

**An Afro-centric analysis of South Africa's foreign policy  
on the Southern African Development Community  
(SADC): Case of Zimbabwe, 1999-2018**

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## **Abstract**

The 1994 democratic dispensation was the watershed on South Africa's foreign policy. Given the protracted fight against apartheid, human rights took precedence on South Africa's foreign policy. Concomitantly, Tshwane incorporated African Agenda on its foreign policy by forging ties with former liberation movements throughout the continent, in particular Zambia and Zimbabwe. By so doing, South Africa abandoned the apartheid siege mentality and became a leader towards the Southern African region. South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe received and continue to receive much attention from scholars, academia and media alike. This is largely spurred by the ongoing economic crisis which led many of that country's nationals to fled into South Africa. Scholars employed *North [ern]* Angled perspectives which provide fragmentary analysis and understanding of South Africa's foreign policy. This article moves away from Euro-American cultural value systems and experiences of Westerners about the phenomenon of politics and foreign policy by adopting Afro-centricity as an alternative lens to explore Tshwane-Harare relations. The main argument of this article is that South Africa's foreign policy towards Southern African Development Community (SADC) especially Zimbabwe, should be understood based on African experiences. Methodologically, this study is a desktop research relying on secondary data and adopted document analysis.

**Keywords:** *Afro-centricity, African Agenda, Foreign Policy, South Africa, Zimbabwe.*

## **Introduction**

This article uses Afro-centricity as an alternative theoretical lens and interdisciplinary discourse analysis to explore South Africa's foreign policy towards SADC within the context of Zimbabwe. The adoption of the Afro-centricity approach is informed by Eurocentric perspective adopted by previous studies, which lump the European experiences and preferences with those of the African continent. In this article, both South Africa and Zimbabwe are individual; independent states (1980 and 1994 respectively) with own individual foreign policies with comprehensible intents of how both wish to interrelate to one another both at the multilateral and bilateral level. This article places greater emphasis on a broader discussion of the main integrated principles and pillars which underscored South Africa's foreign policy towards SADC: case of Zimbabwe. Since 1994, South Africa has continually played a significant role in peacekeeping missions on the continent particularly,

the SADC region. In this article, Zimbabwe is considered as a suitable case study because it has been a victim of violent confrontations since the early 2000s, which often manifested into the state resources used to subject citizens to the worst form of human rights violations. The periodization of this article is limited to both Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) and Jacob Zuma's (2009-2018) administrations, which occasioned much debate on quiet diplomacy. The terms of office periods were selected as they served a suitable time for the authors of this article to make a meaningful and conducive understanding of the entire foreign policy complex of South Africa towards SADC: case of Zimbabwe. The first section expounds the Afro-centricity as an alternative theoretical framework adopted for the study. The subsequent two sections cover South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe under Mbeki and Zuma's administration. This is followed by the section that analyses Zimbabwe-South Africa relations from an Afrocentric perspective, to remedy fragmentary analyses provided by previous studies. The last section of the article provides a conclusion of the study by outlining its intention and contribution to the existing literature.

### **Role of the theory: Afrocentric paradigm**

The origin of Afro-centricity is traced back to the Pan-Africanist movement, writers and leaders. Asante is credited to be the founder of the Afrocentricity. He adopted and complemented the works of early writers in his books entitled *Afro-centricity*:

The Theory of Social Change, Kemet, Afro-centricity and Knowledge, and the Afrocentric Idea. The core principles of Afro-centricity are cultural centeredness, paradigmatic pluralism, liberation, and cultural agency (Asante, 1990, 2003; Schreiber, 2000; Ntseane, 2011).

