



## Balancing Act: South Africa's Foreign Policy, Peacebuilding and SDG 16 in an Era of Renewed Unilateralism

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### Abstract

South Africa has established a post-apartheid foreign policy based on the principles of peace, justice, and inclusive governance, positioning itself as a supporter of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). However, renewed unilateralism in global politics, intensified by the return of a second Trump administration, is weakening multilateral institutions and placing greater pressure on middle powers to choose between normative commitments and strategic interests. This article examines how South Africa manages this dilemma by drawing on constructivism, middle power theory, and the English School to explain how identity, international norms, and strategic interests shape foreign policy behaviour. These insights inform a 2x2 scenario planning framework in which normative commitment and strategic interest alignment operate as independent variables and the resulting scenario functions as the dependent variable. The framework is applied to three case studies: the 2014 Lesotho mediation, the 2013 Force Intervention Brigade in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa's voting behaviour in the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council. The analysis finds that South Africa most often occupies the values-interests dilemma quadrant, where normative commitments are maintained rhetorically but weakened in practice by geopolitical and economic pressures. The article concludes that South Africa must recalibrate its diplomacy to remain strategically adaptive while preserving its credibility on SDG 16 in an increasingly divided international order.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals 16, Foreign Policy, Peacebuilding, Multilateralism, national interest(s), Unilateralism

## Introduction

The *resurgence* of unilateralism in global politics, accelerated by a second Trump administration, poses a sharp test to countries that have historically championed multilateral diplomacy, international cooperation, and human rights (Mahmud 2025). For South Africa, this test is particularly direct. As a state whose foreign policy has long been rooted in the values of its democratic transition, peaceful negotiation, inclusive governance, and Pan-African solidarity, the new geopolitical climate demands difficult choices (Mlambo & Adetiba 2017: 1; Nyuykonge & Zondi 2017). The return of the Trump-era foreign policy, characterised by reduced commitment to international institutions, increased pressure on allies to align with the United States' (U.S.) interests, and transactional diplomacy, has reshaped the global arena in which South Africa operates. In this context, South Africa's ability to pursue Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which centres on peace, justice, and strong institutions, faces mounting constraints (United Nations (UN) 2015).

Since 1994, South Africa has positioned itself as a leading voice for democratic norms and peaceful conflict resolution, particularly in Africa (Mlambo & Adetiba 2017). Its foreign policy has emphasised Pan-African unity, multilateralism, and human rights. From Nelson Mandela's insistence that human rights should be the cornerstone of international relations to Thabo Mbeki's articulation of an *African Renaissance*<sup>1</sup> South Africa's global identity has been closely tied to its moral standing (Nantulya 2015). This identity has shaped its diplomatic interventions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, South Sudan, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe, often prioritising inclusive political settlements over military force, and institutional reform over regime change. South Africa's peacebuilding efforts have also extended to its engagement with multilateral bodies, including

the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement.

But this normative stance has become increasingly difficult to maintain. South Africa's voting record in the UN, its measured silence on human rights violations in allied states, and its reliance on economic partnerships with China and Russia have led to accusations of diplomatic ambiguity or selective moralism (Graham 2016; Eduard 2016). Critics argue that the country's commitment to global norms has softened under pressure, especially when economic or security interests are at stake. The current global reordering, shaped by the U.S. inward focus<sup>2</sup> and intensified great power rivalry, further complicates these choices. South Africa now faces heightened scrutiny from the Global North and its African neighbours over how it defines its values, and when it chooses to uphold them (Habib 2025). These pressures expose two recurrent dimensions in South Africa's foreign policy behaviour: its level of normative commitment to peace, justice and multilateralism and the extent to which its strategic interests align with or conflict with these principles. These dimensions are observable in practice. Normative commitment refers to the degree to which South Africa's actions reflect the values of SDG 16, as evidenced by its voting behaviour, responses to human rights violations, and engagement in multilateral peacebuilding. Strategic interest alignment reflects the influence of economic dependencies, geopolitical partnerships, and regional security priorities on foreign policy choices. Together, these indicators reveal when South Africa acts in accordance with its normative identity and when strategic incentives drive more

<sup>1</sup> *Emphasis added.* The African Renaissance refers to the normative vision advanced by Mbeki in the late 1990s, centred on African renewal through democratic governance, regional integration, cultural revival and collective self-determination. See Mbeki (1998).

<sup>2</sup> President Trump has pursued the "America First" policy (inward-focused), a set of policy ideas that prioritise the interests of the United States and its citizens above all else. It emphasises national interests in matters of trade, immigration, foreign policy, and national security. It has resulted in the U.S. partially withdrawing from international organisations and initiatives that have been the cornerstones of its hegemony, creating a vacuum that Beijing will be keen to exploit. Trump's 'America First' foreign policy could accelerate China's push for global leadership. (See Mathews, 2024).

pragmatic behaviour. This article argues that renewed unilateralism intensifies the tension between these two dimensions and that South Africa's ability to advance SDG 16 depends on how it balances normative commitments with strategic interests in this constrained environment.

