

**“Zimbabwe is not a South African province”:
Historicising South Africa’s Zimbabwe policy since the 1960s**

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Abstract

This paper interrogates analyses of Thabo Mbeki’s South Africa’s Zimbabwe policy which compare his approach to that of John Vorster’s government in the 1970s and decry Mbeki’s inability or unwillingness to use its ostensibly considerable hegemonic power to force Robert Mugabe to practise good governance.¹ It is argued that just as Vorster used South Africa’s dominant influence over Rhodesia to “persuade” Ian Smith to negotiate with the country’s African nationalist leaders, the Mbeki administration should have taken a similar line instead of pursuing “quiet diplomacy”. The assumption is that little had changed in the relations between the two countries in the meantime and that South Africa continued to have the same level of hegemonic power over Zimbabwe. The paper argues that a more historicised approach shows that the relations between the two countries had changed so dramatically by the 1990s that South Africa no longer wielded compelling power and influence over its northern neighbour. The thirty-year liberation wars in the region and the “debt” that the ANC government owed the region for its support during the struggle, among other factors, meant that the dynamics governing South Africa–Zimbabwe relations were very different.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; South Africa; diplomacy; hegemony; Thabo Mbeki; Robert Mugabe; Rhodesia; sanctions; B.J. Vorster.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bevaagteken analises wat Suid-Afrika se Zimbabwiese beleid in die Mbeki-era vergelyk met dié van John Vorster se regering in die 1970’s, en wat Mbeki se onvermoë of onwilligheid betreur om sy land se oënskynlik noemenswaardige hegemonesie mag te gebruik om Robert Mugabe tot ’n verantwoordbare regering te dwing. Daar is aangevoer

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1. The quote in the title is from BBC News, 5 April 2008, Thabo Mbeki speaking at a Progressive Governance Conference of centre left leaders, Watford, England, April 2008.

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dat net soos wat Vorster gebruik gemaak het van Suid-Afrika se magsoorwig om Ian Smith te “oorreed” om met sy land se swart nasionalistiese leiers te onderhandel, die Mbeki-regering, in plaas van sy “stille diplomاسie”, dieselfde roete moes gevolg het. Die aanname is dat daar in die tussentyd weinig verander het wat betref die verhouding tussen die twee lande, en dat Suid-Afrika steeds dieselfde mate van hegemonesiese mag oor Zimbabwe gehad het. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat ’n meer historistiese benadering daarop wys dat die verhouding tussen die twee lande teen die 1990’s só dramaties verander het dat Suid-Afrika nie meer dieselfde mag en invloed oor sy noordelike buurman kon uitoefen nie. Die streek se dertig jaar-lange vryheidsoorloë en die ANC se “morele skuld” teenoor die streek na dié se steun tydens die vryheidstryd het, tesame met ander faktore, daarop neergekom dat die verhoudingsdinamika tussen Suid-Afrika en Zimbabwe baie anders was.

Sleutelwoorde: Zimbabwe; Suid-Afrika; diplomاسie; hegemonie; Thabo Mbeki; Robert Mugabe, Rhodesië; sanksies; B.J. Vorster.

Background

South Africa’s recent policy towards Zimbabwe in the context of that country’s multi-layered crisis,² particularly the so-called quiet diplomacy of former President Thabo Mbeki, came under heavy criticism as an ineffectual, inappropriate, and a disappointing response from a neighbouring country with the power to force the hand of Zimbabwe’s rulers because of its position as an economic, political, and, by implication, a moral giant in the region. Post-apartheid South Africa’s alleged “failure” to discipline Harare was unfavourably compared to the success of the John Vorster administration in quickly bringing Ian Smith’s Rhodesian government to heel by applying economic pressure to force it to accept political change. In D. Geldenhuys’ words:

South Africa is being singled out for critical attention because its special relationship with Zimbabwe gives it both the motive (South Africa’s vital interests are at stake) and the means (flowing from its economic preponderance) to act more forcefully in resolving the crisis in Zimbabwe.

According to this view, in the 1970s it was only the South African prime minister who “could provide the ‘clinch’ that sealed the fate of UDI and the Smith regime”. Similarly, it was argued, the South African president “is the sole leader who can do the same now to end the crisis in Zimbabwe” because “*there would be no Zimbabwean crisis*

2. For a brief discussion of Zimbabwe’s multi-layered crisis, see A.S. Mlambo and B. Raftopoulos, “Zimbabwe’s Multi-layered Crisis in a Regional Context: An Analysis”, Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) Brief, 9, 3 (2010) available at <http://www.cmi.no/publications/publication/?3727=zimbabwes-multilayered-crisis>

without . . . South African support” (emphasis added).³ Similarly, in her analysis of the Mbeki policy in 2005, Linda Freeman argued:

In the apartheid era, South African governments had been both willing and able to pull recalcitrant governments into line. Unofficial sanctions – the long delays for border controls, disappearing rolling stock and, especially, refrigerated railway cars – were used to express displeasure. Power blackouts were also in the realm of possibility, as were an end to petrol supplies. One has only to review the comparative ease with which the South African Prime Minister, John Vorster pulled Ian Smith, the rebel Rhodesian leader, into line and forced an end to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in the 1970s to appreciate the *very real potential power which the South African state possessed* (emphasis added).⁴

Making the same point, one commentator maintained that “At the height of Zimbabwe’s political turmoil, the only country with the power to change the course of Zimbabwe’s history was South Africa” and added that “Thabo Mbeki was the only individual capable of bringing pressure to bear on President Robert Mugabe. Despite this wealth of opportunity, Mbeki chose ‘silent diplomacy’.”⁵

The assumption informing the above arguments is that a “special relationship” exists between South Africa and its northern neighbour, and has always been there. As Geldenhuys argues, throughout the last four or so decades, “the two neighbouring countries have . . . enjoyed a special relationship born of geographical contiguity, historical ties, economic interdependence, racial solidarity and shared political interests”. It is in the context of this special relationship that “the present dissension over South Africa’s response to the turmoil in Zimbabwe has to be seen”.⁶ Thus, underpinning this view is that (a) South Africa has the power to influence Zimbabwe’s policy if it chooses to use it; (b) the Harare regime would do what South Africa required because of South Africa’s hegemonic

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3. D. Geldenhuys, “The Special Relationship between South Africa and Zimbabwe” at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Chapter+7%3a+the+special+relationship+between+South+Africa+and+Zimbabwe> Accessed 7 January 2010, citing R.W. Johnson, “Mugabe, Mbeki and Mandela’s Shadow”, *National Interest*, 63 (Spring 2001), at <http://0-web26.epnet.com>
 4. L. Freeman, “South Africa’s Zimbabwe Policy: Unravelling the Contradictions”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 23, 2 (2005), pp 147–172. For similar views on South Africa’s potential to twist the arms of the Harare administration through economic pressure, see also P. Bond, “Zimbabwe, South Africa and the Power Politics of Bourgeois Democracy”, *Monthly Review*, 54, 1 (2002), at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0502bond.htm> and A.S. Mlambo, “South Africa’s Reaction to the Zimbabwean Crisis in Historical Perspective, with a Focus on the Mbeki Years”, Paper presented to the Canadian Association of African Studies, Ottawa, Canada, 5–7 May 2010.
 5. T.J. Fowale, “South Africa–Zimbabwe Relations under Mbeki: Thabo Mbeki’s ‘Silent Diplomacy’ and Zimbabwe’s Power Struggle”, at www.Suite101.com Accessed 3 July 2009.
 6. Geldenhuys, “Special Relationship”.

power over Zimbabwe; and (c) South Africa has “failed” to or “chose” not to exercise its power to get Mugabe to change his ways.

