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## South Africa's foreign policy challenges and prospects since the Russia-Ukraine war

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**Vongani Muhluri Nkuna**

*Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs  
University of South Africa*

*Emails: [nkunavm@unisa.ac.za](mailto:nkunavm@unisa.ac.za); [muhluri.nkuna@gmail.com](mailto:muhluri.nkuna@gmail.com)*

### Abstract

South Africa's challenges in pursuing a value-based foreign policy in international politics are not a recent phenomenon. The common expression in the critical discussion of South Africa's foreign policy prospects in the post-apartheid era is the relationship between Pretoria's commitment to live up to the declared foreign policy principles and equally pursuing the country's national interests. Since the Russia-Ukraine war started in 2022, political studies scholars and members of the media have been concerned about South Africa's non-alignment position towards the conflict. Many argue that the African National Congress (ANC)-led South Africa is risking key trade relationships with the United States (US) to keep Russia (a BRICS associate) happy. Moreover, some scholars are of the view that Washington should not trivialise the sovereignty of other countries, and South Africa should be able to choose their trading partners without being dictated to or threatened by sanctions. To that end, this study deploys qualitative research methods in their broadest form to delve into South Africa's foreign policy challenges and prospects since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In detail, the author arranged this article under the themes (1) US threats against South Africa's close relationships with Russia (2) the challenges of South Africa's non-alignment position towards the war; (3)

BRICS associates attempts to 'de-dollarise' the international system; and (4) the expansion of BRICS as a potential threat to US global dominance.

**Keywords:** *South Africa, Russia-Ukraine war, Non-aligned foreign policy, United States, BRICS.*

## **Introduction**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has introduced a new discourse in understanding the dynamics of international relations and contemporary frameworks of the contested term 'new world order'. The war has placed a crippling strain on the strategic ties between the US and South Africa. South Africa's close ties with BRICS associates such as China and Russia are a noted concern for Washington's interests in South Africa and the rest of the continent. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Pretoria has demonstrated averse attempts to demand Russia to unilaterally silence the guns and end hostilities in Ukraine (Nkuna, 2023). This stance goes against South Africa's inscribed foreign policy commitments to advance human rights and the promotion of democracy and international law. As such, the current researcher asserts that South Africa's unwillingness to appear concerned about its apparent contradiction to prescribed foreign policy goals portrays a reasonable stance in the international system characterised by the 'unequal application' of Western principles in hostile armed conflict environments. Against this backdrop, this study delves into South Africa's foreign policy approaches and non-aligned position on the conflict in Ukraine. The author further deliberates on the noted US 'jealous' stance on the relationship between Russia and South Africa. The paper provides concluding remarks and proposes recommendations using the workable relations between BRICS associates on how they pose a threat to the US-dominated international system.

## **The theoretical framing of the study**

This study is underpinned by the African-centred framework known as Afrocentricity, as articulated by thought thinkers such as Asante (2003). Afrocentricity in International Relations (IR) is contextualised by the works of Shai (2021), Rapanyane (2021), and Nkuna (2022), who distil a vision and a blueprint for the reconstruction and emancipation of an epistemic revolution to nuance IR studies using African lenses. In

general, Afrocentricity has widely recognised African experiences from a life of abandonment, enslavement, resistance, and attempted recovery from coloniality. In this study, Afrocentricity forms a cognitive appreciation of Africans' existential and intellectual ruins, thereby enforcing a challenge to the contrived reality of the continent and its knowledge production in IR's studies. The noted paucity of radical post-colonial leadership in Africa has drained the vitality and dimmed the revolutionary fervour of African radical consciousness, especially in African studies (Mazama, 2021). Afrocentricity serves as a theoretical guide that advances African IR diminished radical consciousness. Afrocentricity in this study is deployed as a cognitive grounding to unmask the post-colonial realities of the international system and the class of leaders who oversee imperialist ideas and their doctrines. To this end, the imperative task of the current researcher is to revalidate the authentic parameters of Afrocentricity in IR, which has become increasingly compelling in the face of the tragic dominance of Western dogmas in Africa's international relations (Shai, 2021).

