

A MISTRA Discussion Paper

Defining the National Interest: South Africa's Dilemmas

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INTRODUCTION

Africa is at a geopolitical crossroads. The changing global landscape—marked by rivalry between militarily powerful states, trade wars between economic rivals, and the rebalancing of power and influence between the countries of the world—is creating uncertainty and volatility. Multilateral institutions of the rules-based international order established after World War II have been undermined and weakened, the transatlantic alliance is unravelling, and the security guarantees that underpinned the liberal international order cannot be taken for granted any longer. Countries all over the world are reassessing their foreign policy priorities as they take stock of these developments.

A major factor in the calculation of many states is the rise of China, which is closing the gap on the US as the world's largest economy. On the other hand, the second Trump administration came to power in 2025, on the back of a promise to American voters to put American interests first, and has rapidly dispensed with the constraints of multilateral cooperation, in favour of a transactional, bilateral America First foreign policy that is also trying in its own way to come to terms with the geopolitical complexities facing the US¹. But even states that do not have the military might of the US, or the economic weight of China, are demonstrating that power is no longer concentrated in the hands of the few. According to Caromba and Omar (2022:429), Russia, Japan, India, Brazil, Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Nigeria and Rwanda are examples of states that have become more assertive in their pursuit of regional influence. In such a world, states can utilise their comparative advantages to exert influence in foreign relations in ways that serve their purposes. The most recent example is that of Iran which, in its recent war with the US, has leveraged its chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting crucial supply chains and so impacting on the global economy.²

There is a lack of consensus among domestic constituencies in South Africa on what these developments mean for the country, and what strategies are necessary to navigate them. One view is that South Africa's long-established, traditional partnerships with Western countries, particularly the US, must be preserved at all costs. This perspective, held by many in the political and liberal business establishment, is driven by the argument that South Africa is economically dependent on Western partners for investment, job creation, and access to their markets. Others argue that South Africa should not be beholden to its traditional partners in the West, that the country has started to diversify

¹ [The Meaning of 'America First' Foreign Policy - The National Interest](#)

² [How the Iran Conflict Is Disrupting Global Supply Chains - Oxford College of Procurement and Supply](#)

its trading partnerships and should intensify efforts to further do so. What is clear is that the US factor looms large and is creating an existential crisis for South African authorities and this is reflected in the public discourse and in political analysis alike.³

This discussion paper evaluates the debate. It lays out key considerations that should inform South African decision-makers' choices about the country's national interests. This is a timely debate, as there is clearly contestation in the body politic about which trade-offs, if any, will advance South Africa's interests. This paper starts by acknowledging and assessing the key considerations identified in the *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment*, published by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation in 2022⁴. Thereafter, it identifies the key strategic factors South Africa should consider in formulating a grand or overarching strategy, considering the country's geography, and its military, political and economic positioning, as well as the needs of its people. Finally, the paper proposes some recommendations for the country as it navigates its national interests in the current era.

DEFINING AND DEBATING SOUTH AFRICA'S 'NATIONAL INTEREST'

The ideal of a consensus-driven 'national interest' is strategically ambitious, especially in a country still struggling with unresolved divisions of class, racial, and gender inequality, and sharply divided about how to address the legacy of apartheid. But South Africa, with all its imperfections, must face the rest of the world in an organised and coherent way if it is to maximise its advantages. Thus, a conversation on how it does so, and how it defines its national interests, must be undertaken, and should involve the various constituencies that are vying for influence in the debate.

In 2022, South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) published a *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment*. According to the document, South Africa's national interest can be defined as the protection and promotion of its national sovereignty and constitutional order, the wellbeing, safety and prosperity of its citizens, and a better Africa and world. The *Framework Document* was timely because it provided South Africa with a lens through which to view the global environment. It categorised South Africa's national interests into four domains:

³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-03-21-navigating-the-us-sa-relationship-crisis-means-performing-a-delicate-geopolitical-balancing-act/>

⁴ https://dirco.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/sa_national_interest.pdf

- South Africa's **political interests**, which are to maintain the country's sovereignty and defend the constitutional order that underpins the country's democratic dispensation;
- Its **security interests**, which are to ensure the safety of its citizens;
- Its **human development interests**, which are to ensure the well-being of its citizens; and
- finally, **its economic interests**, which are to ensure that the country can enhance its prosperity and productive trade relations with other nations.

