

Playing in the orchestra of peace: South Africa's relations with Iraq (1998–2003)

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South Africa's status and prestige as a country that successfully and unilaterally disarmed its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programme enabled it to engage with the Saddam government of Iraq in the months leading up to the US-led invasion of March 2003. Following intense international diplomatic efforts, Saddam Hussein had agreed to allow UN and International Atomic Energy Agency weapons inspectors to enter Iraq in November 2002. Acting outside the UN Security Council, the US and its coalition partners maintained that Iraq continued to maintain and produce WMD, a claim refuted by weapons inspectors, including a South African disarmament team that visited Iraq in February 2003. Employing three diplomatic strategies associated with niche diplomacy, South Africa contributed to attempts to avert the invasion by assisting with the orderly disarmament of Saddam-led Iraq and by practising multilateralism. These strategies, notwithstanding the US-led invasion signalling a failure of South Africa's niche diplomacy in this instance, provide valuable insight into the nuclear diplomacy of South Africa.

Keywords: South Africa; Iraq; Saddam Hussein; Thabo Mbeki; weapons of mass destruction; niche diplomacy; nuclear diplomacy

Introduction

On 20 March 2003, the US led a military invasion along with the UK, Australia and Poland into Iraq. The invasion followed, *inter alia*, US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 5 February 2003 claiming that the US had found new evidence that Iraq had been developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This put Iraq in the position of noncompliance with UNSC resolutions and, according to the US and its 'coalition of the willing', was a *casus belli*.¹ Unlike the UNSC-endorsed invasion of Iraq of 1990, the 2003 Iraqi invasion occurred without UNSC endorsement. South Africa, along with other international actors in the 'orchestra of peace', had failed to avert war in Iraq.²

Since 1990, the UNSC had instituted a comprehensive sanctions regime against the government of Saddam Hussein.³ In November 2002, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1441 (2002), which accused Iraq of 'material breach' of UNSC resolutions, provided Iraq a 'final opportunity' to comply with its disarmament obligations and established an 'enhanced inspection regime' to achieve the full and verified completion of Iraq's disarmament processes.⁴ Resolution 1441 also provided for the return of UN weapons inspectors on 27 November 2002, four years after their withdrawal in December 1998 (having served in Iraq since 1990). The 1998 withdrawal occurred after Iraq unilaterally

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suspended inspections by the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), accusing the UN of justifying US aggression.

On 12 March 2003, days before the US-led intervention, South African Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Aziz Pahad, reiterated South Africa's position on Iraq, namely that South Africa supported the full implementation of UNSC Resolution 1441 and called on the Saddam government to fully cooperate on the implementation of the resolution.⁵ Refuting the claims made by Colin Powell during his UNSC presentation on the presence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the threat posed by Saddam, Pahad stated that Resolution 1441 addressed the issue of WMD and that this was 'not about fighting terrorism or regime change'.⁶

South Africa had had full diplomatic relations with Iraq only from 1998; Iraq's diplomatic presence in Pretoria was fully established in 2001 when Iraq accredited a full Ambassador to South Africa.⁷ It was thus during the tenure of President Thabo Mbeki that the relations between these states were consolidated.

South Africa's foreign policy during the tenure of Mbeki defined a greater international role for South Africa as, among others, an emerging middle power; a voice of the South; a supporter of the UN and international law; and a strong campaigner for human rights. South Africa also had ambitions in respect of the UN, focused on the expansion of the UNSC to allow for more permanent seats, including one for South Africa.

These developments and ambitions coincided with increased international calls for Iraq's compliance with UNSC resolutions in respect of its disarmament. South Africa, as a UN member with an ambitious foreign policy agenda and increased trade with Iraq under the UN Oil-for-Food Programme (hereafter, the UN Programme), had diplomatic interests generally in Iraq. At the same time, Pretoria was still glowing in the international recognition of its nuclear disarmament of the early 1990s and continued to capitalise on what Mbeki described as the 'South African example'. Hans Blix, the Executive Chairman of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), referred to this example as the 'South African model of cooperation'.⁸

Against the aforesaid, South Africa became increasingly occupied with the Iraqi disarmament issue and, towards the end of 2002 and in the beginning of 2003 as war loomed, this engagement was to such an extent that it can be considered an illustrative case study of its nuclear diplomacy.

South Africa's position on Iraq should be read against the background of its post-1994 foreign policy and its expressed commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. A cabinet statement of 5 February 2003, for example, reiterated South Africa's position on nuclear issues, namely that South Africa supports the 'eradication' of WMD.⁹ This position was re-affirmed by President Mbeki during the 2003 state of the nation address specifically with regard to Iraq.¹⁰

The rationale for this study is four-fold. Generally, South African-Iraqi relations are under-researched. More specifically, there is little in the discourse with regard to South Africa's despatch of a team of nuclear disarmament experts to Iraq in February 2003 as an example of its nuclear diplomacy. Moreover, having been an isolated state itself, South Africa's bilateral relations with an isolated state under a severe sanctions regime is also under-researched. Also under discussion in the following analysis is the fact that South Africa's relations with Iraq occurred in the context of UNSC Resolution 986, the Oil-for-Food-Programme, which was approved by the 661 Committee of the UN (the UN Sanctions Review Committee).¹¹ South Africans with close ties to the African National Congress (ANC) have been subsequently fingered for illicit activities under the UN Oil-for-Food Programme.¹²

This contribution focuses predominantly on South Africa's relations with Iraq from 1998 until the 2003 invasion. Background on these bilateral relations will be provided, as well as some context regarding the debate in the UN on Iraq's possession of, or intentions to possess, WMD, and South Africa's position. Finally, South Africa's diplomatic practice will be analysed and assessed as an example of niche diplomacy.

