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A perspective on the South African Council on International Relations (SACOIR)

1. Introduction

In November 2011, a Cabinet meeting was held and Cabinet noted the establishment of the South African Council on International Relations (SACOIR) as well as the terms of reference. The South African Council on International Relations would serve as a consultative forum for South African non-state actors and government experts to interact with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (the Department) on the development and implementation of South Africa's foreign policy.

The main objectives of this forum were described as follows:

1. To provide a platform for the generation of public debate on foreign policy;
2. To provide a consultative forum for the regular review of South Africa's foreign policy.
3. To advise the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation¹

This brief will begin by providing Members of the Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation (the Committee) with an overview of key priorities associated with South Africa's Foreign Policy. This brief will then describe the launch of SACOIR and recent engagements its Members have been involved with. Finally, the brief will look closely at the functioning of a similar body to SACOIR known as the Council on Foreign Relations which is based in the United States of America, and will also give a brief description of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

2. Overview of South Africa's Foreign Policy

In 2009 the Department of Foreign Affairs was transformed into the Department of International Relations and Cooperation to reflect the nuanced foreign policy orientation envisioned by South Africa. In an analysis of the first year of the post-Mbeki phase of foreign policy by the South African Institute of International Affairs, it is argued that President Zuma has been vigorously committed to both the attainment of domestic and foreign policy objectives. In addition to this, it is interesting to note the increasingly important role the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) has assumed during President Zuma's first term in office. DIRCO currently plays a much more influential role in the formulation and execution of SA's foreign policy than in previous years. This is evidenced by the fact that Minister Nkoana-Mashabane has come to play a very important role in the country's foreign policy initiatives.²

¹ Government Communication and Information System, (2011).

² Brueton (2010).



In addition to giving the Department the responsibility of executing South Africa's foreign policy, President Zuma has also used the State of the Nation Address as an opportunity to inform the South African population about the orientation of South Africa's foreign policy. The 2009 State of the Nation Address outlined the following key strategic objectives for Government to be pursued by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation:

- Strengthening the structures of the African Union (AU);
- Giving impetus to the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD);
- Contributing to the continental process of harmonising and rationalising regional economic institutions in order to achieve the goal of forming the Union Government of Africa;
- Enhancing cooperation with international partners by establishing the South African Development Partnership Agency;
- Strengthening the Southern African Development Community (SADC) so as to contribute to the process of regional integration, with a focus on the recently established Free Trade Area (FTA) that is set to enhance regional economic cooperation;
- Ensuring peace and security on the African continent by contributing to reconstruction efforts;
- Bring peace and stability to conflict situations, such as Darfur in Sudan, by promoting increased cooperation between the AU and the United Nations;
- Contributing to global peace by supporting initiatives to bring about a peaceful resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, based on the Two-States solution;
- Addressing the plight of independence for the Saharawi people;
- Promoting an inclusive government of Zimbabwe until such time that free and fair elections are held in that country. Government will also galvanise the support of international partners to assist Zimbabwe towards economic recovery;
- Realising the return of constitutional order in Madagascar;
- Building on work to promote human rights and democracy throughout the African continent;
- Strengthening South-South relations by focusing on key countries and securing mutually beneficial agreements with those countries. Among the countries that are key to this objectives are: China, India, Brazil, Mexico and Angola;
- Developing North-South relations, by focusing among other things on the strategic relationship between South Africa and the European Union (EU); and
- Ensuring through active participation that the Doha Round of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) produces developmental outcomes.³

The State of the Nation Address reiterated the commitment by Government to building a better Africa and a better world. To this effect not much is expected in terms of policy change, but rather there is a slight shift in emphasis in order to streamline the Department's objectives with Government's overall developmental objectives.⁴

³ Zuma, (2009)

⁴ Zuma, (2009)



