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Op-ed

South Africa's Diplomatic Obituary Is Premature

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There is much to criticise in South Africa's foreign policy. Its messaging is sometimes ill-considered. Different arms of the state sometimes appear to be conducting different foreign policies. Historical loyalties too easily become substitutes for explaining what a relationship delivers for South Africans today.

But criticism requires proportion. Greg Mills and Ray Hartley's argument that South Africa's foreign-policy star has fallen reaches further than their evidence reasonably allows. An obituary needs more than a difficult relationship with Washington and an acrimonious one with Israel.

Some criticisms are entirely justified. General Rudzani Maphwanya's visit to Iran and the controversy surrounding his reported remarks were ill-judged. The Presidency itself called the visit ill-advised, while DIRCO distanced government policy from the statements attributed to him. Whatever the subsequent explanations, the episode exposed an avoidable failure of coordination.

Iran's participation in the January 2026 naval exercise in South African waters was another serious failure. Describing it as a Chinese-led exercise involving BRICS countries does not remove our responsibility as host and participant. More troubling still was the failure to give effect to President Cyril Ramaphosa's instruction that Iran should no longer participate. The resulting inquiry concerned the authority of the commander-in-chief, not simply an unfortunate photograph.

Non-alignment requires discipline. It cannot mean that a general, minister or party delegation is free to improvise the country's international identity.

These are substantial criticisms. They should be made without hesitation. They do not, however, settle the larger question.

The world is wider than the United States and Israel. Both matter. The United States matters enormously to South Africa's economy, and a government indifferent to that relationship would be failing its citizens. Repairing it deserves sustained attention.

The authors' criticism extends beyond Washington, particularly to the uneven application of principle. That deserves an answer. But deteriorating relations with Washington and Israel cannot carry the weight of a verdict on South Africa's international standing as a whole.

Europe provides an inconvenient complication for the article's broader thesis.

At the March 2025 EU-South Africa summit, European Council President António Costa described the two sides as strategic allies, bound by democracy, human rights, the rule of law and multilateralism.

That is a statement of political affinity, not merely commercial interest. It hardly suggests a country whose diplomatic standing has collapsed.

In March 2025, the European Union announced a €4.7 billion investment package for South Africa. By October, the Team Europe package had expanded to almost €12 billion, covering energy, infrastructure, digital connectivity and pharmaceutical production. These are commitments whose delivery must still be assessed. They nevertheless represent a substantial expression of confidence in a continuing partnership.

The parties subsequently signed a Clean Trade and Investment Partnership and a strategic partnership on sustainable minerals and metals value chains. Implementation has advanced during 2026. Europe is deepening important parts of its relationship with the very country whose diplomatic decline we are being asked to accept as an established fact.

Relations with China have also acquired greater political depth. In September 2024, the two countries elevated their relationship to an all-round strategic cooperative partnership in the new era. Subsequent ministerial exchanges in 2026 have given substance to that commitment through closer scientific and technological cooperation. Diplomatic titles alone prove little; the sustained engagement behind them matters.

China, meanwhile, has signed an economic partnership framework with South Africa and introduced temporary zero-tariff access for qualifying South African exports. That arrangement comes with conditions and a time limit. Its economic value will depend on our ability to use it. But it is a concrete development, not another summit photograph.

Africa also deserves a place in this assessment. In February 2026, AU member states elected South Africa to a two-year term on the Union's Peace and Security Council. Election does not guarantee effective leadership; that must be demonstrated through the work that follows. But it is evidence that fellow African governments continue to entrust South Africa with responsibility for continental peace and security. Their judgment belongs in the assessment too.

South Africa's contribution also extends beyond diplomacy. It deployed personnel to the SADC mission combating the insurgency in northern Mozambique, committing soldiers and resources to regional security. That mission has ended, but its Operation Copper deployment, supporting maritime security in Mozambican waters, is authorised until March 2027. Neither commitment is beyond scrutiny. Both belong in an assessment of what South Africa contributes to peace and stability in its own region.

None of this proves that our foreign policy is succeeding everywhere. It does make the verdict of general failure difficult to sustain.

