

The 'De-legitimization of South Africa':

A Case Study on South African–Cuban Relations

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Abstract

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, South Africa's international standing has come under attack by Western-leaning forces who advocate that the country should forget its global South stance in favour of obeisance to the neo-liberal world order. This can be seen in the almost 30-year-old narrative which questions who South Africa should be allied with. The purpose of this narrative, according to Professor Chris Landsberg, is to 'de-legitimize' the country's international image. In this research, the author examines South

African–Cuban relations from a realist and post-colonial perspective, arguing that South Africa's rich history and foreign policy of non-alignment in fact give it a respected status in the community of international states—an idea which is never afforded to the country. Instead, the nuances of South African–Cuban relations, and in fact South Africa's relationship with other states which are vocally 'anti-imperialist', are often overlooked, distorted, and hidden from the public's attention. This paper brings attention to this debate.

According to Landsberg (2023), South Africa is undergoing an extensive ‘international de-legitimization’ programme. Translated from International Relations (IR) lingo, the phrase refers to the coordinated attacks the country is facing by actors who seek to provoke and derail the country’s foreign policy with the aim of re-orientating it to lean Westwards instead of its current role as architect of a multi-polar world. In a nutshell, South Africa’s foreign policy is based on a long-standing commitment to the Pan-African agenda, conflict resolution¹, nation building, and challenging the predominance of the Western powers and the liberal international economic order (DIRCO, 2022). These functions were not chosen because of their pleasant-sounding nature, but stem from the country’s own transition from imminent civil war to peace, democracy, reconciliation, and equality (Southall, 2006; Miti, 2012).

The de-legitimization programme is implemented through a number of internal actors who are portrayed as ‘voices of reason’. These internal actors or domestic sources are wrongly conflated and confused as drivers of South African foreign policy (Landsberg, 2018). Collectively, they argue that South Africa’s foreign policy has lost its way, has morally disintegrated, is confused, shameful, and dotted with inconsistencies (Mills and Hartely, 2023; Van Heerde, 2022; Goris, 2022). The solution to this conundrum, they propose, as expressed by Gumede (2023), is that South Africa and other African countries ‘must stop partnering with industrial and emerging powers based on the past.’

Since the country’s transition to democracy, foreign policy initiatives by the government to not only distance itself from the Western world order but to challenge it have been met with immediate condemnation by the above-mentioned internal actors. In many cases, the analytical condemnation is impartial, never considering strategy, documentation, or policy as laid out by the Department of International Relations and Co-Operation (DIRCO).² The biased analysis is most likely due to the way Western multinational media³ operates through corporate finance to persuade, disengage, and ensure that domestic commentary and narratives toe the line. In providing platforms to critics from Western-funded Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), opposition party members,

and Western-leaning academics, multinational media create IR ‘authorities’ who are very capable of manufacturing and fabricating IR phenomena with the hopes of influencing and/or dictating South African foreign policy.⁴

Theoretically, the de-legitimization of South Africa’s foreign policy speaks to defence of the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP) syntax. The CMP consists of four interrelated domains: control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity. This power structure regards all Western knowledge as the only truth while relegating global South knowledges as irrelevant, outdated, and wrong (Licata 2012). In its control of knowledge, research, and thought, the CMP decides what is history, culture, language, and identity (Gurminder, Kerem and Dalia, 2018; Le Grange, Du Preez, Ramrathan and Blignaut, 2020). In his *magnus opus*, Rovogui foments that despite postcolonial independence, the transfer of political power to the state has been severely limited. Self-determination, then, is severely hindered as African states have little capacity to ‘secure external recognition’ (Rovogui, 1996). This speaks directly to how the forces of colonialism/neo-colonialism⁵ ‘accept as true’ that they have the sole right to determine South Africa’s global narrative.

Since the Russian-Ukraine conflict (2022–), the critiques of the de-legitimization project have grown louder due to their increased frustration

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with South Africa's foreign policy actioning.⁶ The government has come under intense scrutiny for not speaking out against Russia or condemning the Russian invasion. For example, in the South African-led peace initiative of June 2023, the South African press described the initiative as shambolic, disgraceful, useful idiots, and a travelling circus. With the government not budging on its stance and refusing to dance to the tune of the West, the rhetoric has moved from admonishment to threat to punishment. Table 1 explains how states can come into non-violent conflict with each other.

Table 1: *Three levels of non-violent state conflict*

Level 1	Admonishment	Speeches by leading political figures, commentary in press, recalling ambassadors, or summoning ambassadors to clarify.
Level 2	Threat	Participating in army games and war simulations in controversial locations, purchasing specific military hardware to counter other states' purchases or capabilities, mobilising troops to a contested border, creating cordial relations with enemies of that state.
Level 3	Punishment	Economic hits, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, social media propaganda.