2.1 South Africa’s Foreign Relations as articulated in the National Development Plan

In Chapter 7 of the National Development Plan entitled “Positioning South Africa in the world”, the National Planning Commission argued that government’s global and regional policy-making stance should be South Africa-centric and improve South Africa’s integration in the region, on the continent, among developing countries, and in the world with measurable outcomes. The National Planning Commission also argues that policy-making should be guided by the following principles and objectives:⁵

- Focus on what is achievable without over-committing to possibilities of regional and continental integration. Foreign Policy should be evaluated on a regular basis to “ensure that national interests are maximised”;
- Remain an influential member of the international community;
- Deepen cooperation with Brazil, Russia, India and China as part of the BRICS group while promoting regional and continental integration;
- Stabilise the regional political economy through increased integration and cooperation; and
- Achieve measurable outcomes related to food, energy, education, health, transport and communication infrastructure, national defence, adjustment to climate change and economic growth to benefit all South Africans.⁶

2.2 The Mandate of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation

As articulated in the Estimates of National Expenditure (ENE), the Constitution gives the President the ultimate responsibility for the foreign policy and international relations of South Africa. It is the prerogative of the President to “appoint heads of mission, to receive foreign heads of mission, to conduct state-to-state relations, and to negotiate and sign all international agreements”.⁷

International agreements that are not of a technical, administrative or executive nature will only bind the country after being approved by Parliament. Parliament also approves ratification or accession of the country to multilateral agreements. All international agreements must be tabled in Parliament for information purposes. The Minister of International Relations and Cooperation is entrusted with the formulation, promotion and execution of South Africa’s foreign policy and with the daily conduct of South Africa’s foreign policy.⁸

⁵ National Planning Commission (2011).

⁶The National Development Plan. Chapter 7: Positioning South Africa in the World.

⁷ National Treasury Estimates of National Expenditure 2017

⁸ Ibid



The overall mandate of the Department of **International Relations and Cooperation** is to work for the realisation of South Africa's foreign policy objectives. This is done by:

- Coordinating and aligning South Africa's international relations abroad;
- Monitoring developments in the international environment;
- Communicating government's policy positions;
- Developing and advising government on policy options, and creating mechanisms and avenues for achieving objectives;
- Protecting South Africa's sovereignty and territorial integrity;
- Contributing to the creation of an enabling international environment for South African business;
- Sourcing developmental assistance; and
- Assisting South African citizens abroad.⁹

2.3 State of the Nation Address 2017

In the 2017 State of the Nation Address, President Zuma began by noting that with the National Development Plan as a guide; the government is building a South Africa that must be free from poverty, inequality and unemployment. While the global economic environment remains uncertain, indications are that South Africa has entered a period of recovery. The government anticipates an economic growth rate of 1.3 per cent in 2017 following an estimated 0.5 per cent in 2016. However, the economy is still not growing fast enough to create the jobs South Africa needs.¹⁰

It is for this reason that government has decided to focus on a few key areas packaged as the Nine Point Plan to reignite growth so that the economy can create much-needed jobs. The focus areas include industrialisation, mining and beneficiation, Agriculture and agro Processing, energy, SMMEs, managing work place conflict, attracting investments, growing the oceans economy and tourism.¹¹

In terms of International Relations, President Zuma emphasized that Oliver Tambo set the tone for the country's foreign policy as early as 1977 when addressing the first Congress of the Angolan ruling party MPLA that: "We seek to live in peace with our neighbours and the peoples of the world in conditions of equality, mutual respect and equal advantage".¹²

President Zuma noted that South Africa is honoured to chair the Southern African Development Community (SADC) starting from August 2017. South Africa will utilise its tenure to fast-track the implementation of the SADC Industrial Strategy. South Africa is accelerating the integration agenda through the implementation of SADC-COMESA-East African Community Free Trade Area.¹³

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Presidency, (2017).

