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policy dialogue brief

Critical thinking from Stanley Foundation Conferences

Dialogue on
Global Leadership

March 19-20, 2012

Pretoria, South Africa



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This brief summary was drafted during the conference and reviewed by the participants, who had a subsequent opportunity to suggest revisions before it was finalized. Except where contrasting points are noted, the summary was meant to capture the group's shared views, though not every participant agrees with every point, and everyone spoke in a purely individual capacity.

The Roles of South Africa and the United States for the 21st Century International Agenda

Discussion Summary

On March 19-20, 2012, the University of Pretoria Department of Political Science and the Stanley Foundation brought together prominent experts from the US and South African foreign policy communities in Pretoria to discuss their two countries' roles as global leaders. Both nations are wrestling with how they should adjust their strategic aims, diplomatic tactics, and governmental capacities in the midst of rapid international change. Our discussion clarified some key considerations each government should weigh.

While experts from the two countries (and one from Canada) were forthright about their differences, they also took pains to emphasize the solid foundation for cooperation between the United States and South Africa—two democracies with heterogeneous populations and a shared commitment to the values of peace, justice, and human rights.

Participants highlighted the inherent tension between the considerations of effectiveness and legitimacy as nations structure their multilateral cooperation. It is all too easy for an established power to focus on effectiveness and downplay the need to give emerging powers and regional representation an enhanced role. Contrary to the idea of “earning” positions of leadership through substantive contributions to common global goods, leaders typically raise their level of responsibility when they assume leadership roles rather than beforehand. On the other hand, contributing toward effectiveness is a way for emerging powers to elevate their international stature prior to further global governance reform. One clear example was South Africa's recent turn as chair of the 2011 UN climate change conference, a vital contribution on an issue that is a priority for both countries.

There was consensus among participants that reforming the composition of the UN Security Council is not only desirable but necessary. Leaving its post-World War II structure in place will put the legitimacy of the Council in increasing jeopardy. At the same time, participants recognized

the obstacles to reform—including questions about the degree of other African countries' support for South Africa's candidacy—and were uniformly pessimistic about achieving reform. Americans at the conference said that the United States should weigh making a major push, but short of that, should broaden its support for reform beyond simply endorsing the candidacies of Japan, India, and Brazil. Meanwhile, South Africa managed to assume near-successive terms for an elected seat on the Council. The difficulties in the United Nations notwithstanding, South Africa's stature has been raised by its inclusion in the G-20 and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) group (and to a lesser extent the partial reforms of International Monetary Fund [IMF] governance), though none of these is equivalent to Security Council reform.

With the impending appointment of a new president of the World Bank, participants thought it was time to shift to a merit-based process and abandon the tradition of keeping an American in the job. Beyond the substance of the issue, such a change would be an apt symbol of the efforts to make room for increased participation by rising powers. Unfortunately, our discussion probably comes too late to have an impact on the decision.

To some degree, the divergence between US and South African foreign policies stem both from historical roots and from differences in their major priorities. Looking for potential overlap, participants noted that the preservation of peace in South Sudan ranks high as part of South Africa's concern about peace and security on the continent; it is also prominent on the US policy radar. This has indeed enabled the two governments to work in good coordination. At present, the fragility of the peace and major unresolved issues such as oil revenue, border demarcation, and the threat of new atrocities call for redoubled tandem diplomatic efforts. Participants strenuously emphasized the palpable danger of renewed war—which after South Sudanese independence has the potential to be an interstate and/or intrastate war. They

also stressed the importance of economic development to make the peace truly durable.

More broadly, participants made a compelling case that the United States should offer more active support for the African Union peace and security regime. This would help South Africa with a pillar of its foreign policy strategy while serving American interest in a stable, economically developing African continent. In that connection, the United States has a relatively new ambassadorship to build closer relations with the African Union (AU) as well as hosting an annual US-AU summit. Participants also discussed Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter as the basis for much greater reliance on regional multilateral organizations, particularly to support increased AU responsibility for regional peace and security.