In the case of South Africa, the agency to delegitimize has steadily progressed. One threat is seen in the way an undoubtedly Western-funded agenda pushed to move the BRICS summit away from South Africa so to discredit the nation. The International Criminal Court (ICC), which consists of mainly British and American lawyers, and masquerades as international legality, also sought to force South Africa to arrest Putin if he arrived for the summit. Another threat is the 'warning' relayed by the South African Reserve Bank that the government's stance on Russia-Ukraine could see a shock to the system and possible US sanctions. According to Herco Steyn, more than 90% of South Africa's international payments are processed through the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication system (SWIFT). 'Should South Africa be banned from SWIFT due to secondary sanctions, these payments will not be possible.' South Africa's financial system would be unable to function if its ability to make international payments in dollars was impeded (Bloomberg, 2023).

In more recent events, punishments have been meted out. The claim by US Ambassador to South Africa, Rubeen Brigety, that South Africa supplied Russia with weapons and ammunition was not a misstatement⁷, but a calculated economic hit which sent the Rand crashing within minutes of the statement. The Rand lost more than 30 cents of its value against the dollar, hitting its weakest level since the record low set in 2020. The claim, which was later revoked due to no evidence, shows how the US can enforce its hegemony with a few cleverly calculated words. Another potential punishment is seen in the way a group of US lawmakers have pushed to move the US-African trade summit planned for Johannesburg in

2023. In a letter to the US Secretary of State, the group urged that South Africa lose its benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

Overall, the main objective of the delegitimization campaign is to re-align the country as it was during the apartheid era; a proxy and puppet to Western interests. One dimension of this de-legitimization is seen in the narrative on who South Africa should be allied with. This has been the subject of intense scrutiny since the unbanning of the ANC in 1988 and is visible in a famous interview of pre-President Nelson Mandela in New York in 1990.

As Deputy President of the ANC, on January 21, 1990, Mandela sat down for an *ABC Nightline Special Edition* interview with Ted Koppel at the City College of New York. In a pre-arranged question from the audience, Ken Adelman of the Institute of Contemporary Studies asked:

“ Who South Africa should be allied with is seen in the way certain actors cite history as the only glue that forges ties between different nations. History, however, is not static and exists both concurrently with the present and spirals simultaneously towards the future. ”

‘Those of us who share your struggle for human rights and against apartheid have been somewhat disappointed by the models of human right that you have held up since being released from jail. You meet over the last 6 months three times with Yasser Arafat who you have praised, you have told Ghaddafi that you share the view and applaud him on his record of human rights and his drive for freedom and peace around the world, and you have praised Fidel Castro as a leader of human rights, and said that Cuba was one of the countries that is head and shoulder above other countries in terms of human rights...I was just wondering are these your models of leaders of human rights?’

In his answer, Mandela would state:

‘One of the mistakes which some political analysts make is to think that their enemies are our enemies. That we can and will never do. We have our own struggle which we are conducting. We are grateful to the world for supporting our struggle. But nevertheless, we are an independent organization with our own policy. And that our attitude towards any country is determined by the attitude of that country towards our struggle.’⁸

The above sentiments expressed by Mandela were instrumental in shaping the country’s post-apartheid foreign policy. In the years of Mandela’s presidency and those of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa opened

numerous diplomatic missions across the world (Landsberg, 2005). The country was instrumental in peace processes in the DRC, Burundi, and Sudan given its own transition from the brink of civil war to democracy. In East-Timor’s succession struggle from Indonesia, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was replicated there with the help of South African officials (Jenkins, 2002). Building on the legacy of Mandela, the country’s foreign policy commanded both respect and admiration in the global community of states (Landsberg, 2010). The country was also key to bringing the ‘African Agenda’ to the world (Bohler-Muller, 2012). UNSC Resolution 2033, which aims to strengthen co-operation between the UN and the African Union (AU), stressed the importance of establishing more effective relationships with the UN and regional bodies. In more recent times, the country was elected to almost back-to-back UN Security Council membership which shows faith in South Africa’s vision and mission.

The above realities are almost always omitted from the CMP grand narrative on South Africa’s foreign policy. Who South Africa should be allied with is seen in the way certain actors cite history as the only glue that forges ties between different nations. History, however, is not static and exists both concurrently with the present and spirals simultaneously towards the future.

