



FES South Africa

Guiding Discussion Document

***Reflections on the ANC NEC International
Relations Sub-Committee Discussion Document***

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Introduction

The ruling African National Congress (ANC) has always taken international relations with seriousness. Its commitment to international relations, especially what it characterises as 'progressive internationalism' can be traced to the internationalism of the Bandung Conference era in the 1950s. Internationalism for the ANC has since become an article of faith, born of necessity, and pursued as an integral part of the struggle against disenfranchisement of the black population. The character of international relations today is markedly different from the era in which the seed of internationalism was born in the ANC, when the world was mapped along ideological tensions between the US-led Western bloc and the Soviet Union. The British empire was also reaching its climax, and showing signs of rupture in the African continent. The framing of the ANC's international paradigm, hitherto, has been along anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles.

This was more so since it considered South Africa to be under colonial rule of a special type, precisely because of the overlaps between the British colonial rule and the successive Afrikaner governments, sometimes in coalition with pro-British parties, and the continuities in the assertion of racial ideology in extreme forms from the time the National Party government took over in 1948 until its collapse in the early 1990s. The ANC's nationalism cast itself in progressive terms – to dismantle the system of apartheid and replace it with democracy and non-racialism, and to mobilise progressive allies internationally with a view to champion a normatively-driven political change in South Africa. As such, the ANC over time would internationalise its idealism on issues of democracy, human rights, equity, and fairness.

Working across a range of countries to build a formidable counter-weight to the apartheid system, the ANC's internationalism mobilised a global anti-apartheid movement that would draw moral opprobrium against the prevailing political order of the time. Even when it had been banished to exile, international mobilisation, including nurturing the global anti-apartheid movement, remained a critical pillar of the ANC struggle alongside its other instruments: the armed struggle, underground movement, and mass mobilisation. The ANC in exile was active in petitioning the United Nations, participating in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and lobbying the non-aligned movement to support the cause of liberation movement. The crucial moment in the ANC's African diplomacy came at the OAU Council of Ministers Session in Dar es Salaam in 1975, when the leadership of the ANC made a persuasive call for the OAU to identify itself fully on the side of the liberation movement and in opposition to the apartheid government. This also opened up an avenue for the ANC to broaden its African diplomatic footprint, especially with countries that were gaining political independence. The ANC's involvement in the G77 harkens to this period in history. The normative qualities of the ANC's struggle, pivoted on emancipatory politics of freedom and democracy. These would later influence the human rights rhetoric when the party assumed government in 1994, with multilateralism as a cornerstone.

Treading the waters of a new democratic dispensation with both internal (imperatives to overcome the socio-historic legacy of apartheid) and external (expectations to be an international citizen conforming to Western norms) pressures, sustaining idealism in foreign policy has proven to be challenging. While advocating progressive change through the agency of a liberation movement is a less burdened exercise, implementing it when in power is a treacherous undertaking that requires careful management of competing interests. Yet in rhetoric, the South African government has remained consistent in its commitment to multilateralism. In more recent times, the ANC has lost the vigour of its idealism, both in terms of what the party believed in, as well as the ability to cast new, innovative ideas in a world that is no longer strictly marked by empire or binary tensions along ideological lines.

Since 2009 the ANC has failed to offer animating ideas about the country's place in the world. Its perspectives on power dynamics in the world have travelled back in time, and are frozen in a world that no longer exists. This is notwithstanding its acknowledgement that at both the National Conference in Mangaung in 2012 and the National General Council of 2015 observed that the

material conditions continue to change in ways that are unpredictable and fluid. This point also features in the current discussion document prepared for the 30 June 2017 ANC Policy Conference.

This particular document observes that the current global economic crisis is a mere symptom of the unjust nature of global capitalism which is used to advance the narrow interests of powerful states and poses risks to the goals of ending poverty, unemployment and inequality. Without presenting a compelling rationale, it also argues that the global economic conditions have frustrated the consolidation of south-south cooperation. Further, it observes that these economic conditions weaken the potential of the South African economy to become inclusive and resilient, negatively affecting our pursuit to the goals of the *National Democratic Revolution* as expressed in the National Development Plan and the actualization of south-south cooperation into prosperity. The economic conditions encourage protectionism in powerful countries however, emerging economies experience higher economic growth rates than most of the developing world, helping them take up the pressures of the global economic crisis caused by the industrialized North. The core thrust of the discussion paper is what the ANC refers to as progressive internationalism, which we also subject to critical scrutiny against the backdrop of global changes.

Here below, we provide a critical reflection of the ANC's discussion paper, looking at the global configuration of power, the role of ideas and leadership, and the state of the institutions.