## **South Africa's foreign policy prospects in context**

### ***National interest***

A significant theme in South Africa's foreign policy discourse and scholarship relates to the relationship between core principles on human rights, democracy, the African agenda, regional cooperation, constitutionalism, and the commitment to upholding South Africa's national interest. Hill (2003:119) contends that national interests serve as a yardstick for determining whether foreign policy goals attend to the people's interests. Alden and Soko (2005) and Hadebe (2015) claim that the ambiguity in arriving at a universally accepted definition of national interest makes foreign policy goals redundant. National interests differ from one state to the next. Thus, most scholars who conceptualise national interests deploy the realist school of thought, which emphasises the importance of power (Hadebe, 2015). A classical expression of national interest was captured by Morgenthau (1978), who holds the view that defining the pursuit of power as a national interest dictates how states drive their foreign policies. Borrowing from the pursuit of power narrative as articulated by Morgenthau (1978), it is important to contextualise South Africa's foreign policy opportunities and constraints

to trace Pretoria's national interests on the continent and the world at large. In their influential study titled "*Defining a South African Foreign Policy for the 2020s: Challenges, Constraints, and Opportunities*", Bradlow et al. (2020) define national interest in two senses: the first is focused on a state's long-term foreign policy objectives (South Africa). The goals are aligned with a country's social, cultural, historical, economic, environmental, and geographic background. The second sense is tied to the conception that national interests are not binding actions that exclusively belong to a state. Thus, ruling parties advocate foreign policy goals aligned with their political agenda or worldview. Moreover, Siko (2012) believes that governments occasionally use the term 'national interest' to justify unpopular actions taken by government leaders. To support this claim, the 9/11 attacks can serve as an example. In response to the attacks, the US, under the leadership of George W. Bush, arrayed a 'war against terrorism' foreign policy towards the Middle East region. Surprisingly, the US presence in Afghanistan and Iraq amplified humanitarian crises, and its troops annexed key economic establishments (mainly oil reserves) (Shai, 2016).

Landsberg (2016) holds a well-considered view that South Africa's national interests can be viewed as both a constraint and an opportunity. The international community received Pretoria comfortably in the post-apartheid period, and the then Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) utilised the opportunity by expressing its foreign policy on the African stage as a regional hegemon (Sidiropoulos, 2014). Central to this is the fact that the international balance of forces has not always been favourable for South Africa's international ambitions. Qobo (2018) contends that South Africa is just an African middle power with no voice (permanent seat) at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Furthermore, it is not a nuclear power, despite being the largest producer of uranium (Nkuna & Shai, 2020). To this end, Pretoria cannot use the soft power of an African anchor state to dictate or coerce its worldview. Correspondingly, Fabricius (2019) posits that South Africa's constraints internationally can be attributed to domestic troubles (income inequality, poor governance, and corruption), which yields its limited capacity to coerce other states to act in the desired direction. This unequivocally indicates that "South Africa lacks the kind of foreign policy activism found in other countries where government strategy and corporate objectives for expansion abroad are mutually supportive" (Qobo, 2010:8).

For all governments, national interests are the starting point for enforcing successful expeditions and negotiations for political, economic, and security interests. Nkuna and Shai (2020) support this view, as they encapsulate that South Africa's foreign policy cannot deviate from its African context or agenda. Therefore, Pretoria's foreign policy should be guided by a pan-Africanist approach. In the same vein, Maloka (2019) thinks that Pan-Africanism has roots in Africa's emancipation to decolonise decades of oppression through unity and regional integration, as expressed in the founding document of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) in 1963, now the African Union (AU).

