

# Reconstructing South African Identity through Global Summitry

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This article will evaluate South Africa's pursuit of global summitry as an expression of its own evolving national identity. Since its inception, South Africa's multiculturalism has produced fragmentation and reconstitution of identity-based sovereignty. We argue that the contradictions which have featured in the historical processes of South African identity formation and reformation, whether from its position as a colonial bastion of white power or that of a beacon of African liberation, are both motivated by, and manifested through, its foreign policy activism in global summitry. This process lends meaning to contested domestic politics and helps shape regional and global affinities, affirming South Africa's legitimacy as a representative of the African continent. Engaging in global summitry provides South Africa an opportunity to present a coherent purpose to audiences at home and abroad on key issues that emerge out of the country's divided diversity.

## Introduction

In an assessment of the future status and position of post-apartheid South Africa in the global system, in 1993 Patrick McGowan opined that "South Africa will be fortunate to retain a place among the world's semi-peripheral powers over the next twenty years ... Rather more likely is relative descent ..." (McGowan 1993). Since then, observers and analysts have regularly warned against South Africa's "descent" and "overstretch," whether because of the country's continued struggle to address apartheid legacies or because of its often contentious positions on various international issues or because of its apparent quest for "trophy diplomacy," as in "hot air" (van der Westhuizen 2003). Yet, early in its third decade as a democracy, the country has retained and expanded its reputation as an emerging power, playing an active role in global summitry through its skillful usage of the notion of "African representivity."

This article will evaluate South Africa's pursuit of global summitry as an expression of its own evolving national identity. Since its inception in 1910, South Africa's multicultural societal composition has produced continual fragmentation and reconstitution of identity-based sovereignty, whether rooted in the politics of ethnicity or in transcendent ideologies of liberalism and solidarity. We argue that the contradictions which have featured in the historical processes of South African identity formation and reformation, whether from its position as a colonial bastion of white power or that of a beacon of African liberation, are both motivated by, and manifested through, its foreign policy activism in global summitry. This process lends meaning to contested domestic politics and helps shape regional and global affinities, affirming South Africa's legitimacy as a representative of the

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## Foreign Policy, Identity Formation, and the Meaning of Summitry

Foreign policy activism is a terrain which provides a voice to normative concerns and interests of a given regime in power in a state. The regime draws these concerns and interests from societal values, and instrumentally aligns them with these values in order to affirm a particular perspective on national identity. National identity is, as noted by Campbell and others, continually being remade through the foreign policy process in the form of a series of authoritative declarations and substantive actions (Campbell 1992). Understood in this way, it reinforces the notion "that foreign policy is about national identity itself: about the core elements of sovereignty it seeks to defend, the values it stands for and seeks to promote abroad" (Wallace 1991). For some scholars, the formulation of national interest, the "source code" of a state's foreign policy, is essentially a top-down driven process in which elite policies and interests are critical in redefining societal norms and identity, while others emphasize the reflexive character of the process (Katzenstein 1996; Weldes 1996). As Lynch declares:

(I)dentify does not directly produce a single, coherent set of interests. On the contrary, actors who share a collective identity compete to interpret and frame the interests of the collective ... (Lynch 1999).

In this respect, what constitutes national identity and its foreign policy expressions is a terrain of contestation between competing social groups laying claim to these meanings and authoritative state action in the international sphere.

For newly independent states in the developing regions of the world, the primary task of government is understood to be forging a nation out of the disparate elements perpetuated by colonial rule (Binder 1964; Coleman and Rosberg 1966). Constructing a coherent sense of national identity is not only considered important as a basis for successful foreign and domestic policy, it plays a much more fundamental role in these developing countries as a key tool for defining the ideational (who we are) and spatial (where we are in relation to others) boundaries of the state, and the accompanying imperatives to action (what should we do). Role theory in this sense provides an enumeration of the foreign policy tasks which emanate from the various ideational positions adopted by states, and serves to reaffirm those positions (Holski 1987). Differing roles—bridge builder, ideologue, etc.—can be held by a state and are reproduced through foreign policy action, although conflicting roles can induce dilemmas, if not outright crises, for foreign policy decision makers.

In contrast with the construction of national identity as a "bottom up assembly" or "shrinkage from regionally-based transnationalism," historically South African foreign policy has been entangled in reconciling internal divisions. Foreign policy in this respect becomes an on-going attempt to use the international system to support and legitimize the dominant power relations within the domestic environment (Walt 1987). In other words, the perpetual weaknesses of the prevailing political order across time in South Africa have required a conscious coupling of regime claims to legitimacy

through alignment with a particular power constellation at the regional and/or global level. As Weldes reminds us, “National interests are not formulated, or deduced from the structure of the international system, and then endowed with legitimacy; instead their legitimacy is conferred in the process of construction” (Weldes 1996).

