South Africa’s Emerging “Soft Power” Influence in Africa and Its Impending Limitations: Will the Giant Be Able to Weather the Storm?

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South Africa’s Emerging “Soft Power” Influence in Africa and Its Impending Limitations: Will the Giant Be Able to Weather the Storm?

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ABSTRACT
South Africa benefits from a symbolic hegemonic identity drawn from its enormous soft power resources. Whereas South Africa has been widely referenced as a regional hegemonic power capable of using its soft power influence to deepen its global status, there are contradictions to Pretoria’s increasing soft power claim. In this article we undertake a discursive analysis of some of these soft power limitations. The main argument raised is that despite the optimism, South Africa’s capacity to translate soft power into influence has been largely undercut by several factors, including its recurring xenophobic incidences and leadership inconsistencies toward Africa. We conclude by asserting that South Africa can indeed continue to punch above its weight if it begins to address the ambivalence that confronts the expression of its soft power resources.

KEYWORDS
foreign policy; hegemony; regional power; soft power; South Africa; xenophobia

Introduction

There is little debate that in the over two decades since its reacceptance into the international community South Africa’s global presence has grown remarkably, to the extent that it has altered the geopolitical and economic calculus of the African continent. Scholars argue that South Africa’s material capabilities guarantee its status as Africa’s regional hegemon. With its inclusion in important global multinational organizations, such as the G20, the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), and the BRICS, South Africa is widely perceived as Africa’s giant, wielding significant influence within Africa and beyond. On the basis of its membership in these global economic forums, South Africa has often canvassed its ambition to represent Africa’s development agenda in international platforms.

For instance, Obi suggests that South Africa’s hegemonic influence in the region is grounded by its claim to be “projecting Africa’s voice and interests at these global economic forums and groups, and in its effectiveness as Africa’s sole player in the BRICS and G20.” Qobo and Dube share similar
sentiments, arguing that “South Africa is often regarded as a lever of progress that could lift the continent and also serve as an enlightened and crucial voice speaking on behalf of the developing world.” In essence, much of South Africa’s regional influence has been centered on its largely superior material capability, which has enabled the country to advance a strong Afrocentric foreign policy and granted it the role as a “big” regional power.

Soft power, however, is increasingly a necessary complement to hard power for regional hegemony. Soft power describes the increasing importance of intangible instruments of power evidenced through persuasion, attraction, and agenda-setting. Although the idea of soft power has featured in the work of scholars such as Morgenthau and Knorr, the concept was first fully developed by American political scientist Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead*.

In Africa, South Africa is widely believed to possess an extraordinary reservoir of soft power. Analysts contend that largely because of its soft power influence, South Africa’s regional and global reputation has increased tremendously, particularly since the end of apartheid rule in 1994. South Africa, therefore, seems to enjoy what Alden and Schoeman termed a “symbolic representivity” on which its putative hegemonic credential in Africa is based. The South African example of symbolic hegemony perhaps confirms that soft power is increasingly gaining prominence as a significant component in the estimation of global power. As Hayden points out, within the realm of international politics, soft power is increasingly becoming a necessary component of statecraft.

The combination of its post-apartheid surge in soft power and its established hard power, however, is not necessarily welcomed by all. Some commentators have built a strong (and at times bitter) narrative of a South African regional hegemony that rests on the complementary strength of its preponderant material and ideational (soft power) resources. South Africa’s post-apartheid economic challenges enhances the relevant role of its soft power. Not least, is its continuing high unemployment rate. In 2012, it increased from 24.9 percent to 25.5 percent, and approximately one-third of youth between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four were not in employment, education, or training. South Africa’s income inequality remains one of the highest in the world.

The main questions, nonetheless, are how much of its soft power resources has South Africa been able to develop and weave into its foreign policy strategies and what might erode the efficacy of South Africa’s soft power influence. Understanding these issues will help provide more nuanced assessments of South Africa’s soft power diplomatic strategy—one that uniquely integrates soft power resources and instruments into mainstream diplomatic practice and promotes South Africa’s regional and global influence.

The central purpose of this article is to examine the limitations to South Africa’s apparent soft power influence in Africa and how the country has been able to confront these challenges. The rest of the article is structured into five parts. In the first, we offer an overview of the concept of soft power
based on the propositions by Nye and other scholars. The second section explores some of the literature on South Africa’s soft power by delineating the various academic claims that South Africa possesses some quantity of soft power over and above other African countries. This is followed by a critical examination of the debilitating factors that impinge on the usefulness of South Africa’s soft power. In the fourth part we examine the emerging paradoxes of South Africa’s soft power claim. The article concludes by advancing suggestions of how South Africa can reduce the negative perceptions and implications of its perceived soft power status within Africa in a way that does not jeopardize its global and continental ambitions.