### ***Human Rights***

National interests and human rights are the bedrock of South Africa's foreign policy studies. Human rights raise countless emotions from advocacy groups and academics who mobilise society to their outcry (Maqhina, 2019). Human rights can never be measured in statistics, so conceptual approaches are essential. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (2013), human rights can be traced back to 539 BC during the Great Babylonian Empire. As stipulated in Article 2 of the Declaration of the UNHRC (2006), human rights are inalienable fundamental common rights and basic values for all cultures and should be respected. Human rights are the core functionality of international relations and international law (Landsberg, 2014). To this end, South Africa's former president and human rights activist, Mandela (1997), contends that human rights are instinctively linked with democracy, as they both advocate for the expression of equality. In South Africa, Feinberg (2020) postulates human rights as a theoretically complex and politically inclined concept that is surrounded by controversy. The nexus between foreign policy and human rights is a highly contentious topic. Hence, practitioners, politicians, and academics remain divided on South Africa's membership in the International Criminal Court (ICC). However, it is safe to argue that South Africa's stance on Omar Al Bashir (a long-serving Sudanese leader accused of war crimes by the ICC) and Dalai Lama (a retired political and spiritual Tibetan leader) and its recent non-alignment posture on Russia-Ukraine are questionable. Maloka (2019) reported that embattled former Sudanese President Al Bashir attended the AU Summit in 2015 as a delegate who enjoyed diplomatic immunity. However, his presence in

South Africa caused a stir as public opinion was divided among human rights activists, academics, politicians, and international law practitioners as to whether Al Bashir should be arrested or not.

In contrast, the Dalai Lama saga also caused a public outcry as the spiritual Tibetan leader was denied entry to South Africa to attend 'peace' events such as Bishop Desmond Tutu's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in 2011 (Maqhina, 2019). Political scientist Steven Friedman (2011) believes that South Africa buckled under pressure from its biggest trading partner (China) to deny the Dalai Lama entry into the country. The Chinese government deems the spiritual leader a threat to its economic interests, thus discouraging DIRCO from issuing him a visa. As stated earlier, human rights and respect for justice remain the cornerstones of South Africa's foreign policy goals. The Al Bashir and Dalai Lama cases prove that Pretoria's deviation from its foreign policy objectives is not a recent phenomenon. Drawing from this background, when the ICC charged Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin for war crimes in Ukraine, South Africa was forced to cancel Putin's (in-person) attendance at the BRICS Summit 2023 to avoid discrepancies in living up to the Constitution and the ICC Rome Statute.

### ***Multilateralism***

The concept of multilateralism traditionally denotes the global engagements of various governments, as coined by the US after WWII in 1945. The US was at the forefront of establishing the new political order, multilateral cooperation, and treaty organisations. The advocates of multilateralism acknowledge the existence of a central authority or hegemons. However, they also hold a strong view that multilateral cooperation benefits secondary actors on the premise of stability. The sole purpose of forming multilateral bodies was to identify common challenges and establish ties for security, political, and economic cooperation (Slobodchikoff, 2009). Recently, there has been growing debate from different schools of thought regarding the context of multilateralism. Constructivists hold the view that governments are actors playing as groups sharing similar ideas, norms, and objectives (Hadebe, 2015). On the contrary, realist scholars are of the view that morality has no space or standing in international politics. States are always guided by their interests, and the existence and influence of hegemons in multilateral bodies cannot be overemphasised (Verdier,

2005). To that end, within the Global South perspective, in multilateral forums such as BRICS, member states are perpetually organised to engage and provide political competition and alternative or institutional means to regulate the dominance of hegemons (the US) in global politics. However, the noted adventurism of Russia and China within the forum confirms the narrative that they pursue their 'own' agenda through the alliance. In this study, multilateralism is understood within the context of states pursuing individual interests over superpowers (Nkuna, 2023).

### **South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy in perspective**

Overreaching cultural worldviews contend for dominance in understanding the 'black box' of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy. South Africa's foreign policy has emerging subparallel threads of change and continuity (Masters, 2017). Thus, Sidiropolous (2008) argues that the post-apartheid government inherited a liberal-oriented foreign policy owing to the country's European past. Also, there is an African identity (African Agenda) foreign policy woven to decolonise the cultural and socioeconomic issues faced by most black South Africans (Nganje, 2012). Both identities in South Africa's foreign policy find expression in the need to reposition Pretoria's international relations, animated by contradictions and tensions, in terms of living up to its declared objectives. South Africa's foreign policy scholars, such as Schoeman (2015), Barber (1973), and Landsberg (2005, 2014), posit that foreign policy is characterised and guided by three concentric orientations, namely (1) regional, (2) continental, and (3) global ambitions. This section thematically borrows views from the works of scholars such as Nganje (2012), Siko (2014), and Ogunnubi (2019), *inter alia*, to give a historical background on South Africa's foreign policy.