¹¹ Presidency, (2017)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid



South Africa will continue with its involvement in mediation efforts, peacekeeping operations, and peace-making initiatives in Lesotho, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Mozambique, South Sudan, Somalia and Libya. The SANDF represents the country well in the peacekeeping missions.¹⁴

Furthermore, trade with our traditional partners in the west remains a significant contributor to our economy. South Africa will continue to partner with the United States and work together on issues of mutual interest such as the full renewal of AGOA.¹⁵

President Zuma emphasized that South Africa values its relationship with the People's Republic of China. China is one of South Africa's most important and key strategic partners. South Africa recognises the PRC 'as the sole Government and Authority representing the whole of China'. South Africa reiterates its position and commitment to the 'One China Policy' and we consider Taiwan as an integral part of the PRC. At continental partnership level, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy remains an important long-term framework for continued cooperation.¹⁶

The Economic Partnership agreement with the EU came into force in September 2016 thus providing new market access opportunities for South African products. Almost all South African products, about 99 per cent will have preferential market access in the EU. About 96 per cent of the products will enter the EU market without being subjected to customs duties or quantitative restrictions.¹⁷

The Southern African Customs Union Mercosur Preferential Trade Agreement has also entered into force, providing preferential access to over one thousand tariff lines. This is an agreement that promotes South-South trade. In addition, President Zuma noted that South Africa's cooperative partnerships with other regions are bearing fruit. The BRICS New Development Bank has recorded encouraging progress. South Africa welcomes the Goa BRICS Heads of State and Government decision to establish the BRICS Rating Agency so that we can assist each other in assessing our economic paths.¹⁸

President Zuma stated that South Africa is also pleased with agreements with our BRICS partners in the field of agriculture. South Africa will implement off take agreements on the export of pulses, mangos and pork to India. South Africa will also export twenty thousand tons of beef to China per year for a period of 10 years.¹⁹

¹⁴ Presidency, (2017)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Presidency, (2017)

¹⁸ Presidency, (2017).

¹⁹ Ibid



In addition, President Zuma emphasized that South Africa will continue to pursue the reform of the international system because the current configuration undermines the ability of developing countries to contribute and benefit meaningfully.²⁰

To conclude, President Zuma noted that 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the occupation of Palestine. The expansion of Israeli settlements undermines global efforts aimed at realising the two state solution and the Oslo accord. President Zuma then reiterated South Africa's support for the Palestinian cause. Similarly, President Zuma expressed hope that the readmission of Morocco to the AU should serve as a catalyst to resolve the Western Sahara issue.²¹

These priorities represent areas that require significant consideration to ensure effective execution of South Africa's foreign policy. These areas will also form part of the consultative processes and debates which could take place within the South African Council on International Relations.

3. Recent engagements related to the South African Council on International Relations

On 16 July 2015, the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Ms Maite Nkoane-Mashabane officially launched both the South African Council on International Relations and South African Association of Former Ambassadors, High Commissioners and Chief Representatives.

During this launch Minister Nkoane-Mashabane emphasized as follows²²:

- Global corporations, civil society organisations, sub-national structures and even private individuals have increasingly become active citizens of the world in this highly webbed global village.
- In the true spirit of consultation, inherited from the best tradition of the liberation movement, we indulged the service of our independent academics to ascertain the necessity for the creation of a platform for South African non-state actors to influence our foreign policy. The discussions of these academics confirmed governments that it was ready to establish a platform of non-state actors.
- From the perspective that foreign policy is an extension of our domestic policy, government strongly believes that the creation of SACOIR will go a long way in offering practical opportunities for cooperation with civil society in tackling the triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment identified as foreign policy priorities by Chapter 7 of the National Development Plan (NDP).
- The creation of SACOIR also gives practical effect to President Zuma's message in the State of the Nation Address (SONA) of 14 February 2013, when he said, and I quote: "We [government] will engage business, labour and other social partners in pursuit of solutions as no single force acting individually can achieve the objectives we have set for ourselves".

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Presidency, (2017).

²² South African Government, (2015).