The role of global summitry, seen from this perspective, presents an opportunity for successive South African governments to re-affirm the dominant domestic political order through their alignment with an external order. Being crucial to regime survival, the prospect of loss of that externally derived legitimacy signals conditions of potential crisis. The painful experience of isolation and acute defensiveness of the white minority to growing exclusion from the West during the apartheid years can be better appreciated on this basis. Its contemporary echo is the defensiveness in response to both Western and African criticism experienced by the African National Congress over the South African handling of issues like Zimbabwe over the years. In each case, the dilemmas have been framed by the contrary actions prescribed by differing role conceptions held by the South African regime in power.

Turning then to global summitry, a useful distinction for understanding the function of global summitry with respect to a state’s foreign policy is to conceptualize it in two dimensions. The first, “summitry as act,” emphasizes the role of foreign policy and its relationship to the decision to host global summits. These events are deliberately convened by states to communicate something particular about its identity and consequentially, the position of that state on the international stage. For instance, states use the convening of summits to demonstrate their new foreign policy alignment in global politics or to set agendas on global issues that they care about. The second, “summitry as performance,” is derived from the conduct of state representatives at global summits. Here, the focus is on particular positions adopted in the course of the actual summit, often emphasizing the role of states engaged in what we might call, for example, middle power behavior, as demonstrated through bridge-building between factions and participants at a global summit. Identity is inferred from the behavior of state representatives, their support for particular resolutions and alignment with blocs within the conference.

While both forms of summitry are utilized by states to broadcast normative features of their foreign policy, it is “summitry as act” which provides greater analytical insight into the aspirational dimensions informing foreign policy and as such is more closely associated with role conception. The decision to host a global summit is ultimately an expression of the state’s (or perhaps more accurately, the leader and his/her political base) desire to highlight their alignment with a community of states, their norms, and interests. For states where national identity is deeply contested, the significance of “summitry as act” is therefore especially important as a means of signaling alignment with external actors, thereby reinforcing regime legitimacy to a domestic audience.

Other societally diverse states use the foreign policy of global summitry in similar ways (Hill 2013). Under Malaysia’s Mahathir, for instance, Malaysia assumed an activist position on the regional and global stage that sought to reinforce selective features of domestic society. These features were promoting modernist Islam, expanding its influence in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and strengthening the capacity of the

global South in international affairs (Izzudin LSE 2015). In pursuit of these foreign policy initiatives, Mahathir expended vital resources on widening the country's participation in the Islamic Organization Conference (IOC), actively engaging in ASEAN summity, and launching the G15 Summit process and the South Commission. This three-pronged engagement provided an opportunity to give expression to the normative characteristics of an imagined Malaysian identity, one that cohered with Mahathir's vision of a modernist Islamic state leading in Southeast Asia and embedded in a renewed global South.

### **South Africa and Global Summity in the Era of Empire, Apartheid, and the Liberation Struggle**

As noted above, throughout its modern history, South African politicians have imbued the international sphere as an especially significant source of legitimacy for South Africa's leadership. This approach is drawn from the complexities of nation-building and state formation in the country and the perennial challenge facing successive governments whose power and authority were constantly being contested at home.

These contested national identities which emerged out of colonial expansion in the 19th century were realized through the formation of protectorates, colonies, independent tribal kingdoms, and breakaway *volkstaats*. These were all political manifestations of the struggle for supremacy and independence between the British settlers, Afrikaners, Zulu, Basotho, and other tribal groupings (as well as significant Tamil and Gujarati minorities) (Davenport and Saunders 2000). This patchwork of sovereign territories was amalgamated administratively in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer war through the Act of Union in 1910 but retained, under British overarching suzerainty, varying degrees of self-government or indirect rule (in some cases like the Crown Colonies of Bechuanaland, Swaziland, and Basutoland, well into the 1960s). But such was the depth of ongoing animosities emanating from fractious identity politics of dominance and suppression that the Union remained a body whose validity to exist was as contested as the politics that sustained it (Vail 1991).

Global summity's significance for the Union of South Africa was primarily played out through the relationship with the British Empire (and its later designate, the Commonwealth). From the Balfour Declaration in 1926, dominions were able to set up diplomatic services and, while the bulk of foreign policy powers were formally retained by London, foreign policy activism gradually expanded over time, accelerating in the aftermath of the World War II (Siko 2014).

For the South African government of Prime Minister Jan Smuts, for instance, a close affiliation with the British Empire was crucial as both a legitimizing agent for South Africa's status as a global actor and regional leader in Africa, as well as confirming his party's hold on domestic power. Smuts' position within the Commonwealth led him to play a small but significant part at the Versailles Conference; subsequent negotiations led to the creation of the Irish Free State, and a more consequential role as part of the British contingent which drafted the United Nations Charter (Hancock 1968). His close relationship with Churchill meant that the Union of South Africa was

represented at the highest levels in the Imperial War Cabinet during World War II and Smuts himself served as Churchill's personal advisor.