This paper questions this reading of South African–Zimbabwe relations in the last half a century, especially the assumption that the hegemonic power that South Africa wielded over its northern neighbour in the 1960s still obtains a half century later, and that Mugabe will cave in under South African pressure in the same way that Ian Smith did in the 1970s. It argues that regional dynamics have drastically changed, mostly because of the region’s thirty-years of liberation wars and apartheid South Africa’s destabilisation campaign in the 1970s and 80s, as well as the “debt” that the present South African government leadership owes the region for the support it received during the years of the struggle. These and other developments have meant that unlike the situation in the 1960s, Pretoria now has limited influence when compared to Pretoria’s influence on Salisbury then, if only because Harare, unlike Salisbury, does not recognise or accept South African leadership or South Africa’s right to set the standards to be followed in the region. These arguments are developed below.

South Africa’s hegemony and power in the UDI period

As is well documented, South Africa and its northern neighbour have had a long historical relationship, dating from the founding of Rhodesia as a British colony in 1890. In that year, Cecil John Rhodes’ pioneer column crossed the Limpopo from South Africa and established the colony of Rhodesia. The very foundation of the colony was thus directly linked to South Africa. This connection persisted throughout the colonial period despite periodic tensions between the two countries, partly arising from the mutual suspicion between the English and Afrikaner settlers, some of whom had trekked into the country in the very early years of European colonisation.⁷ Indeed, there was some expectation that Southern Rhodesia would eventually become incorporated into South Africa. The possibility of it becoming another South African province was scuttled in 1923 when a referendum was held to decide the political future of the country. The electorate voted for self-government under British control rather than incorporation into South Africa.⁸

Despite this, however, for decades afterwards, South Africa remained the model for many Rhodesian institutions and policies, while both countries shared similar views on race relations between the white and African populations. While Southern Rhodesia did not establish a rigid apartheid system like South Africa, in the 1930s Prime Minister Huggins did advocate the “two-pyramids” or “parallel development” policy which also advocated separate development.⁹ Partly to wean Southern Rhodesia from South African

7. For evidence of such tensions, see A.S. Mlambo, *White Immigration into Rhodesia: From Occupation to Federation* (UZ Publications, Harare, 2002).

8. P.R. Warhust, “Rhodesian–South African Relations, 1900–1923”, *South African Historical Journal*, 3, 1 (1971), pp 93–108.

9. G. Arrighi, “The Political Economy of Rhodesia”, *New Left Review*, 39 (1966), pp 35–65.

influence and to curtail the expansion of Afrikaner influence into the African interior, as well as to strengthen the region's economy, among other considerations, the British helped sponsor the Central African Federation that brought the two Rhodesias and Nyasaland together in 1953.¹⁰

Economically, Southern Rhodesia was very heavily dependent on its larger southern neighbour, which was its biggest trading partner and major source of investment capital for its mining and manufacturing industries.¹¹ The two countries became even closer after the now-renamed Rhodesia declared unilateral independence (UDI) from Britain in November 1965, when Salisbury faced international ostracism and a wide range of economic sanctions that were designed to cripple the Rhodesian economy and bring an end to UDI.¹² This made Rhodesia even more economically dependent on South Africa, because normal trade with the rest of the world became difficult. South Africa's role in frustrating international sanctions by supplying Rhodesia with oil, facilitating its contraband trade, and its refusal to condemn the Ian Smith regime, have been well documented.¹³

For an entire decade, South Africa maintained its neutrality in the quarrel between Britain and Rhodesia and continued trading with both countries. It also denounced

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10. Report of the Rhodesia-Nyasaland Royal Commission [Chairman: Viscount Bledisloe] (Cmd. 5949, 1939), (HMSO, London, 1939); R. Hyam, "The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953", *The Historical Journal*, 30, 1 (1987), pp 145-72.
 11. D.G. Clarke, *Foreign Companies and International Investment in Zimbabwe* (Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1975); V.M. Gwande, "Foreign Capital, State and the Development of Secondary Industry in Southern Rhodesia, 1939-1956", MA thesis, University of the Free State, 2015.
 12. R. Renwick, *Economic Sanctions* (Centre for International Affairs, Cambridge MA, 1981); National Archives of South Africa-Dept of Foreign Affairs (hereafter NASA-DFA), 1/156/19, Vol. 2, Rhodesia: UDI Events at the United Nations, Declared Measures by Member States, S.A. Permanent Representative to the UN, to Secretary, Foreign Affairs, 10 April 1966.
 13. A.S. Mlambo, "'We have blood relations over the border': South Africa and Rhodesian Sanctions, 1965-1975", *African Historical Review*, 40, 1 (July 2008); J. Jardim, *Sanctions Double-Cross: Oil to Rhodesia* (Books of Rhodesia, Bulawayo, 1979). See correspondence in NASA-DFA, 1/156/1/18/10, Vol. 1, Petroleum: British Action in Mocambique Channel of Beira: SA Permanent Representative to the UN, to Sect, Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, 8 April 1966; SA Embassy, Lisbon, to Sect, Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, 6 April 1966; and SA Embassy, London, to UK Government, 9 April 1966. Also NASA-DFA, 1/156/1/18/10, Vol. 1, Petroleum: British Action in Mocambique Channel, Verwoerd's 1966 speech cited by K. Rood, Chairman, SA Lines, Cape Town, 1/167. See also R. Mobley, "The Beira Patrol: Britain's Broken Blockade against Rhodesia", *Naval War College Review*, 55, 1 (Winter 2002); NASA-DFA, 1/156/1/2, Vol. 6, Rhodesia: UDI, Special Committee on Short Term Problems, Meetings, Recommendations etc., H. Hawkins, Diplomatic Representative, Rhodesian Diplomatic Mission, Cape Town, to Sect. Foreign Affairs, 1 August, 1974.

sanctions as a weapon of international diplomacy and refused to be party to them.¹⁴ South Africa supported Rhodesia even though it believed that the country was making a big mistake by declaring UDI. President Hendrik Verwoerd's warning that it would be "foolish for Southern Rhodesia to declare independence unilaterally" and the advice that "Southern Rhodesia should do nothing illegal and unconstitutional" had been communicated to Rhodesian leaders but had been ignored.¹⁵ In addition, Afrikaner leadership in South Africa frowned on Rhodesia's political system which was, in their eyes, unacceptable because it envisaged an ultimate sharing of power between black and white, unlike the separate development advocated under the apartheid system.¹⁶ South Africa's support for Rhodesia, therefore, was not given blindly.

South Africa's stance was informed by a number of considerations, including fear that the success of sanctions against Rhodesia might set a precedent that would see the same weapon applied against it because of apartheid. Secondly, there was the need to support kith and kin across the border. As Verwoerd said in 1966, South Africa could not support international sanctions against Rhodesia because "We have blood relations over the border. However others may feel or act towards their kith and kin, when international interests are at stake, South Africa, on the whole, cannot cold shoulder theirs".¹⁷

Thirdly, and most importantly, there was the fact that South African and Rhodesian rulers shared the same worldview; one which regarded the upholding of white civilisation as fundamental to the continued prosperity of their societies and economies. They were bitterly opposed to growing black nationalism or "communism", as both governments often characterised the mounting African nationalist opposition to white minority rule, that was threatening their world. In the words of the leader of the South African opposition, Sir de Villiers Graaff, "the people of South Africa will never forgive the Prime Minister [Verwoerd] if he sits idly by while civilized government and stability are destroyed in Rhodesia as they have been in so many states".¹⁸

South African support for the Smith regime was thus based on the thinking that it was better to resist "communism" on the Zambezi rather than to confront it later at the Limpopo. Hence, South Africa provided Rhodesia with para-military support during the early years of the latter's escalating military conflict with African nationalist guerrillas and

14. International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAAF), Jan/June 1968, 51E, cited in J. Barber and J. Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1945-1988* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), p 137.