It was also seen as being in South Africa's interests to support and be an active role-player in global and regional multilateral institutions, advocating for the values on which its own constitutional order is founded, and for adherence to international law. The *Framework Document* makes the point that the security and development of the African continent are indispensable for the security of South Africa; it emphasises that all these interests are interdependent and must be pursued in a balanced and principled manner.⁵ South Africa's *National Interest Framework Document* is a necessary and welcome intervention because it provides strategic direction for South Africa's foreign policy in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. Scholarly in its departure point, the *Framework Document* draws on international relations theory to frame the concept of 'national interest'.⁶

Moreover, South Africa's *Framework Document* goes a step further by recognising and foregrounding South Africa's anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle legacy. It argues that the transformation towards an equal, just and inclusive polity and economy is unfinished business that remains at the heart of the state's responsibilities.⁷ In addition, the *Framework* can be credited with being pragmatic in asserting that South Africa requires the broadest possible set of allies to achieve its goals. South Africa sets out to achieve peace through 'active non-alignment', and by promoting dialogue and diplomatic solutions over the use of force in addressing conflicts⁸.

⁵ See Section 6.3, p. 9 of the *National Interest Framework Document*

⁶ See Section 5, p.5 of the *National Interest Framework* document. After outlining several theoretical approaches, the paper states that the approach informing it is an adaptation of the approach advocated by political scientist Donald Nuechterlein who broke down National Interest into four categories: defence interests, economic interests, world order interests and ideological interests.

⁷ These points were made by Dr Naledi Pandor, who was the Minister of DIRCO at the time the *Framework Document* was published: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-08-02-south-africas-engagements-with-the-world-are-informed-by-our-national-interest/>

⁸ South Africa has been lauded by some for invoking the memory and strategy of the Non-aligned Movement, which was active during the Cold War period, through its refusal to choose sides in inter-state conflicts. The notion of 'active non-alignment' is gaining currency in global south circles as this article highlights: <https://www.businessday.co.za/bd/opinion/2024-07-22-jorge-heine-sa-foreign-policy-and-active-non-alignment/>

However, the resonance of the *National Interest Framework Document* must be assessed in the context of a growing chorus of voices to the left and right of the political spectrum. Some South Africans, impatient with the slow pace of change, argue that the post-apartheid Constitution has failed to facilitate the radical changes needed to reverse the structural inequalities in South Africa. At the other end of the spectrum, some conservative interest groups resort to narrow identity politics, espousing anti-immigrant sentiment, and denting South Africa's Pan-Africanist credentials. Some, who purport to be mobilising in the name of white Afrikaners, are emboldened by the emergence of right-wing forces around the globe and claim that South Africa's constitutional democracy is being subverted by 'reverse racism': a reference to the country's affirmative action policies.⁹ The Trump II administration has gone to great lengths to ostracise South Africa, and Trump has not only repeated several times a discredited claim that white Afrikaners are the victims of 'genocide' in South Africa, but his administration has also made provision for thousands of Afrikaners to settle in the US as refugees. These polarised standpoints among South Africans reflect a lack of consensus on the kind of society that South Africa is striving to be, and on how to get there.