International expectations of South African leadership on the African continent were shaped in this period and participation in the League of Nations gave the Union an opportunity to expand territorially, initially through the conquest and occupation of German colonies in Southwest and East Africa. Its claims to South West Africa (Namibia) were grounded in the legal status of its role as an administrator of the League of Nations' mandate. South Africa's bid to incorporate other Commonwealth territories in Africa into the Union, like Southern Rhodesia, Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland, in subsequent decades flowed from South Africa's tacit endorsement by the British government within Commonwealth structures (Barber and Barratt 1990).

The unexpected election of the Nationalist Party in 1948 and the intensification of racial segregation under the "apartheid" policy introduced a foreign policy whose primary aim was to seek international recognition for its right to maintain the white settler state under the auspices of the UN Charter's clause endorsing non-interference in domestic affairs. A notable effort of apartheid South African foreign policy was to point out how many other developing countries engaged in ethnically defined discrimination, if not overtly then at least systematically in practice. India in particular—as a leading critical voice—was singled out for criticism by South African diplomats in this period (Geldenhuys 1984). In this new domestic context, the Commonwealth was increasingly seen to be an uncertain pillar upon which to build the South African state's legitimacy and pursue its foreign policy aims (Barber and Barratt 1990, 60–62).

British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's "winds of change" speech before the South African parliament in 1960, articulating the British decision to abandon the imperial mission in Africa, prompted Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd to leave the Commonwealth in 1961. This severing of formal ties was presented to white constituents as a long-sought manifestation of Afrikaner nationalism's historic anti- (British) imperialist stance and return to independent Boer republics. However, it equally represented a withdrawal from international engagement through the Commonwealth with its contemporary liberal turn (Barber and Barratt 1990, 81–83). South Africa's progressive isolation from international forums thereafter meant that its government was no longer effectively able to engage in global summity.

Concurrently, the launching of armed struggle in 1961 in the wake of the domestic banning of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), the African National Congress (ANC), and the South African Communist Party (SACP) raised the significance of international recognition in both a symbolic and material sense. Participation in global summity became a singularly important terrain of support and struggle for both the liberation movements and the apartheid state. It was in these settings that the ANC began to articulate its vision, albeit mediated through the Cold War lens of the time, of a domestic South African society burdened by racially defined inequality within a larger international context of structural inequality (Thomas 1996).

The gradual exclusion of the South African state from most multilateral forums from that point onwards, and its concomitant vilification by the international community, contrasted with the rising stature of the ANC as a participant or observer in multilateral events and global summits. Starting with the Bandung conference in 1955, where the ANC held observer status and carrying on through the tri-annual Non-Aligned Movement summits,

as well as the range of Front Line States and Organization of African Unity (OAU) summits over the decades, the liberation movements came to hold special status as South Africa's sole legitimate representative (Tambo 1983). Indeed by 1989, on the eve of dramatic domestic transformation in South Africa, the ANC had more formal diplomatic missions abroad than the apartheid government. By the early 1990s, apartheid South Africa's missions abroad had dwindled to thirty-six, but representation grew by leaps and bounds after 1994 to reach a high of 126 by early 2015 (SAPA 2015).

## Summitry and Post-Apartheid South Africa

The extent to which South Africa would participate in global summitry in order to pursue its vision of world order and governance as affirmation of its post-apartheid identity was foreshadowed in a 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* in which Nelson Mandela set out the goals and objectives of the country's future foreign policy. Three quotes from this article provide insight into the country's post-apartheid international role:

"A central goal of our foreign policy will [ ] be to promote institutions and forces that, through democratic means, seek to make the world safe for diversity" (Mandela, South Africa's future foreign policy 1993).

"If there is to be global harmony, the international community will have to discover mechanisms to bridge the divide between its rich and poor" (Mandela, South Africa's future foreign policy 1993).

"South Africa cannot escape its African destiny" (Mandela, South Africa's future foreign policy 1993, 89).

Underlying these lofty ideals for its future foreign policy was the quest for the "creation of a peaceful and prosperous country" that could only be achieved in an international system that was "safe for diversity" (Mandela, South Africa's future foreign policy 1993, 86; 89). In other words, the "international community" was to be transformed in line with the transformation of South Africa and this would remain enduring themes at the domestic and international levels. South Africa would be a country characterized by inclusivity across racial divides, prosperous and peaceful, and contributing to the promotion of these values on the continent and internationally, and global summitry would become an important vehicle for pursuing these ideals.