15. NASA-DFA, 1/156/3 Vol. 2, Southern Rhodesia Relations with South Africa, 20 April 1964-23 July 1964, Embassy, Salisbury to Secretary Foreign Affairs, Cape Town, 26 June 1964.

16. NASA-DFA, 1/156/3/ Vol 2, Southern Rhodesia Relations with South Africa, 20 April 1964-23 July 1974, Embassy, Salisbury to Secretary Foreign Affairs, Cape Town, 26 June 1964.

17. Cited in the *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 January 1966.

18. Government of South Africa, *Assembly Debates* 25 January 1966, col. 43, cited in G-M. Cockram, *Vorster's Foreign Policy* (Academica, Pretoria, 1970), p 178.

also provided other logistical support. By 1969, “South Africa had deployed an estimated 2 700 para-military troops inside Rhodesia”.¹⁹ Until 1974-5, South Africa’s foreign policy on Rhodesia was governed by a combination of national self-interest and sympathy with neighbours arising out of racial solidarity and a shared worldview. Scholarly analyses that juxtapose the post-1994 government’s reluctance and “failure” to pull the rug from under the feet of the government in Harare by pointing out how the South African government readily did this, thus, are somewhat misleading. In fact, for a whole decade after UDI, the same criticism of the post-apartheid South African government was made of South Africa then, precisely for its refusal or failure to put pressure on Salisbury.²⁰

There is a sense of *déjà vu*, therefore, when one observes the prevailing scenario during the Zimbabwean crisis of the 2000s in which the ANC government was heavily criticised for not putting pressure on Harare to persuade it to change its ways and South Africa’s adamant refusal to comply with this view which it regarded as being pushed by Western elements seeking to promote a sinister agenda. Common to both situations, it will be argued below, is the need for solidarity between the two countries in defence of common interests. The accusation that the South African government was failing to discharge its obligations in the manner that earlier South African governments had ostensibly done in the 1970s, is clearly a-historical, because it does not take into account the fact that as long as Pretoria shared the same worldview with Salisbury and its interests were not directly threatened, it was quite happy to give its support to the Smith regime regardless of what the rest of the world thought.

Indeed, until 1974-5, South Africa fully supported its neighbour against the rest of the world. However, demonstrating the pragmatic nature of the country’s foreign policy, South Africa’s attitude towards Rhodesia eventually changed and it then used its considerable power and influence to “persuade” Rhodesia to enter into negotiations with black Rhodesians; leading Ian Smith to characterise South Africa’s policy as the “great betrayal”.²¹ Smith could not understand how Rhodesia’s friends whose support was always “staunch and consistent” and “who could be trusted for the obvious and sound reason that we were in the same boat, and we would either survive or sink together” could suddenly hang them out to dry and abandon them.²²

By then, South Africa’s power over the Rhodesian economy was overwhelming. Not only was South Africa Rhodesia’s only trading lifeline, especially after the closure of its trade routes through Mozambique following that country’s independence from Portugal in 1975, but it also was a major source of financial and logistical support for Rhodesia’s anti-

19. E. Torreguitar, *National Liberation Movements in Office: Forging Democracy with African Adjectives in Namibia* (Peter Lang, Oxford, 2009), p 420.

20. Message, Commonwealth Relations Office to British High Commissions, 7 April 1966, Records of the Prime Minister’s Office, 13/11/1139, cited in Mobley, “The Beira Patrol”.

21. I. Smith, *The Great Betrayal* (Blake Publishing, London, 1997).

22. Smith, *The Great Betrayal*, pp 228–229.

insurgency campaigns. When South Africa decided to put the economic squeeze on its northern neighbour and also to withdraw its military units from the country, Rhodesia could not resist the pressure. Acknowledging how South Africa was exerting economic pressure on Rhodesia, the then Rhodesian deputy minister commented:

50 percent of the Rhodesian defence bill was paid by South Africa until June. A reply has not been given since then as to whether they would support it for a further year . . . The railways system is moving very few goods – reported congestion. The border was closed over the period of the Kissinger talks, 1–4 days . . . It is difficult to prove these facts, as we cannot afford to antagonise South Africa by exposing her. The Prime Minister has considered appealing to the South African public over Vorster's head, but did not have enough time. Against this background, the RF [Rhodesia Front] had no alternative but to accept the Kissinger package deal. Saying no would have meant fighting a rearguard action at Beitbridge.²³

Important to note is that South Africa's "betrayal" of Salisbury only came when it became clear that the escalating guerrilla war in Rhodesia was radicalising African nationalists even more and that the Rhodesian war was unwinnable in the long run. Moreover, Vorster was then keen to improve relations with the African continent. To avert the danger of South Africa eventually being confronted by a radical nationalist government at its very doorstep, it was decided to facilitate political change in Rhodesia in a way that would ensure that a mild and pliable black government which would be well-disposed towards Pretoria would be ensconced in Salisbury. Once this decision had been made, Ian Smith's continued intransigence was now seen as foolhardy and harmful to South Africa's national interests and pressure was exerted on Salisbury to negotiate with the "right" African nationalists in order to behold the increasingly radicalised African nationalist struggle spearheaded by ZAPU and ZANU. Thus was born the internal settlement and the Muzorewa administration of the very short-lived Zimbabwe–Rhodesia regime. Ironically, therefore, Rhodesia had to be betrayed in order to preserve the shared worldview focusing on white domination and privilege. As will be argued later, a shared view of the need to protect the collective gains of the liberation struggle in the region was to influence post-apartheid leaders' policies towards Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's independence and South African destabilisation

Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 changed the nature of the relationship between the two countries, because the incoming Zimbabwean government maintained a strong anti-apartheid stance and supported the South African liberation movements, its heavy economic dependence on South Africa notwithstanding. While South Africa remained Zimbabwe's major trading partner and South African capital still dominated Zimbabwe's economy as in the past, the hegemonic power that it had enjoyed in the past no longer existed, especially since the removal of international sanctions opened up opportunities

23. Cited in P.L. Moorcraft, *A Short Thousand Years* (Galaxie Press, Salisbury, 1979).

for global trade and investment inflows into the country and the country was no longer heavily dependent on South Africa alone. If, as is argued, hegemonic power depends in part on acceptance or “buy in” by those over whom it is exercised, there was little that Harare admired or accepted about the apartheid system in South Africa. Instead, like other Frontline States (FLS), Zimbabwe regarded South Africa as a big racist bully to be resisted and destroyed – hence, the creation of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) by the Frontline States in a bid to lessen their economic dependence on South Africa.²⁴

Meanwhile, South Africa’s destabilisation campaign against its neighbours did little to endear it to the region.²⁵ Clearly, it was no longer feasible to speak of a “special relationship” between South Africa and its northern neighbour in the 1980s. What was happening in this period was not just a temporary interruption,²⁶ but a fundamental and far-reaching transformation of the way in which the two countries related to each other and would relate in the future.

South Africa’s quiet diplomacy and its critics

Quiet diplomacy emerged, in part, as a reaction to the very vocal and public criticism of Mugabe’s government by leaders of the Western countries, which the South African government leaders disparagingly characterised as “megaphone diplomacy”.²⁷ It was a rejection of the strident denunciation of Robert Mugabe and his government and the calls for his removal, especially in the wake of the takeover of white-owned farms by supporters of the Zimbabwean government from the year 2000 onwards. Western “megaphone diplomacy” was accompanied by a systematic and relentless campaign to demonise Mugabe in the British press.

