

Lesley Masters^{1,2}

¹Nottingham Trent University
Nottingham, Nottinghamshire, United
Kingdom

²University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa
(lesley.masters@ntu.ac.uk)



ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0002-1053-8977

Chris Landsberg³

³University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa
(clandsberg@uj.ac.za)



ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0002-5503-2152

Copyright:

• This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.

• Este é um artigo publicado em acesso aberto e distribuído sob os termos da Licença de Atribuição Creative Commons, que permite uso irrestrito, distribuição e reprodução em qualquer meio, desde que o autor e a fonte originais sejam creditados.



South Africa Foreign Policy and the National Interest: Which interest?

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202400217>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 67(2): e017, 2024

Abstract

In 2022 the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) released the *National Interest Framework*, formally setting out what South Africa's national interest is. According to DIRCO this aimed at providing an understanding of, and predictability in South Africa's international relations. As the latest document in guiding foreign policy the framework reflects a continuation in the rhetoric of foreign policy principles; yet for all its effort in identifying the country's foreign policy priorities, questions remain concerning the interests it reflects. Indeed, although there has been centralisation of decision-making, this has not translated into presenting a singular foreign policy or national interest position. Rather, South Africa's national interest reflects a negotiated outcome of different positions among the political elites in government and the ruling party (African National Congress). Using Wight's national interest taxonomy, the article highlights the presence of multiple positions evident in South Africa's national interest framework before considering what the implications are for the implementation of foreign policy. This draws on a critical review of foreign policy documents, supported by semi-structured interviews with practitioners, academics, think tanks, and NGOs. The article argues that the national interest framework is not a reflection of one, but an amalgamation of what Wight identifies as realist, revolutionist, and rationalist doctrines. This has left the framework a broad document without specific aims in achieving the national interest. It also goes some way towards accounting for the limited application to date of the national interest framework in facilitating an understanding of South Africa's international relations.

Keywords: South Africa, Foreign Policy, National Interest, Realism, Rationalism, Revolutionist.

Received: March 04, 2024

Accepted: July 17, 2024

Introduction

'We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow' - Lord Palmerston (UK House of Commons 1848, cited in Ratcliffe 2016, 141)

Two hundred years following the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) the focus of state conduct in international relations remains evident in Lord Palmerston's position on the UK's national interest. Today the amorphous idea of national interest(s) remains embedded in the lexicon of international relations, finding support and opposition across ideological perspectives. It is frequently given as the 'go to' explanation by states for their international practice, particularly when the motives for their actions are somewhat questionable. Discussion of the national interest is then a subject that persists in the discourse of International Relations.¹ Although, as Kratochwil (1982, 1) points out, scholars 'who try to clarify the concept also appear to be at a loss, since the conflicting demands made in the name of the national interest clearly defy a substantive definition of its content'. This paper is not aimed at addressing these debates or the ongoing questions concerning the usefulness of the concept. Through the case study of South Africa's national interest framework this analysis argues that, while there has been centralisation when it comes to foreign policy decision-making, this has not resulted in a singular interpretation of the national interest. Rather there is an inclusion of differing positions, reflecting the complexity in defining the national interest.

On 1 August 2022 the Department for International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) released the *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest* to serve as a 'guide [for] future policy decisions within this objective framework, while meeting new challenges in a dynamic domestic and international environment' (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 2). While this is the first publication on the national interest (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022), it follows from earlier foreign policy documents (see appendix 1). Its existence is the response to calls for clarity on the direction, principles, and values guiding South Africa's interaction with the world (South African Government 2012, Sidiropoulos and Mbeki 2008, Bradlow et al. 2020, 10-11). As such, it is argued by the former Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Naledi Pandor, that the framework 'is broad in character and content in that we believe there is a variety of factors that shape what we have set out as our national interest' (Pandor 2022c).

This broad outlook on the national interest is not, however, an extension of broad participation by foreign policy stakeholders in debating South Africa's national interest. Indeed, analysts argue that the launch of the framework effectively closed discussion on the subject (Interviews 2 & 4). The centralisation of foreign policy decision-making is not unique to South Africa. As Hill (2003, 42) points out, while foreign policy is 'for the people', it is mostly made on behalf of the people by the political elites in government. Foreign policy analysis points to the central role of 'formal office-holders', primarily political leaders and officials in government, who sit at the apex of foreign policy decision-making (Hill 2003; Hermann and Hermann 1989; Hilsman 1967). Weldes (1996) too accounts for the central role of state officials in shaping the national interest,

¹ See arguments from Morgenthau (1949), Frankel (1970), Wight et al. (1991), Kratochwil (1982), Weldes (1996); Nincic (1999); Nye (1999), Finnemore (2017).

yet as we argue here, despite this monopolisation there is evidence to suggest that this does not result in a uniform or singular position.

