

SAIIA/ DIRCO Joint Seminar
South Africa's Diplomacy in a Turbulent Geopolitical Era

1. Introduction

- 1.1. South Africa, like the rest of the world, faces a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape marked by intensifying global competition, shifting global alliances, contested norms, economic uncertainty, and growing geopolitical tensions. In this dynamic environment, we must ask ourselves: How do we position our country to navigate these challenges effectively, protect our national interests, and continue to influence the international order in a way that benefits our people?
- 1.2. For many, the uncertainty of the present moment is unsettling. The retreat and erosion of multilateralism, the resurgence of unilateralism, the conflicts that rage across continents, and the political and economic fractures that divide the world have created an atmosphere of instability and unpredictability.
- 1.3. This symposium presents a valuable opportunity for us to reflect on the evolving foreign policy of South Africa, explore our multilateral engagements, and examine the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. I will highlight several areas that require immediate attention to bolster South Africa's standing on the global stage. This includes strengthening our diplomatic strategy to balance our international alliances effectively. However, to navigate the highly dynamic and unpredictable geopolitical landscape, let's first delve into the critical aspects that influence our international relations before discussing how to manage these complexities better.

2. The prevailing geopolitical landscape

I will only focus on four prominent issues that we need to consider. These are: growing right-wing nationalism and narrow ethnoculturalism, the increasing prominence of technology, the ongoing international and regional conflicts, and devastating consequences associated with environment degradation.

2.1. Growing right-wing nationalism and narrow ethnoculturalism

2.1.1. The contemporary geopolitical climate is characterised by a complex interplay of factors, prominently featuring the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and narrow ethnoculturalism in various regions. This movement, fuelled by economic uncertainty and cultural anxieties, has led to a growing prioritisation of national sovereignty and cultural identity. Countries are increasingly adopting policies that favour domestic interests over international collaboration, leading to a decline in multilateralism and a cautious approach to global alliances.

2.1.2. The recent surge in right-wing movements across various regions has intensified the discourse surrounding identity politics, revealing an urgent need for governance that prioritises inclusivity and representation. This shift has sparked increased polarisation within societies as marginalised groups strive for recognition and equality amid rising populism.

2.1.3. The consequence of these ongoing developments could manifest as a prolongation or even a deepening of protectionist policies, potentially leading to heightened trade disputes or tariff wars. This trajectory may catalyse a swift departure from multilateral agreements, instead favouring a landscape dominated by bilateral trade deals prioritising national interests. Such a shift could significantly weaken international cooperation on critical global challenges, including climate change, arms control, and public health initiatives. The erosion of collaborative frameworks may hinder collective efforts to address pressing issues as countries focus on narrow, self-serving agendas rather than engaging in cooperative strategies vital for global stability and progress.

2.1.4. In South Africa, marked by our tumultuous history of apartheid and rich cultural diversity, the trend of narrow nationalism significantly influences political discourse. This phenomenon presents a formidable challenge to governance and societal cohesion. The rise of narrow nationalism often exacerbates divisions among various ethnic and cultural groups, fuelling harmful stereotypes and biases that can deepen societal fractures. Such division threatens to erode

our country's longstanding commitment to reconciliation and unity, principles that were foundational in the aftermath of apartheid.

2.1.5. The impact of narrow nationalism extends beyond domestic issues, adversely affecting South Africa's international image and relationships with countries prioritising inclusivity and social harmony. As we navigate these challenges, it is crucial to tackle the underlying tensions that narrow nationalism generates, all while pushing for ideals of justice and equality for every citizen. This call for inclusivity is particularly relevant in the context of technological developments.

2.2. Technological developments: A double-edged sword

2.2.1. Our foreign policy must consider the complex interplay of technology as a double-edged sword. Historically, right-leaning movements have utilised state institutions, military force, and religious conservatism to consolidate their power. In our digital age, these movements have found a formidable ally in technology, which has significantly extended their reach beyond conventional boundaries. This alliance with a select group of tech oligarchs has intensified hyper-globalisation, benefiting a privileged elite.

2.2.2. As digital monopolies increase their prominence, they tend to influence economic policies that primarily benefit a limited segment of society, which may sometimes be at odds with the needs of the broader community. The emphasis on profit over people can contribute to economic disparity, resulting in significant job losses and a diminishing influence of unions. It can also exacerbate food insecurity, which is tied to the dominance of export-driven agriculture, where land is used to grow crops for international markets rather than for local consumption.