To analyse South Africa's foreign policy under these evolving conditions, this article adopts the Intuitive Logics scenario planning method and applies its two axes approach to develop a 2x2 matrix that maps four contrasting diplomatic scenarios. The design is theory-informed.<sup>3</sup> The framework is built around two independent high-impact, high-uncertainty variables: (1) the level of normative commitment to peace, justice, and multilateralism and (2) the extent to which South Africa's strategic interests align with or conflict with these normative principles. In this design, the two axes function as independent variables and the resulting scenario classification serves as the dependent variable, emerging from the interaction between normative commitment and strategic interest alignment. Together, these dimensions reflect South Africa's position in the international system, whether as a principled actor grounded in the ideals of SDG 16 or as a pragmatic state adjusting to global realignments. Shifting forces, such as the United States' diplomatic pressure, the erosion of multilateral norms, commodity-linked dependencies, and regional instability, influence these variables by unsettling South Africa's traditional balancing posture. The resulting matrix provides a structured tool for assessing whether South Africa sustains principled multilateralism or moves toward interest-led diplomacy in ways that may weaken its commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 16.

To illustrate how these tensions play out in practice, the paper critically evaluates three case studies. First, South Africa's mediation in Lesotho (2014) reflects a moment of principled leadership, where

3 Constructivism explains the importance of identity and norms, which underpins the variable of normative commitment. Middle power theory highlights how South Africa navigates strategic constraints and opportunities, informing the alignment of strategic interests. The English School situates these choices within a society of states where order and legitimacy shape how values and interests are balanced. Together, these perspectives justify the two variables used in the 2x2 matrix.

constitutional order was restored through values-driven diplomacy (Deleglise 2023). Second, the deployment of the Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC (2013) under South African command signals the country's readiness to support regional stability with a military commitment, marking a strong alignment between its interests and norms (Gbaya 2015: 3-4). Third, South Africa's voting patterns in the UN, particularly its mixed positions on Syria, Ukraine, and Palestine, highlight the growing dilemma between normative consistency and geopolitical accommodation (Dent 2022). These examples offer insight into how South Africa's foreign policy evolves in an era of intensified global pressure and diminished normative clarity.

This paper makes two key contributions. First, it advances an analytical framework for understanding middle power<sup>4</sup> diplomacy under normative strain. Second, it situates South Africa's current choices within broader debates on the future of SDG 16 and the viability of values-based foreign policy in the Global South. As South Africa navigates a more fragmented and contested global landscape, its ability to remain a credible champion of peace, justice, and strong institutions will depend on how it resolves the trade-offs captured in this matrix.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it outlines the theoretical basis for the matrix, defining the key variables of normative commitment and strategic interest alignment. Second, it traces the post-1994 trajectory of South Africa's foreign policy to establish its normative foundations. Third, it presents and explains the matrix as an analytical framework. The following section applies this matrix to three pivotal case studies: Lesotho, the DRC, and South Africa's UN voting patterns, to assess how South Africa navigates the tensions between principle and pragmatism in concrete settings. These case studies are strategically selected to demonstrate how South Africa's foreign policy choices impact the advancement or erosion of SDG16 across bilateral,

4 Middle-power diplomacy refers to the foreign policy strategies employed by nations that, while not major global powers, still exert significant influence in international affairs. These countries often leverage their resources, diplomatic capabilities, and international standing to pursue multilateral solutions to global challenges, promote international norms, and act as bridge-builders between different actors (See Efstathopoulos, 2015).

regional, and multilateral arenas. The final section reflects on the risks and prospects of South Africa's diplomacy in an era of global fragmentation and declining multilateralism.

### **Theoretical Framework: Normative Commitment and Strategic Interest in Foreign Policy**

This article adopts a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis, drawing on elements of middle power theory and the English School to explain how South Africa navigates competing pressures in the international system (Efsthopoulos 2015). Constructivism is helpful because it focuses on how state behaviour is shaped by norms, identities, and social structures rather than by material capabilities alone (Jung 2019; Wendt 1992). States are not merely utility-maximising actors. They also act in ways that align with their ideas about who they are and what they represent (Wendt 1992). This is particularly important for a country like South Africa, which has historically framed its foreign policy in moral and ideological terms. Post-apartheid South Africa has pursued a foreign policy rooted in human rights, multilateralism, and African solidarity (Department of Foreign Affairs 1996). These are not simply rhetorical positions. They are integral to how South Africa defines its role in the world.

However, constructivist approaches are often criticised for underestimating the role of material interests and structural constraints (Palan 2000), which have significant implications for South African foreign policy analysis. This limitation is particularly relevant when assessing cases where economic or security interests, such as those in the DRC or the UN, have outweighed normative commitments, exposing the gaps between principled discourse and material-driven diplomacy. To address this limitation, the paper supplements constructivism with insights from middle power theory and the English School. Middle power theory highlights the role of states that, while not great powers, influence international outcomes through diplomacy, coalition-building, and norm entrepreneurship (Eduard 2003). South Africa fits this category, especially in African and global South forums. Middle powers often face constraints when normative ideals conflict with strategic imperatives such as economic stability or

geopolitical alignment. English School pluralism<sup>5</sup> is helpful here because it acknowledges that states operate within a society of states, where coexistence, order, and sovereignty are as important as shared norms (Bain 2013). This pluralist perspective highlights that tensions between national interests and international responsibilities are not always reconciled through consensus or cooperation. Together, these theoretical traditions provide the conceptual grounding for selecting normative commitment and strategic interest alignment as the two dimensions that best capture how South Africa navigates the tension between values and interests in foreign policy.