### ***South Africa's foreign policy since 1994***

The profound foreign affairs activities of South Africa have disproportionately been influenced by internal and external tectonic shifts (adaptation and transition) (Sidiropolous, 2008). Externally, the collapse of the Soviet Union (a proxy supporter of the ANC) and the dormancy of the ideological war (the Cold War) between the US and Soviet Union changed the dynamics of international relations. Internally, within the Southern African region, when countries like Namibia and

Angola achieved independence, the political dispensation in the region influenced the apartheid government to release political prisoners and to unbanned liberation movements (political organisations) to negotiate the country's transition to democracy. As expected, all the shifts had a substantive effect on Pretoria's foreign service and its future posture (Zondi, 2010). Noticeable changes concerned the role of the president and the foreign affairs ministry and the guiding principles of South Africa's foreign policy approaches (Landsberg, 2014). The change of guard at the Union Buildings in 1994 cemented Pretoria's dominance in the SADC regional bloc and within the AU (Obi, 2015). These are major contributory factors that have encapsulated South Africa's foreign policy changes and direction since 1994:

- The collapse of segregationist policies enabled South Africa to rebuild engagements with other governments based on equal values;
- The global changes informed by the fall of communist ideology and the dormancy of the Cold War culminated in South Africa bolstering her policies to fit into the new global order (Habib, 2009; Landsberg, 2014);
- Bureaucratic arrangements and leaders currently drive South Africa's foreign policy apparatus. Thus, the leadership role in South Africa's foreign policy remains a subject of controversy (Maloka, 2019);
- Continental and regional integrations are approached in a spirit of cooperation and develop a realistic joint interest (Evans, 1996);
- South Africa's international order is also predicated on its radical identity for the cooperation of the Global South states (Langa & Shai, 2020); and
- Recently, substantive changes were unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

### ***Bureaucracy and the role of the ANC in South Africa's foreign policy***

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) has vested the President (Head of State) as the custodian of the country's foreign policy, who can mandate the execution and formulation of the same. In addition, the Constitution distinguishes the roles of both the apparatus of the president and the minister as two primary arms of South Africa's foreign policy (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). As stated earlier, South Africa's foreign service (DIRCO) and the ruling party influence the various stakeholders that ensure that Pretoria's international activities remain a



dynamic exercise. Categorically, all additional stakeholders involved in shaping international relations (i.e., arms of government, civil society, and the business community) are influenced by the ANC policies (Van Wyk, 2012).

The ANC's worldview is the most important narrative for understanding post-apartheid South Africa's foreign policy in detail. Drawing from its existence and the extensive international struggle against apartheid, the ANC moved from a liberation movement to a ruling party that laid out the fundamental principles and values that guide democratic South Africa and its international ambitions (Friedman, 2018). Since 1994, the ruling party has strongly advocated for multiparty democracy, human rights, and constitutionalism as the central locus that guides foreign policymaking. Despite this, the ANC's domestic issues continue to cast a shadow over the prospects that can positively dictate the country's diplomacy and foreign policy (see Maloka, 2019).

A reflection on the former liberation movement's understanding of its new mission as the governing party can be interpreted as a small-scale fight against an array of injustices on the continent and in the world at large (Nganje, 2012). Until recently, the ruling party's role in South Africa's foreign policy referred to shaping the initial contours of post-apartheid international relations (Landsberg et al., 2017). The ANC's influence on South Africa's foreign policy direction can be linked with the pragmatic expression of Pretoria's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and recently the Russia-Ukraine war (Maqhina, 2019). After the killing of Palestinian demonstrators by Israeli soldiers in 2017, at the ANC elective conference in 2017, the ANC's NEC resolved to downgrade South Africa's embassy in Israel. As such, DIRCO recalled the South African ambassador to Israel in protest of the human rights violations against Palestinians. South Africa's stance to downgrade the embassy speaks volumes about the ANC foreign policy resolutions (Fabricius, 2019). The ruling party's attempts to influence South Africa's foreign policy direction are linked to the historical gratitude the ruling party has for Russia (the former Soviet Union).