Analytical framework

The study employs Andrew Cooper's extended framework of middle power behaviour to determine the link between a state's identity, role and interests in respect of its nuclear diplomacy.¹³ Cooper initially distinguishes between the form of a state's behaviour (heroic or routine) and the scope of its activity (discrete or diffuse), but then proceeds to distinguish between the focus or target of its diplomatic activity (multilateral or regional) and the intensity of its diplomatic style (combative or accommodative).

According to this framework the target of diplomatic activity (multilateral and/or regional) and intensity of diplomatic style (accommodative and/or combative) are used to produce a 2×2 matrix which serves as an extended framework to describe, classify and analyse middle power behaviour (See Figure 1). Cooper's framework is complemented by Alan Henrikson's three strategies employed by middle powers, that is, confrontation, parallelism and partnership, practising niche diplomacy.¹⁴

Niche diplomacy also refers to the ability of a state to identify and fill niche spaces (issues, organisations or activities) selectively and innovatively.¹⁵ The sources of niche diplomacy are located in the tenets of middle power diplomatic behaviour, which have a strong normative foundation and emphasise 'entrepreneurial flair and technical competence'.¹⁶ States practising niche diplomacy employ various diplomatic practices including confrontation, parallelism and cooperation to achieve material and non-material rewards such as status, prestige and trade opportunities.¹⁷

Establishment of South Africa-Iraq relations

The first diplomatic contact between post-apartheid South Africa and Iraq occurred in June 1994 when an Iraqi delegation attended President Nelson Mandela's inauguration. Since then, bilateral relations have undergone various phases.

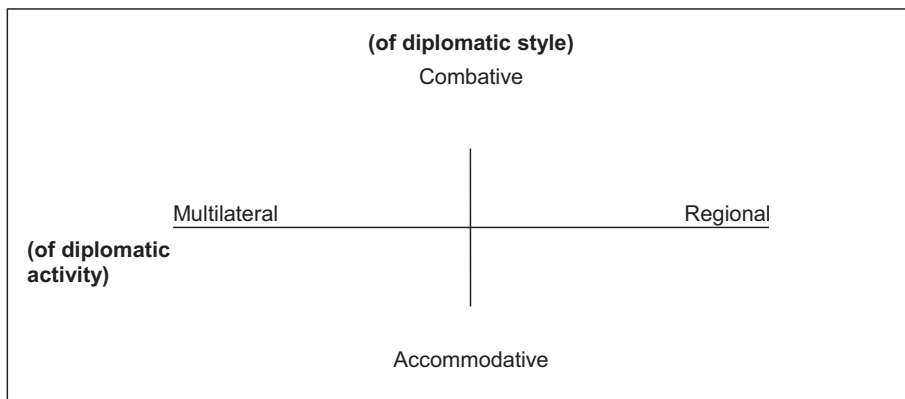


Figure 1. Cooper's extended framework of middle power behaviour.

Source: Cooper AF, 'Niche diplomacy: a conceptual overview', in Cooper AF (ed.), *Niche Diplomacy. Middle Powers after the Cold War*. London: Macmillan, 1997, p. 17.

Following the initial diplomatic contact of 1994, a second phase began with the first official visit to Iraq by a South African delegation in November 1996. The said delegation also visited Kuwait, Jordan and the Arab League to consult on South Africa's 'approach to relations with Baghdad'.¹⁸ South Africa posted a first secretary, Schoeman du Plessis, with specific responsibilities for developing relations with Baghdad, to its embassy in Amman in June 1998.¹⁹ Du Plessis visited Iraq on numerous occasions to promote South Africa–Iraq trade relations.

A third phase in these bilateral relations occurred with the establishment of full diplomatic relations in August 1998. Further Iraq–South African interactions occurred during Iraq's attendance of the conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in South Africa when Deputy President Thabo Mbeki met with his Iraqi counterpart, Taha Yassin Ramadan. By November 1998, South Africa–Iraqi relations were further consolidated by an exchange of notes.²⁰ A year later, Deputy Foreign Minister Pahad led the first South African business delegation of 30 South African companies to Iraq to win contracts under the UN Programme. Pahad met with, among others, Deputy Iraqi President Ramadan, Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and the ministers of foreign affairs, oil, trade and industry. Pahad also met with UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq Hans von Sponeck, and the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Iraq.²¹

The early years of South Africa's relations with Iraq were fairly routine in their approach, establishing relations and diplomatic channels. Moreover, the scope of its activities in relation to the country was relatively diffuse, covering functional areas such as trade and investment. In this sense, these relations were typical of the early years of post-apartheid South Africa's diplomatic behaviour and practice.

Humanitarian and economic diplomacy

Whereas the first phase of relations between South Africa and Iraq focused on the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations, the subsequent phase was characterised by South Africa's humanitarian involvement, alongside continued economic diplomacy. This signalled a change in South Africa's behaviour (i.e. more heroic) in order to, for example, address the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. This is also an early indication of the emergence of South Africa's niche diplomacy, that is, focusing on a particular issue, in respect of Iraq.

