



Foreign policy pivots to China, Russia and anti-Western rhetoric

[From the annual South African Monitor Report of February 2018: Political factionalism, business risks and the ANC's hybrid regime]

South Africa's foreign policy has clearly pivoted to China and Russia during the Zuma presidency. This policy differs sharply from the more balanced multipolar approach under Nelson Mandela's presidency.

A Better Africa in a Better and Just World, a discussion document of the ruling ANC of 2015, reflected this shift.¹ It formed the basis for foreign policy discussions at the ANC's policy-making National General Council in mid-October 2015. Such discussion documents are often an early indication of ANC policy directions in the next five years.²

The text of the discussion document on international relations was drawn up by a panel of foreign policy heavyweights, chaired by the deputy minister in the Presidency, Obed Bapela. Other members of the panel included such foreign policy key players as Zuma's ex-wife and prime rival to Ramaphosa in the ANC leadership contest, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.

Looking to China for symbolic and economic leadership

Due to political factionalism and economic policy failures, the ANC has become more reliant on foreign patrons. The shift in foreign policy also coincides with the shift to a hybrid regime under Zuma's ANC. The ANC leadership has come to view China's Communist rulers as their example. According to John Matisonn, confidential sources

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1. *African National Congress NGC 2015 Discussion Documents* can be viewed at http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf. Chapter 7 of the document, pp 157-193, is entitled "International Relations".
 2. The ANC held its mid-term National General Council (NGC) in October 2015. The NGC is the ANC's highest policymaking body in between the quinquennial meetings of its National Conference. Ahead of the NGC meeting, various subcommittees of the National Executive body released discussion documents.

indicated that Zuma had told his cabinet members in 2012 already to go to China for political training.³

A Better Africa, the abovementioned ANC policy discussion document, concludes:

*China [sic] economic development trajectory remains a leading example of the triumph of humanity over adversity. The exemplary role of the collective leadership of the Communist Party of China in this regard should be a guiding lodestar of our own struggle.*⁴

China now is South Africa's top trade partner. At the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in December 2015, 26 agreements worth R94 billion were signed at the Union Buildings in Pretoria.⁵

According to Mills Soko,⁶ political economist at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business, the ANC government is treating China as a unique strategic partner:

The government's refusal to raise tariffs on cheap steel imports from China suggests that it will prioritise its relationship with China at the expense of domestic interests.

Doctor Jakkie Cilliers, chairperson of the ISS Board of Trustees in Pretoria, commented:

*In exchange for its membership of the BRICS, South Africa appears to have also given China a licence to de-industrialise the country despite the fact that the EU, as a bloc, is South Africa's major trading partner.*⁷

Thus, South Africa's foreign policy shift reflects a geopolitical and domestic political reorientation. The ANC persists in seeing Chinese state capitalism as its model for a developmental state. This remains the case despite South Africa's strong private sector and despite bad governance of its parastatal companies weakening the economy

3. John Matisonn, *God, Spies and Lies* (Missing Ink, Vlaeberg, 2016), p 417.

4. *African National Congress NGC 2015 Discussion Documents*, http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf, p 161.

5. <http://www.moneyweb.co.za/news-fast-news/chinas-jinping-pledges-60bn-to-africa-development/>.

6. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-22-sa-and-china-a-love-founded-on-state-control>.

7. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/selling-our-future-for-a-bric-time-to-rethink-south-africas-foreign-policy>.

even further at this stage. In some cases, Chinese parastatal and other companies are likely to enjoy a politically-based advantage over Western companies.⁸

Political and security cooperation have become closer. Higher-level executives at South African SOEs will be educated at the Chinese Academy of Governance in Beijing.⁹ In addition, the ANC is establishing a Political School and Policy Institute at Venterskroon in South Africa in cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁰ The ANC government has also already signed a deal with the Chinese government on cooperation related to internet infrastructure and cyber-security.¹¹

Voting against human rights measures at the UN

How will these events impact on South Africa's political system? They occurred while Western powers widely criticized the Chinese record on political pluralism and its limiting of citizens' access to "undesirable" news from the outside and social media.¹² After protests in the Ukraine, Turkey and Venezuela, the UN Human Rights Council brought a resolution in 2014 to safeguard the right to peaceful protest. In March 2014, South Africa led a group including China, Russia and Saudi Arabia in proposing several amendments to water down the resolution, which prompted criticism from the UK representative in Geneva and from Human Rights Watch.¹³

In November 2015, South Africa voted with Russia and China against a UN resolution that would recognise threats against defenders of human rights. In July 2016, South Africa joined China and Russia in voting against a UN resolution on the "promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet". The resolution was however adopted by most other member states and will be used by the UN Human Rights Council. The resolution tried to ensure political commitment from member states to protect freedom of expression and privacy online, and to refrain from shutting down the internet during key times such as elections or terror attacks.¹⁴

8. <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/editorials/2018-01-15-editorial-why-the-sinopec-deal-is-intriguing/>.

9. [http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-22-sa-and-china-a-love-founded-on-state-control](http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-22-sa-and-china-a-love-founded-on-state-control;);
<http://www.cnbc.com/2016/08/24/will-closer-ties-to-china-rescue-south-africas-government.html>.

10. <http://time.com/3601968/anc-south-africa-china-communist-party/>;
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/why-anc-following-example-chinese-communist-party>.

11. <http://www.cpifinancial.net/news/post/31624/south-africa-and-china-sign-ict-plan>.

12. <http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publication/zivilgesellschaft-unter-druck-globaler-widerstand-gegen-demokratie-waechst>; <http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/news/media-made-in-china>.

13. <http://blog.unwatch.org/index.php/2014/04/01/shaky-road-to-important-peaceful-protest-resolution/>.

14. <http://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2016-11-08-states-double-dealing-a-threat-to-rights-in-sa/>.

Conditions for good democracy or criticisms of ANC policies formulated by Western powers, Western media or domestic opposition groups are increasingly being portrayed as neo-colonialist. Western “colonial” states are not interested in South Africa’s development, but rather want to take its natural resources and never give anything back, Zuma told the Russian TV news channel RT in May 2015. Zuma believes things “would never be the same” with China that has been heavily investing in Africa since the early 2000s, as the Chinese came to the continent “as equals”.

Some NGOs claim that the Chinese government and the ANC government assist each other in obstructing or delaying the requests of critical NGOs to gain observer status at some UN structures for NGOs. These NGOs include Freedom Now, a US-based group supporting political prisoners of conscience, and AfriForum, a South African-based group supporting minority and civil rights.¹⁵

Choosing Russia against “US-sponsored destabilisation”

Both domestic and foreign considerations play a role in the ANC’s policy towards Russia. *Business Day* editor Peter Bruce speculated in 2013 that the ANC’s financial troubles would probably result in the party returning to its dependence on foreign funders, especially among non-Western powers.¹⁶ In 2014, reports emerged that the ANC was broke. The ANC denied the reports.¹⁷

Putin, a former KGB intelligence officer, used the opportunity to strengthen Russia’s policy to enhance its position in Africa and extend its influence in South Africa.¹⁸ Relations between Putin and Zuma developed to both personal and national security interests. When Zuma believed he had been poisoned in August 2014, it was to Russia that he allegedly went to get medical treatment.¹⁹

During the same period, news emerged of a mysterious, but major personal deal on a nuclear energy programme concluded in Russia between Presidents Putin and Zuma. The nuclear energy deal was in contrast with energy and economic policies, including the NDP. Major departments in South Africa were not involved in the opaque deal, reputed to be worth up to \$100 billion.²⁰

15. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-13-diplomatic-fracas-breeds-over-ngo-freedom-now>.