Combining these perspectives, the paper develops a framework that recognises normative aspirations and strategic calculations in foreign policy. The framework is operationalised through a 2x2 matrix based on two key variables: normative commitment and strategic interest alignment. Each of these is defined below. Normative commitment is defined as the extent to which South Africa adheres to international norms that reflect the principles of SDG 16. These include peacebuilding, multilateral cooperation, human rights, and promoting accountable institutions. A high normative commitment is evident when South Africa acts consistently with these principles, even when doing so imposes costs. This might involve leading mediation efforts, voting for human rights resolutions, or speaking out against repression. A low normative commitment is observed when South Africa avoids engagement or adopts positions that contradict SDG 16 norms, such as remaining silent in the face of regional authoritarianism or supporting governments that undermine democratic institutions. It also becomes evident in voting behaviour at the UN, particularly when abstentions or procedural objections on major human rights or peace and security resolutions weaken the country's normative stance. Normative commitment may also soften when economic or geopolitical pressures arise, including trade partnership risks, tensions related to the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) or G20

5 Pluralism emphasises sovereignty, order, and non-intervention over solidarist goals such as human rights enforcement, which clarifies why states often prioritise stability over normative consistency (See Bull 1977).

positioning, and competition for critical mineral and energy security. Because foreign policy behaviour can be interpreted differently by external actors, the framework does not treat misinterpretation as a separate category. Instead, ambiguous cases are assessed by examining whether the behaviour substantively aligns with SDG 16 principles, drawing on indicators such as voting consistency, rhetorical positioning, multilateral engagement, and the material incentives that shape or constrain South Africa's normative choices (See Tables 1 & 2).

Strategic Interest Alignment refers to whether South

Africa's material and geopolitical interests support or conflict with its normative objectives. These interests include economic partnerships, energy security, trade agreements, and regional influence. When aligned with strategic interests, actions promoting peace and strong institutions also advance South Africa's national interest. For example, supporting AU peacekeeping might reinforce regional stability and economic integration. When strategic interests conflict, acting on normative commitments may come at a cost. This can occur when taking a moral position risks alienating a key trading partner or regional ally.

Table 1. **Empirical Indicators for Normative Commitment and Strategic Interest Alignment.**

Variable	High Expression Indicators	Low Expression Indicators
<b>Normative Commitment</b>	<p><b>Regional:</b> Active SADC mediation; support for democratic transitions; constitutional restoration (e.g., Lesotho 2014).</p> <p><b>Continental:</b> Leadership in AU peace and security reforms; support for AU governance norms; backing inclusive political settlements (e.g., DRC, Burundi).</p> <p><b>Global:</b> Voting for human rights and peace resolutions in the UN; public statements condemning repression; alignment with SDG 16 in multilateral processes.</p>	<p><b>Regional:</b> Silence or passivity toward authoritarian drift in neighbouring states; reluctance to intervene when democratic norms are violated.</p> <p><b>Continental:</b> Support for governments that undermine democratic institutions; avoiding positions that challenge influential AU partners</p> <p><b>Global:</b> UN abstentions or procedural objections on key human rights or conflict-related resolutions; contradictory rhetoric; normative softening due to AGOA, G20, or great-power pressure.</p>
	<b>Aligned</b>	<b>Conflicting</b>
<b>Strategic Interest Alignment</b>	<p><b>Regional:</b> Stability outcomes that support trade corridors, energy security, and cross-border commercial interests; SADC alignment that strengthens security cooperation.</p> <p><b>Continental:</b> Participation in AU peace operations that reinforce South Africa's regional influence and security partnerships; economic complementarities through the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) initiatives.</p> <p><b>Global:</b> Voting alignment with strategic partners where consistent with SDG 16; actions that enhance trade or energy partnerships; protection of export markets in the US, European Union, and Asia.</p>	<p><b>Regional:</b> Interventions or stances that generate economic or security costs; alienation of key SADC partners; risks to regional integration.</p> <p><b>Continental:</b> Tension between peace operations and national security risks; reduced influence in AU decision-making when interests conflict with norms.</p> <p><b>Global:</b> AGOA eligibility risks; pressure from China, Russia, or the US during great-power rivalry; vulnerability linked to critical mineral competition and battery supply chain politics.</p>

Source: Compiled by the author based on reviewed literature, 2025.

Note. Empirical indicators were informed by UN voting records, South African government official communication, and SADC mediation reports, which collectively provide the documentary basis for assessing shifts in normative commitments and strategic interest alignment.

