

# Yea or Nay? Democratic South Africa's Voting behaviour in an Intergovernmental Organisation<sup>1</sup>



Suzanne Graham is a senior lecturer in International Relations at the University of Johannesburg's Department of Politics and International Relations and holds a PhD in Political Studies (UJ). Her research interests include South African foreign policy, international organisations, international conflict and terrorism.

## The World Welcomes a Democratic South Africa

*South Africa's relationship with the United Nations (UN) is as old as the organisation itself as South Africa was one of 51 founding members in 1945. Over the years the South African government's relationship with the UN can be described chronologically as: rocky – during the apartheid years, celebratory – in the early democratic years, and confusing – since 2007 and the onset of the first of two of South Africa's Security Council (SC) terms. Over these 71 years, South Africa has reformed itself and democratised, unlike the structure<sup>2</sup> of the UN.*

UN sceptics, within the local and global community, consider the intergovernmental organisation (IGO) to be outdated and irrelevant. Nevertheless, it is clear that since 23 June 1994, when the new South Africa was welcomed back to full participation in the UN by the General Assembly (GA), the Republic has demonstrated a keen and continuing interest in this 'multilateral system of global governance' representing 'the best hope for the challenges that face humanity.'<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in 1994 South Africa's first Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, expressed South Africa's UN position as the following, 'South Africa can be counted on to adhere to the pursuit of important goals of international peace and security and is committed to being a good citizen of the world.'<sup>4</sup> This explains why, in 2007, when South Africa began its first ever stint as a non-permanent member of the SC, interested observers around the world quickly expressed disillusionment over the country's vote against the condemnation of human rights abuses in Myanmar and Zimbabwe among others. South Africa's first opportunity to "perform" on the Council had essentially cast doubt over the consistency of South Africa's foreign policy choices in that multilateral forum.

The negative attention South Africa received over some of its 2007 UNSC votes inspired two questions: was the perception that the Republic had demonstrated ambiguity over the purpose behind its foreign policy an accurate perception to have? And secondly, if these votes were seen as uncharacteristic of South African foreign policy, by implication this would suggest that South Africa had always voted 'respectably' at the UN (since 1994). In essence, the question was whether/ to what extent South Africa's voting behaviour at the UN between 1994 and 2014 was consistent with its declared foreign policy?

## Analysing votes and judging consistency at the UN

In order to examine South Africa's voting data during its first 20 years as a democracy, some streamlining or narrowing down would have to be done, especially considering that a near 6,300 resolutions were adopted in the UN General Assembly alone in that timeframe. In other words, by investigating as many official government documents and speeches as possible, four specific areas of foreign policy interest became evident: 1.) the promotion of human rights and democracy; 2.) disarmament and related non-proliferation issues; 3.) the advancement of African interests and the consolidation of the African Agenda within the context of North-South relations; and 4.) reform of the UN and the promotion of equitable global governance. A model of voting behaviour was designed and used along with a methodology for examining consistency in terms of South Africa's declared foreign policy and its actual voting practices at the UN. According to a 2009 statement by South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane<sup>5</sup>, the principles underpinning the Republic's foreign policy had remained consistent in the years under review. Consistency<sup>6</sup> was defined as recurring patterns demonstrating a link between foreign policy declarations and foreign policy actions.

### Key Findings

The first theme examined the context behind South Africa's reputation going from a country wholly committed to human rights and democracy promotion around the world in 1994, to having a tarnished human rights status in 2007. The votes

were split into two areas of focus: country-specific human rights situations and thematic human rights issues. The UNGA's Third committee, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights/ Human Rights Council (HRC) and the UNSC were used to source the votes. South Africa's voting behaviour on human rights at the UN between 1994 and 2014 was mixed. South Africa had consistently voted in favour of thematic human rights resolutions, including those protecting civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and also the right to development

and the promotion of democracy. However, it had in the 20-year period failed, at times, to use its public UN vote to take a stance against human rights abuses in Cuba, China, Belarus, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Sudan and Zimbabwe. It should be stated that this failure did not apply to South Africa's consistent votes against Israel's human rights violations. Three main considerations became apparent. The primary consideration was South Africa's failure to indicate to the domestic public and the international community its strategic move away from prioritising human rights, espoused in 1994, to the overriding importance of other competing interests. Such interests included massaging old friendships – with Cuba, for example. This lack of disclosure of its foreign policy priorities resulted, in 2007, in public confusion and in some cases open hostility towards South Africa's uncaring, inconsistent attitude over human rights abuses. This also sparked a public diplomacy onslaught with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation's (DIRCO) declared commitment to informing its domestic constituents of the reasons for its foreign policy actions multilaterally. Secondly, respect for state sovereignty and solidarity proved to be the drawcard

