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South Africa's Role in African Union Peacekeeping Missions: Reviewing the Need to Balance National Interests and Regional Stability

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Abstract

This study examines South Africa's dual role in the African Union (AU) as a champion of regional stability and a defender of its national interests. Based on systematic literature reviews, it provides an analysis of South Africa's involvement in the AU, particularly regarding peace and stability, through its foreign policy posture. Drawing upon a range of scholarly works, this study examines the trajectory of South Africa's national interest in Africa, highlighting its active participation in peacekeeping missions and diplomatic initiatives across the continent. The research highlights the need for South Africa to reassess its national interest policy, emphasising the importance of a more strategic alignment with the country's economic interests and internal development priorities. This study is anchored on the theory of realism. It highlights South Africa's involvement in the African Union (AU), documenting its attempts to navigate the complex dynamics of security threats, conflicts, and political tensions on the continent. The findings underscore the significance of a cohesive strategy that aligns national objectives in the game of nations across Africa.

Keywords: *South Africa, Peacekeeping, National Interest, Regional Stability*

1. Background

South Africa's transition from apartheid to a genuinely diverse democracy remains one of the most significant political developments in the country. The shift was achieved through peaceful negotiations, and the democratic agreement [the formal negotiated understanding between the key political actors] remains intact. This transition from apartheid to non-racial democracy ushered in a new political reality and a renewed national interest (Kotze, 2024, p. 6). However, despite this peaceful transformation, the nation has faced both successes and challenges in the economic, social, and political sectors. For instance, unemployment, which according to the World Bank (2024), stood at 33.5% in the second quarter (Q2) of 2024, along with issues such as inequality, corruption, an energy crisis, and the promotion of human rights. The above indicators reflect some socio-economic and political challenges facing South Africa over time. Rubinfield (2013, p.2) that despite unemployment, the average South African citizen, regardless of race, is economically better off today. South Africa is a democratic nation currently governed by the Government of National Unity (GNU), led by President Cyril Ramaphosa. The new administration necessitates a comprehensive review of the country's national interests, which is crucial as it charts its course. The significant impact of the GNU's concept of national interests on the formulation and execution of the country's diplomatic strategies is essential. This is due to the current government's increased diplomatic activity, particularly within the AU and economic integration. The shift in internal dynamics has prompted a reassessment of South Africa's national interests. This study examines how South Africa has managed to balance its national interest, considering the various stakeholders within the GNU with broader regional interests, while respecting the interests of other states.

This study is significant because a state or country cannot survive if it solely depends on itself. This underscores the fact that national interest remains the primary reason for countries to engage in international cooperation and relations with others (Mana, 2017). Therefore, this study investigates how South Africa, often called "Africa Superpower" (Sidiropoulos, 2007) balances prioritising domestic concerns (economic growth, poverty reduction, unemployment, security stability) with supporting regional initiatives (peacekeeping, conflict resolution).

This study further emphasises the complexities associated with South Africa's ideological commitment to peace and stability, which has

evolved from a strong anti-apartheid focus to a pragmatic approach that balances national interests with regional stability. Additionally, this study is essential because instability and insecurity threaten African development. Therefore, achieving regional stability through peace and security can lead to economic development, which is advantageous for regional growth and financial opportunities. Against this backdrop, this work explores the relationship between national interests and regional stability.

The article is organised thematically; the first section provides a general background on South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, highlighting how this peaceful transition is fundamental to the country's promotion of peace and stability on the continent under the auspices of the African Union (AU). The next section explores the basic concept of national interest in the modern era. The third section, presented in the literature review, discusses how South Africa balances its national interest with regional stability, examining its involvement in the African continent and the implications for the nation's interests. The discussion critically evaluates how South Africa balances national interests with regional stability. Finally, the study concludes with a discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations. It is important to note that there is no ultimate 'fix-all' answer; however, a careful balancing act is required to ensure that South Africa's role in Africa reflects its commitment to constitutionally embedded domestic imperatives and priorities.