The interaction between these two variables generates four possible foreign policy scenarios. First, South Africa can pursue principled and effective diplomacy when both normative commitment is high and strategic interests are aligned. Second, when normative commitment is high, but interests are in conflict, the state faces a values-versus-interest dilemma. Third, when commitment is low, but interests are aligned, diplomacy becomes more transactional and short-term. Fourth, when both variables are weak or negative, the result is policy drift or normative decline (See Figure 1). The value of this framework lies in its ability to link these conceptual dimensions to observable indicators, enabling South Africa's foreign policy choices to be interpreted systematically rather than viewed as inconsistent or ad hoc.

### Post-1994 Trajectory of South African Foreign Policy

South Africa's foreign policy after 1994 was shaped by its democratic transition and its desire to project a new identity based on justice, reconciliation, and multilateral cooperation (Department of International Relations & Cooperation (DIRCO) 2023). The negotiated settlement that ended apartheid not only transformed domestic politics. It also gave rise to a foreign policy vision rooted in human rights, democratic governance, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts (Mlambo & Adetiba 2017). This identity positioned South Africa as a regional leader and a global advocate for a just international order.

Under President Nelson Mandela, South Africa's foreign policy prioritised moral authority and the promotion of human rights. Mandela's government viewed the international community as a partner in advancing peace and equality (Mandela 1993). South Africa's early diplomatic engagements included support for democratic transitions in Nigeria and the DRC, and firm positions against authoritarian rule elsewhere on the continent (Gbaya 2015). During the Mandela era, South Africa positioned itself as a promoter of international norms, aligning closely with international law and the UN Charter (Inglis 2009).

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idea of an African Renaissance, which aimed to promote African unity, economic integration, and institutional reform. He was instrumental in the formation of the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (Inglis 2009: 47). South Africa also took on a more assertive mediation role during this period. It facilitated peace negotiations in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, and the DRC (Gbaya 2015: 2). The emphasis shifted slightly from global moral leadership to African regionalism and institution-building. South Africa's growing involvement in SADC and AU structures reflected this shift.

Under President Jacob Zuma, South Africa's foreign policy became more complex and sometimes contradictory. Zuma emphasised South-South cooperation, particularly through BRICS and the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) dialogue forum (Sidiropoulos 2021: 412-413). However, domestic political challenges began to affect diplomatic choices. South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe is one example. Despite evidence of repression and electoral fraud, the government opted for quiet diplomacy rather than public condemnation (Landsberg 2016). Critics argued that South Africa's commitment to human rights had become selective. Strategic alliances and ideological solidarity often took precedence over normative principles.

The Ramaphosa administration has sought to reclaim South Africa's credibility in international

affairs, reintroducing the language of human rights, multilateralism, and democratic values into foreign policy discourse. Pretoria attempted to reassert itself as a moral actor and continental leader, balancing relationships between BRICS partners and traditional Western allies. This was evident in its active AU chairmanship, rhetorical support for conflict resolution, and continued engagement in regional institutions (Otavio 2021). Nevertheless, longstanding tensions in foreign policy practice persisted. Despite affirming support for human rights in principle, South Africa frequently abstained from key UN resolutions concerning Syria, Ukraine, Belarus, and China, often citing sovereignty, non-interference, or lack of consensus. Such positions raised questions about the inconsistency between South Africa's stated values and diplomatic actions. As Dent (2024) argues, the country has often adopted the language of principle while avoiding principled stands, especially in situations involving powerful allies or strategic interests. This pattern suggests that while the Ramaphosa era has marked a rhetorical shift, the substance of South Africa's human rights diplomacy remains constrained by geopolitical alignments and cautious pragmatism.

Two persistent forces have influenced South Africa's foreign policy throughout this period. The first is the country's normative identity as a post-conflict democracy that champions peace and justice. The second is the need to protect strategic interests in a changing global environment. These interests include economic ties, energy security, and regional influence. The tension between these forces has produced a pattern of mixed engagement. South Africa remains active in diplomacy and peacebuilding but is increasingly cautious in how it positions itself.

The Trump-era shift in U.S. foreign policy has sharpened this dilemma. The U.S. placed greater pressure on its global partners to align with its strategic agenda (Ubaydullaeva 2025). At the same time, it withdrew support for multilateral institutions and reduced funding for peacebuilding and development. This environment has made it more difficult for middle powers like South Africa to maintain their normative commitments. As the second Trump administration intensifies this trend, South Africa faces renewed pressure to choose between principle and pragmatism.

SDG 16 is central to South Africa's foreign policy identity because it aligns directly with the principles that shaped its democratic transition: peace, justice, accountable governance, and strong institutions. SDG 16 is not only a global commitment but also a strategic interest for South Africa. Stable, democratic, and peaceful regional environments support economic integration, reduce security burdens, and enhance South Africa's leadership role on the continent. Upholding SDG 16, therefore, strengthens both the normative foundations of South Africa's diplomacy and the practical conditions needed for regional stability. This makes SDG 16 an appropriate lens through which to assess whether South Africa's foreign policy remains consistent with its post-1994 aspirations in an increasingly fragmented world.

