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**Advancing South Africa's Agenda through the 'African Agenda'**

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## INTRODUCTION

Shaping the content and nature of public discourse on the 'African Agenda' is a basic element in South Africa's approach towards the continent. That is, if the African Agenda is a programme of action solely formulated outside of the borders of South Africa. However, this paper argues that South Africa has its own 'African Agenda' which it seeks to advance and promote and whose success depends on the endorsement of other countries in the continent.

This policy brief seeks to explore the strategic significance for South Africa of pursuing its 'African Agenda' through engagement within the affairs of the African continent. It argues that South Africa's advancement of the 'African Agenda' and its programme of action, serve the multiple role of: promoting the continentalist orientation of the country's post-apartheid leadership; promoting its own long-term strategic interests and objectives; and simultaneously obfuscating the fact that it is using the 'African Agenda' to promote its own interests.

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## MULTIPLE ROLES OF THE 'AFRICAN AGENDA'

The notion of the 'African Agenda' is fairly broad in its meaning and seems to entail a combination of themes and issues of concern to the political leadership of the continent. While its definition remains imprecise at best and elusive at worst, its application in public discourse by policy actors in South Africa usually avoids addressing these conceptual and definitional problems.<sup>1</sup>

At one level, the 'African Agenda' seems to denote general debates on processes to promote African democracy and governance and the challenges that these face. At another level, it appears to mirror South Africa's own key challenges as the country seeks to carve a leading role and advance its own strategic interests in the continent.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, South Africa's 'African Agenda' serves an obvious and critical role of setting out the continentalist agenda of the country's mainstream political establishment, as evidenced by the vigorous participation in and support of various collective activities and programmes on the continent. It also aims to promote South Africa's own national interest on the continent. But a less obvious but potentially important role, is to obfuscate the fact that the country seeks to promote its own long-term interests on the continent - among others the strengthening of the country's position within the continent. It is this multiple role of the 'African Agenda' that is an important dynamic in understanding its strategic utility for the country's foreign policy makers of advancing this agenda on the continent.

One of the strategic goals of the 'African Agenda' is the search for peace and security, as well as socio-political and economic stability in Africa. This search rests on five key pillars: peace, security and stability through the African Union; development through the New partnership for Africa's development; effective governance through mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), co-operation through international partnership pacts, and regional economic communities (REC's) - or sub-regional bodies - as the building blocs for a continental institutional order.

Clearly as a hegemonic power in the sub-region and a strategic geopolitical player in the continent, South Africa has a vested interest in seeking political stability and order throughout the continent as a fundamental pre-condition for social, economic and democratic stability. However, it is also critical for South African political leaders in general, and the foreign policy making elite in particular, that this search for order and stability in the continent is conducted in a consensus-seeking fashion, and in a way that seeks to demonstrate the potential tangible benefits for the countries on the continent, rather than merely seeking to stabilize the continent for its own strategic economic and other interests. Through this, the country creates space to achieve its own, less obvious but critical, strategic goals as will be argued below.

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Broadly, the 'African Agenda' supports the establishment of sound and enduring social, political, economic and security institutions to underpin the development of sound governance practices in the continent. Critically, the promotion of the 'African Agenda' is being driven through negotiated consensus around common norms and standards for good governance practices in the continent. It emphasizes common approaches and collaborative strategies by African countries in dealing with Africa's problems, while seeking partnerships at two levels - with external players (especially potential funders and donors who play a critical role in guaranteeing the financial sustainability and viability of these strategies), and key countries in the various sub-regions of the continent.

The partnership strategy is an integral part of South Africa's 'African Agenda' and is especially critical in two ways. Firstly, it serves to construct a basis for enlisting the support of prospective foreign investors who could provide much needed financial, technical and other assistance for the Agenda and its programmes of action. This assistance has the potential to serve as an incentive to African countries to pursue the necessary reforms and other programmes. For instance, the Nordic group of countries, through the Skagen Declaration of 2002, has declared its willingness to support the 'African Agenda' and South Africa's efforts to promote its programmes.<sup>3</sup> The increased prospects for donor funding and other support from developed countries and investment agencies is absolutely vital, in that it could relieve South Africa from the potential burden of having to provide a large proportion of the necessary financial and other

support necessary to incentivise its continental counterparts to pursue and support its 'African Agenda' vigorously.

