Time to jettison quiet diplomacy

Tim Hughes and Greg Mills argue the case for South Africa adopting a policy of targeted sanctions against Mugabe's regime

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"South Africa must be the only country without vital interests" a senior Pretoria-based diplomat remarked recently. The diplomat concerned was maligning South Africa's contrasting diplomatic positions of "positive engagement" with Iraq and that of "quiet diplomacy" with Zimbabwe.

It is difficult to explain South Africa's position towards Zimbabwe along either realist/traditionalist or idealist modes of foreign policy analysis. The former holds that states behave in a "rational actor" basis and constantly seek to maximise their key, core, or vital interests, however defined. There is no convincing evidence to demonstrate that either quiet diplomacy or tacit support of the Zimbabwe government have advanced any of South Africa's vital interests.

If South Africa's position towards Zimbabwe cannot be explained in realist or traditionalist terms, the idealist interpretation offers no clearer insight. Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma reminded Parliament in May 2001: "Our foreign policy... is not only anchored in our domestic policy, but on (the) responsibility... that South Africa offers hope for all humanity... (We) have to contribute to the ongoing struggle for a better world... Internationally, we continue to struggle for a world with the following values... democracy, good governance, people-centred development, peace, stability and security, promotion of co-operation, partnership and good neighbourliness".

Given the acute and deepening humanitarian crisis unfolding in Zimbabwe, it is impossible to square South Africa's stance towards its most important northern neighbour with that of its avowed commitment to a human rights-orientated foreign policy.

South Africa's quiet diplomacy approach to Zimbabwe hardly qualifies as policy. It is non-verifiable, non-specific, has no clear or given objectives or deliverables and does not permit either the local or international community to understand the substance of the positions adopted. No time frame or framework for engagement has ever been published or agreed to, except the announcement in October 2002 that South Africa and Zimbabwe would hold bi-annual talks. That response to a national and regional catastrophe is inadequate and disproportionate.

The approach of quiet diplomacy is, moreover, conceptually flawed as it makes the fundamental assumption that engagement with a political leader, who has abrogated the most basic tenets of democracy and the rule of law, will be amenable to a quiet diplomatic approach to change. The South African government has failed to place the superordinate principles of humanity, human rights, and good governance above fraternal links and domestic political concerns. Thus there is an acute dissonance between Pretoria's avowed approach to foreign policy and its practice.

Furthermore, South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe is inconsistent with its tried and trusted practice of seeking to mediate conflicts elsewhere in Africa and further afield by providing a platform for constructive dialogue between political opponents, whether in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo or even in the Middle East through the Spier initiative.

Recent reports of high-level kite flying by senior Zanu-PF figures, however, suggest that events may be overtaking the ruling septuagenarian, but likewise may also be overtaking South Africa's position of quiet diplomacy.

What cost South African policy towards Zimbabwe?

In December 2001, Trade and Industry Minister Alec Erwin noted in Harare: "We all know that a rising tide lifts all ships and a strong regional economy is essential for the success of any one nation... In a short period in Zimbabwe the industrial capacity has been destroyed. What is happening to ordinary people and workers is absolutely devastating". The cost of South Africa's position is impossible to measure in financial terms but the downward trajectory of trade between the two countries is easier to plot and is demonstrated in Table One.

Foreign direct investment (FDI), the key driver of growth in any developing economy, has been hit hard by concerns over Zimbabwe and its potentially destabilising effect on South Africa. In 1997 portfolio investment in Zimbabwe stood at around US$32 million (about R272 million). The pattern has however changed with the country registering net outflows in the US$10-$15 million (about R85-R127 million) range over the past two years.

The International Crisis Group has estimated that the loss of potential investment to Southern Africa as a direct result of the Zimbabwe crisis is some US$36 billion (about R306,5 billion, i.e. R306,5 thousand million, or 'milliard'). In addition South Africa's parastatals have paid a heavy price. Zimbabwe has defaulted on its debt to both Eskom and Sasol. As the ICG notes, "SA utilities are thus carrying Zimbabwe with longer and longer credit lines for electricity and fuel".

The American Chamber of Commerce has estimated that for the year to mid-2001 South Africa had lost US$ 3 billion (about R25,5 billion) in potential investment as a result of the Zimbabwean crisis. *BusinessMap* echoes that sentiment. During the period of the Zimbabwean crisis South Africa's own investment risk rating has declined slightly, making it a less attractive destination for scarce capital.

