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Perspectives and Hidden Ambiguities in the 'African Agenda'

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INTRODUCTION

For some time during the past decade, constant reference has been made to the notion of the 'African Agenda' in official statements, press releases and public speeches by South African state officials, government ministers and political leaders. A cursory reading of these statements reveals a seemingly self evident and conceptually non-problematic set of laudable themes. However, a closer look at the frequent use of this notion begs a number of questions that may need to be addressed by key actors within government in general, but particularly within the leadership of the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

For example, what is the origin of this notion, and does the constant reference to it and its widespread usage by state officials and government leaders serve to obscure more than it clarifies, particularly regarding its meaning and the basis of its application in terms of relations between South Africa and the African continent? Crucially, does this notion refer to a continentally-derived political consensus on the social, economic and political agenda that serves as a common framework within which South Africa's foreign policy, and those of other African countries collectively, can be formulated and conducted? Or alternatively, does this notion point to an underlying strategy of the South African government to promote its own foreign policy objectives under cover of support for the African Agenda? Or is the picture more complex, where the notion serves to obscure the contradictions and/or dilemmas at the heart of the South African government's approach towards the continent?

Does this notion point to an underlying strategy of the South African government to promote its own foreign policy objectives under cover of support for the African Agenda?

This paper seeks to undertake a brief examination and analysis of this seemingly non-problematic, popular and widely used concept. It is hoped that through this examination and analysis, the notion of the 'African Agenda' will be problematised, with the aim of unpacking it, in order to contribute towards a more nuanced and less mysterious understanding of its meaning.

THE 'AFRICAN AGENDA' IN PERSPECTIVE

The earliest references to this notion by state officials and government leaders in South Africa appear in official statements as far back as 2002. By some accounts the origins of this notion could go as far back as 1999 or earlier. It is not clear how it emerged but it seems widely used and accepted in the public discourse about government's involvement in promoting a particular agenda on the affairs of the continent. On the face of it, the notion of the 'African Agenda' appears fairly simple in terms of its concrete referents. On the one hand, it is applied to refer to a broad approach adopted by continental political and government leaders and institutions seeking to change fundamentally the way African countries have been governed and led in the past. On the other hand though, a closer examination of the use of this concept by a range of state

actors and other commentators in South Africa, points to its inherent complexity and its potentially problematic nature, mainly due to a lack of precision among those routinely invoking it as a concept through public pronouncements, speeches, articles and press releases. Such a lack of precision poses the risk of the concept becoming all things to all people, thus creating the unfortunate risk of turning it into a cliché.

The Africa-Centred Perspective

Generally the concept of the African Agenda seems to refer to integrated socio-economic, political, security and other strategies to address Africa's deep-seated and long standing developmental and governance challenges. Included in this is a strong desire to put in place institutions and processes for the peaceful resolution of conflicts around the continent, thus creating conditions for sustainable peace and security. The latter is critical as an input towards the desired outcomes of political stability, good governance, economic and social development. In turn the achievement of these outcomes in the long term would serve as critical conditions for sustainable peace and security on the continent. Institutionally, the driving force behind the African Agenda at the continental level is the African Union (AU), operating within the framework of a developmental intervention plan articulated through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and a political governance intervention plan to promote good governance in Africa driven through the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), a component of the NEPAD programme. A range of other support structures such as the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOC), the Peace and Security Council, the African Court of Justice and the African, Human and People's Rights and the Pan-African Parliament provide the critical institutional architecture which appears to underpin the evolution of the African Agenda and its initiatives.

A closer examination of the use of this concept by a range of state actors and other commentators in South Africa, points to its inherent complexity and its potentially problematic nature

The above perspective on the notion of the African Agenda seems fairly unambiguous, rooted as it is within the current dominant paradigm that places the interests of the continent and its people, and the collective efforts of the continental African leadership at the centre of all efforts driving the African Agenda and its key initiatives. This Africa-centred perspective is currently dominant among, and routinely espoused by, government leaders and state officials in South Africa. In terms of this perspective on the African Agenda, all the efforts and activities of South African President, Thabo Mbeki, government ministers and diplomatic officials in the continent are usually articulated as "consolidating", "advancing" or "contributing towards" the African Agenda. This is a perspective that posits the task and responsibility of setting the African Agenda at the centre of the collective efforts of the leadership of the continent and all the economic, political, cultural and security governance structures of

the continent, rather than in the efforts of individual leaders from selected countries in the continent.

