

Analysis of south africa's foreign policy issues

Government



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When analysing a country's foreign policy structures one needs to be cognisant of both the international as well as domestic factors and actors. South Africa, as a particular case study, provides Foreign policy analysts with quite an interest topic of study. Chris Alden provides an effective approach to understanding the influence which domestic factors and actors have on foreign policy.

Alden suggests that before deciding whether or not domestic factors have a tangible impact on foreign policy one must first investigate the nature of the state and society as a prerequisite to decide how exactly these actors affect foreign policy.

Traditionally in South Africa, the levels of public participation in foreign policy have been very low in spite of the post-1994 government's commitment to upholding democracy at all levels of society. This goal of democratising democracy was first expressed in a 1993 discussion paper of the African National Congress (ANC) which stated that " Foreign policy belongs to South Africa's people". However, the reality in South Africa's case is that foreign policy was an elite-driven process shrouded in secrecy which left scholars still highly puzzled with the question of what domestic factors actually affect foreign policy. This elitism continued throughout the administration of former President Thabo Mbeki. Most decisions regarding foreign policy were centralised within the presidency. Under the Zuma administration there had been greater emphasis placed on understanding and drawing links between domestic and foreign policy. This resulted in greater public engagement. South Africa as it currently stands, is one of the few states who include communication with domestic audiences in their public diplomacy attempts.

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Therefore it is evident that South Africa does in fact place a great amount of value with regards to incorporating domestic factors and actors in the plurality of its foreign policy decision-making. However, it is unclear as to whether or not these factors have any significant influence on the policy considerations.

Alden suggests that there are three popular approaches which scholars of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) make use of when assessing the influence of domestic factors on foreign policy decisions and implementation. The three include the domestic structures approach, the “structuralist” approach and the pluralist approach. These three approaches will be explored in greater detail throughout the body of this text.

Perhaps the most popular approach is that of the domestic structures approach which investigates the nature of the state political institutional arrangements linking state and society and channelling societal demands into the political system. When analysing the state of affairs in South Africa's current foreign policy it is important to understand that even though these structural institutions are independent of each other, they are still used as a method of accountability. One body cannot act in complete isolation of the other. Alden refers to the work of Risse-Kippen when underlining the notion that the importance of the state structure resides in the fact that it is the crucial site for foreign policy decision-making, but in the same breath that it is mediated through constitutional arrangements. In South Africa which is a country who has historically been plagued by injustice and corrupt political systems, the constitution is a cornerstone for all decision-making and

engagement. The following example illustrates the interplay and influence of domestic factors on foreign policy considerations.

Section 231(1) of the South African Constitution secures the supremacy of the national government over foreign affairs issues. It affirms that the national executive has exclusive power to negotiate and sign all international treaties. However, section 231(1) further mandates that international agreements that are not of a technical, administrative or executive nature, and those requiring ratification or accession must be approved both by the National Assembly as well as at least six of the nine provinces in the NCOP. This is just one example of the interplay between domestic factors. On the one hand it exhibits how the judiciary is able to limit state power so as to ensure that all decisions with regard to foreign policy are done so democratically, it also exhibits the importance of consensus within the legislative assembly with regards to this decision-making. When engaging further with this example one can highlight the importance of political interest groups in the form of opposition parties. In a democratic state such as South Africa, political interest groups play an imperative role in the polity of international relations, as so clearly reflected above.

Here, within the particular constitutional framework of the state, domestic institutions and interest groups operate, devising coalition-building strategies that ultimately demonstrate the effectiveness of domestic influences over foreign policy. The rules of political participation influence formal politics and the conduct of political parties in relation to international issues. Traditionally, the executive has the power to formulate and implement foreign policy, awarded by the constitution. The legislature and <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-south-africas-foreign-policy-issues/>

judiciary in the case of South Africa have limiting powers of judicial review and budgetary control. The number of access points between societal and decision makers ultimately determine the degree to which there is public input to state foreign policy. In the South African context, one needs to be cognisant of the fact that South Africa is a democratic republic. This means that there are many access points to engagement with the different levels of government. With this in mind one also needs to accept the fact that the primary concern of party leaders is to maintain public support if they want to ensure political longevity. This means that a complete disregard for public opinion could be detrimental to governments if they wish to enjoy an extended term. An example of this can be seen in the loss of support that the ANC received after entering into an unwanted arms deal with Russia.

