In March 2016 the Council on Foreign Relations’ (CFR) International Institutions and Global Governance program and the South Africa Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) held a workshop on South Africa’s role as an emerging power. The workshop was made possible by the support of the Robina Foundation. The views described here are those of workshop participants only and are not CFR, SAIIA, or Robina Foundation positions. The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. In addition, the suggested policy prescriptions are the views of individual participants and do not necessarily represent a consensus of the attending members.
INTRODUCTION

As an emerging economy, South Africa seeks to reshape the world order to better suit its needs and vision. However, prospects for effective multilateral cooperation on global and transnational problems inevitably reflect the distinct national interests and goals of the most influential powers. At the same time, changes in the world’s leading states create both challenges and opportunities for global governance. South Africa’s rise over the past fifteen years has given it a greater voice in questions of global governance, but the country’s current and future ability to alter the existing world order depends on domestic constraints and the actions of other countries, including the United States.

To better understand South Africa’s contributions to regional and world order and its vision for the future of global governance, the Council on Foreign Relations and the South African Institute of International Affairs cohosted a workshop in Cape Town on March 1, 2016. The workshop brought together prominent scholars, business leaders, civil society representatives, and former government officials.

WORKSHOP TAKEAWAYS

- South Africa is still invested in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group and sees it as a powerful mechanism to advance its national interests.
- South Africa’s search for alternatives to the current world order stems from a desire for more equitable global institutions and for a counterweight to the world’s most powerful countries.
- South Africa’s primary focus is on its domestic challenges, which impedes its ability to articulate a cohesive foreign policy.
- Policy uncertainty, including the constantly changing regulatory environment, creates serious obstacles for the private sector in South Africa.
- Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has become a stabilizing, if sometimes reluctant, leader on the continent. It will continue to be a major presence in regional peacekeeping.

SEEKING ALTERNATIVES TO THE CURRENT WORLD ORDER

Shifts in the global balance of power are straining the existing multilateral system and driving efforts to reform it. South Africa’s active presence in multilateral bodies and forums can be a powerful tool for South African diplomacy, but several participants commented that the country’s role should be better managed. One gauge of South Africa’s influence is that other African countries have asked South Africa to use its Group of Twenty membership and relationship with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to assist them with debt relief. Some workshop participants proposed that joint U.S.-South African efforts to strengthen the global architecture could fortify the bilateral relationship and overcome existing stalemates in global governance. Among workshop participants, there was little consensus about where South Africa will fall in the changing world order. Consider the BRICS: whereas the dominant narrative suggests that the BRICS are rising while the West is in decline, current trajectories could point to a
different conclusion. The BRICS’ economies all face serious challenges while the U.S. economy is growing, and Western Europe is getting richer despite the current refugee crisis. Climate change will likely be more devastating for the global south than for the global north, and the BRICS’ different systems of government suggest the grouping may be less cohesive than it appears.

**SOUTH AFRICA AND THE BRICS**

Several participants characterized the BRICS as an effort by emerging countries to have a greater say in global institutions, rather than as an effort to replace the liberal world order.

Participants emphasized that South Africa wants to work with the United States and European Union, as well as with the other BRICS countries. South Africa’s goal is to link these groupings and improve global governance without sacrificing partnerships with either. Some participants cautioned that South Africa should be wary of placing all its eggs in the BRICS basket at the expense of its African alliances, noting that other BRICS members may be less invested in the grouping.

However, South Africa still sees the BRICS as a powerful tool to advance its national interests. The creation of the BRICS’ New Development Bank has provided the first concrete expression of how the bloc can change the global system. Some participants predicted that the bank would create a new center of gravity in international development, providing welcome competition to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This is particularly attractive for African countries that have been long suspicious of the Washington consensus and frustrated by the limited financing these institutions provide for infrastructure, and the creation of the BRICS bank prompted the World Bank and the African Development Bank to reprioritize infrastructure.

Although reports of the “death of the West” have been greatly exaggerated, the current system is showing visible cracks. The emergence of the BRICS reveals frustration with that system, even if these countries cannot offer an alternative one at this stage.

