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NATIONAL INTEREST

# Foreign policy leaves no room for regional freedoms

Despite its chunky title, the government's recently released "Framework Document on SA's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment" lays out a state-of-the-art consideration of the global, continental and regional context within which the country's domestic objectives are to be pursued. It's a far cry from the elegant simplicity of the Mandela era, when in a 1993 article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, the former president wrote that "human rights will be the light that guides our foreign affairs". Mandela emphasised that SA



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would be "at the forefront of global efforts to promote and foster democratic systems of government". The new document captures the huge advances made during Thabo Mbeki's reign, especially in pursuit of the "African agenda", and seeks to build on them in the current context. It is a huge improvement on

the foreign policy white paper of 2011, released during Jacob Zuma's administration, entitled "Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu". Liberal use of the term "ubuntu" or "batho pele", mixed with badly constructed restatements of foreign policy practices, did not make for an insightful or instructive directive to those of us on the ground. However, this is not to say these two principles do not appear in the current document: through much of the text "ubuntu" serves as the fulcrum for the balancing act between the idealism of Pan-Africanism, South-South co-operation and multilateralism and the realism

of pursuing domestic interests, especially economic ones. Quoting several contributors to the question of national interest, such as University of California political scientist Miroslav Nincic and US diplomat George Kennan, a clear argument is made that the purpose of external affairs is inextricably bound to the preservation of domestic ideals. In the SA case, this flows out of our constitution. One of SA's starting points has been our standing in the global arena, which has seen us admitted to global structures such as the Group of 20 and serving several times on the UN Security Council, while having a

powerful presence and influence in Africa. However, given the sleaze with which our government continues to associate itself, and display of Afrophobia by our society and state, how much longer can we be guaranteed such privileges? The document deservedly recognises the sterling work carried out by our diplomatic corps. In its follow-through, the department of international relations & co-operation will need to tackle the complex issue of its human resources. Topmost is the frustration of career diplomats whose paths are blocked by the constant appointment of undeserving political appointees.

It is clear that foreign policy is not the sole remit of the department, as the document emphasises the "whole of government" approach in pursuit of foreign policy objectives, with the department providing a framing, coordinating and technical expertise role. There is no seceding and no unilateral declarations of independence from policies that are meant to serve the pursuit of national interests – a principle the DA-led Western Cape government would do well to heed, as would national, provincial and local government structures led by the ANC. Recognising the emergence

of nonstate actors, a revised version of the document should analyse these in greater detail. For example, while citing reports of the World Economic Forum, it does not look at the critique of this body as a gathering of elites taking positions that erode the sovereignty of national states. Similarly, factoring in more centrally the role of global and local civil society and labour movements would enhance its analysis of the current environment. A set of nonstate actors the authors would do well to incorporate in the document are intellectuals, the media, cultural activists, faith-based leaders,

individual power brokers, the private sector generally and influential families. Few diplomats are equipped to transit between the official channels and these broader societal players, where significant power is located. International relations & co-operation minister Naledi Pandor needs to be applauded for having placed this critical issue in the public arena. The public needs to respond by engaging with the issues raised and sending their responses to the department. ● Abba Omar is director of operations at the Mapungubwe Institute.