabwe compiled by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Minister Dlamini-Zuma was one of Zimbabwe's toughest critics within the Union's executive council, her spokesman maintained; this is a perennial claim by South African officials, that President Mbeki and his colleagues are more assertive and prescriptive in their encounters with Mugabe behind closed doors than they are in public. Moreover, Dlamini Zuma's representative continued, the South Africans "were sick and tired of the Zimbabwean government embarrassing our president by leading him to believe that they are engaged in talks with the opposition when in fact there is no movement. The Zimbabweans lie when it suits them". In September, though, President Mbeki confirmed his commitment to engendering talks between the Zimbabwean parties, pledging himself to travelling every day, if necessary, to Harare to bring leaders together.

Neither MDC nor ZANU-PF politicians are ready to describe their intermittent encounters as negotiations (despite their promises at the beginning of 2004 to ANC leaders) nor have they conceded in public any agreements about any issues at all. Their meetings, though, are perhaps the only positive consequence that the South Africans can claim from "constructive diplomacy" unless they count the occasional signal of residual judicial independence¹². After allowing a degree of internal debate within

¹¹ Thabo Mbeki, "We will resist the upside down view of Africa", *ANC Today*, 3, 49, 12 December 2003.

¹² Though at least one academic commentator has suggested that South African policy has been successful in so far as it has helped to maintain any Zimbabwean commitment to procedural democracy: from this perspective the MDC's gains in the 2000 parliamentary election represent "a vindication" of quiet diplomacy (Mwesiga Baregu and Christopher Landsberg, *From Cape to Congo: Southern Africa's evolving Security Architecture*, Lynee Reinner Publishers, Colorado, 2003, p. 187). Landsberg's argument is more elaborate in an earlier contribution in which he suggested that South African influence had been decisive in persuading Mugabe to open the election up to foreign observation teams (Chris Landsberg, "Promoting Democracy: The Mandela Mbeki Doctrine", *Journal of Democracy*, 11, 3, July 2000, p. 117).

ZANU-PF succession at the party Congress in December 2003 and several times since then, Robert Mugabe has made it quite clear that he intends to remain in office until the end of his term in 2008. With the almost complete takeover of white-owned commercial farms, land redistribution appears to have moved into a second socially regressive phase with the recent expulsion of “veteran” squatters from certain enterprises claimed by party notables. If anything the scope of state sponsored bullying has expanded with the institution of an official youth movement to occupy whatever remaining civil space exists in the countryside. Through such means, ZANU-PF’s reconstruction of its rural base would today probably enable it to win an election without the overt thuggery and gerrymandering that characterised the polls of 2000 and 2002. Whether the party would risk an honestly conducted election is another matter: within Zimbabwe there are fewer political compulsions on the country’s governors to abide by conventions of procedural democracy than was the case five years ago.

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Why has South Africa’s political leadership been so determined to maintain its pursuit of affable and often supportive interaction with the Harare administration, a policy that has probably detracted from external business confidence in South African itself, that has engendered considerable criticism domestically, and, which at least since December 2003, no longer receives united African endorsement? At least three kinds of explanation have been offered for Pretoria’s “quiet” diplomacy.

The first is to understand Mbeki’s responses to Zimbabwean events as reflecting popular admiration of Mugabe amongst black South Africans and strong sentiment within the ANC in favour of the Zimbabwean land seizures. The Zimbabwean journalist, Geoff Hill, recalls a conversation with a South African intelligence officer in 2002 in which he was told that Mbeki himself “might have welcomed an MDC victory in the election, but could say or do nothing that might be seen as steering the process of change”. The officer went on to explain that the ANC’s left wing was opposed to any South African effort to “steer the process of change” and that disagreements about the party’s relationship with ZANU-PF “were strong enough to split the ANC”¹³. Much the same kind of logic informs Patrick Bond’s assessment of the ANC’s position: “electoral consolidation of Southern African nationalism is ... vital to Pretoria” and “ANC bias for Mugabe was the main political phenomenon”¹⁴. In Bond’s view, ANC bias is partly spurred by sentiment, comradely fraternity (“relations sealed in blood” to quote Myakayaka-Mazini, the head of the ANC’s international relations department) but it is also the consequence of alarm at the prospect of Zimbabwe moving into a post-nationalist phase of politics after the failure of neo liberalism. In this sort of vein, his critics view Thabo Mbeki’s statements on the crisis are the consequence of his own propensity to view opposition to South African policy and indeed even Zimbabwean developments as motivated by racial and neo-colonial malice, in South African and abroad.

