

African Solutions to African Problems South Africa's Foreign Policy

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Die jüngsten Interventionen westlicher Staaten in Libyen und Mali stießen auf harsche Kritik innerhalb der Afrikanischen Union. Angeführt von Südafrika mehren sich die Stimmen auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent, die selbstbewusst „afrikanische Lösungen für afrikanische Probleme“ fordern. Wie kann es den afrikanischen Staaten, gerade vor dem Hintergrund der leidvollen Erfahrungen in Ruanda, gelingen, geeignete Instrumente zur Friedenssicherung aufzubauen?

The idea of ‘African solutions to African problems’ has become a compelling maxim of the African Union (AU) and its leading member states like South Africa. It is an emotive, politically charged call that resonates equally among governments and civil society on the continent. The maxim applies to a wide range of issues, including development, education and health, but it is used most often in relation to peace and security. It is embodied in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which encompasses the Peace and Security Council, the Continental Early Warning System, the African Standby Force, the Panel of the Wise and the Peace Fund.

Former President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa was one of the principal designers of APSA and his successor, President Jacob Zuma, has followed suit in seeking to strengthen the mechanisms. In May this year Zuma proposed that the AU should create a military rapid reaction force known as the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC). Zuma motivated this proposal, which was accepted by the AU Summit, in terms of ‘African solutions to African problems’. More broadly, South Africa emphasised this dictum when it served on the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 2007/08 and again in 2011/12.¹

¹ Statement by Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane: Parliamentary debate on the Central African Republic, 23.04.2013. <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2013/mash0423.html> (accessed 17.07.2013).

The concept of ‘African solutions’ evokes a sense of self-reliance, responsibility, pride, ownership and indigeneity, at once a rallying cry and a neat amalgam of politics, agency and geography. But what exactly is it intended to convey, and what are its implications? In the discussion that follows I address these questions in the context of South Africa’s foreign policy, distinguishing between the organisational, ideological and cultural implications of the concept.

Responsibility for Peace and Security

At the most basic level the maxim of ‘African solutions’ is a manifestation of the global tendency for regional organisations to claim a prominent role in the prevention and resolution of conflict in their respective neighbourhoods. This position has long been endorsed internationally. Article 52 of the UN Charter promotes regional arrangements and agencies for dealing with matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action. The end of the Cold War gave fresh impetus to this aspiration. Over the past two decades the UN has championed the peacemaking role of regional bodies. The motivation is that these bodies have a compelling interest in local peace and stability, are more familiar with local conflict dynamics than other actors and can build trust through frequent interaction.

The precept of ‘African solutions’ fits this general pattern of regional responsibility for security and peacemaking. But it has an additional urgency and poignancy as a call to overcome the continent’s inability to deal decisively with large-scale violent conflicts. The most devastating conflict in this regard was the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which the UN peacekeeping mission in that country failed to stop. These events stimulated the emergence of APSA and the AU’s radical policy shift from ‘non-interference’ to ‘non-indifference’. In the wake of the genocide, African leaders were determined to end the continent’s reliance on being rescued by the UN in calamitous situations.

The more recent crisis in Mali triggered President Zuma’s proposal to set up the ACIRC. In early 2012 separatist and Islamic rebel movements seized and occupied large swathes of territory in northern Mali. Over the following year the Islamists mounted a campaign to take the capital city, Bamako. In January 2013 the country was saved in the nick of time by French military intervention. South Africa’s foreign minister, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, referred to these events when explaining the AU’s decision to create a rapid reaction force:

This is the time for Africans to provide African solutions for African problems. We shouldn’t be hamstrung and wait and just sit, like ducks, like what happened in Mali. [...] Leaders in that region [West Africa] say that it took

them 11 meetings in 11 months polishing the decision to intervene in Mali, until one day they woke up and the rebels were now marching towards Bamako. That shouldn't have happened.²

A key implication of 'African solutions to African problems' is thus organisational, concerning the building of military and other kinds of capacity in order to prevent and resolve high-intensity conflict. Pretoria expects the UN to support the AU's capacity-building efforts on this front. While serving on the UN Security Council in 2012, South Africa sponsored the drafting of Security Council Resolution 2033 on strengthening the relationship between the UN and regional organisations, particularly the AU, in the maintenance of peace and security. South Africa and the AU have stated repeatedly that the drive for 'Afri-can solutions' does not absolve the UN of its peace and security responsibilities on the continent.