The South African business community has steadily increased its criticism of South Africa's position on Zimbabwe. Chairman of Sasol Paul Kruger stated in his 2002 annual address to shareholders: "(Quiet) diplomacy pursued by the South African government has had no material effect on the appalling occurrences in Zimbabwe". Kruger went on to warn of the impact of Zimbabwe on the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). "The despotic conduct of that country's leadership and the anarchy and abuse of human rights appear to go unabated, thereby tarnishing the image of the whole continent."

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Zimbabwe's foreign minister, Stan Mudenge, and his South African counterpart, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma at a bilateral meeting in November 2002, where it was decided that the joint commission would meet every six months at ministerial level rather than annually at deputy ministerial level

On the reverse side of the social and economic spectrum, ANC alliance partner Cosatu has been far more vocal than the government in its condemnation of Zanu-PF policies, in particular as they pertain to the curtailment of worker rights and freedoms. The fraternal relationship between Cosatu and elements of the MDC are, however, a cause of friction between the government and the labour federation. Indeed South Africa's official stance on Zimbabwe can to some degree be explained in terms of domestic imperatives of the government attempting to curb the ascendancy of both populist and workerist tendencies within the alliance.

There are additional material costs to South Africa of the Zimbabwean meltdown. They include a substantial reduction in tourist numbers between the two countries as well as a looming environmental crisis being driven by poor animal husbandry practices in newly expropriated farms, as well as a foot and mouth crisis that is rapidly growing out of control.

The precipitous drop in the value of the rand during 2001, the subsequent importation of inflation and the corrective hiking of domestic interest rates, were in part influenced by negative market sentiment regarding Zimbabwe through the contagion effect. Rand-linked regional currencies, particularly the Namibian dollar, were affected as well as the rand.

Zimbabwean imports and exports *(Table One)*

Imports to and exports from Zimbabwe in thousands of Zimbabwean dollars (which have depreciated alarmingly since the crisis started gathering momentum in 2000). Figures for 2002 are currently not available

Main exports	Jan-Dec 1995	Jan-Dec 1996	Jan-Dec 1997	Jan-Dec 1998	Jan-Dec 1999	Jan-Dec 2000	Jan-Dec 2001	% total markets
South Africa	2016	2025	3113	5390	8436	12191	6505	15,0
United Kingdom	2059	2112	2836	4363	6949	7102	8394	8,7
Main imports	**Jan-Dec 1995**	**Jan-Dec 1996**	**Jan-Dec 1997**	**Jan-Dec 1998**	**Jan-Dec 1999**	**Jan-Dec 2000**	**Jan-Dec 2001**	**% total markets**
South Africa	8789	10767	13362	22873	32951	30773	36435	38,2
United Kingdom	1857	2228	2688	4063	5554	3847	3016	4,8

The Zimbabwe crisis has also propelled an unwanted refugee phenomenon across the border particularly through Messina. It is estimated that two million Zimbabweans have sought refuge in South Africa. That has the deleterious effect of placing increased stress on the South African job market and scarce housing, besides causing a drainage of skills and people from Zimbabwe. Most of these immigrants are "illegal" and have given rise to a network of criminal activity in border towns. Some 1,200 illegal immigrants are repatriated to Zimbabwe every week. The government has put in place emergency measures to accommodate a feared mass exodus of immigrants.

At the level of international prestige and standing, South Africa's position on Zimbabwe has had a profound impact on particularly western countries' perceptions of President Mbeki's political leadership and his brainchild, Nepad. One diplomat argued that, after the holding of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Australia in 2002, during which Zimbabwe was a key issue, Nepad became a programme that needed more than support. It had to be defended as well. Even more pessimistically, a senior Africanist scholar has remarked that, "Nepad's headstone will no doubt have Zimbabwe inscribed on it".

Policy alternatives

If quiet diplomacy has been the abject failure it is broadly held to be, given the parlous state of the Zimbabwean economy and its deepening humanitarian crisis, what are the alternative policy responses that may be considered by South Africa?