The discussion wrestled with the gap between the US' and South Africa's shared long-term interest in a rules-based international order and their somewhat divergent approaches, in practice, to upholding that order. This has fostered mutual suspicions over images of the United States as heavy-handed and self-serving on the one hand, and South Africa as too willing to turn a blind eye to nations that run afoul of international norms on the other. Participants were able to alleviate this mistrust somewhat through a more detailed exploration of the two countries' respective standpoints to help overcome stereotypes.

The 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya as well as the current sanctions and threat of force against Iran are both clear sources of such tensions. Citing the Middle East regional security and the integrity of the overall nonproliferation regime, American participants stressed the importance of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. They also expressed their strong preference for a diplomatic solution and expressed serious doubts about a military option. South Africans at the conference emphasized their country's position that while Iran has a right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, it bears the burden of proof for the civilian character of its program and has been stubbornly

uncooperative with the international community. This opened an area of potential convergence—i.e., means of pressuring Iran in ways that South Africa would not consider excessive.

Taking a longer-term view toward the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty's (NPT) requirement for nuclear weapon states to disarm, participants discussed the need to extend the arms control process beyond the bilateral US-Russian negotiations so that China, France, and the United Kingdom also limit the size of their forces. This issue could represent an opportunity for South Africa to leverage its moral authority as a nation that voluntarily relinquished all of its nuclear arms. And once all five nuclear weapon state parties to the NPT have reduced their arsenals, it would bring to the fore those countries not covered by the treaty: India, Israel, and Pakistan.

Some parallels were noted between the United States' position as a major global power and South Africa's role as a major regional power. South African participants pointed to some resentment on the continent for its role and identified this as a potentially increasing foreign policy concern. They also mentioned a debate within the RSA foreign policy community about the possible need to sometimes be more forthright in advancing national interests rather than the consensual approach that was a hallmark of the Mbeki era. Others were of the opinion that building consensus and constructing partnerships is key. South Africa cannot be seen to be going it alone in Africa. It needs to work with reliable partners, especially Nigeria, and the tensions between the two African powers need to be defused as a matter of urgency. That said, South Africa's preference for dialogue rather than the use of force remains a hallmark of its foreign policy—an approach that speaks to the roots of post-apartheid South Africa.

In the conference discussion of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the response to mass atrocities, the Libyan case proved to be a contentious issue. Several South Africans alleged that the NATO-led intervention had seriously undermined the credibility both of the major Western

powers and the R2P norm itself, particularly the perception that coalition operations exceeded the Security Council mandate and dismissal of the African Union mediation initiative. The concept had originally enjoyed solid support among African governments, as expressed in the African Union Constitutive Act, which was striking given the region's longstanding tradition of stressing the principle of noninterference in states' internal affairs. American participants acknowledged some of the criticism but on balance supported the Libyan action, based on their interpretation of the UN Security Council 1973 mandate, the process by which it was developed and approved, and the imminent threat of atrocities. After further discussion, and taking into account the positions of other key global players, participants acknowledged that significant support remained ("R2P still matters," as one participant put it), and that working through differences on R2P is a better option than abandoning it. There is a need for trust and consensus building on how best to ensure that actions on behalf of the norm are more transparent and legitimate, as well as developing appropriate strategies for preventing mass atrocities.

Given the success of our relatively brief interchange in Pretoria, there is clearly plenty of room for Americans and South Africans to gain new insight into each other's foreign policy thinking. The participants looked forward to further opportunities for dialogue and encouraged their colleagues inside and outside of government to pursue similar in-depth discussions, if not full-blown collaboration.

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The research and teaching of the University of Pretoria's Department of Political Sciences focus on the areas of security and strategic studies, diplomatic studies, mediation in Africa, and South African foreign policy. It offers a Master's in Security Studies, and its Master's in Diplomatic Studies for senior diplomats from across Southern Africa is supported by the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO).

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