



National Interest and Foreign Policy in Africa; Understanding the South Africa's Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the National Interest and Foreign Policy trust in Africa, the paper particularly gave attention to South Africa. The paper observed that, since apartheid ended, much of South Africa's positioning on the world stage has been informed by what has been described as an Afrocentric approach to foreign relations. This paper seeks to examines the central question of whether the South African governments are realistic in taking adequate account of South Africa's national interests as it relates to the social wellbeing of its people as provided for in the preamble of the 1996 constitution. The study is anchored on Constructivism theory. Documentary method of data collection was employed relying on secondary data from books, journals and official documents. Data were analyzed using content analysis. It was found that there is a clear foreign policy drive ab nesio in South Africa, however there is lack of clear national interest. Therefore, the paper recommends that, like other African States, who are facing Conceptual gap, South Africa needs to define its national interest and build a discourse of how its national interests are balanced against its first principles in the Constitution, regional integration, the African agenda, as well as its international values, norms and obligations towards the rest of the world. More so, South Africa should pursue a foreign policy that will contain crisis of underdevelopment, challenges of poverty, leadership, Zenophobia, and a host of other maladies.

Keywords: *Foreign policy, National interest, State, Africa, Human rights*

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Background to the Study

It is truism that, scholars of international relations have come to conclusion that, national interest occupies a prime position in a nation's foreign policy. According to Obi (2015), National interest and foreign policy are at the root of the study of international relations. The totality of the actions, means and processes through which the national interest of a state are pursued constitutes those states foreign policy. Generally, international relations are driven primarily by national interests as posited by Padelford (1976) that; National interest are centered on the core values of the society, which include welfare of the nation, the security of its political beliefs, national way of life etc.

South Africa is one of the nations in Africa that suffered the apartheid policy which was based on the ethos of white superiority over the black majority. Their quest to participate in international activities and have a clear foreign policy drive with an attendant national interest was cut short by apartheid. However, understanding that national interests, values and identity are paramount in informing foreign affairs, they quickly move towards firstly, seeking the ability to assume a leadership role on the continent, and secondly, the nature of its foreign policy discourse, must be evaluated against the benchmark of actions that best serve the interests of the South African people which is national interest. In the context of this paper the nature of South Africa's constitutional democracy is taken as a starting point in determining the interests of South Africa as a nation.

The 1996 constitution is supreme and encompasses the recognition of international human rights law. The preamble makes explicit reference to the following values within historical context: We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to:

1. Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
2. Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
3. Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
4. Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

Questions can be asked as to whether an African Agenda pertaining to continental integration, and the diplomacy of Ubuntu is a strategy that adequately considers South Africa's national socio-economic interests; and whether it advances the national values of dignity, equality, freedom, democracy and the rule of law as articulated in the constitution. Against this backdrop, this work is set to unravel national interest and foreign policy in South Africa.

Conceptual Clarification

Foreign policy

There is no general agreed decision on conceptualization of foreign policy, hence scholars have differently attempted to define it. According to Modelski (1962) foreign policy is the

system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment. To Frankel (1968), he feels the subject matter can be defined as consisting of decisions and actions which involve to some appreciable extent relationship between one state and another. Foreign policy can be seen as the mechanism national governments use to guide their diplomatic interactions and relationships with other countries. A state's foreign policy reflects its values and goals, and helps drive its political and economic aims in the global arena. Many foreign policies also have a strong focus on national and international security, and will help determine how a country interacts with international organizations, such as the United Nations, and citizens of other countries.

Foreign policies are developed and influenced by a number of factors. These include:

- i. The country's circumstances in a number of areas, including geographically, financially, politically, and so on
- ii. The behavior and foreign policies of other countries
- iii. The state of international order and affairs more widely (for example, is there war or unrest? Are there trade alliances to take into consideration?)
- iv. Plans for advancement, such as economic advancement or technological advancement

Guided by foreign policy, diplomats and diplomatic bodies can work across borders to tackle shared challenges, promote stability, and protect shared interests. A nation's foreign policy typically works in tandem with its domestic policy, which is another form of public policy that focuses on matters at home. Together, the two policies complement one another and work to strengthen the country's position both within and outside its borders. Conceptually, Foreign Policy is a general objective that guides the activities and relationships of one state in its interactions with other states. The development of foreign policy is influenced by domestic considerations, the policies or behaviour of other states, or plans to advance specific geopolitical designs. Therefore, Foreign policy can be seen as the totality of nations reaction towards external environment.

