

The Quest for Partnership in Southern Africa: South Africa's Foreign Policy Dilemma

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The great doyen of African studies, Claude Ake, once observed that African countries were poised between a discredited past and a future which refuses to arrive. Considering South Africa's foreign policy relations with the Southern African region, it is an apt assessment. From the exclusive policies of total onslaught to the inclusive policies of the African Renaissance, South Africa has tried almost everything and still has not found a niche for herself in Southern Africa. Rather than a happy marriage of mutually interested partners, it appears that many of the states in the region may now be harboring deep reservations about South African intentions and commitment. It is almost as if there is a feeling of non-complementariness between the interests of the regional states and South Africa. This is despite the reality of shared fears of further marginalization and aspirations of more propitious integration within a rapidly globalizing international environment.

Clearly, the region still has to learn how to move smoothly from the old politics of confrontation to the new development-focused politics of cooperation. The paper argues that transformative development in Southern Africa is impossible without a leading contribution by South Africa. However, South Africa's inability to convince other states that her vision is complimentary to their needs has inhibited her ability to engineer a process of transformation and development in the region. In essence, the central argument in this paper is that the defining parameters of South Africa's regional foreign policy have remained largely indeterminate because of Southern Africa's ambivalent perceptions regarding South Africa's motives (on the one hand, the region is fearful of South African dominance; on the other, it sees South Africa as a launch pad into the international economy and as a solution to the region's marginalization in the international system).