2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology, specifically utilising a systematic literature review to comprehensively assess South Africa's role in the African Union, particularly in balancing its national interests with regional stability. Secondary data were collected in the form of articles, books, book chapters, and research journals, both nationally and internationally, focusing on publications from 2015 to 2024 that are relevant to South Africa's national interests. However, to ensure academic rigour and historical context, this study utilised publications on peacekeeping principles predating 2015. Over 80 pieces of literature were sourced from various academic databases and research outlets using advanced search techniques on Google Scholar, Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Scopus, pertaining to the phenomena under investigation. The search used a combination of keyword search terms aligned with the

subject of study. This approach enables researchers to examine and interpret written documents that may be accessible in either public or private domains (Payne & Payne, 2004; Mogalakwe, 2006). After preliminary screening, 30 articles deemed relevant to this study were selected to inform the research.

The rationale for selecting a systematic literature review is based on its fundamental ability to facilitate an in-depth exploration of historical contexts, policy documents, and empirical evidence. This approach aligns primarily with the study's objective of understanding the complex national interest policy framework that balances national interests with regional stability.

3 Theoretical Frameworks: National Interest vs. Regional Stability

This section outlines the study's theoretical framework, conceptually clarifying its associated concepts. This study is grounded in the realist theory of international relations (IR), which posits that states are primarily geared toward pursuing national interest. Realist theory posits states as primary global actors, with their international behaviour shaped by both external environment and internal characteristics. In other words, realists also believe that a state's behaviour in the international arena is influenced by both the external environment and the internal characteristics of the actors (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca, 2017). In the context of this study, the external environment refers to the African continent, while the internal environment encompasses the domestic objectives aimed to be achieved through interactions with other countries. Building on this assertion, the theory provides a valuable framework for analysing the various perspectives critically and comparatively.

3.1 Theoretical Application of Theory

This paper adopts realist theory as its analytical framework. Realist theory plays a pivotal role in explaining national interest and foreign policy in South Africa. The nation embodies various identities shaped through social interactions, resulting in a dynamic national interest that can be actively pursued on the global stage. Furthermore, it is important to note that South Africa has mechanisms in place that can socially influence the national interest, enabling the country to present its perspectives in international forums.

This theory is relevant to this study because it highlights the national interest framework of South Africa, acknowledging the implications of regional and continental interests as integral components of its national interest. Additionally, it incorporates aspects of a realist perspective. South Africa's role in AU ensuring peace and stability is linked to the principles of realist theory. This theory is also pertinent to this study because it enables South Africa to maximise its national interest within the continental framework.

The concept of national interest aligns well with the realist paradigm, which asserts that security is the primary objective. This perspective clearly explains regional stability (Humphreys, 2015, p.571). For example, in the context of promoting economic development that benefits South Africans, there is a strong emphasis on advancing equitable human rights, peace, and stability across Africa. Grounded in the principles of realism, both domestic and international considerations should guide South Africa's national interest following the spirit of the national constitution.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Conceptual Review: The Place of National Interest

The concept of national interest is a significant phenomenon in the discourse of International Relations and foreign policy. In the context of this study, national interest not only serves as a criterion for evaluating actions in foreign relations but also provides an opportunity to articulate the various positions that those responsible for formulating foreign policy consider important for the country tailored to achieve state goals (Nincic 1999, p.30).

According to Osgood, cited in Ebegbulem (2010, p.139), defined national interest is a “state of affairs valued solely for its benefit to the nation.” Nuechterlein (1976, p.246) further describes national interest as a target that must be achieved by a “sovereign entity.” In other words, national interest can be viewed as the ideal goals upon which a state's domestic and foreign policies are based. For this study, national interest covers the goals, values, and objectives that a country seeks to promote and protect in the international system (Kootheeti, 2022, p.1). Dyke, (1972) posits that national interest is “a shorthand expression of the total of a nation-objectives, states and goals.” Its nation’s objectives, states, and goals.” Important to note globally, national interest

plays a worldwide role in shaping the formulation of their foreign policies.