National Interest

One of the most contentious concepts in international relations is the concept of national interest, which means different things to different scholars, analysts, practitioners, and policymakers. It has been defined as a "goal," a "method of achieving a goal," the "basic motivations of foreign policy formulation, execution," and a "guide for policymakers. Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson created the concept (Rosenau, 1969). National Interest is defined as "a shorthand expression of the sum total of a nation-objectives states and goals." (Dyke, 1972). As a result, a concise, precise definition of National Interest is suggested. It excludes international relationships between states. National interest, on the other hand, is "the key to any explanation of goal-seeking behavior... that states pursue in their international relationships," according to Rosenau (1969:167).

As a result, National Interest is regarded as the most straightforward means of comprehending or explaining "how and why nations do what they do when they engage in international action." And, because "nations do what they do in order to satisfy their best interests," analysts could use the concept of national interest as a tool for explanation or analysis by describing national aspirations so satisfied (Rosenau, 1968:35, in Saliu & Aremu, 2013:68). Unlike the definition of National Interest, this definition is broad and comprehensive (Dyke, 1972). Similarly, Obiozor (1999:69) believes that national interest "evaluates not only the worth of foreign policies but also explains why nations do what they do when they engage in international affairs." As a result, this definition provides justification or rationale for state behaviour in international relations. As Rosenau (1969), defined national interest, it is arguably very indicative of country relationships at the international level. Alternatively, Adeniran (1983:191) described national interest this way: "When statesmen and bureaucrats are expected or are required to act in the national interest, what is meant is that they are being called upon to take action on issues that would improve the political situation, the economic and social well-being, the health and culture of the people as well as their political survival. They are being urged to take action that will improve the lot of the people rather than pursue policies that will subject the people to domination by other countries... policies which are likely to make them unable to stand among other nations." When examined critically, this definition is similar to Rosenau (1968) and Obiozor (1999) in that it is global in scope. Despite the fact, it should be people-centered, bureaucratic, and can be "bullish," (pragmatic or assertive), or passive (subservient and passive). Furthermore, to Inioluwa (2023) national interest is the exclusive domain of the elites and or statesmen, to whom they are expected to say and do whatever is best for the citizens' overall well-being; politically, economically, socially, culturally, and health-wise. Therefore, National interest can be defined as the totality of policy instrument aggregated by individuals and groups in a given state.

Theoretical Framework

Generally, the study of foreign policy and National interest is characterized by a plurality of theoretical perspectives and approaches. These theoretical frameworks seek to explain state behavior in the international system and provide a lens through which scholars can analyze and understand the complexity of foreign policy.

In this work, the study will utilize the theory of Constructivism. The constructivist theory was first introduced to international relations through Nicholas G. Onuf's 1989 book *World of Our Making*. Onuf and other early scholars who built the theoretical foundations of constructivism in international relations first established that norms matter in this context. Norms are shared social beliefs about ideas, people, and concepts. Constructivism is a theoretical approach that emphasizes the role of ideas and norms in shaping state behavior. Constructivists argue that states' identities and interests are not fixed but are shaped by social norms and beliefs. They emphasize the importance of ideas, norms, and discourse in shaping foreign policy.

The Basics of Constructivism

Constructivism sees the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed. This view refers to the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge that are also called ontology and epistemology in research language. Constructivists argue that agency and structure are mutually constituted, which implies that structures influence agency and that agency influences structures. Agency can be understood as the ability of someone to act, whereas structure refers to the international system that consists of material and ideational elements.

Another central issue to constructivism is identities and interests. Constructivists argue that states can have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction with other actors. Identities are representations of an actor's understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests. They are important to constructivists as they argue that identities constitute interests and actions. For example, the identity of a small state implies a set of interests that are different from those implied by the identity of a large state. Social norms are also central to constructivism. These are generally defined as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity.

Application of the Theory

Constructivism theory is central to the understanding of national interest and foreign policy in South Africa in that, South Africa as a nation have multiple identities that are socially constructed through interaction which can provide a robust national interest that can be vibrant to pursuit at the international palace. It is also useful in that; South Africa has structures that can socially construct the national interest of the nation towards projecting their views in international phora.

Understanding the Foreign Policy and National Interest of South Africa

Historically, most African nations were hit in series of colonial malfeasance and other forms of subjugation that see them picking up gradually at the end of colonial rule. It is apt to note that, South Africa foreign policy has a history and can be traced back to the 20th century after the collapsed of the apartheid era in 1994. Like Ezekannagha (2016) rightly opined, that, this saw the end of international isolation and brought about the emergence of non-racial democracy. Nelson Mandela and his successor Thabo Mbeki saw to the invigoration of the conduct of international affairs. Under the tenure of Mandela from the period of 1994–1999, foreign policy was geared towards the promotion of human right, peace, justice, unity and democracy.

More importantly, they were hopes by majority of South Africans that the liberty we see them pursuit vigorously imperative issues in international affairs and redefine relationships with other nations, and this was done by great leaders like Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki who both recorded tremendously, a huge success in positioning the South Africa's image in international system.