Active participation in multilateralism – whether in the "formals" or the "informals" – became a hallmark of the country's foreign policy engagement in subsequent years. This participation initially focused on the rejuvenation of organizations and institutions, such as United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Commonwealth (which it re-joined in 1994) and the OAU, and the possible restructuring of the Security Council (an abiding theme in its foreign policy) and the Bretton Woods Institutions. Under Presidents Mbeki and Zuma, the reformist agenda would expand to include the formation and/or joining of informals – IBSA, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), and the G20. As was the case in the discourse of the early, exclusively white (and Afrikaans) National Party government, the country's post-apartheid foreign policy was to be conducted in a deeply-rooted paradigm of anti-imperialism (Klotz 2006; Nathan 2005). This

focus would often, in the years to come, result in serious criticism of being “schizophrenic” (Rawoot 2012) and increasingly inconsistent with its commitment to human rights (Nathan 2010).

### *Early Forays into the Global Summitry Arena*

One of South Africa’s first forays into global summitry was its participation in the 1995 Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review and Extension conference. South Africa played a crucial (and at the time somewhat unexpected) role in facilitating an agreement between the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and the Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS) for the permanent extension of the NPT.<sup>1</sup> South Africa’s commitment to international disarmament, and in particular to nuclear non-proliferation, had already been heralded in Mandela’s *Foreign Affairs* article (Mandela, South Africa’s future foreign policy 1993, 89). It was legitimized by its voluntary relinquishment of nuclear weapons (de Villiers, Jardine, and Reiss 1993) and by subsequent leadership role in the creation of the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone through the Pelindaba Treaty of 1996. South Africa’s role as facilitator during the 1995 NPT Review Conference showed an appetite for and an impressive level of expertise in the role of mediator, and a skillful use of its new-found image as a “miracle country” seeking to bridge entrenched international divides between the global North and South.

An indication of South Africa’s reformist sentiments and objectives (at home and abroad) came with its hosting of UNCTAD IX in 1996. In these early years of a “new” international engagement, the country’s focus was on formal international institutions and multilateralism. And South Africa’s aim, in line with Mandela’s foreign policy view of a rules-based international society, was the reform of these institutions. For South Africa, hosting UNCTAD IX was not only about a new beginning for the country, but also a case of breathing “new life into the organization” to make it “more responsive and relevant to its members” (Carim 1996). Already at this Conference, at least three themes that would become part of South Africa’s global engagement and of its global summitry agenda, began to emerge: South Africa employed a constant refrain for the need to restructure international institutions, an insistence on the inclusion of the global South in global governance activities and the notion of partnership, i.e. cooperation between developed and developing countries, and amongst developing countries. For South Africa, part of its achievement was perceived to have been the fact that, apart from heralding the country’s return to multilateral fora, South Africa was negotiating on a common platform with the G77 and as part of the G77 and that it “sought to build bridges amongst all member countries in an attempt to achieve overall consensus” (Carim 1996). UNCTAD IX was, at this early stage of South Africa’s return to the global fold, above all a demonstration of its intention to align itself with the interests and concerns of the developing world, yet in a global setting, much as, in domestic politics, it was aspiring to reconciliation between two historical “racial blocs” representing deep divisions and inequalities in South African society.

By 1998 the country hosted the NAM conference, allowing it to further focus and expand its reformist approach to global governance, based on an increasing disquiet within the ruling tripartite alliance – the ANC, the South African Communist Party, and the Congress of South African Trade

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of South Africa’s role, see (Masiza and Landsberg 1998) and (van Wyk 2000).

Unions—as to the impact of globalization on South Africa, the continent and the global South. This conference marked the genesis of what would become Mbeki's tireless quest for global economic justice in the face of what he considered to be the evolution of "global apartheid" (Mbeki, Keynote address to the ANC National General Council 2000) and the intransigence of inequality and white privilege within the country—his "two nations thesis" (Mbeki 1998). South Africa's tenure as chair of NAM confirmed the country's ability and competence in hosting and driving a reformist agenda at the global level, going beyond the mere declaratory and symbolic value of building the prestige of the country as an emerging global player, to establish and portray itself as a mediator and block leader.