As with others in the international community, South Africa became increasingly concerned with the humanitarian situation in Iraq resulting from international sanctions.²² Summarising South Africa's position, Pahad stated that South Africa 'given its national ethos and international responsibilities cannot ignore the human consequences of this disaster'.²³ In response, the South African government, various business people and a number of civil society organisations organised a humanitarian flight to Baghdad, scheduled initially for February 2001.

The purpose of the flight was to provide assistance to Iraq owing to the 'catastrophic humanitarian situation' in the country since 1990.²⁴ The Durban-based Iraqi Action Committee, a coalition of more than 30 philanthropic, multifaith and community organisations, ran a national campaign to collect six tonnes of humanitarian supplies, consisting of medical supplies, medical equipment and baby food formula, for delivery to Iraqi civilians. The originally planned flight was delayed owing to local logistical issues and, following the requests of the Iraqi Action Committee and the government of Iraq, the

flight was rescheduled for between 28 February and 3 March 2001. The latter flight was again postponed.²⁵ Only in June of that year was a humanitarian flight achieved.

Pahad explained the diplomatic process in respect of the flight.²⁶ He indicated that, during the initial planning for the flight, the UN and the government of Iraq were informed by South Africa of the complete list of all those individuals who would accompany the flight. Pahad also confirmed that there had been ongoing contacts with the UN, Norway and the five permanent members of the UNSC. During these contacts, 'cordial discussions took place regarding the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Iraq and the need to break the impasse currently existing between the Government of Iraq and the international community over the issue of sanctions'.²⁷ Pahad insisted that at no stage was South Africa requested to cancel the humanitarian flight. At the time, South Africa viewed the flight as a 'powerful international statement about the unprecedented conditions of human suffering prevailing in Iraq today and the need of the international community to address the causes of this'.²⁸ Other states dispatching humanitarian flights to Iraq included the US, France, Russia, Jordan, Egypt, Vietnam, the Gulf states, India, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Turkey and Iceland.

Notwithstanding the delays around the South African humanitarian flight to Iraq at the time, Pahad again visited Iraq in April 2001 to meet with Iraq's deputy prime minister as well as the deputy minister for oil. On this occasion, the interactions between the two governments focused on economic matters. It was agreed that South African private and state-owned enterprises should be encouraged to involve themselves with the UN Programme and the post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq needed after the 1990/1991 Gulf War and the decades-long UN sanctions.²⁹ Apart from the economic focus, Pahad's visit also had one other major diplomatic outcome, namely that Iraq upgraded its representation in South Africa to the rank of ambassador.

When, in June 2001, South Africa finally sent the humanitarian flight to Iraq delivering donated medical and baby food supplies, the trip coincided with a South African delegation of approximately 100 people representing government, business, media and civil society.³⁰

By late 2001, South Africa's trade with Iraq under the UN Programme had reached \$70 million, with Pretoria later admitting that there was 'room for expansion for more trade' but for the fact that Iraq had imposed surcharges on their oil allocations, a move that was illegal under the UN Programme.³¹ By then, as well, the department of foreign affairs had alerted South Africa's ambassador to the UN of 'illicit activities' by South African companies in order to gain access to Iraqi government contracts.³²

The new sanctions regime against Iraq

South Africa's relations with Iraq entered a third distinguishable phase in 2002. At that time Pretoria began its focus on the situation in the Middle East, and especially on the effect of the new UN sanctions regime against Iraq and attempts to resolve the impasse on weapons inspections. In July 2002, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Aziz visited South Africa and met with Pahad, as well as South Africa's ministers of health and of minerals and energy affairs.³³

By October 2002, members of the international community expressed increasing concern about Iraq's possible possession of WMD. South Africa was not left unscathed in the WMD debate that followed: South African citizens were accused of involvement in the supply of aluminium tubes to Iraq for the development of WMD, an accusation that South Africa rejected. Prior to the new dispensation in Pretoria in 1994, South Africa had

sold arms and weapons to Iraq.³⁴ Fearing international suspicion of possible proliferation activities, South Africa ‘consistently’ sent diplomatic messages to Baghdad requesting Iraq to comply with UNSC Resolutions.³⁵ In addition to this, the South African Council for the Non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction also stated that it ‘ha[d] not approved any exports of controlled goods, including special aluminium tubes that can be used for uranium enrichment, to Iraq’.³⁶

On 1 October 2002, the Saddam government reached an agreement with UNMOVIC and the IAEA on arrangements for the resumption of inspections. After an absence of four years, UNMOVIC inspectors arrived in Iraq in November 2002 to resume their work under UNSC Resolution 1284 (1999), aiming to monitor and verify Iraq’s compliance with relevant UNSC Resolutions. With the arrival of the inspectors in Iraq, international efforts to resolve the Iraqi impasse regained momentum.

By November 2002, bilateral trade between South Africa and Iraq had increased significantly since the countries established full diplomatic relations (See Table 1).

