
Johannesburg, South Africa

Date of publication: November 2019

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5 MOLESEY AVENUE, AUCKLAND PARK 2092, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA
1. Introduction

In 2018, South Africa was elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council for the third time to serve a two-year term in 2019-2020. Tshwane (Pretoria) had served in this position for two previous terms in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012.

In a bid to enhance effective policymaking and coordination within the South African government, and to promote dialogue between policymakers, scholars, civil society actors, and members of the informed general public on the role of South Africa on the UN Security Council, the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) organised two public dialogues in March and September 2019 at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa.

The March 2019 public dialogue titled “South Africa on the UN Security Council” was chaired by Dr Heinz Bongartz, Director, FES South Africa Office, and the speakers were Mr. Doctor Mashabane, then Chief Director, United Nations Political, Peace, and Security, in South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), and Ms Nicole Fritz, Chief Executive Officer, Freedom under Law, Johannesburg. The September 2019 event titled “The United Nations Security Council: South Africa and the Great Powers” was chaired by Professor Adekeye Adebajo, Director, IPATC. The three speakers were: Ambassador Welile Nhlapo, former Assistant Secretary-General at the UN; Mr Li Nan, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of China to South Africa; and Dr Jens-Christian Gaedtke, Head, Department of Political Affairs, Embassy of Germany to South Africa.

This report is based on discussions and key recommendations from both meetings.

2. South Africa’s First Tenure on the UN Security Council (2007-2008)

During its first term on the UN Security Council in 2007-2008, South Africa sought to promote the principles of its foreign policy including the peaceful resolution of conflicts, respect for human rights and international law, and a commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based international order. Tshwane was actively involved in the resolution of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. South Africa further sought to promote the “African Agenda” involving the strengthening of African institutions and regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.
During South Africa’s presidency of the Council in April 2008, President Thabo Mbeki chaired a meeting that focused on cooperation between the 15-member UN Security Council and the 15-member AU Peace and Security Council (PSC). Africa accounted, at this time, for more than 70 percent of the UN Security Council’s agenda. Tshwane also called for African regional and sub-regional organisations to play a more active role in addressing peace and security issues on the continent. South Africa further promoted security sector reform (SSR) on the Council.

However, Tshwane’s first term on the Security Council was also controversial. South Africa opposed resolutions critical of human rights violations in Sudan, Zimbabwe, Iran, and Myanmar. This significantly tarnished the country’s image in the eyes of many Western states and some South African civil society and media actors. The Mbeki administration did not communicate effectively with the public in explaining these decisions.

3. South Africa’s Second Tenure on the UN Security Council (2011-2012)

South Africa’s second stint on the Council in 2011-2012 sought to promote its foreign policy principles. President Jacob Zuma chaired the meeting of the Council in January 2012 which strengthened the South African-led resolution in April 2008 on cooperation between the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council. Both resolutions resulted in annual meetings, from 2016, between the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council on African security issues. South Africa also advocated for the rule of law to be upheld in international affairs, criticising the abuse of Security Council Resolution 1973 by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) which transformed a Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mandate into a “regime change” agenda during the Libyan crisis that led to the assassination of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011. During its first two terms on the Council (2007-2008 and 2011-2012), Tshwane also pushed for the reform of the Council to expand the permanent five veto-wielding members – the United States (US), China, Russia, Britain, and France – to include other countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan.

In 2011, South Africa, along with Nigeria and Gabon, supported UN Security Council Resolution 1973 which many within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) felt had facilitated NATO’s “regime change” agenda in Tripoli. Tshwane was criticised for its positions on Libya and Côte d’Ivoire. In the latter case, South Africa was diplomatically isolated in pushing for a political settlement after the incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, had rejected the results of the 2010 elections that saw Alassane Ouattara declared president of Côte d’Ivoire. Tshwane’s position was in direct contradiction to most ECOWAS, AU, and UN member states who overwhelmingly backed Ouattara’s victory, culminating in the French-led UN removal of Gbagbo from power in April 2011.

“South Africa’s second stint on the Council in 2011-2012 sought to promote its foreign policy principles.”

A UN SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING IN NEW YORK IN JUNE 2019.