Politically and diplomatically this perspective is likely to be accepted and popular among the political leadership of the continent as it clearly promotes a more cooperative and collaborative, consensus-based approach to issues of governance, development and leadership, especially when addressing problems affecting the continent. This Africa-centred perspective is also likely to elicit strong support from many of the Western backers of the African Agenda, especially the donor community, who are likely to subscribe to an approach that promotes collective accountability in socio-economic and developmental processes in the continent for which they provide official financial and other aid. For instance, in May 2002 President Mbeki attended the South Africa-Nordic Summit in Norway where, together with the Prime Ministers of Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, they released the "Skagen Declaration". Among other things, the Declaration supported the "African Agenda", and called for international partnerships with the leadership of the continent in addressing poverty.

The Africa-centred perspective is currently dominant among, and routinely espoused by, government leaders and state officials in South Africa

The National Interest Perspective

Along the widely accepted and articulated Africa-centred and consensus-based perspective of the African Agenda, is another perspective that is less openly articulated in public but which may be equally valid as an interpretation of the African Agenda. This perspective is somewhat more subtle and ambiguous in its statement of the tenets of the African Agenda, but appears to be narrowly focussed on advancing South Africa's national interests as the ultimate goal of the country's promotion of the African Agenda. Seemingly underpinned by the country's acknowledged political, economic, military and diplomatic strength in the sub region and the continent as a whole, this perspective seeks to focus attention on advancing South Africa's economic interests through the creation of conditions conducive to the penetration of the country's business interests into the sub-region and the continent.

Some commentators have hinted at this, while some donors have also indirectly endorsed this perspective. There is no doubt that many donor efforts are ultimately designed to enhance prospects for economic self interest and encourage the promotion of trade that on balance is favourable and beneficial to their own domestic economies and firms. Therefore, a perspective of the African Agenda that places a strong focus on South Africa harnessing its economic, developmental and military strength to advance its interests in the region and the continent through the promotion of conditions of peace, political stability and good governance practices, is likely to receive endorsements from

many developed countries. As part of this perspective, donor support clearly anticipates South Africa's economy and its business interests across the continent growing over time, thus rendering the country a leading player in the development aid arena on the continent. Sentiments akin to this have already emerged in the thinking of South Africa's ruling party, where draft resolutions at its June 2007 policy conference mooted these ideas in more concrete form for discussion and possible adoption and amendment at its December 2007 Party Congress. Whatever the outcome of the draft resolutions, the thinking in the ruling party on the matter of South Africa emerging as a donor on the continent is clear. Such conditions of peace, stability and good governance are conducive to entry by business not only from South Africa, but also from the developed world. For instance, during the South Africa-Nordic Summit of 2002 referred to, the Norwegian Prime Minister, Kjell Bondevik, made a statement that "South Africa fulfils a strategic role on the African continent and forms the gateway to markets in the Southern African Development Community of 180 million people".

The 'national interest' perspective appears to be narrowly focused on advancing South Africa's national interests as the ultimate goal of the country's promotion of the African Agenda

The African National Congress has also issued a strong statement recently, which appears to advance this 'national interest' perspective. For instance, during its National Policy Conference in June this year, a report of the Commission on International Relations put forward two key ideas with strategic interest implications for the country. Firstly, the idea of a 'South African Developmental Aid' programme to the region and the continent as "one of the key strategies that could assist the ANC and government in pursuit of our vision for a better Africa", while cautioning against "negative perceptions about South Africa's colonial power".

The second idea is that of 'Economic Diplomacy'. In this regard, the statement elaborates that the "advent of democracy has created new opportunities for South African business both in Africa and in the world...". The statement adds that this opportunity "brings with it new challenges in the relationship between South Africa and other African countries", while stating clearly the need for "beefing up of economic desks in the South African embassies to ensure our business/companies exploit the available business opportunities ... in the continent". Reference is also made to the goal of expanding "our objective on the national interests", without further elaborating on the latter, but the implications are unambiguous.