16. <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2013/11/18/thick-end-of-the-wedge-zuma-is-pretty-well-untouchable-politically>.

17. <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-30-broke-anc-may-have-to-cut-jobs-for-comrades>;
<http://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-31-anc-denies-it-is-broke>.

18. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/en/blogs/africasource/russia-s-return-to-africa-an-update>.

19. <http://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/opinion/reliance-on-russia-goes-way-back-1.1903975>.

20. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/08/14/uk-safrica-nuclear-idUKKCN0QJ11T20150814>; “Jacob Zuma’s secret nuke stitch-up”, *Mail and Guardian*, 26 September 2014; “Less Russia, more speed”, *Financial Mail*, 4 September 2014; “SA denies corruption in Russia’s nuclear deal”, *Fin24*, 1 October 2014.

The state law adviser stated that, under the South African Constitution, the deal had to be agreed to by Parliament, due to its size and decades-long economic implications for South Africa. However, this public procedure had not been followed. The then Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan and Energy Minister Ben Martins, who opposed the signing of the agreement, were subsequently moved out of their positions by President Zuma in May 2014.

The nuclear deal had as much potential for corruption as the arms deal scandals of the 1990s, in which Zuma's role has not yet been clarified. In September 2017, *Sunday Times* stated that Mahlobo and two officials from the Central Energy fund allegedly travelled to Russia with businessmen Kenny Kunene and Gayton McKenzie, where the two negotiated a multi-billion rand gas deal. The decision to appoint Mahlobo as energy minister in October 2017 may have been Zuma's way of putting in place a pro-nuclear Cabinet.²¹ Since his election as ANC president, Ramaphosa has indicated that the nuclear deal will not be pursued further. However, at present it is unlikely that the ANC-controlled security apparatus will markedly change their policies on Russia.²²

Numerous intelligence officials of South Africa have also received training in Russia in recent years.²³ In September 2016, the deputy director of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSVTS), Anatoly Punchuk, confirmed that the FSVTS had for the first time proposed to South Africa to engage in joint industrial research in the defence sphere.²⁴

According to leaked cables obtained by Al Jazeera, the military intelligence services of both countries have been involved in a \$100 million joint satellite surveillance programme covering Africa. The satellite system, known as Project Condor, is regarded as a significant part of the envisaged strategic cooperation between Russia and South Africa. The project is also aimed at challenging the domination of African arms sales by the US and France.

The ANC discussion document claims there is a concerted effort to destabilize Russia:

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21. <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-10-17-president-jacob-zuma-implements-his-12th-cabinet-reshuffle>.
 22. https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKBN1FF1JT-OZATP?utm_source=34553&utm_medium=partner.
 23. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Spies-trained-in-Russia-raise-double-agent-fears-20140831>.; <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-02-05-ramaphosa-will-need-to-tackle-the-state-security-agency/#.WngwGqjibIU>.
 24. https://rbth.com/news/2016/09/13/russia-proposes-to-south-africa-industrial-cooperation-in-defense-sphere_629635.

*The US does not appreciate the resurgence of China and Russia as dominant factors in the arena of international power relations. It has instead declared a cold war against these two emerging world powers.*²⁵

In the document, the ANC leadership also reaffirms its ideological roots:

*The ANC is a revolutionary national liberation movement which is an integral part of the international revolutionary movement to liberate humanity from the bondage of imperialism and neo-colonialism.*²⁶

The text even goes so far as to quote the founder of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin, on the revolutionary transformation of society, and extolls the value of the Russian Revolution in 1917.²⁷

The ANC document does not celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall a quarter of a century ago. Instead, the ANC document actually laments “the sudden collapse of socialism in the world [that] altered completely the balance of forces in favour of imperialism”. This new imperialism has “plunged humanity in a perpetual socio-economic crisis”, and the US stands accused of “effectively using its aggressive foreign policy to advance its national interests”.