Reviewing soft power and its interpretations

The 21st century has witnessed new ways of conducting international diplomacy. While power has remained the central focus of state interactions, notions of power have changed remarkably. Traditionally, a state’s capacity to gain influence in international relations has been conceived and measured purely in terms of hard power competences (economy and military). However, as highlighted, Nye drew our attention to the point that current trends in international relations suggest that states are developing other non-coercive and ideational methods of influence beyond the traditional realms of military and economic power.

While it is useful for this study to provide a brief overview of the notion of soft power, especially as propounded by Nye, it is equally pertinent to delve into the diverse conceptual prescriptions on soft power, especially from a non-Western perspective. By doing this we can conceptualize soft power so as to fit the analytical lens of this study. Nye submits the argument that although the wielding of hard power competencies might often get others to change their position through inducement or threat, evidence shows that it is equally possible to get the outcomes one wants through indirect means. Describing this as “the second face of power,” Nye argues that it is possible to “set the agenda and attract others in world politics” armed by the ability to shape the preferences of others. This fluidity of power relations is what Nye along with others refer to as “soft power,” which is the power of attraction. This demonstrates that in the post–Cold War era the domain of foreign policy has moved beyond traditional and official instruments of diplomacy, with non-state actors playing more prominent diplomatic roles.

Since then, the notion of soft power has gained wide popularity among scholars of international politics, practitioners, media, the corporate world, and even music bands. Li, for instance, notes that hardly any international conference concludes without a reference to the term “soft power.” With United States as his main example, Nye summarized soft power in a variety of definitions: “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather
than coercion or payment; the ability of a country to attract other countries by ideas, values and ideology; the ability of a country to let another country think what it thinks.” Nye’s idea of soft power draws from the ability of a state to derive acquiescence through its power of attraction. According to him, soft power is the “ability to affect the behaviour of others by influencing their preferences” and “the ability to entice and attract” others without having to deploy hard power threats. As he argues, “If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want to do.”

Fundamentally, as Nye and other soft power proponents argue, the power assessment of a state must be one that includes both hard power and soft power for what Nye termed as “smart power.” He explained further that there are a number of ingredients (soft power resources) that produce soft power outcomes and points to three components of soft power: political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority), and culture (in places where it is attractive to others). These three components are the primary currencies through which a state’s soft power can be projected. Beyond being an antonym for hard power, soft power therefore requires the ability to determine and shape the agenda and preferences of actors with the ultimate objective to make others see the sensibility in cooperation rather than confrontation. In many ways this reduces the requirement and necessity for the mobilization of hard power.

It is hardly surprising, then, that in the current globalized system the premium states place on the subtle effect of soft power instruments and resources is gaining prominence. Given poor economic growth and a reduced financial means to pursue a rigorous foreign policy, states can address much of their foreign policy priorities by relying on their soft power base. As a consequence, states with a reasonable degree of soft power capability can rely more on their soft power resources to leverage international diplomatic interaction. Soft power has also become a necessary prerequisite for regional and middle power status and can be regarded as critical to the local acceptance of regional hegemony.

Since Nye’s exposition of soft power, our understanding of soft power has been subjected to multiple interpretations. Scholars have offered their own analysis on the concept, including how it can be measured, the resources (state and nonstate) that can be mobilized to enhance soft power, the contradictions and limitations of soft power, and the use of soft power by developing and authoritarian states. Haynes argues that soft power resources include attributes such as culture, values, and ideas which collectively reflect different forms of influence deemed to be antonymous to hard power. His definition draws the inference that soft power can be wielded not only by states but also by non-state actors, or what he called secular sources of soft power. His view aligns with Sidiropoulos’ assertion that soft power is “the ability of a nation (or a multinational organization) to achieve desired outcomes without the use of hard force.”
However, others have critiqued the usefulness of soft power as a tool of state power. They ask: how useful is soft power in dealing with the challenges of state interaction, and in what specific ways does soft power allow states to alter the behavior of their contemporaries? Critics contest that Nye’s three soft power instruments appear to be vaguely described and sometimes overlap with one another. They argue that Nye failed to create a distinct analytical depiction of the point where foreign policies, political values, and culture influence behavior. This is why Li explains that despite its popularity, the concept of soft power has remained notoriously undertheorized, leading to confusion in current literature and even practical discussions on international relations. He suggests that although the literature points to ideational elements as sources of a state’s soft power, there is still far less clarity about how these soft power currencies actually produce attraction. Explaining China’s diplomatic posture, Li, however, agrees with Nye, that economic and military sources of powers can also be transposed into soft power to exude admiration and attraction. Li’s overall argument is that the nature of power is neither soft nor hard since the form power takes is largely contingent on how an actor chooses to exercise its capability.

