South Africa's «Quiet Diplomacy» and the crisis in Zimbabwe

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A Southern African Development Community (SADC), outrora vista como um potencial baluarte de solidariedade para a protecção da segurança regional e de uma política democrática emergente, está hoje mais dividida que nunca. Desde o início, em 1998, da intervenção regional no Congo (ex-Zaïre), esta organização composta por catorze estados membros passa por dissensos e fricções internas sem precedente que a paralisaram na sua função de garantir a paz na região. Enquanto as vozes da democracia, tolerância e paz – mesmo as do gigante regional, da África do Sul – são cada vez mais silenciados pelos líderes autocráticos no Zimbabwe, em Angola, na Namíbia e na RD Congo, a SADC se tornou num instrumento ineficaz para promover a segurança na África Austral. Neste contexto, o comportamento mais desconcertante e o da democracia mais célebre do continente, a da África do Sul, face à crise no Zimbabwe.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), once perceived to be a potential bulwark of solidarity on regional security and emerging democratic politics, is divided as never before. Since the onset of regional intervention in the Congo (ex-Zaïre) in 1998, the organisation of fourteen member states has experienced unprecedented dissent and internal friction that has paralysed its role as a regional peacemaker. With the voices of democracy, tolerance, and peace, including that of regional giant South Africa, increasingly silenced by autocratic leaders in Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, and the DC Congo, SADC has become ineffective in fostering security in Southern Africa. Most puzzling for international observers is in this context the behaviour of the continent's most celebrated democracy, South Africa, towards the crisis in Zimbabwe.

La Southern African Development Community (SADC), autrefois vue comme un mécanisme de défense solidaire de la sécurité régionale et d'une politique démocratique émergente, est aujourd'hui plus divisée que jamais. Dès le début, en 1998, de l'intervention régionale au Congo (ex-Zaïre), cette organisation composée de quatorze états membres passe par des dissensions et frictions internes sans précédents qui la paralysent dans sa fonction de garantir la paix dans la région. Or que les voix de la démocratie, de la tolérance et de la paix – même celle du géant régional, l'Afrique du Sud – sont de plus en plus réduits au silence par les *leaders* autoritaires du Zimbabwe, de l'Angola, da la Namibie et de la RD Congo, la SADC est devenu un instrument inefficace pour promouvoir a sécurité en Afrique Australe. Dans ce contexte, le comportement le plus déconcertant est celui de la démocratie la plus célèbre do continent, celle de l'Afrique du Sud, par rapport à la crise au Zimbabwe.

«(T)he ZANU-PF leadership has not been entirely honest in its dealings with the ANC government»[1].

«What I know is that we cannot afford the complete collapse of Zimbabwe on our borders, so we have to try and do whatever we can»[2].

South Africa's policy of constructive engagement, or «quiet diplomacy», towards the crisis in Zimbabwe has been a source of domestic concern, international scepticism and eventually outspoken criticism. The mounting economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe, exacerbated by the costly intervention in the Congo and economic mismanagement of its autocratically-inclined president provided an opportunity for South Africa to give substance to its stated democratic aspirations for the continent. Believing that it held sufficient leverage over Zimbabwe, South Africa sought to mobilise diplomacy and economic instruments to bring about a resolution to the crisis through the application of «quiet diplomacy». Combining public reassurances for Robert Mugabe and support for the land issue while exerting limited diplomatic and economic pressure and incentives, the South African government hoped to bring about a peaceful settlement. However, while South African president, Thabo Mbeki, issued assurances to an increasingly violent-prone regime in Harare, South Africa's own credibility as a bastion of support for human rights values was increasingly called into question and the rand came under severe pressure, exacting a high toll on its own economy.

For observers of this phenomenon, the most puzzling aspect is the behaviour of the continent's most celebrated democracy, South Africa. At the same time that Mbeki was articulating a vision for Africa's revival couched in terms that marries pan-African idealism to neo-liberal tenets, Pretoria was pursuing an apparently inchoate approach to the economic and political crisis in neighbouring Zimbabwe. With international expectations running high that the South African would play a key role in resolving the crisis, the apparent failure of «quiet diplomacy» to stem Zimbabwe's slide into economic and political chaos calls into question many key assumptions held of South African foreign policy. What, one may ask, happened to the promise of enlightened South African leadership of the region? Or for that matter its converse, the latent fear of South African hegemony over the region?

This paper seeks to understand the South African government's response towards the crisis in Zimbabwe. It will investigate South Africa's «quiet diplomacy»

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1 «Report of the Africa Institute Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe», Africa Institute, April 2001.

2 Thabo Mbeki, 6 August 2001.Interview on BBC World Service, «Hard Talk», 6 August 2001.

towards Zimbabwe in crisis through, first, a brief theoretical discussion; secondly an equally brief historical study of South African-Zimbabwean relations; thirdly an overview of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy towards SADC; fourthly, an examination of the Zimbabwean crisis and South Africa's attempts to resolve it; and, finally, an analysis of the failings of Pretoria's approach.

A theoretical detour

The popularly held assumption that post-apartheid South Africa, by dint of its economic weight in the Southern African region (with over 70 per cent of SADC's gross domestic product), its military capacity (with a battle-tested conventional force and a competitive arms manufacturing industry) and its political authority (based upon the peaceful nature of the negotiated transition and the moral authority of Nelson Mandela), would dominate continental Africa. According to Patrick McGowan and Fred Obeng, whose ground-breaking study on the role of South African business on the continent framed the issues in terms of «partner or hegemon», South Africa was poised between playing a role that sought to overwhelm the region with its economic power and one with more benevolent intent as an engine for regional development. Ian Taylor and Philip Nel have examined post-apartheid foreign policy and seen the move towards embracing multi-lateralism as a key instrument for South African diplomacy to be one that tied the new black elite to a wider neo-liberal project.

The former perspective finds its mooring in the theoretical literature on hegemonic stability that suggests that international systems are ordered and organised through the actions of a dominant state. The hegemon – which is able to wield superior economic, political and even military resources – typically uses its position and resources to re-write the rules that govern the system so as to sustain its own status[3]. In so doing, it becomes the anchor of a sustainable system that offers stability to other states within it. The latter perspective builds upon a self-described neo-Gramscian analysis of the structure of the international system that places the emergent black elite within the context of a transnational elite and the South African state as subordinate to the whims of international capital. In effect, Taylor and Nel are providing an international relations version of Hein Marais's work on the post-apartheid state and the limits to change. Both analyses share the view, one encouraged by South Africans themselves, that in the post-apartheid era Pretoria would assume a role commensurate with its potential capacity and, acting through formal (SADC) and informal (business) regional arrangements, use its substantive means to re-order

3 See Robert Keohane, Robert Gilpin and others writing in this tradition.

regional relations to its advantage. For Taylor and Nel, this has meant that South Africa has adapted itself to neo-liberalism and has in the process forsworn the liberation project and any independence of action that falls outside the attending prescriptions.