- The appointment of the members of SACOIR will allow (DIRCO) to realise the objectives set by government to interact more and more with members of academia, labour, business and civil society on key foreign policy issues.
- It is foreseen that SACOIR will operate under the umbrella of DIRCO, conducting plenary and thematic Working Group meetings. SACOIR will also host an annual International Symposium called the Johnny Makhathini Dialogue Forum (JMDF) aimed at discussing relevant foreign policy issues with both local and international researchers and intellectuals in the field of International Relations and other relevant academic fields.
- DIRCO will provide a Secretariat for the Council, which will serve as an administrative and follow-up support system.
- SACOIR will therefore serve as an avenue and a platform for the generation of public debate on foreign policy; provide an opportunity for the regular open review of South Africa's foreign policy through a consultative forum and make important recommendations to our department.

In addition, the Minister announced the 19 members of SACOIR as follows²³:

- **Academia:** Professor Maxi Schoeman; Professor Anthoni Van Nieuwkerk; Dr Siphamandla Zondi; Professor Shamil Jeppie; Professor Sekgothe Mokgoatsana and Professor Peter Vale.
- **Business:** Ms Nonhlanhla Mjoli-Mncube; Dr Thandi Cynthia Ndlovu; Ms Chichi Maponya; Ms Danisa Baloyi and Mr Billy Masetlha.
- **Civil Society:** Dr Somadoda Fikeni; Mr Jimmy Gotyana; Mr Tshepo Mashiane; Amb Griffiths Mandlenkosi Memela; Mr Kenny Morolong; Molly Dhlamini; Mr Aziz Pahad; General Maomela Motau; Dr Kuseni Dlamini and Mr Vasu Gounden.
- **Labour:** Mr Dennis George and Mr Joel Mfingwana.

On the 19th of January 2016, it was reported that the Executive Director of African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) Mr Vasu Gounden, attended a meeting with Minister Nkoane Mashabane, along with the other members of the South African Council on International Relations (SACOIR). The meeting with the Minister was to present an overview of SACOIR's activities since its establishment.²⁴

In November 2016, SACOIR then briefed the Portfolio Committee on Global Challenges. Former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Aziz Pahad, led the SACOIR delegation and informed the Committee that it was difficult for South Africa to ignore events happening elsewhere in the world. Dr Pahad stated that "what happens in Europe, we cannot ignore. All these developments are a threat to regional and international peace not seen in the recent times".²⁵

²³ South African Government, (2015).

²⁴ Allen, (2016).

²⁵ Maputi, (2016)



He said it is a challenge when the world is quiet when countries implement foreign policies that threaten the existence of human kind. Members asked him about the independence of the SACOIR (bearing in mind that council members are appointed by the Minister,) as well as matters of foreign policy and the national interest, climate change, and policy issues.²⁶

Other issues in the briefing from SACOIR included illicit financial flows, insurgency, the role of media, the brain drain, and the role of diplomacy as an alternative to war. SACOIR Council member Dr Vasu Gounden told Members that while the country still struggled with the triple challenge of inequality, poverty and unemployment, five other challenges have been added. Dr Gounden said, “the world is increasingly dangerous and fragile. We are where we are because we have serious problems, including exponential population growth that outstrips economic growth”.²⁷

The Committee resolved to have regular engagements with the Council, and that it should be allowed to address political party caucuses in Parliament on foreign policy and national interest. Dr Pahad said because of the globalised world South Africa could not legislate against people seeking opportunities abroad. Furthermore, Dr Pahad said that “South Africa is inextricably linked to what is happening in the continent. Africa with all its problems remains our challenge”.²⁸

4. Comparative Analysis: Foreign Policy Think-tanks

This section is intended, for comparative purposes, to provide Members with an overview of the functioning and structure of selected case studies of think-tanks with a similar mandate to SACOIR.