## South Africa's foreign policy challenges

### *United States-South Africa's diplomatic fallout since the Russian invasion of Ukraine*

To add to the vast body of knowledge in contemporary and post-apartheid South Africa's foreign policy studies, the author adopted South Africa-US relations as a niche area to discuss South Africa's foreign policy challenges in recent times. To that end, Pretoria's stance on the Ukraine crisis raised questions as to whether South Africa has crossed the red line in its strategic partnership with the US. While the African IR community and the rest of the world wait for a visible answer, it is important to reflect on the series of events that led to the decline of the strategic partnership between the US and South Africa. The noted decline of US-South Africa relations can be seen when US Ambassador to South Africa Rueben Brigety went out in public, levelling serious accusations against the ANC and Pretoria. Brigety made remarks that South Africa supplied Russia with arms, which highlights the existing tension and instabilities in relations between Washington and Pretoria since the Ukraine crisis started (Gopaldas, 2023).

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and DIRCO Minister Naledi Pandor insinuated that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is responsible for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ramaphosa is quoted by Walsh (2023:1), explaining that "war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings among its leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region". Pretoria further described its position on taking an adversarial stance on Russia because South Africa does have a legal obligation to abide by Western-imposed sanctions on Russia. The ruling party in South Africa, the ANC, has noted that the US-led expansionist agenda and military strategies are the result of Western imperialist dominance in the international system. The ANC is of the view that the Ukraine crisis was evoked by the US imperialist agenda that is influenced by the Wolfowitz Doctrine. The *Wolfowitz Doctrine* is the policy that is named after the former Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz in the 1990s. The policy underscores American supremacy in the post-Cold War or Soviet era by destroying and preventing rivals before they emerge and form alliances (Nkuna, 2023).

In February 2023, South Africa hosted a major military exercise with BRICS associates Russia and China. Ironically, the military exercises coincided with the ‘one-year anniversary’ of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The military drilling was a significant trend as Russian Foreign Ministry Sergey Lavrov visited South Africa prior to the exercises, and a US-sanctioned Russian cargo plane was permitted to land at the Waterkloof Air Force Base. The rekindled Russia-South Africa relations since the Ukraine crisis have provoked the US’s strategic partnership with South Africa as a series of accusations were levelled against South Africa’s conduct and the plans of the ANC’s new line of foreign policy (Eligen, 2023). This diplomatic breakdown had a wide range of fallouts for South Africa’s image in the international system and the country’s economy. South Africa’s bond yields immediately skyrocketed due to foreign direct investors’ concerns that the diplomatic meltdown between Washington and Pretoria could potentially affect preferential trade access worth billions of dollars (Gramer & Detsch, 2023). Before this, the South African Rand (ZAR) fell to its weakest level record against the US Dollar (USD) in recent years.

The ANC’s new line of foreign policy was met with a chorus of condemnation from the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), the DA cascaded their concerns and cautioned that the ANC has lied to the public about Pretoria’s involvement in the Ukraine crisis. The DA strongly condemns the ANC’s attempts to subscribe to the country’s foreign policy rubric of promoting human rights. However, the third largest party in South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), took a radical stance on the US’s misplaced concerns about South Africa’s non-alignment position towards the war. The party leader, Julius Malema, claimed the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has no capacity to supply or empower Russia with arms as the SANDF is already underperforming due to budget deficits. Malema is quoted by Walsh (2023:3) as expressing his concerns that “the US government is just a cry-baby trying to find a way into punishing South Africa because of our position on the Russia-Ukraine war”.

The US views South Africa’s stance towards the war and the increased relations with Moscow as a behaviour that does not reflect friendship or a neutral partner, and there are calls from US Congress to completely overhaul the strategic relationship with South Africa (Eligen & Chutel, 2023). Among others, US Congress lawmakers suggested an assessment of South Africa’s eligibility to benefit from the African

Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and for US President Joe Biden to find a new location for the 2023 AGOA Summit (Pecquet, 2023). Among others, AGOA requires that benefiting members not engage in 'activities' that undermine US national security and foreign policy goals. In the financial year of 2022, South Africa exported around 3 billion USD worth of goods through the AGOA. As a result, South Africa's prospects of losing the AGOA benefits are a thorn in Pretoria's commitment to addressing the triple-headed monster (unemployment, income inequality, and poverty) from the grey-listed economy (Gopaldas, 2023).