A limitation of the way the *Framework Document* frames South Africa's national interests is that it does not clarify what trade-offs may be required to ensure that the country navigates the geopolitical tumult it faces. Whilst offering necessary and useful signposts, including the values that drive South Africa's foreign policy, it does not provide a vivid, bold contemporary register of South Africa's needs, capabilities, deficiencies and goals; nor does it signal to domestic constituencies the parameters within which it intends to engage external actors in pursuit of its objectives. Thus, the South African government was initially unable to deliver a coherent response to ultimatums communicated by several unofficial delegations returning from talks with Washington insiders after Trump's return to office. A narrative that white Afrikaners were the targets of crime, especially through farm attacks, served to advance the narrative that the US should sever diplomatic ties with South Africa. There was pressure on South Africa to distance itself from countries that the US regarded as adversaries, including China, Russia and Iran. Another US demand was that SA should not apply any legislation or policies that conflicted with US government policy to US firms operating in South Africa. These included what the US refers to as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) or affirmative action policies, land reform policies, and other policies which the US administration argued unfairly targeted White people, leading

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/08/trump-cuts-aid-to-south-africa-over-racial-discrimination-against-afrikaners>

to the administration introducing measures for the resettlement of White Afrikaner ‘refugees’ in the US.¹⁰

The strained relationship with the Trump administration caused the South African government to proceed with caution in trying to maintain an amicable relationship with it, not least because it wanted to avoid the impact of the US’s imposition of punishing tariffs on many South African exports.¹¹ On the other hand, the uncertainty of its relationship with the US encouraged South Africa to deepen trade partnerships with other countries and regions of the world. South Africa is the European Union’s largest trading partner in Southern Africa. In March 2025, as the US was turning up the pressure on South Africa, even expelling the country’s ambassador, the EU announced a \$5billion investment package into South Africa to fund green energy projects and vaccine development.¹² South Africa also doubled its efforts to consolidate its trade relationship with China, and is exploring further opportunities with countries in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America in a move the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) dubbed a ‘strategic adaptation’ to the US posture.¹³ Some observers, looking for the silver lining, argue that the withdrawal of US donor assistance and the impact of US tariffs could potentially act as a catalyst for African countries to cooperate more closely with each other, particularly around trade through the African Continental Free Trade Agreement.¹⁴

TOWARDS A GRAND STRATEGY FOR SOUTH AFRICA

According to Caromba and Abba Omar (2022:428), a grand strategy can be defined as the long-term pattern of choices and trade-offs that states make when choosing how to employ their military, diplomatic, and economic resources towards their national goals. In developing a grand strategy, it is necessary to understand four things (Caromba and Abba Omar, 2022):

First, what are the key features of the international context in which the state is situated? Second, what are the long-term interests and goals that the state wishes to achieve within that environment? Third, what are the various resources at its disposal that it could use to achieve those interests? And

¹⁰ Shortly after taking power, Trump announced his intention to provide refuge for white Afrikaners, codified in one of several orders from the White House targeting South Africa: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/addressing-egregious-actions-of-the-republic-of-south-africa/>

¹¹ <https://www.thedtic.gov.za/south-africas-response-measures-to-the-us-tariffs/>

¹² <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-to-invest-5bn-in-south-africa-after-us-aid-withdrawal/a-71915894>

¹³ [South Africa’s Strategic Adaptation to U.S. Tariffs: Advancing National Interests through Policy and Strategy – The Department of Trade Industry and Competition](#)

¹⁴ <https://saiia.org.za/in-the-news/financing-africa-forward-summit-30-tariff-offers-opportunity-for-intra-africa-trade/>

fourth, what are the trade-offs and sacrifices that the state should consider when choosing how to employ its finite resources in pursuit of goals?”¹⁵

‘Grand strategy’, like the ‘national interest’, is a contested and somewhat problematic concept as it is centred on the coordinated actions a state can take to realise the objectives of the people it claims to represent. It has been criticised for simply being a mirror of political and business elites’ anxieties about their waning influence on the global stage and the resulting responses of military and diplomatic posturing.¹⁶ In reality, few states operate with such unity of purpose; they are subject to diverse and sometimes conflicting pressures from contending loci of influence, including the bureaucracy, executive and elected bodies. Moreover, actors in these bodies may align with, or be influenced by, one or other political or ideological viewpoint, making the very idea of a single grand strategy a simplification of reality.

