

UBUNTU DIPLOMACY? EXAMINING FOREIGN POLICY PREFERENCES IN SOUTH AFRICA

National policy documents suggest South Africa's international engagements are shaped by a commitment to multilateralism and a desire to build solidarity and co-operation among the Global South countries. But what is the public's attitude towards foreign policy? *Steven Gordon, Benjamin Roberts and Jarè Struwig* take a look at national interests, government's foreign policy evaluation, and foreign policy preferences.

The recent White Paper on Foreign Policy advocates pursuing an active engagement in world affairs, while building African unity and contributing to the economic, political and social renewal of the continent.

The National Development Plan (NDP) regards such an approach essential if the country is to achieve its national interests, which include addressing shared challenges of underdevelopment in the Global South, promoting global equity and social justice, and reforming international institutions.

But does the public support an active engagement of the nation in foreign affairs? What do South Africans believe should be the strategic focus of foreign policy? And do they feel the state is performing well in promoting the country's national interests?

The 2013 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) tried to answer these questions by including a module on foreign policy. SASAS is a nationally representative, annual survey series designed to understand the underlying values of the South African public older than 15 years towards issues of national importance. A total of 2 739 South Africans were interviewed as part of the study.

What is in the national interest?

The results suggested a majority of South Africans rejected isolationism and did not believe the best interests of the nation were served by keeping the affairs of the world at a distance. When asked if they agreed or disagreed whether it was best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs, four-fifths (80%) of the public said yes.

To understand which foreign policy goals South Africans want the government to pursue, respondents were asked to rate nine possible foreign policy goals as very important, somewhat important, or not important at all.

The respondents who stated a goal should be 'very important' were then asked to rank the different objectives to determine relative priorities. The goals generally fitted into

three broad categories: domestic wellbeing and prosperity; global justice or humanitarian assistance to people in other countries; and security.

South Africans placed a strong emphasis on several goals relating to security of domestic wellbeing.



From the 2014 rankings shown in Figure 1, it was apparent South Africans placed a strong emphasis on several goals relating to security of domestic wellbeing. The top two ranked foreign policy goals were 'protecting the jobs of South African workers' (74%) and 'promoting economic growth' (68%).

Two-thirds (67%) assigned high importance to 'controlling and reducing illegal immigration' – an issue that has domestic as well as security implications.

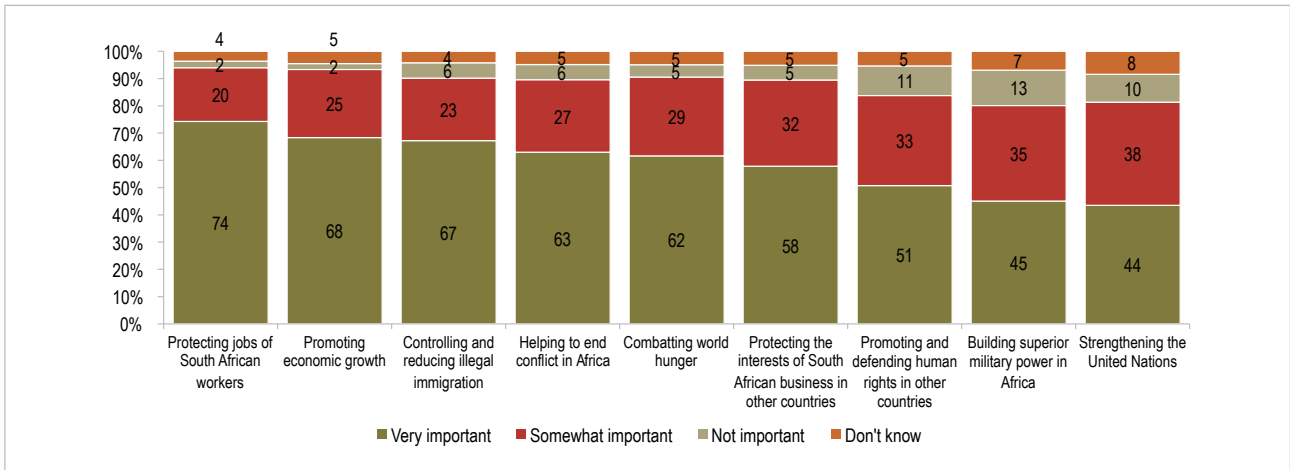
Slightly lower ratings were offered in relation to altruistic or humanitarian goals focused on assisting people outside the country. In 2013, 63% declared 'combatting world hunger' as very important, while an equivalent share deemed as critical the mixed altruism-security goal of 'helping to end conflict in Africa'.

