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## Implications for South Africa's foreign policy beyond the Lesotho crisis

*by Anthoni van Nieuwkerk<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

On 22 September 1998, a SADC military task force, consisting of soldiers from South Africa and Botswana, entered Lesotho ostensibly to quell a "coup d'etat in the making" and to restore law and order in the country. This intervention was accompanied by an orgy of destruction, looting, and violence which resulted in 39 casualties. However it also succeeded in putting Lesotho's rebellious soldiers back in the barracks, thereby allowing the country's political parties to restart negotiations around the disputed 1998 election outcome. Following this intervention severe criticism from the media and commentators was launched particularly at the South African government for "poor planning" and a "flawed execution" of the intervention. This paper briefly examines the implications of this development – South Africa's first cross-border military excursion since 1994 – for its future regional foreign policy.

### South African foreign policy: principles and decisionmakers

By way of background, it is necessary to re-visit some features of the new ANC government's foreign policy. Between 1993 and 1994, the ANC announced seven principles which "ought to guide the conduct of South Africa's new foreign policy":

1. A belief in and preoccupation with human rights;
2. A belief in the promotion of democracy world-wide;
3. A belief that justice and international law should guide relations between nations;
4. A belief that international peace is the goal to which all nations should strive;
5. A belief that South Africa's foreign policy should reflect the interests of Africa;
6. A belief that South Africa's economic development depends on growing regional and international economic cooperation; and
7. A belief that South Africa's foreign relations must mirror a deep commitment to the consolidation of its democracy.

#### <sup>1</sup> **Anthoni van Nieuwkerk**

*Anthoni van Nieuwkerk is presently the research director of the Foundation for Global Dialogue. He has a Masters degree in political science from the Rand Afrikaans University, and research interests include the theory and practice of foreign policy, political and economic developments in Southern Africa, and the dynamics of political transition in South Africa. He has co-edited three books and a number of articles on aspects of international affairs and foreign policy.*

The leitmotif governing foreign policy has been labelled "universality", essentially the opening of foreign and local doors in the same reconciliatory spirit that has characterised its own domestic transformation. Only recently Foreign Minister Nzo stated that "the vision behind South Africa's foreign policy was the attainment of a state of peace and prosperity which would allow South Africa to outgrow its designation as a developing country". The noble intentions and the affirmation of certain values in its foreign policy notwithstanding, their realisation and implementation in practice has proven to be an ongoing dilemma and a vexing problem. In the view of some analysts, foreign relations could be said to be lacking the necessary broad orientation and strategic purpose. In fact, the visionary and enlightened principles in South Africa's foreign policy can be seen as forming a coherent belief system or worldview. However, there seems to be less consensus among key decision-making elites about the substance and goals of policy. But what has proved to be much more problematic is the processes by which policy is made.

Who then makes foreign policy? Earlier this year Deputy Foreign Minister Pahad identified the key players as the offices of the president and deputy president, senior civil servants in relevant government departments, and cabinet. He pointed out that "there is still not a system whereby major foreign policy issues are taken to parliament. It is absolutely necessary to have parliamentary debate on broad policy issues such as South Africa's role in peace support operations in Africa" (emphasis added). In general terms, the locus of foreign policy decision-making under the new government can be identified as consisting of the offices of the president and deputy president, cabinet and the senior structures of the ANC, such as its national executive committee. The departments of foreign affairs, trade and industry and defence make major policy recommendations. Note that Foreign Affairs Minister Nzo recently claimed that his department "may not always draw attention to itself, so that other actors on the foreign policy stage may seem to be doing all the running". The central implementation unit in the deputy president's office is tasked with the coordination of all policy, while the national intelligence co-ordinating committee (NICOC) is tasked with co-ordinating intelligence for use by the state and cabinet. The chair of NICOC is also the national strategic intelligence advisor to the president. It appears that other government departments and parliament play a lesser role. The influence of non-state sectors on foreign policy (such as business, labour, the informed public and civil society organisations) has been given a new impetus but still remains unclear.

## Foreign policy in action: South Africa and the recent Lesotho crisis

Having briefly described the principled and institutional foreign policy set-up, we now come to South Africa's foreign policy in action. It is important to understand the Lesotho context. Unlike the impression created by some media

reports, Lesotho is not a country in a state of peace and harmony, thrown into chaos as a result of the South African-led military intervention. As Southall and Petlane make clear, the politics of post-independence Lesotho was – and still is – characterised by ongoing struggles between the dominating influence of the military, the monarchy, and political parties, against the background of economic impoverishment and dependence on South Africa. As the addendum to this paper shows, since 1970 Lesotho has suffered a number of unconstitutional political developments including coups d'état. Developments following the 1998 elections therefore must be seen and interpreted against this background.