Considering South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, along with the concept of national interest summarised above, South Africa's national interest encompasses its economic, political, military, or cultural. South Africa's national interest is further grounded in the values and ideals outlined in its Constitution, guided by the needs of its people (Department of International Relations and Cooperation [DIRCO], 2022). In other words, national interest is a sub-set of public interest that is affected by external politics. These influences include the eradication of apartheid and overcoming the triple challenges of unemployment and poverty. According to the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (2022, pp.27-28), there are multiple position frameworks that outline the process of 'balancing' diverse national interests. Therefore, this study identifies that balancing national interests with regional stability is fundamental to portraying South Africa's national interests both regionally and internationally. This is particularly crucial as South Africa aims to solidify its regional leadership amidst shifting global power dynamics. The shift in global power is a challenge to South African foreign policy, which made it difficult for SA to maintain a consistent position. Given that the country's national interests encompass various components, this study highlights the political and economic considerations, national security, peace, stability, and the promotion of democracy as a beacon of articulating South Africa's national interests on a regional scale.

4.2 Empirical Review: South Africa's Role in the African Union

This section of the study focuses on South Africa's role in the African Union, which is central to its strategy for balancing national interests with regional stability. This is evident in its contributions to peace and stability on the African continent. South Africa's support for unstable countries is crucial in defining its national interests. South Africa's approach to balancing its national interests with regional stability is a complex and dynamic process shaped by its historical context. However, its approach to balancing national interests contradicts domestic issues. For example, South Africa supports neighbouring states at the expense of addressing its own social and economic challenges, such as unemployment.

Since 1994, Africa has been a prime focus of South Africa's agenda. The sentence mentioned was affirmed by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), which indicates that the country's participation in the African continent reflects where they are coming from (Bohler-Muller, 2012) and as a beneficiary of many acts of selfless solidarity in the past. It is, therefore, imperative that what South Africa wishes for its people should be what it wishes for the citizens in Africa and the world in general. The above assertion was affirmed by Sidiropoulos (2007, p.2), "indicating that the African agenda in South African foreign policy grew from the support for the national liberation struggles of many African countries, which made it a target for cross-border raids by the apartheid government. To cement the above consideration, South Africa's White Paper stipulated that "it is in our national interest to promote and support the positive development of others "(DIRCO, 2012, p.4).

South Africa plays a significant role in Sub-Saharan Africa, making substantial contributions to regional politics, economic integration, and peacekeeping efforts (Swart, 2015). Through its leadership role, South Africa was able to play a diplomatic leadership role in shaping regional policies, particularly in democracy, Human rights and governance. Its strategy to balance national interests with regional stability is complex and multifaceted, shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic factors. As the chair of the African Union (AU) and the AU's Peace and Security Council, the country is tasked with promoting economic development, trade, and investment by seeking ways to foster inclusive growth and sustainable development. Additionally, it aims to strengthen efforts to maintain peace and security in Africa and support good governance through the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the AU structure responsible for implementing the Union's good governance agenda (Government Communication and Information System [GCIS], 2020, p.2).

To establish itself as a prominent player in African affairs, South Africa is engaged in initiatives aimed at fostering regional stability and championing the continent's emancipation. Its persistent commitment to promoting peace, stability, trade, economic growth, and development in Africa underscores the nation's trajectory as a vigorous advocate for African unity and progress. This further positions South Africa as an active contributor to the continent's overarching socio-political and economic objectives. The above statement was affirmed by the current Minister of International Relations, Ronald Lamola, who suggests that

“South Africa, with its unique policy of active non-alignment, is not reactive but proactive in its pursuit of peace” (Kotze, 2024, p.13).

Arguably, this could enhance its contribution to building regional and continental institutions, improving the peace and security framework, promoting norms of good governance, democracy, and human rights, resolving and mediating conflicts, and providing support for peacekeeping efforts. Nevertheless, the underlying principle is that there should be collaboration and connectivity between internal nation-building efforts and the pursuit of regional stability. Without this connection, promoting continental stability would serve only domestic interests. To better understand South Africa's responses and their impact on regional stability, an analysis of its regional interactions would be beneficial.

5. Security Concerns and Regional Stability

In the wake of independence movements across Africa, more than half of the continent's nations have experienced significant conflicts, often reverting to warfare after periods of relative stability (Akinola, 2024, p.3). Conflict is a facet of human interaction that has transformed various societal and institutional norms globally. Hence, the terms are within the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council. In the realm of regional stability, South Africa has been notably active, frequently positioning itself as a mediator, peacebuilder, and peacekeeper. South Africa's involvement in various conflict situations across Africa has yielded numerous peace dividends on the continent, as demonstrated below. This study examines the conflict cases in Sudan, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others, to support the above assertion.