In contrast, only 51% of South Africans said 'promoting and defending human rights in other countries' should be a very important goal of the country's foreign policy, placing this on a lower rank than the largely domestic goal of 'protecting the interests of South African business in other countries' (58%).

Far greater doubt was expressed in relation to the military security goal of 'building superior military power in Africa' and the multilateral justice item 'strengthening the United Nations'.



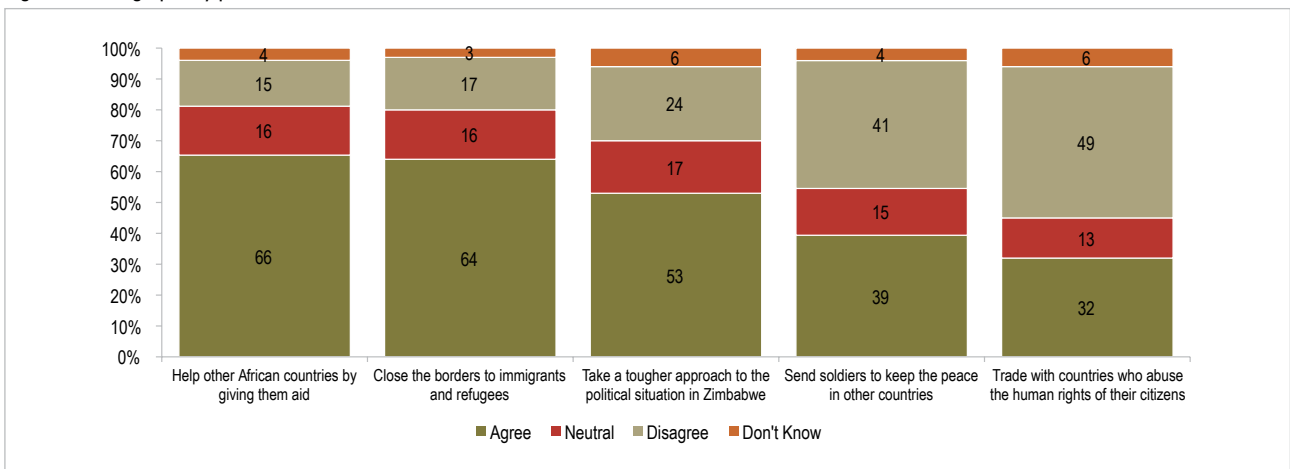
Figure 1: Importance of national goals for foreign policy



Note: Data is weighted to nationally representative of the adult South African population.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2013

Figure 2: Foreign policy preferences




Note: Data is weighted to nationally representative of the adult South African population.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2013

Foreign policy preferences

The survey also included a set of five questions intended to provide insight into the preferences of the mass public to international economic policies, such as trade relations, development assistance and immigration, in addition to views on peacekeeping operations and diplomatic relations with other countries. Responses were captured using a five-point agreement scale, presented in Figure 2.

The public tended to offer critical evaluations of South Africa's relations with Zimbabwe.



Views on Zimbabwe

One of the more salient foreign policy issues to confront South Africa in recent years was the response to the political and economic situation in Zimbabwe. While some criticised the South African government, particularly during the Mbeki administration, for its quiet diplomacy stance towards Zimbabwe, others defended this approach as consistent with the promotion of democratic consolidation in Africa through multilateral diplomacy.


The public tended to offer critical evaluations of South Africa's relations with Zimbabwe, with 53% expressing the view the government should take a tougher approach, whereas a quarter (24%) disagreed with this perspective.

Views on peacekeeping

The South African National Defence Force has been involved in peacekeeping operations under United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) command in Sudan, Burundi, Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yet, peacekeeping in other countries does not find widespread support among all South Africans.

Public opinion was polarised about this form of international engagement, with 39% of the adult population agreeing South Africa should send soldiers to keep the peace in other countries, 41% opposing such action, and 15% voicing neutral views. This might partly be a reaction to the risk facing soldiers involved in such missions, but also a rejection of the use of military force in foreign policy (albeit for altruistic ends).