Anti-Western bias and paranoia

In this regard, outlandish international conspiracy theories find fertile ground in the ANC, according to political scientist Anthony Butler of the University of Cape Town.²⁸ In September 2014, Kebby Maphatsoe, the deputy minister of Defence and Veterans, called Public Protector Thuli Madonsela a CIA agent because of her continued investigation of the Nkandla scandal involving President Zuma. The US ambassador was present and lodged an official complaint. Peter Fabricius of the ISS commented:

[A]t least [Maphatsoe] did new members of the diplomatic corps a favour ... Many diplomats still arrive in the country under the naïve impression that they are coming to serve in the land of Mandela, a rather idyllic rainbow nation in love with itself and the entire world. Maphatsoe’s crude suggestion ... would have been a wake-up call,

25. *African National Congress NGC 2015 Discussion Documents*, http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf, p 162.

26. *African National Congress NGC 2015 Discussion Documents*, http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf, pp 160, 185-186.

27. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201508251340.html>; <http://time.com/3601968/anc-south-africa-china-communist-party/>.

28. “ANC blame shifting exercise is under way”, *Business Day*, 26 February 2016.

*alerting them to the sort of ideological sentiment that still runs beneath the surface here, and sometimes emerges.*²⁹

When in early June 2015 the news broke that the hosting of the FIFA World Cup in South Africa in 2010 may have been obtained through a \$10 million bribe to FIFA officials, a similar response emerged from ANC circles.³⁰ In March 2015, the State Security Agency announced that it was investigating Public Protector Thuli Madonsela, EFF leader Julius Malema, former DA Parliamentary Leader Lindiwe Mazibuko and head of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union, Joseph Mathunjwa, as American spies. Claims of a UK military plot against Zuma emerged in 2016.³¹

In February 2016, the then ANC Secretary General Gwede Mantashe, a strong Ramaphosa ally, said: “We are aware of the programme that takes young people to the US for six weeks, then brings them back and plants them everywhere in the campuses”. He said “regime-change elements” had gripped South Africa and they (the students) aimed to “plant the seeds of anarchy”. US Ambassador to South Africa, Patrick Gaspard, pointed out that he had personally invited Mantashe to recommend young leaders from the ANC for the programme, called the Washington Fellowship.³²

Van Onselen states:

*Under pressure the African National Congress (ANC) has historically relied on one red herring above all others to negate responsibility and divert attention from dissatisfaction with its own performance: a “third force”, be it the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or white supremacists, is supposedly the root cause of its many and varied problems. Always unseen, never proven and yet constantly alluded to, its claims to this effect are the ultimate abdication of agency ... The ANC has deliberately manufactured an environment in which everything that runs against the party or threatens its legitimacy is blamed on some outside agency ... The ANC has helped engender and augment that reality on various different levels, least of all by fuelling an atmosphere of paranoia and conspiracy.*³³

29. <http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/acronymia-nervosa-the-cia-and-the-icc>.

30. <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2015/06/05/thick-end-of-the-wedge-fikile-mbalulas-folly-play-chicken-with-the-fbi>.

31. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/anc-claims-uk-plotting-to-unseat-zuma-20160516>;
<http://www.vice.com/read/exclusive-the-british-armys-secret-plan-to-prop-up-south-africas-ruling-party>.

32. “South African ruling party official accuses US of plot”, *The Washington Post*, 21 February 2016.

33. <http://sa-monitor.com/top-10-bogus-anc-conspiracy-theories-bdlive-25-may-2016/>.

Security (non)cooperation with the US?