While the debate on soft power will continue, the idea remains a significant element of state power given the changing terrain of international relations discourse and praxis. For example, insecurity from nontraditional sources (human security) is becoming more prominent in global and especially in the developing world. The meta-geography of terrorism has redefined geopolitics globally as the struggle is no longer over territories or on territories but a clash of beliefs that crisscross territories through social and technological networks. Therefore, intelligence gathering, technological prowess, and the ability to build consensus and coalitions through attractive ideas (all elements of soft power) will be vital to exercising power and influence in the twenty-first century. Despite its contentious meaning, soft power plays an important role in the practice of international diplomacy and politics. Moreover, it has come to inform “the logic behind particular strategic choices in public diplomacy and strategic communication.”

There is little wonder, given South Africa’s reference to the idea of soft power in its National Development Plan 2030, that the country has gained significant global reputation and attention as a result of its apparent soft power capabilities.

**South Africa’s rising soft power: Perspectives and perceptions**

When South Africa emerged from apartheid isolation in 1994 amid great expectations, its government was confronted with two major dilemmas. The first was that of presenting itself as a radical departure from the erstwhile notorious apartheid government, which had as an article of faith the
preservation of minority white rule. Indeed, the fundamental way in which the African National Congress (ANC)–led government could show itself as different from its predecessor was not only by its domestic priorities but also by building new relationships both with Africa and the entire world. South Africa’s second major challenge was to create a unique national (and African) identity for itself that would mark a clear path for the “Rainbow nation.”

Because the country had long been associated with racist apartheid rule, it made strategic sense to confront its past. And in a bid to transform its image from that of a pariah, Nelson Mandela as president made numerous foreign trips abroad to garner international support for the new South Africa. As Geldenhuys puts it, “These exemplary features and the saintly presidential presence of Nelson Mandela provided a solid domestic base and the self-confidence to pursue an ambitious, moralistic foreign policy.” According to him, “South Africa’s virtuous global citizenship since 1994 can be regarded as the external corollary of its commitment to democracy and good governance at home.”

South Africa’s increasing prominence in Africa has been due largely to its assortment of hard and soft power over and above other regional contenders. As Alden and Schoeman contend, post-apartheid South Africa has seemingly recognized the utility of its material and ideational assets in representing its national interest but also for promoting its global reputation relevant to other African countries held capture to poverty, unemployment, conflict, and corruption. Thus, despite its relatively new status in the international system, post-apartheid South Africa’s emergence to the fore of regional politics in Africa brought about significant changes in the geopolitical calculus of the region. Even before the ANC gained power, South Africa was invited to join the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This meant that countries such as Nigeria and Egypt had to contend with the increasing presence of South Africa not only by accepting Pretoria as an important regional actor but also by embracing its prominent role in Africa.

South Africa was beginning to play the role of an African hegemon capable of imposing its will and dominating the discourse of African politics. It was displaying the capacity to present itself as a leader on continental and global matters. South Africa, particularly under Mandela’s successor Thabo Mbeki, assumed a leadership role in Africa. South Africa stood firm in the promotion of peace, democracy, and the reconstruction and development of the continent. It positioned itself to occupy the leadership vacuum created in Africa partly as a result of Nigeria’s internal and external dilemmas as well as Egypt’s sustained lack of interest in Africa.

The international goodwill afforded South Africa’s leaders also helped push through their foreign policy. It allowed other stakeholders to adopt the “ideas and norms the country purports to defend and put forward, including its substantive contributions.” To this extent, it became increasingly difficult to separate the values that these leaders represented from the sensibilities of the
policies they proposed to the international community and especially to their African counterparts. This was not always successful, as evidenced, for instance, in the case of Mandela’s unsuccessful bid to have Nigeria suspended from the Commonwealth in 1995 following the execution of the nine Ogoni activists by President Abacha. Nonetheless, the afterglow of apartheid’s demise had a halo effect on South Africa’s new leaders.

The main point here is that in the past two decades South Africa has been able to embark on a remarkable transformation wherein it gained significant international credibility, acceptance, and moral identity as a major African leader. Following its successful bid and subsequent hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2010 as well as its membership of the BRICS in the same year, international reviews of South Africa improved significantly. A survey of sixteen major countries by the BBC 2011 World Service Rating Poll indicated South Africa’s global influence increased from 35 percent in the preceding year to 42 percent in 2011, accounting for the second highest rise among the countries surveyed and ninth in the overall standing of positive international perception.43

In many ways, as major soft power indexes show, South Africa’s soft power profile dwarfs that of regional contenders such as Nigeria and perhaps Egypt.44 South Africa has, therefore, been able to benefit from its efforts to promote its international prestige among the comity of nations. Its international status greatly improved with the end of apartheid. The legacy of apartheid, however, casts a shadow over its emerging regional role.

