

When a Giant became a 'Reluctant Peacekeeper': South Africa and Peacekeeping Operations between 1994–2003

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Abstract

South Africa joined the international community after its transformation from apartheid to democracy in 1994. The transformation created its own reverberations both regionally and globally as democratic South Africa aroused high hopes that it would assume leadership on the continent. With the help of Pretoria, it was hoped, Africa could solve its own problems. However, South Africa did not fully assume this expected role until 2003. Its low level participation, especially in peacekeeping in Africa—the theme of this article—should be attributed to its own domestic consolidation preoccupations, lack of training and incoherency in its foreign policy until roughly the early twenty-first century.

Keywords

South Africa, peacekeeping, Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Africa

Introduction

South Africa's involvement in peacekeeping operations and conflict resolution within its region¹ is vital to its national interest as virtually each and every conflict affects it in many ways. The most common is that South Africa is experiencing a high influx of economic refugees from both the region and the continent (Schraeder, 2001). Internally, South Africa has already had a high rate of unemployment. With the coming of new immigrants, the unemployment rate and poverty has worsened resulting in high crime rate and other consequences.

When the African National Congress (ANC) assumed power expectations of its role in peacekeeping and peacemaking were very high. It is often argued that whether alone, or in a strategic partnership with the United States (Cochran 2000/2001; Stremmlau, 2000), only South Africa is capable of exercising the

necessary leverage over the warring sides to convince them for a solution in African conflicts. Being seen as a 'regional agent for peace' (Muller, 1999, 14), South Africa had to deal both with consolidating internally the concept of a 'rainbow nation' and externally play the critical role in developmental and security issues that were worsening the continent in terms of insecurity and poverty. This double-edged sword sometimes caught Pretoria unprepared and culminated in failure in its relations.

Why South Africa contributed less than it should have, to peacekeeping operations until 2003, is the main question of this study. First, technical and training preparations along with the domestic contingencies are analysed. Second, a detailed description of South Africa's participation in peacekeeping operations in the period in question and how they were conducted are given. The last section is the conclusion.

Mission is Ahead: Preparations, Learning and Consolidating Democracy

The newly elected South African Government had inherited in 1994 a legacy of strife with the governing elite of more than forty years. The new ruling party, the ANC, faced the reality of restructuring and revamping the composition of the offices. In relations with Africa, much more effort was needed for the task to be tackled, because, the apartheid regime's diplomacy and diplomats—who were in office when the ANC took over had diametrically opposite views regarding the values, perceptions and foreign policy priorities of the newcomer (Oliver & Geldenhuys, 1997, 365). While internal arrangements were underway, the pride of sharing a place among the pillars of South Africa's new foreign policy was defined as a new engagement with the whole of Africa. Mandela (1993) in his oft cited article wrote that 'South Africa cannot escape its African destiny', and that 'Southern Africa commands a special priority in our foreign policy. We are inextricably part of southern Africa and our destiny is linked to that of a region, which is much more than a mere geographical concept'.

Almost immediately after the 1994 elections, the South African Government, like the rest of the international community, was confronted with a major catastrophe, the genocide in Rwanda. Failure of the international community to act in Rwanda prior to the genocide overlapped the same failure and disregard by African countries. South Africa as an ambitious leader of the continent was busy reordering its internal settings and, therefore, did not have even a chance to analyse what was happening in Rwanda. These events continued to dominate the minds of South African foreign policy decision-makers and they have felt concerned that similar events might occur anywhere in Africa. In order to prevent any such eventuality South Africa acted as quickly as possible in crisis areas. Especially in the Mandela period, the Rwandan genocide had a tremendous

impact on the government; at the tenth anniversary in 2004, South African President, Thabo Mbeki openly apologised to the Rwandan people (Mail & Guardian, 2004). Students of South Africa's peace operations in this period need to regard this as an important issue. In general, the bottom line is that South Africa's regional peacemaking efforts have pursued engagement tacitly supporting the position that instability is rooted in colonial and neo-colonial factors—a position broadly consistent with the ANC's policies of solidarity. This stance shored up support for elites in their pursuit of territorial sovereignty and self-determination.