Such explanations are only partly persuasive. Historically, the ANC’s relations with ZANU-PF were not especially close. The ANC’s left flank is by no means universally uncritical of Mugabe and indeed both the SACP and particularly COSATU have adopted positions that suggest reservations about President Mbeki’s Zimbabwean diplomacy. After the Zimbabwean presidential elections in 2002, COSATU urged the South African Observer Mission to review its conclusions and declared its support for a three day strike by Zimbabwean unionists¹⁵. In May 2003, the SACP announced its concern about human rights violations north of the Limpopo and its intention to despatch a fact finding mission to Harare. COSATU held a meeting with the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions on May 28th which resolved in favour of “an interim government in Zimbabwe and the drafting of a new constitution on the basis of fresh elections”. COSATU spokesmen also suggested that its Limpopo affiliates would be organising demonstrations at Beit Bridge “to highlight the plight of the Zimbabwean people”. Discomfiture with official positions is not limited to Alliance partners. In May 2000, Pallo Jordan, one of the most popular ANC leaders amongst party rank and file, read out in parliament a notice of motion that acknowledged that the brutality of election campaigning in Zimbabwe “severely compromises the possibility of a free, fair and credible election”, apparently contradicting Thabo Mbeki statement on this issue made in Washington the same day. Under pressure from Lutuli House, Jordan later retracted the motion and later, perhaps to make amends, wrote in *ANC Today*, that “whatever its faults, the government led by ZANU-PF is a government elected by the

¹³ Geoff Hill, *The Battle for Zimbabwe*, Zebra Books, Cape Town, 2003, p. 174.

¹⁴ Patrick Bond, “Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the power of politics of bourgeois democracy”, *Monthly Review*, 54, 1, May 2002.

¹⁵ *COSATU statement on the Zimbabwean Presidential Election*, Communications Department, 21 March 2003.

majority... in an election judged to be acceptable by the international community”¹⁶. In fact, though, the strongest backing for Mugabe within the ANC come not so much from its left wing but rather from populist or “Africanist” quarters, especially within the Youth League (a body with its best organised support in the countryside). Thabo Mbeki’s relationship with this constituency is complicated but he is unlikely to defer to its promptings against his better judgement.

The second interpretation of South African official behaviour is that it springs from less politically sectional and more essentially pragmatic considerations. One justification for not using economic leverage that is sometimes cited in defence of the South African position is that refusing Zimbabwe economic support might bring about a simultaneous political and economic collapse. As the locally influential Centre for Policy Studies director Chris Landsberg has expressed it “a policy based on force will aggravate an already unmanageable situation and hasten a meltdown”¹⁷. In an especially cynical interpretation of the South African government’s motives, Dale McKinley argues that South African economic support for Zimbabwe is prompted chiefly by concerns about the degree of Zimbabwean indebtedness to South African parastatal corporations, the main vehicles for the ANC’s strategy of nurturing a black business class¹⁸. However, a “meltdown” might well have been understood to threaten a broader conception of South African national interests. In the words of the British parliament’s Select Committee on Foreign Affairs a collapsed Zimbabwean state would have “rebounded on Pretoria with disastrous effect via a mass influx of refugees, disrupted trade links ... and generalised chaos on the borders”¹⁹. Such considerations may be less compelling today than they were five years ago: South Africa already hosts a very large Zimbabwean refugee community, trade between the two countries has deteriorated sharply, and bad debts to Zimbabwean parastatals have increased exponentially.