South Africa’s apartheid history has left a mixed identity.45 According to Adebajo, “The apartheid era army’s destabilization of neighbors has left a profound distrust of South African military interventionism which remains strong today.”46 The decades prior to South Africa’s democratic transition at the cusp of the end of the Cold War was post-independent southern Africa’s most volatile. South Africa’s rearguard action against the “Winds of Change” animated by anti-apartheid forces camped in its near-abroad cost the region an estimated 1.5 million lives between 1980 and 1988 with a cumulative cost to the region of approximately $60.5 billion.47 South Africa’s “destabilization” campaign was part of President P.W. Botha’s “total national strategy,” which was meant to protect the encircled South Africa from its near abroad. It at one time or another directly or indirectly intervened in the civil wars in Rhodesia (which became Zimbabwe in 1980), Angola, and Mozambique. It also applied economic pressure throughout the region. As Hanlon stated, “The military attacks catch press headlines, but outside Angola and Mozambique, South Africa’s economic power in the region is in some ways more critical.”48 Southern Africa was wary of the “new” South Africa.

South Africa’s neighbors responded by forming the Front Line States (1970), which led to the formation of SADC’s precursor, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) in 1980. SADCC was a self-conscious effort to balance the regional dominance of South Africa,
by at least loosely tying the states of the southern African subcontinent together is a form of regional economic integration.

The legacy of South Africa’s hard power, both military and economic, in southern Africa limits its ability to leverage that power to promote its regional foreign policy. Soft power, therefore, is not only a complement to hard power but takes precedence in South Africa’s projection of power in the region. South Africa’s soft power profile includes its cultural and media exports, political ideals, constitutionally enshrined values of the rule of law, the Bill of Rights, its vast array of iconic personalities and political goodwill, the presence of multinational companies in Africa, highly ranked universities, the successful hosting of mega-sporting events, and tourism and hospitality.

**Leaving no turn “un-stoned”**

The importance of soft power in South Africa’s toolkit is enhanced when juxtaposed to its use of hard power during apartheid. After its international isolation, South Africa underwent an incredible transformation from a hitherto pariah state to one that is today globally accepted and recognized as a middle/regional power. Qobo and Dube argue that “integrating into the global system was one of the major priorities of the South African government in the early 1990s, especially because the country was keen on reflecting the pariah image associated with the period of apartheid rule.” Emerging from the apartheid isolation in 1994, South Africa positively positioned itself as a promising regional actor in Africa and in the past two decades focused on expanding its political, economic, and ideational influence while at the same time increasing its diplomatic niche in the continent and beyond. A number of scholars have argued that since the post-apartheid era soft power has been the constant of South Africa’s foreign policy.

Much more than other contending regional powers in Africa, South Africa conceivably places greater premium on its soft power resources. Inspired by its willingness to conform to international law and adhere to its legal obligations in the international community, South Africa’s commitment to collaborative efforts toward tackling global issues like climate change, poverty, underdevelopment, and promoting human rights reflect this priority. Qobo and Dube rightly assert that South Africa’s involvement in multilateral forums like the G20 has “clearly helped to sustain the country’s international profile as a global actor and a voice to be reckoned with in the developing world.”

The wielding of soft power assets has often yielded benefits such as international recognition, reputation, and the acceptance of South Africa as a legitimate regional power. It has also advanced Pretoria’s regional hegemonic status and underscored its moral authority, especially within Africa.

An assessment of post-apartheid South Africa’s engagement in Africa since 1994 reveals that much of its rising status within Africa has been promoted by the official and unofficial rhetoric and subtle wielding of its soft power,
which has evinced dividends that qualify Pretoria as Africa’s hegemonic power. There is, however, tension between South Africa’s de facto regional hegemony and southern Africa acceptance of it hegemonic status.

**Soft power and its discontents**

There are a number of issues that have limited and continue to limit South Africa’s ability to project its soft power. More than anything else, these issues have continued to define South Africa’s relationship with its neighbors and the rest of the world. The shifting trend of South Africa’s foreign policy toward soft power has equally portrayed ambivalence that challenges its status as a regional soft power state in Africa. Its leadership is often suspect. For South Africa to command the full strength of its hegemonic potential it needs to resolve the multiple domestic contradictions and external challenges that confronts its global reputation. Alden and Schoeman point out that South Africa’s ability to conduct a successful foreign policy that aligns with its continental and global ambitions hinges on how it deals with the ambivalences of its domestic weaknesses and “a divided continental reaction to South African leadership.”

In this regard it is important, therefore, to focus on some of the domestic challenges that limit South Africa’s use of soft power.