The Anti-Imperialist Critique

The crises in Rwanda and Mali highlight the import of 'African solutions' as a continental project to build capacity for greater African engagement, if not self-reliance, in the sphere of peace and security. The crises in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, on the other hand, reveal that the maxim is also an expression of opposition to Western solutions to African problems and, more specifically, to the imposition of Western solutions. South Africa and the AU have articulated a visceral critique of external bullying and militarism that deny African organisations the opportunity to fulfil their responsibility for peacemaking in their own neighbourhood. African leaders were humiliated and incensed by the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 and by the French military intervention in Côte d'Ivoire in the same year. They insist that their peacemaking efforts were brushed aside in these two conflicts by more powerful, non-African actors. In the midst of the Libyan civil war, President Zuma castigated the 'developed world' for deviating from the intent of UN Security Council resolution 1973, which authorised a no-fly zone to protect civilians. He accused NATO and its allies of pursuing a regime change agenda and reiterated 'the AU's call for African solu-tions to African problems'.³

This invocation of 'African solutions' is a core element of the anti-imperialist ideology that lies at the heart of South Africa's foreign policy.⁴ In terms less diplomatic than Zuma, Deputy Foreign Minister Ebrahim Ebrahim placed the Libyan experience squarely within Pretoria's anti-imperialist view of the con-temporary world order:

² SouthAfrican.info: SA backs African rapid response force, 30.05.2013. <http://www.southafrica.info> (accessed 17.07.2013).

³ Address by President Jacob Zuma to the Parliament of the Republic of Burundi on the occasion of the State visit to Burundi, 11.08.2011. <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=4642> (accessed 17.07.2013).

⁴ Nathan, Laurie: Consistencies and Inconsistencies in South African Foreign Policy. In: International Affairs 81(2), 2005, p. 361-372.

Libya will remain one of the recent harsh reminders that indeed it is neither principles nor international law that matters in world politics, but the narrow national interests of those who have the best and the most sophisticated means of perpetuating violence, and who do not hesitate to unleash them on anyone to further their objectives! The centuries old maxim of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides still applies: that the strong do as they wish, while the weak suffer what they must! Libya will serve as another recent reminder of how the AU, despite its best intentions to be at the centre of dealing with African challenges, continues to be deliberately side-lined.⁵

The anti-imperialist paradigm and South Africa's vision of an African Renaissance are intimately linked since both have to do with self-reliance and genuine political independence. Pretoria's commitment to the development and flourishing of the continent is simultaneously a commitment to breaking neo-colonial relations between Africa and the world's economic powers. As Deputy Minister Ebrahim put it, it is only when African leaders can stand together against 'powerful forces (our former colonisers)' that 'we as Africans indeed become the midwives of our own destiny'.⁶

An African Style of Peacemaking?

Since the advent of democracy in 1994 South Africa has been extensively engaged in peacemaking on the continent. This is due to a number of factors: the country's perceived moral obligation to compensate Africa for the sins of apartheid; its sizable economic and military resources, which give it the capacity and clout to play a leadership role; and the success of its own negotiated transition to democracy, which it seeks to promote in other conflicts. In addition, as Mbeki argued, the African Renaissance depends on sustained development, investment and economic growth, which in turn require good governance, peace and stability. Conflict resolution in Africa is consequently a central thrust of South Africa's foreign policy.

This foreign policy priority is obviously consistent with the maxim of 'African solutions'. But does the maxim also mean that South African peacemaking has a distinctly African content or a distinctly African method or style? Are the peace processes led by Pretoria different from, say, those of Europe or the UN? This does not appear to be the case. Within South Africa, especially in certain rural areas, traditional African forms of conflict resolution are still practiced but there does not seem to be anything specifically African about the government's peacemaking endeavours on the continent.

⁵ Statement by Deputy Minister Ebrahim Ebrahim: Libya, the United Nations, the African Union and South Africa: Wrong Motives? Wrong Moves? Pretoria University, 15.09.2011.

⁶ Ibid.