South Africa has seen the centralisation of foreign policy in the predominant role played by the presidency and foreign policy decision-making elites (Masters 2012; 2017). During the Zuma (2009-2018) and Ramaphosa (2018 -) administrations the position of the African National Congress (ANC), as the ruling party, has expanded with the party flagrantly occupying a position in foreign policy decision-making. This development is reflected in the 2023 country experts survey of emerging country foreign policy, who now place the ruling political party ahead of the ministry of foreign affairs and head of government when it comes perceived role in shaping foreign policy (Ganter et al. 2024, 17). Yet within this centralised approach there are differing positions within the foreign policy space. For instance, while the framework document positions the Presidency as responsible for the management and implementation of the National Interest, significantly it was released by DIRCO rather than the Office of the President (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 15).

That there are multiple positions on South Africa's national interest is reflected within the framework document. While the national interest framework provides an account for 'balancing' differing national interests in pursuit of foreign policy (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 27-28), there is no accounting for how these multiple positions are incorporated and balanced *within* the framework. This has presented a challenge when it comes to the implementation of foreign policy, and just which national interest should take precedence. This question links to the focus of this special issue, considering the 'ability of strategic elites and governing elites to define political solutions'.² Here the crux of our analysis is in grappling with the question of 'which' elite interests are reflected in the national interest framework. The article demonstrates that, despite the centralisation of foreign policy decision-making, an element of plurality (although contained within the elite) remains in policy development. The result is that the framework is itself a negotiated compromise, a point we develop below.

Which National Interest(s)?

This study looks to expand an understanding of the national interest through addressing the changing preferences and priorities of decision-makers, including the 'preferences of a specific government or policy elite' (Burchill 2005, 3). In this context the national interest does not just provide 'a standard to judge the conduct of foreign affairs' (Nincic 1999, 30), but an opportunity to unpack the differing positions of what elites perceive as vital for the country. The national interest is open to wide theoretical interpretation (Burchill 2005), but it is the taxonomy set out by Wight et al. (1991) that presents a useful starting point for this discussion as it highlights

² Focus provided by the special issue concept note.

alternative doctrines through which the national interest can be understood. In his analysis Wight identifies three doctrines: firstly, the 'realist' doctrine, which perceives international relations as one of anarchy and so the national interest is to preserve a state's freedom of action (Wight et al. 1991, 112). Secondly, what he calls the 'revolutionist' doctrine, which comes from the opposite premise as the realist in that they hold that there is an 'international community and solidarity of interest' (Wight et al. 1991, 114). Here there is no parochial national interest in an anarchical environment, but a convergence of, or an international solidarity of interests. In this understanding there exists an 'international community' of interests and, as the revolutionist state represents the 'true international interest', so it also contributes to defining the interests of other states (Wight et al. 1991, 116-117).

Between the realist and revolutionist doctrines there is a middle ground in the form of the 'rationalist' doctrine of national interest. This is linked to the idea of 'enlightened self-interest', where there is an understanding of state interests as well as consideration given to other states' national interests. In other words, a rationalist position is not seeking to define another state's interest, as in the revolutionist approach, but does consider other states' interests in addition to a common international interest and the role that international organisations play in managing or 'mutually adjusting' these interests (Wight et al. 1991 128). The focus here is how decision-makers manage to balance national interests with wider international interests. In other words, for the rationalist, the 'great aim of statecraft, of foreign policy, is to pursue and safeguard the national interest within the setting of a respect for the interests of others, or of international society as a whole' (Wight et al. 1991, 126).

While this taxonomy presents a useful distinction for analysis, in practice the lines between these different positions are blurred, and as this analysis demonstrates, may all be present in a single framework document on national interest. In addressing the plurality of positions reflected in the framework document, this analysis challenges the idea that there is a unitary approach to South Africa's national interest. It is not, as Morgenthau (1949, 208) suggests that '[m]oral principles and the national interest have contended for dominance over the minds and actions of [decision-makers] throughout the history of the modern state system'; but that moral principles and considerations of realpolitik are both present in the national interest.

In unpacking 'which' elite positions are reflected in the national interest framework, a critical analysis of South African foreign policy documents was conducted. This includes policy documents from South Africa's transition to democracy (1994), to the launch of the national interest framework (see appendix 1), as well as the foreign policy discussion documents presented at the ANC annual conferences. This enabled a review of developments in the concept of the national interest, from government and the ruling party. In addition to this, a wider literature review was conducted. This highlighted that prior to the launch of the framework there was some discussion on the ambiguous nature of the term, the limited approach in stakeholder participation in the development of a national interest, and the role of the national interest in foreign policy decision-making (Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Landsberg 2010; Bohler-Muller 2012). However, following

the release of the framework there has been a little engagement on the subject, particularly in questioning the framing of the document, the understanding of public and international interests, and what might be understood by the idea of ‘balancing’ presented as part of the framework. There is also criticism that it is unclear whether ‘it is to guide government policy, direct South African investment, or inform the country’s allies and friends’ (Esterhuysen 2022).