As Ogunnubi and Uzodike contend, a regional hegemonic power, particularly within the discourse on emerging middle powers, refers to a state that enjoys superior power advantages, possesses political and economic capabilities, boasts of a combined capacity for considerable influence on its neighbors, and enjoys a considerable level of acceptance of its regional leadership. In many respects, South Africa is considered a regional superpower. It has disproportionate socioeconomic and political resources in the region. The country has the capacity to drive Africa out of what Kagwanja argues is the continent’s “mire of poverty and desperation.” South Africa is (arguably) Africa’s most technologically and industrialized country, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of over $350b (2013 estimate). Its economy is two times that of the entire Southern African subregion, which gives it immense comparative, economic, and soft power advantages within its subregion and on the African continent. With a population of over fifty million people, second only to the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC) in the SADC region, South Africa possesses the greatest human and material resources within its subregion. More than anything else, these advantages confirm South Africa’s status as a regional hegemon and to a considerable extent a hegemon in Africa.

**South Africa’s hegemonic aspirations and “soft power”**

South Africa has attempted to leverage its inherent advantages. For example, in the area of peacekeeping and conflict resolution, South Africa has
employed the use of what Neethling argues its diplomacy-based approach to encourage parties to cease hostilities and negotiate a peaceful settlement of their disputes while holding back from engaging in peace enforcement and peace building.\textsuperscript{59} Over the years, South Africa has adopted a regional approach to conflict resolution in Africa, or what van Nieuwkerk identifies as the “art of transforming war into peace through the lens of regionalism.”\textsuperscript{60}

It bears mentioning that the model has been put to test over the years in the course of its mediation in a number of conflicts in Africa, particularly those in Burundi, the DRC, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Côte d’Ivoire.

As a middle power, scholars have also contended that South Africa possesses the human, financial, and military resources to function as a bridge between the West and Africa.\textsuperscript{61} It is instructive to note that this argument has been largely echoed by a number of its leaders, particularly former president Thabo Mbeki, who once noted that the country desires to be a champion of the invisible people of the world, where there would be a democratization of the system of international relations and the space for the poor and the powerless within an unstoppable globalization process.\textsuperscript{62}

Southern Africa was the place to start. South Africa’s Department of Foreign Affairs argued that “the future of our country is inextricably linked to the future of the African continent and that Africa remains the central area of focus in the conduct of South Africa’s foreign policy.”\textsuperscript{63} This perhaps explains Khadiagala and Nganje’s argument that emerging powers such as South Africa are leaders in their regional neighborhoods and are thus in the ambiguous position of reconciling regional sensitivities associated with their leadership with the global demands of promoting democracy.\textsuperscript{64}

South Africa, however, has increasingly faced stiff opposition from other African countries, who view its quest for dominance as an affront to their own role. As Khadiagala and Nganje argue, “South Africa’s bid to transform the political landscape in Africa has faced numerous difficulties, particularly resistance from authoritarian and antidemocratic regimes.”\textsuperscript{65} Many African states, particularly Nigeria, Angola, Zambia, and Zimbabwe do not like being lectured by South Africa. They regard it as a relatively new entrant on the African stage.\textsuperscript{66} This is perhaps informed by the scepticism and apprehension with which Pretoria’s leadership role in Africa is often viewed, particularly in the light of its ability to undermine their own aspirations for regional or continental leadership.\textsuperscript{67} As a consequence, South Africa’s perceived self-appointed hegemonic role and its regional power and influence in Southern Africa and across Africa has limited its ability to openly articulate its foreign policy ideals of democracy and human rights.\textsuperscript{68}

South Africa’s ability to transform its immense soft power advantages depends on its ability to downplay the apparent pugnacity attached to the advancement of its hegemonic aspiration. Being a hegemon in itself is not necessarily a bad thing; however, how the role is pursued and perceived...
matters. For South Africa, therefore, one way of downplaying this perceived arrogant hegemonic posture could be by taking a cue from Nigeria, which in the course of its engagement in peace and security related discourses in Africa and in its relationship with its contiguous states (Benin, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon) does not impose its authority on any of them.\(^{69}\)

**Xenophobia/Afrophobia**

If southern Africa is the natural stage for South Africa to build a hegemonic role, how its neighbors’ citizens are treated is of importance. One other issue that often impedes South Africa’s capacity to fully leverage its soft power is its xenophobia. For Evans and Newnham, the notion refers to a crime against humanity involving aspects such as dislike, fear, distrust, or intolerance of foreigners, often expressed in terms of hostilities toward nationals from other countries.\(^{70}\) Others see it as a hate crime, defined as the extreme expression of prejudice through violent criminal acts committed against people, property, or even organizations, either because of the group to which they belong or with which they identify.\(^{71}\) It has been argued that xenophobic intolerance often stems from three factors: (a) interactive factors related to the amount of exposure inhabitants have to strangers, (b) cultural factors that include identity and nationalism, and (c) material or economic factors related to employment opportunities, available resources, etc.\(^{72}\)