Agency, multilateralism and solidarity at the UN

For the purposes of this analysis, a fourth phase in South Africa–Iraq relations is identifiable. Whereas the previous phases predominantly focused on bilateral relations, the fourth phase is characterised by South African agency and multilateralism at the UN. South Africa’s preference for multilateralism was clearly evident in the months before the invasion. Addressing Parliament on Iraq, for instance, President Mbeki called on all states to ‘respect the principle and practice of multilateralism’ to resolve the Iraq impasse.³⁷

Two South African post-1994 foreign policy principles – recognition of the UN’s authority to resolve international disputes peacefully, and the adherence to international law – were also expressed in the context of Iraq. In several cabinet statements, the South African government expressed its support for the UN weapons inspections in Iraq.³⁸ South Africa also recognised the UN as the major organisation responsible for the peaceful settlement of disputes rather than states’ unilateral action outside the UN.³⁹

On several occasions non-UNSC members, including South Africa, were invited to address the UNSC on Iraqi compliance with UNSC resolutions and a possible invasion. South Africa maintained that ‘resorting to war without fully exhausting all other options represent[ed] an admission of failure by the Security Council in carrying out its mandate of maintaining international peace and security’.⁴⁰ In fact, a day before the US-led

Table 1. South Africa–Iraq trade (2000–2002)

	2000	2001	2002
Number of contracts approved	3	14	18
Collective value of approved contracts (ZAR)	84,000,000	416,000,000	330,000,000
Number of oil contracts submitted for approval		4	7
Volume of oil contracts submitted for approval (barrels of oil)		8,000,000	
Number of oil contracts approved	1		2
Volume of approved oil contracts (barrels of crude oil per day for one year)	30,000		3,500,000

Source: DFA, ‘Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aziz Pahad to visit Iraq’, statement, Pretoria, 28 October 2002, <<http://www.gov.za/speeches/2002/02102814461001.htm>>.

invasion, 19 March 2003, the South African cabinet condemned the plans for a 'unilateral resort to force' and called on the UN to 'assert its authority'.⁴¹

Prior to that, South Africa had persuaded the UNSC to allow open debates on the Iraqi issue. In October 2002, in his capacity as the chairman of the co-ordinating bureau of the NAM at the UN, Dumisani Kumalo, the South African ambassador to the UN, expressed concerns about the role of the UN in resolving the tense relations between Iraq and Kuwait.⁴² Ambassador Kumalo warned against unilateral action outside the mandate of the UNSC and the UN Charter. He also called on the UNSC to resolve the matter peacefully, rather than authorising the use of force.⁴³

On 2 January 2003, South Africa on behalf of the NAM, called on the UNSC to allow UNMOVIC's head, Hans Blix, and IAEA Director General Mohamed Elbaradei to present their inspectors' initial findings in an open meeting, thus allowing all UN members – and not just the UNSC – to be informed of the situation.⁴⁴ A few weeks later, Blix and Elbaradei were allowed to brief UN members on the latest developments in Iraq.

Blix, in his comments, concluded that Iraq, unlike South Africa in openness and cooperation in respect of disarmament, seemed not to have accepted that the international community demanded it to disarm.⁴⁵ A series of statements by world leaders followed.

In his state of the union address on 28 January 2003, George Bush referred to Iraq's non-compliance in respect of UNSC disarmament resolutions, and linked the Saddam regime with Al Qaeda and the US 'War on Terror'. He alluded to new evidence against Iraq to be submitted to the UNSC in February, and made it clear that the US would 'lead a coalition to disarm' Saddam if consultations did not succeed.⁴⁶

Shortly thereafter, on 3 February 2003, the African Union (AU) issued a declaration on the disarmament of Iraq in compliance with UNSC Resolution 1441, a position South Africa supported.⁴⁷ With this, African states reaffirmed their position on the 'central role' of the UN and the Security Council 'in any action or initiative aimed at maintaining and strengthening peace and international security'.⁴⁸

Malaysia reiterated the position adopted at the February 2003 NAM Summit, namely that the use of force in Iraq would have far-reaching humanitarian consequences; NAM called on Iraq to comply with UNSC resolutions.⁴⁹ Finally, in a presentation to the UNSC on 5 February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell provided 'new' evidence that Iraq had been developing WMD.⁵⁰ This, among other developments, prompted the South African government to move into a more active role.

President Mbeki's diplomatic initiative

During his February 2003 state of the nation address, President Mbeki noted South Africa's proposal to the UN and the government of Iraq that a South African team should visit Iraq. The purpose of this visit would be to 'share' South Africa's 'experience relevant to the mission of the United Nations and Iraq to eradicate weapons of mass destruction under international supervision'.⁵¹ Iraq accepted the offer. The team of South Africans was to be composed of experts from Pretoria's programme to destroy its nuclear, chemical and biological WMD and thus had experience in cooperating with the UN Conference on Disarmament and other international bodies responsible for the enforcement of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions.⁵² According to Mbeki, the team was able to address 'all matters that relate to nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, missile systems, non-proliferation and disarmament, affecting all weapons of mass destruction'.⁵³

Mbeki hoped that the South African ‘intervention’ would improve the cooperation between inspectors and Iraq to prevent war, while ensuring a WMD-free Iraq.⁵⁴ Therefore, South Africa shared with Iraq the South African legislation pertaining to WMD, namely the Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 1993, as well as notices and regulations published in terms of the act in the period between 1997 and 2002.

The Mbeki initiative illustrates middle power behaviour in employing niche diplomacy, per Cooper’s matrix. That is, South Africa was able to identify and fill a niche using its non-material power as a former nuclear weapons state and its technical expertise. South Africa was able to engage with Iraq in a way that none of the superpowers managed to do.