IMAGE SOURCE - The Times Of Israel
PHOTO CREDIT - Eskinder Debebe/UN
4. South Africa’s Third Tenure on the UN Security Council (2019-2020)

South Africa’s quest to serve on the UN Security Council in 2019/2020 coincided with the centenary celebrations of the birth of its first post-apartheid president, Nelson Mandela. The UN had convened a summit in honour of Mandela in 2018, and subsequently declared 2019-2028 to be the “Mandela International Decade for Peace”. By September 2019, Tshwane had deployed 1,162 troops to three UN peacekeeping missions in the DRC, Darfur, and South Sudan. About 97 percent of these troops (1,137) are deployed in the Congo, with 19 in Darfur and 6 in South Sudan. South Africa also sought to pursue the AU’s Agenda 2063 aspiration of “Silencing the Guns by 2020” on the Council. The country further seeks to co-draft UN Security Council resolutions on African cases, 10 out of 12 of which are currently being drafted by France, Britain, and the US. South Africa held consultations with France regarding the renewal of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), and with the US, on the renewal of the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMIS), in January and February 2019 respectively. The challenges that Tshwane and the other nine non-permanent members of the Council face involve a lack of institutional memory and working within the constraints of the geo-political contestations among the veto-wielding five permanent members of the Council (the US, China, Russia, France, and Britain). This is further complicated by the fact that the Security Council has not adopted any rules of procedure after 74 years of operation.

In October 2019, South Africa chaired the UN Security Council. Its four key priorities were: managing African conflicts; promoting AU-UN cooperation; pushing the agenda of “Women, Peace, and Security”; and promoting the AU campaign of “Silencing the Guns by 2020”. Tshwane organised a quarterly open debate on the Middle East, focusing on the Palestinian question. Under South Africa’s presidency, the Council also considered resolutions relating to mandate renewals including on the Joint Border Verification Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM) in Abyei, Sudan/South Sudan; the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO); the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID); Migrant Smuggling in Libya; and the UN Mission for Justice Support in Haiti (MINUJUSTH). During its presidency in October 2019, Tshwane further led the annual UN Security Council meeting with the AU Peace and Security Council in Addis Ababa which discussed the cases of South Sudan, the Sahel, Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, and Guinea-Bissau.
The reform of the Security Council has been scuttled by a lack of consensus between African countries and the Group of Four (G-4) – Japan, Germany, Brazil, and India – as well as by China's opposition, and American and Russian vacillation. The five veto-wielding members of the Security Council also dominate key departments in the UN Secretariat. American diplomat, Rosemary DiCarlo, is the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs; French diplomat, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, is the Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations; British diplomat, Mark Lowcock, is the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs; while Chinese diplomat, Liu Zhenmin, is the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. South Africa believes that it is one of the potential holders of a permanent seat on the Security Council from Africa. It has often noted the double standards and distortions that have arisen from the inequality and unrepresentativeness of many global institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In January 2019, while France and Belgium were critical of the DRC's presidential elections, South Africa noted the need for the Security Council to await official results, reiterating that this was an internal issue that needed to be resolved by the country's electoral body and other national institutions. Tshwane's stance, alongside Beijing and Moscow, contributed to the emergence of Félix Tshisekedi as the Congo's president in January 2019. Similarly, in Burundi, the Cyril Ramaphosa administration has reiterated that the UN Security Council should not interfere in the internal affairs of the country, as this could aggravate its internal security. In South Sudan, South Africa, China, and Russia, opposed the permanent three's (P-3) – the US, Britain, and France – preference for maintaining sanctions on the belligerents. In Venezuela, Tshwane again joined Beijing and Moscow to oppose the US-led “regime change” agenda in Caracas, arguing that this domestic issue did not pose any threat to international peace and security, and emphasising the unconstitutionality of the position taken by the US and its allies.

5. China’s Role on the UN Security Council

China has been a strong supporter of multilateralism and a rules-based international order. Beijing contributes the largest number of peacekeepers among the five permanent members of the Council: in the past 28 years, it has deployed over 40,000 peacekeepers to more than 30 UN peacekeeping missions across the globe. In 2015, the Asian power announced the establishment of a $1 billion 10-year China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund. In September 2019, Beijing had 2,521 military personnel deployed to eight UN peacekeeping missions in the Western Sahara, South Sudan, Mali, the DRC, Darfur, Cyprus, and the Middle East. In 2019, China’s assessed contribution to UN peacekeeping rose to 15 percent – from 10 percent in 2018 – of the total UN peacekeeping budget, the second largest after the US at 28 percent. In contrast to Washington, whose contributions are often late, Beijing makes payment in full and on time.