Nevertheless, the notion of a ‘grand strategy’ is a compelling one since it captures the register of choices that states face when they engage others in the sphere of international relations. Much theorising around the concept exists, but ‘grand strategy’ in the world of diplomacy-speak and international security refers to a comprehensive framework for how a state uses its resources to achieve its long-term national interests and objectives, given the geopolitical realities facing it.¹⁷ Developing a proposition for a grand strategy for South Africa requires an assessment of the country’s comparative advantages, along with the opportunities it can exploit. A sense of the constraints and risks facing the country completes the picture.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SOUTH AFRICAN ‘GRAND STRATEGY’

The first strategic consideration that South Africa must consider is its location and its geography, including its natural resources.¹⁸ The country was once considered by some to be the gateway to Africa, located as it is on the southern tip of the African continent, with access to both the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.¹⁹ Others have argued that, historically, the claim of South Africa being a gateway has never been fully justified and that the African continent has always had multiple points of contact and

¹⁵ Caromba, L. and Abba Omar, Y. “Conclusion: A New Grand Strategy for South Africa, an African institution-builder” (pp.427 -449) in Caromba, L. and Abba Omar, Y (eds) 2022. *Reflections on Africa’s Place in the World*

¹⁶ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/it-was-grand-but-was-it-strategy-revisiting-the-origins-story-of-grand-strategy>

¹⁷ Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy’ in *Security Studies* 2018, Vol.27, No1. 27-57. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073#d1e1396>

¹⁸ <file:///C:/Users/sandy.africa/Downloads/Occasional-Paper-121.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://saiia.org.za/research/south-africa-as-africas-gateway-a-perspective-from-business/>

engagement with external players.²⁰ Whatever is believed, this distinction has been overshadowed over time, with the development of improved infrastructure, particularly ports and transportation networks, and digital connectivity across multiple African countries, leading to a situation where there exist multiple economic hubs with which the rest of the world engages. This is seen by some analysts as good for the continent as a whole, creating opportunities for the continent.²¹ For now, South Africa's location remains important in terms of maritime trade traffic between the western and eastern hemispheres, and between countries of the Global North and South.²² But major powers, in trying to outmanoeuvre each other, have their eyes set on alternative sea routes: the Northern Sea, which is experiencing significant melting of its ice due to climate change, is being eyed by both Russia and the US²³. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative, has steadily plotted a path of infrastructure projects over both land and sea to ensure that its economic and trade needs are met in the coming decades²⁴. A stabilisation of the situation in the Middle East could mean safer passage through the Red Sea and Mediterranean, and less need for trade to circumnavigate the entire African continent. In fact, China, the US, Middle Eastern countries and others are investing in the infrastructure necessary to support these alternative trade corridors, including railways and ports, in central Africa and in Southern Africa, through routes that bypass South Africa²⁵. South Africa needs to think strategically about the advantages and disadvantages offered by its geography and location, and invest in leveraging the opportunities presented. One of the advantages is that South Africa is not geographically located in the theatre of any of the major interstate conflicts unfolding globally. The risk in being too lax about this situation is that the country has not adequately prioritised its security and defence needs, including securing its porous borders. Many security sector analysts and policy observers constantly assert that the military is underfunded, leaving the country in a poor position to project a credible defensive, let alone offensive posture²⁶. To its advantage, South Africa enjoys friendly relations with its SADC neighbours and a level of stature given its relative economic dominance in the region. It can therefore leverage its location as a space of relative peace for investment, provided it can ensure that it remains a secure space, both from within and without, and can provide the necessary infrastructure and policy space to promote economic development. In this context, the state will have to urgently

²⁰ <https://thoughtleader.co.za/why-south-africa-is-not-the-worlds-gateway-to-africa/>

²¹ <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/growing-africas-industrial-corridors-seizing-the-manufacturing-opportunity-2024-10-08>

²² <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/positioning-south-africa-as-guardian-of-the-cape-route>

²³ <https://www.dfwworld.org/arctic/>

²⁴ <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/the-belt-and-road-initiative-what-impact-on-china-and-the-global-economy>

²⁵ <https://defenceweb.co.za/sa-defence-sa-defence/sa-could-be-defenceless-without-intervention-in-the-sandf/>

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address the vulnerability suggested by claims that South Africa's security institutions may be heavily infiltrated by criminal cartels.²⁷