### ***South Africa's non-alignment position with the Russia-Ukraine war***

In 1999, South Africa and Russia agreed to display a commitment to the Declaration Concerning Friendly Relations and Partnership, which was later improved into a strategic partnership in 2006 (Graham, 2023). Moreover, Russia-South Africa relations were upgraded into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2013. Among others, the CSP outlines a non-aggression pact on the commitment that neither should condemn nor challenge each other in the international system (Madonsela, 2023). As such, South Africa's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has explicitly attracted criticism from human rights activists and other like-minded individuals who are not informed of the outlines of the CSP between Pretoria and Moscow. Pretoria's longstanding policies on the commitment to advocate state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peaceful resolutions to disputes reflect the practical stance for respecting the United Nations (UN) and the provisions of international law (Gopaldas, 2023). The Ukraine crisis is described by Western scholars as the turning point in international relations that contours the dynamics of the post-Cold War international order. For the Global South, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a watershed moment to reinvigorate foreign policy autonomy to practice the doctrine of non-alignment as the geopolitical tension between the Western bloc and Russia has crippling effects on the Global South (Nkuna, 2023; Sidiropoulos, 2022).

When the war started, South Africa vacillated with DIRCO to call out the withdrawal of Russian armed forces in Ukraine and, after a few days, withdrew the position. This position was followed by an abstention to vote against the withdrawal of military forces at the United Nations

General Assembly (UNGA). As a signatory to various pro-human rights forums, South Africa is expected to play a leading role in advocating a robust stance against the aggression used by Russian forces in Ukraine. However, South Africa is strategically using the membership of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) to defend its position towards the conflict, and the ANC's successionist vision against the Western bloc, influenced by BRICS associates such as Russia outlines and informs South Africa's non-aligned foreign policy towards the Russia-Ukraine war (Melber, 2023).

A common feature that must be considered in South Africa's position towards the Ukraine crisis is the 'politics of solidarity'. The ANC's longstanding solidarity with the Western Sahara, Palestine, and Cuba is a case in point. The ANC's historic relationship with the Soviet Union dates back to the apartheid era. The Soviet Union supported the ANC and South African Communist Party's (SACP) armed struggle with military training and other forms of formal education. (Sidiropoulos, 2022). The ANC-led South Africa's foreign policy displays solidarity with parties that supported the liberation struggle against the segregationist apartheid government. As such, the politics of solidarity must be viewed within the context of the existing discourse of the new global order. BRICS associates are increasingly calling out the double standards displayed by the West on multilateralism through the application of rules or laws that guide against the use of force.

The BRICS grouping can be viewed as another layer of solidarity since its formation. To this end, what can be drawn from South Africa's narrative and position towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine is best explained by the West's hypocrisy on the application of international law and the function of the UN Charter (Graham, 2023). The DIRCO Minister Naledi Pandor has repeatedly emphasised that South Africa has a responsibility to exercise a well-thought-independent and non-aligned position, and the West should not expect Pretoria to take a stance in a conflict with no direct interest to the country. Moreover, it is important to note that earlier in the war, the US and the EU dubbed the conflict a rivalry between democratic and authoritarian systems. This is displayed by the voting behaviour of countries from the Global South during the three-course voting at the UNGA. South Africa and other developing countries adopted the 'non-aligned' position not because they support the atrocities and humanitarian crisis caused by Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, but rather as a position for the prevalent existing

proxy wars between the Western bloc and emerging markets such as China and Russia (Sidiropoulos, 2022). The West has demonstrated little appetite to live up to the principles inscribed in the UN to use force and expect other countries, especially developing countries, to automatically fall into line. Against this backdrop, the relationship between Moscow and the ANC must be understood within the context that dates back to the Soviet Union's support for the resistance against apartheid. As such, both Ukraine and Russia play a major role in Africa's vulnerable food staples, fossil fuels, and other commodities. This view can also be viewed in light of South African President Ramaphosa's leading role in steering the delegation of African leaders to the Peace Mission to both Russia and Ukraine.