Intert structuralist approach

Finally, Alden presents the pluralist approach. This approach focuses on sub-state societal actors and interests. Pluralism is deemed as one of the most widely acknowledged approaches with regard to assessing the influence of domestic factors on the foreign policy of a state. Pluralism introduces a myriad of factors and actors which have the ability to influence foreign policy decision-makers. In the body of this work three factors in particular will be examined, namely: interest groups, local media, and public opinion.

Interest groups can be viewed as “ auxiliary actors” that stand between the government and the mass public, tied to the governmental-decision-making system by channels of communication. Interest groups which attempt to wield power foreign policy decisions fall into different categories dependent

on their specific agenda. These agendas can be political, economic or social. These organizations have specific policies and processes which they utilize in order to influence foreign policy. Public interest groups have a great impact over public opinion and as such provide governments with a useful link with regards to the attitudes of the mass public towards certain issues. Interest groups provide governments with insight as to popular opinion and have a significant influence on public opinion. These interest groups offer either electoral support or financial mobilization in exchange for their backing for foreign policy positions. Maintaining a certain level of internal diplomacy with these interest groups is imperative to the survival of a government, especially in the case of a democratic republic like South Africa where public support is what a political party would need to ensure longevity. These interest groups are also highly reflective of national interests and as such can be a useful tool in understanding the gaps or demands of the nation at large. Opposition parties are seen as one of the most prominent forms of interest groups in democratic societies such as South Africa.

The local media can be seen as one of the most important role players in the foreign policy process in the sense that it acts as a connection for the passing of information between the public, the state and the international arena. Local media also has a significant impact on policy decision-making in many ways. On the one hand it is imperative to the notion of agenda-setting. For example when considering phenomena such as the “ CNN effect” it is clear that in South Africa that which receives the most media coverage is that which receives the most governmental attention. Moreover it is a crucial factor which shapes public opinion and holds massive power in this respect.

The local media also has a direct influence on policy-makers, particularly regarding its public diplomacy. In a democratic society like South Africa, image is everything. And as such the local media has the power to shape, not only domestic opinion, but international opinion. In the last century the role of the media has been two-fold: acting both as a support structure as well as a basis for criticism. The role of the media also begs the question of how to strike a balance between freedom of the press and national security. With the advancement of so-called “ new media” in the form of cell phone and computer technology information is almost instantaneous. This means that citizens are being made aware of events and policy changes as they are taking place. People are now able to more easily voice an opinion over a particular matter by engaging in online discussions and simply airing their own concerns through social media. The media has a great influence over public opinion and as such has an impeding effect on the public diplomacy. The local media acts as a link to the greater global media. This means that the way in which an issue is reflected in the local sphere is what will shape external media and as such have an effect of the reception of foreign policies by other countries. In the post-Apartheid South Africa, domestic actors which include civil society and the broader public are becoming more conscious of the effects which international issues have on their own lives. In the same breath, with the uncontrollable growth of technology, it has become increasingly difficult to target a specific audience with a specific message without it being heard by other audiences. This has resulted in a blurring of lines between international and domestic audiences.

Public opinion is a broad term which encompasses many facets including the mass, attentive public and various interests and lobbying groups. Public opinion is influential in the sense that it sets the parameters to foreign policy decisions. Alden refers to the influence of public opinion as a “ background restraint” to foreign policy implementation. Many conservatives believe that public opinion should not have an influence on foreign policy considerations as these would be uninformed and ignorant opinions. Many suggest that elite power should be placed in the hands of government actors in order to ensure that informed decisions are made. However, in a democratic society such as South Africa one should not deny the fact that the first concern of governments is to maintain good domestic relationships as this will determine their longevity in the democratic state. One needs to be aware of these tensions and not neglect the appeasement of the public at large. If the people of a democratic state feel as though they are being ignored, it might lead to a massive withdrawal of support for the governing party. Public opinion can therefore be seen as having two levels to its influence. On the one hand it can constrain freedom which governments can have. The second influence it can have is that it can shape or influence what priority policy makers give to foreign policy issues.