UN multilateralism phase II

On the eve of the South African team’s departure for Iraq, Blix briefed the UNSC again. He was unequivocal:

How much, if any, is left of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and related proscribed items and programmes? So far, UNMOVIC has not found any such weapons, only a small number of empty chemical munitions, which should have been declared and destroyed.⁵⁵

Supporting Blix’s assessment, South Africa again successfully advocated that the UNSC allow open debate on Iraq. At these debates, the UNSC had a letter dated 14 February 2003 from South Africa, informing the UNSC President that Iraq had accepted South Africa’s offer to send a team of scientists, government officials and engineers to Iraq to share the South African disarmament experience under international supervision. South Africa stated that Iraqi cooperation had improved since the resumption of inspections and called on the UN to improve its inspections regime. South Africa also reminded UN members that there was no time limit on the inspections in UNSC Resolution 1441. Finally, South Africa called on the UN to resolve the Iraq issue peacefully.⁵⁶

South Africa, in order to acquire and maintain this particular diplomatic niche, utilised authority, influence, power, recognition, a secured position in a globally competitive arena through initiative (proposing open UNSC briefings and debates, and proposing the South African team’s visit to Iraq), advocacy (promoting the UN as the primary institution to achieve and maintain international peace and security) and positive branding, which it achieved through promoting itself as a disarmament success story, that is, the ‘South African example’.⁵⁷

Team South Africa in Baghdad

As South Africa had no diplomatic mission in Baghdad, it conducted its relations with Iraq through its mission in Jordan. The South African team that visited Iraq from 23 to 28 February 2003 included:

- Aziz Pahad, leader of the delegation and South African deputy minister of foreign affairs;
- Ben Steyn, chemical and biological advisor to the surgeon-general of the South African National Defence Force and advisor to the South African Council for the Non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction;
- Philip Coleman, technical advisor to the Chemical Weapons Convention;

- Daan van Beek, director of non-proliferation and space, South African Department of Trade and Industry;
- Deon Smit, general manager of procurements, Armscor;
- Super Moloi, member of the presidential support unit;
- Pieter Goosen, chief director of peace and security, South African Department of Foreign Affairs;
- Thomas Markram, director of peace and security, South African Department of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁸

Once back in South Africa the delegation prepared a report for President Mbeki, a copy of which was also delivered to Kofi Annan. The delegation concluded that 'Iraq had undergone a considerable disarmament process and conceivably did not possess any weapons of mass destruction that posed a threat to international security'.⁵⁹ The South African report acknowledged that Iraq continued to have some of the resources required to produce WMD, but argued that its general ability had been severely limited by international actions against the country.

Reporting to Parliament, Pahad provided a comprehensive account of the details of the visit and a unique insight into South African diplomacy and WMD disarmament.⁶⁰ According to Pahad, the South African team which he described as a 'radiation survey team' travelled 2000km in Iraq, and gained access to over 75 facilities, including military garrisons and camps, weapons factories, truck parks, manufacturing facilities and residential areas. The delegation also conducted interviews with individuals and groups on site during unannounced inspections, and during pre-arranged meetings with scientists and experts. In some instances, individuals consented to be interviewed without escort and without a tape recording.⁶¹

South Africa's approach to the visit was to focus on the policy decisions that were taken in South Africa to destroy its own WMD capabilities, and emphasised the provision of 'fully transparent and proactive cooperation'.⁶² The delegation also underlined the importance of taking the necessary steps to disarm, as well as the importance of confidence-building through compliance with UNSC Resolution 1441 (2002).

The three-day discussions with Iraqi experts focused on issues regarded as outstanding by UNMOVIC and the IAEA; South Africa encouraged Iraq to address these in order to resolve the impasse.⁶³ During these meetings Iraq requested South Africa's assistance in validating their proposed methodology to prove the destruction of Iraq's VX nerve gas and Anthrax stockpiles, as Iraq apparently did not have the appropriate equipment to conduct the soil analysis to determine the alleged quantities of VX/'Choline' at several locations in Iraq. Although South Africa had the equipment to conduct these analyses, the delegation decided to provide technical assistance only if the UNMOVIC inspectors allowed it and undertook to be present at these tests. The South African team viewed the Iraqi methodology as promising for the verification of the presence of chemical and biological elements, but remained concerned that Iraq would not be able to fully convince UNMOVIC and the UNSC on the merits of those tests alone. South Africa maintained that for Iraq to convince the international community it needed to provide additional evidence such as interviews with officials involved in the disposal process, to corroborate their findings.⁶⁴

The South African team also addressed issues surrounding Iraq's missile programme, its destruction and the verification thereof. This related, *inter alia*, to the Al Samoud II missiles and Iraq's contravention of the 60 mm-diameter restrictions placed by UNSCOM. Iraq's contravention had resulted in the missiles' range being beyond the

allowed limit of 150 km as prescribed by UNSC Resolution 687 (1991). Iraq's Al Fatah missiles seemed to not have contravened UNSCOM's restrictions. Iraq, subsequent to the South African visit, announced its decision to destroy its Al Samoud II missiles and, according to Pahad, had commenced with the destruction 'under [South African] supervision'.⁶⁵

The South African delegation also emphasised the importance of the domestication of WMD legislation in Iraq as a confidence building measure. For this reason, as noted earlier, the South African delegation provided the Iraqi officials with South Africa's WMD legislation and policies. In addition to this, the South Africans stressed the need for Iraq to 'co-operate fully' with UNMOVIC and IAEA inspectors in order to comply with UNSC Resolution 1441, in an effort to 'avert' war, terminate international sanctions and ultimately improve the human security of Iraqis.⁶⁶

Pahad's report also referred to South Africa's discussions with Iraq on the disclosure of the location of its underground storage facilities. South Africa recommended that Iraq set up random roadblocks to assist UNMOVIC in monitoring the movement and cargo of trucks that were allegedly transporting WMD and related material around Iraq to prevent its detection. South Africa also recommended that Iraq encourage its scientists to grant private interviews with UNMOVIC and IAEA inspectors.