### **BRICS expansion implications for South Africa's global ambitions**

In light of recent geopolitical events, US dominance is facing serious geopolitical challenges. The formation of the BRIC bloc in 2009, later renamed BRICS after South Africa's inclusion, increasingly diluted the US international system's dominance. Since the Russia-Ukraine war started in February 2022, the current world reserve (USD) has been facing a challenge from the countries of the Global South, mainly BRICS associates who pursue trading options beyond the greenback. China is a notable country that is working against the reliance of the USD in the international market. The choice of an Afrocentric theoretical approach for this study is informed by the works of Asante (2003) and Mazama (2021) beliefs that Euro-American paradigms and theories do not exclusively provide all scholarly conversation in African IR, hence sometimes capture partial realities to the essence of African-centred studies. As such, informed by the notions of Afrocentricity as articulated by Asante (1990) and Mazama (2021), the current author is of the view that the behaviour and conduct of developing countries reveal the looming annoyance of the West's presence over global governance and finance. The Global South states are increasingly showing commitment to finding alternatives to the USD as the standard exchange rate. This emerging discourse is also known as the process of 'de-dollarisation', which is gaining momentum within the corridors of the BRICS forum. It must be stated categorically that the USD has been the world's principal reserve currency since the end of the Second World War (WWII), and the USD amounts to over 80 percent of international trade (Kirten &

Larionova, 2023). The newly re-elected Brazilian President, Luiz Lula da Silva, bemoans why all countries have to base their international trade on the USD as the principal exchange rate. As such, Lula da Silva strongly suggests the BRICS forum work towards formulating an exclusive economic system (a new reserve currency) to benefit the members (Gouvea & Gutierrez, 2023).

The 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the BRICS Summit hosted by South Africa (Johannesburg, Sandton) in August 2023 was a watershed moment in emerging discourse on multilateralism, and it generated widespread attention on the workable BRICS new reserve currency in the existing Bretton Woods international trade regulations. The leading arguments propelled by many political analysts range from the implications of having a global reserve currency without freedom of capital movement to the interference of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The setup of the New Development Bank (NDB) by BRICS countries is aimed at improving and providing finance to projects in areas such as infrastructure, transport, energy, and sustainable development. The NDB functions under the Contingent Reserve Agreement (CRA) framework, which provides short-term support for liquidity that mitigates the balance of payments, also known as the BOP. The 2023 BRICS Summit delegation opened its doors to six new emerging markets, such as (i) Saudi Arabia, (ii) Iran, (iii) the United Arab Emirates (UAE), (iv) Egypt, (v) Ethiopia, and (vi) Argentina. The addition of the mentioned emerging markets amounts to 42 percent of the world's crude oil output. It must be noted that the idea of the new currency was earmarked by China during the BRICS Summit 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine evoked and polarised the division between the Western bloc and the Global South (Kirten & Larionova, 2023).

The new BRICS currency is believed to be organised as a reserve currency backed by precious mineral resources such as gold, oil, etc. The idea of BRICS currency has gained traction, and many scholars propose a debate on whether the currency will ultimately pose a threat to the domination of USD or as an alternative to the emerging market's dependence on US-jealously-governed international institutions. The BRICS expansion, also known as BRICS Plus, with the addition of the six emerging markets, has its own unique challenges to achieve its intended goal beyond the establishment and operationalisation of the NDB and CRA. The BRICS expansion will open up new avenues to

trade in local currencies, especially in the crude oil market, which is dominated by USD (Gouvea & Gutierrez, 2023).

### ***South Africa's benefits from the expansion of the BRICS***

The study's main focus is based on South Africa's foreign policy approaches, using the Russia-Ukraine war as a case in point; however, it is worthy to note that South Africa's relationship with BRICS associates can also add valuable understanding to contemporary South Africa's foreign policy prospects. The BRICS expansion is a watershed moment for South Africa as it enhances Pretoria's global image and influence on multinational forums such as the UN, the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). South Africa's membership in the BRICS grouping provides an immediate advantage to negotiate and establish cooperation with other BRICS counterparts on matters of mutual interest, such as reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Sidiropoulos, 2023). Moreover, establishing economic ties with the BRICS associates bodes well for Pretoria's global interests as it opens avenues to the export market for the country's raw materials. South Africa and the rest of the world are still recovering from the crippling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, stabilising the grey-listed economy through industrialisation and diversification of its mineral resources becomes the main objective for South Africa. Amidst strong competition in the international market and imposed import tariffs, it is increasingly difficult for South African transnational companies (TNCs) to make inroads in the international market. The BRICS membership opens up new market opportunities for TNCs to reach the global market, including service-related sectors such as tourism, to name a few. The investment opportunities stemming from the expansion of BRICS will trickle down to South Africa's economy and stimulate and lead to more innovation, which will boost the much-needed economic growth to address unemployment, poverty, and income inequality (Arapova & Lissovolik, 2021).