South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy has therefore evolved through three overlapping phases. The first focused on moral leadership and reconciliation. The second expanded into regional institution-building and peace mediation. The third has been marked by growing uncertainty and contested priorities. The challenge now is whether South Africa can still act as a credible promoter of SDG 16 in a world that increasingly rewards transactional and interest-driven diplomacy. This question is central to the scenarios developed in the next section of this article.

### **Towards a Conceptual Framework: Foreign Policy Trade-offs and SDG 16**

This section introduces the 2x2 analytical matrix used to assess South Africa's foreign policy behaviour under the constraints of a fragmented global order. The framework draws on the Intuitive Logics tradition of scenario planning, a method that has long been used in strategic foresight and is increasingly adopted in academic research for its structured and transparent approach to analysing uncertainty. Scenario planning is valuable because it anchors inference in clearly defined variables, documented evidence, and systematic design procedures (Wright and Cairns 2011). By organising high-impact uncertainties around theoretically informed dimensions, it enables the exploration of multiple plausible futures rather than a single deterministic forecast. Scholars such as Schoemaker (1995) and Bradfield et al. (2005) highlight that its academic strength lies

in combining historical patterns with theoretical framing to enhance analytical robustness. Following these principles, this article incorporates established behavioural trends in South Africa's diplomacy into the scenario design process to strengthen plausibility and reduce subjectivity.

The matrix builds directly on the theoretical foundations established in the previous sections. Constructivism, middle power theory, and English School pluralism together clarify why South Africa's foreign policy is shaped by the tension between normative identity and strategic calculation. These insights justify the selection of the two variables that organise the matrix: normative commitment and strategic interest alignment. Their conceptual meanings and empirical indicators have been defined, providing the basis for analysing how South Africa navigates the pressures of a divided international environment marked by weakened

multilateralism, renewed unilateralism, and intensified competition over influence (see Table 1).

The purpose of the matrix is not to predict outcomes with certainty but to map the range of plausible foreign policy configurations that emerge from different combinations of these variables. In doing so, it offers a structured tool for evaluating how shifts in global and regional pressures affect South Africa's ability to advance SDG 16. This includes external shocks, such as the resurgence of unilateralism in global politics, which is intensified by the policy orientation of a second Trump administration. This places growing pressure on middle powers to adopt clearer geopolitical positions. The scenarios developed in the next section illustrate how variations in normative commitment and strategic interest alignment have shaped South Africa's behaviour across regional, continental, and global cases, and how these historical patterns help inform the plausible futures captured in the matrix.

### Scenarios of Foreign Policy Alignment and Implications for SDG 16

<b>Strategic Interests Alignment</b>	<b>Aligned</b>	<b>Strategic Pragmatism</b> Foreign policy is driven by material or regional goals, with limited concern for human rights or democratic norms. Peacebuilding may occur, but it lacks strong normative framing. <i>Example: DRC Force Intervention Brigade (2013).</i>	<b>Principled Multilateralism</b> South Africa's actions are consistent with the SDG 16 goals. It engages in diplomacy, peacemaking and multilateral cooperation that also benefit national interests. <i>Example: Lesotho mediation (2014).</i>
	<b>Conflicting</b>	<b>Normative Decline</b> Foreign policy neither prioritises peace, justice or human rights, nor serves long term national interest. Engagements may appear transactional, inconsistent or passive. <i>Example: Silence on the Zimbabwe human rights violations.</i>	<b>Values vs Interests Dilemma</b> South Africa maintains a strong commitment to norms, but doing so may damage key relationships or economic interests. <i>Example: Supporting Palestine while risking U.S. criticism.</i>
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
		<b>Normative Commitment</b>	

Source: Compiled by Author, 2025.

Figure 1. Shows scenarios of foreign policy alignment and their implications for SDG 16.

This figure outlines four scenarios based on the interaction between normative commitment and the alignment of strategic interests. Each scenario represents a dominant foreign policy orientation and its likely impacts to SDG 16 (see Table 2), including peacebuilding, institutional accountability, and democratic governance.

#### Principled Multilateralism

This scenario reflects South Africa's post-apartheid aspiration to act as a norm-driven and cooperative middle power. In this configuration, strategic interests and normative commitments reinforce one another, enabling foreign policy choices that advance human rights, peacebuilding, and

Table 2. Shows foreign policy orientation and its projected impact on SDG 16.

Quadrant	Foreign Policy Orientation	Impact on SDG 16
<b>Principled Multilateralism</b>	Norm-driven, values-led diplomacy with institutional support	Strong positive effect on peace, accountability, and the rule of law
<b>Values vs Interests Dilemma</b>	Selective norm adherence constrained by external pressures	Mixed effect: reinforces values in some areas, weakens credibility in others
<b>Strategic Pragmatism</b>	Interest-based diplomacy focused on regional stability	Limited impact: stabilises conflict zones but lacks long-term institutional investment
<b>Normative Decline</b>	Passive, transactional, or ambiguous diplomacy	Negative effect: undermines the rule of law and weakens South Africa's leadership role

Source: Compiled by the Author, 2025.