Iraqi officials informed the South African team that it had provided nine reports to the UN in February 2003. These officials also informed the South Africans of the 'massive campaign' (the campaigners were not specified by the Iraqis) to bribe top Iraqi politicians, military officials and scientists to defect to the West, which according to the Iraqi delegation, had an impact on the individuals' positions on interviews.⁶⁷

The South African delegation visited Iraq with some diplomatic clout and 'with the full support' of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, as well as a 'tacit positive nod' from the UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and the administration of US President George W. Bush.⁶⁸ Not mandated to act as weapons inspectors, the delegation had access to Iraq Deputy President Tariq Aziz and individuals involved in the country's weapons programme. The South African delegation also visited destroyed WMD sites. While they found that the Iraqis had been 'negligent' in their documentation of the destruction processes,⁶⁹ the experts suggested that interviews on the extent of the destruction could be conducted. Once the South African delegation left Iraq, it became known that the Iraqi government had commenced with the dismantling and destruction of its missiles, an issue in respect of which the South African delegation 'had tried to persuade the Iraqis'.⁷⁰ Thus, the South African delegation succeeded in at least one instance.

South Africa was able to focus on a particular issue – disarming Iraq – by selecting a particular diplomatic approach, demonstrating what Cooper would point to as middle power behaviour, with a strong normative foundation and 'entrepreneurial flair and technical competence'.⁷¹ At the same time, South Africa promoted multilateralism in the UN as an instrument to achieve disarmament. Even in its bilateral interactions with Iraq prior to the invasion, South Africa informed the UN of its movements.

Final diplomatic attempts

The NAM made a third request to the UNSC for an open meeting, which took place on 7 March 2003 in the form of a briefing again by Blix and Elbaradei, followed days later by an open debate on Iraq. Elbaradei and Blix maintained that there had been no indication of resumed nuclear activities, nor of attempts to import uranium since 1990 to import aluminium tubes for centrifuge enrichment (thus exonerating South Africa in respect of

the above-mentioned allegations), or to import magnets for use in a centrifuge enrichment programme. Blix informed the UNSC that Iraq had taken significant steps to comply with disarmament efforts but insisted that UNMOVIC and IAEA required more time to address unanswered questions.⁷² On 13 March 2003, South Africa called for a draft work programme to be submitted to the UNSC containing the key remaining disarmament tasks from the inspectors.⁷³

The negotiators were not to be afforded either of these luxuries, however. On 17 March 2003, the UK, US and Spain abandoned their efforts to secure a second UN resolution authorising force, citing French opposition and France's threat to veto any such resolution. Unable to persuade the UNSC to intervene in Iraq, the US increasingly considered unilateral options in this regard. One of the justifications for the US threats of an impending invasion was the claim that Iraq had developed and maintained WMD, which if true was not only in contravention of a series of UN resolutions and the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, but also posed a real risk to US national security.

In response, South Africa announced that 'given the rapidly deteriorating security situation' in the Gulf Region it had put interim measures in place for South African diplomats and staff, and citizens in the region.⁷⁴ South Africa requested all South Africans in the region to register their presence with the South African embassies, consulates and honorary consulates. Moreover, the evacuation of non-essential staff of the mission in Jordan was called for by Minister of Foreign Affairs Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.

By the time the inspectors of UNMOVIC and the IAEA withdrew from Iraq on 17 March, owing to an imminent US-led military invasion, UNMOVIC had conducted 731 inspections, covering 411 sites in Iraq following their return to Iraq on 27 November 2002.⁷⁵ The UN and IAEA inspectors reiterated that they had not found 'any evidence' of proscribed WMD in Iraq and no evidence of the revival of Iraq's nuclear programme prohibited by UNSC Resolutions 687 (1991) and 707 (1991).⁷⁶

Referring to the impending attack against Iraq, South Africa explained that it had 'examined contingency measures to deal with any adverse consequences of the action in Iraq' on South Africa. In addition, an inter-departmental task team was established to address the evacuation of South Africa's missions 'when it becomes necessary' and the government also advised South Africans not to visit the Gulf Region.⁷⁷

On 20 March 2003, a US-led coalition invaded Iraq. Describing the invasion as 'the moment we feared and hoped to avoid', Pahad expressed South Africa's 'regrets at the coalition's decision to resort to force outside the framework of the Security Council,' which he called 'a tragic failure of negotiations and diplomacy'.⁷⁸ He further noted the 'unilateral resort to force' despite the 'progress' made in dealing with Iraq's disarmament. Moreover, South Africa stated that the invasion set 'a regrettable precedent which undermines the authority of the UN' in addressing global crises. South Africa also called on the UN to 'assert its authority to ensure that whatever action is undertaken is within the rules of international humanitarian law'.⁷⁹