2.2.3. In the context of South Africa, technology presents both opportunities and significant hurdles. On one hand, rapid advancements can drive economic growth, boost productivity, and create new job opportunities. On the other hand, the stark digital divide – particularly in rural areas lacking access to high-speed internet and essential digital skills – poses a considerable threat to

equitable progress. As industries evolve and the economy becomes increasingly digitised, these disparities may worsen, deepening existing inequalities.

2.2.4. Moreover, the impact of technological growth on the labour market cannot be overlooked. Automation and artificial intelligence threaten to displace traditional jobs, especially in vital sectors like mining and agriculture, which are cornerstones of the South African economy. To mitigate these challenges, there needs to be a concerted effort from both government and the private sector to invest in education and training programmes. This collaborative approach is essential to prepare the workforce for the evolving job landscape, fostering adaptability and a diverse skill set.

2.2.5. International relations has to consider addressing the dual challenges of narrow nationalism and technological disruption as it is crucial for fostering a more equitable society. By ensuring that technological advancements benefit all members of society, rather than just a privileged few, we can work towards a future that prioritises inclusivity and sustainable economic growth. This focus on equity is particularly relevant in the context of regional conflicts and transnational challenges, where nations must navigate complex societal dynamics.

2.3 Security and the Nexus with Development

2.3.1. Peace and development in Africa remain intertwined. Conflicts in the Sahel, Libya, Sudan, and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo underscore the interconnectedness of security and governance. The principle that “there are no military solutions to complex political and economic crises” resonates throughout the region. Regional mechanisms, including the AU’s vision to “Silence the Guns,” highlight conflict prevention and mediation. Multiple states—Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali—face ongoing turmoil associated with extremist groups, tenuous governance structures, and international involvement.

2.3.2. Governance in places like South Sudan and a resolution in Western Sahara, where self-determination remains unfulfilled, reflect key items on Africa's security agenda. Effective mediation, adequate funding, and robust coordination with RECs are fundamental to resolving these ongoing conflicts. Yet external influences can either catalyze or complicate these objectives, depending on the actors involved. South Africa's commitment to regional stability is evident in its peacekeeping operations. Our involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) through SADC-led initiatives exemplifies this dedication.

2.3.3. Despite receiving a R5 billion budget boost for peacekeeping missions in the DRC, challenges persist. The deaths of fourteen soldiers earlier this year highlight the risks involved in these operations. To enhance our contribution to the region, we must modernise our defence capabilities while ensuring that peacekeeping missions are adequately supported.

2.3.4. Beyond the DRC, conflicts in countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, and in the Sahel region demand urgent and comprehensive attention. These crises threaten their respective countries' stability and pose significant risks to regional security. A coordinated response, leveraging the African Union (AU) mechanisms in partnership with international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and various non-governmental entities, is crucial for effective resolution. Such collaborative initiatives can help address the root causes of these conflicts, including ethnic tensions, resource distribution disputes, and governance failures.

2.3.5. We are also affected by global conflicts that are continuously reshaping the geopolitical landscape. The ongoing war in Ukraine remains a central point of international tensions, bringing with it far-reaching economic repercussions that extend well beyond Europe, affecting global energy prices and supply chains. While South Africa's non-aligned stance, emphasising dialogue over confrontation, drew much criticism from Western allies who expected stronger condemnation of Russia's actions, it is now proving to have been correct. The re-election of Donald Trump into the presidency of the

United States has resulted in shifting US foreign policy priorities. Just three months ago the US regarded Russia as a foe, and today it is an ally.

2.3.6. Furthermore, the escalating conflict and enlargement of the genocide by the Israeli state against the Palestine people in Gaza, continues to threaten not only local stability but also broader regional peace prospects, influencing international diplomatic relations. South Africa's decision to take Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for genocide was not made in haste. It was made in the full understanding that the pursuit of justice is never easy, that truth comes at a cost, and that challenging the status quo will always invite resistance from those who benefit from it. Our case at the ICJ against Israel is not an attack on any nation—it is a defence of human rights, the rule of law, and international accountability.

2.3.7. Additionally, the recent political shifts in Syria, marked by shifting alliances and power dynamics, introduce new uncertainties that complicate peace efforts in the region. South Africa, particularly, is affected by our pro-humanitarian stance. While many countries have supported our case at the International Court of Justice, highlighting the plight of the people in Gaza, we are also facing severe pressures to withdraw. This demonstrates the delicate balance between asserting the right to foreign policy sovereignty in an environment where others disregard territorial integrity and international law.