Bradlow et al. (2020, 7) do consider the role of the national interest in shaping long-term foreign policy goals and as the ‘specific policy objectives articulated by the government of the day’. However, the volume by Bradlow et al. (2020) is concerned primarily with the former, setting out what these interests are. This article builds on the latter, questioning which objectives and priorities are being articulated. In understanding the articulation of national interest by the political and policy elites, this analysis draws on insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with foreign policy stakeholders. The focus of the interviews was to establish what engagement (if any) there has been in developing the national interest framework, how the framework relates to other foreign policy documents, and the implication of the framework for the implementation of foreign policy. Participants were selected based on their knowledge of South African foreign policy as well as their prior participation in discussions focused on foreign policy. This includes representatives from civil society, academia, government and research organisations.³

South Africa’s National Interest Framework: reflecting differing elite positions

The existence of the national interest framework is itself a negotiated outcome, between those elites looking to delineate South Africa’s national interest and those who did not. In the case of the latter, the use of the term ‘national interest’ was considered too aligned with traditional realist thinking and out of step with what South Africa should be setting out to do. This was followed by the argument that the conceptualisation of South Africa’s national interests was not necessary given that South Africa’s Constitution sets out the general principles, values, and norms, which already inform South Africa’s foreign policy as is evident in the policy documents (Interview 2; South African Government, 1996). Yet such was the concern with the lack of clarity on what the national interest meant for South Africa in guiding foreign policy, that the framers of the National Development Plan (NDP) urgently called for a high-level task team to address the national interest and South Africa’s position in the world (South African Government 2012, 241). The result of this call was the release of the framework document, itself a compromise in that it was not released as a policy paper (Interview 2).

The content of the framework document reflects an amalgamation of differing positions between policy decision-making elite when it comes to South Africa’s national interest. This underlines the challenges government faces in bringing together a divided nation in building a

³To which the authors would like to thank those who gave of their time to take part in this discussion.

South African identity following the transition to democracy in 1994. It is a point raised in the framework, which notes the need to develop a national interest that would reflect a break with the past. In particular, to distance the new South Africa from the apartheid regime's realist approach to the national interest with its focus on security, the protection of the government's sovereignty, and continued white minority rule.⁴ This saw prominence given to the pursuit of freedom, democracy and human rights in foreign policy and the national interest, principles drawn from the ANC's Freedom Charter (African National Congress 1955) and the South Africa's progressive Constitution (South African Government 1996a). Yet while the 1996 foreign policy discussion document signals that foreign policy is to be guided by the national interest, initially no attempt was made to define what this was. This was based on a decision by the Sub-Council on Foreign Affairs of the Transitional Executive Council (TEC) that there would be 'the broadest possible consensus on matters affecting South Africa's international interests, particularly its long-term interest' (South African Government 1996b). This has seen continuity, at least in the rhetoric, of a national interest that is linked to the values and principles of common humanity - Ubuntu.

Ubuntu and a revolutionist position on the national interest

South Africa's national interest and the country's response to the invasion of the Ukraine by Russia were the target of criticism by an article in *The Economist* (2023). The analysis argued that the launch of the framework constituted a move away from a foreign policy guided by the principles of human rights and saw the national interest as being 'subordinated to narrower party and sometimes personal business' ("South Africa's diplomatic descent." 2023, 13). The result, it argues is that by 'by snubbing its liberal friends for autocrats, South Africa is wrong in principle. It is also acting against its own interests' ("South Africa's diplomatic descent." 2023, 13). This critique raises questions on the role played by the ruling party and government in shaping the national interest, and which interest is being pursued.

Despite criticism that national interest is a move away from principles, within in the framework there is evidence of what Wight et al. (1991) identifies as a revolutionist position, with an emphasis on principles, values, and norms in pursuit of a 'better Africa and better world'. Among the elites within the ANC and government there are those who argue for the collective interest of international society and the development and cohesion of humanity. Indeed, that realism should not define South Africa's national interest is a point argued for in the development of South Africa's framework. The ministerial panel that conducted the review of foreign policy (2019) led by former deputy Minister for International Relations and Cooperation, Aziz Pahad, argued that the actions of larger states is evidence of the dangers of realism in guiding national interest. The

⁴The National Party government, which came to power in the 1948 elections, saw the expansion of policies of apartheid (separate development) in the interest of the white population and at the expense of black, Asian and Coloured South Africans. As the domestic and international struggle against apartheid gathered pace (deemed a crime against humanity by the UN), the Nationalist government sought to strengthened its control of the state and to use foreign policy in defence of minority white interest. See for instance Geldenhuys, D. *The Diplomacy of Isolation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984.

review points out that ‘there is a tendency of powerful countries to reduce complex and interrelated problems of the world to narrow national interests, including militarist and transactional approach to diplomacy’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2019, 7). This has seen South African foreign policy acknowledge that common values and principles should be promoted as part of the national interest. Like Wight’s revolutionists, this vision challenges the notion of realism in defining national interests, which are seen as a hindrance to the pursuit of these pillars. Certainly, from within the ANC it is pointed out that when ‘global and local realities, principles, values and institutions are interconnected [...] how do we reconcile ‘national’ interest with the pursuit of pan-Africanism and a progressive internationalist movement?’ (African National Congress 2017, 2).