The anti-US position of the ANC has implications for the US Africa Command on the African continent, as is apparent from this excerpt from the National General Council (NGC) discussion document:

*The campaign to engage all [African Union] member state [sic] on the continent not to host these military bases continue [sic]; however, the question that should be posed is whether this is still preventable because in certain places on the continent AFRICOM has already established its footprint in the form of training soldiers and other newly devised mechanisms? The ANC has to deal with these realities and develop new strategies to take this campaign forward.*³⁴

There is still active cooperation between South African and European and US security agencies on potential Islamist extremism. Some differences have been noticeable. In June 2016, the US warned its citizens of possible attacks by Islamist militants against US facilities or shopping malls in South Africa during the month of Ramadan. The South African government, however, said the country was safe. In July 2016, the SAPS arrested four people who had allegedly planned an attack on the US embassy in South Africa.³⁵ The US embassy had issued a similar alert in September 2015.³⁶

To date, terrorist groups have preferred to use South Africa as a sanctuary to gain passports, raise funds and recruit with relative ease.³⁷ However, there are concerns that several factors may at some stage converge to increase the risk of Islamist extremist attacks against Western or symbolic targets in South Africa. The extent of political and bureaucratic corruption and factionalism, which also constrain crime intelligence and policing abilities, may play a role. Changing dynamics among extremist groups elsewhere in Africa and the Middle East, as well as alliances like that of the governments of South Africa and Nigeria against Boko Haram, may also result in targets in South Africa being selected.

The ANC has also used anti-Israel policy gestures to reinforce its “revolutionary” credentials. The one foreign policy decision announced during the ANC’s conference in December 2017 was to downgrade South Africa’s diplomatic relations with Israel by reducing the embassy in Tel Aviv to a “liaison office” – “immediately and

34. *African National Congress NGC 2015 Discussion Documents*, http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf, p 176.

35. <https://2010sdafrika.wordpress.com/2016/10/01/die-unterschaetzte-gefahr/>.

36. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/04/south-africa-islamist-militant-attacks-us-warning>.

37. http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-06-06-terror-warnings-is-south-africa-really-an-islamic-state-target/#.V1T7X5Uw_IV.

unconditionally”.³⁸ At the hundred-and-fifth anniversary celebration of the ruling ANC in January 2017, Zuma called on South Africans not to visit Israel in order to show solidarity with “the people of Palestine”.³⁹

Leaving the International Criminal Court (ICC)

The ANC government’s foreign policy often diverts from Western powers’ concerns regarding human rights and rule of law. On 15 June 2015, for example, Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir was allowed to leave South Africa, despite an ICC warrant for his arrest. On the same day Judge President Dunstan Mlambo of the High Court in Pretoria ruled that the ANC government’s failure to arrest Bashir was inconsistent with the South African Constitution, that the government was in contempt of court and should have arrested and detained Bashir.⁴⁰

Doctor Abiodun Williams, president of The Hague Institute for Global Justice, referred to “a clear abuse of executive authority by the South African government ... Clearly, the Bashir case is not in keeping with Mandela’s ideals”.⁴¹ When the opposition party, the DA, in September 2015 brought a motion to impeach President Zuma for the government’s handling of the Bashir visit, the ANC’s response was to state that the DA was acting on behalf of the US and promoting an “imperialist agenda”.⁴² At the ANC’s NGC meeting in October 2015, the latter took the decision to ask the ANC government to begin the process of withdrawal of its membership of the ICC.⁴³

In October 2016, after Zuma’s visit to Kenya and a BRICS summit, during which he may have received guarantees of support, the ANC government gave notice of its intention to leave the ICC. Shortly thereafter, Russia also indicated that it would withdraw its support of the ICC, which has categorized Russia’s actions in the Crimea as an occupation.⁴⁴ “South Africa’s withdrawal would be a huge reversal of its role as a leader promoting victims’ rights and the values in its post-apartheid constitution”, was the response by Human Rights Watch.⁴⁵ Western media and policy-makers

38. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-ramaphosa-revitalise-south-africas-foreign-policy>.

39. <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/222973>.

40. <http://www.bdlive.co.za/africa/africanews/2015/06/15/failure-to-arrest-bashir-violated-south-african-constitution-judge-rules>.

41. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/jun/24/south-africas-failure-arrest-al-bashir-not-in-keeping-mandelas-ideals>.

42. <http://www.citizen.co.za/666696/anc-rips-into-colonialist-da-over-failed-impeachment-motion/>; <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/anc-rips-into-colonialist-da-1.1909728#.VkMy0JqBfmQ>.

43. <http://www.voanews.com/content/anc-wants-south-africa-out-of-international-criminal-court/3002092.html>.

44. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/22/world/africa/south-africa-international-criminal-court.html?_r=0; <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-11-22-view-from-the-hague-the-icc-bleeding-has-stopped/>.

45. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/24/south-africa-icc-move-betrays-victims>; <http://www.fr-online.de/politik/suedafrika-sabotage-am-straengerichtshof,1472596,34875228.html>.

expressed their dismay at what former US Ambassador Stephen Rapp described as “a betrayal of the victims of atrocious crimes”.⁴⁶

However, in November 2016 the ANC government gave notice of its intention to withdraw from the ICC. “South Africa’s proposed withdrawal from the International Criminal Court shows startling disregard for justice from a country long seen as a global leader on accountability for victims of the gravest crimes,” said Dewa Mavhinga, the NGO’s Africa division senior researcher.⁴⁷

In February 2017, the ANC government’s decision to withdraw from the ICC was ruled “unconstitutional and invalid” by the High Court. The court ordered the government to revoke its notice of withdrawal. In December 2017, Justice Minister Michael Masutha said the government still intended to quit the ICC.⁴⁸ Ramaphosa defended the government decision to withdraw in 2016 when he was vice-president.⁴⁹ It remains to be seen whether he would change the policy if he were to become state president.

Anti-Western reflexes?

Western governments and South Africa naturally continue to try and find common ground and cooperate on various economic and security interests, including terrorism in Africa. However, as in the case of relations with Germany, the UK and US⁵⁰ on various issues there is a distinct chill in the diplomatic air.

Professor Robert Kappel, former president of the Institute for Africa Studies at GIGA, has described relations between Germany and South Africa as “relatively tense”. According to him:

*The Zuma government follows an anti-Western course. They would like to rather orient themselves according to China’s model of authoritarian capitalism.*⁵¹

46. “South Africa to Withdraw From International Criminal Court”, *New York Times*, 21 October 2016.

47. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37724724>.

48. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39050408>;
<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-12-07-south-africa-confirms-withdrawal-from-icc/>.

49. <http://ewn.co.za/2016/11/09/ramaphosa-defends-south-africa-s-withdrawal-from-icc>.

50. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/chancellor-house-the-case-against-hitachi--us-sec>;
<http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/trade/2015/09/18/sa-us-talks-floundering-says-nkoana-mashabane>; <http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/trade/2015/09/11/us-tariff-threat-as-dispute-dragson>;
<http://mg.co.za/article/2015-08-13-diplomatic-fracas-brews-over-ngo-freedom-now>.

51. <http://www.dw.com/de/deutschland-und-s%C3%BCdafrika-br%C3%BChige-freundschaft/a-36833721>.

The tone of ANC statements on Western policies is largely critical, and is noted by Western governments and business.⁵² Often this occurs to cover internal weakness and failures in governance, to compete with internal rivals or to find scapegoats. The factionalised ANC is now more reliant on Russia and China as foreign patrons. However, the agency of the ANC's own factions should not be underestimated.⁵³ Negative responses by the ANC towards Western powers, businesses and value systems at crucial moments remain likely in the next few years.

52. <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-08-20-ancs-future-foreign-policy-all-roads-lead-to-china/#.VeCrx5rALmQ>; <http://time.com/3601968/anc-south-africa-china-communist-party/>.

53. <http://www.ascleiden.nl/news/new-asc-infosheet-pivoting-russia-china-and-anti-western-rhetoric-south-africas-foreign-policy>.