South African-Zimbabwean relations in historical perspective

While a cursory reading of South African-Zimbabwean relations sees much that binds the two states together, a deeper historical analysis underscores the differences, animosities and even outright rivalries. During the early colonial period South Africa's ambitions to play a dominant role in the sub-region as articulated by the liberal Afrikaner Jan Smuts were manifestly thwarted by the Rhodesian settler community in the 1920s with Rhodesia's move to self-governance as opposed to closer amalgamation with the Union of South Africa[4]. During the period of Unilateral Declaration of Independence, the mutual distrust with which the Smith regime and the National Party (echoing the Anglo-Boer conflict) held towards one another that it played out into ambivalent co-operation and, ultimately, paved the way for Vorster's decision to force the pace of negotiations between Smith and Zimbabwe's liberation forces in a mistaken belief he could earn kudos with other African leaders (and guarantee non-interference with apartheid at home)[5].

This ambivalence between the two white settler governments had its equivalent in the relationship between the countries' liberation movements. Zanu (Zimbabwean African National Union) and Zapu (Zimbabwean African People's Union), the two principal liberation movements were aligned with Chinese and Soviet support respectively and, following the pattern of the Cold War, South Africa's Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC) paired up with their ideological comrades[6]. Furthermore, given Rhodesia's proximity to liberated Africa, the Zimbabwean liberation movements were accorded significantly more resources, developed a stronger politico-military organisation and fought a bitter insurgency that was to eclipse anything experienced by the South African movements.

Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 did not, as some would have expected, usher in a period of co-operation between Robert Mugabe's Zanu and the primary South African liberation movement, the ANC. On the contrary, the Lancaster House

4 Smuts wished to create a federation that incorporated not only the British high commission territories but Northern and Southern Rhodesia as well as Nyasaland. James Barber and John Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: the search for status and security, 1945-1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1990), pp. 18-19.

5 Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy...*, pp. 82.

6 Scott Thomas, *Diplomacy of Liberation: the foreign policy of the ANC since 1960* (London: IB Taurus 1995).

process – which has provided for a decade of permanent white minority representation in parliament, an independent judiciary, constitutional guarantees on property rights and a commitment on the part of Britain and the United States to finance land reform – that foreswore many of the aims of the revolutionary era. In the economic sphere, the new government in Harare sought to protect South Africa's dominant position in the economy as well as that of the white commercial farming sector and, for its own part, Pretoria renewed the strategically important preferential trade agreement of 1964. Politically, while allowing for the establishment of an office in the capitol, the Mugabe government did not let the ANC to use Zimbabwe as a staging area for guerrilla infiltration into South Africa. The South African military's destabilisation campaign launched in the early 1980s, which provided for a time support for «super-ZAPU» dissidents as well as moves to disrupt transport within the country, served as a warning which Mugabe heeded against more significant support. At the same time, as the liberated region's largest economy, Zimbabwe was able to take the leading role in the creation of the Southern African Co-ordination Conference (SADCC), a regional groupings whose explicit purpose was to progressively detach their economies from the dependent relationship upon South Africa. This leadership in regional matters was reflected internationally as Zimbabwe came to host the Non Aligned Movement summit in 1986 and the Commonwealth in 1990.

The onset of the transition to democracy in South Africa, a process that began with the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and continued through the extended constitutional negotiations that ultimately culminated in democratic elections in 1994, served to cast a further shadow over the relationship. FW de Klerk's decision to unilaterally abrogate the preferential trade agreement in 1992 at the same time that Zimbabwe was undergoing a painful structural adjustment programme sowed additional economic disruption in an increasingly troubled domestic situation. The textile industry, where Zimbabwe had a comparative advantage, was particularly hard hit with duties raised to 70 per cent and attendant job losses of over 13,000 workers. At the same time, the debate over South Africa's relationship to the various competing regional economic institutions – SADCC, SACU and COMESA – sparked discussion as to the efficacy of SADCC and, once the ANC elected to join the newly formed Southern African Development Community (SADC) underscored for all South Africa's dominant economic position within the region. This situation was replicated with respect to the Front Line States (FLS), a diplomatic/military instrument that had been dominated by Mugabe in recent years and whose efficacy was suddenly called into question in the aftermath of the achievement of its historical task. Finally, the international acclaim heaped upon Mandela effectively sidelined Mugabe as a regional leader and contributed to the animosities that surrounded the Zimbabwean leader's efforts to maintain control over the newly formed SADC security apparatus (see below).

South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy towards SADC

The «lietmotif» of foreign policy issues involving Africa during the Mandela period – General Abacha's human rights violations in Nigeria, Mozambique's nearly scuppered elections and the civil war in Angola – reflected the idealism of the newly democratic state on a continent in transformation[7]. Concern for human rights, democratisation and peaceful resolution of conflict drove the public stances taken by South African officials and appeared to many observers to signal the fulfilment of the promise of a distinctively normative-based post-apartheid foreign policy. The principal theme of the incoming Mbeki administration, the pursuit of a vision of an economically prosperous and politically independent continent led implicitly (and increasingly explicitly) by South Africa, was already forming part of the foreign policy discourse before he took office. Coming into prominence in the aftermath of the ousting of Zaire's Mobutu sese Seko in 1997, this «African renaissance» (as Mbeki coined it) was predicated upon the resolution of conflict; adherence to a development regime based upon neo-liberal tenets of open markets and free trade; and the practice of «good governance» through the promotion of human rights and democratisation[8]. At a more profound level, the notion of an African renaissance was an attempt to reconstruct South Africa's fractured identity in terms that reclaimed its African heritage while concurrently asserting a positive rationale for its engagement in continental affairs. Mbeki's unveiling of the Millenium Africa Plan at the Davos meeting in early 2001 and its reconfiguration as the New Economic Programme for African Development (NEPAD) a year later is a further expression of this effort to provide the blueprint for constructing the continental revival.

Notably, whereas human rights took centre stage during the Mandela era, following the diplomatic fiasco surrounding South Africa's lone stance on the isolation of Abacha's Nigeria, the government increasingly subsumed human rights and democratisation concerns within a multilateral setting while pursuing «quiet diplomacy» with violators on a bilateral basis[9]. The operational difficulties of giving substance to ethical considerations was paralleled by a reconsideration of the means of integrating pressing domestic developmental concerns against a torrent of globalisation and continuing conflict on the continent. This process culminated in the Department of Foreign Affairs' strategic review in early 1999 that sought to incorporate the government's neo-liberal economic policies (embodied in the Growth,

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7 See Greg Mills, *The Wired Model: South Africa, foreign policy and globalisation* (Cape Town: Tafelberg 2000); Philip Nel and Ian Taylor, *South Africa's Multilateral Diplomacy and Global Change: the limits to reform* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate 2001); Chris Alden and Garth le Pere, *South Africa's Post Apartheid Foreign Policy: Africa's last best hope?* Adelphi Paper, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London (forthcoming).

8 Thabo Mbeki, address to the Corporate Council Summit, Chantilly, Virginia, April 1997, *The African Renaissance*, Occasional Papers, Konrad Adeneur Stiftung, Johannesburg, May 1998, pp. 9-11.

9 On the Nigerian fiasco, see Maxie van Aardt (aka Schoeman), «A Foreign Policy to Die For: South Africa' Response to the Nigerian Crisis», *Africa Insight*, 26:2, 1996.

Employment and Redistribution programme) alongside more traditional security concerns into the foreign policy framework. Coined «wealth creation and security», the new approach effectively completed the shifting of South African foreign policy away from its explicit human rights orientation to one which placed developmental concerns at its heart[10].

