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By Chris Landsberg

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Relations between South Africa and Nigeria have long resembled a rollercoaster without a safety bar. While Africa's first- and third-largest economies, respectively, have for long stretches shared a close relationship, it is one marked by volatility and tension. And during the past three years, this critical bilateral relationship has begun to wobble dangerously, finding itself today in need of urgent détente.

Nigeria has long seen itself as a leader in Africa, having played a championing role in the anti-apartheid struggle, while South Africa sees itself [an exemplar of both democracy](#) and the conduct of international relations. After a history of tensions due to the apartheid regime in South Africa and the dictatorship in Nigeria, bilateral ties reached a zenith between 1999 and 2008, when the governments of Thabo Mbeki in South Africa and Olesugun Obasanjo in Nigeria articulated grand continental ambitions, including the twin goals of stabilizing and democratizing Africa. Both governments came to the realization that the continent's marginalization and underdevelopment could only be reversed if countries like Nigeria and South Africa acted together in a kind of "Concert of Africa," a latter-day version of the 19th-century European hegemonic alliance system.

During this period, Nigeria and South Africa were pivotal in engaging the outside world, especially the G-8, in search of a strategic partnership between the continent and the industrialized states. They openly attempted to play a bridging role between Africa and the Global North, with the two countries' leaders considering this vital for the success of the newly re-formed African Union and its New Partnership for African Development. Increasingly, Nigeria and South Africa saw themselves as "problem solvers" in world affairs, particularly with regard to advancing African development, peace and security.

From 2005 onward, however, the relationship weakened due to tensions over how to respond to Zimbabwe in 2003-2004 and the contest for permanent African seats on the U.N. Security Council. After Mbeki and Obsanjo left office, the relationship between the two African giants went from bad to worse, and during the 2009-2012 period Abuja felt abandoned by Pretoria. By 2010, the tensions had become so serious that the two states cancelled celebrations of the South Africa-Nigeria Binational Commission, signalling that the two Africans pivots had become rivals.

The tensions in the relationship came to a head during the 2011 NATO war against Libya. Both countries, in their capacity as nonpermanent members of the U.N. Security Council, voted in favor of resolutions 1970 and 1973, which instituted punitive sanctions, an arms embargo and a no-fly zone over Libya. However, they were soon at loggerheads when South Africa accused NATO of abusing the U.N. mandate for regime-change purposes, refused to recognize the National Transition Council (NTC) as the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people and dragged its feet over unfreezing assets for the NTC. While Nigeria also criticized the NATO intervention following the UNSC votes, it soon aligned itself with the P-3 position, recognizing the NTC and going along with the decision to unfreeze assets. Nigeria also encouraged other African states to follow its example instead of the South African position.

Beyond Libya, the two governments differed vehemently over how Cote d'Ivoire's electoral crisis

needed to be resolved, with Nigeria opposing French and U.N. military intervention. Nigeria has also not taken kindly to South Africa being [the only African member in the BRICS formation](#) and the G-20, with the de facto status of African spokesperson that both confer. Along with other African states, Nigeria has felt that South Africa is not well-placed to represent the interests of the continent and that Pretoria's interests should not be conflated with those of the continent at large.

By the beginning of 2012, tensions once more boiled over when Nigerian Foreign Minister Olugbenga Ashiru openly accused South Africa of being xenophobic toward Nigerians after 125 Nigerians were deported home from South Africa. Ashiru angrily asserted that this move fueled "the irritation between our two countries," prompting Pretoria to issue an unprecedented apology.

Apart from their geopolitical disagreements, the countries' presidents are both embroiled in domestic fights for political survival, with South Africa's Jacob Zuma in an internecine battle with the African National Congress Youth League, and Nigeria's Goodluck Jonathan under pressure to quell domestic unrest [sparked by his attempt to curb fuel subsidies](#), deadly conflict between Muslim and Christian groups [and Boko Haram terrorism](#). Against this backdrop, any idealistic hopes of facilitating and strengthening cooperation between the two countries in the areas of African peace, security and stability have taken a back seat. Worse still, the leadership struggles are playing out at a time when there is a desperate need for strategic leadership on the part of Africa's two anchor states.

South Africa and Nigeria need to restore their African Concert, for if they are strong Africa is strong, and conversely, if they are weak so is Africa. Since 2009, the relationship has deteriorated to the point that the two states are hardly on speaking terms. The two could begin by resorting to old-fashioned diplomacy to increase contacts and consultations over both bilateral and multilateral relations. It is imperative that these pivotal African states restore their entente cordiale and take the lead in restoring efficiency and effectiveness in the African Union and other continental organizations. □

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Photo: ANC leader Jacob Zuma (South African government photo).