A second strategic consideration for South Africa, in formulating a grand strategy to reflect its national interests, is its ability to grow its economy to ensure the wellbeing of its fast-growing population, currently sitting at over 60 million people. This entails having the infrastructure, energy resources, industries operating at scale, and human capital necessary to energise the sluggish economy. The South African apartheid economy was founded on a mineral-energy complex, and analysts say that this has metamorphosed into a mineral-energy-financial complex.²⁸ Although it is relatively strong in comparison to most African countries, South Africa has a small, open economy, which makes it vulnerable to shocks in the global economy.²⁹ The country is heavily dependent on imported goods to activate its industrialisation, which has been sluggish for decades. It is still taking stock of the impact of the tariff barriers imposed by the Trump administration, which threaten a substantial share of its markets, and which could result in job losses in the country's fragile economy. South Africa's strategic advantage lies in its holding of a substantial portion of the world's platinum resources, as well as substantial deposits of critical minerals sought by industrialised countries.³⁰ However, low tertiary skills levels in South Africa have resulted in underdeveloped capacities for the beneficiation of these minerals, resulting in the country being unable to fully maximise its command of these resources. Fortunately, the government has factored this into its strategic planning.³¹ In addition, labour market trends are shifting, with technological change and artificial intelligence presenting both opportunities and risks.³² In a nutshell, South Africa is unable to pursue a strategy of isolationism in its economic development and urgently needs to find optimal locations in global value chains in order to maximise its potential and fuel its economic growth.

²⁷ At the time of writing, two official probes were underway: the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry established by the President of the Republic, and an ad hoc parliamentary Inquiry; both were looking into allegations of political interference in the affairs of security institutions and claims that these institutions were infiltrated by criminal networks.

²⁸ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/new-south-african-review-5/south-african-economy-the-mineralsenergyfinance-complex-redubbed/69889BC0F641BFA5B73BA1253C82990A>

²⁹ <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/attaining-economic-growth-must-be-sa-obsession>

³⁰ <https://afripoli.org/south-africas-new-critical-minerals-strategy-promises-and-paradoxes>

³¹ <https://www.dmre.gov.za/mining-minerals-energy-policy-development/operating-mines/beneficiation-economics>

³² <https://unu.edu/article/resistance-futile-south-africa-must-urgently-adapt-new-age-artificial-intelligence>

A third strategic consideration for South Africa as it develops a grand strategy is how to facilitate peace and stability at both regional and global levels so that South Africa can pursue its own survival and prosperity. South Africa's military capabilities pale in comparison with those of major powers or even comparable middle powers, even on the African continent.³³ In a time when war clouds are hanging over much of the globe, and military expenditure is on the rise, South Africa will have to consider what its strategic options are to ensure its sovereignty, and what this would look like for a country of its means. The fact that South Africa's defensive capabilities have been depleted and undermined through underfunding means that, in the immediate future, the country's best option will be to leverage tools that support peace processes like mediation, peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding, as well as avoiding confrontation. It also means that South Africa must tread carefully and not alienate any of its 'traditional' allies or partners, whilst striving to widen its circle of allies. In this context, remaining within the extended BRICS bloc of countries is an important strategic choice. It will give South Africa a wider set of strategic options for pursuing its material interests. But it would be foolhardy for South Africa to deny that BRICS's political orientation will be shaped by the range of ideological actors who are part of it. South Africa, if it wants to retain the currency of being a champion of human rights, will have to satisfy itself with advocacy on the issue, in other fora and not in the context of the BRICS+, which increasingly accommodates countries with very different political cultures to its own. This reality is one South Africa is alive to, and it has been interpreted by some analysts as moving away from its neoliberal positioning to a more assertive and independent posture.³⁴

A fourth strategic consideration that South Africa must consider for its grand strategy is the ability to maintain a stable and inclusive environment in which the population feels invested in the future, able to participate freely in the political, economic and social life of the country. After 30 years of democracy, whilst many gains have been made, many fissures and contradictions have not been addressed. The lack of a common sense of purpose among South Africans has resulted in them pulling in different directions around burning questions such as the ownership and structure of the economy, the distribution of wealth, race relations, gender-based violence, language and cultural rights, immigration, growing urbanisation, and the quality and cost of basic services. On top of that, environmental degradation caused by climate change has rendered the most vulnerable of the

33 Heitman, H. R. (2025) 'South Africa's declining military capability', *The Round Table*, 114(4), pp. 525–527. doi: 10.1080/00358533.2025.2514775.