The article's treatment of Ukraine raises a different problem: the standard against which influence is measured.

South Africa has not persuaded Russia to withdraw. True. Neither have the United States and Europe. Their relationship with Moscow is different, the authors might reasonably reply.

Then consider China. It has a much closer relationship with Russia and vastly greater economic and strategic weight than South Africa. It has not secured Russian withdrawal either.

On this test, whose diplomacy survives?

Nor is it accurate to imply that Pretoria has made no serious effort. Ramaphosa travelled with other African leaders to Kyiv and St Petersburg in June 2023. They presented proposals addressing de-escalation, negotiations, sovereignty, prisoners, children and humanitarian assistance. China has pursued its own proposals and repeated rounds of shuttle diplomacy. Their initiatives can be criticised. Their existence cannot be wished away.

Those efforts have not ended the war. Neither have the efforts of countries with vastly greater resources and influence. Why, then, should South Africa's inability to secure Russian withdrawal be taken as evidence that its diplomacy has failed?

The more useful questions concern how consistently South Africa has defended Ukrainian sovereignty, how persistently it has pursued its proposals and what practical results its access has produced. Those questions allow scrutiny. An impossible benchmark merely supplies a predetermined answer.

Gaza deserves the same intellectual care.

South Africa's ICJ application was not an isolated gesture confined to an anti-Western diplomatic fringe. Spain, Ireland, Belgium and numerous other states have filed interventions. These do not make every intervening state a co-applicant or imply agreement with every South African submission. They do demonstrate that the proceedings have attracted serious international legal engagement, including from Western democracies.

Beyond the courtroom, Britain, France and Canada jointly described Israel's escalation in Gaza as wholly disproportionate. Spain has explicitly described events there as genocide. Governments differ on that legal characterisation, but grave concern about Israel's conduct extends far beyond Pretoria and its BRICS partners.

Then there is Palestinian statehood itself. Britain, France, Portugal and several other European countries formally recognised Palestine in September 2025, alongside Canada and Australia. These governments have their own disagreements with Pretoria, but on the fundamental principle that Palestinians are entitled to a state, there is substantial common ground. Recognition does not imply agreement with every South African diplomatic choice. It does show that support for Palestinian statehood is shared by governments whose international standing the authors would hardly dismiss. A position does not become strategically respectable only when London or Paris adopts it.

One may question South Africa's consistency without treating its resort to international adjudication as evidence of diplomatic decay. Indeed, consistency is precisely where the debate should become more demanding.

South Africa has condemned Hamas's attacks on civilians and hostage-taking. It has affirmed Ukrainian sovereignty. In January 2026, it publicly defended Iranian citizens' rights to peaceful protest and called for investigation and accountability for deaths during the demonstrations. Its language on Iran was cautious and qualified. That is open to criticism. Silence is a different allegation.

Official statements are not the whole test, however. Condemning an abuse does not settle whether government has used its access, diplomatic pressure and public voice consistently. On that question, Pretoria owes a fuller account, especially where its friends are concerned.

Friendship should create an obligation to speak honestly. Liberation history cannot purchase permanent exemption from scrutiny. Pretoria would strengthen its credibility by applying that principle more visibly to its friends.

But the same discipline is required of those assessing Pretoria. Evidence that complicates a preferred conclusion must receive more than passing acknowledgement.

The authors are right to insist that foreign policy should serve a coherent national purpose. For South Africa, that purpose must include growth, employment, security, constitutional values and a functioning international legal order. We need partnerships that expand our choices and officials capable of managing their tensions.

That requires a better foreign policy in several respects. Clearer authority. More careful judgment. Greater consistency. Serious attention to implementation.

What it does not require is accepting that displeasure in Washington constitutes a universal diplomatic verdict.

South Africa has made mistakes. Some have been costly, others embarrassingly avoidable. It also retains consequential relationships, has secured new agreements and has undertaken peace initiatives whose limitations deserve examination alongside their intentions.

A country's diplomatic standing must be assessed across that whole record. There is work to do, but there is no need to invent a funeral.

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