It was in the SADC setting that the bulk of South Africa's diplomatic resources were focused. In the area of regional trade, the signing of the Maseru Protocol in 1996 put in motion a process that would ultimately establish a free trade area across the region, aimed both at building upon and rectifying the existing foundation for economic integration already implied by the legacy of the colonial infrastructure. Concurrently, the rapid expansion of South African corporate interests across the region, from South African Breweries to Standard Bank, anticipated the formal move to integrate Southern Africa's economies. The Maputo Corridor, a public-private partnership centred on the transport link between Johannesburg and Maputo (port city and capitol of neighbouring Mozambique) attracted millions of dollars in investment, was indicative of the new approach that coupled the promise of local prosperity to the imperative of South African economic hegemony[11]. In the area of regional security, the re-ignition of conflict in Laurent Kabila's newly established Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in August 1998 saw armed African intervention on an unprecedented scale and divided the SADC between participants – Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe – and those states – South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique – seeking a negotiated solution to the conflict. With Kabila providing the supporting states and leaders with substantial concessions to its vast mineral resources and Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda acting on behalf of their domestic security concerns, the stage was set for an internal «scramble» pitting brother against brother on a scale which Africa had not experienced before[12]. Exacerbating the divide within SADC was the controversial South African and Botswanan military intervention in Lesotho in September 1998 to uphold democratic elections. In both cases, Zimbabwe and South Africa attempted to use the regional grouping through recourse to its security institutions to prop up their larger foreign policy objectives and in the process put the organisation's security apparatus into a condition of paralysis.

The construction and promulgation of a post-apartheid South African foreign policy, a process complicated by the need to reconcile competing ANC and National party bureaucratic interests, has experienced its greatest challenge in the imperative to manage conflict in the Southern African region. The ongoing civil war in Angola, the internationalisation of the war in Congo and the mounting economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe threaten the integrity of these states as well as regional stabil-

10 Alfred Nzo, «Foreign Minister's Budget Vote Address», *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 6:2, 1999, p. 220.

11 Fred Ahwireng-Obeng and Patrick McGowan, «Partner or hegemon? South Africa in Africa: Part one», *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 16:1, pp. 5-38.

12 Sagaren Naidoo, «Congo: From Bad to Worse», *South African Yearbook of International Affairs, 1999-2000* (Braamfontein: South African Institute for International Affairs, 1999), pp. 332-333.

ity and with that, the very prospects of development. Against the background of these tumultuous events, the guiding principles of South African policy under Mbeki towards the crisis within SADC have centred upon three basic concerns: to keep SADC united; to work to resolve institutional problems within SADC within the organisation's framework; and, where necessary, to use other multilateral instruments and avenues to pursue its conflict resolution strategy.

Keep SADC united

SADC's central position in South Africa's post-apartheid economic and political strategy preclude it from acting in any way that would undermine the cohesion of the organisation. It bears repeating that the original impetus for SADC in 1992 was that of a vehicle for developmental regionalism and that was reflected in the fact that summit meetings were the responsibility of ministers of trade and finance of member states (as opposed to traditional regional projects, which are usually the creature of their foreign ministries). Indeed, a strategic review of the organisation completed in 1997 did not mention the need for the creation of a security sector but rather focused on structural issues related to development[13]. While the security apparatus may have been paralysed due to internal dispute and in a condition of suspension (see below), the all important trade, transport and finance sectors continued to function and consume the bulk of the organisation's time and resources. South Africa places great stock in the organisation's commitment to sign on to and activate the 1996 Maseru Trade Protocol, which opens the region to cross border exchange and is believed will set in motion greater development and conditions for regional integration, and does not want to jeopardise the realisation of these larger aims.

Mandela's perchance for unilateralism on questions of principle or urgency – seen in the SADC context in his apparent threat to withdrawal from SADC in 1997 or in the launching of bilateral negotiations with Mobutu sese Seko that same year – has arguably contributed to inter-organisational dissent[14]. Since 1999, this approach has been overtaken by Mbeki's conciliatory tone that emphasises quiet diplomacy and consensus building between SADC member states. A contributing factor to this tack, ironically, could be the tradition of post-independence African leaders offering solidarity to one another – though Mbeki himself has spoken out against this in the wider OAU setting – which remains a cardinal principle of African inter-state relations.

Work to resolve institutional problems within SADC

Even before the dramatic split within SADC in August 1998, which saw Mugabe use his position as head of the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security to mobilise support for tri-state intervention in the name of SADC, there were tensions within the

13 Mark Malan, «SADC and sub-regional security», *ISS Monograph Series*, n. 19, February 1998, pp. 9-10.

14 Walter Tapfumaneyi, «Regional security co-operation: a view from Zimbabwe», *Global Dialogue*, 4.2, August, 1999, pp. 23-25.

organisation around security, leadership, democracy and intervention in internal affairs. In the area of security, the question of relationship between the Organ, the Inter-State Defence and Security Committee (ISDSC) and the SADC chairman bedevilled several efforts to resolve the dispute since the muting of a desire to formally establish a security sector. The attempt to create an Association of Southern African States in 1995, which proposed to incorporate the now defunct Front Line States as a separate entity from the SADC Secretariat under the auspices of the heads of state and government, floundered exactly on this point of authority and autonomy[15]. The establishment of the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security in January 1996 was done to *«allow more flexibility and timely response, at the highest level, to sensitive and potentially explosive situations»* and a later summit meeting in June elaborated upon its structure by tasking it with sixteen very specific roles[16]. The apparent ambiguity which was midwife to its creation and the subsequent effort to give specific content to its role was to become part of the ongoing dispute over the nature and responsibilities of the Organ. However, this became especially acute after Mugabe authorised SADC intervention in the Congo at a meeting of defence ministers on 18 August 1998 (despite the fact that the Organ had been suspended in Blantyre in 1997), causing Mandela to convene an extra-ordinary SADC summit on 23 August 1998 to re-examine this decision. The South African position on the validity of SADC intervention under the auspices of the Organ was that it could only take place in terms that conform to Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, and therefore accede to the internationally recognised criteria for a regional security organisation and have the proper international authorisation. From this perspective, the Organ was not constituted as a recognised freestanding regional entity but derives its position from its relationship under SADC[17]. Zimbabwean officials took the view that the Organ, like its predecessor the Front Line States, was a largely informal grouping of senior officials chaired by a troika of heads of state that operates alongside – but not under – SADC and therefore has a right to authorise intervention[18]. Indeed, the joint South African-Botswanan intervention into Lesotho, coming on the heels of the Zimbabwean led intervention in the Congo, while claimed by Pretoria to have taken place under SADC auspices, was arguably on even shakier ground than Mugabe's action.

This dispute overlapped with broader concerns of regional leadership, especially on the part of Mugabe and his suddenly diminished international status with the ascension of Mandela, and complicated by a desire to find a successor role for the Front Line States mechanism within the framework of SADC. Furthermore, the commitment

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15 Concern was voiced at the SADC summit in August 1995 over the placement of security issues in the hands of one state – as was customary with other SADC sectoral approaches. Malan, «SADC and sub-regional security…», 1998, p. 13.