Global Balance of Power

The paper opens with an expression of powerlessness in the face of an almighty global capitalism. It then starts to define the landscape of power in the current global order. It observes that due to the increasing uncertainty and insecurity of the current global system, the negative impact of globalisation is not only felt by populations in the South but those in the North as well. The financial and economic crisis of 2008 is viewed in the document as an overwhelming force that has wreaked damage on economies around the world, and from which South Africa finds it hard to recover. Amongst other international developments, the paper points to the election of Donald Trump as the new President of the United States and the exit of Britain from the EU as indicative of uncertain shifts in the global system. However, the ANC paper reaches for easy binaries. The rise of China and other emerging powers are pitted against old powers in the West. Much of what the paper has to say about the global order reads as if the world has, by and large, remained static, and that alliances along the North-South binary are fixed permanently. The time of fixed alliances is fading into the sunset. The notion of friendship in international relations is transient, and often dependent on the depth of economic relations and the extent to which such alliances bolster countries' national interests. As such, many countries today approach international relations, primarily, from the point of view of their national interests.

The ANC's idea of alliance blocks that are fixed, and determined ideologically or geopolitically is a backward one, and does not resonate with the character of global transformations that have taken place in the last three decades. For example, Russia may have played a pivotal role as an ally to the liberation movement in the past, and may have had a lot in common ideologically, but the Russia of today has been presided over by a right-wing political party – United Russia – with the political elite in that country showing no signs of commitment to progressive ideas on democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. Another example is that of China. Despite its rhetoric on international platforms, this country's most strategic relations are with the US, and this is based on intertwined commercial interests between the two countries. While this might change in future, the strong bond, often characterised by competition and mutual respect, is a clear example of how alliances do not assume a neat format and go through reconfigurations several times depending on economic interest. If there is any lesson to be learnt from China it is that pragmatism, but of a principle type, is the best approach to international relations today.

In February 2017 at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Xi Jinping promoted globalisation at the time when countries such as the US are shrinking from global leadership and articulate a rhetoric

that oppose globalisation. China has decided to engage fully in the realities of the global order rather than take a victim posture. It may not necessarily view the global system as benign, but it positions itself strategically to maximise gains, including how it participates in multilateral forums or negotiate bilateral relations with other countries. Other countries such as India are more calculative and pragmatic about their choice of bilateral relations, and would not allow a quasi-ideological alliance, as is the case with the BRICS formation, to determine their approach to international relations.

In the case of South Africa, we have very strong bonds with Russia (along with China), but our approach to international relations tends to be informed by quasi-ideological standpoints rather than grounded in pragmatic realities of commerce. Even our participation in the BRICS gets muddled up in geostrategic obsession rather than clear-eyed, strategic thinking about how best to maximise our involvement for our own national economic prosperity. The obsession with geopolitics, and sometimes poorly articulated anti-Western rhetoric, forecloses the space to think deeply and creatively about various ways in which South Africa can improve its global profile, its leadership in the African continent, the nature of bilateral relations, and the character of its values and ideas.

Need for Compelling Ideas for Domestic Economy and Foreign Policy

What has been lacking in the ANC so far, especially since the 2007 Polokwane conference, is a clear set of compelling and animating ideas that come from the developing South on the character of global governance, leadership, and the nature of institutions that should anchor it. The institutional pillars of the post-World War 2 era are corroded, and it may become more difficult to forge consensus on the types of collective actions that need to be taken to sustain global stability and steer progress. There are both opportunities and dangers in the current state of the world, which the ANC paper does not reflect upon.

Apart from the geographic diffusion of power from West to the East, the composition of power broadly is also changing. Non-state actors, including individuals, NGOs, policy think-tanks, foundations, and development agencies have a growing influence in international relations in both positive and negative ways. Some of these actors engage directly with other governments, they can influence government policy or stance on matters relate to international relations, and in some instances, they work with their governments abroad. Weighing in on the weak domestic economic performance, the ANC paper uses the global financial crisis as an excuse for lack of economic dynamism and weak traction in south-south relations. It argues that these conditions “undermine the potential of the South African economy to recover and become inclusive and resilient, affecting negatively our pursuit of the *National Democratic Revolution* as expressed in the National Development Plan”. There is a failure, emblematic of South Africa’s governing elites, to shirk their responsibility for domestic economic woes. The discussion paper stresses the constraints on growth placed by the external environment, and ignores factors such as policy uncertainty and the tense relationship between government and business. It is not the global conditions that have locked the South African economy in a low-growth tailspin for such a long period, but primarily politics.