Two reasons that affected South Africa's low level or non-participation in peacekeeping operations through the first decade of its democracy were as already stated, the lack of training and the need to consolidate its domestic affairs. In order to improve training of its forces, in 1996 the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) took part in the peacekeeping training operation 'Exercise Morning Star' held in South Africa in collaboration with the Norwegian Government and the British Army Staff College. In the same vein, in February 1997, joint exercises with Zimbabwe, that involved 250 South African troops, were organised. There was also a move to expand ties with the Tanzanian military, with the long-term objective of creating a regional peacekeeping brigade. 'Operation Blue Hungwe', duly held in April 1997, was the first planned attempt towards future regional peacekeeping operations (Southscan, 1997). In October 1997, South African representatives participated in a Peacekeeping Conference at the Zimbabwe Staff College and in January 1998, Denmark, during a visit to the country by Foreign and Defence Ministers of eight SADC countries, offered to provide \$3.3 million over three years to help with the establishment of a Southern African Peacekeeping Force (Southscan, 1998). But, even while South Africa was considered a good candidate for leading peacekeeping on the continent, it 'lacked' as stated by Welile Nhlapo (1999), then Deputy Director General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, 'the structural, administrative and practical capacity to contribute meaningfully' to such ventures in the first period of ANC rule. Till 1999 South Africa had contributed only a few missions with small numbers; it sent four observers to Bosnia for two periods of six months each and nine engineering experts took part in the the United Nations Observer Mission in Angola (MONUA) operation in Angola until December 1998 (Nhlapo, 1999, 128). In fact prior to 1997, South Africa's participation in peace operations was largely limited to sending troops to Korea in the 1950s and assisting the UN peacekeeping in Rwanda and Mozambique (Berman, 2002). Pretoria therefore engaged in a process to overcome this background; in October 1998, the cabinet approved the *White Paper on South African Participation in International Peace Missions* whose main agenda was to establish a coherent policy approach to future peacekeeping operations (Williams, 2000). At the level of capacity-building (Nhlapo, 1999, 128), some 6,000 military personnel and about 15 foreign affairs officials have undergone training in peacekeeping, conflict resolution and civil-military relations between 1996–1999. This included training both in South

Africa and at international training facilities in Africa and abroad. In 1999, a number of humanitarian peacekeepers also received training; in April 1999, some 2000 South Africans, ranging from a large contingent of troops to police officers and civilians, participated in the biggest ever peacekeeping exercise to date on African soil (Neethling, 2002). *Exercise Blue Crane* brought together 14 SADC and 10 non-SADC African countries to practice their skills in peacekeeping in an integrated manner in South Africa at the SA Army Battle School in the Northern Cape Province.² The SANDF played a major role in *Exercise Blue Crane*; it not only hosted the event but also provided the Exercise Director and control staff (Neethling, 2002, 9).

South Africa's participation in peace initiatives was extended by collaboration with regional and international bodies such as the SADC, the African Union and the United Nations (Nhlapo, 1999, 130). In the early years of the ANC Government, Pretoria had been cautious and hesitant to such initiatives. If one of the explanations for this attitude was that South Africa lacked structural and practical experience (Barber, 2004, 177); another definitely is that the South African elites believed that it was only the UN that had the supreme responsibility for maintaining peace and security. It was a conviction that as a member, South Africa had to assist the UN in fulfilling its task (Nhlapo, 1999, 130–131).

Over the years, South Africa has transformed from being the most isolated state in modern times (Geldenhuys, 1990) into a fully integrated participant. During the Presidency of Nelson Mandela from 1994 to 1999, most South African commentators and international academia believed that the country did not have a coherent foreign policy and it was directed by an ad hoc and often-haphazard approach. As explained by Nathan (2005), there were several reasons to account for this; first, the new government was inexperienced and preoccupied with the domestic imperatives of national reconciliation. Secondly, the ANC Government spent most of its time transforming the state departments, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Overall, during this period South African foreign policy had shown 'lack of a coordinated vision' (Alden & le Pere, 2003, 15). To some, it was 'lacking the necessary broad orientation and strategic purpose' (Mills, 1997, 19). This was also partly because of the need to overcome the challenges posed by the ANC's transformation from a liberation movement to government (Van Der Westhuizen, 1998, 451). In short, domestic consolidation of democracy, ANC's transformation along with South Africa's transition, had all contributed and played an important role in Pretoria's approach to and participation in peacekeeping operations in Africa.