In May 2000, Britain imposed an arms embargo on Zimbabwe, stopped the provision of 450 British Land Rovers destined for the Zimbabwe Republic Police as part of a standing Britain–Zimbabwe agreement and later, together with the European Union, imposed “smart” or targeted sanctions namely, financial restrictions, travel bans, arms

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24. M. Schoeman, “From SADCC to SADC and beyond: The Politics of Economic Integration”, at <http://eh.net/XIIICongress/Papers/Schoeman.pdf> Accessed 20 January 2011.
 25. J. Dzimba, *South Africa’s Destabilization of Zimbabwe, 1980–89* (Macmillan, London, 1998); J. Hanlon, *Beggar your Neighbours: Apartheid Power in Southern Africa* (CIIR and James Currey, London, 1986); P. Johnson and D. Martin, *Apartheid Terrorism: The Destabilization Report* (James Currey, London, 1989); B. Turok, *Witness from the Frontline: Aggression and Resistance in Southern Africa* (Institute for African Alternatives, London, 1990).
 26. Geledenhuis refers to this period as an interlude. See Geldenhuys, “Special Relationship”.
 27. The term is taken from Mbeki’s description of the Australian prime minister’s loud and open denunciation of Mugabe before the Abuja Commonwealth meeting: “We don’t think that using megaphone diplomacy will work and we hope the Australian Government in particular will understand this position”. See, *The Australian*, 17 September, 2003.

embargoes and commodity boycotts. The United States, for its part, passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA) in 2001, enabling Washington to put increasing economic pressure on Zimbabwe's ruling elite.²⁸ In March 2003, the Bush administration imposed sanctions on Robert Mugabe and 76 members of his government. The sanctions "prohibit any US corporations from making business deals with Zimbabwe and also freeze any assets these Zimbabwean officials may have in US banking institutions".²⁹ The West's public denunciation of Mugabe proved to be counter-productive in that it completely alienated the Harare regime and merely hardened Mugabe's resolve to resist what he saw as continuing Western imperialist machinations. Thus was born the often-repeated slogan: "Zimbabwe will never be a colony again".³⁰ It is against this background that President Mbeki's quiet diplomacy must be understood.

Quiet diplomacy increasingly came under criticism, particularly in the South African and Western press, as well as within Zimbabwean opposition circles, as ineffective and biased in favour of Mugabe, with some critics suggesting that "South Africa's diplomacy has bordered on collaboration with the Mugabe regime".³¹ Critics also drew attention to the fact that South Africa remained quiet when the Zimbabwe government's Operation Murambatsvina destroyed thousands of homes in the urban centres in a campaign to undermine the opposition party's urban support in an assault poorly disguised as an urban renewal measure.³²

Mbeki's government was also criticised for endorsing Zimbabwe's flawed general elections since 2000 as free and fair even in the face of widespread evidence to the contrary. Similarly, in the 2002 presidential elections, during which the ZANU-PF militia made large parts of the country no-go areas for the opposition and military chiefs declared in advance of the polls that they would not accept the opposition leader as president if he were to win; conditions that led many observer missions to reject the elections as faulty, the South African Observer Mission declared that the elections were "a legitimate

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28. US Government, *Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 2001).
 29. M. Moorehead, "Bush Attacks Zimbabwe with Sanctions", at <http://www.iacenter.org>, 13 March 2003.
 30. I. Taylor and P. Williams, "The Limits of Engagement: British Foreign Policy and the Crisis in Zimbabwe", *International Affairs*, 78, 3 (2002), pp 547–65, argue that the West's vociferous public denunciations of the Harare authorities, the imposition of international sanctions, efforts at building a multi-lateral position against Mugabe and calls for regime change not only failed, but in fact made the situation worse.
 31. Solidarity Peace Trust, *A Difficult Dialogue: Zimbabwe–South Africa Economic Relations since 2000* (Solidarity Peace Trust, Johannesburg, 2007), p 8.
 32. A.K. Tibaijuka, *Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to Assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe* (UNHCS-Habitat, New York, 2005), p 24.

expression of the will of the people of Zimbabwe”.³³ In 2005 a South African observer mission also endorsed the clearly flawed elections, despite the negative reports of many other observer missions.³⁴ Such actions and statements led to severe international criticism and growing suggestions that President Mbeki was “collaborating” with the Mugabe regime,³⁵ a perception increasingly strengthened by President Mbeki’s many public defences of Mugabe’s policies.

In his defence, Mbeki argued that there was no viable alternative to quiet diplomacy in the campaign to resolve the Zimbabwean crisis because, by its very nature, diplomacy precludes loud pronouncements from rooftops. Thus, in response to repeated questions by journalists during his visit to the United Nations in mid-April 2008 to explain why he was clinging to quiet diplomacy, Mbeki responded: “I don’t know whatever is meant by quiet diplomacy. What is loud diplomacy?”³⁶ When challenged for not doing enough to rein in the Zimbabwean government, South Africans repeatedly pointed out that Zimbabwe is a sovereign state or, as President Mbeki stated in a speech in London in April 2008, “Zimbabwe is not a province of South Africa. Can we agree about that?”

Making sense of quiet diplomacy

Much has been written on the motives behind Mbeki’s Zimbabwean policy, some based on the personality of Mbeki himself, others exploring issues of South Africa’s hegemonic power and influence over Zimbabwe, and yet others exploring the tensions arising from the role of South Africa as a world citizen and as an African country.³⁷ They all have useful explanatory value, but an understanding of Mbeki’s policy can be sharpened if South Africa–Zimbabwe relations are historicised, especially given the comparisons between South Africa’s policies in the 1970s and in the post-apartheid era outlined above. This paper seeks to historicise post-apartheid South Africa’s policy towards Zimbabwe by highlighting the following factors:

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33. S. Motsuenyane, “Interim Statement by the SA Observer Mission on the Zimbabwean Presidential Elections of 9 and 10 March 2002”. See also Zimbabwe Election Support Network, “Post-Election Assessment: Elections in Zimbabwe 2002”; SADC Parliamentary Forum, “2002 Zimbabwe Presidential Election Observation Report,”; Commonwealth Observer Group to the Zimbabwe Presidential Election, “Preliminary Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group on the Zimbabwe Presidential Election, 9–10 March 2002”.
 34. “No Change in ANC Zimbabwe Policy”, Nehanda Radio, 11 April 2007.
 35. *Zimbabwe Solidarity, A Difficult Dialogue*.
 36. *Mail & Guardian*, 17 April 2008.
 37. A. Adebajo, A. Adedeji and C. Landsberg (eds), *South Africa in Africa: The Post-Apartheid Era* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2007), also available online at http://ccrweb.ccr.uct.ac.za/fileadmin/template/ccr/pdf/SAinAfrica_1to39.pdf

- a) Due to developments in the 1980s, South Africa now has neither much hegemonic power over its northern neighbour nor the capacity to “discipline” the Mugabe regime.
- b) While international economic sanctions “worked” in the 1960s to persuade the Salisbury government to change its ways, conditions in the 21st century are so different that economic sanctions imposed by South Africa are unlikely to work on Harare – and may even hurt South Africa as well.
- c) Because of the shared history of liberation movements in southern Africa, there is a common understanding of the threat to the gains of the liberation struggle and a determination to defend them from erstwhile colonial powers.
- d) There is also a shared sense of irritation at what is regarded as the condescending attitude of the West towards Africa and its tendency to “lecture” African states on democracy and good governance; a tendency that is seen as arising out of ingrained white racism.

A discussion of each of the above factors follows.

Hegemon? What hegemony?