The ANC paper does not account for the fact that some countries, including India, have come out of the crisis emboldened to take policy measures that would restore economic dynamism. A balanced and an honest appraisal of South Africa’s economic performance is necessary if the country is to turn the corner while also bolstering its place in the world. For South Africa to reclaim its credibility in the world, engage effectively in the African continent and earn the respect of its peers, it would need to fix its domestic politics and improve the performance of its economy. Rhetoric is unhelpful in the absence of a purposeful development strategy and an international relations perspective that is cast on the frame of rich ideas.

Key Challenges Highlighted by the ANC Discussion Paper

In the ANC paper, five challenges are identified: the first is with respect to foreign policy’s ability to

respond flexibly to global developments. It is difficult to demonstrate flexibility when foreign policy is parochial and pursues one-sided type of alliances in a fluid world. Further, there is no evidence that there has been renewal in foreign policy thinking in the past 10 years since President Jacob Zuma ascended to office. What has been glaring, rather, is the crisis of ideas and the absence of robust and open debate on foreign policy and South Africa's place in the world.

The second challenge highlighted in the paper has to do with the capacity of South African institutions, including diplomatic services to take advantage of growing South-South cooperation. By all accounts, South Africa's diplomatic presence is ubiquitous, stretching to over 120 countries. The lack of a strategic focus in South Africa's foreign policy means that there is a lot of wastage in this corpulent diplomatic presence at a time when the country needs to conserve its resources and deploys them wisely.

Importantly, it is not clear what the return on diplomatic investment is for South Africa at a time of economic strain, and at a time when the majority of its citizens are facing economic deprivations. There is no clear strategic focus and prioritisation of South Africa's diplomatic engagements that would allow for greater rationalisation, and enable the country to transform its limited resources for greater effect and gains. The ANC needs to be open about the full-blown tendency to fill senior diplomatic positions with, predominantly, political appointees. It is unacceptable that political appointees head over 70 percent of South African missions abroad. Many of these appointees have no proper expertise or preparation for the demands of modern day diplomacy, including the importance of pursuing commercial diplomacy.

This practice has a value-destruction effect, since many of these appointees are unlikely to be absorbed into the bureaucracy upon their return. This potentially makes it difficult to manage foreign services, as politicians may not easily subject themselves to the discipline of bureaucratic authority – and South Africa does not have such a culture. In addition, there is a need to revamp and renew institutions that are charged with executive foreign policy, beginning with improving capacities within DIRCO, and developing a new cadreship of foreign policy practitioners. Finally, strategic thinking, leadership, and replenishment of ideas are urgently needed.

The third challenge set out in the ANC paper is that of growing the economy in the current global climate. This is not going to be easy when there is no clearly defined development strategy, and with no explicit links created between domestic economic policy and articulation of economic diplomacy abroad. In addition - or as a complement to economic diplomacy that is grounded in a coherent economic development strategy and reinforced by strategic trade and investment drive - it is also important that new dimensions of diplomacy related to innovation and science and technology are factored into the broader strategic thinking about leveraging foreign policy for economic development. Managing structural change under the current global economic circumstances also calls for a new dialogue, domestically, that would focus on exploring new sources of growth (innovation-led growth); a new thinking about industrial policy; and a structured engagement between government, business, and civil society on a new social compact.

The ANC paper also identifies the fourth challenge the need for harnessing activism of non-state actors and different spheres of government such as provinces in order to expand beneficial international relations. Harnessing non-state actors will need government to be more open and engaging rather than isolating itself. Many civil society organisations would welcome such as dialogue, especially if it is on an all-inclusive basis rather than cherry pick those actors that are likely to echo the ruling party's thinking. The space of para-diplomacy is complex, since these entities have constitutionally guaranteed authority to undertake certain international relations functions, and do not need permission from central government. Establishing a healthy spirit of cooperative governance, and working with provinces and the cities on a mutually respectful basis could help in consolidating South Africa's external engagements. Some of the cities are no longer under the ruling party, and this may soon become the case with some of the provinces. What this means, therefore, is that an adversarial relationship between the different spheres of government, especially

on party political lines, could fragment and weaken South Africa's foreign policy articulation and branding abroad.

Characterising the rise of the opposition as a threat to progressive ideas, as the ANC paper suggests, could be read as an attack on democracy, since that is the route through which the opposition would ascend. Assuming a hostile posture to the opposition on matters such as international relations, which should transcend party differences, may also make it harder for the governing party to gain cooperation on areas for which they may need the opposition's acquiescence to solve collective action problems and co-generate solutions at the city and provincial level where different political parties may be in charge. The tone of the ANC's international relations paper, and indeed the posture of government in this regard, should avoid politics of expedience and careless rhetoric, and be mindful that foreign policy is, in a broader sense, part of governance and an extension of a country's domestic policy.