Many workshop participants emphasized the need for United Nations (UN) Security Council reform in order to address today’s transnational challenges, suggesting that the Security Council is becoming increasingly irrelevant and, if not reformed, will eventually be discarded or at least bypassed. However, the current environment for creating new institutions is dramatically different than in 1945, and several participants stressed that efforts to reform the international system should focus on what is feasible as well as desirable. One participant suggested that cooperation between the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) and individual countries, in the style of the P5+1 grouping (which included Germany for negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal), could be more productive than efforts to reform the Security Council’s permanent membership.

Although South Africa seeks to move beyond the current balance of power in international institutions to better reflect the true balance of global power, one participant suggested that when the government has claimed to rectify injustices in the current world order by challenging the United States, the actions it has taken have made little difference in this area. For example, South Africa has
protected Russia and China in multilateral fora, and a South African politician recently made baseless accusations against the U.S. that it sought regime change in Pretoria. With these actions, South Africa risks distancing itself from the United States and the wider West instead of bridging the divide between emerging and established powers. Although South Africa does not want to choose between cooperation with the United States and China, it often tries to play them off each other and ignores opportunities for Washington and Beijing to cooperate in Africa.

Participants broadly agreed that the U.S.-South Africa relationship could be far better than it is today. Both countries benefit from the current world order. Unfortunately, U.S. foreign policy toward South Africa is often inconsistent, and Africa is not a priority for the United States. Likewise, South Africa has at times allowed ideological differences to interfere with the relationship.

VALUES DRIVING SOUTH AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY

South Africa’s search for alternatives to the current world order is based on a desire for more equitable global institutions and for a counterweight to the world’s most powerful countries. A perceived history of marginalization also infuses South Africa’s foreign policy, and South African multilateralism seeks to bring developing world voices to the global high table.

A commitment to human rights and civic nationalism also drives South African foreign policy, as does the vision of a prosperous, peaceful, nonracial, and united Africa. However, one participant suggested that South Africa’s involvement in conflict resolution on the continent has sometimes raised suspicions of ulterior motives, leading the government to adopt a hypercautious approach to avoid accusations of naked self-interest. Other participants questioned the realism of pursuing a solely altruistic foreign policy in Africa.

This question of altruism in South African foreign policy is fueled by sentiment that the country is held to a higher standard because of Nelson Mandela’s legacy. There is also a deeply rooted perception in South Africa that it has a special, even moral, role to play in the world, given its history of and emancipation from apartheid. However, participants debated whether this posture would—or should—hold true as the world changes. Some suggested that South Africa has already retreated from the values and norms it espoused at the time of transition, and that the South African model (to the extent that one exists) is under strain due to the country’s inability to live up to its own expectations: it is difficult to lecture others or serve as a model if one’s own system falls short. This tension has been particularly evident in South Africa’s efforts to mediate conflicts on the African continent.

Several participants agreed that South Africa has done a poor job communicating the interests, values, and reasons behind its foreign policy, leading to misinterpretations and misunderstandings in its foreign relations. Although one participant suggested that South Africa takes a case-by-case approach to pursuing its foreign policy values, another cautioned that this could be interpreted as
confirming that South Africa selectively takes principled positions. Others debated whether this was inevitable, given sometimes unavoidable tensions between interests and principles.

DOMESTIC CHALLENGES INHIBIT FOREIGN POLICY

Notwithstanding South Africa’s extensive multilateral involvement, the country’s severe domestic challenges consume most of the government’s attention and complicate its ability to articulate a cohesive foreign policy. As a relatively new democracy, South Africa is still learning how to strengthen its political institutions.

South Africa’s capacity to act as a middle power bridge in international affairs will depend on the strength of its domestic political institutions. However, as a relatively new democracy, the country is still learning how to strengthen its political institutions and move beyond racism. One participant commented that for many South Africans, the mindset of living in an authoritarian system persists today. Others emphasized the importance of civic education and a vibrant civil society to strengthen democracy going forward. Participants underscored the risks posed by the personalization of politics in South Africa and the need for robust institutions to counter this trend.