The emphasis on promoting the interests of the region, continent, and world as part of the national interest is encapsulated in the concept of Ubuntu, which informs South Africa’s foreign policy and national interest framework. Here Ubuntu is defined as ‘the recognition of South Africa’s interconnectedness and interdependence’ with others in international relations (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 16). This aligns with Wight et al. (1991, 117) argument that revolutionists perceive their national interest as being in the interest of other states, and so in effect act as their ‘protectors’. In the foreign policy White Paper, *The Diplomacy of Ubuntu* (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2011), South Africa’s national interest is envisioned as one that will ‘promote and support the positive development of others’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2011, 4). This is based on recognition that South Africa has benefited from the ‘selfless solidarity in the past, [and] believes strongly that what it wishes for its people should be what it wishes for the citizens of the world’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2011, 10).

This revolutionist leaning is evident in South Africa’s foreign policy in the importance attributed to regionalism and outreach to the continent, defining and extending relations to the region and outreach to the continent via the vision of an ‘African Renaissance’. This drove the development of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and its allied African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), both seen as a means of institutionalising the revolutionist ideals of collective African interests on socio-economic development and good governance. The focus on the promotion of continental political independence and the pursuit of a rules based international order has seen South Africa positioning itself as an international ‘norm setter and developer’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 18). This includes values and principles as part of the promotion of the national interest, privileging dialogue in support of ‘global trends that favour human rights, the peaceful settlement of disputes, transitional justice and respect for international law, norms and collective action through multilateral organs, as well as a strong belief in the role of women in peace and security’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 17).

The ANC internationalist vision of Pan-Africanism and South-South solidarity underpins South Africa’s interests in continuing the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism, drawing

on a ‘shared history’ and ‘common destiny’ in arguing for greater cooperation and progressive international solidarity (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 8; 2011, 3; Pandor 2022). As such South Africa’s foreign policy includes regional, continental, and international interests as a ‘natural extension’ of South Africa’s national interest (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2011, 12). As former Minister Pandor (2021) notes,

the living conditions of South Africans [...] contribute to the wellbeing of our fellow Africans as well as all those who are yearning for freedom, peace and prosperity in the world. It is in our interest that Africa and the world is peaceful, politically united and economically prosperous.

An outward looking focus in the national interest continues to see South Africa assuming the role of the ‘voice’ for Africa in international forums, particularly where it finds itself as the only representative from Africa (G20, BRICS – ahead of the entry of Ethiopia and Egypt). As Pandor (2023; 2022a) points out, South Africa is representing South Africa and African interests. It is also positioned as addressing the challenges of (neo)colonialism and racial oppression.

Realism in the national interest

While there is considerable evidence that supports the inclusion of a revolutionist position in foreign policy and the national interest, it is not the only position evident in the national interest framework. Wight et al. (1991) discuss the different doctrines on national interest separately; however, in practice the lines between them prove difficult to separate. As this analysis points out, South Africa’s national interest framework sees these positions sitting (at times uncomfortably) alongside each other, raising question for consistency and coherence of foreign policy implementation.

Internationally, from the 1990s globalisation gave rise to arguments for the growing transnational nature of international relations and the growth of global governance in addressing myriad transnational ‘wicked problems’ such as climate change, migration, global health. Yet the rise in unilateralism and a growing emphasis on parochial state interest from the late 2000s has seen the concept of the national interest back at the fore in international relations. While South Africa’s national interest framework addresses the importance of regional, continental, and global interests as a part of the national interest, it also includes elements of a realist position. For example, in October 2009, the International Cooperation, Trade and Security (ICTS) Cluster tasked DIRCO – formerly the Department of Foreign Affairs – with the responsibility of developing a strategic approach to South Africa’s relations in the rest of Africa. This resulted in the development of a draft discussion document, *A Conceptual Framework for the Identification of South African Foreign Policy Anchor Countries in the Five African Regions Recognised by the African Union*. This was aimed at prioritising state-to-state engagement in pursuit of the national interest, identifying countries

that would be targeted in South Africa's unfolding post-apartheid Africa policy (Landsberg 2010). The singling out of key states did, however, raise questions on how this targeted approach would align with South Africa's focus on improving relations across all of Africa and the inclusion of all in the pursuit of an African renaissance.

That realism is evident in informing the national interest follows through from South Africa's foreign policy documents. For example the foreign policy white paper points out that 'South Africa subscribes to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states' (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2011), and although the Foreign Policy Review (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2019, 8) avoided explicit discussion of the pursuit of national interest, the language still considers whether South Africa has been able to use global forums to 'consistently to advance national priorities, the interests of the SADC region, the African continent and the countries of the South'. This feeds into the national interest framework's focus on the protection of security, sovereignty, and defence of the state (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022). This includes defining the South African national interest as "The protection and promotion of its national sovereignty and constitutional order, the well-being, safety and prosperity of its citizens, and a better Africa and world" (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 9 **Bold and italics in the original**). There is also the link made to the Constitution as the foundation for the national interest, which itself protects the inviolability of the state and support of South Africa's 'rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations' (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 9). This follows in the national interest in the emphasis on defence and security against a threat to South Africa's sovereignty and national interest (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 18).