It is during South Africa's term as chair of NAM that Mbeki seems to have recognized that advocating for global reform required more than working through large organizations and groupings such as UNCTAD, NAM, and the G77. Towards the late 1990s and early 2000s three summit-related initiatives started to evolve. The first and second were closely linked: engagement with the North and reform of the OAU in order to address African marginalization in the global political economy particularly in the face of growing global (and domestic) inequality (Vickers 2013). There was also a move towards global South cooperation in a smaller formation—what Alden and Vieira called the "new diplomacy of the South," viz. trilateralism, with the establishment in 2003 of IBSA (the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum) and, then several years later, membership of BRICS (Alden and Vieira 2005).<sup>2</sup>

### *Putting Africa (and South Africa) Right—and on the Global Agenda*

By the late 1990s, the ANC-led government felt compelled to address and theorize about the persistence of "economic apartheid" and the deep racial division within South Africa. In a speech to the National Assembly in May 1998, then Deputy President Mbeki formulated his "two nation" thesis: a South Africa with two nations, one "white and relatively prosperous," the other "larger, black and poor" (Mbeki 1998). This thesis would become a recurring theme in his analysis of the country's socio-political ills and one dovetailing with his "global apartheid" analysis (Mbeki 2007).

In preparing for hosting the UN World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in August 2001, a national conference on racism was organized in March 2001 where Mbeki emphasized the extent to which racism and racialism still permeated South African society, and as a result entrenching historical inequities in South Africa. For Mbeki, the WCAR was aimed at "helping our country towards the realization of the goal contained in our Constitution of the creation of a non-racial society" and un-making the "life-world of an Europeanized South Africa"—an aim he considered to be a "moral challenge" (SAHRC 2001). At the opening of the WCAR, Mbeki universalized this concern with the continuing and persistent racism in South Africa by referring to a "struggle against global apartheid" (Goodenough 2001–2002). He also linked this to slavery and colonialism, recurring themes of his presidency which conflated South Africa's national goals of creating a non-racial society with the country's desire to promote a continental revival of the old

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive history and analysis of IBSA, see (Steunkel 2014).

transnational idea of pan-Africanism under the banner of an “African Renaissance” (Mbeki 2001). These goals implied there would be redress for its masses of poor, unemployed, and economically marginalized black citizens.

Driven by this commitment to realize an African Renaissance,<sup>3</sup> the OAU was transformed into the African Union (AU) at the Durban Summit in 2002, with a vision closely mirroring South Africa’s image and conception (and ideal version) of itself: “An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in [the] global arena” (African Union n.d.). At the Durban Summit, South Africa placed a number of core issues on the agenda of the transformed organization,<sup>4</sup> summarizing and reflecting the extent to which its own domestic agenda and vision coincided with its continental vision. This vision included building unity, solidarity, cohesion and cooperation within the continent; promoting gender equality; and a commitment to development and the peaceful resolution of conflict. Here too, Mbeki’s vision of an end to the marginalization of the continent, based on deep-seated relations of inequality between the continent and the West (Mbeki 2002), mirrored his analysis of South Africa’s troubled domestic economy in which poverty and inequality remained deeply entrenched, despite efforts to liberalize and build a black capitalist class.

Already in January 2001, Mbeki had presented his Millennium Africa Recovery Plan (MAP) at the Davos World Economic Forum meeting, thereby placing the issue of Africa’s development on the global stage. The same month saw Senegal’s Abdoulaye Wade presenting his African vision—the Omega Plan—to the Francophone Africa Leaders’ Summit in Cameroon, confirming that South Africa’s leadership of the continent was not a foregone conclusion. During the course of 2001, the two recovery plans were merged into the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and Mbeki, together with Nigeria’s Olusegun Obasanjo, would jointly over the next few years seek access to the global North, in particular the G7/8, in order to gain support for and partnership in the implantation of NEPAD. A year earlier, on the side-lines of the G8 Okinawa Summit, South Africa had pressed for the inclusion of issues such as debt relief, foreign direct investment, development aid and Northern trade protectionism on the global agenda (Vickers 2013). The promotion of NEPAD would become the main vehicle through which South Africa would pursue a global summitry role in support of its quest for the African Renaissance. After 2000 Mbeki, often in the company of Obasanjo, would engage with the G8 on a regular basis promoting African concerns, culminating in the country’s inclusion in the G20<sup>5</sup>—the only African member of what many at the time believed to be the new premier informal to steer the global economy.

Membership of the G20 may have confirmed South Africa’s identity and role conception as a bridge, an African leader and an example, through its

<sup>3</sup> The idea and ideal of an African Renaissance that would mirror that of a “new” South Africa, though usually associated with Thabo Mbeki, was first enunciated by Nelson Mandela in his statement at an OAU summit in 1994. See (Mandela 1994).