A significant share of the adult public supported closing the borders to immigrants and refugees.



Views on immigrants

South Africa currently hosts an estimated 67 500 refugees, and 233 100 who have applied for asylum. The UN's Population Division reports there are more than two million

international migrants in the country. New restrictions introduced into the country's immigration legislation highlighted the concern many South Africans feel about immigration. A significant share (64%) of the adult public supported closing the borders to immigrants and refugees.


Many South Africans supported foreign policies that favoured humanitarian positions.



Views on trade relations

Despite the fact that South Africa currently faces challenges in growing its economy, many South Africans supported foreign policies that favoured humanitarian positions over purely mercantile ones. Around half (49%) of South Africans opposed trading with countries that were known to abuse the human rights of their citizens, with around a third (32%) supporting such trading. Furthermore, despite the economic hardship experienced by many South Africans in recent years, almost two-thirds (66%) supported the provision of development aid to other African countries.

Social class seemed to underly government foreign policy performance evaluations.



Rating government foreign policy performance

Survey respondents were lastly asked to evaluate the performance of the South African state in meeting its foreign policy goals. Three aspects were examined, focusing on promoting domestic well-being, global justice, and political and economic relations with Africa. In each of these three dimensions, the majority voiced satisfaction, though a sizable minority express discontent.

Slightly more than half of all adult South Africans were satisfied with the role of the government in growing the national economy, promoting democracy and human rights in other countries, as well as building political and economic unity in Africa (50% satisfied in the first instance, and 52% satisfied in the other two cases). Negative assessments of state performance were offered by close to a third of respondents in the case of economic policy (29%), and slightly less than a fifth in relation to promoting democracy and human rights (19%) and fostering closer regional political and economic ties (18%).

Social class seemed to underly government foreign policy performance evaluations. Middle and upper class South Africans tended to be more critical of the government on foreign policy than those in other classes. Analysis showed those who distrusted national government and political leaders were also more likely to express dissatisfaction in

the performance of the government in national affairs. This suggests institutional trust was associated with how the public viewed the nation's performance on foreign affairs.

Conclusion

This study showed considerable majorities of South Africans placed a high priority on foreign policy goals relating to domestic socioeconomic wellbeing (job security, economic growth and controlling immigration), though notable shares of the adult population also viewed humanitarian objectives as important. Although significant numbers of citizens continue to experience material disadvantage and vulnerability, popular support was found for an outward looking foreign policy in the country, and there were encouraging messages about development aid and fair and ethical trade relations. While concerns about immigration and appropriate diplomatic responses to regional political situations remained, the public was also clearly divided about the role of military peacekeeping operations.

More research is required to investigate differential support for the interventionist (versus isolationist) role that South Africa seeks to adopt. To this end, the HSRC as part of a grant from the Open Society Foundation is currently undertaking a more detailed examination of the results represented in the overview presented in this article. ■

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A FOREIGN CONCEPT: WHAT SOUTH AFRICANS KNOW ABOUT INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

How knowledgeable are South Africans about world affairs; and do they care? *Benjamin Roberts, Steven Gordon and Jaré Struwig* examine new survey evidence on levels of interest and knowledge of foreign policy issues.

There exist relatively few representative studies on the public knowledge of foreign affairs in contemporary South Africa. To address this lack of evidence, the Open Society Foundation's (OSF) South African Foreign Policy Initiative funded the inclusion of a module on foreign policy in the 2013 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). A representative sample of 2 739 respondents, aged 16 years and older and living in private homes, took part in the survey.

Interest in the outside world

To gauge general levels of interest in world affairs, respondents were asked how interested they were in 'news about the relations of South Africa with other countries'. Around a fifth (21%) reported being very interested, 30% were somewhat interested and almost two-fifths (38%) were either hardly interested or not at all interested. The remainder either did not know (4%), or indicated that they did not follow the news (8%).

Studies from other countries tended to show a much higher interest in foreign affairs. For example, a study by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs in 2007 found that, in general, at least two-thirds of the public in 15 countries tended to be somewhat or very interested in their country's relations with other nations, ranging from countries such as Russia, Poland and India (all around 67%) to highs in countries such as the US (84%) and Australia (92%).