16 Malan, «SADC and sub-regional security…» 1998, pp. 13-14. According to Denis Venter, the ISDSC was to become the Organ's secretariat. Denis Venter, «Regional security in sub-Saharan Africa», *African Insight* 26:2 1996, pg. 173.

17 Horst Brammer, «In search of an effective regional security mechanism for southern Africa», *Global Dialogue*, 4.2, August, 1999, pp. 21-22.

18 Tapfumaneyi, «Regional security…», pp. 23, 25.

to democracy and human rights – a feature of the SADC Treaty of 1992 – implies that there is a role for some form of interference in the domestic affairs of SADC member states that violate these conditions. Indeed, SADC actions supporting the Mozambican elections of 1994 and the Lesotho constitution crises in 1998 were conducted in the name of these values and have recently been reaffirmed by the foreign minister. That being said, it is clear that – beyond the structural disputation and the debate over lines of authority – there remains an unresolved conflict within SADC over the statutory commitment to promotion of democratisation and human rights and the maintenance of established norms of sovereignty. Even the restructuring of SADC in 2001, which consolidated the sectorally-based approach (left over from the era of «delinkage» from apartheid South Africa) into four distinctive areas, has yet to operationalise these codified principles in the day to day workings of the newly established committee[19].

Where necessary, use other multilateral instruments to pursue its conflict resolution strategy

The South Africa government's commitment to pursue a multilateral approach towards foreign policy provides it with alternative avenues of action to that of the SADC. In particular, the OAU with its officially sanctioned regional initiatives such as the Arusha talks over Burundi, the United Nations with its various initiatives on Angola and the Congo, the Commonwealth on the Zimbabwe crisis, provide settings to give expression to South African foreign policy objectives. Thus where SADC as an institution has been unable to muster a strongly articulated position on a conflict due to the involvement of its constituent members, the South African government has been able to participate in other multilateral initiatives that actively promote its concern to bring about peaceful resolution to these conflicts. Though, as noted above, there was a tendency under Mandela to pursue unilateral initiatives – for example this was most evident in the South Africa action taken in support of the United Nations brokered talks in Lusaka to win Savimbi's adherence – the general opprobrium and/or failure of these measures has curbed this tendency under Mbeki[20].

The Zimbabwean crisis and South Africa's «Quiet Diplomacy»

The South African government's response to the crisis in Zimbabwe, like the evolution of the crisis itself, has been one that has developed over time. Sources of influence upon the South African response have been, first and foremost, the domestic environment and the vulnerability of the ANC government on the question of land

19 Interview with Anthoni van Nieuwkerk, Johannesburg, February, 2002.

20 Paul Hare, *Angola's Last Best Chance for Peace: an insider's account of the peace process*, Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1998, p. 111.

restitution and redistribution, something that domestic political parties have sought to exploit. Another factor has been the regional states and the desire to maintain cohesion within SADC during this period of multiple crises facing the organisation. And, finally, the international community and – especially seen through the media – its expectations of South Africa have been a constant source of pressure.

The crisis

While the details regarding the crisis in Zimbabwe are best treated elsewhere it is important to provide a summary of the main issues that have brought the country to the brink of disaster as seen from the South African perspective[21]. An influential report produced by the Africa Institute of South Africa, the result of a government-instigated mission to Zimbabwe in early 2001, characterised the crisis in the following terms. In the first instance, there is a *crisis of legitimacy* as a result of the erosion of the post-colonial consensus built during the course of the liberation struggle. There is a *crisis of expectations* coming from the deteriorating economic situation and the failure of structural adjustment measures to halt the erosion of social and economic gains of the independence period. And there is a *crisis of confidence* in the institutions of the state, inspired by the actions of the security forces and intimidation of the judiciary[22].

Underlying this set of intertwining crises was the colonial legacy of land distribution in which 10 million hectares of the country's most viable land is owned by 4,500 mostly white commercial farmers and 18 million hectares is owned by about 850,000 black farmers. The promised land distribution, which was predicated on the «willing buyer and seller at market values» approach (adopted by South Africa after 1994) and had called for 162,000 families to be resettled on 8.3 million hectares under Phase One of the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme, had resulted in only 71,000 families being resettled on 3.5 million hectares of land by 1990. Since that time, various efforts to institutionalise international support for an orderly approach to redistribution have failed. Concurrently, the implementation of a structural adjustment programme in the early 1990s, in conjunction with the difficulties experienced in competing in the emergent international trading environment, resulted in a contraction of the economy by 8 per cent in 1993, unemployment increasing to over 50 per cent, double-digit inflation (despite World Bank predictions that it would drop) and a collapse in social services. Finally with the ending of the Lancaster House constitution in 1990, various attempts have been made by Mugabe to alter aspects of it so as to further entrench Zanu rule through the creation of a one-party state or, after that failed, to severely circumscribe the role of other sectors or power bases.

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21 See, for example, Vitor Hugo Nicolau, «Poder, clientelismo e violência política no Zimbabwe: a Terceira Chimurenga», paper presented at the conference on War and Violent Conflicts in Africa, Centro de Estudos Africanos, Lisbon, 21-22 February 2002.

22 Africa Institute, «Report on the Africa Institute of SA Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe», April 2001, p. 5.

Assumptions informing South African foreign policy towards Zimbabwe

When examining the content of South Africa's «quiet diplomacy», it is useful to identify the assumptions and perceived constraints that have guided it. These were:

- South Africa's economy is too closely linked to Zimbabwe to impose sanctions;
- The ANC government is itself vulnerability on land question;
- South Africa has the necessary leverage over Zimbabwe in the areas of finance, oil and electricity to affect changes in behaviour;
- The South African model of negotiated settlement based on compromise is transferable to Zimbabwe;
- South Africa's regional hegemony requires a careful approach favouring persuasion over confrontation and multilateralism over unilateralism.

An additional point, emphasised by Linda Freeman, is that both parties saw themselves as inheriting the mantle of rule through the liberation struggle and, consequently, viewed with suspicion any domestic opposition outside of that historical framework[23]. This belief was more pronounced by Zanu than the ANC, and, within the ANC, more pronounced amongst the exile movement than those coming out of the domestic «charterist» tradition that characterised the United Democratic Front. While these considerations exercised influence over South African decision making towards the crisis in Zimbabwe, the foreign policy approach adopted by Pretoria has experienced an evolution from denial to constructive engagement and, in the wake of near collapse of law and order in Zimbabwe in the run up to presidential elections, disillusionment.

The period of denial

While it was evident to some observers as early as 1997, when the war veterans rioted upon discovering their pensions had suddenly disappeared, that the problems facing Zimbabwe were deeply structural in nature rather than a passing crisis, in most South African political and business circles there was every expectation that Harare in conjunction with the international community would resolve these matters. The steady trickle of illegal immigrants across the Limpopo, the economic difficulties experienced in bi-lateral trade, the onset of strikes by public sector workers protesting against the fall in their standard of living, the drying up of Zimbabwean-sourced investment capital and the nascent political activism aimed against Zanu all could be seen in hindsight as warning shots of a coming crisis.