The case of South African–Cuban relations is a good example of how ‘history’ alone is perceived to be the reason for the alliance. South African–Cuban relations are often vilified as corrupt, dishonest, and a total waste of resources. According to Gibson, ‘Cuba accounts for virtually no trade with SA, yet this country has lavished billions (of Rands) on the Caribbean island state. Is the ANC’s loyalty to historical friends compromising its financial responsibility to its own citizens?’ (Gibson, 2022). Similarly, Ntyintyane (2022) notes that:

‘Then you hear on the radio international relations and co-operation minister Naledi Pandor pleading with South Africans to understand as her government wants to bless Cuba with another few million rand as a gift. This has been going on since 2012. I have stopped counting the millions dished out to the regime by our generous ANC-led government.’

In 2021, the decision to hire 24 Cuban engineers to help resolve the challenges faced by the water sector, as well as transfer skills, was slammed by opposition parties. One opposition member stated that 'to import Cuban engineers, who qualified from lower standard universities than our own world-class engineers, is criminal' (Sinkins, 2021). He would go on to declare that 'like the import of Cuban doctors, the import of Cuban engineers is 100 percent about the ANC scratching the back of a country that it has historical links with' (ibid). In May 2023, for example, a civil society group sought the interdiction of the High Court to prevent South Africa from donating to Cuba.

This history, or rather *the anger behind* this history, is based on solidarity⁹ in both nations' shared fight to end colonialism and apartheid (Suttner, 2021). From Angola to Namibia, to Algeria and to Guinea Bissau, Cuba played a decisive role in contributing to the liberation of countries from colonial occupation (Pandor, 2022). At the Battle of Cuito Canavale (1987–1988), the biggest battle in Africa since WW2, an estimated 40,000 Cuban troops defeated the mighty apartheid military giant, which was armed and backed by the CIA and Israel.¹⁰ With this counter-offensive, the South African-occupied provinces of Angola were liberated, and the South African Defence Forces (SADF) retreated from their positions. As Colonel Jan Breytenbach defines it, the South African assault 'was abruptly and definitively stopped' by the Cubans and Angolans (Gonzalez, 2023). In its totality, the battle was a major turning point in the history of the subcontinent and, in the negotiations leading to Namibian Independence, part of the deal was that Cuban forces return home (Breytenbach, 1997).

Since the 1959 Cuban revolution which freed the country from the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and subsequent nationalization of US assets on the island, the country has remained not only a threat to American imperialism in the entire Latin America but an embarrassment to the US government. The sanctions on the island which persist today have nothing to do with contemporary realities but are rather informed by pride, arrogance, and spite that a tiny nation would stand up to the American giant. The crippling sanctions have had dire consequences on the island's economy, increasing poverty, and effecting growth. Since the Covid-19

pandemic, the island lost a main revenue stream in tourism and is more reliant than ever on its allies.

In a way, South Africa's unwavering support of Cuba speaks to its own leadership in global affairs. Where other states cower and do the bidding of Euro-American interests, South Africa manages its own destiny in the community of states. It continues to build stronger ties with Cuba and support an ally which always supported its struggle even when it was not fashionable to do so. Where the West labelled Mandela and the ANC as terrorists, it was states like the USSR, India, and Cuba that supported and financed not only the ANC but different pro-democracy and anti-apartheid groups in the country. So, while the US and Britain vetoed action against apartheid South Africa and armed it to the teeth, it was the minority who stood up against the imperial powers. On December 11, 1964, the Argentine/Cuban *revolutionaire* Che Guevara at a speech to the United Nations as Cuba's representative declared:

'We speak out to put the world on guard against what is happening in South Africa. The brutal policy of apartheid is applied before the eyes of the nations of the world. The peoples of Africa are compelled to endure the fact that on the African continent the superiority of one race over another remains official policy, and that in the name of this racial superiority murder is committed with impunity. Can the United Nations do nothing to stop this?'

The Cuban anti-apartheid stance has angered the 'powers that would be' in South Africa. Arguably anger of the pivotal role in defeating apartheid persists today and can be seen in the way the Western Cape refused to accept Cuban doctors in 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Western Cape, the opposition stronghold in the country, was the only province not to accept the contingent of Cuban doctors.

Nothing is however mentioned that Cuba has the highest life expectancy at birth and the lowest infant mortality rate in the Western Hemisphere thanks to its free healthcare scheme. Cuba has double the number of doctors per person, 5.91 per 1,000, as compared to 2.56 doctors per 1,000 in the US. Former General Secretary of the UN, Kofi Annan, stated in 2000 how

'Cuba should be the envy of many other nations', adding that the achievements in social development are impressive given the size of its gross domestic product per capita: 'Cuba demonstrates how much nations can do with the resources they have if they focus on the right priorities – health, education, and literacy.' In 2006, a *BBC* flagship news programme *Newsnight* identified the country's health systems as the world's best in public services. The Cuban healthcare system is also a destination for medical tourists from across Europe and Latin America. Treatment in Cuba is estimated to be 60 to 80% less than the cost in the US. Annually the country sees an average of 20,000 paying health tourists which generate revenues of around \$40 million a year. These details are almost always omitted from the narrative on the relationship between South Africa and Cuba. With all the health crises faced by South Africa, there are definite lessons to be learnt from Cuba, a primary one being how to re-engineer South Africa's failing health system. Instead, we are repeatedly told that the cost of Cuban doctors is 'exorbitant' and wasteful (Khan, 2022).