It does seem likely, however, that ANC politicians have continued to feel that a continuation of ZANU-PF in office represents the best prospect for political stability. This may partly be the consequence of their ideological predisposition toward a former liberation movement but it is also likely to be a consequence of their initial under-estimation of the MDC’s electoral support (during the 2000 campaign ANC observers were convinced that at best the MDC would win a handful of seats) and their later scepticism about Tsvangirai’s leadership qualities. It also seems that South African politicians took very seriously the threat by General Vitalis Zvinashe, the army commander, that the military would prevent an electoral alternation of power²⁰. Jeremy Cronin, writing in his capacity as SACP deputy secretary suggests that by 2002 the ANC prime concern with Zimbabwe was to strengthen the prospects of a consensual “regime change”. According to Cronin’s account to ANC leaders it was unclear “whether a redoubtable Zimbabwean security apparatus would allow an MDC victory”. In this setting “encouraging the acceptance of some kind of patriotic government of national unity” after the election became the main purpose of engagement²¹. Endorsing ZANU-PF’s victory would be indispensable in any effort to persuade ZANU-PF’s leadership to take such a course. A military coup and the resulting political crisis in Harare would represent a major security challenge to Pretoria, especially given the shortcomings in South Africa’s own military establishment, with its best units already deployed quite extensively in African peacekeeping missions.

The third way of explaining South African dealings with the Harare administration is to understand them as the corollary of South Africa’s broader engagement with other parts of Africa and with particularly pan-African affairs. Here the argument proceeds on the following lines. Since 1999, a major goal of Thabo Mbeki’s foreign policy has been the reconstruction and reform of African continental institutions in such a fashion that they in turn can help to foster regional forms of economic collaboration and institutional renovation and democratisation at a national level. The achievements in this project include donor support for the New African partnership for Development’s Africa Action plan - in 2002 G8 pledges represented more than \$20 billion of “new money”²² - as well as the admittedly slow progress of African ratification of the African Union’s founding principles of

¹⁶ Z Pallo Jordan, *Much Ado about Zimbabwe*, 1, 11, 6 April 2001.

¹⁷ Chris Landsberg, “South African must retain its voice of reason”, *The Star*, 2003.

¹⁸ Dale McKinley, “South African Foreign Policy Towards Zimbabwe under Mbeki”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 100, June 2004, pp. 358-359.

¹⁹ United Kingdom Parliament, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Fifth Report: South African and Zimbabwe*, 2003. For more in this vein see James Hamill, “South Africa and Zimbabwe”, *Contemporary Review*, July 2002.

²⁰ It seems that the army did just this through inflating the postal ballot through which soldiers serving in the Congo were allowed to vote: see Basildon Peta, “We helped rig presidential elections, claim ex soldiers”, *The Star*, 27 November 2003.

²¹ Jeremy Cronin, “Zimbabwe must be helped to break impasse”, *Sunday Independent*, 22 February 2004.

²² New Partnership for African Development, *Annual Report*, 2002, pp. 76-77.

“democratic principles, popular participation and good governance”. In pan-African structures South African advocacy of their reconstruction incorporating democratic principles has not been uncontested, particularly by a group of authoritarian governments including Libya, Zimbabwe and Uganda. South Africa’s degree of success in obtaining acceptance of such principles within the new architecture of continental government and their subsequent translation into a new doctrine of intervention (as opposed to the more traditional OAU maxim of non interference by continental bodies in the internal affairs of member states) has depended upon a very fragile alliance. In particular, SADC support for South African positions was crucial in building this alliance and most of South Africa’s SADC allies would have reacted very negatively against any exercise of pressure or leverage by South Africa on Zimbabwe. Ineffectual “megaphone diplomacy”, that is the kind of rhetorical confrontation with Harare that might have been calculated to reassure City of London investors and the “white Commonwealth”, would also have weakened South Africa’s status within SADC. In particular Zambian, Namibian and Mozambican leadership have stated unqualified support for Zimbabwean land seizures.

Thabo Mbeki’s preference for multi-lateral diplomacy in his “prudent promotion of democracy” in Africa is well known²³. Failure to elicit African support in their efforts to isolate the Abacha regime in Nigeria convinced South African foreign policy makers “that there is no way in which South Africa and the ANC can stand alone and outrightly condemn”²⁴. Is there evidence, though, to indicate that the trend in South African efforts to influence African affairs whether through pan-continental institutions or through bilateral encounters with individual countries has generally been to promote democratic principles and practices? If this is the case than apologists for Mbeki’s Zimbabwean policies might have strong reasons to defend them through reference to broader policy goals in Africa.