During discussions about democracy in South Africa, a number of participants characterized the governing African National Congress (ANC) as internally divided and facing a growing legitimacy crisis, despite its leading role in ending apartheid. One participant even argued that the ANC is the greatest threat to improving labor conditions in South Africa. Black economic advancement has not in fact been a tool of empowerment; it has instead helped only a few. Corruption has deeply weakened public services, and unemployment poses a major threat to social cohesion and stability. Still, the ANC retains majority support because people are reluctant to vote against the party that was so deeply involved in the nation’s liberation.

Reflecting on South Africa’s current economic challenges, one participant noted that the country’s commodities-led growth in the 2000s gave an impression that it had far more economic resources than it actually did. Absent further reform, South Africa will be unable to change its growth trajectory and deliver prosperity to its millions of poor. The country’s economic struggles have placed significant financial constraints on the execution of its foreign policy: the Department of International Relations and Cooperation has a budget of only ZAR 5.7 billion ($375 million), meaning that South Africa can only pursue the foreign policy of a regional, not global, power.

The South African economy benefits from both foreign direct investment and domestic investment, and the country has a strong economic presence on the continent. However, policy uncertainty, including constantly changing regulatory requirements, creates serious obstacles for the private sector (both domestic and multinational). Participants also stressed that bureaucratic and political alliances within South Africa have led to incoherent policymaking, particularly in the economic sphere. As a result of these factors, South Africa has lost substantial credibility in the international investment community, and it will take time to recover its reputation. Still, participants highlighted both the financial regulation system and the legal system as underutilized tools that could strengthen the country’s regulatory environment and economy.
AN UNCERTAIN LEADER ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has become a stabilizing, if sometimes reluctant leader on the continent. It has played a major role in promoting peace and security in Africa, including consolidating peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, participants questioned the future of South African leadership in this area, given that the country announced in late February 2016 that it will withdraw all troops from the UN/African Union (AU) mission in Darfur by April 2016. South Africa is also tiring of its leadership role in the eastern DRC.

Nonetheless, participants were sanguine that South Africa would continue to play a major role in continental peacekeeping. If the UN Security Council is ever reformed, South Africa’s role in peacekeeping will be an important factor in its bid for the “African seat” on the council, particularly because other African states also have strong peacekeeping missions. Going forward, South Africa will attempt to focus its involvement on a select number of missions.

Although some participants saw relative continuity from presidents Mandela to Thabo Mbeki to Jacob Zuma on regional peace and security issues, others argued that, unlike his predecessors, Zuma has not harnessed continental partnerships effectively. Under Mbeki’s leadership, the concept of an “African renaissance” gained wide support on the continent, and he pushed for the consolidation of the AU as the primary vehicle for peace and security. However, participants commented that although Mbeki successfully brought countries together at the continental level, his efforts to forge partnerships in Southern Africa were less fruitful. Zuma has taken the opposite approach, but his methods have been less strategic and more mercantilist. Under his leadership, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (possibly South Africa’s largest contribution to the AU) has withered and the AU has increasingly become, in the words of one participant, a “club of autocrats.” At the same time, South Africa’s active development of regional institutions has created both opportunities and constraints for the country: as the AU has evolved, it has placed limits on South Africa.

Still, pan-African solidarity remains an important dimension of South African foreign policy and, in the view of many participants, a foundation for its global role. To become a true continental leader, South Africa requires both capacity and legitimacy in Africa. By the same token, its political power on the global stage is deeply linked to the power projection of regional institutions such as the Southern African Development Community and the AU. Many participants saw potential for South Africa to play a greater role in resolving disputes on the African continent and to be a champion for Africa on the multilateral stage, but stressed that the country must work with external actors—including the United States and Europe—to address Africa’s security challenges.

CONCLUSION

Despite its deep involvement in a variety of multilateral bodies, South Africa sees itself as a challenger to the liberal world order rather than a leader within it, as demonstrated through its prioritization of the BRICS and its efforts to reform multilateral bodies. However, serious economic challenges and popular disillusionment threaten the vitality of South African national institutions. South Africa’s future will depend on its ability to address these domestic challenges.