Secondly, the creation of partnerships with key states in various parts of the continent is vital in ensuring that South Africa wins geo-politically strategic allies and regional champions of the 'African Agenda' that it can rely on in pursuing its vision of the future of the African continent. It also serves to create a basis on which these key states can generate a stake in the promotion of the African Agenda, thus potentially offsetting the risk of South Africa being seen to pursue its own Agenda exclusively and unilaterally. South Africa's foreign policy makers are extremely sensitive to perceptions of the country pursuing a neo-imperialist or colonialist agenda on the continent, especially in the post-apartheid diplomatic era. Therefore, partnerships with countries such as Nigeria, Algeria, Ghana, Tanzania, Botswana and Mozambique are vital and have been forged to ensure the anchoring of support for the 'African Agenda' and its programmes of action in the various sub-regions of the continent.

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## **IMPORTANCE OF PEACE AND STABILITY IN THE CONTINENT**

Socio-economic development is an important component of South Africa's advancement of the notion of the 'African Agenda'. The pursuit of socio-economic development is not only an important priority among all the African states, but also has a symbiotic relationship with the pursuit of peace, security and political stability. Therefore, a key aspect of South Africa's 'African Agenda' over the past decade has been to play the role of peacemaker and negotiator in the continent. It has championed Africa's efforts to convey to the world the desire of its leadership to create and sustain peace and stability as a basis for socio-economic and political development. The country's involvement in peace efforts in various parts of the continent, within the context of its advancement of the African agenda, has established the country's credentials as a peacemaker. This is an important diplomatic achievement for the country, which stands in stark contrast to the days of the apartheid regime when the its political leadership incited civil/military strife and political instability among its neighbours in the sub-region to guarantee its political survival.

Since the dawn of the post-apartheid era, the South African political leadership has been eager to demonstrate concretely, non-hegemonic intentions to its continental counterparts, especially that the country's survival can only be guaranteed through the promotion of regional and continental economic and political integration, underscored by peace and stability. Clearly, South Africa sees its own future as inextricably linked to that of the continent, and this leaves no space for the hegemonic intentions of the past.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the country has coupled its pursuit of the Agenda with the expenditure of

considerable financial, economic and other resources to enable it to engage in expansive and extensive peacekeeping operations in parts of the continent, clearly aimed at winning confidence and support among other states.

The country's involvement in conflict resolution and management missions in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Lesotho and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with its attendant financial and technical resource costs, has been widely acknowledged as evidence of its attempts to stabilize the continent. The effort to stabilise the continent is clearly a strategic investment not only in political stability and development of the continent in general, but also a strategic investment in the country's own future as an integral part of the continent.

## **CONCLUSION**

The search for peace and stability as well as socio-economic development in the continent is at the centre of the pursuit and advancement of South Africa's 'African Agenda'. The efforts expended by South Africa's foreign policy makers in advancing its 'African Agenda' - not only within the continent but also among developed countries - clearly constitutes an investment in the future of the continent. These efforts are also an investment in the country's own future as an integral part of the continent. Moreover, they are an investment that seamlessly and unobtrusively advances South Africa's own economic and other interest as part of this Agenda. However, the imperative to exorcise from the conduct of the country's foreign policy towards Africa the lingering sensitivities resulting from past apartheid state aggression towards its neighbours, has created residual reluctance within the leadership of the country to articulate clearly its specific strategic interests that underpin its advancement of the 'African Agenda'.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on this, see Thabo Rapoo (2007), Exploring Perspectives and Hidden Ambiguities on the 'African Agenda'. Policy Brief 41, Centre for Policy Studies.

<sup>2</sup> For an expansion of the term Continental-Africanism, see C. Landsberg (no date), Continental Africanism: South Africa's "African Agenda", Centre for Policy Studies.

<sup>3</sup> See T. Rapoo, (2007), Exploring Perspectives and Hidden Ambiguities on the 'African Agenda'. Policy Brief 41, Centre for Policy Studies

<sup>4</sup> Thabo Mbeki, 'A National Strategic vision for South Africa.' Address to the Development Planning Summit, hosted by the Intergovernmental Forum. Pretoria, 27 November 1995: 2-4; Thabo Mbeki, 'Africa: The time has come.' Address to the Corporate Council on Africa's attracting capital to Africa summit. Chantilly, Virginia, United States of America, 19-22 April 1997: 2-4.