### **Cultural centeredness**

The central argument of Afro-centricity is that African phenomenon or communities cannot be understood, in cases where they are studied from outside. To attain valid knowledge on studies about Africa requires oneself to be positioned on African experiences (Schreiber, 2000). In other words, the centre refers to a location and/ place and/ position. Unlike the Eurocentric perspective, Afro-centricity emphasises the centrality of African culture, ideals, values and history in the study of African phenomenon or communities (Schreiber, 2000). It rejects the

Eurocentric ethnocentricity fragmentary analysis and understanding of African phenomenon. This is so because, the African way of life including their view on epistemology, ontology and axiology vary to those of the West. Thus, the use of Eurocentric perspective in studying developments on the continent put Africans at the margins of their experience (Ntseane, 2011).

### **Paradigmatic pluralism**

Afro-centricity does not reject the use of more theories in studies that involve multiple cultures. It rejects the Eurocentric ethnocentricity in studies about non-Europeans (Schreiber, 2000). In other words, Africans and other nations should be studied from their perspective. In cases of studies involving multiple cultures, the perspective for each nation should be used equally to improve co-existence. Thus, Eurocentricity is not supreme but a perspective among others (Schreiber, 2000; Ntseane, 2011).

### **Liberation and cultural agency**

Afro-centricity seeks to re-centre, revive and liberate African societies. Included here is the African history, view on epistemology, ontology, axiology and liberation of their minds. Most significantly, Afro-centricity argues that Egyptian civilisation predated Greek civilisation. However, only the latter is credited for contributing to modern knowledge. As such, the studies on global history should start with the African continent. Among other things, the continent's contribution to world development particularly Greek civilisation should be acknowledged (Schreiber, 2000).

Afro-centricity as an alternative theoretical lens is employed to provide a distinctive perspective to understand South Africa's foreign policy towards SADC within the context of Zimbabwe. The foregoing should be understood within the context that Afrocentric position to data is different from conventional approaches, Euro-American world-view. The latter world-view produces data, which is solely based on the unorthodox perspectives such as Marxism, Realism and Liberalism. The trio is predominant theories in the foreign policy analysis and they are ponderously modified by the Euro-American cultural merit system and the encounters of the Americans and Europeans about foreign policy phenomenon at the international level. It is worth to note that this article

does not dismiss the usage of Eurocentric perspective in studying the European phenomenon. However, the use of this perspective in studying an African phenomenon cannot yield valid knowledge because it overlooks African experiences. Previous Eurocentric studies overlooked the African experience, which informed South Africa's foreign policy, notably the history of the continent, socio-economic developments in Zimbabwe and the principle of collectivism. On this account, Afro-centricity as both the theory and paradigm is applied to explore South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe. The application and adoption of Afro-centricity is informed by Reviere's sentiments that this theory (Afro-centricity) can furnish a brand new theoretical and epistemological perspective, bestowing a brand new research method in point, criticism, interpretation and procurement of knowledge (Reviere, 2001). It is therefore informative to the reader in this instance that, Afro-centricity preaches that African problems ought to be relentlessly located in the academia centred on Africa; solely built on the culture, values and the history of Africans; and ought to also be operationalised in the way that they prioritise African interests (Asante, 2003). Therefore, this article should be seen as the work, which shows the extent, which Afro-centricity can bestow to the epistemic justice in foreign policy analysis, as its use, clearly unmutes the genuine voices of the African masses that have been previously submerged or rather marginalised.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Mbeki's administration, 1999-2008***

Studies conducted by Hudson (2010), Zondi, Masters, Jumat, Reinecke & Boldt (2014) and Masters (2014) indicate that foreign policy is the extension of national interests and values abroad. As such, scholarly literature analyses South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe in the context of its principles and African Agenda. Given its prolonged struggle against apartheid, democratic South Africa became the champion of human rights. In keeping with this commitment, promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law became the cornerstone of South Africa's foreign policy. Unlike its predecessor, the post-apartheid South Africa became a leader rather than being hostile to its continental counterparts. It adopted the African-centered foreign policy premised on the revival and development of the continent (Hadebe, 2015). Zondi et al. (2014) assert that strategic priorities inform foreign

policy-making (FPM) and implementation. For South Africa, the African continent, especially the SADC member states, take precedence on its foreign policy (Bohler-Muller, 2012; DIRCO, 2011).