Note. The table summarises the four scenarios generated by the 2x2 matrix. Each quadrant represents a distinct combination of normative commitment and strategic interest alignment, illustrating how variations in these variables influence South Africa's capacity to promote peace, justice, and robust institutions.

institutional reform. Regional and multilateral bodies such as SADC, the AU, and the UN provide the institutional platforms through which South Africa can pursue both stability and principled diplomacy. Actions in this quadrant rely on mediation, rule-based cooperation, and support for inclusive political settlements, producing a coherent alignment between South Africa's values and its regional economic and security interests. The 2014 Lesotho mediation offers a clear example. South Africa, acting through SADC, restored constitutional order by facilitating a negotiated political process, thereby supporting democratic norms while safeguarding regional stability (Deleglise 2023). This reflects a moment where moral leadership and strategic interest convergence produced a constructive foreign policy outcome. This behaviour strengthens SDG 16 by reinforcing the rule of law, promoting peaceful dispute resolution, and bolstering South Africa's credibility as a principled regional leader.

### Values vs Interests Dilemma

This scenario captures the increasing difficulty South Africa faces in sustaining its normative identity while operating in a polarised international system. In this configuration, normative commitment remains strong at the rhetorical level, especially in support of SDG 16 principles such as peace, justice, and human rights. However, these commitments increasingly conflict with strategic partnerships, geopolitical alignments,

and economic interests, resulting in a selective or inconsistent application of values. The pressures associated with renewed unilateralism intensify these contradictions. Major powers expect clearer political alignment, and deviation from their preferences risks trade consequences, diplomatic friction, or reduced access to key markets. The Russia-Ukraine war is a prominent example. South Africa's decision to adopt a non-aligned position and abstain from several UN resolutions drew criticism from Western partners, who interpreted neutrality as favouring Russia. Pretoria justified its stance in terms of sovereignty, dialogue, and its strategic considerations linked to BRICS.

A similar pattern appears in voting on Syria, Belarus, and China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims, where South Africa has avoided firm human rights positions through abstentions or procedural objections (Stremlau 2022). By contrast, South Africa has maintained consistent and vocal support for Palestine, even when this has generated tension with Western partners. This contrast underscores the selective application of values, shaped by ideological commitments, domestic political resonance, and strategic partnerships. The outcome is a foreign policy posture in which norms matter, but interests determine when and how they are applied. This produces reputational ambiguity and constrains South Africa's ability to advance SDG 16 in a consistent and credible manner.

## Strategic Pragmatism

In this scenario, South Africa's foreign policy is shaped primarily by material interests and geopolitical calculations. Normative goals are not abandoned entirely but are selectively invoked to justify actions. Engagements are transactional, and support for peacebuilding may be motivated by economic, security, or reputational concerns rather than a consistent commitment to justice. The Force Intervention Brigade in the DRC (2013) offers an example (Gbaya 2015). South Africa contributed troops and leadership in an unprecedented peace enforcement mission. While the intervention restored some stability, it did not centre on long-term governance reform or an inclusive political settlement. The focus was on neutralising immediate threats. The announcement of a phased withdrawal of South African troops in 2025, following deadly clashes near Goma, underscores the fragility of South Africa's sustained commitment to peacebuilding (South African Government News Agency 2025). Rather than reinforcing a rules-based regional order, Pretoria's response, accompanied by a sharp deterioration in relations with Rwanda and growing scrutiny of its business interests in the DRC, raises doubts about the coherence and impartiality of its regional security role (Sanderson 2025). Taken together, these patterns point to a utilitarian approach to peace and security: one that delivers tactical gains or stabilisation but lacks the consistency, institutional foresight and normative clarity required for meaningful progress toward SDG 16. Although South Africa appears to be a capable security actor, its actions do not reliably translate into long-term governance improvements or strengthened regional norms.

## Normative Decline

This scenario represents a breakdown in South Africa's foreign policy coherence. Both normative commitment and interest alignment are low. South Africa becomes reactive, avoids controversial issues, and fails to leverage its diplomatic standing. The result is increased alignment with authoritarian regimes, silence on repression, and reduced credibility in multilateral forums. This path risks turning South Africa into a passive or opportunistic actor, undermining the legacy of its democratic transition. It's quiet diplomacy in

Zimbabwe, especially during moments of political crisis, that illustrates this trajectory. Inaction or moral ambiguity diminishes South Africa's ability to defend democratic norms in the region. A similar ambiguity emerged in its neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where abstentions and procedural explanations highlighted that geopolitical partnerships took precedence over normative commitments to international law and peaceful dispute resolution. The implications for SDG 16 are negative. Weak engagement, selective partnerships, and incoherent messaging limit progress toward accountable governance, the rule of law, and peaceful conflict resolution.

Current evidence suggests South Africa often oscillates between the value-interests dilemma and strategic pragmatism quadrants. However, specific cases vary. This analytical framework enables movement across quadrants depending on the issue, region, and timing. It does not assume fixed positions. Historical examples show moments of high normative commitment, such as the 2014 Lesotho mediation, where constitutional restoration was prioritised despite political costs. There are also moments of low normative commitment at the UN, such as muted responses to crises in Zimbabwe, Syria, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. These shifts illustrate how changes in normative commitment and strategic interest alignment shape behaviour across different contexts.