2.3.8. I would be negligent not to highlight the increasingly critical role that transnational conflicts play in shaping global affairs. This reflects the intricate interplay between security and diplomacy in a world that is more interconnected than ever before. Conflicts often transcend national borders, creating a pressing need for collaborative diplomatic efforts among nations to address emerging security challenges effectively. The relationship between security concerns and diplomatic strategies underscores the necessity for countries to navigate the complex geopolitical terrain thoughtfully. Consequently, a nuanced understanding of transnational conflicts is essential for

formulating effective security policies and diplomatic initiatives to foster lasting peace in a multifaceted global environment.

3. A strategic approach to multilateral engagement

Having outlined several key characteristics of our current geopolitical landscape, I want to shift focus to our strategic approach for navigating these complex dynamics. South Africa is committed to guiding principles that shape our foreign policy and define our role on the global stage.

3.3. Principled foreign policy

3.3.1. The democratic South Africa follows a principled international relations policy grounded in non-alignment, adherence to international law, multilateralism, diplomacy, peaceful dialogue, and a commitment to progressive Africanism and internationalism. These principles reflect our historical context and our vision for a more equitable world. By prioritising these values, we engage actively in international organisations such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Plus Initiative, the UN, the AU, and the G20. Our involvement in these multilateral platforms underscores our commitment to cooperative governance and collective action in addressing pressing global issues.

3.3.2. Our approach is characterised by a balanced interplay of diplomacy and proactive engagement. We strive to sustain robust bilateral relations with our strategic partners while harnessing the power of international summits and regional collaborations. Through these platforms, we advocate for our national interests while fostering cooperative solutions to shared challenges. This balance is crucial as we engage with diverse countries and address multifaceted global issues, including climate change, security threats, and economic disparities.

3.4. Leveraging Membership in BRICS+

3.4.1. Our membership in BRICS+ has granted South Africa significant advantages, including access to funding through institutions like the New Development Bank. This financial support facilitates collaboration on research, innovation, energy, health, and education,

which are key areas for our national development. BRICS also amplifies our voice in advocating for a reformed global governance system that respects the sovereignty of nations and promotes equality among them. As a member of this group, we also have the opportunity to engage with emerging economies and address the evolving dynamics of global power.

3.4.2. While BRICS is a significant part of South Africa's global strategy, we recognise the importance of a pragmatic foreign policy. In a world characterised by fragmentation and unpredictability, avoiding becoming overly dependent on any bloc is essential. Hence, we continue to diversify our partnerships across various platforms and engage with a multitude of actors to safeguard our national interests effectively.

3.5. The G20 Presidency: A platform for innovation

3.5.1. South Africa's holding of the G20 Presidency presents a pivotal opportunity to reshape global cooperation amid escalating geopolitical tensions. With the theme 'Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability' and a focus on Africa's development, we are uniquely positioned to bridge divisions, advocate for the Global South, and drive actionable solutions to interconnected crises.

3.5.2. By prioritising the needs of developing nations, we aim to maximise this platform to strengthen international cooperation in a time of global fragmentation. The 2025 Summit will occur amid a disintegrating international order, highlighting our role as a neutral facilitator in a world where emerging blocs vie for influence. South Africa's historical commitment to non-alignment enables us to contribute actively to addressing polarised geopolitics. We will emphasise dialogue between blocs, highlighting shared goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while enhancing multilateral cooperation frameworks and pushing for meaningful reforms in the global financial architecture.

3.5.3. With rising protectionist tendencies worldwide, our G20 Presidency will also be leveraged to advocate for trade reforms that protect the interests of developing economies. In an era where global trade

dynamics are shifting, promoting inclusive development strategies that benefit all is vital. We must utilise the G20's consensus-driven model to revive institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which has faced significant challenges in recent years.

3.6. Addressing climate change

3.6.1. Another pressing issue on our agenda is climate change, which poses an existential threat to South Africa and the broader global community. We are taking bold steps to address environmental challenges, with the just energy transition at the heart of our climate response strategy. While coal remains a significant part of our energy mix, we are ramping up investments in renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and hydrogen. Transitioning to a low-carbon economy is not merely an environmental imperative; it offers significant economic opportunities in green industries, stimulating job creation and fostering innovation.