That the 'national' should be at the centre of South African interests is evident in the National Development Plan (NDP) chapter, 'Positioning South Africa in the World'. Although the NDP argues for the development of national interest that is 'practical, honest and principled', it also points to setting national priorities that include the aggressive expansion of trade, investment, and improving human security through effective transnational natural resource management (South African Government 2012, 241, 236-237). The emphasis on domestic priorities has seen debate among the political elite on whether South Africa's expansive international relations address socio-economic interests. This includes assessing South Africa's African Agenda as well as participation in forums such as the BRICS group (Bohler-Muller 2012, 5).

In the list of national interest priorities set out within the framework document there is a specific focus on political interests (sovereignty), security interests, and economic interests in promoting the quality of life for South Africans. However, while there is a clear sense of realism within these identified priorities there is also recognition of wider international interests. For instance, while addressing economic development for the benefit of South Africans, there is consideration given to promoting fair labour standards and decent work across the world. There is also attention given to wider interests evident in the national interest priority identified in

‘a better Africa and world’, which notes the role in ‘strengthen[ing] continental institutions to bolster integration and peace on the African continent’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 13).

The inclusion of the Rationalist

It is not, then, only the revolutionist and realist positions included within the national interest framework. What Wight et al. (1991) terms the ‘rationalist’ doctrine sits alongside principles of international interests (revolutionist) and the promotion of state sovereignty (realism). The idea of enlightened self-interest is reflected in the focus on finding the middle ground between the realist and revolutionist positions. This position too has been evident in shaping the national interest framework. For instance, the NDP (South African Government, 2012) calls for a focus on domestic priorities in informing national interests, but also calls for attention to South Africa’s international role in supporting democracy and human rights. This includes measures (short-to-medium term guide), calling for a foreign policy that is orientated towards addressing the domestic challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequality as well as a national interest where there is a clear benefit accruing from international relations (South African Government 2012, 237). It has also seen discussions concerning South Africa’s international commitments, and whether the state is over-stretching. This saw the call for ‘a pragmatic appraisal of existing agreements on the continent’ (South African Government 2012, 243), a point challenging the international leadership role envisioned in the position of the revolutionists.

The rationalist position in South Africa’s national interest highlights the country’s national development, as well as the socio-economic development of the region and continent. Here the focus includes defending ‘multilateralism and the rules-based international system’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 14). This has played out in South Africa’s foreign policy commitment to multilateralism and its continued participation in multilateral forums such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change, negotiations on nuclear non-proliferation amongst others (Taylor and Williams 2006). It has also seen South Africa prioritising its participation and engagement in international governance institutions such as the United Nations and the African Union. This links to the middle power narrative of South Africa that emerged amongst analysts (Nel et al 2000). Although a middle power position is not declared, an enlightened self-interest is evident within the framework. Here South Africa commits to continue working towards the development of international rules and norms as well as acting as ‘a bridge-builder to bring together parties that hold different views’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 25). This rationalist position is further evident in the position that ‘the protection and promotion of the country’s political values and principles will be pursued in a spirit of cooperation, as opposed to imposition, paternalism or dominance’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 15).

National Interest as a 'Balancing Act'

In critiquing South Africa's national interest framework Esterhuyse's (2022) analysis considers the concept of national interest in the singular rather than as an amalgamation of differing positions. The concept of 'national interest' is understood to include a variety of permanent, variable, long-term to short-term and competing public priorities in the literature, but that there are differing positions embedded within the framework is an area in need of further discussion. As the analysis above notes, South Africa's national interest framework should not be regarded as reflecting a singular position, even if it remains centralised within policy elites. What a critique of the national interest should consider is that the conflation of these positions means that there are too many agendas present. This raises the question of 'which' national interest South African foreign policy is guided by. This has posed problems when it comes to the implementation of foreign policy, where efforts to follow one position have given rise to challenges from another.

That there may be a 'clash between elements of the national interest' (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 27) is a point addressed in the framework, in recognition of the challenges in balancing of South Africa's own position in the international society with its domestic context. The solution proposed is to balance these elements to achieved foreign policy priorities. This is where the question is, which interest prevails when it comes to decision making. Those who adopt a revolutionist position have argued for the universality of relations from the outset of the 'new' South Africa's foreign policy including the importance of Pan-Africanism and solidarity with Africa and the global South (South African Government 1996b). Yet this interpretation has caused controversy in South Africa's international engagement, particularly given continued relations with Africa's authoritarian leaders who disregard democratic and human rights principles (Mhaka 2020). As such, while the point of the national interest framework is to alleviate challenges of coherence and predictability to foreign policy decision-making, the continued presence of diverse positions within the framework has not provided for a clear South African position.

Those elites adopting a rationalist position have been cautious in advancing South Africa's role on the continent so as to avoid imposing the county's national interests on other African states. This includes the position that South Africa's national interest 'intersects with the pursuit of the National Interest of a partner(s) bilaterally and/or multilaterally' (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 27). This itself reflects the complicated attempt to reconcile transforming the region, continent and world while avoiding the label of regional hegemon, but it has seen South Africa fall short in reconciling economic pragmatism with political sensibilities.