However, it was the intervention in the Congo in August 1998 that transformed the South African government's attitude with respect to Zimbabwe. This shift was fuelled, on the one hand, by the recognition that military intervention in the name of SADC by Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia jeopardised the institutionalised nature

23 Linda Freeman, «Gulliver in Southern Africa: South Africa and Zimbabwe in the post-apartheid era», unpublished paper, p. 16.

and conduct of the regional organisation given its uncertain basis of action and, on the other hand, was a direct challenge to South African aspirations to regional leadership. The hastily organised and poorly implemented joint South African-Botswanan operation in defence of constitutional rule in Lesotho the following month, which arguably had a weaker SADC mandate than the intervention in the Congo, was considered by many observers to be a direct response to events in the Congo[24]. With SADC effectively split between two poles – Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia versus South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique – Pretoria's ambitions for regional development and indeed its own role the continental leader were called into question.

The convening of an international donor conference in Harare in September 1998 seemed to offer a credible route to resolving Zimbabwe's land problem. Funding amounting to Z$7.4 million was pledged to purchase 118 farms but the inception phase never happened due to conditionalities on transparency of the process imposed by donors. However, within a year the costs to the Zimbabwean economy of sustaining the Congo operation had become apparent and, following the disclosure of irregularities in national accounting to underplay these costs, brought about a suspension of IMF loans of US$193 million and US$140 million. At the same time, the European Union put its aid programme under review following a confrontation with Zimbabwe over the Congo issue.

In the wake of continued economic hardship, opposition political forces began to coalesce and in September 1999 the leader of the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), Morgan Tsvangirai, prominent trade union activists, and some white business interests came together to form a new party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Open discord within Zanu itself was increasingly voiced, especially after the economic costs of the land invasions and the Congo intervention began to take their toll[25]. By October 2000, with the installation of technocrat Simba Makoni as finance minister in Mugabe government, a concerted effort was launched to halt the slide through currency devaluation, reduction of bank rate, limitations on government borrowing and reduction of state salaries. However, cabinet ministers anxious to bring the farm invasions to an end found their actions continually blocked by Mugabe[26].

The period of constructive engagement

Under these circumstances, isolating and acting against Mugabe, whose behaviour as a rogue player within SADC has become increasingly obvious, has not seen by the Mbeki administration as a viable option. «Quiet diplomacy» became the

24 Mark Malan; Anthoni van Nieuwkerk.

25 John Makamure, chief economist Zimbabwe Chamber of Commerce and Industry, «New Finance Minister gets down to serious business», *Trader*, October 2000-January 2001, p. 22.

26 Makamure, «New finance minister…», p. 22.

watchword for Pretoria's chosen approach to the promotion of dialogue and persuasion in engaging the Zimbabwean leadership. South Africa's trade and investment interests in Zimbabwe were still substantial and, despite the cost to the rand and its own international reputation, underscores the fact that Zimbabwe is South Africa's largest trading partner in Africa. The imposition of economic sanctions would impose high costs on South African businesses operating in the country, in addition to incurring domestic political fallout with uncertain consequences[27]. The very real fear that a seriously destabilised Zimbabwe would ignite refugee flows and greater economic chaos across the region also stayed Pretoria's hand and exercised influence over fellow SADC states who themselves were not part of the triple intervention in the Congo. With the involvement of Angola and Namibia in what amounted to a de facto alliance with Zimbabwe to support the Kabila regime in Kinshasa, the threat to SADC unity is very real indeed. By adopting the «quiet diplomacy» approach, Mbeki underscored the limitations of South Africa's willingness and ability to overtly challenge the non-interventionist norm in SADC while respecting, flawed though the process was, that Mugabe and ZANU-PF were democratically elected.

The result was that through «quiet diplomacy» South Africa sought to ensure that the Zimbabwean economy continued to function through, for example, extra-ordinary extensions of credit in key sectors over which South African had control such as power. It also undertook to serve as an intermediary between the Bretton Woods Institutions and Harare, giving voice to the concerns of the Zimbabwean state and business. This is especially the case in the volatile area of land reform that Mbeki personally sought to resolve by seeking out foreign financial resources to pay for the purchase and legal transfer of white-owned farms. It sought to avoid any form of sanctions that would, it was felt, bring about a full economic collapse as well as directly damage South African commercial interests in the process. At the same time, the South African government entered into a number of discussions with Mugabe that, for the most part, sought to give public assurances of support to him and the concerns over the land issue while suggesting through private channels Pretoria's mounting concerns.

This new activist approach to the crisis commenced in earnest with the referendum on the Zimbabwean constitution in February 2000. The Constitution Commission's liberalising reforms to the constitution, which had had substantive input from civil society, were rejected by the government in early February 2000. Mbeki flew with a delegation that included officials from the South African parastatal ESKOM, SASOL and the Reserve Bank to meet with the government in Harare in advance of the referendum. He was able to convince Mugabe to honour the results of the referendum, which the Zimbabwean president apparently believed would go in his favour, in exchange for providing a continual flow of electrical power, oil deliv-

[27] John Makumbe, «South Africa's Quiet Diplomacy: has it worked?», paper delivered at a conference on the Zimbabwe crisis, South African Institute for International Affairs, Johannesburg, 14 February 2001.

ery and promises of a US$133 mn «economic rescue package»[28]. Contrary to expectations, 55.9% of Zimbabweans polled, the majority of whom were based in the urban areas and were a bastion of anti-Mugabe support, rejected a government sponsored referendum on constitutional reform. At this juncture the notion of the efficacy of «quiet diplomacy» seemed to be confirmed for officials in Pretoria and this set the stage for their continued positive expectations towards this approach to the crisis.

Mbeki put the strategy to work, embarking on a lightening visit to Harare in the immediate aftermath of the referendum defeat, to discuss the outcome and the forthcoming parliamentary elections in June. He hoped through bringing pressure to bear upon Mugabe in private, while indicating support for his government publicly, the upcoming elections would be free and fair. Invasions of white owned farms began by self-proclaimed «war veterans» began within a month, with the vocal support of the government (who stayed the hand of the police and, as subsequent events demonstrated, were intimately involved in creating the «war veterans» movement) and violence perpetrated by the war veterans against white and black Zimbabweans began to have a delirious effect on both the Zimbabwean economy and those of its neighbours. A summit meeting between Mugabe and the leaders of South Africa and Mozambique in April 2000, which ended with Mbeki and Chissano proclaiming solidarity with the Zimbabwean leader, and privately voicing their concerns. This public position was echoed again by Mbeki at the Zimbabwean Trade Fair later that same year.

It would be best that (the land question) is dealt with in a co-operative and non-confrontational manner among all the people of this sister country, both black and white, reflecting the achievement of national consensus on this issue encompassing all Zimbabweans[29].

Alarm palpable within Zanu with the results of the parliamentary elections of June 2000 in which, despite intimidation and the death of over thirty MDC supporters, the MDC won 57 seats to Zanu's 62 seats. Thereafter, the pace of land invasions increased and, concurrently, Mugabe began to take aim at the independent judiciary that was increasingly seen as an obstacle to realising the ambitions to «accelerated» land redistribution. As was to become evident in 2002, a decision was taken within Mugabe's circle that, unlike the parliamentary elections (which despite the violence that accompanied the campaign, were for the most part conducted in a «free and fair» manner on the polling day), the presidential elections of 2002 would not only be fought through mobilisation of party activists, but that the electoral process itself would be subject to manipulation in order to assure a positive result for Zanu.