<sup>4</sup> In 2010 South Africa’s President Zuma was elected as president of the new Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) (NEPAD n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the process through which the G7/8 eventually included the ‘Outreach 5’ countries—Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa—as well as a number of other countries into the G20, see (Cooper and Thakur 2013, 52–68).

domestic policies. It concurrently enhanced its international status and prestige as an emerging power, but has as yet been provided with little opportunity for setting the global agenda through the hosting of a summit or addressing the country's domestic challenges. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that the G20 is still alleged to be dominated by the G7 with little opportunity for other members to play a decisive role. The G20, some would argue, is a result of the major powers having co-opted a number of emerging powers into its midst, largely in order to legitimize their continued dominance over the global economy. If this is true, the G20 provides a rather limited scope for South Africa to push an agenda that it cares about. This sentiment is confirmed by the South African Reserve Bank's deputy governor, Daniel Mmimela in 2012, referencing the fact that within the G20's agenda, "development issues are not prominent" (Mminele 2012). Of interest in Mmimela's take on South Africa's role in the G20, is his comment that membership of the G20 requires a "move away from traditional views of alliances that address issues along the lines of North/South" – confirmation that "sitting at the high table" at times clashes with the country's South-solidarity agenda (Mminele 2012).

Within South Africa, its membership of the G20 fails to enjoy anywhere near the attention or status of the country's BRICS association. This can be explained in two ways.<sup>6</sup> First, for the Zuma government, BRICS tends to overshadow all other international institutions and is perceived as the country's most important external association, proving its status internationally and touted as crucial to its economic growth (Thakali 2015).<sup>7</sup> In this regard, bilateral relations with China and Russia in particular are cherished. At the level of North–South engagement, South Africa, in the post-Mbeki era, has been less engaged and has shown little appetite for working with France and Korea to promote the G20's development agenda. Second, it can be argued that South Africa has not managed to identify or pursue priorities vis-à-vis its G20 membership, thereby perhaps being marginalized within the group to some extent. South Africa does tend to work closely with middle powers in the G20, such as Canada and Australia on financial regulatory issues, but it would seem as if other potential areas of mutual interest, such as resource exporting benefits, are not given much attention. The country has not declared any interest thus far in hosting a G20 summit, despite the opportunities offered to determine the agenda, and little attention has been paid to the most recent Antalya Summit in Turkey. Rather, attention is focused on the December 2015 FOCAC (Forum on China–Africa Cooperation) meeting, which will be co-chaired by South Africa. Usually a ministerial meeting, the 2015 event has been elevated to the level of a summit.

### *IBSA, then BRICS*

Whereas the 1990s appeared to be a decade of optimism in South Africa, the harsh realities of the persistence of the "two nations thesis" started hitting home in the first decade of the new century. The ANC as the governing

<sup>6</sup> This analysis is based on an interview with Prof Danny Bradlow, former head of the International Economic Relations and Policy Department on 5 September 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See latest ANC National Executive Committee strategy document, which articulates the Zuma position on the centrality of BRICS and China in particular as a natural ally of South Africa.

party faced increasing criticism and pressure from its traditional tripartite alliance partners, the trade union movement, COSATU, and the SACP to address the deteriorating racially-based class division in South Africa. Between 1994 and 2014, unemployment (narrowly defined) increased from 20 to 26 percent. The Gini coefficient, which is a measure of societal inequality, worsened and the percentage of black Africans living in poverty increased by 10 percent (Bond 2014). Importantly, the wage share of GDP decreased from 56 percent in 1994 to 50.6 percent during the first decade post-apartheid (Gelb 2003). These statistics reinforced perceptions on the home front that transformation had failed: political freedom did not bring economic freedom and prosperity. It implied that the neo-liberalist growth-path favored by Mbeki in his Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR) and subsequently Jacob Zuma's New Growth Path policy of 2010 (Department of Economic Development 2010) aimed at the creation and promotion of a black capitalist class had failed to address the needs of the masses of black Africans who remained poor and unemployed (ANC 1998; ANC 2007; and Gumede 2013). Increasingly, South Africa had to turn to the external environment to seek resources – tangible and intangible – in the service of domestic power struggles.

Concomitant with its efforts to engage the global North in global summity processes with a view to push its African Renaissance agenda, South Africa also explored opportunities for cooperating with likeminded emerging South powers in the quest for global transformation, especially in the face of what Mbeki seems to have perceived as an insurmountable hurdle for South Africa acting on its own vis-à-vis the North. In 2003 the IBSA Dialogue Forum came into being, joining India, Brazil and South Africa in an informal alliance as “three emerging countries, three multiethnic and multicultural democracies,” underpinned by the values of participatory democracy, respect for human rights and rule of law and cooperating on the assumption that “democracy and development [were] mutually reinforcing” (IBSA n.d.). In the words of Mbeki at the end of the 2006 IBSA summit in Brazil, IBSA offered South Africa an opportunity, in the wake of the failure of the Doha trade talks, to form a strategic partnership to “unlock the vast resources and economic opportunities within and between these countries” (Mbeki 2006). The 2007 IBSA summit, hosted by South Africa, reflected, as far as ethos and process were concerned, South Africa's “traditional” (at least since 1994) approach of incorporating business, civil society, women, and academia in the various working groups of the meeting.