As already noted, South Africa was widely criticised for failing to use its power and influence to compel the Mugabe regime to toe the line. The unquestioned assumption, therefore, was that South Africa has the capacity to make Harare do its bidding. It is contended here that in fact, this power is non-existent and that as Maxi Schoeman’s studies have indicated, South Africa is far from being the regional hegemon and is merely the new kid on the block; that the celebrated hegemonic power “never was”.³⁸ It is, of course, undeniable that South Africa remains the economic giant of the region and that its economic might continues to grow, especially in the wake of the meltdown of the Zimbabwean economy. However, it is also true that China has emerged as Zimbabwe’s biggest investor in the last few decades and has become a significant challenge to South Africa’s erstwhile towering economic presence.

Economic muscle notwithstanding, post-apartheid South Africa has not yet been able to translate its economic power into hegemonic power that has the ability to induce neighbouring countries to accept Pretoria’s decisions, especially on matters impinging on their sovereignty. For Mugabe specifically, Zimbabwe’s sovereignty is virtually non-negotiable. Thus, Pretoria has not held any hegemonic power over Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. Moreover, given the history of Zimbabwe’s support for the South African liberation struggle after its independence in 1980 and the role that Mugabe played in it, there is a tendency for the Zimbabwean ruling elite to see themselves as the hegemonic power in the region who can teach the “younger” South African post-apartheid government a thing or two about racism and imperialism.

38. M. Schoeman, “South Africa in Africa: Behemoth, Hegemon, Partner or ‘Just Another Kid on the Block’?”, in Adebajo et al, *South Africa in Africa*.

Harare's attitude towards Pretoria is partly shaped by the belief among some ZANU-PF leaders that the 1994 transition in South Africa was cosmetic and left whites in control of the economy. This view is not confined to Zimbabwe, as evident in the fact that a Nigerian politician described Mandela as the "black leader of a white country" when Mandela denounced the Abacha government and called for international economic sanctions following the assassination of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. Similarly, when Mbeki championed NEPAD, the Zimbabwean cabinet minister Stan Mudenge almost sparked a diplomatic row with South Africa when he dismissed it as "not African enough".³⁹ In turn, African intellectuals at a CODESRIA conference dismissed the initiative as a mere continuation of the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programmes, while a Senegalese economist rubbished it as "a bogus programme, recycling the failed development strategies and policies of the Bretton Woods institutions".⁴⁰

Critics across the continent caricatured NEPAD as KNEEPAD, implying that, once again, Africa was going down on its knees to beg for Western money, as the success of Mbeki's initiative depended on Western donor funding. Others called it NEOPAD because they saw it as a neo-colonial scheme designed to keep Africa in subjection; an initiative they felt was reversing the Lagos Plan of Action that had been designed to promote African economic self sufficiency.⁴¹ Evidence that the initiative did not have much African acceptance is the fact that its very important component, the peer review mechanism, did not really take off apart from a few countries that subjected themselves to its scrutiny.

Meanwhile, public criticisms of Mugabe's government by Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela elicited very dismissive responses from Harare, with Mugabe ridiculing Tutu as "that evil little bishop", while Mandela's denunciation of dictators while attending a function in his honour in London was dismissed as inconsequential. When the head of COSATU, Zwelinzima Vavi led a delegation to Zimbabwe on a human rights fact-finding mission in 2005, they were deported by the Zimbabwean authorities.⁴² Lastly, when the South African mediator in the negotiations leading to the 2008 Global Political Agreement (GPA) in Zimbabwe – Jacob Zuma's international relations advisor, Lindiwe Zulu – insisted on reforms before the 2013 elections, Mugabe publicly denounced her as a "stupid idiotic woman" and a "little streetwalker" and threatened to pull Zimbabwe out of SADC, pointing out that "SADC has no power. We are in SADC voluntarily. If SADC decides to do stupid things, we can pull out".⁴³

39. D. Mleya, "Nepad Detractors Talking 'Nonsense': SA", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 9 August 2002.

40. Z. Ndayi, "Nepad's Integration into the AU Poses Several Challenges", *Business Report*, 11 February 2010.

41. "Debate on the NEPAD: Are Africans Telling their True Story?", *The Statesman*, Ghana, 2005.

42. "Zimbabwe Expels Union Leaders", BBC, 2 February 2005; *Cape Times*, 23 May 2006.

43. "Lindiwe Zulu a 'streetwalker' and a 'stupid idiotic woman' [says] Robert Mugabe", *Politicsweb.co.za* 7 July 2013 at <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/lindiwe->

Thus, to speak of the South African government “disciplining” Harare or even “holding a protective hand over Mugabe”⁴⁴ is really to give Pretoria a powerful hegemonic role that it does not actually have. Certainly, Mugabe’s administration does not recognise South Africa’s hegemonic power; if anything, Mugabe and his party feel that it is they who can teach the new South African rulers a thing or two about post-colonial governance. In any case, it is not at all clear that the South African leadership sees itself in a hegemonic role over Zimbabwe. South Africa’s reputed hegemonic power over Zimbabwe is something that seems to have been thrust on it by the developed countries and which it has not been too keen to take up. This may indeed be a case of the “hegemon that wasn’t”.⁴⁵

Fully aware of this fact, the South African government has repeatedly emphasised Zimbabwe’s sovereignty and the right of its people to chart their own destiny. For instance, in response to increasing domestic agitation for a more vigorous South African intervention in Zimbabwe, Mbeki bitterly wrote that a visitor from Mars visiting South Africa might be misled into concluding

... that Zimbabwe is a province of South Africa. With this understanding, the visitor would come to know that some South Africans are concerned that their country is wrongly handling such matters as land reform, the economy, the rule of law and the independence of the press and the judiciary in its province of Zimbabwe . . . [and] that what was demanded of the South African government was that it should denounce and take all necessary steps to crush the provincial government of Zimbabwe.⁴⁶

Mbeki sarcastically observed how those who criticised the South African government for not doing more about Zimbabwe,

... are firm in their conviction that we have some divine right to dictate to the people of Zimbabwe what they should do about their country. They seem to believe that if we issued some instructions to the political leaders of Zimbabwe, as determined by themselves, this leadership would meekly obey . . .⁴⁷

[zulu-a-streetwalker-and-stupid-idiotic-woman](#), Accessed 9 February 2016. See also “Mugabe Warns Zimbabwe Could Leave SADC”, *Mail & Guardian*, 5 July 2013.

44. M. Prys, “Regional Hegemon or Regional Bystander: South Africa’s Zimbabwe Policy 2000–2005”, *Politikon*, 36, 2 (2009), pp 193–218.
45. C. Alden and M. Schoeman, “The Hegemon that Wasn’t: South Africa’s Foreign Policy towards Zimbabwe”, *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 25, 1 (2003), pp 1–28.
46. *ANC Today*, 1, 9, 23–29 March 2001.
47. T. Mbeki, “The People of Zimbabwe Must Decide their Own Future”, *ANC Today*, 3, 18, 9–15 May 2003.

The issue of economic sanctions

Proponents of a hardline approach demanded that South Africa should impose economic sanctions on Zimbabwe, arguing that this would soon force Mugabe to toe the line in the same manner that Ian Smith was successfully pressurised by Pretoria in the 1970s. While the proposition appeared feasible given South Africa's economic dominance in the region, upon close examination, it is clear that economic sanctions were never a viable alternative. International economic sanctions against Rhodesia during UDI "worked" only in conjunction with the escalating pressure of the guerrilla war. It is doubtful that they would have brought the Smith regime down on their own. There were simply too many countries that were deliberately breaking international sanctions to make them fully effective. However, Rhodesia was then almost completely hemmed in by enemies, especially after the independence of Mozambique in 1975 and the subsequent closure of Rhodesia's access routes to Beira and Maputo. It was thus forced to depend wholly on South African trade routes. This accounted for the effectiveness of South African economic pressure on Rhodesia in the 1970s. The situation is very different in the present case of Zimbabwe.

