

South Africa's Approach to Hosting and Chairing Major Events

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1. Executive Summary

South African foreign policy positions the country at the centre of international affairs, referred to as 'punching above its weight.' This stems from its history, including its role in the First World War and the struggle against apartheid. In the post-apartheid period, South Africa continued to assert its international presence by sending cultural icons abroad and hosting major events. The country has also chaired significant international bodies and initiatives. Despite these efforts, it has not systematically measured the benefits of hosting and chairing to justify the costs.

The National Planning Commission (NPC) studied the cost-benefit balance of hosting and chairing international events to provide suggestions for a better balance. The study focused on the benefits derived from hosting and chairing the Southern African Development Community (SADC), African Union, and Brazil, BRICS forums. These entities were chosen for the availability of data and the different dynamics associated with hosting and chairing them.

The findings suggest that while South Africa uses hosting and chairing opportunities to advance its national and regional interests and to enhance its global image as Africa's voice, domestic constraints have complicated its foreign policy identity and limited its ability to produce results. South Africa has demonstrated effective leadership when chairing by contributing to positive outcomes for the chaired entity and generating direct and indirect benefits. Lessons from comparative case studies show that chairing and hosting offer long-term benefits when correctly planned to include the growth of political, economic, and cultural capital. However, South Africa's share of BRICS trade and investment remains low. There are growing concerns about the misalignment of South Africa's political and economic policies, with an overemphasis on political objectives undermining potential economic interests. Additionally, there is no guiding document or strategy governing how the country approaches chairing and hosting as a foreign policy activity.

The study recommends how to enhance South Africa's approach to hosting and chairing international events, such as continuously updating national framework documents related to foreign policy, strengthening Parliament's oversight role in international engagements, and establishing a forum for discussing foreign policy issues.

The study concludes that although South Africa has made progress in planning and benefiting from international hosting and chairing opportunities, alignment with national interests and economic objectives varies. The country can enhance its capabilities to better align global ambitions with national interests and receive material benefits.

2. Introduction

A key feature of South African foreign policy is the ability to place South Africa on the centre stage of international affairs, referred to as ‘punching above its weight.’ This comes from a longstanding tradition of positioning South Africa in key events shaping international relations. Jan Smuts’ government’s positioning among the victors of the First World War enabled South Africa to be on the centre stage in the interwar period. The struggle against the apartheid system gained global recognition through one of the most extensive solidarity networks in the world as Nelson Mandela was fashioned into an international icon. The successful ending of apartheid via a negotiated process, leading to an exemplary government of national unity added to this currency and prestige.

After apartheid, South Africa harnessed this experience of being on the centre stage as its musicians and artists continued as icons in the world. It has also done this by hosting important global sports tournaments, UN conferences, and significant arts and culture events. It has readily taken opportunities to chair important global bodies and initiatives such as being co-chair (with South Korea) of the G20’s Development Working Group, occasionally chairing the BRICS, IBSA, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, among others. While this iconography is expected to translate into material value in the form of investment, economic growth, political capital, capability, and other benefits over time, the country seldom measures these benefits as a justification for the costs of hosting and chairing.

This advisory is derived from a study commissioned by the NPC to analyse this cost-benefit balance and suggest how the country might balance the costs and benefits of chairing and hosting.

3. South Africa: Hosting and Chairing

The commissioned case study focused on assessing the benefits that South Africa derived from hosting and chairing the SADC, African Union, and BRICS forums. These three were chosen for the availability of data, frequency of hosting and chairing involving them, and the different dynamics involved in chairing and hosting these three.

Chairing SADC

In 2018, South Africa was elected to chair SADC, committing to focus on seven structures and processes to promote peace and stability, socio-economic development, good governance, and regional integration. This presented an

opportunity for South Africa to ensure that 80% of applicable resolutions or outcomes within the SADC mechanisms reflect South Africa's national and regional interests. However, it was subsequently revealed that there was no budget to pursue these goals due to austerity measures. Yet, remarkably, the South African President reported that the country secured more than R85 billion in committed productive investments by South African companies in each of the priority value chains across the region, covering forestry, agriculture and agro-processing, fertilisers, mining and mineral processing, and pharmaceuticals.

Chairing the African Union

South Africa chaired the African Union in 2020, promising to achieve the following: -

1. Finalising outstanding issues around the AfCFTA and the implementation of the Presidential Infrastructure Champion Initiative
2. Hosting the Extraordinary Summit on Silencing of the Guns, and focusing on conflict resolution on the continent, particularly in Libya and South Sudan
3. Green growth and opportunities presented by the green transition
4. Prioritising skills needed for the Fourth Industrial Revolution and establishing an Africa Artificial Intelligence Forum
5. Addressing gender-based violence and prioritising the adoption of an AU Convention on Violence Against Women

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 global pandemic shifted the focus to coordinate the continental response to the pandemic, which South Africa is reported to have done with great success, showing remarkable leadership. As a result, however, there was very little progress to report on the five priorities.

