



# 100 Years of ANC foreign policy

OR Tambo with Fidel Castro in the 70s

Mobilising international solidarity and fighting for the self-determination of black South Africans, and other peoples under the gripping yoke of colonial domination, became a hallmark of ANC international strategy.

By Chris Landsberg

An African National Congress (ANC) foreign policy or international relations strategy is as old as the movement itself: a whopping 100 years! There are very many ANC, South African Communist Party (SACP) and South African Congress of Trade Union (SACTU) leaders and activists who played a critical role in defending and promoting the theory and practice of internationalism, international solidarity, world peace, African unity, African renaissance and an African agenda. Let us in the year of the centenary mention some of them. They are: John Langalibalele Dube, Pixley ka Seme, Z. K. Mathews, Inkhosi Albert Luthuli, Walter Sisulu, Yusuf Dadoo, Brian Bunting, Ray Simons, Joe Slovo, Johnny Makhathini, Alfred Nzo, Kader Asmal, M.P Naicker, Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, O.R Tambo, Mark Shope, Duma Nokwe, Gertrude Shope, Ruth Mompathi, Nelson Mandela, Reginald September, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob.G Zuma, and others like Pan-African Congress leaders Robert Sobukwe and Black Conscious leader Steve Biko. The white minority embarked on efforts to create their “white state” in a black land, which culminated in the elections in September 1910 to consolidate the Union of South Africa, with the South African Party (SAP) winning comfortably. The primary aim was to seek reconciliation within the white community between descendents of the English and Dutch who had engaged in the two Anglo-Boer Wars of 1880 to 1881 and 1899 to 1902.

The establishment of this white-dominated Union changed the face of black politics forever. Black South Africans and other anti-racist forces objected to the fact that black citizens were given no protection, privileges, or legal safeguards. On 12 January 1912 African leaders met in Bloemfontein, in the spirit of African nationalism, and vowed to establish a Native Union in South Africa. Its aim was to provide a representative and responsible outlet for African opinion and to counter exploitation. The NNC took umbrage at the fact that blacks were not even consulted over the establishment of the Union and delegates to the 1912 Convention responded emphatically with the

establishment of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), to be re-named the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923.

The ANC articulated a foreign policy component to its political strategies from the onset. It should be noted that, a good 8 years before the SANNC was established, one of its future leaders, Pixley ka Seme would publish his seminal document 'The Regeneration of Africa', which would help to shape the thinking of the new movement and infuse modernity into the African consciousness of the organisation.

In reaction to the arrogance of the whites to establish their Union, the SANNC sent its first delegation to Britain to mobilize solidarity against the creation of a white union of South Africa., but did not get a sympathetic hearing from the Crown. From that time, mobilising international solidarity and fighting for the self-determination of black South Africans, and other peoples under the gripping yoke of colonial domination, became a hallmark of ANC international strategy. Whites were determined to turn South Africa into "a great White man's land". The ANC was determined to see to it that international solidarity helped to thwart this goal.

### **The Freedom Charter**

The Freedom Charter was adopted in 1955 following the ANC's Defiance Campaign which started in 1952. It spelled out the basic demands of the people, but it did not neglect to speak about foreign policy. Under the clause 'There shall be Peace and Friendship' the ANC campaigned for a clear identity as 'a fully independent state, which respects the rights and sovereignty of all nations'. It went further to assert that it should 'strive to maintain world peace and the settlement of disputes by negotiation and not war'. The idea of a country at peace with others was a strong point, committing the ANC to a posture that 'Peace and friendship among all our people shall be secured by upholding the equal rights, opportunities and status of all'. In terms of the African continent, the Freedom Charter stated that 'The people of the Protectorates – Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland – shall be free to decide for themselves their own future,' a

clear reference to African sovereignty and self-determination. It specifically opined in this regard that 'The right of all people of Africa to independence and self-governance shall be recognised, and shall be the basis of close cooperation'. The principles of self-determination and solidarity thus loomed large in ANC foreign policy from its very foundation years.

### **The International Anti-Apartheid Crusade**

It was in fact after the Freedom Charter that the ANC came to develop a real foreign policy in the form of an "international isolation" crusade, complementing its other strategic arenas: underground organisation, mass mobilisation and armed struggle. The ANC in fact became one of the world's most sophisticated liberation movements precisely because of this ambitious foreign policy strategy.

In his famous Nobel Peace Prize speech titled 'Africa and Freedom', in December 1961, Chief Albert Luthuli alluded to a philosophy of African renewal as he made clear that the ANC's goal was 'a united Africa in which the standards of life and liberty are constantly expanding'. Luthuli vowed that his movement would work towards helping to realize 'Africa's age'. He called for sanctions against the apartheid regime, and for harsh punishment of the racist government who committed the 'cruelty' at Sharpeville.