This is not the place to construct a detailed balance sheet. An important entry on the positive side of the ledger would include South African support for electoral reform and upgraded electoral management - especially significant with respect to Lesotho – but also more generally through the SADC Electoral Commission Forum. South Africa’s principled commitment to politically negotiated conflict resolution as an alternative to military force – a reflection of the ANC’s own experience as beneficiaries of a “pacted” democratisation - can also be considered as one of the more idealist dimensions of its African initiatives: initially cool relations with Laurent Kabila’s administration in the Congo closed down space for the exercise of South African business interests. South African encouragement of an “Inter-Congolese Dialogue” and support for a government of national unity since 2002 has been underwritten by a substantial commitment to peacekeeping. Overall South African peacekeeping deployments in African countries total 2,800 personnel and in the case of Burundi, South African soldiers play a particularly critical role in setting the stage for South African/Tanzanian sponsored constitutional negotiations. South African participants in the Burundian peace negotiations who have included two cabinet ministers and the deputy-president are credited with a degree of civil society engagement in the Burundian negotiations. Various public statements by President Mbeki on the importance of respecting constitutional limitations of terms of office have represented a departure from the SADC norm of non-interference and are perceived to have influenced the politics of leadership renewal in Zambia and Malawi.

On the other hand these benign developments need to be set against the expansion of South African economic influence on the continent. This, arguably, may have weakened other African economies especially with respect to trade. From 1994 South African exports to Africa expanded very quickly, increasing at a rate of 15 per cent a year. This development was accompanied by a widening trade deficit between South African and her African trading partners. South African manufacturing exports to Africa constitute about a quarter of total South African exports: in other words, Africa represents a crucial market for the economic sector within South Africa that government is most concerned to nurture and that is most capable of creating new jobs. South African exports compete effectively in African markets against local industrial production as well as imports from the rest of the world; hence it is likely that the inflow of South African manufactured commodities contributed decisively to industrial decline in the more advanced African economies such as Kenya and Zimbabwe²⁵. South African government policy that has broadly supported continental trade expansion has facilitated this

²³ See especially Chris Landsberg, “Promoting Democracy...”, *Journal of Democracy*, 11, 3, July 2000, pp 116-121..

²⁴ Japreet Kindra, “We won’t make the same mistake in Zim”, *Mail and Guardian*, 2 March 2001.

²⁵ For an authoritative version of this argument see Stephen Gelb, *South Africa’s Role and Importance in Africa and for the Development of An African Agenda*, The Edge Institute, Johannesburg, October 2001, pp. 9-12.

process, contrary to the view maintained by several analysts²⁶ that an “idealist” set of government policies have been at odds with exploitative “sub-hegemonic” business expansionism. As one especially enthusiastic proponent of South Africa’s pivotal role as an imperial sub-hegemon has put it, “democracy elsewhere... serve(s) its vital interests. Simply put, the rule of law (Africa wide) is good for south African business”²⁷.

It is at this point that it is appropriate to return to the theoretical debates about the character of South African foreign policy referred to at the beginning of this paper. For in practice, realist and idealist compulsions in policy making are quite difficult to separate from each other and to interpret Pretoria’s African policy as being one or the other seems misguided. Even with respect to security policy in which one might expect an especially disciplined and coherent sense of purpose to be evident, policies are often contradictory, reflecting as they do constellations of interests. So for example, the 1998 Defence Review assigned to the National Defence Force a primarily peace keeping function while at the same time the government ordered equipment “geared to war fighting”²⁸. To be sure, in contrast to defence, official relations towards Zimbabwe, as with other dimensions of foreign policy are particularly likely to be “identified with and the product of one man”²⁹, a consequence of the peripheral role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the weak influence of civil society think tanks in shaping policy. But Thabo Mbeki’s grand vision of African regeneration must construct its institutions through the realist protocols of a regional community of vulnerable nation states that share strong historical predispositions to resist the expansion of South African power. In this setting quiet diplomacy is probably the better of a range of morally unattractive options.

²⁶ For example, Chris Landsberg, *op cit*, p. 115.

²⁷ John Stremlau, “Ending Africa’s Wars”, *Foreign Affairs*, 79, 4, 2004, p. 127.

²⁸ Garth Shelton, “The SANDF and President Mbeki’s Peace and Security Agenda”, *Institute for Global Dialogue Occasional Paper* no. 42, March 2004, p. 37.

²⁹ Greg Mills cited in Chris Alden and Garth le Pere, “South Africa’s Foreign Policy: From Reconciliation to Ambiguity”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 100, June 2004, p. 293/