It seeks to promote and develop the continent by promoting democracy, good governance, human rights, peace and security. This includes partaking in peace-resolution led by African Union (AU) and other multilateral institutions through providing monetary and non-monetary aid. Supporting and promoting the AU development initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Partaking in peacekeeping missions, conflict-resolution, election observer missions, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, and Development (PCRD). Facilitating socio-economic development on the continent through funding and participating in projects that enable technical and skills transfer. Supporting the SADC initiatives to facilitate political and economic integration as well as the effective economic regional community (Zondi et al, 2014). As stated earlier, South Africa's foreign policy principles and African agenda form the basis for many scholarly analysis and criticisms against its approach to Zimbabwean instability. Many of such scholars argue that the developments in Zimbabwe demonstrate that there are discrepancies in South Africa's FPM and implementation. Hudson (2010) asserts that South Africa is accused of adopting "quiet diplomacy" towards the Zimbabwean government's violation of human rights. In agreement, Hadebe (2015) observes that the employment of "quiet diplomacy" by Mbeki administration was not in keeping with South Africa's commitment to human rights and democracy. The policy-implementation in Zimbabwe was anchored on theory than genuine execution. A referential case is the vote cast by South Africa in the year 2008, against United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution that sought to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe (Hadebe, 2015).

Mangani (2016) asserts that the post-2000 era was earmarked by several developments in Zimbabwe, which had implications on South Africa's foreign policy. During that time, political turmoil and economic recession spurred many Zimbabweans to leave their country. Despite Robert Mugabe (former and late President of Zimbabwe)'s autocratic regime, Tshwane maintained relations with Zimbabwe. The mediation effort by Mbeki administration was skewed in favour of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Makokera (2015) submit that Mbeki's mediation attests to South Africa's awareness of threats to regional security posed by the developments in Zimbabwe.

However, the approach taken by South Africa was spurred by the anti-imperialist stance of Mbeki and Mugabe. As a result, the quiet diplomacy intended to promote anti-imperialism rather than providing positive remedies to the crisis. Hence, Mbeki was reluctant to condemn Mugabe's regime publicly (Phimister and Raftopoulos, 2004; Mangani, 2016). Moreover, Mbeki's government and South African Observer Mission (SAOM) was criticised for endorsing the 2000 and 2002 Zimbabwean elections opined to be illegitimate by other observers (Mlambo, 2016). The SAOM echoed the same statement in 2005, despite the negative reports from other observer missions. This occasioned another severe international criticism and a conviction that Mbeki administration collaborated with Mugabe regime.

When responding to questions regarding his approach to Harare, Mbeki had this to say,

there was no viable alternative to quiet diplomacy in the campaign to resolve the Zimbabwean crisis because, by its very nature, diplomacy precludes loud pronouncement from rooftops

(Mlambo, 2016). When asked the same question in 2008 during the United Nations (UN) Summit, Mbeki had this to say:

I don't know what is meant by quiet diplomacy. What is loud diplomacy? In the same token, his executive respond to the international community was that Zimbabwe is a sovereign state. Mbeki consolidated this remark when speaking at London by stating that, Zimbabwe is not a province of South Africa. Can we agree about that? (Mlambo, 2016).

In assessing South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe, Lipton (2009) asserts that Tshwane failed to observe its commitments. Poverty, violation of human rights and other events that constitute a threat to human security remained pervasive in Zimbabwe. The Path taken by Tshwane did not only worsen things in Zimbabwe, but it posed a threat to South Africa and SADC interests alike. In agreement, Van Wyk (2002) states that the future of South Africa and the credibility of the NEPAD were linked to the issues of Zimbabwe, which remained a challenge to Mbeki's presidency.

## **Zuma's administration, 2009-2018**

Zuma's ascendancy in 2009 was expected to bring changes in South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe. With Zuma being the policy directive, many anticipated that he would employ a different approach to his predecessor (Mbeki), in responding to the Zimbabwean crisis (Lesley, 2017). This was anticipated due to the contention of the policymaking observed from both their administrations, especially diverge priorities in the country's foreign policy actors. For example, during his incumbency, Mbeki prioritised Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), but for Zuma, the Department of Intelligence took precedence (Lesley, 2017; Landsberg, 2010a; Landsberg, 2010b).