South Africa's focus on economic diplomacy has sought to engage industry, investment, and labour in promoting the national interest. It is also seen as imperative that South Africa's representatives going abroad should be fully versed in the 'policies and strategies of domestic departments in order to pursue the national interest in all spheres' (South African Government

1996b). The subsequent DIRCO strategic plans address the role of bilateral and multilateral relations as they promote the national interest in the pursuit of economic growth and increasing FDI to South Africa and Africa, promoting South African exports, and growing South African tourism. These areas are considered key for the national interest, but their national focus means that they are juxtaposed to the more revolutionist conception in pursuing continental solidarity, regional integration, and peace and stability (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2020, 18-21). The challenge is that the rationalist approach has become a shopping list of domestic issues that government needs to address rather than informing what South Africa should be pursuing at an international level to achieve these. Certainly, in the 2009 discussion on defining the national interest, DIRCO listed issues such as the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment, creation of jobs, wealth, economic development, democracy, food water and energy security, elimination of inequality as in the national interests (Landsberg 2010, p. 279). Yet there is not clarity on how they should be pursued internationally.

That there should be ‘an objective enquiry, based on reasoned analysis’ where there is a conflict in national interest (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 28) has fallen short. There has been a particular challenge in balancing economic and ideological positions when it comes to promoting trade, international investment and regional economic development (seen as paramount in addressing poverty, inequality and employment). The revolutionist position has seen the emphasis on African solidarity and South-South cooperation as central to the national interest. This includes advancing relations with its partners in the BRICS. Yet South Africa’s relations with Russia and China have given rise to scepticism among European and US trading partners (Harding 2023, Masters and Firsing 2015), who are questioning how serious South Africa is in pursuing trade and investment and creating uncertainty in the application of foreign policy.

Between government departments the differences in positions on the national interest is also evident. The framework sets out that DIRCO is ‘responsible for the formulation, coordination, implementation and management of South Africa’s foreign policy and international relations programmes’ (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 16). The release of the national interest framework by DIRCO does point to a more active foreign policy bureaucracy than it has been during Zuma’s administration, but a challenge remains in coordinating the pursuit of national priorities. This has come to the fore in balancing which of the differing positions (revolutionist, realist and rationalist) would inform South Africa’s national interest in guiding relations with Russia following its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. DIRCO and the presidency have expressed concern at the action as a breach of international law and sovereignty, and for the humanitarian crisis that has followed, calling for negotiation and a political solution (Pandor 2022b). However, South Africa continued to undertake military exercises with Russia with concern raised by the US that South Africa was shipping arms to Russia (Ray and Walsh 2023). While in this instance DIRCO adopted the rationalist position evident in the framework, the Department of Defence aligned with the realist position with its defence of the sovereignty

of South Africa's actions⁵ (Redaction Africanews and Agence France Presse 2023). These actions raise the need for further consideration of a whole of government approach, and whether the Framework would be better located within the presidency⁶.

Since the launch of the national interest framework, South Africa's foreign policy responses to the Russian-Ukraine conflict (2022), the hosting of BRICS (2023), and response to the conflict between Israel-Hamas (2023), have not drawn on the document in guiding the country's international relations. This is despite expectation that it would be 'used extensively in future debate and analysis of South African foreign policy' (Esterhuyse 2022). There has been little subsequent discussion, research, or critique forthcoming on its design or role in the implementation of foreign policy from within government or more widely. Although the final framework was released with much fanfare, after a draft lay dormant for years, there is little to suggest that the process itself had been inclusive or participatory. Concern is that with limited participation there will be limited buy-in from stakeholders⁷. Following the launch of the framework there has been little discussion on the national interest and how this should be applied. There was a workshop discussion, hosted by the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) with Parliament at the end of 2022, but this focused on addressing the role of oversight that Parliament should play rather than how the legislature might contribute to further debate on determining South Africa's national interest.

The national interest framework is a response to the calls to define South Africa's priorities. Its purpose is to clarify and articulate South Africa's 'key values, principles and goals that influence our foreign policy and practice' and present a 'useful template for our interlocutors to perhaps understand the decision and choices we make' (Pandor 2022). However, the framework has not contributed significantly to clarifying the implementation of foreign policy principles and practice. A challenge given that the document itself is a combination of differing positions of what South Africa's national interest is. Without further engagement or discussion on which of the positions reflected in the national interest are being drawn on and when, in the implementation of foreign policy, the national interest framework seems fated to be consigned to obscurity. That it is not being referred to in support of foreign policy decision making undermines its role as a measure or a means of maximising its role in shaping South Africa's international relations (Interview 4). Indeed, more emphasis has been given to achieving the output of a national interest framework than considering positions integrated into the national interest framework, and how this informs the practicalities of foreign policy decision-making. As Burchill (2005, p. 12) points out, any analysis of national interest should begin by understanding the ideas reflected as representing the state's interest (Burchill 2005, p. 12).

⁵ Interview. Online discussion. International Relations Research Organisation, Johannesburg. 8 November 2023.

⁶ Interview. Online correspondence by email. Academia, Pretoria 11 October 2023; and Interview. Online discussion. International Relations Research Organisation, Pretoria 27 October 2023

⁷ Interview. Online correspondence by email. Academia, Pretoria 11 October 2023; Interview. Online discussion. International Relations Research Organisation, Pretoria 27 October 2023; and Interview. Online discussion. Diplomat/Practitioner, 27 October 2023

Conclusion

President Ramaphosa argues for the possibility of shared national interests in the closing address of the ANC 2022 policy conference,

While different constituencies may pursue different interests, and may hold different views, we share a common national interest in unity, stability, growth, employment and prosperity for all (African National Congress 2022, 106).