34 Alden, C., & Schoeman, M. (2025). "Being Africa's BRIC(S): South Africa's foreign policy turn from 'Neo-Liberalism' to the 'New Era'". *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 32(1–2), 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2025.2503212>

population even more vulnerable. Whether or not South Africans can mutually agree on what is in their collective interests will be crucial to their ability to navigate a complex world.

ALIGNING NATIONAL INTERESTS WITH CURRENT REALITIES

Developing an approach to promoting and realising South Africa's national interests will not be an easy task. It will require South Africa to constantly review its assumptions about the emerging and future world, and to have a long-term vision of how to prepare for such a world. This will be the responsibility of leaders of the future as the inevitable handing over of the baton from one generation of South African leaders takes place. South Africa would do well to anticipate some of the traits and competencies that will be required of future generations of leaders around the world and on the continent, and to prepare its own leaders accordingly. On the African continent, South Africa will encounter leaders who are engaging with the transactionalism that is currently driving decision-making. It should therefore not be surprised when some of the postures taken by these leaders do not resonate with its own values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To present a coherent face to the world and pursue its national interests with gravitas, South Africa will have to do the following:

- South Africa must strengthen and defend its constitutional democracy and its integrity. These are the bedrock necessary for the distribution of power in the politically diverse society that South Africa chose to become at the dawn of its democracy. The provisions for representative and accountable institutions, an independent judiciary, the freedoms articulated in the Bill of Rights, among others, are the very reasons that South African can agree to disagree so volubly about the strategies that must be pursued to make the country inclusive and just. This is an asset that must be preserved and protected from all forms of elite and sectarian capture, criminality and corruption and indifferent and poor-quality service from state institutions that are meant to unleash opportunities for inclusion and wellbeing of the citizens.

- South Africa must define the greatest challenge or challenges facing its people and decide what it wants to do about them and within what timeframes. For some, the greatest challenge is poverty; for others, it is inequality or crime and corruption. For South African women, the biggest threat is undoubtedly the ever-present threat of sexual violence. South Africa needs to take a hard look at itself and decide which problems are so essential that they constitute a threat to the survival of the nation. The recently adopted Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2024-2029 could be the basis for such a determination; it may require the undertaking of policy reforms to address the challenges.³⁵ But this is not enough; a clearer vision of what the country envisages as its future must be articulated. In 2012, government adopted a National Development Plan, which represented a vision of the kind of society envisaged for the next generation of South Africans. As plans unfold to develop an update of this vision, it will be prudent to frame the plan in a manner where what the country wants is clearly framed against how its external relations will help to achieve this.
- South Africa must not be forced into taking sides in the great power competition unfolding. Instead, it should map out clearly its strategic relationships and be able to define who it regards as allies and, if appropriate, who it sees as competitors. It must be clear about what its vulnerabilities are and what it stands to lose or gain, depending on the decisions it takes. It must be clear about how it will relate to major powers, to 'middle powers' and to small states, as well as define its approach towards various regions and interest blocs of the world. Underlying the approach in mapping these strategic partnerships will be questions like: What do they want? What does South Africa have that they want, and conversely, what do these countries have that South Africa wants or needs? What are South Africa's ambitions or visions for the relationship? And what capabilities does the country need to achieve the above?
- It is unlikely that South Africa will get far unless South African political and business elites form a compact based on clear agreements on how these challenges are to be addressed. This will be a complex process, in which there will have to be trade-offs about what various domestic constituencies are prepared to sacrifice. The fact that South Africa currently operates under a coalition government forces political parties to find common ground on issues where they previously were divided, can be leveraged to this end. But this is a temporary solution. It remains to be seen whether South Africans will be able to build consensus around shared values and goals.

