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Changes in South Africa's Foreign Policy

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May's parliamentary elections in South Africa, a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), will change the directions of its foreign policy. The victory by the African National Congress (ANC) was made possible by the popularity of the current president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who will emphasize the international dimension of policy. In his new term, he will focus on regaining the trust of foreign investors, strengthening the country's pro-Western course, supporting multilateralism, and reform of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Political Landscape after the Elections. The 8 May elections were won by the ANC, the ruling party since the end of apartheid in 1994. The newly elected parliament chose incumbent Ramaphosa, in power since 2018, as president. Since 2017, he has been the head of the ANC. The party's victory was the result of support for Ramaphosa's policy of reversing the legacy of his predecessor, Jacob Zuma, whose decade-long rule was marred by corruption scandals and irresponsible foreign policy that resulted in the loss of public trust in the party and erosion of the state's international image. Zuma's actions led to an economic slowdown and outflow of foreign investors. Ramaphosa, formerly a popular unionist, promised to renew the country by returning to the values espoused by Nelson Mandela, who had been his close associate, particularly by fighting corruption. However, Ramaphosa's position within the party was uncertain and his policies dependent on compromises with the populist opposition—the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The ANC's victory in the parliamentary elections and Ramaphosa's re-election by the National Assembly have given him the needed mandate for reform.

Ramaphosa's biggest challenge will be to reverse the negative trends in the economy, which is growing by less than 1% now. Only if it reaches 3-5% will it help decrease the 27% unemployment (50% among youth). Regaining international credibility and attracting investors are instrumental in stimulating growth. The major rating agencies, except for Moody's, assess the investment environment in South Africa as unfavourable. The government will seek to change this state of affairs with a foreign policy correction.

Between BRICS and the West. South Africa joined Brazil, Russia, India, and China in the BRICS cooperation format in 2011, accompanied by anti-Western rhetoric, which complicated relations with the U.S. and the EU. South Africa is the Union's biggest trade partner on the continent. The EU is also the donor of 70% of development aid reaching South Africa. The EU was critical of South Africa's reorientation towards BRICS, which initially was seen as a political competitor to the globalisation model based on Euro-Atlantic institutions and standards. A trade clash with the U.S. in 2015 almost led to the expulsion of South Africa from the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, a framework facilitating U.S.-bound exports. Among the additional costs of participation in BRICS were Zuma's non-transparent policies. He made agreements with Russia and China amid allegations of corruption. For example, Ramaphosa's predecessor agreed with Russian state firm Rosatom to build nuclear plants in South Africa on terms the nation's budget couldn't support.

Still, South Africa was able to benefit from participating in BRICS, mainly serving to strengthen its international position, mostly in Africa. In 2017, the first foreign branch of the Shanghai-based New Development Bank, the BRICS flagship financial institution, was opened in Johannesburg. During the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in July 2018, South Africa persuaded its partners to create a BRICS vaccine centre and enhance cooperation in peace operations, mostly in Africa. Considering those benefits, Ramaphosa will not withdraw from participation in the bloc but he will try to better balance the advantages and costs related to membership in the organisation, which not only will enable him to differentiate himself from his predecessor but also to improve relations with the Western partners. Such aspirations are reflected in the fact that Ramaphosa has skipped Russia in his foreign trips. He also has declared South Africa will not finalise the deal with Rosatom and will focus on renewable energy instead.

International Criminal Court. One of the characteristic points of Zuma's foreign policy was sharp criticism of the ICC, which he called a post-colonial institution biased against Africans. This argument became more widely used after the scandal of the 2015 South Africa visit by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, wanted by the ICC for crimes in Darfur. South Africa, a state-signatory to the Rome Treaty, was supposed to arrest him but it didn't, and starting in 2016, Zuma tried formal ways of withdrawing from the ICC. If he had succeeded and other African states followed suit, the institution could have collapsed. After Zuma's removal, Ramaphosa remained tactically silent on the issue of the tribunal. He didn't defend it directly, fearing a media clash with the "anti-imperialist" opposition from the EFF and from within his own government before the elections. Today, South Africa sees more advantages in joining states such as Tanzania that are critical of the ICC but want to reform it from within instead of rejecting it.

UNSC and Multilateralism. The perspective of non-permanent membership of the UNSC in 2019–2020 gave a chance to highlight South Africa's role as a responsible participant in international relations. One of Ramaphosa's first decisions after re-election was to sign into law a tax on greenhouse gas emissions, despite being painful to the country's carbon-dependent industry. South Africa has declared increased activity in the UN Human Rights Council and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. It declares speeding up operationalisation of the African Standby Force (ASF), designed to react to crises on the continent. In November 2018, the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed its previously neutral stance on the crisis in Myanmar and requested its diplomats condemn that country's government on the international stage for persecuting minority Rohingya. This approach is an example of the use of "Nelson Mandela values" in foreign policy, meaning taking a principled stance on human rights throughout the world. However, for now, such values-based policies are more likely to be implemented with regard to issues outside of the continent than to African states. In January, for example, South Africa did not support the UNSC's condemnation of the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo for forcing an internet blackout after controversial elections. It also did not support the U.S. and French attempts to adopt a resolution questioning the election results, which could have harmed the economic interests of members of the South African elite in the Congo. Also in January, the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) unsuccessfully called on Ramaphosa's government to act to stop a wave of repression in Zimbabwe, whose citizens form the biggest immigrant community in South Africa.

Conclusions. Ramaphosa's victory and re-election as president, combined with the launch of South Africa's term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, presage the activation of its foreign policy. Its final form will be clarified once the competition between the supporters of Ramaphosa and Zuma within the ANC is resolved. The requirement to regain the trust of foreign investors and backtrack on the legacy of Ramaphosa's predecessor will strengthen the Western edge of his foreign policy. It will not be hampered by continued membership in BRICS, currently de-ideologised and focused on elevating the country's profile on the continent. In the global dimension, Ramaphosa will support initiatives fighting climate change and strengthening multilateralism and will soften criticism of the ICC. In relation to "Mandela's values" in foreign policy, the most likely scenario is that South Africa will maintain two standards—one for Africa and one outside it, where economic interests are not at stake. In Africa, there are no signs that South Africa will take strong political actions to diffuse looming crises. Instead, Ramaphosa will present progress in the creation of the ASF as sufficient success in this area. With South Africa's ambivalent approach in Africa, Poland will have difficulties engaging with this country in cooperation on matters in the Sanctions Committees on Sudan and South Sudan, which Poland chairs within the UNSC until the end of this year.