The final challenge underlined by the discussion document is that of national interest. This is an elusive concept. In a country that is fragmented along race and class lines, and where there are still lingering tensions over the terms of transition, it is difficult to identify concretely a unifying idea of national interest. It is important, though, as the ANC paper correctly suggests that greater attention should be given to this area. Leadership plays a crucial role as a unifying factor. Further, norms, policies, and programmes that are deliberately developed to ensure political and economic inclusion can go a long way in cultivating a shared sense of national interest. Accordingly, a social compact domestically, embracing a normative approach to the economy, and an open dialogue across various stakeholders can help in a nation-building exercise that is not used as a shibboleth for political elite interests at the expense of the welfare of the people.

While the economy is buffeted by storms, corruption deepens, mistrust between leaders and the citizens widen, and a sense of economic marginalisation (including high levels of unemployment) worsens, it will be difficult to have a shared sense of national interest. Some of the key pillars in cultivating a positive sense of national interest that is broadly shared include ongoing national dialogue, a commitment to nation-building undergirded by those principles laid out in our Constitution, a drive for national economic prosperity, and legitimacy and credibility in leadership.

Conclusion: Progressive Internationalism and Domestic Institutional Challenges

The idea of progressive internationalism is the centrepiece of the ANC's discussion paper. The ANC adopted progressive internationalism due to its interaction with fellow liberation movements throughout the world and international solidarity movements in their opposition to global imperialism, dominance of the global North over the South, and structural global inequalities. The movement requires the building of alliances and solidarities with similar movements around the world to obtain a just, equal, diverse and democratic world system. Another expression of progressive internationalism is the fact that in the past, the South has been active in several international forums, placing great emphasis on shared interests through bodies such as the G77.

The South has been unequivocal in insisting that poorer countries should not be expected to shoulder responsibilities of solving structural problems in the same manner as wealthier countries. South Africa has played a catalytic role in shaping some of the thinking around advancing a development agenda in global governance, a role that has been evident in the World Trade Organisation, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, the G20, and various other bodies in which South Africa participates. The perception of itself as a progressive force has never been a parochial one that panders to expedient ideologies. The country has also conceived of its global actor role in the form of a bridge-builder between the North and the South. The ANC paper argues that in advancing this progressive internationalism, the ANC-led government has strategically positioned South Africa in the BRICS platform whose importance is expanding.

For the ANC, the establishment of the BRICS Bank represents a definitive way of providing

alternative sources of support to poor countries and South Africa being home to the Africa office of the BRICS Bank strengthens efforts to implement the vision of an African Renaissance while deepening south-south cooperation. However, one must be aware of the changes in government within our BRICS partners as these have the potential to have a negative impact on the continuity of the BRICS. What is not clear, however, is the meaning of this concept in a changing world. The kind of values that should define this progressive internationalism are not clearly laid out in the document. It is important that the paper places a premium on our Constitutional values as guiding light for progressive internationalist politics. This includes accent on human rights (including protection of the rights of citizens against excesses by unaccountable governments), democracy, equity, and socio-economic development. The character of countries with which to build shared platforms should also be values-defined rather than be chosen on geopolitical basis.

What is troubling about what seems to be the outlines of progressive internationalism defined in the ANC paper is that the party sees the world as static, and the tools with which to deal with the world look the same as those that were applicable over six decades ago. The party seems to have sleepwalked through the changes of the 1980s and the 1990s. There is obsession in this paper with state sovereignty, but nothing of the rights of people against excesses by the very state elites who use the cover of sovereignty against external powers. It makes sweeping statements about the rise of neo-Nazism in the North, and neo-conservative elements in the South, without any elaboration of what these means. It sees the opposition as undermining a progressive international agenda. It is not so clear how it is progressive to shield Al-Bashir, or to be in alliance with United Russia – a right-wing party that pays lip service to civil liberties, or to vote against human rights in international forums.

According to the discussion paper, South Africa's participation in the system of global governance has always been about advocating for transformation from within, with an aim to serve the interests of the small poor countries of the South and the Continent. The ANC has set out several strategies towards building a better world: (i) strengthening North-South dialogue; (ii) parliamentary solidarity through foreign policy; and (iii) economic diplomacy. It needs to be mindful, however, that its contribution to this objective may likely be constrained by its narrow view of alliances in the changing international order. It needs to be a lot more open-minded in engaging both countries of the North and the South, primarily from the view of maximising benefits for the South African people, as well as to build bridges that would ensure global stability. While South Africa is likely to share a lot in common with other African countries and countries of the South, it should be mindful that alliances are not cast in stone, and that there is a need for flexibility and openness in order to play a meaningful role in the global system.

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