Reading through the various speeches made by South Africa's leaders (and those of India and Brazil) at the various IBSA summits between 2006 and 2011, what is striking is the heavy focus on South Africa, rather than Africa. South Africa twice hosted IBSA summits—in 2007 and again (what has turned out to be the last one) in 2011, the year South Africa joined BRICS. Throughout, a number of issues dominated the agendas of these tripartite summit meetings: mutual concern among the IBSA leaders about domestic economic growth and development, and the reform of global institutions, particularly of the UN Security Council. For South Africa, IBSA provided an opportunity to pursue its quest for foreign investment, trade expansion, and infrastructure development, issues high on its domestic agenda (Zuma, Opening statement by President Jacob Zuma to the 4th IBSA Summit, Brasilia 2010).

Yet IBSA's main image, domestically and internationally, was that of a club of South *democracies*, with an emphasis, however skewed in the eyes of beholders, as first and foremost promoting democratic values, despite its clear enunciation of a developmental agenda. Promoting democracy and good governance internationally – initial pillars of the country's foreign policy – increasingly took a back seat, with South Africa leading more as an example. It simultaneously promoted international pluralism (particularly the reform of global institutions) in a trade-off between principles and its quest for a continental (and global South) leadership role on the one hand, and, on the other, in an attempt to respond to domestic critics' call for an economic-oriented foreign policy (Khadiagala and Nganje 2015). In short, IBSA was not sufficient as a vehicle for promoting South Africa's growing domestic socio-economic needs and pressures and new avenues of influence and resources were seen as being necessary to stem the growing tide of criticism and popular unrest at home.

Despite Mbeki's earlier caution against falling into a "colonial relationship" with China that would condemn the continent to "underdevelopment," replicating Africa's "historic relationship" with its former colonial masters, Zuma actively pursued membership of the BRICs club (BBC 2006).<sup>8</sup> South Africa's inclusion in the BRICS alliance in 2011 more effectively catapulted the country into the international limelight than did its membership of the G20 (or IBSA). It offered South Africa more opportunity to demonstrate its strong alignment to the global South, whilst at the same time opening up opportunities for domestic economic development. For South Africa's leaders, BRICS is first and foremost about economics – cooperation among the top emerging global South economies (identified as such in late 2001 though initially excluding South Africa). At the same time, South Africa's membership in the BRICS is also about promoting an alternative world order. Inclusion was of paramount importance to South Africa's President Jacob Zuma. Such inclusion would confirm South Africa's global position as an emerging power (the pre-eminent and only such power in Africa) and provide an avenue through which it could pursue its transformative global agenda. Moreover, it opened up the possibility of giving South Africa access to the resources of its BRICS peers to address its own deepening economic woes (persistent inequality, unemployment, and poverty) and harness resources for its ambitious African Agenda, in particular investment in the development of continental infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

There is little doubt that the main attraction of BRICS membership for South Africa is the presence of China which, by the end of 2009, had become the country's biggest trading partner. The status of inclusion in the group confirmed for South Africa its equality with these other large emerging market powers (save Russia) despite its profile as a pygmy compared to the likes of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. At its first BRICS summit attendance in Sanya, China in 2011, Zuma demanded, with India and Brazil, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and presented South Africa as a gateway to Africa, emphasizing the country's "stable institutions" that

<sup>8</sup> This warning was reiterated by Mbeki in August 2015 when he referred to a "creeping perception" that in relations between the continent and China, "the continent is getting the short end of the stick" (Chimombe and Mokoena 2015).

<sup>9</sup> In 2010 South Africa's President Zuma was elected as president of the new Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) (NEPAD n.d.).

could form the basis for the expansion of its allies' corporations into the continent. Mindful of his undertaking to create five million jobs by 2020, Zuma was accompanied by a large contingent of South African business leaders (Hervieu 2011) and although acknowledging the continued importance of the US and EU to South Africa's economy, he pointed to the "rising importance of the giants of the South" (SouthAfrica.info 2011). Investment in Africa and the need for alternative development resources for the continent would become the mantra of South Africa's engagement in BRICS, while its membership served to demonstrate to home audiences that South Africa was actively involved in what some commentators were referring to as "counterbalancing Western influence in major forums" (Hervieu 2011). The latter would find its clearest impression in the eventual agreement amongst the BRICS to establish the New Development Bank, which was set to be operational by the end of 2015.

