Introduction

While in the years immediately following the demise of the apartheid regime the analyses of South Africa’s foreign policy mostly focused on Pretoria’s economic and security relations with the other Southern African countries, in the last decade scholars have been increasingly concerned with the role played by South Africa within continental and global institutions and organizations such as the African Union, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the BRICS grouping (le Pere et al. 2008; Alden and Shoeman 2013; Bond 2013; Kagwanja, 2006; Melber 2014).

The recent shift in scholarly attention reflects a concrete change in South Africa’s foreign policy. After some initial hesitations (Neethling 2003) and diplomatic fiascos (Inegbedion 1997; Ajulu 2009: 257), in the last decade the South African government has been playing a more active role in Africa, promoting the transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union, drafting and then directing the implementation of the *New Partnership for Africa’s Development* (NEPAD), and taking actively part in peacemaking activities and peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, its inclusion in the BRICS countries (together with Brazil, Russia, India, and China) in 2011 has apparently legitimized South Africa’s role as a spokesperson for Africa at the global level.

The recent official documents of both the South African government and the African National Congress (ANC) emphasize the political relevance of the country’s inclusion in the BRICS grouping, and argue that Pretoria can now play a more prominent and effective role in reforming the global political and economic agenda. Pretoria’s rising international status has been further enhanced by South Africa’s two terms as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, Pretoria’s role on the UNSC did not go without controversy. While during its first term (2007–2008) South Africa’s position on the violations of human rights in countries such as Zimbabwe and Myanmar provoked stern criticism from Western governments and civil society organizations, during the second term (2011–2012) Pretoria was heavily
criticized for its contradictory policy towards the conflict in Libya, having first voted UNSC Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force against the Gaddafi’s regime, and then voiced its opposition to the military intervention in the country.

While some scholars have celebrated South Africa’s new role in international affairs, others have sounded a note of caution and highlighted the limits of South Africa’s external projection. For example, Elisabeth Sidiropoulos has labelled South Africa as “a leading country of the South” that, having entered the BRICS group (until April 2011 Brazil, Russia, India and China), is now “playing in the premier league” (Sidiropoulos 2014: 432, 434). Likewise Adam Habib has recently argued that “South Africa is a regional power [and] it should be recognized as such, and given responsibility for stabilising and underwriting the continent’s development”, and concluded that “in many ways, South Africa has already begun to play a hegemonic role” in Africa (Habib 2013: 180–181).

It is precisely the latter role that has been questioned by some scholars. According to Alden and le Pere, “while having many of the trappings of a hegemonic power, South Africa is nonetheless experiencing difficulty operationalising these attributes into concrete policy gains in the region” (Alden and le Pere 2004: 294–295). This difficulty is rooted in a number of factors, such as the (initially) confused articulation of Pretoria’s foreign policy priorities, the economic and social problems of South Africa, the criticism aroused by South African investments in other African countries (Daniel, Naidoo and Naidu 2003), and the legacy of the destabilization policy pursued by Pretoria in Southern Africa during apartheid. Chris Landsberg has argued that while these factors “negate any role of hegemony [that South Africa] may wish to play”, because of its influence at the regional level the country should still be considered a “pivot” state (Landsberg 2004: 3). However, South Africa’s capacity to promote progressive (and effective) partnerships between the (Southern) African governments with the aim of strengthening democracy and fostering development on the continent has also been questioned (Alden and Schoeman 2003; Pallotti 2013). Thus, ASS: while some scholars have argued that post-apartheid South Africa has played with some success the role of “middle power” in global affairs (Cornelissen 2006), others have come to the conclusion that Pretoria is still far from being an “emerging middle power” because of the many difficulties its foreign policy has encountered in Africa and especially in Southern Africa (Schoeman 2003).

This chapter examines the regional conditions of South Africa’s global projection and highlights the risk that a number of unsolved problems and contradictions in post-apartheid South Africa’s relations with the other African and