On the broader front of SADC and its role in the security sector, since the rupture over Mugabe's use of the suspended SADC Organ to support the Congo intervention, South Africa has been quietly lobbying the other SADC members to consider

28 Freeman, «Gulliver in Southern Africa...», p. 17.

29 Cited in Thabo Mbeki, «Clamour over Zimbawe shows continuing racial prejudice in SA», *Sowetan*, 26 March 2001.

restructuring this anomalous situation. The SADC foreign ministers meeting in late 2000 announced that the security sector would be included in the overall restructuring of the organisation and this was confirmed at the Heads of State summit in Windhoek in March 2001[30]. In a clear demonstration that the South African government understood the role economic incentives have played in sustaining the complicity of the Zimbabwean military in the Congo intervention, they proposed that SADC undertake to develop a regional arms manufacturing capacity – one that would incorporate the Zimbabwean Defence Industries which have been key beneficiaries of the war in Congo – under the auspices of a restructured Organ[31]. This is especially the case given the involvement of Angola and Namibia in a de facto alliance with Zimbabwe to support the Kabila regime in Kinshasa. Under the stewardship of Swaziland, SADC reconsidered the position of the chair of the Organ and the terms which allowed it to be used to authorise intervention[32]. Faced with concerted pressure from SADC, Mugabe finally agreed to relinquish his position in favour of an arrangement that gave the outgoing, current and future chairs a role in August 2001.

Following the June 2000 elections and the spiralling violence that accompanied the land occupations, disquiet within South Africa «quiet diplomacy» began to assume a more public stance as the political parties sought to gain from the perception of inaction and even support for Mugabe's unlawful land acquisition policy. At the same time, the crisis in Zimbabwe began to register within the South African political landscape. Democratic Alliance leader, Tony Leon, became a persistent critic of the government's approach to Zimbabwe from the right while the Pan Africanist Congress felt the ANC's position marked a betrayal the dire circumstances facing not only Zimbabwe's landless black majority but within South Africa itself. Other voices within the country's foreign policy community urged action upon the government[33]. Such was the growing domestic sensitivity of the issue that Mbeki himself responded by declaring that those who criticised the government's «quiet diplomacy» were to be suspected of racist sensibilities[34].

At the same time, pressure had begun to mount within South Africa's rural and urban black communities for resolution to their own problem of landlessness. For its own part, the PAC used the volatile issue to stir up support amongst the urban homeless through a «sale» of unoccupied public land in Johannesburg and a group of black tenant farmers based in Mpumalanga province called upon Mugabe to come to South Africa to address their concerns[35]. In Kwazulu-Natal, illegal land occupations

30 Southscan, 16:3, 9 February 2001, p. 5.
31 Southscan, *Monthly Review Bulletin*, September 2000, 9:9, p. 8.
32 Interview with Anthoni van Nieuwkerk, 4 February 2002.
33 See, for example, Kuseni Dlamini, Greg Mills and Neuma Grobbelaar, «Rethink quiet diplomacy in Zimbabwe», *Mail and Guardian*, 9 May 2001.
34 Thabo Mbeki, «Clamour over Zimbawe shows continuing racial prejudice in SA», *Sowetan* 26 March 2001.
35 *Independent Online* (Johannesburg), 9 July 2001, www.iol.co.za.

mushroomed in areas such as Mangete, bringing white farmers, black tenants and squatters, as well as local advocacy groups, into direct confrontation. The demolition of squatter camps and provisions for police and army protection of property under siege suggest that the ANC government was more committed to supporting the position of the white owners than that of landless blacks[36]. A sign of the divisive nature of the issue within South Africa and even ANC circles was Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's visit in April 2000 to an occupied farm in Zimbabwe as an unofficial act of solidarity with the self-styled «war veterans». At the same time, Mugabe's call for black Africans in other SADC countries to launch their own occupations of white-owned farms at SADC summit in Windhoek in 2001 served to highlight the slow pace of resettlement programmes in South Africa and Namibia, raising the spectre of Zimbabwe-inspired domestic strife within these states.

The final phase of constructive engagement saw South Africa engaging the issues around the regional SADC setting, the continental forum of the OAU and internationally through the Commonwealth and the United Nations. South African officials, following in the wake of the UN's Millennium 2000 Summit in New York when Mbeki committed the government play a role as intermediary role between the international financial institutions and Zimbabwe at the behest of Kofi Annan, had secured agreement of IMF support for a financial package that would support some of the costs of a land redistribution programme envisaged at the 1998 UNDP conference. Britain itself was induced to pledge US$57 million towards the process – after failed bilateral talks between Blair's government and Zimbabwean officials in London the previous year – but again the agreement fell apart as Harare refused to be moved on the issue of «law and order» and transparency. At the same time, the aspect of «quiet diplomacy» that had drawn so much international and domestic criticism, South Africa's public support for Mugabe, began to wane and South African officials became more cautiously outspoken. For example, at a press conference in November 2001, Mbeki acknowledged that the violence occurring in the build up to the presidential elections would affect more than just perceptions, noting, *«If you have elections which are not seen as legitimate by the people, you will have a situation that will be worse than the present one»*[37].

A final effort to resolve the land question in advance of the presidential elections. A meeting was held in Nigeria in September 2001 under the auspices of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group seemed to herald an eleventh hour resolution to the problem of garnering British financial support for land reform and its results were swiftly endorsed by five SADC presidents. However, the land invasions continued unabated and, with Mugabe's decree in November 2001 ordering 1000 farmers to leave their land within three months, it was clear to all observers that the Abuja Agreement was dead.

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36 *Independent Online* (Johannesburg), 28 May 2001, www.iol.co.za

37 *Independent Online* (Johannesburg), 29 May 2001, www.iol.co.za

The period of disillusionment

While the collapse of the Abuja Agreement signalled the effective end of «quiet diplomacy», there had been a hardening of position within government circles in South Africa for some time. Growing pressure within ANC ranks to take action had been a feature of the public debate since on the middle of 2000 and was seen both in the public criticism and even resignation of some (white) ANC members of parliament and also in Mandela's thinly veiled statements on the subject. The ANC's alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party, have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of spiral of violence and attacks on Zimbabwean trade unions and the media[38]. And while the South African government has been fairly dismissive of reports that the rand's slippage has been the result of Zimbabwean instability, this and the continuing dearth of foreign direct investment were credited by the International Investor Forum – a leading group of financiers brought together at Mbeki's behest – to be behind the lacklustre response of investors towards South Africa[39]. Finance Minister Trevor Manuel explicitly attacked the policy in August 2001 when he stated that «Zimbabwe has come off the rails». SADC summit in Blantyre in August 2001 expressed concern of the effect it was having on the region. SADC Task Team, which grew out of the August Summit, criticised Mugabe in October 2001 on failure to reinstate law and order. Proponents of constructive engagement within government fewer and fewer, centred within the President's office and in the person of Mbeki himself[40].