How did South Africa become part of the unfolding Lesotho crisis, and at what point after the 1998 elections did its decision-makers decide to send in the military? South African involvement should perhaps be understood in the regional context. It became part of a SADC initiative in 1994 which was set up to reverse the constitutional coup carried out by Letsie III, the BNP and sections of the military. Since then, it has kept a close eye on developments in Lesotho. When opposition protests to the outcome of the 1998 elections became disruptive, senior South African government leaders (Mbeki, Nzo and Modise) intervened on behalf of the SADC troika (South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana) and secured agreement from Lesotho's ruling LCD and the main opposition to hand over the election dispute to the adjudication of SADC and Lesotho's IEC. Justice Pius Langa from South Africa's constitutional court was then appointed to lead the commission of investigation into alleged election fraud. Unfortunately, for reasons that are still unclear, the release of the commission's report was delayed, which allowed opposition players in Lesotho to activate sinister agendas which involved the military. Between late August and September 17, when the report was finally handed over, the stage was set for a mutiny among soldiers of the Lesotho Defence Force, and despite Modise's repeated interventions on the ground, the situation in Lesotho rapidly descended into chaos.

Against this background, the SADC troika decided to take action. Two strategies were followed. First, as mentioned above, SADC had already established a "committee of experts" to investigate the claims of election fraud. This initiative was also followed by mediation attempts. In this, South Africa took the lead. Secondly, when chaos erupted, South Africa was asked to take direct action. When Buthelezi (acting president at the time in the absence of both Mandela and Mbeki) was requested, in desperate communiques from prime minister Mosisile, to come to the (military) assistance of the Lesotho government, he launched into a process of consultation. This included the Lesotho government and King, and South African cabinet ministers, government departments and intelligence advisors.

After having obtained clearance from president Mandela, deputy president Mbeki, and the other members of the SADC troika, it was decided that in the event of a final breakdown of negotiations between the ruling LCD and its opposition, a

military operation would be launched. This then happened on 22 September.

Buthelezi explained that the purpose of such intervention “was to neutralise a brewing military coup which would have prevented the majority party, the opposition and the monarchy from performing their respective constitutional roles and would have been an equal threat to them all”. Foreign minister Nzo also stated that “we were not willing to stand by and see certain groups in Lesotho refuse to explore all peaceful means of dispute resolution (while) winning enough time to violently overthrow the government”.

This paper cannot analyse in any detail the developments around the SADC military intervention (called operation Boleas) essentially because not enough is yet known. This should be reserved for later. However, as the fog clears, some impressions can be noted. First, the operation succeeded in securing Lesotho’s strategic installations (fuel depots, the Highland Water Project, key buildings, and so on) from being taken over or destroyed by the rebels. Secondly, it did succeed – after a number of gun battles – from containing the impact of the armed rebels. It also succeeded in bringing stability to the country, which has allowed the political parties to resume negotiations around issues of governance, under the mediation of the SADC troika. However, the operation failed to prevent and control the orgy of looting and destruction of property in central Maseru. The operation also suffered from a serious lack of accurate intelligence regarding the movement and capability of the armed rebels. This resulted in a number of casualties. The Botswana and South African contingents also failed to coordinate their movements to maximum effect. This could have prevented some of the destruction that followed the intervention. Reports of human rights abuses by SADC forces – if true – are cause for great concern and need to be investigated.

## Implications for South Africa’s regional and Africa policy

Following this brief analysis, I would like to conclude with three broad suggestions.

### On South Africa’s Africa policy

Recent policy statements from the South African government, and in particular from the key foreign policy makers – the deputy president’s office and the foreign ministry – make it clear that the visionary concept of the “African renaissance” will guide and inform South Africa’s orientation towards Africa. However, critics assert that this concept remains, as yet, too vague to serve as a precise foreign policy tool. Indeed, it appears that South Africa’s emerging Africa policy remains underdeveloped and prone to *ad hocism* (responding to situations as they arise). In particular, as illustrated by the Nigerian crisis of 1996 and the Zairian/DRC crisis of 1997-8, South Africa still struggles to find the right blend of strategies concerning its commitment to other African nations. This impairs the development of a proper foreign policy orientation: should South Africa develop

a non-aligned, isolationist or coalition-building orientation? Similarly, there is a lack of clarity around South Africa’s role/s in the region and further north: should it be the regional leader, protector, peacemaker, or hegemon? And finally, should its foreign policy objectives include a commitment to regional (through SADC) and continental (through the OAU) peace-making and peacekeeping, and if so, when and how should it be operationalised?

If it is true that South Africa will not be able to escape the call for a committed, coalition-building African orientation and regional leadership role, then it seems logical to conclude that South Africa ought to adopt, as a matter of urgency, a policy on peace operations. As we know, the relevant government departments over the past few months have developed such a draft policy. This white paper now needs to be published for public comment and put before parliament for discussion and adoption. Once such a policy is in place, South African involvement in any future peace mission – whether of a non-military or military nature – will benefit from careful planning and be executed with a clear mandate, rules of engagement, and exit strategies.