In the aftermath of the bannings of the ANC and other liberation movements, a new chapter would begin in earnest: deputy president at the time, and soon to become president, Oliver. R. Tambo would come to spearhead the movements new focus on building an international solidarity movement, consolidating the ANC's bases abroad, notably in Africa, and do so amidst trying circumstances. Part of the new international strategy was to expose Apartheid as the most extreme form of government-sanctioned racial segregation in the world, and former director of the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid, E.S. Reddy, stated, 'apartheid was the world's most blatant system of racism'.

The international isolation campaign helped to unite against apartheid the

UN, OAU, Commonwealth, non-aligned movement, progressive trade union, peace, youth and student movements and international civic movements in ways that few other issues could. Former Swedish Prime Minister and staunch ANC ally, Olaf Palme, once depicted the struggle against apartheid as a 'universal cause'; and Kadar Asmal similarly noted that 'opposition to racism and apartheid' established 'the only universal consensus the world has seen since the Second World War'.

In 1962, the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid was established. One of its objectives was to maintain detailed surveillance of, and to seek to curtail, South Africa's trade, economic, financial, business, military, diplomatic, sport and cultural ties with the outside world. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU), established in 1963, never even bothered to invite South Africa to join, instead choosing to support the liberation struggle of the ANC and the PAC.

The OAU campaigned for sanctions, international mobilisation and armed struggle against the 'the illegal government of the settler minority'. The ANC and other liberation movements were regarded as 'the sole and authentic representatives of the peoples of South Africa'. Campaigned for by the ANC and other liberation forces, the OAU established a Liberation Committee and a Special Fund for the Liberation of African Territories still under Colonial and Racist Rule.

The broad anti-apartheid movement forged close working relations with the South African liberation movements in exile, as well as the United Democratic Movement (UDF) and the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) inside the country. Anti-apartheid movements took the art of lobbying to new heights.

By the time of the obdurate P.W. Botha's enforced resignation from the presidency in August 1989, South Africa had been rendered one of the most isolated states in the world, with only 27 countries maintaining formal diplomatic relations.

### **Constitutional Guidelines of 1988 and the Harare Declaration**

The rising intensity of the struggle inside South Africa, led by the ANC,



Alfred Nzo, OR Tambo and Thabo Mbeki

and the enormous impact of the international solidarity movement gave impetus to the ANC formulating *The Constitutional Guidelines for a Democratic South Africa* of 1988 and the *Harare Declaration* of 1989, which both committed a future South Africa to being a unified and independent state that would pursue a non-aligned posture in foreign policy. Together these represented a vision of the future.

#### 1994 Foreign Policy Discussion Document

In March 1994, just one month before the April elections, the ANC released a comprehensive foreign policy document entitled 'Foreign Policy Perspectives in a Democratic South Africa'. It offered to promote a people-centred foreign policy that would mirror the ANC's 'long relationship with the international community' and 'reflect the rich tapestry of their international heritage'. Such an orientation emphasised a new harmony with neighbours and a creative contribution to the continent, beckoning the ANC 'to international service so that their country may fulfill its calling as a responsible global citizen' and summoning citizens to look to the future and challenges of the millennium. The identity was seen as strongly African as well as that of a good world citizen.

#### The Mandela Period

Contrary to the apartheid era, when white minority governments were banished to the sidelines of world affairs, the new post-apartheid Government

of National Unity was as committed to recomposing South Africa's foreign policy and international affairs as it was to reconstructing the post-apartheid state. But embarking on these projects was often frantic and bewildering as the new government struggled to find its feet and adapt to a perplexing and

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fast-changing post-Cold War global order. The new post-settlement government was committed to become a full and respected member of the family of nations. It was determined that its diplomacy should conform to the institutionalised and accepted practices derived from international law and diplomatic conventions. The Mandela government realised that its respectability abroad would come from credibility at home and as such worked on strengthening and consolidating its young democracy.

But as the Republic tried to find its new role, so it experimented with different conceptions. It tried to pursue

an ethical, moralistic foreign policy while also pursuing its economic self-interests. The government tried to be both non-aligned and close to the West; and promised to put Africa first while also placing the global South at the top of its foreign policy agenda. In the end, the Mandela administration learned that it was no easy task to practice diplomacy along the lines of a set of seemingly contradictory doctrines as the government struggled to promote human rights on the African continent. On the one hand it wished to encourage the democratisation of, and human rights in, countries like Nigeria; yet on the other hand it needed these countries as strategic partners to help it to realise its goals of peace promotion in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. It stressed ethical foreign policy goals while pursuing the imperatives of building African unity and solidarity.

Government had learned some gruelling lessons as it tried to navigate change and reconfigure its global role. It was thus not surprising when Alfred Nzo, then Foreign Minister, called for a codified foreign policy doctrine. The question arose as to the lessons the incoming Mbeki government could learn from the experiences of the Mandela administration and what changes it would bring about to arrive at a more anchored diplomacy.