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explanation for South Africa in its hesitation to name and shame any potential Global South partner's involvement in human rights abuses, even within the UN body essentially established for this purpose – the HRC. A third consideration was the Republic's desire to forge its own identity within the UNGA and later the UNSC. South Africa's attempts, under President Mandela, to single out Nigeria's human rights violations were met with resistance in Africa. This along with other reasons prompted the evolution of a South Africa unwilling to be perceived as an extension of the West, especially prominent in South Africa's UNSC role in 2007 and 2012.

The second theme explored one of the Department of Foreign Affairs/DIRCO's most comprehensive commitments: the fields of disarmament and non-proliferation. During the 20 years under review South Africa's strong moral authority in respect of non-proliferation and its rhetoric against anti-personnel landmines and small arms proliferation met with a few hurdles (notably its involvement in arms sales to war-torn countries) affecting the Republic's distinguished reputation in the field. The UNGA's First Committee, the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) annual report to the UNGA plenary, and the UNSC were considered. For the most part the Republic's foreign policy declarations on this theme were consistently adhered to in its voting behaviour. Three issues surfaced as prominent. Firstly, since 1994 the DFA had encouraged its delegates to become actively involved in UN-based nuclear diplomacy forums, among others. This helped to cement South Africa's reputation as a moral authority and technical nuclear expert and created a platform for South Africa at the UN's First Committee. Secondly, South Africa took its reputation very seriously as was evident in its consistent and careful studying of the wording of each disarmament resolution in its path. Moreover, the Republic was firm to insist on the undisputed authority of the IAEA as the sole verification instrument internationally in an attempt to neutralise somewhat the nuclear power politics played out in the UNSC. The third issue was South Africa's steady conviction that all states be allowed to use nuclear technology for civilian purposes. This conviction lost some focus, however, when the Republic became drawn in on the muddied waters of interpretation over Iran's real intentions in its pursuit of nuclear technology since 2003. Anti-personnel landmines and small arms proliferation became avenues of particular concern to South African delegations over the 20 years.

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Theme three explored South Africa's voting behaviour at the UN in relation to its efforts to advance African interests within the context of North-South relations. The Republic had emerged in 1994 as the 'new kid on the block' in Africa in terms of being welcomed as a democratic member of the continent for the first time. South Africa had to find its place both within Africa and the UN. By 1999 South Africa's President spearheaded a new initiative to improve Africa's situation in the world. Five years later it became a priority for the DFA to create a prominent position for South Africa within the hierarchy of the Global South. This was reaffirmed when Jacob Zuma became President in 2009 (and again in 2014). However, South Africa's foreign policy decisions have not always been popular with the rest of Africa or with other members of the Global South. South Africa's votes in the UNGA's Second Committee, Fourth Committee, plenary, and also

the UNSC were examined. Again three main areas stood out. Firstly, from 1999 onwards, during Mbeki's first term, South Africa began nurturing its African identity at the UN with great zeal. This identity was visible in the Republic's efforts to promote Africa's interests during its presidencies of the UNSC in March 2007 and April 2008 and again in 2011-2012. Secondly South Africa repeatedly relayed to the world community, through its delegation's speeches and sponsoring of resolutions on the subject, that the twin challenges facing the African continent were underdevelopment and poverty. Articulating Africa's concerns became part of a greater South African effort to embolden the Global South's cause for a more equitable international system. South Africa consistently voted in favour of resolutions aimed at the upliftment of Africa.

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The final theme delved into South Africa's UN reform agenda. A recurring DFA declaration, since 1994, called for the restructuring of the UNSC to reflect the realities of a post-Cold War era. The UNGA's Fifth and Sixth Committees and its plenary sessions were consulted. UNSC reform, although reasonable, is only one section of an otherwise vast initiative to improve, restructure and upgrade the UN organisation's overall workings. South Africa has since 1994 demonstrated a full commitment to:

UNSC reform; the improvement of the UN's finances and the distribution of benefits from the UN's budget; transparency in the Secretariat, and improved UN inspection and oversight mechanisms. South Africa's determination to reform the UN by consistently voting in favour of change is apparent. Issues over consensus, ping-pong politics<sup>7</sup>, and South Africa's desire to become a permanent member of the UNSC were recurring points.

