Chapter 18

South Africa’s Parliamentary Diplomacy and the ‘African Agenda’

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**Introduction**

With the practice of parliamentary diplomacy developing internationally, there is a growing understanding of the concept in developed countries. For many developing countries, however, the discourse on parliamentary diplomacy is still fairly limited, especially because many of these legislative structures may be new and still developing their role in the context of limited capacity and resources. The historical context of apartheid saw participation in the South African legislature limited to only white representatives from 1968. Although Indian and Coloured groups were granted a segregated form of participation in 1984, through the establishment of the House of Delegates (Indians) and House of Representatives (Coloureds), black people remained excluded.2

Following the negotiated political transition in 1994 South Africa's first truly democratic and inclusive Parliament was established, comprising the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), the latter being South Africa’s upper house of Parliament. The result is that the ‘new democratic’ South African Parliament is a relatively new actor internationally, with just over twenty years since the country’s political transformation. Parliament has been slow to develop its position in international affairs, in part due to its historical context, given South Africa’s international isolation during apartheid. The diplomatic role of Parliament has also been constrained by a dominant executive.3 Although there were numerous calls for Parliament to adopt an active role internationally following the democratic transition, domestic

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1 See the introductory chapter by Stelios Stavridis and Davor Jančić in this volume.
imperatives in support of the transition saw a legislature that was primarily inward looking.4

Parliamentary diplomacy has, however, gradually become an element of the South African legislature’s core business. This includes an international relations programme of action with four identified areas: 1) developing and strengthening partnerships in Africa, 2) advancing multilateralism, 3) bilateralism through friendship societies and strategic groups, and 4) providing for public input into South Africa’s international relations.5 Parliament’s international focus also mirrors South African foreign policy priorities, where Africa is given a particular emphasis given the need to address the role that the country played in the past in destabilizing the region, and where South Africa has found itself as the de facto representative of the continent in multilateral forums such as the G20 and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).6 It is not surprising, therefore, that the official discourse considers South Africa’s parliamentary diplomacy, particularly its multilateral dimension, as an expression of Pretoria’s foreign policy priority of supporting the socio-political and economic development of Africa. Otherwise referred to as the ‘African Agenda,’ this policy priority was first articulated during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki from 1999–2008, and speaks to a commitment by the South African government to assume a leading role in Africa’s regeneration.

Through analysis of the South African Parliament’s international relations and its foreign policy focus on the African Agenda, this chapter demonstrates that just as the country has faced challenges in reconciling foreign policy rhetoric with practice, so has Parliament faced its own challenges when it comes to aligning its guiding values and principles with parliamentary diplomacy in practice. This impacts on the efficacy and the value of South Africa’s parliamentary diplomacy, an area where there is still significant opportunity for development.

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6 Although included within the emerging powers grouping of the BRICS, the South African economy is considerably smaller with a population of over just over 50 million and a GDP of approximately USD350 billion.