South Africa, since the end of apartheid, has proactively engaged in various peacekeeping efforts both within the African continent and beyond. Through diplomatic efforts and peacekeeping, South Africa plays a crucial role in conflict resolution and maintaining stability. For instance, South Africa's involvement in peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan, Chad, and Zimbabwe underscores its commitment to balancing national interests with regional security. This paper will utilise these three countries to illustrate South Africa's involvement in promoting and maintaining regional stability.

Case 1: The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the African nations beset by severe armed conflict. The eastern region of the Congo has endured prolonged cycles of violence for many years, primarily characterised by conflicts among various armed factions vying for control over vast areas rich in minerals (Mabera, 2024, p. 4). The latest wave of violence began in November 2021, when a rebel faction known as the M23, which was believed to have been neutralised in 2013, launched a series of attacks on the positions of the Congolese national army across multiple locations in North Kivu Province. The resurgence of the M23 has heightened tensions in the region, resulting in the deaths of more than 2,750 civilians and displacing approximately 6.9 million people internally (Mabera, 2024, p.4).

Considering the increased potential for spillover conflict and instability in the region, regional stakeholders have taken the lead in proposing a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the crisis. For example, under the auspices of AU and the United Nations (UN), South Africa deployed 1,184 peacekeepers as part of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to help stabilise the situation (Abdool, 2022). Additionally, South Africa has played a significant role in facilitating the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and the Sun City Agreement established in 2003. Furthermore, South Africa helped restore political contestation in the DRC, leading to successful elections and a functional government (Sidiropoulos, 2007).

Besides, the deployment of troops to the DRC and South Africa also played a pivotal role in providing logistical and financial assistance for peace efforts, culminating in the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement in 2002. It is important to note that Pretoria continues to engage in various post-conflict and reconstruction initiatives in the DRC, while also serving as a key mediator, facilitator, and guarantor of the peace process (Mabera 2024). South Africa's involvement in the Congo conflict aligns with its goal of regional stability, given the DRC's potential for widespread instability. This position is motivated by national interests in preventing a destabilising collapse of the DRC, which could adversely affect its investments in the country. Also South Africa's involvement in the DRC is important to its national interest because regional peace is vital for African development and integration.

It is important to highlight that South Africa's peacekeeping contributions to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have been essential. This involvement has included the deployment of personnel in infantry battalions, helicopter units, and military medical teams, all of which have played a vital role in promoting peace and safeguarding the health and safety of fellow peacekeepers. Given South Africa's engagement in the DRC, this study argues that the country's commitment to ensuring peace and stability in Eastern DRC stems from its broader dedication to security and stability across Africa.

Case 2: Sudan

Since Sudan's independence in 1958, Sudan has experienced the highest number of coups on the African continent, with six successful coups and ten attempts, as noted by Harshé (2021). The ongoing conflict in Sudan poses significant threats to regional stability in East Africa and the broader African continent. As of 2024, the war in Sudan persists unabated, resulting in a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale and causing severe shortages of food and healthcare.

In response to the conflict in Sudan and to ensure stability in the region, South Africa participated in the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). Although South Africa's intervention was not entirely successful, it contributed to mitigating the insurgency in Sudan. The country has invested both human and material resources to address the Sudan crisis. The deployment of peacekeepers by South Africa was commended by the Secretary-General for Peace Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, who stated, “We thank South Africa for its strong support of United Nations Peacekeeping and for the service and sacrifice of its military and police personnel deployed under the UN flag” (Abdool 2022, p.2). Furthermore, South Africa's involvement in South Sudan was successful, ultimately leading to the country's independence in 2011 (Kumsa, 2017).