Four additional significant issues featured in South Africa's reform lobby over the years. Essentially the UN was the only organisation reflecting a truly global membership and this together with a post-Cold War environment inspired a new responsibility for the organisation to reflect a new era of global representation in the UNSC. Secondly, South Africa consistently expressed its dismay over the US's lack of payment of its dues to the UN. Powerful states in the UN had under the scale of assessments method of payment a greater share of the bill to foot, and without this payment, or with a delay in full payment, many UN operations, especially those in Africa, were undermined. Thirdly, attempting to chip away at the seemingly immovable structure of the UNSC did not deter South Africa from simultaneously making its voice heard in smaller avenues of reform, including mandate review, the development account, revitalisation of the UNGA, and renewal and strengthening of the Secretariat. Although important, these three areas would pale in comparison to South Africa's efforts to achieve its ultimate goal of becoming Africa's permanent representative on a reformed UNSC.

### Consistency Ratings

Essentially the Republic has demonstrated, in all resolutions pertaining to human rights in the UNGA, an 8 per cent inconsistency with its declared human rights foreign policy. The 8 per cent seems particularly insignificant when placed against the 33 per cent partly consistent and 58 per cent consistent ratings South Africa received under thematic human right issues. However, the 8 per cent is important



when considering that it reflects South Africa's negative votes for resolutions that favour human rights promotion in specific countries where human rights are severely lacking or non-existent. What is most apparent is South Africa's fully consistent rating related to its votes on resolutions attempting to reform the UN since 1994. Each vote taken has reflected an earnest desire to restructure the organisation and is in direct harmony with South Africa's stated goals on the subject. What prevents South Africa from receiving a 100 per cent consistency finding for issues pertaining to the promotion of Africa's interests and those of the Global South, is its lack of explanation behind continuously failing to favour resolutions that would recognise the role sustainable agricultural technologies could play in alleviating poverty as well as its vote on Resolution 1973 in 2011 concerning the situation in Libya<sup>8</sup>. This partly consistent rating is given for this vote only in relation to the error South Africa later admitted regretting having made in voting for this Resolution.

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South Africa's votes on disarmament issues were also mostly consistent with its declared foreign policy on this theme. The Republic's combined 18 per cent partly consistent – inconsistency rating is based on South Africa's inconsistent voting patterns over: NPT-related issues and the risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East; resolutions concerning anti-personnel landmines; resolutions on conventional disarmament at a regional level; compliance with non-proliferation, arms limitation and disarmament agreements, and the role of science and technology in international security.

It is interesting to note that South Africa was mostly consistent on issues of UN reform, followed by the promotion of Africa's interests, then disarmament issues and lastly human rights. It may be incidental but it could be said that South



Africa's foreign policy evolved from one unsure how to deal with human rights issues at the UN, to one rooted firmly in nurturing solidarity with its Southern partners in Africa and the rest of the world. This reflects a young democracy finding its way in the multilateral organisation and attempting to balance external expectations of the Republic with its foreign policy priorities.

Taking the consistency assessments into consideration as well as the main issues surfacing within each chapter, the first key insight of the study is that to a great extent South Africa did have a rationale behind its voting behaviour at the UN between 1994 and 2014. In most respects there was congruity between South Africa's declared foreign policy and its UN voting behaviour. It has stumbled at times and side lined certain principles, human rights promotion in specific countries most especially. There is a suggestion that South Africa's refusal to name and shame in situations of human rights abuses in countries (preferring instead to abstain or vote against and rarely sponsoring resolutions on these situations at the HRC), is a testament to its own history. That is, South Africa came through

the transition period to democracy via an internally negotiated political settlement. It is plausible to suggest that South Africa would not try to impose on another's sovereignty when it had enjoyed the fruits of its own negotiations relatively untouched by the outside world, and therefore would want others to be afforded the same opportunity. However, even if this is partly true it does not explain South Africa's willingness to name and shame Israel for human rights abuses. So what this implies is that South Africa has a consistent policy of non-interference with human rights abusers, but there can be exceptions.

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Despite this inconsistency, overall such a young democratic country demonstrated a fair commitment to its declared principles in its voting behaviour. Expressed differently, democratic South Africa has been consistent four fifths of the time in voting in line with its declared foreign policy priorities. This is a remarkable feat. One fifth inconsistency is relatively minor. However, the nature of the content of this inconsistency (for the most part failing to act against human rights abuse) is not, and so it cannot be discarded. Another finding was the Republic's penchant for using consensus decision-making strategies at the UN (especially in areas relating to UN reform). Apart from pushing for consensus South Africa has also used the ping-pong strategy of procedural manipulation over both human rights and nuclear issues.