South Africa 'Reluctant Peacekeeper' through 1994–2003

The promotion of democracy through negotiations and brokering peace deals has been the dominant theme of the 'new' South Africa. It continued even later,

especially in the first period of the ANC-led government (1994–1999) and was in fact one of the key features of Pretoria's foreign policy approach. Its understanding of bringing peace³ to Africa during the Mandela period (1994–1999) was clearly more favourably disposed towards preventive diplomacy rather than peace-keeping and peace enforcements. There was in fact a 'reluctance to don the mantle of peacekeeper' (Muller, 1999, 14; Oliver & Geldenhuys, 1997, 371). In the first five years of ANC rule, Pretoria had almost completely ruled out the military option and displayed a keener interest in brokering peace deals and promoting negotiations along the lines of its own experience (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003; Landsberg, 2000). This preventive diplomacy often (if not always), was coupled with Mandela's extended reliance on 'personal diplomacy' (Cooper, 1998).

In this regard, both Mandela and Mbeki initially committed themselves to a settlement of the more than two-decades-old civil war in Angola. Just one month after coming to power in May 1994, President Mandela invited both Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, leader of ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and Jonas Savimbi, leader of the rebel National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), to join talks that would bring an end to fighting. Pretoria tried to help in finding an accommodative solution where two belligerents could serve in a government of national unity. Even while South Africa's intervention helped facilitate the setting up of camps and training centres, the mobilised UNITA and MPLA soldiers and the training of Angolans to remove mines from the countryside along with Pretoria's involvement, gave little success and no lasting solution could be achieved. When the Angolan peace process broke down, South Africa's relations with Dos Santos' MPLA deteriorated and the two countries were no longer on speaking terms.

Pretoria's first participation in preventive diplomacy was its intervention in the political crisis that erupted in Lesotho. Just after King Letsie's 'royal coup', the governments of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe threatened to impose sanctions against Lesotho. As a result of intervention, King Letsie and the Prime Minister Ntsu Mokhehle agreed to 'restore constitutional order'. Again, South Africa's engagement to resolve tensions in Swaziland was another effort at preventive diplomacy. In 1996, after the tensions in Swaziland over the role of the monarchy, South African President Mandela met with King Mswati III to explore ways to solve the issue. This so-called 'serene diplomacy' (Landsberg, 2000, 110) made a reasonably good impact on Swaziland.

Before this in 1995, President Mandela intervened personally in Nigeria to direct the military regime of Sani Abacha who had detained Chief Moshood Abiola, the frontrunner in Nigeria's annulled June 1993 presidential elections. During this period, Pretoria pursued a policy of 'quiet diplomacy' that sought to save dissidents like Ken Saro-Wiwa and to push that regime towards democracy. Also, Mandela rushed to the rescue of former (and current) President General Olesagun Obasanjo and 39 others convicted on 'coup'-plotting charges (Landsberg, 2000, 110–111). In November 1995, when Nigerian ruler Sani Abacha executed nine environmental activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, an

enraged Mandela unilaterally called for boycott of Nigeria's oil and its expulsion from the Commonwealth. Many African states refused to take sides with Pretoria in its efforts to ostracise the Abacha regime and South Africa was left alone in its crusade. African countries criticised Pretoria for not consulting with other African states about African issues and argued that South Africa would seek their assistance only when it faced outright political embarrassment and failure as happened in the case of Nigeria (Landsberg, 2000, 112). Having failed to galvanise African support for its initiatives, South Africa turned to appeal to Washington, London and the Commonwealth to impose oil sanctions against the Abacha regime. This, furthermore, infringed the solidarity rule among African states and South Africa was accused of being 'pro-West', un-African' and acting in favour of Western interests (Alden & le Pere, 2004; Van Der Westhuizen, 1998, 447). Overall, South Africa's preventive diplomacy in the name of 'quiet diplomacy' towards Nigeria failed (Muller, 1999, 5), and this implied 'considerable loss of prestige' for Pretoria (Oliver & Geldenhuys, 1997, 372).