There is no doubt that this perspective is focused fairly narrowly on promoting and advancing the national economic interests of the country through its involvement in advancing the African Agenda. In and of itself, it is perfectly acceptable for a country to promote and advance its economic, political and other interests through the conduct of its foreign policy or its involvement in foreign affairs. However, the key element in contrasting the two perspectives

on the African Agenda is the fact that the Africa-centred perspective seems to conceptualize South Africa's involvement in the affairs of the continent as motivated by a largely altruistic and philanthropic agenda. In terms of the second perspective, the country's actions in relation to the promotion of the African Agenda are largely underpinned by the need to promote self-interest. In this context, the country's economic and business superiority, underpinned by its military strength in the sub-region and the continent, become extremely critical.

Landsberg also makes reference to this dilemma facing the conduct of South Africa's foreign policy and its relations with its neighbours - the need to be seen playing a collegial role in promoting the collective, consensus-based and collaborative processes of the African Agenda on the one hand, and on the other, the need to assert its economic interests aggressively, utilising its military and economic strength in relation to the sub-region and the continent. This dilemma is characterised by a debilitating paralysis, at least in public, brought about by the fear and sensitivities of being perceived as a dominant, regional hegemon with potential for imperialist tendencies. This is an inherent element in South Africa's foreign policy agenda, and an enduring challenge to overcome. As such, the ruling party seems keenly aware of this conundrum as is evidenced by the cautionary note expressed in one its draft policy conference resolutions.

A clear strategic approach is yet to be found by South Africa's foreign policy makers

A COMPROMISE APPROACH OF SORTS

It would seem that a clear strategic approach is yet to be found by South Africa's foreign policy makers in order to deal with the inherent dilemma of perceptions and sensitivities among its neighbours and continental counterparts, surrounding its status as a regional hegemonic power. The legacy of past South African regimes acting belligerently towards the continent and creating political, economic and security instability in the sub region has rendered the country continuously vulnerable to a debilitating sense of foreboding regarding the utilisation of its own strengths to pursue openly its strategic interests in the region and the continent, due to the fear of accusation of having an imperialist agenda.

To prevent the development of a perpetual state of psychological vulnerability within South Africa's foreign affairs establishment, it is obvious that a clear strategy needs to be formulated urgently to serve two critical purposes: firstly, to allay the fears of its neighbours and counterparts in a way that demonstrates concretely, and beyond mere political rhetoric, its capacity to utilise its economic and military strength for the benefit of the sub region and the continent. Secondly, the strategy needs to allay these fears among neighbours

and continental counterparts without necessarily compromising the imperative to promote the country's own strategic self interests - especially in terms of its economic, political, developmental and security interests.

In the long term this compromise may disadvantage the country's strategic economic interests in the region and the continent

Perhaps the ANC's National Policy Conference suggestion of a 'South African Developmental Aid' programme for the region, as well as the notion of an 'Economic Diplomacy' constitute the kernel of an incipient current thinking within the organisation around the issue of a coherent strategy towards dealing with this dilemma. While this new approach is yet to be developed, the country appears to have settled for an uncomfortable and self effacing compromise. In terms of this compromise strategy, support for and efforts to 'consolidate', 'advance' and 'contribute towards' the Africa-centred perspective of the African Agenda will be publicly and vocally articulated by the leadership of the country and its diplomatic establishment at every forum in the continent and on the world stage. This is an important short term measure clearly aimed at avoiding courting negative perceptions about any attempts openly to play to its strengths and push its own agenda in its dealings with neighbours and continental partners. But in the long term this compromise may disadvantage the country's strategic economic interests in the region and the continent, especially in the face of fierce and aggressive economic activities of powerful actors from the developed world, including China. In addition, the organised corporate sector in general and the strong business wing of the ANC may begin to feel constrained and, therefore, agitate against the current limiting approach that seeks to downplay the country's economic and other strengths in relation to its regional and continental counterparts in order to minimise the perceptions of imperialism.