According to the South African Migration Project, South Africa currently has one of the highest levels of xenophobic occurrences in the world, with attacks mostly directed toward African immigrants.\(^{73}\) As argued by Solomon, xenophobic attacks in South Africa follow a pattern of racism, orchestrated by locals, against African migrants, and it emanates from factors such as the fear of losing their social status and identity, the conviction of intimidation that foreigners pose to citizens’ economic success, and feelings of superiority.\(^{74}\)

The first major incident of xenophobic attacks in South Africa occurred in May 2008, and it left an estimated sixty-two people dead, six hundred and seventy injured, and displaced another thirty thousand, mostly foreign nationals.\(^{75}\) Similarly, during the 2015 incident, at least seven people were reported to have lost their lives.\(^{76}\) It should be noted that this trend has remained a constant, despite South Africa’s political, economic, and social transformation and its endorsement of a constitutional framework based on the principles of human rights, equality, social justice, and tolerance and nondiscrimination.\(^{77}\) Indeed, the consequences of these attacks on South Africa’s ability to maximize its soft power are enormous, particularly when situated within the purview of the dictates of Articles 5 and 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 5, for example, states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” while Article 9 forbids “the arbitrary arrest detention or exile” of foreigners or migrants.
More than anything else, the recurrence of these attacks and the apparent inability of the South African government to forestall them cast doubts on South Africa’s capacity to defend international conventions. And at the same time, as an international norm entrepreneur it claims to be, recurring xenophobia also portends serious implication for South Africa’s ability to command respect within the international community.

**Leadership Inconsistencies and Africa: The global versus regional role**

South Africa’s voyage into carving a front-runner role for itself began shortly after the demise of apartheid in 1994, when the ANC unequivocally spoke of its determination to return South Africa to where it thought it belonged. It noted:

> The ending of apartheid was a joyous moment in the history of our continent. Africa sacrificed much during the course of our struggle. Our people—refugees and the liberation movement were offered food, shelter and facilities to enhance the common endeavour to put an end to racist tyranny and oppression. With fellow Africans we share a vision to transform our continent into an entity that is free, peaceful and vibrant.\(^78\)

South Africa has demonstrated its resolve to play a lead role in the resolution of conflicts in Africa and in providing logistics and financial support to a number of regional organizations. It supports the African Union (AU), particularly its Peace and Security Council (PSC),\(^79\) which seeks to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the encouragement of peacebuilding in Africa and the Common African Defense and Security policy.\(^80\) South Africa, under former President Mbeki, emerged as the first chairperson of the AU and later the PSC during which the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) initiative was launched. Similarly, South Africa, through tactful diplomacy, particularly in the use of its special envoys and ambassadors, has mediated in the crises in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Using this platform, South Africa has provided financial and diplomatic support indirectly through the AU to mediators in a number of West African countries, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d’Ivoire.\(^81\)

In terms of its interventionist role in Africa, South Africa, between 1994 and 2000,\(^82\) attempted to make its presence felt on the international scene through its contribution to UN and AU peace missions, committing a total of 2,020 troops in fourteen peace missions.\(^83\) South Africa also went into Lesotho in 1998 to reverse a coup attempt and played a mediatory role in Burundi, Sudan, and Côte d’Ivoire. These attempts, as Alden and Schoeman argue, remain a clear demonstration of South Africa’s desire to play a central role in the regional management of conflict.\(^84\)

South Africa gives the impression of being more comfortable acting as a third party mediator under the auspices of supranational institutions like the SADC, the AU, or the UN. Regardless of these initiatives, however, some critics
have also noted that a number of South Africa’s interventions, particularly the Mbeki government’s “quiet diplomacy” approach to the Zimbabwean crisis and its attempted brokerage of peace in Côte d'Ivoire are a failure.\(^85\) South Africa’s attempt to exert its authority in Africa is not without blemish.

Commenting on what has been argued as South Africa’s leadership and policy inconsistencies in Africa, some critics have pointed to the role played by South Africa in the passage of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 on Libya. Khadiagala and Nganje argue for example that South Africa, alongside Gabon and Nigeria, had initially voted in favor of the enforcement of a “no fly zone” on Libya in 2012. It repudiated it after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s military intervention on the grounds that NATO overstepped the bounds of the resolution.\(^86\) Zuma’s back-pedaling on Libya called into question Pretoria’s policy consistency, particularly with regard to South Africa’s commitment to democratization on the continent.\(^87\)

South Africa has refused to draw concrete lessons from its checkered apartheid history in the course of its interaction within the community of nations. A case in point is what Khadiagala and Nganje call the “the opportunity provided by the Arab Spring,”\(^88\) which should have been used by South Africa to “reassert its leadership on democracy promotion, particularly since Libya and most of North Africa had for a long time remained strongholds of authoritarianism in Africa.”\(^89\) Instead, South Africa’s policy discourse was dominated by claims concerning NATO’s “regime change” in Libya. Zuma maintained that NATO and the UN had undermined African efforts and argued that “the AU was not given space to implement its roadmap to ensure an African solution to the Libyan question.”\(^90\)