As Chairman of SADC in 1996, South Africa embarked on a new peace initiative in Africa; Thabo Mbeki, then Deputy President of South Africa, played an active role to broker a peace deal for the war-torn DRC (then known as Zaire) in 1996 after the outbreak of a rebellion that resulted in the downfall of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Mbeki's approach to Zaire constituted, in the words of Landsberg (2000, 111), 'a combination of stick and carrot'. Stick was exemplified by Pretoria sending one of its warships (the *Outeniqua*) in an attempt to broker a truce between Mobutu and rebel leader Laurent Kabila. The carrot policy, however, was to offer assistance for post conflict reconstruction in exchange for acceptance of the peace deal. But, Pretoria's initiative weakened as its presumed neutrality was questioned because it was selling arms to Kabila's rivals, Uganda and Rwanda (Landsberg, 2000). Bold though these attempts of preventive diplomacy were, they failed to deliver a peaceful and negotiated transition (Alden & le Pere, 2003). Without sending troops or a police force to conflict areas, this was, like all South Africa's peace initiatives, simply playing the negotiator, as mentioned above. South Africa did intervene in some countries as part of its preventive diplomacy strategy, but while some moves were successful, the others were far from it and culminated in South Africa's loss of prestige in African affairs. As Landsberg aptly argues (Landsberg, 2000, 107) in the Mandela period, South Africa's democracy promotion efforts through preventive diplomacy have countered many 'pitfalls, contradictions, and dilemmas' that forced Pretoria to alter its approach.

After these bitter experiences, South Africa under Thabo Mbeki, began to promote balanced and mutually beneficial political, security and economic relations with its neighbours, usually through multilateral institutions. In this regard, Mbeki asserted (Editors Inc., 1999, 16–17) that South Africa 'should place itself within the context of the southern African region and define its place on the continent' by taking into account 'the need for development throughout the region of Southern Africa'. Again, following Mandela's bitter experiences of promoting

democracy through preventive diplomacy in Nigeria, Angola and Congo, Mbeki has refrained from publicly confronting other African governments. Instead, the new policy is to give preference to multilateral and regional organisations to settle issues. Mbeki himself has consistently stated that South Africa will engage with Southern Africa and Africa at large 'as a partner and ally, not as a regional superpower' (Mbeki, 1995). Pretoria's new consultative strategy has been especially evident in Mbeki's decision to invite his Mozambican and Namibian counterparts to form part of the troika of regional leaders who engaged Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe in talks at Victoria Falls in April 2000 (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003, 187).

Overall, during the Mandela Presidency, South Africa's role in peacekeeping and peacemaking issues can, at best, be described as those of a 'reluctant peacekeeper'. Pretoria's approach has been, in principle, preventive diplomacy rather than using military options in any form to help solve issues in Africa. It was Pretoria's belief that a stable future for the region could be only through conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy. It was stated in this regard, using soldiers to build schools, roads and hospitals in the region, as part of preventive diplomacy, might prove a more effective method of peacekeeping than patrolling (Williams, 2000).

Until early 2000 when Pretoria committed troops for peacekeeping in the DRC, South Africa's priority in solving crises in Africa was through preventive diplomacy. Only after this commitment to send troops did Pretoria begin to demonstrate a greater willingness to keep the peace in Africa through, if necessary, military means too (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2003, 186). However, this military dimension of brokering is a compliment to preventive diplomacy, not a replacement of, nor an elimination of the strategy.⁴

This greater willingness to participate in peacekeeping operations was obvious in 2003 when South Africa contributed to the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC). This was a turning point in South Africa's diplomacy in the continent. It started to deploy significant numbers of its troops to various peacekeeping missions in Africa. Having committed approximately 1,200 troops to MONUC, South Africa's stature as a UN peacekeeping nation jumped from 39 out of 89 countries in May 2003 to a ranking at number 10 in October 2003 (de Coning, 2003, 33). South Africa now is the fourth largest UN troop contributing country in Africa, after Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya. If one adds the deployment of a further approximately 1,600 troops to Burundi, then South Africa had a total foreign deployment of around 3,000 personnel in 2003, making it the second largest peacekeeping contributor in Africa after Nigeria. South Africa has personnel in the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and is participating in almost every UN peacekeeping mission in Africa. In addition, South Africa has also contributed to the EU operations in Ituri district of the DRC. South Africa's troop deployments in DRC and Burundi are an indication that it has now developed the political will to support its peacemaking initiatives with military deployments too (de Coning, 2003, 34).