Some of the basic objectives of South Africa's foreign policy include:

- i. Multilateral and economy diplomacy
- ii. North – South dialogue
- iii. South – South Co-operation
- iv. The African agenda
- v. Bilateral relations with individual countries.

In the words of Ezekannagha (2016) while appreciating the South Africa's vigorous pursuit of her objectives, he observed that, South Africa has recorded a number of successes as in meeting its foreign policy goals. It engaged in a bilateral agreement on the management and conservation of biodiversity (aimed at stopping poaching, particularly the poaching of rhinos), in the greater Limpopo cross – border park. The country's foreign policy also highlights the importance of multilateralism as a means of ensuring broad participation in international relations. It therefore played roles in multilateral fora such as North-South dialogue centered on trade, investment and aids.

On South –South Cooperation Ezekannagha (2016) pointed out that, South Africa foreign policy has embraced South cooperation which includes strengthening the political, social and economic linkages with partners in the developing world especially emerging powers like China, India, etc. the African Agenda as part of its objective was geared towards promoting socio- economic development within the frame work of Nepad and regional integration, strengthening bi-lateral relations and enhancing African units. It will also be pertinent to note that South Africa foreign policy under Jacob Zuma, recorded some level of success as a result of its focus on building a better Africa and a better world, promoting human right and democracy respect and justice for international law. It also announced a major foreign policy on Syria which aimed at ensuring lasting peace in Syria. It ensures that the international community must reject all calls for regimes change in the country. It must not also support external military interference or any action in Syria which is not in line with the UN charter.

Also, south Africa trade relation with Nigeria has brought development bearing in mind that it's telecommunication giant MTN, gained control over six million Nigerian telecommunication subscribers. this has enabled it to make huge profits from the Nigeria market. Other prominent examples include multichoice which controls 90% of the cable tv business in the country. other south African companies include chevron in the petroleum/gas exploration sector, south Africa airways in the commercial aviation industries, safmarine in the shipping business and Stanbic bank which is a critical actor in the banking industry. Seeing above, it is clear that, South Africa foreign policy has really positioned them in international politics. Though, of recent they have suffered some setbacks in its foreign policy implementation.

South Africa National Interest

According to Notshulwana (2012) the challenge faced by most analyses of South Africa's national interest, as well as by the Draft White Paper, is the development of a more coherent, elaborate statement of the country's national interest. Without such an explanation, it is less

useful to draw on the notion of the “inextricable link South Africa's national interest entails particularly with the region of southern Africa and the continent. South Africa's national interest is best conceptualized and derived from how its identities are being produced in interactions with its own society and the many identities that constitute that society. With regard to the proper conceptualization of South Africa's national interest, Van (2004) is correct in proposing the following questions: “What is South Africa's national interest? Who determines it? Can South Africa afford competing interpretations of the national interest? Or is contestation inevitable; in fact, a normal feature of democratic intellectual dialogue? Most of all, can the concept realistically guide South Africa's foreign policy?”

The debate on South Africa's national interest and foreign policy has been ongoing. This policy brief contends that the way in which the debate has developed has tended to place foreign policy above national interest, and not vice versa. The dilemma is that the media has foisted the false, if essentialist, notion of foreign policy in relation to national interest on the debate. For instance, an article in *The Star* made the following assertion: “How seriously do the Zuma people take foreign policy? This is the question still preoccupying the diplomats in Pretoria as well as policy experts ... as the whole of this administration are too focused on the vicious quarrels within the tripartite alliance” (Fabricius, 2010). The national debate in the tripartite alliance is important if it is meant to assist in defining national interest, in the same way that a debate in *Afri-Forum* on the Afrikaans language is important in terms of how it serves the country's national interest.

South Africa therefore needs to conceptualize and define its national interest better. A country's national interest is the collective – and, indeed, an aggregation – of all the other interests in all the political, economic and social dimensions of state activity. To define the national interest of a state based on one of its subsystems is not only incorrect, but also narrows the scope of state-society interaction that is required to construct an overarching statement of national interest. A great deal of work has been undertaken in each of the subsystems of national interest in South Africa, but what seems to be lacking is a systematic, coordinative discourse towards establishing an overarching framework.

Conclusion / Recommendation

Conclusively, this work examines the foreign policy and national interest of South Africa. It was observed clearly that, there is a clear foreign policy drive ab nesio in South Africa, however there is lack of clear national interest. Therefore, like other African States, who are facing Conceptual gap, South Africa needs to define its national interest and build a discourse of how its national interests are balanced against its first principles in the Constitution, regional integration, the African agenda, as well as its international values, norms and obligations towards the rest of the world. More so, South Africa should pursue a foreign policy that will contain crisis of underdevelopment, challenges of poverty, leadership, Xenophobia, and a host of other maladies.

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