South Africa's renewed image on the international front will play a leading role in lobbying for greater and improved transparency within the African Union (AU) and UNSC. The BRICS 15<sup>th</sup> Summit advocated for this call for the inclusion of Africa as a whole in international affairs and defining international relations. The BRICS forum has two UNSC permanent members (China and Russia) who fully support the inclusion



of African countries in the permanent membership of the UNSC. The weight of BRICS as an economic bloc places South Africa within the prospects of being the first African representative of a permanent member of the UNSC. South Africa is viewed as a gateway to the rest of the African continent because of its highly industrialised infrastructure, which includes world-class airports and ports, road networks, and a robust financial system. South Africa connects the rest of the continent with conduit opportunities for trade as a BRICS member. Against the mentioned opportunities for the expansion of BRICS within South Africa's context, it suffices to argue that South Africa's economic recovery and the growth of new sectors that will lead to innovation to improve the competitiveness of the South Africa Rand (ZAR) heavily depend on the economic and political ties with BRICS associates.

## **Conclusion**

As the choice of theory (Afrocentricity) for this study has direct implications for the ideas of this research inquiry, it is safe to state that Afrocentricity informed the discussion on US hypocrisy in the application of the UN Charter and international law, with a cursory look into the Russia-Ukraine war and the recent Israel-Palestine conflict. The current researcher is influenced by Azibo's (1992) conviction that any knowledge centred on Africa that is based on foreign intellectual tools risks being riddled with substantive limitations. As such, this foregoing premise does not suggest that analytical tools outside the African continent could not produce substantive value in this study. As such, the researcher borrows from Shai's (2023:4) argument that "at the heart of Afrocentricity is the strong belief and conviction that research about African issues should be centred on the history, culture, and lived experiences of Africans".

The current author has hinted at South Africa's foreign policy prospects and challenges within the Russia-Ukraine war by deploying relevant themes to discuss South Africa's renewed foreign policy since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The study highlighted the challenges of South Africa's non-aligned position towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the declining relations between the US and South Africa. Moreover, the main discussion of this study analysed South Africa's foreign policy prospects and challenges within the context of the government's crude

efforts to adhere to the prescribed foreign policy commitments while equally pursuing the country's immediate interests.

## **Recommendations**

Emerging from the discussed foreign policy trends that inform South Africa's foreign policy challenges and prospects since Russia-Ukraine started, the author proposes the following recommendations on the noted challenges for policymakers and future studies related to this study:

- The current author suggests that a state should know what it represents in international relations. The author has noted that South Africa has an unsettled identity crisis, and the uncertainty affects how Pretoria redefines its core national interests in the changing world order. Decisions based on national interests often contradict South Africa's foreign policy principles. Since 1994, South African nationalism (rainbow nation) and its goals have been difficult to trace. Each administration introduces a new political direction that yields uncertainty and an unstable identity posture.
- There is confusion between South Africa's guiding foreign policy principles (the promotion and adherence to the human rights foreign policy approach) and the national interests that should be pursued in the international community. Also, the most confusing aspect of South Africa's foreign relations is whether the African Agenda is to put "South Africa first" in multilateral groups such as BRICS or whether the goal is to pursue South-South cooperation to dilute the Euro-American world order. To this end, the study recommends that this ambiguity in decision-making be dually deliberated by DIRCO practitioners, the ruling party (ANC), and academics who are working on South Africa's foreign policy.
- Lastly, the political influence of South Africa should resemble the power of an imposing state. Based on these reasons, the current author proposes more research on the role of South Africa as an anchor state in African politics.

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