

South Africa and the BRICS: An Ingrained Ambiguity

Written by Siphamandla Zondi

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SIPHAMANDLA ZONDI, JUN 12 2012

“There is a dynamic that Western investors must wake up to,” said the Secretary General of the governing African National Congress (ANC) recently; “If they are still sulking regularly, there is a growing ‘look East’ tendency that is emerging throughout the continent, the developing world.” This and many similar statements by the political elite in the recent past suggest that South Africa’s international aspirations lie in a shift to the east and therefore away from the west. But this is not the case. Instead, this look east idea is just one of many ingrained ambiguities that underpin the country’s foreign policy in general.

The yearning for greater autonomy and independence is a major consideration in South Africa’s relations with the world. I suspect this is true of many countries shortly after independence. In South Africa’s case the last phase of colonialism is represented by the white minority rule that ended in 1994. This, in my view, explains South African government’s desperation to join the BRICS and its hope that the BRICS will evolve beyond being a mere platform for the high politics of global reform by adding functional cooperation in various areas of development.

Arguably, the concept of reform, especially the reform of the international environment, is the biggest obsession of South Africa’s foreign policy. It undergirds the country’s strong belief in the renaissance of Africa, as this is seen as an important part of defending the independence and agency of Africa in helping to move from the periphery to the centre of international affairs. It is the reason why South Africa places a strong emphasis on building and reinforcing south-south cooperation, for it believes that with a united Africa and strong global south it will achieve the dream of a new world order.

The unstated aim of the discourse of north-south relations in South African foreign circles is not only about beneficial economic relations, but also the neorealist idea of external balancing by joining alliances that are seen as alternative to dominant centres of global power – the west in this case- and the hope to subvert the power system from within by building relations with states associated with such a system as well as by participating actively in the key structures of global governance. It is an ambiguity that is ingrained in South Africa’s identity, a cosmopolitan society and one that in its composition straddles the north-south divide. In the words of former president Mbeki, South Africa is a country of two nations and two economies, one is western not just in its cultural roots and outlook, but also in being industrialised; and the other is typical of the rest of Africa in being poor and marginal as well as an economy that is informal.

This double identity was enshrined in the political compromise that created the new South Africa in 1994. It is an ingrained ambiguity of the country’s national project, the reconciliation of two nations into one. This also finds expression in the governing party’s multiple identities and colours public policy whose making it dominates. Thus, right at the centre of the country’s foreign policy the idea of north-south dialogue co-exists with the push for counter-hegemony from the global south (including Africa) as if these ideas could be aligned without contradictions.

This also finds expression in the Kantian faith in the international system, a system in which Africa and the south are on the periphery. This co-exists with disenchantment about the system and the wish to see a new world order. It underlies the anguish of South Africa at being recently left out of the high tables of the G8 outreach in the US recently – especially that this is being done by one of our own, a Kenyan American in the US president, Barack Obama. This ambiguity underpins a spirited call for revitalisation of the Non-Aligned Movement in that very same week. It helps to

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explain the country's lofty hopes for its role in the G20, a body it sees as weakening the role of the UN, and its aspirations for a UN Security Council seat, a council it believes is fundamentally undemocratic at the same time.

This ambiguity will ensure that South Africa's membership in the BRICS will remain a major priority for it enables the country to be on various and sometimes opposing platform at the same time. Although, the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) forum is a much more useful platform for synergy of economic, developmental and political interests amongst leading south nations than the internally incoherent BRICS, the latter is seen as better poised to exercise counter-hegemony successfully. Therefore, South Africa's dilemma is how to balance the need for developmental cooperation that IBSA offers and a push for reform of the global order through BRICS.

To do this successfully, South Africa needs a clear global strategy on how it will navigate the contradictions inherent in this ambition. Such a strategy should also indicate how the fundamental balance between principle and expediency as well as between values and interests would be pursued and achieved in the process. None of this can be done without a serious conversation about the country's international aspirations through a purposeful cacophony of voices including academia, the broader civil society and government.

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