Assessing South Africa's diplomatic efforts

South Africa's diplomatic practice featured typical niche diplomacy through consensus and coalition building (in the context of the AU and NAM), cooperation on an issue-specific basis (based on the country's disarmament experience), and adopting the role of bridge-builder, mediator, facilitator or catalyst.⁸⁰ Examples of the latter include drawing

up declarations and manifestos as a member of the AU and NAM, several visits to Iraq by South Africa's deputy foreign minister, and president-to-president diplomacy in Mbeki's personal communication with Bush and Saddam. Mbeki, for example, called Bush to appeal to the US not to act unilaterally outside of the UN.⁸¹ Another example of South Africa's role as a bridge-builder and mediator is South Africa's submission of the South African team's report to the UN general secretary on 6 March 2003. Annan, according to Pahad, distributed the South African report to all members of the UNSC.⁸²

South Africa's support of a rules-based international system and its position on multilateralism and South-South solidarity was also evident following the fall of the Saddam government, in its participation in the NAM Troika (South Africa, Malaysia and Cuba) meeting on the reconstruction of Iraq in May 2003 to discuss the role of the NAM and the UN in the reconstruction of Iraq and the provision of humanitarian aid to Iraq. Also discussed were the latter's membership of the NAM, and the status and staffing of diplomatic missions in Iraq.⁸³

The limits of niche diplomacy

In its handling of the Iraq issue, South Africa's diplomacy could be described as niche diplomacy typically practised by middle powers; this refers to diplomatic specialisation in a particular area, that is, disarmament. Acting in middle power fashion, South Africa concentrated its resources (technical and practical disarmament experience) in this specific issue area.⁸⁴ South Africa's ability to 'generate return worth having' implied that it wanted to achieve non-material objectives with niche diplomacy which, in turn, would probably generate international prestige, status, material benefit, soft power and moral authority. The post-1994 South African government often referred to South Africa as a state that had dismantled its nuclear weapons and terminated its nuclear weapons programme. The country was and remains involved in resolving the impasse in respect of Iran's nuclear programme, efforts it has been commended for by former IAEA Director General and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mohamed Elbaradei.⁸⁵ Mbeki referred to South Africa as 'an example of best international practice'.⁸⁶

However, the fact that a US-led 'coalition of the willing' invaded Iraq in March 2003 was, for South Africa, a failure of its niche diplomacy and 'a blow to multilateralism', demonstrating 'the urgency for the UN to assert its authority, and the need for UN reform'.⁸⁷ Against the aforesaid, it is clear that there are limits to middle powers' niche diplomacy. One example of this is, for example, Norway's repeated efforts to reconcile and achieve sustainable peace between Israel and Palestine.

Why did South Africa's niche diplomacy fail? Several possible explanations could be offered. Firstly, South Africa may be accused of punching above its weight. It displayed a certain naivety when confronting the permanent members of the UNSC, and most notably the UK and the US. South Africa was evidently mistaken about the geo-political ambitions of these states.

South Africa's niche diplomacy rested on its technical expertise in respect of its own disarmament. However, Pretoria lacked experience in wider disarmament initiatives, which may have contributed to its failure. It could also be that South Africa was unable or unwilling to coordinate its efforts with other states in order to maximise its international status and prestige. In addition to this, it could be argued that Mbeki should have announced his initiative much earlier. Some surmise that South Africa was more concerned with its economic relations with Iraq and entered negotiations on breaking the impasse too late.

Thirdly, factors exogenous to South Africa may also have undermined its ability to succeed. The US invasion clearly indicated Washington's unilateralist agenda and its intention to undermine or sidestep the UN in order to pursue the US agenda. Therefore, irrespective of South Africa's initiative and report to Kofi Annan, the UN was compromised long before a peaceful solution could be achieved. Another possible exogenous factor explaining South Africa's failure may be linked to the nature of the Saddam regime, and its relations with, for example, the UN and the US.

In the final instance, the South African initiative may have been undermined by other competing agendas and motives. One unresolved matter relating to the UN Programme in particular cast a long shadow over South Africa's diplomatic efforts. In April 2004, Kofi Annan established an independent investigation committee (deemed the Volcker Committee), which included South African former Constitutional Court Judge Richard Goldstone. By 27 October 2005, the committee concluded that 2253 firms from 52 countries made illegal payments amounting to \$1.8 billion to the Saddam government.⁸⁸ The Volcker Report also concluded that six South African companies made illegal payments to Saddam's government and singled out two South African oil trading companies—Montega and Invume—that were engaged in illicit activities under the UN Programme. The remaining four companies—APE Pumps (\$96,200), Falcon Trading Group (\$2.6 million), Glaxo Wellcome South Africa (\$19,836) and Reyrolle Limited (\$168,022) were said to have paid kickbacks to win lucrative contracts for humanitarian supplies.⁸⁹

Following in the footsteps of government investigations into UN member states such as the US, France, Australia and Germany, among others, the South African Commission of Inquiry into the Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq (Donen Commission) was established by President Mbeki on 17 February 2006. Advocate Michael Donen, director general in the presidency, was appointed to determine whether any South Africans were involved in sanctions busting in respect of UNSC Resolutions against Iraq and the UN Oil-for-Food Programme (an investigation that won the name 'Oilgate'). The commission's report, which was completed in September 2006, was only released during the tenure of Mbeki's successor, President Jacob Zuma, on 7 December 2011,⁹⁰ a few days prior to the ruling ANC party conference in Mangaung (and subsequent to Donen's reinterpretation of the same report in 2009).⁹¹