Case 3: Mozambique

Next door to South Africa, is Mozambique's recent political instability has challenged democracy, particularly within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. Discontent in Mozambique began in late October 2024, after the election commission declared Daniel Chapo of the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) the

winner of the October 9 election (Isilow, 2024). According to the official count, the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front had 71% of the vote, defeating opposition candidate Venancio Mondlane of the Optimist Party for the Development of Mozambique (Podemos). However, the election results were rejected by Mondlane, who alleged vote rigging. This has led to unprecedented political tension since October 2024, threatening peace and stability not only in Mozambique but also in the SADC region. Since then, political protests and social tensions have escalated amid ongoing allegations of vote rigging and corruption. The opposition party, Optimist Party for the Development of Mozambique, continues to refuse to recognise Daniel Chapo as the duly elected president, which has resulted in social unrest throughout the country. The government is managing political dissent by prohibiting protests and intimidating the opposition.

As public anger escalates and the economy continues to shrink rapidly due to unrest in cities like Maputo, Chimoio, and Gondola, as well as other provinces, the government is seeking to contain the situation. This has been achieved through various strategies. For instance, there are significant concerns from South Africa's perspective.

To prevent the protest from escalating into a humanitarian crisis and its subsequent spillover effects on neighbouring countries, the Government of South Africa has expressed concern as the protests in Maputo appear to be spiralling out of control, despite the government's insistence that it has the situation under control. Amid the protests, hundreds of people have been killed, and thousands have fled to neighbouring countries such as Eswatini, Malawi, and South Africa (Katzenellenbogen, 2025).

To respond to the election violence in Mozambique, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa dispatched an envoy to Maputo, led by Sydney Mufamadi. Mufamadi urged all parties to engage in urgent dialogue aimed at healing the nation and establishing a new political and developmental trajectory (DICRO, 2024).

At the time of writing, it remains that Amnesty International is calling for intervention from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Troika to initiate dialogue aimed at resolving the election violence in Mozambique. Ultimately, South Africa's involvement in peacekeeping and economic development demonstrates its commitment to regional stability.

In addition to these considerations, it is important to note that, alongside regional conflicts, other security threats such as terrorism and

various transnational challenges are also posing significant risks to security and stability in several areas of the continent. Therefore, based on the aforementioned factors, South Africa prefers to foster multilateral consensus with its partners rather than act unilaterally.

Balancing Economic Interests with Regional Stability

Furthermore, in addition to maintaining peacekeeping efforts as demonstrated above, South Africa has engaged in economic diplomacy to involve industry, investment, and labour in promoting national interests (Masters & Landsberg, 2024, p.11). Its economic ties with neighbouring countries significantly influence its approach to regional stability. Instability in neighbouring states directly impacts South Africa's economic stability, thus its foreign policy prioritises economic stability. Based on this premise, South Africa, through its foreign policy, seeks to ensure stability on the continent. For instance, the political post-election violence in Mozambique led to disruptions in trade due to the closure of the Lebombo border for several weeks, which posed a direct risk to South Africa. To this end, the examples from the DRC, Sudan, and Mozambique provide tangible evidence of South Africa's peacebuilding efforts in maintaining stability in the region.

6. Implications of Balancing National Interests with Regional Stability

Balancing national interests with regional stability has proven to be challenging in the pursuit of peace and conflict resolution, the promotion of human rights and democracy in Africa, and the advancement of regional economic development.

The implications of South Africa's regional engagement assume that the nation is attempting to serve too many international agendas, resulting in an over-extension of its international commitments and a lack of a clear foreign policy. South Africa's active participation in peacekeeping operations has required substantial financial investment and has led to the loss of numerous soldiers deployed to various conflict zones. For instance, 14 South African Soldiers (SANDF) were killed while fighting M23 rebels in Eastern DRC (Baillie, 2025). This is coupled to the case of SANDF troops that were deployed to the Central African Republic in 2013, resulting in the deaths of 13 South African soldiers, which had no strategic or economic benefit for the country. Similarly, the

financial costs associated with the deployment of soldiers, such as in Congo, were estimated to amount to \$100 million (Wolters, 2024), particularly when considering the significant domestic challenges currently facing the nation. Nyuykonge and Zondi (2017) noted that South Africa also spends approximately \$10 million to curb violence in Mali and over \$8 million to assist the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia. These figures underscore the urgent need for the South African government to reevaluate its approach to peacekeeping missions in Africa, ensuring that assistance to African nations is grounded in tangible and strategic considerations that align with South Africa's national interests. This study argues that such funding could have been better utilised for capacity-building training and domestic policy development to address the triple challenges faced by South Africa. Moreover, South Africa has been accused of acting unilaterally in many instances of conflict on the continent. In one such case, there were allegations of unilateralism against South Africa (Nyuykonge & Zondi, 2017).