Firstly, apart from the Western countries that imposed a few targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe, no other country followed suit. It was never on the cards that African countries, let alone other SADC members, would agree to impose sanctions on the country, even if South Africa were to decide to do so. With Zimbabwe free to trade with the rest of Africa and the world, especially given the increasing role of China in Zimbabwe's economy, South African economic sanctions would have been largely symbolic and ineffective. As Sasa Mabasa in *New African* observed, as of 2006 South Africa had become the principal source of Zimbabwe's imports, providing about 57 percent of total imports in that year valued at US\$1.094 billion, all paid for in cash. Cutting this trade off would clearly impact negatively on South African exporters. Moreover, he argued, what was often overlooked was that "Zimbabwe's Beitbridge border post is South Africa's gateway to the rest of the continent. All northbound goods from South Africa pass through Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe, in that sense, theoretically wields the muscle to choke South Africa".⁴⁸ It is thus clear that South Africa itself would not escape unscathed from an imposition of economic sanctions on Zimbabwe. The need to protect and promote South Africa's economic interests was thus a factor in the choice of quiet diplomacy.

Some shared perceptions

When Mbeki was recalled from office, some commentators expressed the hope that this would mark the end of "quiet" diplomacy and see the inauguration of a more vigorous anti-Mugabe policy.⁴⁹ A 2008 study optimistically predicted that Zuma would adopt a more forceful policy towards Zimbabwe because:

48. S. Mabasa, "Zimbabwe Economy: The Real Story", *New African*, 1 August 2007.

49. L. Mhandara and A. Poee, "Mediating a Convolutd Conflict: South Africa's Approach to the Inter-party Negotiations in Zimbabwe", Occasional Paper Series, 1 (2013), p 25.

... recent developments in South Africa are indicative that pan-African solidarity with Mugabe inside the ANC is collapsing and that there is a growing willingness to replace “quiet” with a far more forceful diplomacy. It may not be long before officials of the foreign affairs ministry are scurrying off to the archives to *find out in detail how former South African president B.J. Vorster dealt with Ian Smith* . . . it could be that Jacob Zuma’s growing willingness to distance himself from “quiet diplomacy” and to promise a more forceful South African stance on Zimbabwe will hugely increase his stature internationally [emphasis added].⁵⁰

By 2009, the hope that Zuma’s presidency would mark a radical departure from that of Mbeki with respect to Zimbabwe had fizzled out and the Democratic Alliance (DA) of South Africa was complaining that “Jacob Zuma has failed in his role as mediator in Zimbabwe’s political crisis and has adopted the infamous policy of quiet diplomacy”.⁵¹ Similarly, outraged at Zuma’s call for the lifting of targeted sanctions on Mugabe during a visit to London, columnist Justice Malala bitterly observed how, “in the run up to the ANC’s conference in Polokwane in 2007”, Zuma had been making “encouraging noises” on Zimbabwe and promising to deal decisively with Mugabe and yet nothing had changed thereafter. Instead, he had become an international defender of Mugabe.⁵²

What everybody seemed to be missing was that South African government policy towards Mugabe under the ANC, regardless of who was in the presidency, was not likely to differ substantially partly because, as has been argued, South African foreign policy seems not to change radically with the change of the country’s presidents. If anybody had been listening, Zuma stated soon after his selection as ANC Party leader: “Our quiet diplomacy, we are confident with it. We are going to continue with it.”⁵³

Too much was sometimes made of the fact that during the struggle, ZANU was closer to the PAC than it was to the ANC, which worked more with ZAPU, with the implication that the ANC government should be hostile to the Mugabe government on that score. The fact that the ZANU government did not allow ANC guerrillas to fight from Zimbabwean soil is given as proof of this hostility. However, while the ANC and ZANU were never close, the real reason for not allowing the ANC to use Zimbabwe as a staging ground for attacks on South Africa was the pragmatic one of not giving South Africa an excuse to invade Zimbabwe because it was a haven of ‘terrorist’ activities. Mozambique and Botswana had long done the same. It was pragmatism, not hatred of the ANC, which led the Zimbabwean government to collaborate with the South African Defence Force to ensure that the ANC did not infiltrate South Africa through Matebeleland. As Scarnecchia observes, “the anti-apartheid efforts of ZANU-PF [in the early

50. R. Southall, “South Africa and Zimbabwe: The End of ‘Quiet Diplomacy?’”, available at www.opendemocracy.net/print/36374, Accessed 23 August 2011.

51. “Zuma Now Adopts Mbeki’s Quiet Diplomacy”, *Daily News*, Zimbabwe, 10 December 2009.

52. J. Malala, “Zuma Sells his Soul for Mugabe”, *Times LIVE*, 7 March 2010.

53. <http://www.thetimes.co.za/News/Article.aspx?id=666420>, Accessed 23 August 2011.

1980s] were constrained by the realities of regional power”.⁵⁴ This notwithstanding, according to Siko, “Mbeki and the ANC were also motivated to an extent by struggle-era loyalties to ZANU-PF” in opting for quiet diplomacy because ZANU-PF did assist the ANC in the 1980s.⁵⁵ The same pragmatism prevented Mugabe from imposing economic sanctions on South Africa despite his constant denunciation of it.

Thus, the animosity between the ANC and ZANU should not be overstressed, for by the 1990s, this was no longer an issue strong enough to influence South African foreign policy. In addition, the 1989 Unity Accord, which officially marked the end of Matebeleland’s so-called Dissident War and merged ZAPU and ZANU into one party named ZANU-PF, incorporated former ZAPU leaders into the government, thus muting the open conflict between the traditional rivals.⁵⁶

In addition, Mbeki and other ANC leaders resented the strident Western attacks on Mugabe. They felt that Mugabe was being singled out for condemnation by the West mainly because he was taking land back from their kith and kin and challenging white interests in his country; an indication that they bought into Mugabe’s pan-African and his “Third Chimurenga” or economic-emancipation-war rhetoric. The Western attack on Mugabe was in fact seen as the start of counter-revolution that sought to reverse the gains of the liberation struggle. Indeed, liberation movements, now governments, in the region have increasingly felt that they are under attack from former colonial powers and feel that there is an agenda to undermine them and replace them with puppet neo-colonial leaders who would protect Western interests.⁵⁷ According to Jeremy Cronin of the South African Communist Party, Mbeki’s Zimbabwean policy was informed by “the belief that national liberation movements in our region should close ranks”, because “the crisis in Zimbabwe is being used as an entry point by imperialist powers to reassert hegemony over a former colony and eventually over our whole region”.⁵⁸ Such fears were, of course, not at all allayed by the MDC’s decision to enter into an alliance with the South African opposition Democratic Alliance that the ANC and ZANU-PF regard merely as a white party from yesteryear.

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54. T. Scarnecchia, “Rationalising Gukurahundi: Cold War and South African Foreign Relations with Zimbabwe, 1981–1983”, *Kronos*, 37, 1 (2011), p 89.
 55. J. Siko, *Inside South Africa’s Foreign Policy: African Diplomacy from Smuts to Mbeki* (Tauris, London, 2014), p 74.
 56. This is not to say that the Unity Accord was not problematic or that ZAPU leaders and followers were completely happy with the merger, especially since the party was swallowed up by ZANU and lost its separate identity.
 57. Mbeki regarded Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirayi as one such Western puppet and so had no sympathy with his cause.
 58. J. Cronin, “Why South Africa will Never be Like Zimbabwe”, Chris Hani Memorial Lecture, Durban, 4 May 2008. See also International Crisis Group (ICG), *Zimbabwe: The Politics of National Liberation* (ICG, Brussels, 2002), p 18.