The dilemma facing Mbeki in the aftermath of Abuja, whose defensiveness reached the point of trying to characterise critics of South Africa's approach as racists in March 2001, was what action to take in light of the failure of «quiet diplomacy». The rationale for pursuing constructive engagement had been both one of potential damage to South Africa's economy and a belief in the country's leverage over Zimbabwe. While the former was fast being realised the latter never seemed to materialise. Decision making on the issue had been complicated by Mbeki's own administrative re-structuring of government as well. Presiding over a centralisation of the instruments of foreign policy, through his selection of a weak foreign minister and bolstering of the Office of the Presidency, coupled to a general clearing out of seasoned personnel in the DFA and DTI without providing for effective replacements, limited the role of appointed officials in setting and implementing policy towards Zimbabwe[41]. Indeed, the deputy-minister of foreign affairs complained that there

38 IRIN, «Southern Africa: News Briefs 14 March 2001», IRIN-SA@irin.org.za

39 «Mbeki to meet Mugabe to discuss thorny issues», *Independent on Line* (Johannesburg), 25 February 2001, www.iol.co.za.

40 This was underscored at an extra-ordinary meeting of all senior officials from relevant ministries (as well as members of civil society) convened by Lindiwe Sisulu, Minister of Intelligence, in late January 2002 in which it was acknowledged that «quiet diplomacy» had failed to produce the intended outcomes. Interview with Anthoni van Nieuwkerk, 4 February 2002.

41 In January 2002, 7 out of 16 directorates within DFA were without heads and DTI was in the midst of a wholesale purge of the personnel hired during the Mandela presidency.

was no one within the government services who could provide effective analysis of the crisis[42]. Exacerbating all of this was Mbeki's personal predilection for sticking obstinately to a publicly stated view point, seen most infamously in his dogged attachment to the HIV/AIDs dissident argument, which seemed again to have eclipsed his sense of reason[43].

The response to the fail of «quiet diplomacy» was to give consideration, albeit without straying too closely to a public admission of failure, to a new approach that focused on organising an exit strategy for Mugabe. This increasingly came to mean the onset of a transitional government in which representatives from the Zanu and the MDC participated, directly drawing from South Africa's own experience of transition. In this context, the launching of «party-to-party» discussions was thought to be a means of broaching the subject with those elements within Zanu that had been marginalised by Mugabe. As Zanu veteran, Eddison Zvobgo, stated, *«We have tainted what was a glorious revolution, reducing it to some agrarian racist enterprise...we must clean the slate, bury everything that has divided us and begin again»*[44]. There had been expectations that the party congress in late 2000 would oversee the retirement of Mugabe but the president was able to outmanoeuvre Zanu reformists. Concurrently, Morgan Tsvangirai's meeting with top ANC officials in early 2001 was seen as a harbinger of this new South African approach to the crisis. One of the contributing factors to the government's ambivalent attitude towards the MDC had been the perception that it was such a «broad church» that, should it win the election in 2002, it would not be able to reconcile its internal differences and effectively govern[45]. An initiative to broaden the party-to-party discussions to the SADC level, which resulted in trilateral meetings between the ANC, Zanu and Frelimo, proved however to be ineffective as the rhetoric of the liberation struggle and the notions of solidarity overtook any talk of criticism of events in Zimbabwe[46].

In the meantime, the cost of the Zimbabwean crisis to South Africa's economy could not longer be ignored by Pretoria. The battering of the rand, which had lost nearly 40 of its value at one point in October 2001, the impact that this and the crisis in general had on the carefully constructed macro-economic policy which sought to establish South Africa as a preferred destination for foreign investors and the onset of thousands of impoverished Zimbabwean refugees illegally crossing the border to escape growing hunger. The international community, which had been for so long urging South Africa to take a more forthright position on the crisis, finally itself began to edge towards action. On the eve of the presidential elections the EU, under the urgings of Britain and the Scandinavian states, successfully passed a resolution applying

42 Interview with Shannon Field, deputy director, Institute for Global Dialogue, 18 February 2002.
43 Anthony Holiday, «Indecision wracks Mbeki».
44 Cited in Richard Cornwall, «Zimbabwe: 90 days after the elections», *Occasional Paper* No. 46, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, October 2000, p. 7.
45 Interview with senior foreign policy official.
46 International Crisis Group, *Crisis in Zimbabwe*, 2001.

targeted sanctions against Mugabe and 19 of the top Zanu leadership. The reaction on the part of the South Africa government was to shrilly deny that sanctions would have any effect upon the crisis.

«The South African government finds it regrettable and unfortunate that the European Union chose to impose targeted sanctions…We believe that sanctions will not achieve the intended result. On the contrary, they may further compound the situation»[47].

The United States, which had threatened to take action through the Zimbabwe Democracy Act in 2000, finally passed the bill into law that echoed the EU's application of «smart sanctions». While a few foreign policy pundits in South Africa urged for greater action, on the whole in the run up to the presidential elections in Zimbabwe there seemed to be a consensus that all reasonable avenues had been tried and that events would have to run their course[48]. Finally the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (Chogm) in Australia, which highlighted the gap between the outlook of the «ABC countries» (Australia, Britain and Canada) and the African states, efforts by Tony Blair to secure a condemnation of Mugabe and even discussion of suspension of Zimbabwe were thwarted by the combined resistance of Africa's leaders. A compromise was struck whereby the Australian prime minister and the presidents of Nigeria and South Africa would convene a special meeting that would look to the Commonwealth Observer Mission's report of the conduct of the elections before ruling on Zimbabwe's suspension.

However, it was an ambitious initiative that sought to bring together the leading industrial countries in support of African development, the New African Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), which was to ultimately exercise influence over the South Africa position on Zimbabwe. Mbeki himself had devoted considerable diplomatic and financial capital towards winning support in the North for NEPAD and, on the basis of a series of bi-lateral meetings as well as interventions at the World Economic Forum, was along with Obasanjo to address the G-8 meeting in June 2002 on the topic[49]. At the same time, the British prime minister's own role as champion of Africán interests was increasingly drawn into a consideration of the conduct of South African diplomacy on Zimbabwe. While initial indications out of Downing Street in advance of the Chogm meeting were that, as Baroness Amos declared in mid February, that «it would be wrong to see Zimbabwe as a test case for NEPAD», in the aftermath of the Commonwealth meeting, the British government stated that its support for NEPAD might indeed be affected by events in Zimbabwe[50].

47 Independent Online, 19 Feburary 2002 (www.iol.co.za).

48 Hussein Solomon, «SA must take the lead: intervene if Mugabe's army prevents a victorious Tsavgirai from taking office», *Financial Mail* 18 January 2002, pp. 23-24.

49 For a critical assessment of the NEPAD initiative, see Ian Taylor and Philip Nel, «New Africa, globalisation and the confines of elite reformism: getting the rhetoric right, getting the strategy wrong», *Third World Quarterly* 23:1, 2002.

50 *The Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 17 February 2002.