The implications of South Africa's efforts to balance its national interests with regional stability highlight the urgent necessity to reassess the fundamental dynamics and mechanisms that underpin the nation's support for other African countries. Within this framework, it is important to note that South Africa's involvement in promoting peace, security, and stability in the region aligns with its national interest, as it seeks to assist those suffering from conflict, political instability, repression, terrorism, and other challenges.

6.1 Complexities and Challenges faced by South Africa in promoting stability in Africa

This part explores the potential benefits and obstacles. South Africa's engagement in promoting regional peace and stability is driven by practical considerations, where economic interests and security issues play a significant role. However, the Balancing Act is not without criticism. While the country has been successful in some operations, setbacks and challenges still abound. This study examined four aspects of complexities in South Africa, engaging in national interests with regional stability. Despite a strong overlap with some of the priorities, challenges may arise from South Africa's engagement in the continent. This is discussed below.

In terms of promoting democracy and good governance South Africa has been criticised for its failure to censure African dictators in the AU, which does not send out strong signals to the African community that South Africa values human rights and good governance as strongly advocated in its constitution as much as it does socio-economic development for its own sake. For instance, South Africa has been criticised for its inconsistent stance on unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) and poor human rights records, which has limited its ability to promote good governance and democracy through its national interest. This study argues that it is clear that South Africa has not promoted moral ethics in governance to achieve good governance in Africa. This balancing act may result in tensions as the nation endeavours to maintain regional stability while avoiding the estrangement of adjacent governments.

Reasons on the same line, South Africa has been criticised for human rights violations. This is evident by the fact that a South African company, Dyck Advisory Group, hired by the Mozambican government to maintain instability in the Cabo Delgado conflict in Northern Mozambique, was accused of human rights violations against Mozambicans (Amnesty International Mozambique, 2021). According to Amnesty International, the Dyck Advisory Group was reported for randomly firing into crowds, resulting in the killings of civilians and extrajudicial executions (2021).

Moreover, the government has been criticised for its silent approach in addressing the persistent issues of harassment and violence faced by foreign nationals, particularly evident during the xenophobic incidents (Benjamin & Amuche, 2023). This study argues that for the government to balance its national interest, it should protect its borders and manage its population. However, South Africa's critics, citing human rights violations and its perceived lukewarm response to UCGs in some African states, suggest an inconsistency in its approach to balancing national interest and regional stability (Mashamaite & Achu, 2024). The outcomes reflect South Africa's inconsistent approach in condemning member states affected by UCGs and coups. This inconsistency undermines the significance of maintaining constitutionalism and adhering to shared values and principles. Consequently, the continued presence of criticism within its national interest framework does not provide a clear position for South Africa in maintaining regional stability. Furthermore, in terms of peacebuilding and peacemaking, South Africa has faced criticism for demonstrating a lack of consistent commitment to

peace initiatives in Africa, exhibiting violence in certain contexts while retreating in others, notably in Somalia (Nyuykonge.C. &Zondi, 2017). Considering the above, Nyuykonge & Zondi (2023) point out that South African peace diplomacy serves to facilitate market access for its multinational corporations, which are perceived to exploit other African countries. The above assertion demonstrates its unwavering interest found in its national interest.

Regarding finances, South Africa has been criticised for its unscrupulous spending in peacekeeping missions in Sudan and DRC. Millions of Rands are being spent on the deployment and maintenance of peacekeepers, which is not good for a nation like South Africa facing a high rate of inflation, poverty and unemployment. This study points out that a critical re-evaluation of the allocation of financial resources is therefore warranted, advocating for a strategic realignment of priorities that emphasises the upliftment and welfare of South Africans. As such, the study findings highlight the fundamental necessity for South Africa to readjust the substantial funds allocated to meet international commitments and responsibilities, which could be practically redirected to enhance projects aimed at improving the quality of life for South Africans, subsequently promoting sustainable economic development and generating substantial opportunities for employment and socio-economic progress.