In a bid to strengthen their resistance to the perceived external threat, liberation movements hold periodic meetings to discuss matters of mutual interest.⁵⁹ These exclusive meetings suggest that none of them are likely to publicly condemn other members of the club or impose punitive sanctions against each other, because this would be seen as abetting the Western counter-revolutionary agenda. This means that whatever disagreements the liberation movements may have had among themselves, they should not be aired publicly.

Two leading ANC activists, Eddy Maloka and Ben Magubane articulated the thinking behind the need for liberation movements' solidarity in a paper which contended that Western imperialism was on a campaign to "ensure that either the liberation movements are denied the possibility to govern their countries or that they are transformed from within, to become client political movements gutted of their anti-imperialist content" and that this campaign was now focused on the "defeat of ZANU PF, which will lead directly to an offensive to transform our broad democratic movement [the ANC] and democratic South Africa into yet another pliant client of world imperialism". They emphasised that:

In its own interest, our movement [the ANC] will have to abandon all illusion and understand that the sustained offensive to defeat ZANU PF is but a curtain raiser to what will inevitably follow – a sustained offensive to defeat our very own movement.

Indeed, their strong recommendation was that the ANC should "defend ZANU PF in Zimbabwe" while doing "everything in our power to help a fellow anti-imperialist movement to correct the mistakes it has made".⁶⁰

Thus, just as South African and Rhodesian leaders of the 1960s and 1970s supported each other in defiance of world opinion because of a shared worldview that sought to defend white privilege and white rule, post-apartheid South African leaders and the Mugabe government also have a shared world perspective that they are determined to protect.⁶¹ In fact, the ties between them go back all the way to the inter-war years when several Zimbabwean nationalists studied or lived in South Africa and interacted with ANC nationalists.⁶² Later, ZIPRA and MK mounted a joint military operation in the Wankie Campaign in north-western Zimbabwe in 1967 as they fought a common enemy.

59. N. Serache, "Statement on Meeting of Former Liberation Movements", 11 October 2000 at www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=7532 ; and "Meeting of Former Liberation Movements, 6–9 March 2013" at www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=10102 Accessed 9 February 2016.

60. E. Maloka and B. Magubane, "Zimbabwe: An International Pariah! What are the Revolutionary Tasks of the South African Democratic Movement?", Unpublished paper, April 2008.

61. For more on the liberation movements' solidarity as a factor in Mbeki's policy, see I. Phimister and B. Raftopoulos, "Mugabe, Mbeki and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 101 (2004), pp 389–391.

62. M. Nyagumbo, *With the People* (Allison & Busby, London, 1980).

African solidarity in the face of Western hectoring

Closely linked to the above is a very strong resentment of what is regarded as the West's double standards which lead it to bitterly condemn Zimbabwe's actions only when they negatively affect white Zimbabweans whereas the West did nothing to condemn the massacre of the Ndebele people in the 1980s during the Dissidents War. Indeed, a study by Ian Phimister documents how Western countries cynically ignored the gross human rights violations at the time, even though there was more than sufficient evidence that Mugabe's government was brutalising the people of Matabeleland.⁶³ For most of Black Africa therefore, the Western countries' hostility to Mugabe and his government arises mainly from outrage at Zimbabwe's land reforms. Hence, a SADC meeting at Victoria Falls rebuffed Britain's call for the condemnation of Mugabe's human rights abuses and disrespect for the rule of law, while Tanzania's then President Mkapa strongly condemned the West's "sanctimonious" statements on Zimbabwe.⁶⁴

The continent's solidarity with Mugabe against the West was amply demonstrated when, despite widespread condemnation of Mugabe's appropriation of white farms and growing demonisation of Mugabe in the Western press, Mugabe was the only head of state to receive a standing ovation in 2004 in Pretoria during the tenth anniversary celebrations of the end of apartheid. He also received a rousing ovation when he attended a meeting of the SADC Heads of State in Lusaka in 2007.⁶⁵

Not wanting to be seen as out of step with the rest of the continent, acting in isolation, and behaving like a continental bully, as in the apartheid era, the ANC leadership decided on a multi-lateral approach to foreign policy. As is well documented, when President Mandela attempted to push a morally-driven foreign policy that publicly condemned the Abacha regime in Nigeria for assassinating Ken Saro-Wiwa, South Africa was immediately isolated and was forced to move towards multi-lateralism as a guide for its foreign policy. As Mbeki later acknowledged, his government had learnt from that experience that there was a need to "work in concert with others and to forge strategic alliances in pursuit of foreign objectives" and not to act in isolation.⁶⁶

The choice facing South Africa was whether to behave in a manner that demonstrated that it was an African country or whether to insist on its principles as a citizen of the world – but at a cost of being ostracised in the same way as the apartheid regime before it had been. Clearly, Mbeki and his successors chose the former and quiet diplomacy was the result of that choice. Thus, just as Vorster had supported Ian Smith for many years and then dumped him later according to his assessment of what was best for

63. I. Phimister, "The Makings and Meanings of the Massacres in Matabeleland", *Development Dialogue*, 50 (December 2008), pp 197-215.

64. *Business Day*, SA, 3 June 2005.

65. "SADC Applauds for Destroying a Nation", *Mmegi*, Botswana, 31 August 2007.

66. Cited in Siko, *Inside South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p 52.

South Africa, Mbeki's equally realistic assessment led him to opt for quiet diplomacy in Zimbabwe in order to work in concert with Africa rather than be seen to be doing the bidding of the West.

Meanwhile, capitalising on African leaders' suspicions of the West's motives on the continent, Mugabe shrewdly employed Pan-African, anti-colonial and anti-Western rhetoric that made it difficult for African leaders to take policy positions that could be seen as siding with former colonial masters against fellow nationalists and liberation fighters and thus running the risk of being labelled "sell-outs" or lackeys of Western imperialism. Not surprisingly, Mbeki was wary of being used by the West to advance its neo-colonial interests, as evidenced by his declaration that: "What President (George W.) Bush calls regime change is not going to happen" and that "the particular focus on Zimbabwe ... suggests that particular agendas are being pursued here. And we are being dragooned to ... fulfil and implement other people's agendas".⁶⁷

Also resented by both the South African and other African ruling elites is the tendency by the white world to hector African leaders on good governance and on how to handle African problems. For Mugabe, the Western countries' approach was racist and betrayed a tendency to ignore the fact that those in power today in South Africa and Zimbabwe had to fight hard against those who now lecture them in order to bring about democracy in their countries. In an interview during Zimbabwe's 28th independence celebration, Mugabe said:

Today we hear the British saying there is no democracy here . . . there is no observance of rule of law. We, not the British, established democracy based on one person one vote, democracy which rejected racial and gender discrimination and observed human rights. We are the ones who removed the oppression which was here.⁶⁸

Almost echoing Mugabe, Mbeki also argued:

Many of our people died, suffered torture, imprisonment, banishment and exile in the course of a difficult struggle for the rule of law, the independence of the press and the judiciary, property rights, a prosperous economy that would benefit all our people, democracy and human rights. The cruel irony, among others, is that the same people against whom we waged this struggle, the people who killed, tortured, imprisoned, banished and exiled those who fought for property rights and the rule of law for all, are the most strident in demanding that we prove our democratic credentials.⁶⁹

67. <http://www.herald.co.zw/index.php?id=15214&pubdate=2002-10-14>. Accessed 20 August 2015.

68. "Mugabe Brushes off Human Rights Criticism", *Bangladesh News*, 19 April 2008.