The Commonwealth Observer Group issued a strong condemnation of the electoral process in Zimbabwe on 12 March 2002 though the South African observer mission declared the election substantially «free and fair», in spite of considerable dissent within the ranks of the 50 strong mission. SADC was divided, with the SADC parliamentary group condemning the election on eight points and the SADC Council of Ministers' group declaring the results to be legitimate[51]. A senior British official, speaking after the results had been released, declared: «*Tony Blair is sympathetic to NEPAD but if Mbeki rolls over on Zimbabwe, British domestic opinion may leave him little room for manoevre*»[52]. Washington was more blunt, with the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs saying that without South African condemnation of the elections «NEPAD would be dead on arrival». The hostile response of the international community to the South African government's position, which necessitated a retraction of a piece attributed to Mbeki in the ANC Today online publication which characterised the elections as legitimate, was a clear indication that Mbeki's government was panicking. After failing to attend Mugabe's inauguration on 17 March, the South African and Nigerian presidents with Mugabe and Tsvangirai to discuss the possibility of a government of national unity, a suggestion that was treated with ridicule by Zanu ministers and ruled out by the MDC leader. Meeting in London on 19 March, Mbeki, Obasanjo and Howard recommended that the Commonwealth suspend Zimbabwe for a year.

Assessing «Quiet Diplomacy»

An assessment of «quiet diplomacy» as conducted by South Africa demonstrates some fundamental flaws or oversights in the approach and is suggestive of both naivety in Pretoria and the limitations on South Africa's ability to act as a regional leader.

Misreading of Mugabe

There has been every expectation – both within moderate elements of Zanu and South African government circles – that each crisis was issue-specific (the referendum, the parliamentary elections) rather than systemic (white ownership of majority of agricultural land, the Bretton Woods Institutions' hold over the economy, and Mugabe's political status) and would therefore come to an end. After all, Mugabe had had a history of using the land issue many times before to galvanise domestic support without ever taking serious action against the farmers. It was not until April 2001 that members of the government began to recognise that Mugabe was bent on

51 Independent Online, 15 March 2002 (www.iol.co.za).

52 *Daily Mail and Guardian*, 15 March 2002.

using all means possible to secure re-election in 2002 and that, like Milasovitch, would issue assurances to Pretoria as a matter of short term expediency.

Misreading of South Africa's influence over Zimbabwe

The February 2000 experience around the referendum suggested that South Africa could bargain with Mugabe through the application of incentives, in this case diplomatic in the form of support and sympathetic utterances or in the economic support in the form of credits in the energy sector and other areas. This situation, however, was not to repeat itself as Mugabe, on the one hand, sought out alternative sources of finance such as Libya to fend off creditors for energy; and on the other hand, demonstrated a willingness to allow the economy to slide into disarray if necessary to facilitate his pursuit of power. The initial assumptions of leverage, which had been a central motivation in support of pursuing a policy of constructive engagement, were transformed by the end of 2001 to a recognition of having been both outmanoeuvred by Mugabe and an absence of leverage over him.

Misreading of South Africa's influence over SADC

Multilateralism had been the chosen means to resolve the problem of unilateralism experienced by South Africa during the Nigerian crisis. However, at least in the SADC context where Mugabe exercised considerable influence by dint of his past role in the organisation, enduring ties of solidarity and self-interest amongst the leadership with its own tenuous claims to legitimacy, the limitations of collective action were demonstrated. Indeed, the Zimbabwean crisis and the difficulty to win support for South African positions within that framework has introduced a distinct disillusionment within Pretoria for the efficacy of multilateralism in the region[53].

Beyond the particulars of «quiet diplomacy» and its failings, what this case tells us is that South Africa's willingness and capacity to act as a regional hegemon is limited. Where the South African government has chosen to act, and succeeded, has been in long term restructuring of SADC, seen for instance in the process of wresting the Organ away from Mugabe. But, the government's efforts to utilise what it perceived to be its influence over Mugabe proved to be illusive and ultimately ineffectual. This suggests that – outside of the business community – post-apartheid South Africa may lack the pre-requisites necessary to play the dominant role ascribe to it by McGowan and others.

Some may want to see «quiet diplomacy» as an effort to purse a foreign policy that was more autonomous of the forces of international capital, deliberately ignoring the signals and punitive measures sent through the markets. In this analysis, independent action is a function of willingness to endure economic and political censure against a measuring of the costs of doing so. When faced with the spectre of los-

53 Interview with Eddie Malokoa, director of the Africa Institute (Pretoria), 10 February 2002.

ing vital industrialised country support for NEPAD, Mbeki chose to finally abandon the last of his pretensions to a «middle way» in dealing with Mugabe and adopted the position held by the G-7 countries.

Finally, this case study underlines the point that leadership matters, that is that the role of structural and institutional forces alone are not sufficient to account for the policy outcomes pursued by Pretoria. Mbeki's preference for a «softly, softly» approach, contrasted with Mandela's forthright declaratory approach, as well as his centralisation of decision making, were all part of the pacing and process of articulating «quiet diplomacy» as well as the international community's perception of it.

Conclusion

The arc of crisis across Southern Africa, in which Zimbabwe is but one of a number of interlocking issues, highlights several challenges for the regional organisation that not only are suggestive of the divisions within the region but, ironically, are also an expression of growing regional integration. Grappling with issues as diverse as human rights and democratisation promotion; the need to expand a market-oriented financial and trade architecture; and the position on state sovereignty and interference in domestic affairs of member states, the SADC leadership must come to terms with this set of fundamental concerns that will shape the organisation and its long term development. Within the regional framework of crisis and change, South African leadership remains the linchpin and – despite differences – it certainly is the society with which the West most closely identifies[54]. South African assertiveness in regional affairs, when conducted in a multilateral setting and clearly backed by the international community, can be a powerful tool to promote peaceful and democratic outcomes in the Southern Africa. However, and this is emphasised by Pretoria, to pursue foreign policy without reference to the underlying economic and political realities of its own development and its wider ambitions for SADC (as well as the continent) would be dangerously short sighted. In this sense, the isolation and opprobrium in African circles which accompanied South Africa's criticism of Nigeria in 1996 – a position applauded by a West itself unwilling to take substantive action against Abacha – continues to cast a pall on South African action in defence of human rights.

That the crisis in Zimbabwe puts the dilemma of South African aspirations for continental leadership and its limitations – self-imposed or otherwise – in sharp relief is clear. By adopting the preferred «quiet diplomacy» approach towards Mugabe, the Mbeki administration has underscored the limitations of South Africa's willingness and ability to overtly challenge the norm of non-intervention in SADC and, by implication, Africa as a whole. The international chorus for South African-led action

54 Princeton Lyman, «South Africa», *Foreign Affairs* 1999.

against Mugabe's obvious human rights violations is echoed amongst opposition figures within Zimbabwe itself, where, in the words of one observer, «*History will judge harshly those like Thabo Mbeki who should act but choose to feed the serpent*»[55]. And yet one need look no further than neighbouring Mozambique to see the enormous cost of pursuing an ideologically purist foreign policy – implementing sanctions against Rhodesia in the 1970s and supporting the ANC in the 1980s – to recognise that such an approach should only be embarked upon with great trepidation. Balanced between its own history, development imperatives and the desire to assume a leading role in continental affairs, the South African government will continue to act like the frightened elephant in the fable, taking refuge in the fact that despite its timidity it is bound to outlive the mouse. What condition the fragile ideals that brought it and so many liberation movements to power across the region will be at that point in remains to be seen.

55 Tendai Laxton Biti, «Zimbabwe's Participation in the Congo War», paper delivered at a conference on the Zimbabwe crisis, South African Institute for International Affairs, Johannesburg, 14 February 2001.