Conclusion

The adage that 'the future of South Africa is inextricably linked to that of the African continent' (Ntsaluba, 2004) has been a truism to explain Pretoria's foreign policy towards Africa both at official and non-official levels. Though this has become more rhetoric than reality, it is worthwhile to see the main dimension of this discourse in the light of peacekeeping operations.

During the post-apartheid period, it is said that South African foreign policy was based on 'active internationalism, primarily through multilateral institutions' (Alden & le Pere, 2003, 13). Pretoria's intensive involvement in institution building in Africa and its leadership role in those institutions has made this a strong claim. A closer look however at South Africa's role in regional and continental bodies does not lead one to reach such a conclusion, at least for the Mandela period. During the Presidency of Mandela, South Africa's foreign policy had been overshadowed by his towering personality and international stature. This mostly, in turn, resulted in Mandela dominating every major foreign policy decision. Mandela's international renown was such that 'it ... meant South Africa's image (and its foreign policy) tends to be largely equated with the president's profile. As a result, policy has often followed his public statements, rather than the other way around' (Mills, 1997, 24). In the first phase of ANC rule, South Africa witnessed a learning process regarding its foreign relations towards Africa. Trying to secure economic relations with Europe and Latin America sometimes surpassed Pretoria's relations with Africa at large and Southern Africa in particular (Makoa, 1999, 81).

South Africa's leading role in Africa can be best tested with regard to its security and peacekeeping policies; the reason being that the continent must cease to be a cauldron of conflict and wars. The low level of investment in Africa is defined a priori as the result of instability and insecurity. Until 2003, South Africa was hesitant, reluctant and careful in its dealings with Africa not only in terms of peacekeeping operations, but also its overall relations. Domestic consolidation of its own society, the lack of training and incoherence in its foreign policy made South Africa, albeit unintentionally, a 'reluctant peacekeeper' in its own region. In general, regarding the conflicts in Africa, Pretoria is convinced that pacific forms of conflict resolution are the most viable methods for achieving durable peace and stability. This has attributed mostly to the success of South Africa's negotiated settlement and to Mbeki's style of politics (Nathan, 2005). In general, Mbeki preferred persuasion and negotiations. Resultantly mediation and facilitation of dialogue has become an area of continuous and energetic engagement, most prominently in the case of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan and Liberia. Overall, the South African Government strongly favours peacekeeping over peace enforcement and maintains that external military deployment should necessitate approval of the UN Security Council (Republic of South Africa, 1996). South Africa's peace engagement roles in Burundi and Ivory Coast show that South Africa

prefers the role of peacemaker to that of peacekeeper (Malan, 1999). Active peacemaking has often been implemented through facilitation of dialogue and mediation.

Notes

1. In this article, the definition of region for South Africa is Sub-Saharan Africa. The reason for this is that South Africa is the single most influential country because of its democracy and economy. Its foreign policy makers do not consider their region as being restricted to Southern Africa, but to Sub-Saharan Africa. For more on this see, Ozkan (2013, 168–223).
2. Only DRC and Seychelles did not take part in the exercise.
3. In this study, trying to bring peace is regarded as an indirect way of promoting democracy. Therefore, when the peacekeeping and peacemaking role of South Africa is mentioned, it should also be understood that it is one of the ways in which South Africa used to promote democracy.
4. South Africa's Lesotho intervention was an example of using its military option. But here the Lesotho case has not been regarded as a peacekeeping operation. It was solely a military intervention and has nothing to do with its peacekeeping role. See Landsberg (2000, 113).

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