69. *ANC Today*, 1, 9, 23-29 March 2001. See also Phimister and Raftopoulos, "Mugabe and Mbeki", pp 395-398 for similar views from other African leaders.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated above, a historical awareness of developments in the southern African region in the last half century or so helps to appreciate the roots and logic of South Africa's policy towards Zimbabwe during the Zimbabwean crisis. While other explanations provide useful insights into Mbeki's Zimbabwean policy, they can be enhanced by an appreciation of the history of the two neighbouring countries' relations over time. Indeed, explaining South Africa's policy on the basis of what Mbeki did or did not do, while important, ignores the basic fact that, his two successors Motlanthe and Zuma did not depart significantly from Mbeki's approach, suggesting that there is more to the factors shaping South Africa's attitude towards Zimbabwe than just the personality of the incumbent in the presidential office in Pretoria.

It has been argued that explanations of the South African government's policy must be sought in the history of the region, particularly the thirty-years of conflict which forged strong ties among the various liberation movements struggling against white minority rule. The leadership's shared history and some shared perspectives from the days of the liberation struggles make it extremely unlikely that they will publicly criticise each other, let alone impose punitive sanctions against one another, especially in a situation in which they feel that one of them is being singled out for condemnation by the Western world which is bent on protecting its own interests. It has also been argued that the assumption that because of South Africa's economic power, it has the hegemonic authority to dictate to the smaller neighbours is erroneous, for the relationship between Pretoria and Harare now is not the same as the relationship between Pretoria and Salisbury during the UDI regime of Ian Smith. While South Africa then clearly had hegemonic influence on its northern neighbour and deployed it to great advantage in the 1970s when it forced Ian Smith's government to negotiate with the African nationalist leaders, it does not have any hegemonic power over Harare today.

In the light of the above, regarding South Africa–Zimbabwe relations after 1994 as little more than a continuation of the two countries' earlier "special relationship" is completely missing the point of how developments between 1980 and 1994 fundamentally altered that relationship. Without appreciating this, it becomes impossible to understand Mbeki's irritable responses to Western pressure on South Africa's policy on Zimbabwe or why Mbeki's successors, Kgalema Motlanthe and Jacob Zuma, did not really depart from the Mbeki policy on Zimbabwe, the sterner rhetoric of their administrations notwithstanding. On this basis, therefore, it can be argued that it was not so much that Mbeki and his colleagues in government "failed" to exert their power and to stand firm against Mugabe's government, as it was the fact that that approach was never an option for the government leaders in Pretoria.

The question might be asked: But what about the role played by South Africa in establishing the Government of National Unity (GNU) in the 2008–2013 period? Does that

not show that South Africa had the muscle and influence to direct political developments in Zimbabwe? The evidence does not support such an interpretation. The Global Political Agreement (GPA) negotiations and the subsequent GNU operations until 2013 clearly demonstrate ZANU-PF latitude to do as it pleased and to ignore both South Africa and SADC. Indeed, as Brian Raftopoulos shows, ZANU-PF all but dictated the tenor of the GNU and its operations until 2013.⁷⁰ Tellingly, despite having lost the presidential elections, “winning” only after a bloody ZANU-PF terror campaign which forced Tsvangirayi to withdraw from the race, and despite the fact that the opposition had the majority in parliament, Mugabe behaved, and was allowed to do so by South Africa and SADC, as the senior party in the GNU. He retained the country’s presidency, while his party controlled all the institutions of coercion, namely, the army, the police, and the Secret Services (CIO) and he systematically used them to hold onto power.

Meanwhile, none of the reforms agreed upon during the negotiations were implemented because ZANU-PF remained deliberately obstructionist despite five SADC Heads of State summits urging the full implementation of the GPA before the next elections. Mugabe ignored all this and went ahead to call for the 2013 general elections before any reforms had been implemented.⁷¹ South Africa, SADC, and the African Union stood virtually helpless on the sidelines demonstrating that none of them “could force Robert Mugabe to make changes he did not want to make”.⁷² Finally, recent statements by Thabo Mbeki vindicate the arguments advanced in this study. Early in 2016, Mbeki began to release weekly letters in the media to defend his legacy by setting the record straight to counter misperceptions and misrepresentations of some of the decisions he was part of when he was president of South Africa. The controversial letters, which have received mixed responses, have hitherto addressed issues such as Mbeki’s alleged aloofness and paranoia, autocratic style, monopolisation of power, and his “political meddling” in the investigation against Zuma.⁷³ His letter of 22 February, dealing with South Africa’s policy towards Zimbabwe, confirmed that:

70. B. Raftopoulos, “An Overview of the Politics of the Global Political Agreement: National Conflict, Regional Agony, International Dilemma” in B. Raftopoulos (ed.), *The Hard Road to Reform: The Politics of Zimbabwe’s Global Political Agreement* (Weaver Press, Harare, 2013), pp 1–38.

71. Mhandara and Pooe, “Mediating a Convolved Conflict”, pp 25–26.

72. Siko, *Inside South Africa’s Foreign Policy*, p 73.

73. T. Mbeki, “The Tragedy of History: When Caricature Displaces the Truth”, 11 January 2016, at <http://thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/The-tragedy-of-history-When-caricatur-...>, Accessed 26 February 2016; T. Mbeki, “When Your Position can’t be Sustained, Create a Scarecrow: The Menace of Post-apartheid South Africa”, 18 January 2016, available at <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2016/01/18/in-full-volume-2-of-the-thabo-mbeki-...>, Accessed 26 February 2016; T. Mbeki, “Yet Another Myth: Mbeki and the Monopolisation of Power”, 25 January 2016, at <http://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/in-full-volume--3-of-the-thabo-mbeki-letters/>, Accessed 26 February 2016; T. Mbeki, “Behind the Narrative of the Abuse of State Power was a Larger Goal”, 8 February 2016, at <http://www.thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/Behind-the-narrative-of-the-abuse-of-...>; T. Mbeki, “A

- a) While the ANC and ZANU-PF were not close at the beginning, “firm fraternal relations between the ANC and ZANU-PF” later developed after Zimbabwe’s independence when Mugabe agreed to allow the ANC’s operatives Chris Hani, Joe Gqabi and Geraldine Fraser, to conduct underground work from Zimbabwean soil.
- b) During the many years of “working together with President Mugabe, the Government of Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF”, the ANC and ZANU-PF grew to share the same objectives of the necessity of “defending the independence of our countries and advancing Pan Africanist goals”.
- c) When political and economic problems surfaced in Zimbabwe, the ANC “prepared and shared a document with ZANU-PF . . . with suggestions about what ZANU-PF should do to correct what was wrong”, which ZANU-PF did not take up.
- d) During the controversial and violent 2008 presidential elections, Mbeki met Mugabe and proposed that “the election should be called off and conducted afresh in conditions of the total absence of any violence”. Mugabe rejected this suggestion.
- e) The ANC’s Zimbabwean policy was motivated by a determination to resist the Western countries’ “regime-change” agenda, namely, “the forcible removal of President Mugabe and his replacement by people approved by the UK and its allies”.
- f) Lastly, South Africa’s Zimbabwe policy was based on the ANC’s resolve “that democratic South Africa should at all costs avoid acting as a new home-grown African imperial power” with “the right unilaterally to determine the destiny of the people of Africa”.⁷⁴

It is evident therefore that Zimbabwe did not always heed South Africa’s advice and that quiet diplomacy was not evidence of South Africa’s “failure” to use its hegemonic power to “discipline” Mugabe, but a policy shaped by the prevailing regional and geopolitical realities and the ANC’s assessment of them.

Tale of Political Conspiracy and Incomprehensible Judicial Imaginings”, 19 February 2016, available at www.thabombekifoundation.org.za/Pages/A-tale-of-political-conspiracy-and-in..., Accessed 26 February 2016.

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