

Hegemon or Pivot?: debating South Africa's role in Africa

These perspectives were presented at a public debate held during August 2003, organised by the Centre for Policy Studies, in conjunction with the Open Society Foundation of South Africa. The panelists were Dr Adam Habib of the Centre for the Study of Civil Society at the University of Natal and Dr Chris Landsberg of the Centre for Policy Studies, Johannesburg.

Perspective 1: South Africa: Hegemon or Pivotal State?

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Let me begin by thanking the organisers of this event, and in particular the Centre for Policy Studies, for inviting me to share my thoughts on the matter at hand. Indeed there are too few forums in the new South Africa, which encourage public discourse on the issues of national, continental and global concern. Of course we do have closed forums – forums in universities, academic institutes, and governments departments that address these issues. But we need to bridge these organisational divides, not only because they allow for better deliberation on the matters at hand, but also for the fact that they lend to the process of creating an informed layer of public servants and citizenry.

At the risk of being presumptuous and speaking on behalf of Chris, may I say that we are not going to speak for too long. Our comments should be treated as a set of introductory statements to a broader discussion here on South Africa's post-1994 track record in the region, and what its role should be in both the sub-continent and the continent as a whole.

This event has its origins in a debate that took place on the John Perleman chat-show on SAFM sometime in June. In that debate, Chris who was relatively more positive about South Africa's post-1994 engagement in Africa, suggested that the country should reject a hegemonic role since it is already being perceived as the bully-boy of the region. I protested, arguing that the analogy is inappropriate in particular because it assumed that the interests of regional elites were the same as those of its citizenry.

Under pressure to advance a counter analogy, I settled on 'Batman' to emphasise the necessity of firm intervention in order to create a secure environment in the collective interests of the region's citizens. In retrospect, however, I think this was a mistake, not because I have changed my mind about South Africa's role in the region, but rather because the resort to analogies is inappropriate. It unnecessarily simplifies the

issues and diverts attention from the substance of the debate. And, I therefore think its better not to resort to analogies in this intellectual exchange.

So, what is South Africa's role in the region? What should it be, and what has it been?

The literature on this subject is deficient in two important respects. First, much of this literature tends to overly simplify and caricature the options available. Take for instance an article published before 1994 by Rob Davies in which he suggested three scenarios of South Africa's role in the region: a 'South Africa first approach, an integration under South African hegemony, and a non-hegemonic and regional cooperation model. Similarly, the title of an otherwise well thought out two-part article by McGowan and Ahwireng-Obeng poses South Africa's option as between hegemony and partnership?

The problem with both pieces, other than the romanticism implicit in some of their recommendations, is the assumption that these are mutually exclusive options. But any careful study of hegemonic behaviour, in both global and regional contexts would demonstrate that partnership is as much a modality of engagement for hegemons as is other more aggressive interventions. The literature thus implicitly leads to caricatures of what the hegemonic and partnership models involve.

A second serious weakness in this literature is what I call the ideologically constraining effects of left wing and liberal orthodoxy. Much of the literature emanating from progressive quarters (those associated with the ANC and those left of it) romanticise partnership and engagement and refuse to consider other options on the grounds of 'political incorrectness'. Let me use an example to demonstrate this.

In a chapter to a book to be published in a couple of weeks, John Daniel, Varusha Naidoo and Sanusha Naidu maintain approvingly that South Africa's political elites have behaved (with one exception) in a non-coercive, non-hegemonic way in Africa. Ignoring the accuracy of this conclusion, given the fact that these scholars have not considered South Africa's role in the political negotiations around regional economic relations, one has to be struck by two arguments in their conclusion.

First, they remain critics of South Africa's intervention in Lesotho, even though they admit that it facilitated "a period of unprecedented post-independence stability, during which a general election has been conducted without controversy, and even more remarkably, without any challenge to the legitimacy of its outcome'. Second, they remain avid supporters of the partnership model, rejecting power politics and coercion in favour of negotiations and persuasion, even though they opposed to the implementation of this 'quiet diplomacy' approach in Zimbabwe. This is the irony of the Zimbabwean situation.

So what should South Africa's role be? The discussion in recent months has become framed between two options: Hegemon versus Pivotal State. Let us begin with a definition of these two terms. A hegemon is 'a global or regional leader in military, political, economic and often cultural affairs'. A pivotal state has been described as one that 'is so important regionally that its collapse would spell trans boundary mayhem... A pivotal state's economic progress and stability, on the other hand would bolster its regions economic vitality and political soundness'. Let us be clear about

these definitions. The latter, the one on the pivotal state, is a mere description. The former, the definition of the hegemon, stresses the term 'leadership'. That is, it goes beyond mere description to emphasize the role of agency.