#### The Mbeki Period

While there was a great deal of continuity between the domestic and foreign policies of the Mandela and Mbeki governments, there is little doubt that Mbeki introduced significant modifications to both national and international strategies. Development goals, and the idea of a developmental state enjoyed salience as Mbeki characterised the Republic in class-racial material terms when he depicted it as a country of two nations and two economies that was the legacy of a long and sustained period of apartheid and white minority domination.

In order to overcome the deep divisions, Mbeki introduced modifications to the nature of the state and gave greater prominence to the ideas of transformation and developmentalism. By the start of

his second term as head of state in 2004, the government promoted the strategy of South Africa becoming a developmental state, a fast-growing, industrialising nation that prioritised education and health on the basis of a meritocratic civil service.

The years from 1999 to 2008 saw Thabo Mbeki elevate Africa to the top of his foreign policy agenda and assume the role of foremost champion of the continent's political and socio-economic development agenda. Mbeki's government did this by negotiating common rules, principles and values, crafting common institutions, and hoping that African states would live by this new normative framework on the basis of *pacta sunt servanda* (the keeping of agreements). Mbeki's African Agenda supported the mantra that there can be no peace without development and no development without peace, and helped to ensure that it became accepted by the AU. Functionalism and institutionalism were clear policy thrusts running through the African Agenda, and policy emphasised the building of strong continental and regional institutions as South Africa set out to play the role of institution builder and policy initiator.

Mbeki was the chief champion of a modernising development model for the continent in the form of NEPAD, and played a leading role in negotiating a strategic partnership between Africa and the industrialised states on the basis of mutual accountability and responsibility. South Africa set out to be the continent's foremost partnership builder, whilst remaining sensitive about a perception that it was, or might seek to become, a domineering, hegemonic power in Africa. As a pivotal state in Africa, the Mbeki government chose to be a non-hegemonic partner to achieve its political and development goals.

Southern solidarity loomed large as a priority and it was Mbeki who emphasised South-South co-operation, which gave rise to the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Tri-lateral forum and the New Asia-Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP). The Mbeki administration also promoted the idea of a North-South dialogue, in which African and other developing states

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sought to extract commitments from the industrialised powers for decades of colonial domination and exploitation. Mbeki and his administration also introduced the idea of global governance transformation, and stressed the idea of the reform of the UN Security Council, the IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organisation, and other global governance institutions.

#### The Zuma Government

The political upheavals at the ANC National Conference in Polokwane, December 2007, did not result in much change with respect to the domestic and foreign policy orientations of the ANC as well as the Zuma government. However the Zuma government set out to champion a national interest-oriented foreign policy to benefit people and country. On the other hand, in typical Mandela-like fashion, part of the national interest paradigm would be to promote values such as non-racialism and non-sexism, the supremacy of the Constitution, and respect for human dignity and human rights.

What is interesting about the national interest paradigm articulated by the Zuma government is that it is broad, wide-ranging and highly eclectic. The national interest came to be defined so broadly that it ran the risk of becoming an all-encompassing concept trying to grapple with a variety of foreign policy dimensions. While government declared that its foreign policy would be driven by the national interest, almost two years into its term it has not yet articulated a comprehensive

national interest paradigm. Instead, a set of national aims was announced including economic growth, job creation, rural development and improving the health and education profiles of the Republic. These strategic aims were no substitute for a coherent national interest doctrine.

While government is doubtless determined to ensure foreign policy responds in concrete ways to the domestic imperative of creating economic growth and decent jobs, improving social and human development and fighting crime and corruption, there is little evidence in practice that broader international relations are linked up with these priorities.

In reality the government continues with grand positions regarding African advancement; strengthening South-South co-operation; improving strategic relations with the North; actively participating in global governance; and strengthening bilateral relations while pursuing economic diplomacy. The Zuma government, like its predecessors, is battling with the challenge of reconciling moralistic approaches to foreign policy with utilitarian, economic self-interest considerations. Moralistic pronouncements about human rights clashed with statements about being open for business as the country sought to realise economic interests in pursuit of the abovementioned goals.

Following NATO's (and, by extension, the UN Security Council's) brutal war against Libya in 2011, questions are being asked about the very future of what came to be labelled the African Agenda and the autonomy and self-determination of Africans in world affairs. Doubts are being raised about whether pivotal African states like South Africa and Nigeria will restore their leadership roles and help to reclaim African international agency. The ANC would do well, both as movement and governing party, to look back at its 100 year existence and again reinforce the sacred ideas of solidarity, self-determination and internationalism. This will require that it locates itself squarely within Africa, and as quintessentially African, not just another player in a continental chess game. ■