In a world shaped by renewed unilateralism and global fragmentation, intensified by the foreign policy posture of a second Trump administration, the matrix provides a structured way to assess whether South Africa continues to uphold or risks drifting away from its normative foreign policy legacy. It also clarifies what is at stake for SDG 16. The following section applies this matrix to three key cases: South Africa's mediation in Lesotho, its peace enforcement role in the DRC, and its voting record in the UN. These historical patterns provide a baseline for assessing how renewed unilateralism, intensified under a second Trump administration, may shape South Africa's future ability to advance SDG 16.

## Foreign Policy in Action: Navigating Norms and Interests in a Divided World

This section applies the matrix to three case studies to evaluate how South Africa balances its normative

commitments and strategic interests in foreign policy. The selected cases, including Lesotho (2014) and the DRC (2013), as well as UN voting, offer a cross-section of diplomatic engagement across bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels. Each case is situated within a different quadrant of the matrix. Together, they illustrate how South Africa moves between principled diplomacy and strategic accommodation in a changing geopolitical environment.

### **Lesotho (2014) – Principled Multilateralism**

In August 2014, a failed coup and political crisis in Lesotho threatened to derail the country's constitutional order. South Africa intervened diplomatically as the regional hegemon and a founding member of SADC to restore stability. Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa was appointed as the SADC mediator to facilitate dialogue among political actors, re-establish the rule of law, and create conditions for democratic elections. The analysis draws on SADC mediation communiqués and the official reports of the SADC facilitator, which document the process and outcomes of the intervention (South African Government 2014a; South African Government 2014b).

South Africa's role in this intervention reflected high normative commitment. The emphasis was on constitutional legitimacy, electoral integrity, and peaceful resolution. At the same time, given Lesotho's geographic proximity and economic dependency, it also served South Africa's strategic interest in regional stability (Gbaya 2015). The mediation avoided military escalation and delivered a negotiated political solution through multilateral channels. Elections were held in early 2015, with international observers confirming their credibility.

This case aligns with the Principled Multilateralism quadrant. South Africa supported the values of SDG 16, including peace, justice, and strong institutions, while securing its regional leadership and mitigating reputational risks. The coordinated use of diplomacy, institutional legitimacy, and peaceful settlement mechanisms demonstrates how values and interests can be mutually reinforcing in addressing regional crises.

### **DRC (2013) – Strategic Pragmatism**

In 2013, South Africa joined the UN-authorized Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) under MONUSCO in eastern DRC. The FIB was an unprecedented

shift in peacekeeping practice. Unlike traditional operations, it had an offensive mandate to neutralise armed groups (Mutisi 2016: 32). South Africa provided troops, equipment, and command leadership. The intervention was successful in achieving its short-term military objectives. It reduced armed violence and helped stabilise a volatile region.

However, the operation focused on military goals rather than institutional reform or political transition (Karlsruud 2018). The FIB relied on offensive operations to defeat M23, but it did not establish a pathway for post-conflict reconstruction, inclusive governance, or justice mechanisms. Karlsruud's study, *The UN at War: Peace Operations in the New Era*, shows that regional troops in the FIB acted effectively only when military action aligned with their governments' national interests, and cooperation declined once operations no longer served these interests (Karlsruud 2018: 91). This highlights the structural limits of peace enforcement missions that depend on politically diverse contributing states. South Africa's involvement reflected these constraints. Its decisions were shaped by regional security concerns, defence industry interests, and its desire to maintain influence in the SADC and within the UN system. The intervention delivered a temporary reduction in violence, which aligns with selected SDG 16 indicators, but it did not advance the deeper goals of institutional accountability, inclusive governance, or the rule of law. The resurgence of conflict and the phased withdrawal of South African troops in 2025 further illustrate the short-term and interest-driven character of this approach.

This case fits within the Strategic Pragmatism quadrant. South Africa aligned its security interests with a form of multilateral engagement. However, its normative commitment to long-term peacebuilding and institutional accountability was limited.

### **United Nations Voting Behaviour (2019-2024): Values vs Interests Dilemma**

South Africa's voting record at the United Nations illustrates how tensions between normative commitments and strategic interests shape its foreign policy behaviour. South Africa abstained from several high-profile human rights resolutions during its recent voting cycles, including the 2019 UNGA vote on Belarus (UN Watch 2018) and the

2022 resolution suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. It also abstained from the 2022 resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (South African Government New Agenda 2022). These decisions were often justified in terms of sovereignty, procedural objections, or the need for inclusive dialogue; however, they also reflected deeper strategic pressures linked to relations with Russia, China, and BRICS partners (Dent 2022; Stremmlau 2022).

South Africa also adopted strong normative positions on Palestine (South Africa Government News Agency 2024). It consistently condemned Israeli settlement activity and defended Palestinian self-determination. This contrast highlights the selective application of normative commitments. Human rights and accountability are vigorously defended in cases that align with South Africa's ideological identity and domestic political resonance. However, South Africa adopts more cautious or ambiguous positions when core geopolitical or economic interests are implicated, particularly in relations with strategic partners.