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IMAGE SOURCE: Columbia SIPA. Journal of International Affairs
PHOTO CREDIT: Albert Gonzalez Farran/AFP via Getty Images
LINK: https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/china-africa-diplomatic-new-normal
China has established a cordial relationship with the three African countries on the UN Security Council: South Africa, Côte d’Ivoire, and Equatorial Guinea. As developing countries and emerging markets, Beijing and Tshwane have similar interests and have held similar positions on many peace and security issues. China seeks to work closely with South Africa and other countries to promote international cooperation on the Council in the following four areas: first, upholding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter which promote an international order guided by international law; second, defending multilateralism and promoting economic globalisation; third, providing joint support for development programmes in Africa such as the AU’s Agenda 2063 and the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; finally, promoting comprehensive reform of the UN Security Council in order to improve its authority, efficiency, and representation. The commitment of China to Council reform has, however, been questioned by several critics on the basis that it is keen to exclude Japan from the UN’s most powerful organ, and to avoid an expanded Council that could dilute its own global influence.

6. Germany’s Role on the UN Security Council

Germany currently occupies a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2019/2020. The country’s three priorities on the Council include: first, the protection of women in peace processes to ensure sustainable peace. Berlin believes that there is an urgent need for more conscious efforts to combat sexual violence, as the 20th anniversary of the adoption of UN Security Council 1325 on Women and Security approaches next year. Second, Germany is prioritising human rights and humanitarian law. In August 2019, its foreign minister, Heiko Maas, attended the meeting of the UN Security Council organised by the Polish presidency of the Council to mark the 70th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva Convention. Maas used the opportunity to note the increasing number of humanitarian crises across the globe, as well as the growing pressures on humanitarian international law. Third, Germany is prioritising climate and security issues on the belief that climate change poses an increasing threat to peace and security across the world. Hurricanes, storms, floods, and rising sea levels have had a significant impact on food prices and on safe drinking water. Berlin is convinced that this threat can only be resolved through multilateral cooperation that pools international capacities and resources. In June 2019, Germany organised an important international conference on Climate and Security in Berlin, calling for decisive action on this international challenge. Building on these efforts, the country continues actively to pursue its campaign on climate change on the UN Security Council.

Germany and South Africa also share common interests in the areas of multilateral order, human rights, and peace and security. Most importantly, Berlin is similarly pursuing the reform of the UN Security Council, arguing that the Council needs to reflect the realities of the 21st century. In promoting this objective, Germany continues to work closely with countries such as South Africa, Brazil, and Japan.

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MINISTERS AND EXPERTS WHO ATTENDED THE BERLIN CLIMATE AND SECURITY CONFERENCE IN JUNE 2019.

IMAGE SOURCE - Planetary Security Initiative
PHOTO CREDIT - Jan Rottler/adelphi
7. Policy Recommendations

The following six key policy recommendations emerged from the March and September 2019 public dialogues in Johannesburg:

1. South Africa must establish strategic alliances in order to actualise its priorities on the UN Security Council. Such collaborations should include: first, the other two African states on the Council - Côte d’Ivoire and Equatorial Guinea; second, China and Russia, and when possible, the US, Britain, and France; finally, collaboration should be fostered with non-permanent members such as Germany, Belgium, and Indonesia;

2. South Africa should ensure that it drafts UN Security Council resolutions on issues relating to Africa in a bid to end the current dominance of Britain, France, and the US in drafting 83 percent of these resolutions;

3. There is an urgent need to improve communication between the AU Commission in Addis Ababa, Africa’s sub-regional bodies such as SADC and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the AU office in New York. This will ensure the coordination of African positions on the Council;

4. South Africa should push for the operationalisation of the African Standby Force (ASF), promised since 2003, in order to enhance the timely deployment of troops to support the UN’s efforts in conflict zones across the continent;

5. South Africa should support efforts to address gross human rights violations across the globe. The country’s legitimacy in the international arena stems from its domestic context, specifically its 1996 Constitution and Bill of Rights. Thus, South Africa’s voting on the UN Security Council should align closely with its domestic culture of human rights.

6. South Africa’s membership of the UN Security Council coincides with the country’s forthcoming chairing of the AU in 2020. This presents an opportunity for the country to strengthen further the relationship between regional and global institutions in the critical area of peace and security.