The launch of the national interest framework aimed at providing a guide to future policy decisions, however, in practice there has been little subsequent engagement with the framework raising questions around its continued utility and whether it is more aspirational than operational. The challenge is that there is not a single, but multiple positions on the national interest included within the framework.

The drafters of national interest framework question the realist response of other states in the conduct of their international relations, arguing for something more; that South Africa's national interest should not 'simply be positioned between Realism and Idealism' (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2022, 16). The framework is certainly not a singular position on the national interest. There is a realist position evident in the continued defence of South Africa's state sovereignty, security, and role as a prominent actor on the global stage. Yet there is also evidence of a revolutionist's position, guided by the principles of the ANC and liberation struggle against apartheid and colonialism. This has contributed to the framework focus on the importance of principles and values in the development of a common, or shared interest for the continent and globally expressed through the diplomacy of ubuntu. In addition, the rationalist position is present in efforts to balance international and domestic priorities through the inclusion of a pragmatic balancing of national and international interests.

The challenge has been in the implementation of the national interest, in particular which national interest is being pursued in South Africa's international relations. This goes some way towards accounting for the divergent actions taken when it comes to South Africa's international relations, challenging the ability of decision-makers to meet all expectations. It also leaves the framework a broad document, without specific aims in the achievement of the national interest, which goes some way towards accounting for the limited application to date.

References

African National Congress – ANC. "International relations discussion document." In 5th National Policy Conference, Midrand, South Africa, 2017.

- African National Congress – ANC. *6th National Policy Conference Report, 28-31 July 2022*. Johannesburg, 2022. <https://www.anc1912.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/6th-ANC-National-Policy-Conference-Reports-2022.pdf>
- African National Congress – ANC. *The freedom charter*. Johannesburg, 1955. <https://www.anc1912.org.za/the-freedom-charter-2/>
- Bohler-Muller, N. “Nuanced balancing act: South Africa’s national and international interests and its ‘African Agenda’.” *Ocasional Paper* no 120, September, 2012.
- Bradlow, D. D., E. Sidiropoulos, and A. Bizos. “Defining a South African foreign policy for the 2020s: challenges, constraints and opportunities.” In *Values, interests and power: South African foreign policy in uncertain times*, edited by D.D. Bradlow, and E. Sidiropoulos. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2020.
- Burchill, S. *The national interest in international relations theory*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Department of International Relations and Cooperation – DIRCO. *Draft white paper, south african foreign policy: building a better world: the diplomacy of Ubuntu*. Pretoria, 2011. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/final-draft-white-paper-sa-foreign-policy.pdf
- Department of International Relations and Cooperation – DIRCO. *DIRCO: Summary of the report of the Ministerial Review Panel on SA’s foreign policy*. Pretoria, 2019. <https://www.polity.org.za/article/dirco-summary-of-the-report-of-the-ministerial-review-panel-on-sas-foreign-policy-2019-04-17>
- Department of International Relations and Cooperation – DIRCO. *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*. Pretoria, 2020. <https://www.dirco.gov.za/2020-2025-strategic-plan/>
- Department of International Relations and Cooperation – DIRCO. *Framework document on South Africa’s national interest and its advancement in a global environment*. Pretoria, 2022. https://www.dirco.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/sa_national_interest.pdf
- Esterhuyse, A. “South Africa’s foreign policy: new paper sets the scene, but falls short on specifics.” *The Conversation*, August 18, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-foreign-policy-new-paper-sets-the-scene-but-falls-short-on-specifics-188253>
- Finnemore, M. *National interests in international society*. Ithaca: Cornell University, 2017.
- Frankel, J. *National interest*. London: Macmillan, 1970.
- Ganter, J., P. Esteves, M. Kripalani, J. Lehrer, S. Gruzd, and C. F. S. Coelho. *Listening beyond the echo chambers: emerging middle powers report 2024*. Berlin: Körber-Stiftung, 2024.
- Harding, A. “Brics summit: How China’s and Russia’s clout is growing in Africa.” *BBC News Online*, August 21, 2023. Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-66562999>
- Hermann, M. G., and C. F. Hermann. “Who makes foreign policy decisions and how: an empirical inquiry.” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1989): 361-387.