Pretoria undoubtedly has a predilection for pacific rather than militarist forms of conflict resolution. In response to a number of major conflicts – including those in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, the Comoros in 2008 and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1998 – South Africa vociferously opposed the external use of force, whether by Africans or non-Africans, and argued that a negotiated settlement was the only viable basis for ensuring long-term stability. Nevertheless, South Africa's involvement in UN peace operations in the DRC, Darfur and elsewhere, and President Zuma's ACIRC initiative mentioned earlier, indicate that Pretoria is not averse in all circumstances to multilateral military intervention.

In keeping with its preference for pacific modes of conflict resolution, Pretoria has been energetically involved in mediation throughout the continent, including in Burundi, the Comoros, the DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar and Zimbabwe. These endeavours have almost always been driven by the President. On the positive side, they have been characterised by a persistent, patient and comprehensive approach. This cannot be said to be an African trait, how-ever. Mediation undertaken by other African governments and statespersons has often been ad hoc, hasty and superficial.

On the negative side, President Mbeki's peacemaking initiatives were sometimes perceived to be biased against the opposition parties and in favour of the government of the country in conflict. This was especially true of his mediation for Côte d'Ivoire in 2005 and Zimbabwe in 2007/08. The Zimbabwe mediation was also controversial because Mbeki's style of 'quiet diplomacy' was seen by human rights activists and Western countries as protecting the Mugabe regime and turning a blind eye to its egregious human rights abuses. Mbeki joined Mugabe in complaining bitterly about the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by the European Union and the United States.

At a public level the controversy around the Zimbabwe mediation often looked like a clash between African and Western perspectives on human rights and crisis management. Yet at a less visible level there were several African presidents, including those from Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius and Tanzania, who were very critical of Mbeki's approach to Zimbabwe. And his efforts in Côte d'Ivoire were ultimately rejected by West African states. More generally, mediator bias is a worldwide phenom-enon rather than an African one, and many mediators in many parts of the world practice 'quiet diplomacy'.

When one examines the mediations run by South Africa, they appear to be little different procedurally from those hosted by the UN. They entail formal negotiations between the government and opposition parties; take place behind closed doors; have a legal or quasi legal orientation; bring in technical expertise on various topics;

concentrate on substantive issues of power, resources and institutions rather than on improving relations between the parties; have tight timeframes and deadlines; and are concluded with the signing of agreements. There is nothing particularly African about this model of mediation and negotiations.

Finally, the content of the negotiated agreements facilitated by Pretoria as a mediator are very similar to those brokered by other mediators in situations of civil war, focusing on elections, the constitution, security, human rights and governance. Pretoria does have a tendency to encourage power-sharing arrangements in these situations but this is more a result of its own negotiated settlement than an African inclination.

Conclusion

The goal of ‘African solutions to African problems’ enjoys broad support within civil society and among governments and inter-governmental organisations, both on the continent and at the UN. Over time, the AU is therefore likely to move closer to the attainment of that goal.

However, there are two substantial obstacles to progress. First, African countries are frequently disunited in their responses to a conflict; this occurred during the crises in Libya, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire. In the absence of unity, it is unclear what the ‘African solution’ is, the AU and sub-regional bodies are unable to act with common purpose and there is hence more space for non-African actors to intervene. The second big obstacle is funding. APSA in general, and African peace operations in particular, rely on UN support and external funding, making them vulnerable to external leverage. The bottom line is that the more financially independent the AU’s peacemaking becomes, the more politically independent it will be.

Südafrika in Daten

Ländername	Republic of South Africa
Einwohner	50 Mio. (Deutschland: 80 Mio.)
Fläche	1,2 Mio. km ² (Deutschland: 349.000 km ²)
Bevölkerung	80 % Schwarze (u. a. Zulu und Xhosa), 9 % Weiße, 9 % „Coloureds“, 2 % Asiaten (v. a. Inder)
Hauptstadt	Pretoria
Staatsform	Republik
Staatsoberhaupt u. Regierungschef	Präsident Jacob Zuma
Religionen	80 % Christen (diverse Strömungen), 13 % sonst. Religio-nen, 7 % Konfessionslose
BIP pro Kopf 2011 im regionalen Vergleich (in Euro, gerundet)	Südafrika 6.100 Botswana 7.300 Namibia 4.500 Swasiland 2.800 Lesotho 1.000 Simbabwe 530 Mosambik 440 (Deutschland 31.400)
Quellen:	Auswärtiges Amt, Internationaler Währungsfond