The foregoing should be understood within the context that there was a clear corroboration from the principles communicated by Zuma, which dated back to the year 2009. These principles linked his foreign policy stance towards the initial position postulated by the "1996 foreign policy discussion document" which regards human rights as the cornerstone of South Africa's approach in international relations (Lesley, 2017). Zuma's foreign policy discussion document articulating Tshwane's foreign policy encompasses some integrated principles such as "African agenda; strengthening South-South cooperation and developing North-South partnerships". Others include partaking in the intercontinental structure of governing and underpinning foreign economic and political ties (Graham, 2015). This suggests that irrespective of the incumbent, the foreign policy remains the same as attested by Zuma and Mbeki Presidency (Sooliman, 2014). Zuma (2009) and Sooliman (2014) advance the view that among the principled imperatives to South Africa, was the elemental national interest-driven policy which sought to deal with discrimination of any kind either intercontinental or nationally. While there was continuity in Zuma's incumbency, an aspect that demonstrates exceptional focus was the speeches handed-down by members of his executive. Their speeches were more assertive on the Zimbabwean issue relative to those of Mbeki administration. A referential case is the remarks by former Deputy Minister of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim in 2009 wherein he stressed the impacts of the Zimbabwean crisis to the region. He also indicated steps of making Zimbabwean crisis a pinnacle priority to South Africa (Ebrahim, 2009).

Ebrahim further states that the crisis in Zimbabwe had adverse effects on the economy of South Africa especially with the influx of

illegal immigrants and refugees. He pointed out that these developments put a burden to the country while still facing socio-economic problems such as unemployment, inequality and shortfall of service delivery (Ebrahim, 2009). Zuma echoed the same sentiments by stating that: “the plight of the Zimbabwean people hurts the SADC region, especially South Africa” (Zuma, 2009). There were also South African civil society groups, which exert pressure on Zuma’s Presidency. A case in point is the Roth’s petition, which called on Zuma’s regime to abandon Mbeki legacy of not dealing with Zimbabwean crisis positively. Another civil rights group is the Human Rights Watch (2009) which called on Zuma’s administration to make a violation of human rights in Zimbabwe a priority. It wrote a letter to the presidency in 2009 indicating that South Africa would be fair-mindedness if its conception of human rights is premised on its foreign policy principles. The letter called on Tshwane to observe its commitments by being the voice of the violated masses, Zimbabweans (Human Rights Watch, 2009). These developments suggest that Zuma had to follow foreign policy premised on the moral and value-laden as supported by the Mandela administration.

Institute for Global Dialogue (2018) demonstrates that shortly after he became the country’s president in 2009, Zuma advanced the “interventionist measures” which were to be undertaken by SADC. This was to happen if Zimbabwe compromises democratic founding ideas and principles. At this time, it was clear that Zuma meant that, Zimbabwe should not compromise the Global Political Agreement (GPA) of 2008. Hartwell (2013) contends that even though this was unnoticed, in March 2011, Zuma fastened the Living Consensus during SADC’s Troika convention in Zambia. As the convention’s chairperson, Zuma castigated the Government of National Unity (GNU) for dismally failing to execute crucial accords curbed on the GPA agreement and articulated that their case could not be condoned, Hartwell (2013) says that Zuma’s position was clear that Zimbabwe had to walk the road towards free and fair elections. Mlambo (2016) agrees that some commentators believe that Zuma will abandon quiet diplomacy and adopt an anti-Mugabe policy. While Zuma’s mediation efforts were informed by the same consideration as his predecessor, he was vocal in his approach towards the developments in Zimbabwe. He underscored that reform was a precondition to stability (Policy Brief, 2015). However, South Africa’s main opposition party, Democratic Alliance (DA) asserted that Zuma’s mediation efforts have failed because he replicated the quiet diplomacy of his predecessor. In agreement, Columnist Justice Malala remarked that

Zuma did not observe his commitments of dealing with Mugabe decisively because the situation remained the same. He instead became the defender of Mugabe on the globe. Thus, South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe under the African National Congress (ANC) remained the same irrespective of the then incumbent presidents (Mlambo, 2016).