- Hill, C. *The changing politics of foreign policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hilsman, R. *To move a nation: the politics of foreign policy in the administration of John F. Kennedy*. New York: Dell, 1967.
- Kratochwil, F. "On the notion of 'interest' in international relations." *International Organization* 36, no.1 (1982): 1-30. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300004768>
- Landsberg, L. "The Foreign policy of the Zuma government: pursuing the 'national interest?'" *South African Journal of International Affairs* 17, no.3 (2010): 273-293. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2010.533890>
- Masters, L. "Opening the 'black box': South African foreign policy making." In *South African foreign policy review: volume 1*, edited by C. Landsberg, and J. van Wyk. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2012.
- Masters, L. "South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy making and the role of the president." *Politeia* 36, no. 1 (2017): 1-21. doi: <https://doi.org/10.25159/0256-8845/3094>
- Masters, L., and S. Firsing. *South African foreign policy and the west: the art of foreign policy balancing*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2015.
- Mhaka, T. "South Africa is not ready to lead Africa." *Aljazeera*, February 19, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/south-africa-ready-lead-africa-200218095017263.html>
- Morgenthau, H. J. "The primacy of the national interest." *The American Scholar* 18, no. 2 (1949): 207-212.
- Nel, P., I. Taylor, and J. van der Westhuizen. "Multilateralism in South Africa's foreign policy: the search for a critical rationale." *Global Governance* 6, no. 1 (2000): 43-60. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-00601005>
- Nincic, M. "The national interest and its interpretation." *The Review of Politics* 61, no. 1 (1999): 29-55.
- Nye, J. S. "Redefining the national interest." *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (1999): 22-35
- Pandor, N. "South Africa's engagements with the world are informed by our national interest." *The Pan Afrikanist*, August 3, 2022c. www.thepanafrikanist.com/south-africas-engagements-with-the-world-are-informed-by-our-national-interest-by-naledi-pandor
- Pandor, N. *Dr GNM Pandor Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Budget Vote Speech 2023, 'Strengthening Partnerships to forge a more just and equitable global system', 10 May 2023*. Pretoria: Department International Relations and Cooperation, 2023. <https://www.dirco.gov.za/dr-gnm-pandor-minister-of-international-relations-and-cooperation-budget-vote-speech-2023-strengthening-partnerships-to-forge-a-more-just-and-equitable-global-system-10-may-2023/>
- Pandor, N. *Media Statement by the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Dr Naledi Pandor, on the occasion of the Budget Vote in Parliament*. Pretoria: Department International Relations and Cooperation, 2021. <https://www.dirco.gov.za/media-statement-by-the-minister-of-international-relations-and-cooperation-dr-naledi-pandor-on-the-occasion-of-the-budget-vote-in-parliament-on-20-may-2021/>

- Pandor, N. *Speech by the minister of international relations and cooperation, Dr Naledi Pandor, on the occasion of the budget vote*. Pretoria: Department International Relations and Cooperation, 2022a. <https://www.dirco.gov.za/speech-by-the-minister-of-international-relations-and-cooperation-dr-naledi-pandor-on-the-occasion-of-the-budget-vote-12-may-2022/>
- Pandor, N. *Statement by the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Dr Naledi Pandor, during the Media Briefing on the Russia/Ukraine Conflict*. Pretoria: Department International Relations and Cooperation, 2022b. <https://www.dirco.gov.za/statement-by-the-minister-of-international-relations-and-cooperation-dr-naledi-pandor-during-the-media-briefing-on-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-08-april-2022/>
- Pandor, N. *Symposium on the Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest*. Pretoria: South African Government. 2022. <https://www.gov.za/speeches/ministe-naledi-pandor-symposium-framework-document-south-africa%E2%80%99s-national-interest-1-aug>
- Ratcliffe, S. *Oxford essential quotations*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University, 2016. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00008130?rkey=yjPT19&result=2820>
- Ray, C. A., and M. Walsh. *Russia's alleged arms shipment in South Africa*. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2023. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/05/russias-alleged-arms-shipment-in-south-africa/>
- Redaction Africanews, and Agence France Presse. "South African military defends joint naval exercises with Russia." *Africa News*, February 2, 2023. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/02/23/south-african-military-defends-joint-naval-exercises-with-russia/>
- Sidiropoulos, E., and M. Mbeki. "An alternative foreign policy." *South African Institute of International Affairs*, July 27, 2008. <https://saiia.org.za/research/an-alternative-foreign-policy/>
- "South Africa's diplomatic descent." *The Economist*, February 23, 2023. Era Irrational interest.
- South African Government. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Pretoria: Constitutional Assembly, 1996a. <http://www.dac.gov.za/content/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996>
- South African Government. *Foreign policy for South Africa: discussion document*. Pretoria, 1996b. <https://www.gov.za/documents/foreign-policy-south-africa-discussion-document>
- South African Government. *National development plan 2030: our future make it work*. Pretoria, 2012. <https://www.gov.za/issues/national-development-plan-2030>
- South African Parliament. *Budgetary review and recommendation report of the portfolio committee on international relations and cooperation*. Pretoria, 2022. <https://pmg.org.za/tailed-committee-report/5111/>
- Taylor, I., and P. D. Williams. *The new multilateralism in South African diplomacy: studies in diplomacy and international relations*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

- Van Nieuwkerk, A. "South Africa's national interest." *African Security Studies* 13, no. 2 (2004): 89-101. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2004.9627289>
- Weldes, J. "Constructing national interests." *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 3 (1996): 275-393. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066196002003001>
- Wight, M., G. Wight, and B. Porter. "Theory of national interest." In *International theory: the three traditions*, edited by G. Wight, and B. Porter, 111-136. London: Bloomsbury. 1991.