³⁵ The Government of National Unity partners have adopted the so-called MTDP ([MTDP 2024-2029 .pdf](#)) as their programme for 2024 – 2029, a positive sign that there is growing consensus about what constitutes the national interest.

The much-touted National Dialogue was meant to provide the basis for such a social compact to emerge.³⁶ However, it remains to be seen how effective it will be.

- Whilst remaining true to the goals of Pan-Africanism, South Africa must realise that the countries on the continent are equally in a fight for survival. Under these conditions, other states may prioritise their own interests. It must therefore strengthen the multilateral institutions of the region, including the AU and people-to-people ties, a necessary condition if Africa is to speak with one voice in reconfiguring multilateral institutions like the UN. South Africa should proactively engage its regional neighbours to ensure that it does not prosper in an increasingly volatile global environment at the expense of more vulnerable states. Instead, it should develop mutually beneficial strategies to mitigate the effects of industrial decline, redefine the development agenda for the region, and explore regional value chains that can bring prosperity to the Southern African region³⁷. South Africa should also use its soft power to encourage governance reforms but it will only be able to do so if it can demonstrate that its own house is in order. A crucial step towards this would be fast-tracking the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area.
- South Africa must also continue its relations with the countries and regions of the Global South, and work with them to push for recognition of the multipolar world it operates in and to establish enduring relations beyond its traditional partners. South Africa can also take comfort in the respect it has gained for its principled stance in its ICJ case against Israel. This stance has been supported by many countries of the Global South, such as the Hague Group of countries, which is committed to promoting international law and justice in support of the people of Palestine. South Africa must strengthen its defence and peacekeeping capacities. The steady defunding of the military that has happened over the years must be reversed. This is particularly relevant because the recent past has shown that the age of power through displays of hard power is not over. This has been demonstrated in conflicts in Russia-Ukraine, Gaza, US-Venezuela, Sudan and the DRC. The recommendations of South Africa's 2014 Defence Review must be reappraised. In addition, Parliament must give the support necessary to ensure that South Africa develops and projects credible deterrence capabilities, and the capacity to support regional stabilisation, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions when required.³⁸

³⁶ After a shaky beginning, the proposed 'National Dialogue' saw many organisations rallying behind it as an opportunity to put their demands for improvements in governance and services to the authorities.

³⁷ These articles suggest how this could be done: <https://www.tips.org.za/research-archive/trade-and-industry/itemlist/tag/Regional+value+chains>

³⁸ <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/new-defence-review-needed-to-tackle-widening-sandf-funding-and-capacity-gaps-2025-03-07-1>

CONCLUSION

Whether South Africans can agree on what is in the national interest remains to be seen. And yet, a robust, adaptive, and inclusive definition of South Africa's national interest is essential for shaping a coherent foreign policy embedded in a grand strategy. South Africa's *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment* is a solid step in the right direction. It is a comprehensive anchor for positioning South Africa's foreign policy in a sober understanding of changing global realities and, at the same time, an acknowledgement of South Africa's past and the struggle waged for freedom. As such, the *Framework Document* reflects South Africa's commitment to equality, solidarity, human rights, racial and social justice and a rule-based international order. However, the *Framework Document* stops short of de-layering the various obstacles and risks that stand in the way of South Africa realising its national interests and identifying specific strategies that could assist in addressing these risks. This is needed for the provision of leadership and direction to the contesting constituencies currently embroiled in a debilitating argument about which strategies will serve South Africa best. But for there to be consensus on the national interests, South Africans must develop a common vision of their future and resolve how they are going to get there. The rapidly changing global environment and shifts in domestic politics call for a critical reassessment and deepening of the *Framework*. Strengthening the *Framework* with clearer priorities, actionable strategies and inclusive dialogue will be key to ensuring its relevance and impact.

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Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2022. *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment* ([sa_national_interest.pdf](#) downloaded 18 May 2026).