The above discussion as highlight shows a slight knowledge deficit produced on the subject. The interpretation and understanding of scholarly research on the subject suggest that South African policymakers were quiet about the violation of human rights committed by the Zimbabwean government. This is attested by the wide misconception of quiet diplomacy amongst scholars. To remedy this, the following section uses Afro-centricity as an alternative perspective to analyse and understand South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe.

### **Zimbabwe-South Africa relations: Afrocentric perspective**

Asante (1998) observes that African foreign policy should be Afrocentric. In other words, the cultural values, experiences, concerns, needs and interests of African people should take precedence on the African foreign policy. Policy-makers should consider the long-term implications of foreign policy to African nationals. In agreement, McDougal (2009) assert that Afrocentric foreign policy should divest Eurocentric conception of developments that lumps the Western experience with those of African nation-states. Previous studies have a misconception of South Africa's commitment to human rights because their argument was confined to political rights. For South Africa, human rights include equal access to socio-economic needs, the right to a clean and healthy environment. Apart from that, punitive measures such as sanctions have spillover effects especially migration that will burden the country's infrastructure and exacerbate the existing socio-economic challenges. Moreover, ordinary Zimbabwean nationals would have suffered the most under sanctions rather than their leaders who have accumulated wealth (Bohler-Muller, 2012; DIRCO, 2011).

Maleka and Shai (2016) underscore that South Africa's foreign policy towards SADC should be understood in line with the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other member states, good neighbourliness, African solidarity and unity as well as an African solution to African problems. Imperialism and colonialism have made African countries to value sovereignty. Equally, to other African countries, South Africa's

foreign policy is anchored on the sovereignty of nation-states (DIRCO, 2011). This includes a belief that cooperation supersedes competition and collaboration take precedence over confrontation. South Africa's foreign policy is guided by continental solidarity, stability and unity as well as African renaissance. In promoting humanity across the globe, South Africa supports the reduction of poverty in the world. It rejects global inequality, the use of power and exploitation of international institutions to resolve conflicts (DIRCO, 2011). The principle of "African solution to African problems" suggests that it is the collective responsibility of African states to bring peace on the continent. As such, interventions were to be carried out under the auspices of international organisations as opposed to unilaterally (Lipton, 2009). In other words, South Africa should have intervened in Zimbabwe under the auspices of SADC, AU, and other multilateral organisations as opposed to individually. This should be understood within the context that Africans value collectivism as opposed to Eurocentric individualism, and South Africa is no exception. More importantly, peace resolution should emanate from nationals and government of the affected state, Zimbabwe in this case (Hadebe, 2015).

South Africa's foreign policy towards the SADC member states is defined by its history. The ruling party (ANC) considers the role played by its regional counterparts during the struggle against apartheid (Maleka and Shai, 2016). South Africa believes in the interdependence and interconnectedness of nation-states. In this regard, South Africa feel indebted to the international community especially African states like Zimbabwe and Zambia, for the support they have rendered during the struggle against apartheid. It is for this reason that Tshwane is grounded by the principle of good neighbourliness as opposed to apartheid hostile policy (Bohler-Muller, 2012; DIRCO, 2011). Its foreign policy towards Africa has been informed by anti-racism and anti-Western imperialism. Zuma and Mbeki preferred 'quiet diplomacy' to abandon a culture of appeasing Western countries. As a result, it was corroborated by South Africa's support and promotion of diplomatic engagements and non-violent measures to solve state disputes. South Africa's diplomacy was misunderstood and exaggerated on the Zimbabwean crisis. This is so because, the Zimbabwean crisis has always been at the forefront of South Africa's foreign policy because of spillover effects (Landsberg, 2018). It is noteworthy to indicate that other African experiences informed South Africa's approach towards Zimbabwe. Firstly, South Africa sought to respect the sovereignty of Zimbabwe and did not want to end African