Every hegemon has to be a pivotal state. But it has to be more. Hegemons not only aspire to leadership, are not only endowed with military, economic and other resources. They necessarily have to have political and socio-economic visions about their trans-national environments, and a political willingness to implement those visions. If that vision is one of security, stability and development, as is often the case, then the hegemon undertakes to underwrite the implementation of these goals. Again, that does not mean that it does not have partners in this enterprise. It often does. But it takes responsibility in the last instance to ensure that the features of its vision are operationalised in the region its sees as its sphere of influence.

South Africa's role should be one of a hegemon. Simply being a pivotal state, an important one, means that we have rejected the role of leadership. And that is not in our, nor the regions' interest. Instability in this region, and as a result development, and democracy, will only truly be addressed, when a regional hegemon is prepared to underwrite these objectives. And so long as that does not happen, our national economic goals will remain compromised. For as President Mbeki has so often said: "the fate of democratic South Africa is inextricably bound up with what happens in the rest of the continent".

Critics of this view often argue against a hegemonic role for South Africa on three grounds. First, they maintain that hegemonic behaviour on the part of South Africa will antagonise elite interests in the region. But perhaps this is what is required if stability, security and development is to be realised. Moreover, some regional elites already perceive South Africa in negative terms in particular because of South African capital's phenomenal expansion into the continent. Second, they maintain that South Africa does not have the institutional capacity, both in military or bureaucratic terms, to sustain such a role. This is true, but the answer is not to eschew the role, but rather to develop the capacity. Finally, they maintain that South African elites will use their hegemonic role to further narrow national interests. This is of course true. McGowan and Ahwireng-Obeng's case study of South Africa's role in political negotiations around regional economic integration more than demonstrate the dangers of this. But as the United State's relations with Western Europe in the post-World War II period indicate, national interests of hegemons can under certain circumstances coincide with those of particular regions.

So how has South Africa performed thus far?

On the one hand, it has demonstrated hegemonic traits. It has been instrumental in fashioning a continental vision in the notion of the African renaissance and subsequently NEPAD. It has been at the forefront of initiatives to develop the continent's institutional capacity especially around the African Union. It has on occasion, particularly in the case of Lesotho, had the political will to intervene aggressively to address hotspots that could destabilise the region. And, through both its public and private business sector, it has been at the forefront of investment and economic development in the continent.

But it has also demonstrated trepidation at performing its hegemonic obligations. This is most obvious in the case of Zimbabwe, where national developments have spun out of control and fostered instability in the region as a whole. Instead of developing a more aggressive intervention (and that need not involve military engagement), the Mbeki strategy involved a mix of multilateral and bilateral initiatives governed by the imperatives of quiet diplomacy. But there is also other evidence of South Africa avoiding a hegemonic role. In regional conflicts in both the DRC and Burundi, more aggressive interventions may have provided breakthroughs earlier on. And finally, South Africa has avoided regulating the economic expansion of its business sector on the continent with the result that some of its companies have been involved in activities that directly contradict and undermine the national project of continental stability, security and development. In retrospect, a review of South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy has to conclude that it has been schizophrenic, displaying hegemonic behaviour patterns on some occasions, and eschewing these on others.

But so long as we do not take on a hegemonic role, and meet our hegemonic responsibilities, stability, security and development cannot be sustainable on the continent or even in the country. It is important in this environment, defined by both the phenomenon of globalisation and marginalisation, for us to think outside the box. Concerns about South Africa prioritising its national interests to the exclusion of those of the region are very real. And these need to be addressed without rejecting our obligations. We could, for instance, support and encourage the development of another regional hegemon, perhaps Nigeria, for nothing makes a hegemon more sensitive to regional interests than a competitor looming on the horizon. Also, we need to develop our civil societies, both nationally and regionally to serve as a check on our political elites. But a hegemonic role has to be undertaken by South Africa if we are committed to the realisation of stability, security and development in South Africa, in Southern Africa, and in Africa. Lesotho is the example we need to learn from. Zimbabwe is the example to avoid.

Perspective 2: South Africa, the Pivotal State

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Many observers, both inside and outside of government continue to struggle to make sense of South Africa's role and identity in Africa. The Republic has variously been described as a hegemon, a regional 'superpower', and the regional leader. Adebajo and Landsberg has argued that South Africa could best be described as a potential hegemon¹, or more properly a pivotal state² both at home and abroad.

¹ See Adebajo and Landsberg, 'Nigeria and South Africa as hegemons', in Mwesiga Baregu and Christopher Landsberg, *From Cape to Congo, Southern Africa's evolving emerging security challenges*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder: Colorado, 2003.

² A few years go, it became fashionable in US foreign policy circles to talk of 'pivotal', or as they saw it, 'key' or 'anchor' states; those states the US wanted to play influential roles in Africa. We are concerned here more with South Africa's regional role and potential, and negate the idea that South Africa has a pre-ordained leadership.

A Pivotal State?

A pivotal state is one that in comparison to its neighbors is, *ipso facto*, a powerful state. From such relative powerfulness flows the capability to influence other states, events and regions. The pivot state is influential in a region because the internal development in such a state, or lack thereof, is so significant that it typically holds major implications for states in its immediate region. Thus, if such a state were to experience positive developments this will typically have a positive demonstration effect on the region. Conversely, if such a state experiences negative developments on the home front, this negatively impacts the broader region.