South Africa's hosting of the 2013 BRICS summit was undeniably a high-point for the country in terms of summitry agenda-setting, its foreign policy objectives, and demonstrating to domestic critics that the country was making headway in addressing the various challenges facing its domestic economy. South Africa hosted the summit with the theme, "BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialization." It invited African leaders to attend the summit and participate in a range of discussions on the margins of the summit, and made much of South Africa's chairpersonship of the African Union. This "outreach" to the rest of the continent would be replicated by Russia when it hosted the 2015 BRICS Summit and invited representatives from the Shanghai Cooperation Forum and the Eurasian Economic Union to meetings with the BRICS leaders on the fringes of the summit in Ufa. In the run-up to the fifth summit, South Africa made it clear that it had high hopes of BRICS both as far as its national economic aspirations were concerned, and also with reference to "promoting African renewal" (Zuma 2013).

During the Durban summit, two agreements were reached: one on multi-lateral infrastructure co-financing for Africa and one on cooperation and co-financing for sustainable development. Importantly, issues hitherto avoided by the group, such as human rights, gender, and peace and security were included in the Summit's eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan (BRICS 2013). All did not go according to plan, though. South Africa had hoped that the BRICS development bank would be headquartered in South Africa (India had harbored similar hopes), but the Chinese made it clear that the Bank would be hosted in China and South Africa had to be satisfied with the rather obvious allocation of heading the "African" headquarters of the Bank (Mittner 2014; Ujah 2014).

Importantly, though, it would seem that BRICS has overshadowed, if not eliminated, IBSA. Hailed initially as an 'innovative partnership' between three global South 'model democracies' sharing a serious commitment to democratic values, development and the promotion of global South concerns, the forum has not met since 2011. Questions over the future of IBSA elicit evasive responses from South African diplomats. Whether and how the IBSA countries would be able to pursue some of its initial mutual objectives, in particular their quest for Security Council reform, within the BRICS formation is doubtful: China has pursued an ambiguous approach to Security Council reforms since 2004 but one which is increasingly seen to be opposition to the reform process (Bahchi 2015).

## Conclusion: Reconstructing of South Africa's Foreign Policy Identity through Global Summitry

South Africa's summitry activism reflects particular themes that emerge in part from its fragmented society with the political elites seeking to re-define the post-apartheid foreign policy agenda. Both during the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, differing identities would compete for prominence in parallel with ongoing debates between contending domestic constituencies. This has resulted in the country's changing role conceptions. In this context, the decision by South Africa to host a dizzying array of global summits in recent times should be understood as an effort by the governing ANC elite to emphasize the country's post-apartheid shift away from its historically grounded Western orientation to one more closely aligned with norms and interests rooted in the African continent and more broadly the Global South. The issues that formed the subject of South African sponsored global summits—"summitry as act"—had their origins in the liberation struggle's concern for the structural inequality of a racist system of apartheid and colonialism. These issues were topics that held particular meaning for the key domestic constituencies in South Africa that continue to be important to the ANC as well as being ones that reverberate with continental African audiences.

In short, the "tropes of liberation" played out across two decades of global summitry tell a story about South Africa's continuing search for a post-apartheid identity. This goal from the start is inextricably linked to an anti-imperialist ethos and a struggle to deal with issues of race, with the latter over time becoming closely tied to issues of class, locally and globally. The rise of a narrative of "global apartheid" mirrors the "two nation" structure of South Africa's political economy. The promotion of both of these issues—anti-imperialism and race (with its distinct undertones of inequality both domestically and internationally)—often led to acrimonious exchanges between South Africa and the Western world as South Africa sought to give foreign policy expression to these visions of South African identity through global summitry. When integrated into the transcendent pan-regional identity embodied in the African Renaissance concept, all these visions are crucial to South Africa's ability to claim to represent continental interests on the international stage. Bridging the global apartheid divide through participation in formal and informal international institutions is complemented by its summitry activism in Africa and with other global South institutions. These visions refract South African concerns about power structures which systematically perpetuate, at home and abroad, injustice and are predicated on forms of inequality.

For South Africa, multilateralism and global summitry activism are more than an effort to promote a reformist internationalist agenda and end the marginalization of the continent by calling for greater accountability and international responsibility towards Africa. The rather abstract ideal finds its concrete expression in the issues pursued by South Africa in its summit engagements. South Africa focuses on race and inequality, environmental degradation, debt relief, economic development, fair trade, the reform of international institutions and more latterly, through its BRICS membership, the creation of an alternative financial institution, the New Development Bank. By consciously articulating these issues through a global platform, the South African government reaffirms the country's *primus in pares* status to a

regional and international audience as the only African state capable of addressing complex global issues leading the continent. At the same time, the selection of global summitry topics resonates with domestic constituencies in terms of recognized world views (opposing structural inequality or “global apartheid”) that give domestic meaning to the governing elites’ foreign policy agenda. It is a complex dance, but for South African leadership global summitry provides an opportunity to present coherent purpose to audiences at home and abroad on key issues that reflect both the country’s heritage of divided diversity while simultaneously reinforcing South African leaders’ claim to govern domestically and lead regionally.

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