The emergent pattern is one in which norms are invoked but not consistently defended. This selective behaviour reflects the dilemma of values-interests at the heart of South Africa's foreign policy. The examples used in this section are illustrative rather than exhaustive, but they demonstrate a clear trend. South Africa's voting behaviour often calibrates principle and pragmatism in response to global power asymmetries. This inconsistency weakens its stance as a norm entrepreneur and limits its credibility on SDG 16 indicators related to accountability, transparency, and the rule of law.

### **Risks and Prospects in an Age of Strategic Fragmentation**

South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy has been shaped by an enduring tension between its normative identity and strategic imperatives. This tension is now heightened by growing geopolitical fragmentation, the resurgence of unilateralism, and the erosion of multilateral institutions. The return of a Trump-style U.S. foreign policy increases the pressure on middle powers to take sides, align diplomatically, or risk exclusion. South Africa is not immune to this dynamic.

The case studies show that South Africa shifts between quadrants depending on the issue and

setting. It remains capable of principled action, particularly in the region, but increasingly defaults to strategic pragmatism or cautious neutrality in multilateral spaces. This behavioural pattern reflects both external pressures and internal political uncertainty. Coalition politics, domestic economic strain, and contested ideological direction all limit South Africa's ability to speak with a unified foreign policy voice.

Looking ahead, the risks are twofold. First, inconsistency may erode South Africa's credibility and influence in shaping global norms. Second, reliance on transactional partnerships may weaken its ability to lead regional peace and governance agendas. If South Africa abandons its post-apartheid commitments to justice, democracy, and multilateralism, it risks falling into the Normative Decline quadrant. This outcome would undermine its role as a bridge between North and South and limit its ability to advance SDG 16.

However, there are also prospects for renewal. South Africa remains a respected voice in African diplomacy. Its historical legitimacy and institutional capacity position it to lead within SADC and the AU. By reaffirming its commitment to consistent norm-based diplomacy and aligning that commitment with carefully selected strategic interests, South Africa can move closer to the Principled Multilateralism quadrant. Doing so will require more explicit policy articulation, stronger regional partnerships, and investment in institutions that anchor democratic values in foreign policy. The matrix presented in this paper provides a tool for navigating this complexity. It helps identify risks, clarify trade-offs, and outline realistic options. Most importantly, it reminds us that foreign policy is not only about diplomacy and defence. It is also about what kind of state South Africa aspires to be in the world and what values it chooses to defend in an age of increasing uncertainty.

### **Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations**

South Africa's foreign policy stands at a critical crossroads. The pursuit of normative ideals such as peace, multilateralism, and justice must be continuously weighed against shifting global realities and national strategic interests. This paper

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has shown that South Africa’s historical identity as a peacebuilder and promoter of SDG 16 remains relevant; however, it is increasingly shaped by the complexity of contemporary geopolitics. The 2x2 matrix framework illuminated how South Africa’s policy choices move across four possible scenarios. Each scenario reflects a different alignment between its values and interests. While the country often aspires to principled multilateralism, in practice, it frequently moves between values versus interests dilemmas and strategic pragmatism.

The case studies, ranging from continental peace initiatives to quiet diplomacy with Zimbabwe and ambiguous alignments with Russia and China, demonstrate the tensions South Africa must

manage. These tensions intensify in a period of renewed unilateralism, further strengthened by the foreign policy posture of a second Trump administration, where global diplomacy is more transactional and multilateral institutions are weaker. This presents a dual challenge. South Africa must resist adopting pragmatic, values-light approaches. At the same time, it must avoid being sidelined by powerful states that are increasingly suspicious of non-alignment and normative advocacy.

Domestically, political pressures within the government, economic vulnerabilities, and limited public engagement in foreign affairs weaken South Africa’s diplomatic coherence. Internationally, closer ties with authoritarian regimes, motivated by economic or geopolitical interests, risk undermining its credibility as a norm entrepreneur and peace promoter. To maintain its leadership on SDG 16, South Africa will need a more calibrated foreign policy that recognises strategic realities while still protecting its normative foundations. Recommended actions include:

Redefine zone-specific diplomacy by focusing value-driven leadership on regions where South Africa holds leverage and legitimacy, such as SADC and the AU.

Revitalise its role as a norm entrepreneur in multilateral forums like the AU, UN, and BRICS by advancing governance reforms and conflict resolution efforts.

Diversify international partnerships while maintaining clear red lines on human rights, democracy, and institutional accountability.

Strengthen internal coherence by aligning domestic political priorities with consistent foreign policy positions that support SDG 16.

Ultimately, South Africa’s foreign policy in the Trump 2.0 era will be judged not only by the alliances it forms but also by whether it can navigate a divided world while remaining committed to the principles that have shaped its global identity since 1994. The matrix framework developed in this article offers a valuable tool for assessing future decisions. It can help ensure South Africa’s diplomacy remains rooted in peace, justice, and inclusive global governance.

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