One other issue that evinces South Africa’s policy inconsistency in Africa is the manner in which its leadership chooses what international treaty, convention, or accord to respect and which ones to disregard. Since the end of apartheid in 1994 and more recently under the Zuma administration, South Africa has been caught “double speaking” and also acting at variance with some of the conventions to which it voluntarily subscribed. In this regard, critiques argue that there can be no better example than in the stance taken by South Africa over the arrest warrant issued to the Sudanese president Omar Al-Bashir for crimes allegedly committed against his own people during the Darfur crisis.\(^91\) South Africa’s adoption of this position is despite the fact that it is a founding member of the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the Hague. It was also one of the first countries in Africa to domesticate the Rome Statute, which created the ICC. Yet the Zuma administration chose to remain silent in the face of the onslaught of opposition to the ICC.\(^92\) South Africa under Zuma was to later take its anti-ICC campaigns to a new height and what some analysts described as “reversing the fight against impunity”\(^93\) when it teamed up to condemn the ICC over its indictment of Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta and his vice president, William Ruto, over the crisis that erupted in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential election in Kenya.\(^94\)
South Africa’s May 2013 decision to vote in favor of the motion calling for sitting African heads of state to be exempted from facing trials at the Hague until the expiration of their term(s) in office and the support it gave to the AU’s October 2013 decision requesting deferral the trials of Kenyatta and Ruto stand diametrically opposed to what should be the ideals of a country intending to command respect within the international community. This development has in fact been described as “an abdication of South Africa’s leadership (responsibility) in Africa, because it amounted to appeasing the anti-ICC block at the AU at the expense of its commitment to international norms.”95

More than anything else, as we argue, it represents a major dent in South Africa’s international image and perception within Africa and its presumed capacity to effectively lead the rest of Africa.

The paradox of South Africa’s soft power

The previous sections point to an interesting paradox. South Africa’s international status and middle power status give it a privileged international place between the weak and the strong in the international system. It is, however, the relatively strong—the major international powers—that supports that role. The relative weak—South Africa’s neighbors—are less supportive. South Africa continues to make vital contributions toward peacebuilding in Africa as evident in its interventions in Burundi, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, and Lesotho. However, South Africa has on a number of occasions defaulted on its commitment to a human-rights-driven foreign policy in favor of defending state security. This was evident, for example, in South Africa’s staunch defence of the Mugabe-led government in Zimbabwe, even in the face of gross human rights violations. It is also evident in its refusal to implement ICC’s arrest warrants against Omar Al-Bashir of Sudan. Acts like these risk portraying South Africa as an obstacle to peace and security on the African continent.

Another factor inhibiting South Africa’s full potential in Africa is the potential effect of xenophobia, which is believed to be motivated by South Africa’s internal socioeconomic challenges. While it is true that the South African government maintains a zero-tolerance for the act, many observers, particularly South Africa’s neighbors, believe that not enough is being done to forestall its reoccurrence. Sporadic xenophobic backlashes still occur in South Africa, which often escape the popular news media. Clearly, this stands in contrast to the United Nations Convention of 1951 and the 1967 Protocol, both of which relate to the status of refugees, defines who they are, and delineates the legal obligations of states toward them.

The inability of South Africa to act boldly in this regard arguably limits its influence as a successful interventionist/mediator, especially within its sub-region, and its capacity to be trusted as an unbiased conflict negotiator in Africa. Similarly, while South Africa’s involvement in the DRC may be a
testament to Mbeki’s wider African renaissance agenda and the need to find African solutions to African problems, some observers maintain the view that the underlying motive for the “invasion” was to prepare the way for “a deeper penetration of the DRC’s resource-rich country by mining companies and other South African corporations with ties to the South Africa’s political elite.” So strong was this perception that some analysts have argued that South Africa appears to be the only country with influence on the regime in Kinshasa.

Nothing better sums up the motivation behind South Africa’s intervention in the Great Lakes region than the speech credited to Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, who in a recent interview stressed the importance of the DRC and the Great Lakes region to South Africa’s foreign policy and economic development prospects. She noted that if “Africa were a body, the real heartbeat at the centre of that body would be the Great Lakes. The region is endowed with minerals, has fertile land for agricultural purposes and holds immense potential to set Africa on a higher trajectory.” It perhaps bears noting that while the adoption of economic diplomacy as a tool for foreign policy is not necessarily bad, it is bad when the approach is seen as overriding the singular objective of peacebuilding, as evidenced in the DRC case.

South Africa, since the advent of the Jacob Zuma led presidency in 2009, appears unwilling to intervene in a conflict, particularly within Africa, when it stands to gain nothing in return. More importantly, the continuing decision by South Africa to aggressively pursue its own economic interest in the course of its conflict intervention in Africa erodes the foundation of its soft power.