A cursory analysis of the Cuban medical education system reveals there is much for South Africa to 'take home with'. Cuban medical education differs from conventional models by providing graduates with a wider skill set. The Cuban system emphasises a caregiver approach, where the medic is a decision maker, communicator, manager, community leader, and teacher (Sui, Reddy, Nyembezi, 2019). Cuba's approach to medical education has a strong focus on primary care, moving the centre of gravity from teaching hospitals to community facilities, and the promotion of polyclinics. Cuba has invested heavily in medical internationalism with an estimated 1/3rd of its 83,000 doctors working outside of Cuba, often in remote areas. According to Squires, Colville, Chalkidou et al. (2020), the negative narrative on Cuban-trained doctors in South Africa is incorrect. The authors note that 'they [South African doctors trained in Cuba] have highly appropriate skills in primary care and prevention and could provide much needed services to rural and urban under-served populations whilst gaining an orientation to the health problems of South Africa and strengthening their skills.'

Cuban-South African medical links were forged by Mandela and Castro in 1996 and expanded in 2011 to

meet the needs of rural and underserved urban areas. This expansion amounted to around 800 students per year training in Cuba, with a total number of around 4,000 training in Cuba by 2017. In 21 years, 4,000 Doctors being trained represents a very miniscule figure in the timescale of South African medical history. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that it is not South African medics trained in Cuba that is the problem, but rather the relationship and shared history of South Africa and Cuba that is the problem. South African–Cuban relations speak to morality and ethics in international relations. Where countries like the US befriend, use, and betray their allies like Noriega, Saddam, and Bin Laden, South Africa has shown that International Relations does not have to follow that model.

Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing South African foreign policy is not an easy task. The country's main trading partners are from both the East and West blocs, as well as the global South, meaning that it must tread carefully in world affairs. In this scenario, it is bound to upset one or another side. South Africa has highly ambitious foreign policy strategies and goals which consider domestic, sub-regional, continental, global South, industrialised North, and global governance dimensions. Despite the agency which seeks to realign South Africa's foreign policy Westwards, South Africa is a leader in its own right. South African–Cuban relations should persist into the future given South Africa's commitment to building a multi-polar world and not one that serves the dictates of Western imperialism.

Notes

1. South Africa's role in conflict resolution has been the source of several books like Shillinger (2009) *Africa's Peace Maker? Lessons from South African Conflict Mediation*, Solomon (2010) *South Africa in Africa: A Case for High Expectations for Peace* and Bentley and Southall (2005) *An African Peace Process: Mandela, South Africa and Burundi*.
2. DIRCO is the equivalent of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
3. Multinational media refers to the West's influence over local media content which purports colonial,

imperial, and white supremacist epistemological thought on the world.

4. In a previous study from 2022, the author examined an IR event which concerned South Africa and asked how it was possible that 40 plus journalists from different media publications all shared the same opinion.
5. Are we experiencing colonialism or neo-colonialism?
6. The idea of neutrality to the Russian–Ukraine conflict was best expressed by India’s Foreign Minister Jaishankar who asked if it was only India who was supporting Russia’s war effort by buying Russian oil, as Europe still buys Russian gas. He would go on to say that ‘Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.’ Jaishankar’s stance is a view shared by all the BRICS bloc.
7. The Ambassador said he was prepared to ‘bet his life’ that Pretoria had provided weapons to Moscow (Seibt and Everett, 2023).
8. According to Suttner (2022), ‘Mandela...made it clear that those countries that had not offered any support to the South African struggle had no right to prescribe to the ANC with whom it should be friends.’
9. Solidarity is not always about gains. Gestures of solidarity are signs of commitment towards each other. During the Cold War, Russia bought mega tons of sugar from Cuba, and more recently, Venezuela and Iran have supplied the island with oil at a loss. Solidarity trumps losses in that cordial relationships between states stretch right into the future.
10. Beginning in 1975, the CIA participated in the Angolan Civil War, hiring and training American, British, French and Portuguese private military contractors, as well as training National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels under Jonas Savimbi, to fight against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) led by Agostinho Neto. The CIA also collaborated with apartheid-era forces.

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