What is slightly disappointing is the Republic's inability to rise above power politics and consider each vote on its merits. This is especially so considering that South Africa's First Committee delegate stated that all resolutions were judged on merit and not on their origins. However, while this may have been the case in many disarmament resolutions, this was perhaps less evident in South Africa's response to: US-sponsored resolutions, or Permanent-5 (P-5)-sponsored resolutions, or United Kingdom-sponsored resolutions on Zimbabwe in which South Africa often questioned the motives of the resolutions' sponsors and not always the content of the resolutions. Also apparent was South Africa's sponsorship or introduction of resolutions on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Group of 77 and China, or the African Group. South

Africa was keen over the years to demonstrate its position within these groups, as an important, hardworking and passionate member and most importantly as a dependable representative of each group's interests. A particular example of Ambassador Dumisani Kumalo's defence of the G-77 over its position on a reform initiative stands out. The Republic also used its UNSC terms to promote Africa. However, South Africa has, at times, demonstrated an independent will, outside of its loyalties to 'Southern' institutions. South Africa disagreed with Ghana over Myanmar's vote in the UNSC in 2007. It also fell out of favour within the G-77 for taking the lead (along with China, India and Brazil) in negotiations with the United States at Copenhagen in 2009, and for filling the only African spot on the Group of 20 (G-20).

## Conclusion

During its first 20 years as a democracy, South Africa has played its part at the UN as one of the most committed delegations present for its votes. Without suggesting that history is destiny, past votes can in certain cases offer a base from which to make cautious judgements of future votes on similar issues at the UN. In South Africa's case, where a change of political party in power is unlikely in the near future, although the results of the 2016 local government elections point to a decline in the ANC's popularity, the pattern of UN voting behaviour built up over 20 years could point to more predictable UN voting behaviour in the near future. What is undoubtedly evident from the findings is that South Africa wants to be a 'big player' in Africa and the Global South. More ambitiously, South Africa wants to be chosen to speak for Africa in the UN. How it attains that position is subject to debate and destiny.

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### NOTE

- 1 Sections of this article are drawn from the conclusion chapter of the author's forthcoming book: Graham, S. *Democratic South Africa's Foreign Policy: Voting Behaviour in the United Nations*. Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-137-59380-1
- 2 To be fair, the UN Security Council was reformed once in 1965 when its membership was enlarged from 11 to 15 members.
- 3 South Africa – The Good News. (2006). 'South Africa secures seat on UN Security Council', 17 October, Retrieved August 26, 2016, from <http://www.sagoodnews.co.za/categories/63-south-africa-in-the-world/465-south-africa-secures-seat-on-un-security-council.html>
- 4 UN Chronicle. (1994). South Africa rejoins the world community: Nelson Mandela elected President, 31(3), 2–4.
- 5 Nkoana-Mashabane, M. (2009). Speech delivered by M. Nkoana-Mashabane, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, during the Ministerial Outreach Programme at University of Limpopo, 16 October 2009, Retrieved April 20, 2011, from <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2009/mash1016.html>
- 6 In order to assess whether or not the 'consistency' noted in the Minister's statement above, was true, if the voting actions taken were in contrast to foreign policy statements on related issues, then this was assessed as inconsistent. Similarly, if South Africa's votes were in line with its foreign policy, the voting behaviour was deemed as 'consistent'. If the voting action taken was out of line with a previously declared policy on the issue, but the Republic was able to provide 'explanation' for its decision, it was assessed as partly consistent. Explanation was assessed according to context and whether or not South African foreign policymakers had openly declared a 'change of heart' concerning policy prior to the vote.
- 7 According to Kaufmann (1996), p 150, Ping-Pong tactics refer to the back and forth nature of organisational decision-making where organisation A throws the point in question over to organisation B, sometimes for trivial reasons, and organisation B responds in kind. See, Kaufmann, J. (1996). *Conference diplomacy*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- 8 South Africa voted in favour of Resolution 1973, authorising a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace (its BRIC partners all abstained, though fellow Africans Gabon and Nigeria also voted in favour), which allowed for the UN to use 'all necessary means' to protect Libyan civilians from Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's regime.