To be sure, the idea of the pivot is subjective and could be contrasted here with the idea of hegemony. While a regional hegemon is a powerful state that sees itself as capable of laying the law down to others through its dominance, the pivotal state is one that acts in the regional interest in collaboration with others. The pivotal state works in collaboration with others, builds partnerships with and amongst its neighbors and is instrumental in the construction of regional societies. The pivotal state influences its neighbours through broad economic and political linkages.

A pivot is, for better or worse, also a country that is a model. The pivotal state is delicately poised between potential success and possible failure: it has the potential to work a significant beneficial or harmful effect on its region. While such a state might be stronger and more developed vis-à-vis others, it also suffers from its own significant socio economic challenges, such as deep inequalities and massive levels of poverty. If conflict results from its own weaknesses, it could easily spill over to other states in the region.

It has significant demonstration effects on a region: if it experiences growth and positive development, it impacts the region positively; if it experiences negative growth and development, its successes lead to push factors in other countries.

The pivotal state naturally plays a key role in global and regional negotiations; it negotiates cosmopolitan norms, values, principles and mechanisms for regional, continental and global governance.

South Africa: the pivot

South Africa is a pivotal state because in spite of the significant socio-economic challenges at home caused by decades of apartheid and white minority domination, it is a resource rich, middle-income country that became a democracy ten years ago, and its own political and economic development holds geo-political significance for the African continent. Since 1994 it has sought to balance local needs and obligations with regional and international responsibilities. The country's strategic geo-political importance has been borne out by its role in initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU).³ South Africa has positioned itself as a key player in resolving issues of interest to the global South. The

³ See Department of Foreign Affairs, *The Operationalisation of the AU and the Implementation of NEPAD Programmes, Placing Africa on a Path of Lasting Growth and Development*, Pretoria, May 2002.

Republic is playing an important role in the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) where one of its major objectives will be to ensure that resources are optimized in achieving the objectives of NEPAD. The government has committed itself to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through NEPAD.

Pretoria has rejected any hegemonic ambitions. Some of the reasons for this anti-hegemonic posture include the fact that South Africa's democracy is still in its infancy and many understandably feel that the country's energies should be directed at resolving its many domestic challenges. There is an understandable reluctance to treat other African countries in heavy-handed, patronising, or interventionist ways. Government realizes that apartheid South Africa's intrusions into neighbouring states are still fresh in the memory. Government is hard pressed to use the countries economic power and political influence in a constructive fashion.

The Government did articulate a post-settlement Africa role; but it is based on building partnerships and stitching together alliances with African states. It rejects go-it-alone postures and instead emphasizes multilateralism. Government has recognized that it is in South Africa's national interests to help strengthening democratic and peacemaking institutions in sub-regions, such as SADC and ECOWAS and the continent more broadly, for example its role in the establishment of the AU. To do this South Africa needs to show humility and it certainly needs the help of others. While South Africa does possess *capacity* to provide cross-border assistance, such capacity is both modest and limited; indeed, there has been a general tendency to overestimate South Africa's capacities and leverage. In short, South Africa is scarcely in a position to play the role of regional policeman.

While there is already a high degree of interest, commitment and involvement among many groups in South African society – NGOs and Chapter 9 institutions – in aiding democracy and peace efforts in other African countries, many such initiatives are ad hoc. Doing this under the banner of a 'hegemon' will only fuel greater suspicions about South Africa's agenda.

Domestic constriction

South Africa is a pivot, not hegemon, because of its precarious domestic characteristics. South Africa remains a deeply uneven society with significant development challenges: it has both first world and third world characteristics. Serious disparities exist in the society given that the Republic has one of the most unequal distributions of income in the world, as measured by the Gini coefficient (0,57 in 2000).⁴ This disparity has a racial basis, with white South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ranked 45th in the world while black South Africa's GDP is ranked 180th. Because of the past system of apartheid, this country has unprecedented levels of structural violence; it will take decades, if not centuries to overcome these structural legacies. Gross disparities also exist in access to basic services such as clean

⁴ Statistics South Africa, Earning and Spending in South Africa, 2002; Also, for an assessment of the poverty debate in South Africa, see Steven Friedman and Ivor Chipkin, A poor voice?: The politics of inequality in South Africa, Centre for Policy Studies, Research Report no 87, Johannesburg, August 2001.

water, sanitation, education, health and welfare, employment and economic opportunities.

Conclusion

South Africa's ambitions for involvement in Africa is clearly hampered by its own resource constraints, the aggressive and detrimental role played by the apartheid state in the past through destabilization, and suspicions about South Africa's agenda negates any role of hegemon this country may wish to play. South Africans, both state and non-state actors, are better advised to consider an approach and posture that is sensitive, shows modesty, and learn to engage others in the region as partners, not cronies to carry out Pretoria's wishes.