4.1 Council on Foreign Relations

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is; “an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries”.²⁹

4.1.1 History

After a series of difficult negotiations during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, a group of diplomats, financiers, generals, and lawyers concluded that the American people needed to be better prepared for the significant responsibilities and decision-making associated with global affairs. Under this backdrop, the Council on Foreign Relations was founded in 1921 to “afford a

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Maputi, (2016).

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, (2012a).



continuous conference on international questions affecting the United States, by bringing together experts on statecraft, finance, industry, education, and science.”³⁰

Upon its creation, early members of the Council on Foreign Relations believed it was important for the institution to be both non-partisan and non-profit. Membership in the Council is restricted to citizens of the United States and is by invitation only, additionally, members are chosen for their knowledge of International Relations as well as their ability to contribute to discussions and debate on key issues. The Council carried out its mission by inviting important statesmen to give presentations and answer questions at meetings. Additionally, the Council formed small groups to discuss serious issues of the day and publish their findings.³¹

4.1.2 Key Functions of the CFR

Some of the key functions of the Council on Foreign Relations include the following:

- Maintaining a diverse membership, including special programs to promote interest and develop expertise in the next generation of foreign policy leaders;
- Convening meetings at its headquarters in New York and in Washington, DC, and other cities where senior government officials, members of Congress, global leaders, and prominent thinkers come together with CFR members to discuss and debate major international issues;
- Supporting a Studies Program that fosters independent research, enabling CFR scholars to produce articles, reports, and books and hold roundtables that analyze foreign policy issues and make concrete policy recommendations;
- Publishing *Foreign Affairs*, the preeminent journal of international affairs and U.S. foreign policy;
- Sponsoring Independent Task Forces that produce reports with both findings and policy prescriptions on the most important foreign policy topics; and
- Providing up-to-date information and analysis about world events and American foreign policy on its website, CFR.org.³²

The Council on Foreign Relations has become one of the most influential bodies in the American political system on International Relations. Its influence has inspired a range of conspiracy theories on both ends of the political spectrum about the true intentions of the Council on Foreign Relations.

4.2 European Council on Foreign Relations

While the Council on Foreign Relation exerts a certain amount of influence in the American political system, its European counterpart is aimed less at exerting influence and focused more on using its intellectual discourses to appropriately track and shape debates in Europe around key issues in International Relations. The **European Council on Foreign Relations** (ECFR) is the first pan-

³⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, (2012b).

³¹ Council on Foreign Relations, (2012b).

³² Council on Foreign Relations, (2012a).



European think-tank. It was launched in October 2007 with the objective of conducting research and promoting informed debate across Europe on the development of an effective European values-based foreign policy. It is independent and has no connection to the institutions of the EU.

ECFR has developed a strategy with three elements that define its activities:

- **A pan-European Council.** ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over one hundred Members - politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU's member states and candidate countries - which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR's activities within their own countries.
- **A physical presence in the main EU member states.** ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- **A distinctive research and policy development process.** ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to advance its objectives through innovative projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR's activities include primary research, publication of policy reports, private meetings and public debates, 'friends of ECFR' gatherings in EU capitals and outreach to strategic media outlets.³³

5. Concluding Remarks and Issues for Committee Consideration

South Africa's foreign policy is following a trajectory influenced by a range of changes in the international system as well as key priorities identified by decision makers within South Africa. While there may be some agreement on the trajectory being followed by South Africa, there remains disagreement about how South Africa's foreign policy must be implemented in order to achieve the objectives articulated by the President of South Africa and the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation at different fora.

The South African Council on International Relations is a place through which important debates on the priorities, desired outcomes, trajectories and implementation of foreign policy should be conducted by a range of stakeholders and entities to further enhance South Africa's Foreign Policy objectives.

Possible issues for consideration by the Committee are as follows:

- What are key areas of focus for SACOIR in the context of current issues in the International System?
- How is the Secretariat of SACOIR structured and funded?
- Is SACOIR planning any stakeholder outreach with Academic institutions?

³³ European Council on Foreign Relations, (2012).



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