### On South Africa and the SADC

I believe South Africans should realise that SADC is contested terrain. Essentially an intergovernmental organisation responsible for promoting and deepening sustainable development of the region, it appears caught in a slow process of reorganisation. This has thrown up a number of contradictions and has produced leadership tensions, disagreement over priorities, and confusion around its security role. The Organ for Politics, Defence and Security is in limbo and the deadlock around its operation should be resolved as soon as possible. Indeed, if SADC is to survive as a regional developmental project, leaders in the region – both within governments and the intellectual community – ought to meet to clarify the road ahead. At this juncture, there appears to be a desperate need among African and other people to understand what the future for southern Africa holds. This future looks rather bleak and clouded by the growing war in central Africa. Should SADC de-prioritise its economic cooperation and developmental focus for the time being, and rather zoom in on resolving the violent conflict in the Great Lakes region? Those in favour of SADC’s developmental focus should not allow the organisation to be dominated by security concerns only. Civil society organisations should lobby the South African government to reinforce SADC’s basic principles which are contained in chapter three of its 1992 founding treaty, part of which reads as follows:

SADC and its member states shall act in accordance with the following principles:

- a) sovereign equality of all member states;
- b) solidarity, peace and security;
- c) human rights, democracy, and the rule of law;
- d) equity, balance and mutual benefit;
- e) peaceful settlement of disputes.

## On South Africa and Lesotho

In my view, the South African government is doing good work by mediating, under the SADC umbrella, the talks between political formations in Lesotho on resolving the political crisis. This needs to be acknowledged and supported. Civil society organisations should in addition assist, where appropriate and in response to requests from the people of Lesotho, in the various processes of democratisation. The democratisation agenda is a complex and long-term one, which includes reform of the electoral system, the future role of the military, the role and functions of the monarchy, and the question of rebuilding the country's economy. South Africans have experience with these issues and can, I believe, make a contribution. This should be offered in a spirit of comradeship.

## Rough chronology of developments in Lesotho

- 1966 Independence
- 1970 Unconstitutional seizure of power by Jonathan's BNP
- 1982 SADF invasion of Lesotho to attack ANC
- 1986 Military coup (Lekhanya)
- 1991 Military coup (Ramaema)
- 1993 Multiparty general elections. BCP emerges as ruling party
- 1994 Constitutional coup by Letsie III, military and BNP
- 1994 Following SADC initiative the BCP is restored to power (SADC mandate to SA, Botswana and Zimbabwe: to resolve the conflict in Lesotho)
- 1997 Prime Minister Mokhehle forms breakaway party (LCD) which takes over
- 1998 LCD wins May general election. Mosisile becomes prime minister
- July Opposition complains of widespread and systematic election rigging. SADC briefed on the situation
- Aug Mbeki, Nzo and Modise secure agreement from LCD and opposition to hand over the election dispute to the adjudication of SADC and Lesotho's IEC. Justice Pius Langa appointed to lead the investigation. Protestors take up outside royal palace. Stayaway enforced. Power struggle and mutiny in Lesotho Defence Force (LDF)
- Sept 12 Modise attempts to talk to mutineers, but with no success
- Sept 5-15 SADC Summit in Mauritius. No firm decision on Lesotho
- Sept 17 SA hands over much-delayed Langa commission report to Lesotho ruling party and opposition (Interim report was handed over Aug 28)
- Sept 16-18 LDF senior officers assume effective control of the country after having forced 28 senior officers and head of army to resign
- Sept 19-20 Prime Minister Mosisile asks acting president Buthelezi for assistance and military support. Ongoing talks between ruling LCD and opposition break down over 'unacceptable' venue
- Sept 12-22 SA consult internally as well as with SADC structures in order to prepare a plan to manage the growing conflict in Lesotho. Consequently, SA talks to Lesotho govt and simultaneously prepares military intervention force and moves into position
- Sept 21 SA, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique representatives meet and confirm the SADC mandate that action (incl military intervention) will be taken in the event of a coup in Lesotho. In Lesotho a point of no return is reached: Military in chaos, general lawlessness, Radio Lesotho taken over by protestors, general crisis of governance
- Sept 21-22 SADC Operation Boleas launched
- Oct 2 Multi-party talks resume under chair of Mufamadi representing SADC.



Private Bag X018, Umhlanga Rocks 4320, South Africa

Tel: +27 (31) 502 3908 • Fax: +27 (31) 502 4160

e-mail: [info@accord.org.za](mailto:info@accord.org.za) • website: <http://www.accord.org.za>

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