3.7. Strengthening diplomatic ties with the European union

3.7.1. Proactive engagement with the European Union (EU) fosters a more resilient economic framework for South Africa amid shifting global dynamics. By strengthening these ties, we aim to create an environment conducive to sustainable development that benefits our citizens and enhances our role as part of the regional leadership. A recent high-level delegation visit from the EU underscores South Africa's growing diplomatic clout and the deepening of our international partnerships.

3.7.2. The EU's endorsement of South Africa's G20 Presidency bolsters our global status, affirming our position as an influential player in multilateral discussions and decision-making processes. This endorsement significantly enhances our legitimacy in international forums and reinforces our capacity to advocate for the interests of the Global South.

3.8. Accelerating Africa's development

3.8.1. As the Global South's influence continues to rise, South Africa's leadership in multilateral institutions becomes increasingly crucial to ensure that Africa's interests are adequately represented. We will

advocate for reforms to the United Nations Security Council that align with current geopolitical realities and support the Global Security Initiative to diversify peacekeeping paradigms. Within the African Union (AU), we will advocate for enhanced collective security mechanisms to address prevailing instability. As an influential player within the AU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), we aim to bolster our peacekeeping capabilities, enhance regional defence collaboration, and prioritise diplomatic strategies to resolve enduring conflicts.

3.8.2. A comprehensive security approach must transcend mere military interventions and tackle the underlying factors contributing to instability, including poverty, governance deficiencies, and transnational crime syndicates.

3.8.3. The current geopolitical volatility poses tangible economic threats, rendering South Africa's economy susceptible to external shocks, such as global financial upheavals, trade disruptions, and commodity price volatility. To counter these vulnerabilities, we will implement economic policies to build resilience. This includes diversifying our trade partnerships and prioritising strengthening intra-African trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

3.8.4. In leveraging our presence in the G20, South Africa is committed to amplifying the African Union's Agenda 2063 and addressing structural impediments to economic growth. Our initiatives will concentrate on mobilising investment for critical infrastructure projects and promoting industrialisation, with an emphasis on developing diverse manufacturing hubs across Africa to lessen dependency on commodity exports. Moreover, we will champion debt relief measures and advocate for equitable access to climate financing for African states while reinforcing collaborations with regional financial institutions, such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the New Development Bank (NDB).

4. **Conclusion**

4.3. The road ahead is undeniably intricate, characterised by unprecedented and erratic decision-making that challenges

established norms and rational principles at a global level. South Africans have consistently demonstrated that we are a people defined by resilience, visionary thinking, and innovation. The current challenges require that you place your confidence in our diplomatic vision and the competencies we possess to navigate these complex circumstances effectively.

- 4.4. With your unwavering support, we are confident that we can successfully traverse this complex landscape. However, to achieve our goals, it is imperative that we all act with a clear sense of purpose, steadfast determination, and unwavering unity. Together, we can confront the challenges in the geopolitical landscape head-on and pave the way for a brighter and more stable future.
- 4.5. Despite the rise in multipolarity attempts at unilateralism persist, undermining the multilateral system. We see international law and the role of the United Nations frequently questioned, weaponised and / or in some instances circumvented, by powerful states. This dynamic has led to a widespread erosion of trust in global governance bodies, a proliferation of tensions in places like Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, and an urgent need to reimagine how all states—large and small—can function cooperatively within a fair and stable global system. In this context, the countries of the Global South are pushing for a more multi-polar, multi-cultural and multi-civilizational world order away from the current unipolar disorder.
- 4.6. We meet today also at a time when the world is teetering between the remnants of an outdated order and the birth of a new one. The forces of power, wealth, and influence that have long dictated the terms of global governance are shifting, and South Africa—like many nations of the Global South—must navigate this transformation with strategic foresight, clarity, conviction, and courage.
- 4.7. On one hand, multipolarity provides a pathway to greater autonomy, reducing dependency on any single power and allowing for diversified partnerships and the diversification of risk. Our

growing engagement with BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and our newest members—has created new opportunities for economic cooperation, financial alternatives to Western-dominated institutions, and security collaborations that do not come with neocolonial conditionalities. The New Development Bank, established by BRICS, has already demonstrated that it can be an alternative to traditional global financial institutions, offering funding without the restrictive political demands of the Bretton Woods institutions.

- 4.8. But multipolarity is also not without risk. As power fragments, conflicts become more complex and more difficult to resolve. The war in Ukraine exemplifies this, where a failure of multilateral diplomacy, entrenched geopolitical interests, and the intensification of great-power competition have prolonged a conflict that has had devastating global consequences.