government at the bidding of Western states, as this would amount to undermining African solidarity and unity to challenge unjust world (Barber, 2005; Lipton, 2009). Secondly, in condemning human rights violators in the UNSC, the West overlooked other African perpetrators. The latter should be understood within the context that South Africa deems the UNSC as deeply politicised and used to humiliate African states such as Zimbabwe. As such, South Africa has been advancing the idea that Zimbabwe had to be dealt with through the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) or the other alternative Human Rights Councils (Minty, 2009). Another reason is that the United Kingdom (UK) failed dismally on its promises of delivering the 1980 Lancaster house funds meant for the Zimbabwean land redistribution programme. According to Zuma's administration, this was the only thing that caused the land invasions that hit Zimbabwe's economics and politics hard in the early 2000s (Lipton, 2009). Not only did the Lancaster house encourage this, but also inflicted Zimbabwe with Structural Adjustment Programme (SAPs) championed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Together, these reasons combined led to the employment of quiet diplomacy in Zimbabwe, which was preferable over the Western megaphone diplomacy (Lipton, 2009). The latter has been driven by the Western mission of promoting white farmer's interests at the expenses of Zimbabweans who are placed at the margins of their land (Barber, 2005).

For some reasons, the weakness of AU human rights architecture contributes to the violation of human rights in African states such as Zimbabwe. For example, the victims of human rights violation must utilise domestic institutions assigned to promote and protect human rights before they approach the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR). This inhibits the masses on the grassroots to get justice because they do not have funds to pay legal fees (Bekker, 2007; Zeleza, 2007). Apart from that, the ACHPR has to receive authority from the Assembly of Heads of State and Government (ASHG) before it could publicise the findings of cases on human rights violations, a matter that raises reservation and questions because even leaders of the affected state have to vote (Killander, 2008). While the African Court on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) is tasked to complement the ACHPR (commission)'s mandate of promoting and protecting human rights, is inaccessible. The access to the Court is confined to the ACHPR (commission), member states and Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs). Individuals and Non-

Governmental Organisations (NGOs) can only file a case if their state has signed that declaration. In this regard, the court is restricted to execute its mandate of probing African leaders who commit human rights violations (Ibrahim, 2012; Enabulele, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This article locates the analysis and understanding of South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe in the context of African experiences. It remedies the Eurocentric exclusion of African experiences, which could aid to understand Tshwane-Harare relations. By so doing, the article argues that South Africa's foreign policy should be understood based on the African principles such as non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states, African solidarity, stability and unity, good neighbourliness and African solutions to African problems. It should be acknowledged that there was a violation of human rights in Zimbabwe that need to be addressed by African states. Nevertheless, developments that spurred South Africa to adopt quiet diplomacy were overlooked by many studies. Because of their prolonged struggle against colonialism, African states value national sovereignty and they do not want any element that replicates colonial attitude. As such, South Africa should carry out interventions within the SADC or AU framework. Unlike its predecessor, the post-apartheid government has a mutual relationship with neighbouring states dating back to the time of the struggle against apartheid wherein the ANC was assisted with monetary and non-monetary aid. Apart from that, for the post-apartheid government, peaceful diplomatic negotiation is valued as an effective tool to pacify volatile areas as opposed to Western measures such as military intervention and economic sanctions that may often escalate the situation. Furthermore, Mugabe was rated and acknowledged by many as one of the living figures from the generation of African freedom fighters. His reluctance to observe Western wishes and orders was admired by Africans. Apart from that, unilateral sanctions by South Africa would have raised reservations that the ANC was following apartheid regime tactics. As a result, the post-apartheid government could have been regarded as agents of the West and eventually subjected to continental political and economic sanctions. More importantly, the weakness of the African human rights architecture contribution to violation of human rights should not be overlooked.

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