South Africa, nonetheless, has attempted to dispel the negative connotations of its hegemonic position in Africa. It has not succeeded in eradicating all fears and suspicions among fellow African member states about its true intentions. It has in fact been argued that a number of African states, particularly within the Southern African subregion, have repeatedly expressed their resentment of Pretoria’s presumptuous foreign policy posture.

Further limiting South Africa’s capacity to fully exert its inherent advantages embedded in its soft power potential is the country’s unabating internal socio-economic problems, which have fueled violent reactions and exposed the troubled state of its economy. For example, and according to Municipal IQ (a specialized local government data and intelligence organization that collects data on service delivery protests), South Africa between 2014 and April 2016 has recorded at least 425 major service delivery protests, with 70 of those protests already recorded as of April 2016. Indeed, if this development continues, the capacity to affect South Africa’s perceived and actual capability to be seen as a major force and leader by its neighbors and on the African continent will be affected.

Public support for South Africa’s peace missions, particularly with regard to the genuineness of its intentions in Africa have continued to be questioned. While the leadership of South Africa’s ANC may genuinely have a sense of solidarity with other African countries, as evidenced in President
Zuma’s speech to the Congolese parliament in 2013, average South Africans find themselves more detached from the rest of the continent, ostensibly because of the country’s perceived “differentness” and isolation during the apartheid regime.  

Finally, South Africa is also often accused of being unnecessarily arrogant in its interactions with the rest of Africa. For example, Daniel and colleagues, while commenting on South Africa’s foreign policy toward Africa, term it as a South African “invasion” of the continent. A case in point is South Africa’s bilateral decision to deploy soldiers to the Central African Republic (CAR) without taking into consideration regional mechanisms and international norms.

**Conclusion: Will the giant be able to weather the storm?**

This article looks at factors that impinge on South Africa’s ability to use soft power to advance its interests. It notes that notwithstanding the seeming optimism of its soft power, South Africa’s capacity to translate this into influence is largely undercut by several factors, including its misinterpreted continental hegemonic aspiration, recurring xenophobic incidences, and its leadership inconsistencies toward Africa. South Africa faces the paradox of effectively playing the role expected of it as an international norm entrepreneur while at the same time being conscious of the expectation of its African constituency. The extent to which Pretoria is able to effectively navigate the international turbulence that confronts the expression of its soft power diplomacy within the murky waters of its national interest will be contingent on how its leadership meets the challenges confronted both in the domestic and international arena.

South Africa is a regional hegemonic power (although with serious limits). For all intents and purposes, South Africa can project a hegemonic role in Africa as long as it addresses the polemic ambivalences that confront the expression of its soft power resources. To maximize the benefits of its inarguable soft power advantages, South Africa needs to do more to convince its neighbors, particularly Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, who have at various times resented Pretoria’s audacious foreign policy posture, that its presence as a subregional power will not in any way undermine their sovereignty. It will also have to lead by example, and that will mean addressing its own domestic challenges and the gaps between its rhetoric and its actions on the continental and global stage.

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Notes


22. Ibid.


24. Ogunnubi and Isike, “Regional Hegemonic Contention.”


34. Ogunnubi, “Recalibrating Africa’s Geo-political Calculus.”


38. Alden and Schoeman, “South Africa’s Symbolic Hegemony.”


41. Ibid.


44. Sidiropoulos, “South Africa’s Emerging Soft Power.”


46. Adedeji Adebajo and Chris Landsberg, “South Africa and Nigeria as Regional Hegemons,” in *From Cape to Congo: Southern Africa’s Evolving Security Challenges,*


51. Ogunnubi and Isike, “Regional Hegemonic Contention.”

52. Alden and Schoeman, “South Africa’s Symbolic Hegemony”; Ogunnubi and Uzodike, “South Africa’s Foreign Policy.”

53. Alden and Schoeman, “South Africa’s Symbolic Hegemony.”


56. Ogunnubi and Uzodike, “South Africa’s Foreign Policy.”


61. Alden and Schoeman, “South Africa’s Symbolic Hegemony.”


65. Ibid.


79. The Peace and Security Council is Africa’s consensual security council with no veto power by any country, and all the continent’s 54 member countries wield the same level of authority.


81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Alden and Schoeman, “South Africa’s Symbolic Hegemony.”

84. Ibid.

85. Giulia Piccolino, Mediation, Local Response and the Limits of International Engagement in Cote d’Ivoire (paper presented at the ECPR Graduate Conference, Dublin, Ireland, August 30–September 1, 2010).

86. Khadiagala and Nganje, “The Evolution of South Africa’s Democracy.”

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 12.


93. Ibid., 15.


95. Khadiagala and Nganje The evolution of South Africa’s democracy, 15.

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