South Africa enjoys considerable economic leverage over its northern neighbour should it choose to exercise it. Zimbabwe is currently dependent on South Africa for the transiting of a high percentage of its US$40 million (about R3,4 billion) monthly fuel supplies (see Table Two); and for providing 20 per cent (300MW) of its electricity (another 20 per cent comes from Cahora Bassa in Mozambique).

Zimbabwe currently imports around 3,5 to 4 million litres of fuel per day. Before the current economic decline, daily consumption was 5,2 million litres, with seasonal peaks driven by the agricultural sector. Approximately one-third of its needs are railed up from South Africa. The Beira-Harare pipeline has a daily capacity of 3 million litres, though it is operating currently at around 70 per cent of its potential. BBR Railways — a joint venture with Spoornet — moves 600,000 tons of liquid fuels from

Beitbridge to Bulawayo. An estimated 2 million litres of fuel are being used per week in the Congo. It is important to note that there has already been a considerable decline in rail transport flows (see Table Two).

South Africa is a significant debtor state of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is deeply in debt to South Africa. The debt includes a R60 million Telkom credit line to the Zimbabwean Posts and Telecommunications Department, the (R75 million maximum) overdraft extended by the South African Reserve Bank to its Zimbabwean counterpart, export credit reinsurance provided by the South African government to the Zimbabwean iron and steel parastatal Zisco, and around R80 million in Eskom electricity payments.

Sanctions are a serious but potentially powerful tool and, in the light of the failure of measures hitherto adopted, now require serious consideration. The impact of sanctions on the regime must be distinguished from that on the population. A list of specific individuals and organisations associated with the regime could be identified, and sanctions targeted as precisely as possible against these. Simultaneously, civil society forces in Zimbabwe could and should be materially supported.

If applied, sanctions against Zimbabwe could be calibrated in the following manner:

◆ 'Smart' sanctions against individuals associated with the regime, including the freezing of bank accounts, restrictions on travel, and seizure of property.

◆ Curtailing credit from South African parastatals Sasol, Eskom, Telkom and Transnet on their sales to Zimbabwe of oil, electricity and telecommunication and transport services.

These measures would need to be sequenced, according to the Zimbabwean government response.

Further measures could be imposed, but their threatened imposition could be used prior to it. These would take the form of multilaterally-mandated sanctions (UN, SADC, EU, AU, Commonwealth), and could, in an extreme case, include a border blockade on both imports and exports, and the suspension/removal of Zimbabwe from leadership and representative functions in international bodies.

Importantly, these measures have to be wielded in conjunction with the formulation and application of an exit strategy for President Robert Mugabe, including possibly a leadership amnesty.

There are a number of difficulties in applying sanctions, which should be acknowledged, however:

◆ There is a need to limit the damage done to the Zimbabwean people and target the Zimbabwean regime.

◆ To a great extent, Mr Mugabe has already self-imposed financial and travel restrictions on himself and his country, and is evidently unmoved by damage to the economy.

◆ Most inter-governmental initiatives, with the notable exception of a physical blockade, would take time to bite.

◆ Any immediate-term impact of sanctions would, to a degree, be offset by the flow of humanitarian aid, which is likely to be controlled by Zanu-PF and used to its political advantage.

◆ The uneven application of measures by different states would, to some extent, undermine their efficacy.

◆ Sanctions would have to be carefully sequenced, and involve a number of key states (such as Mozambique if fuel supplies were to be withheld).

Despite the risks and dangers inherent in a shift of policy, it is time for South Africa to formally abandon its failed position of "quiet diplomacy" towards the Zimbabwe regime and to consider sharper options. For the sake of national self-interest and ultimately that of ordinary Zimbabweans, it is time for South Africa to seriously consider sanctions. ❑

Chairman of Sasol Paul Kruger commented in his 2002 annual address to shareholders: "(Quiet) diplomacy pursued by the South African government has had no material effect on the appalling occurrences in Zimbabwe"

PICTURE COURTESY OF SASOL

Zimbabwe rail transport via South Africa *(Table Two)*

1999/2000 and 2000/2001 (tons)

	1999/00 To	1999/00 From	2000/01 To	2000/01 From
Beitbridge Bulawayo railway	104,916	12,260	242,255	19,245
Zimbabwe	1,331,714	762,370	767,001	719,481
SA regional traffic	4,883,148	1,587,670	4,640,233	1,720,296