7. Discussions of Findings

The findings of this study underscore the importance of South Africa shaping its engagements within the international community, particularly in the context of its relationships with other African nations. The study has demonstrated a persistent trend of South Africa's active involvement in numerous peacekeeping operations and diplomatic efforts throughout the African continent, underscoring the nation's steadfast dedication to promoting regional stability and unity. A key theme that emerged from the examination of South Africa's role in the AU peace and security trajectory is the imperative for the country to consider its approach to international engagements, placing a renewed emphasis on leveraging its economic strength and resources for strategic advantage. This imperative revealed a potential drawback associated with South Africa's national interest as a benevolent contributor to Africa's development and stability. This study further found that despite South Africa's involvement in continental peace and security, the region is spared from security threats,

emergence of new conflicts, political instability and unconstitutional changes of government, among others. This study found that South Africa's pursuit of its national interest in the continent primarily serves domestic benefits, rather than the interests of conflict-affected nations. The above assertion is supported by a statement captured in the White Paper of 1999, which stipulated that “thus national interest in preserving regional peace and stability to promote trade and development and to avoid the spillover effects of conflicts in the neighbourhood” (South African Department of Foreign Affairs 1999, p.20). The above sentence suggests South Africa's continental involvement stems from its national interest in promoting beneficial trade. Therefore, this study concurred that the pursuit of SA's national interest through its FP regionally is about building a better South Africa, including democracy, advancing freedom from threats to individual rights, economic growth, and foreign invasion.

It was also found that the pursuit of South Africa's national interest through peacekeeping missions was faced with heavy criticism at home. For instance, the killing of 14 peacekeepers in the DRC Congo this year led to controversy at home (Baillie, 2025). This study argues that the controversy that emanated because of the death of 14 South African soldiers in DRC and 13 in Central African Republic, respectively, caused the nations to withdraw from both countries. This study found complexity in South Africa pursuing its national interest through its foreign policy.

The recurring violence in Eastern DRC and Sudan, coupled with coups across Africa, highlights the shortcomings of scrutinising South Africa's National interest. This is evident in the repetitive patterns of failed cease-fires and armed proliferation. This study further observed that South Africa in balancing regional stability with other African countries advocates for the eradication of the triple challenges of inequality, poverty and unemployment, affecting Africa on the contrary this study argued that the currency of eradicating the triple challenges in Africa is a cascade given the rate of unemployment and inequality faced by South Africa's citizens.

Overall, this study's findings highlight the critical role of a well-aligned and strategically grounded national interest in driving South Africa toward sustainable economic growth, regional stability, and global influence. The research highlights the necessity for South Africa to reconcile its obligations to regional solidarity and development with a more proactive emphasis on enhancing its economic robustness and

protecting its national interests amid the evolving context of international relations. To this end, there are good reasons to suggest that South Africa balance its national interest with regional stability, which is crucially subject to the process pursued.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

As articulated in the introduction or background, the central thrust of the article revolves around South African national interest and regional stability, especially regional stability, security and economic growth. The pursuit of national interest through foreign policy cannot be understated. It serves as a guiding framework that delineates the trajectory and efficacy of a nation's engagements within Africa and the world in general. For South Africa, a reevaluation of its national interest imperatives emerges as a critical imperative, one that aligns with the statement of intent, which guided the establishment of the Government of National Unity.

By prioritising robust harmony and stability for sustainable African development, South Africa can fortify its position as a self-reliant, assertive continental leader. Furthermore, the imperative for South Africa prioritise stability in Africa is rooted in the recognition that stability and economic resilience serve as the bedrock for development and growth.

Given the prioritisation of human rights and democracy, there is a need for closer alignment between South Africa and countries that violate human rights with key imperatives of fostering human rights in all forms. Such an atmosphere could be a vehicle for the advancement of human rights, particularly in initiatives carried out under the framework of the African agenda.

Regarding its participation in peacekeeping in Cabo Delgado in Northern Mozambique and the DRC, the South African government should take decisive steps in addressing disciplinary matters, especially the allegations of sexual exploitation and human rights abuses. Given the expression of realism in both local and international considerations, South Africa's national interest should follow the spirit and integrity of its national constitution. Without which such allegations could undermine the credibility of the South African mission in the eyes of the local community among which it is deployed.

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