The Donen Commission concluded that no South African had contravened any South African law.⁹² Notwithstanding these findings, the commission failed to address some matters. It did not address, for example, the allegations that the Saddam government sold relatively cheap oil to ANC-connected middlemen, according to the Volcker Report, in order to buy diplomatic favour from South Africa as President Mbeki at the time chaired the NAM and the AU.⁹³ Secondly, by its own admission the commission did not probe the involvement of Kgalema Motlanthe and businessman-turned-minister of human settlements, Tokyo Sexwale, who admitted that his company, Mocoh Services South Africa (alleged to have paid surcharges to the Saddam government), traded in Iraqi oil in terms of the UN Programme.⁹⁴

Between 2000 and 2002, Kgalema Motlanthe, ANC General Secretary and later South African President (2008–2009) accompanied a South African oil trader, Sandi Majali, whose company Montega Trading obtained an oil allocation from the Saddam government in 2000, to Iraq on at least three occasions, creating the impression that he (Motlanthe) was conducting business on behalf of the ruling party.⁹⁵ The Iraqi government levied a surcharge of \$464,632 against Montega but the latter failed to pay. In an effort to receive further allocations from the Saddam government, Majali

visited Iraq on 6 March 2002 after another of his companies, Invume, won a tender to supply Iraqi crude oil amounting to \$100 million (ZAR 1 billion) to the South African state-owned Strategic Fuel Fund. On 7 March 2002, a letter from Motlanthe to the Iraqi Prime Minister Aziz arrived in Bagdad, a letter which seemed to have gone missing and which may exculpate or exonerate Motlanthe.⁹⁶ Motlanthe's correspondence stated that Majali had the ANC's 'full approval and blessing', and noted how the ANC would benefit if Majali's company received further oil allocations. This letter was also not probed, nor the ANC's role or the involvement of Tokyo Sexwale.⁹⁷

These unresolved matters notwithstanding, the diplomatic significance of the South African delegation's visit and report remain. This and the other diplomatic overtures from South Africa should be recognised as having had a direct bearing on South Africa's nuclear diplomacy and its international standing and identity on nuclear issues.

Conclusion

South Africa's nuclear diplomacy in respect of the disarmament of Iraq was South Africa's first such diplomatic and disarmament engagement and thus offered insight into disarmament diplomacy and the practical realities of detection, disarmament and verification. Despite South Africa's bilateral and multilateral efforts to uphold the supremacy of the UN and the sovereignty of Iraq, however, a peaceful resolution was not attained and the US-led invasion took place. Ironically, by 2014, Pahad's rhetorical question remains relevant: 'The coalition will win the war; can they win the peace?'⁹⁸

In its handling of the issue of Iraq's disarmament prior to the US-led invasion, South Africa predominantly employed three diplomatic practices, namely confrontation, parallelism and cooperation, to achieve material and non-material rewards such as status, prestige and trade opportunities.⁹⁹ South Africa often confronted the US on its threats to act outside the UN and also refused to close the Iraqi embassy in South Africa despite the request of the US.¹⁰⁰ Another example included then-Deputy President Jacob Zuma's comments during a dinner hosted for Iraq Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. Zuma described the US and UK as 'bully states' for their imposition of a no-fly zone over Iraq, the comprehensive sanctions against Iraq and their calls for a regime change in Iraq.¹⁰¹

Parallelism as a diplomatic strategy is evident in South Africa's initiative to despatch a team of disarmament experts to Iraq alongside the existing teams of UNMOVIC and the IAEA. Mbeki, for example, maintained that the South African team would 'help to ensure the necessary proper cooperation between the United Nations inspectors and Iraq.'¹⁰²

South Africa's employment of cooperation as a diplomatic strategy is evident in its multilateral engagements in this matter. South Africa, for example, often voiced its concern about Iraq in the context of multilateral groupings. South Africa, among others, endorsed the decisions of the Summit of the Central Organ of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention of the AU, the Franco-Africa Summit and the NAM III Summit.¹⁰³ Despite the invasion, South Africa was, before the invasion, not only lauded for its successful disarmament efforts but also lauded internationally for its attempt at resolving the impasse over Iraq and the question of WMD.¹⁰⁴ Hans Blix referred to the 'South African model of cooperation' that he urged Iraq to adopt in respect of weapons inspections.¹⁰⁵

The case study confirmed South Africa's commitment to nuclear disarmament and multilateralism, and its support for a rule-based international system and the authority of the UN. Moreover, the case also confirmed instances of South African agency in terms of its diplomatic initiative or entrepreneurial flair. It also confirmed the agency of the South in disarmament, as indicated by the NAM's initiatives in respect of the UNSC.

In addition, the case highlighted some of the unintended consequences of a sanctions regime, namely that it can be sidelined as illustrated by the Volcker Report. Finally, the case also indicated the limits of South Africa's diplomacy, in particular its niche diplomacy as a middle power state. It is clear that there is a need for further theoretical exploration of the failure of middle powers' niche diplomacy.

Notes on contributor

Notes

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