Chairing BRICS

South Africa's opportunity to chair the BRICS in 2013 completed the first circle of five summits. The country publicly identified two critical targets: 1) a joint trade study to identify ways of promoting more value-added exports among BRICS members, and 2) a seminar on investment agreements to share BRICS policy experiences and perspectives on investment regulation, including bilateral investment treaties. The unstated goal was to bring African countries closer to BRICS countries through an outreach programme. The chairing produced a BRICS Business Council and the launch of the BRICS outreach programme, which began with 20 African countries and a consensus position between the BRICS and African countries including support for Africa's industrialisation and infrastructure development and an undertaking by BRICS countries to diversify their economic cooperation with African countries away from importing raw materials.

4. Findings

Although South Africa uses hosting and chairing opportunities to advance its national and regional interests and enhance its image as Africa's voice on the global stage,

domestic constraints have complicated this foreign policy identity and positioning and limited the ability to produce the results.

Notwithstanding this, South Africa has, on occasion, demonstrated astute leadership as a chair, helping to engineer positive outcomes for the chaired entity and thus contributing to South African iconography, while generating direct and indirect material benefits for itself. This was demonstrated by South Africa's leadership during the Covid-19 response and BRICS African outreach.

Although South Africa sets laudable goals, including goals that are explicit about the advantages for the country, these goals are not pursued in any meaningful ways. The reasons for this may be exogenous in some cases, as with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, but they are often endogenous in other cases.

Lessons from the comparative case studies show that chairing and hosting can add long-term benefits when correctly planned so that political, economic, and cultural capital accrues to the hosts. The prestige gained is maintained when linked to material goods and services derived from the opportunities. This is an outcome of a deliberate plan for well-defined benefits.

These opportunities have contributed somewhat to the upward trajectory of bilateral trade, investment and tourism flows between South Africa and SADC, AU, and BRICS, in general, but in the case of the latter, South Africa's share of BRICS trade and investment remains very low.

Engagement with key stakeholders revealed a growing concern about the misalignment of South Africa's political and economic policy. The overemphasis on political objectives undermines the evident opportunities for economic benefits and interests.

There is no guiding document or strategy governing how the country should approach chairing and hosting as an important foreign policy activity as this is conducted based on trust in the ability of officials and politicians to customise the broad policy objectives and principles in each case as it comes

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are highlighted as a contribution to enhancing South Africa's approach to the hosting and chairing of international activities/entities:

1. National framework documents (including Chapter 7 of the National Development Plan) relating to South Africa's foreign policy must be updated continuously to guide the actual positioning and achievements in global affairs.
2. Parliament should strengthen its oversight role in ensuring that plans for international engagements are meticulously developed and fully executed.
3. South Africa should establish a forum – similar to the Aswan Forum (Egypt), Raisina Dialogues (India) and Kigali Dialogues (Rwanda) – that brings together

policymakers, academics, civil society, and the private sector to deliberate on critical foreign policy issues.

4. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) should consider reconstituting the South African Council on International Relations. This Council should be complemented by the revival of the former Ambassadors Association and broader consultations with representatives from civil society.
5. DIRCO and the Presidency should strengthen policy research, analysis, and strategic capability to help government understand the cost-benefit strategies of each chairing or hosting opportunity.
6. The guidelines for hosting and chairing events need to emphasise the national interests and benefits of each opportunity that is canvassed or accepted.
7. South Africa needs to develop a clear communications plan about the opportunities and advantages for South Africa related to each chairing and hosting occasion.
8. Data on trade and investment trends including those linked to major chairing and hosting opportunities should be generated.
9. There must be continuous monitoring of South Africa's positions, contributions, and commitments across all its regional and international engagements with more frequent and rigorous evaluations of the outcomes and impact of hosting or chairing international events.

1. Conclusion

South Africa has made strides in planning for and pursuing benefits from the opportunities of hosting and chairing international activities and entities. However, the extent to which these contributions have aligned with its national interests and economic objectives varies from one opportunity to another. The task of aligning global ambitions with national interests in the form of material benefits for the country is a continuous process that needs to be improved including by enhancing the planning, strategising, research, and policy capability in the parts of government that deal with international opportunities. Africa has the potential to harness future hosting and chairing opportunities, which would strengthen South Africa's positioning and benefits.