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"Forging foreign policy during South Africa's transition: The Transitional Executive Council (TEC) and South African reintegration into the international community, 1993-1994"

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On the 23 May 1994, South Africa joined the Organisation of African Unity after decades of isolation in Africa. It was a swift and decisive move by the 'new' South Africa, and of great symbolical significance for the country's foreign policy. Given that the new Government of National Unity, led by Nelson Mandela and the ANC, had only been sworn in on the 10 May, this was a dramatic foreign policy decision after less than two weeks in power. While it would have been safe to assume that South Africa would have entered the OAU at some point, the speed of this decision was surprising, as it might have been expected that the new government would have had more pressing domestic concerns to address. In fact, the recommendations and groundwork for South Africa's entry into the OAU, as well as numerous other international organisations, had been completed in advance of the formation of the new government. These proposals were drawn up by a small, cross-party body, known as the Sub Council on Foreign Affairs, which was a part of the Transitional Executive Council (or TEC), the umbrella body that governed South Africa during the latter stages of the transition from apartheid to democracy. Once in office, the new government simply had to review the proposals and suggestions of the sub councils, and implement those that it agreed with.

This paper will explore the various activities of the Sub Council on Foreign Affairs in the final five months of the transition, and demonstrate the significant influence it had on the direction of South Africa's foreign policy after April 1994. I will begin by providing some context to the dramatic international events at work in the early 1990s that shaped the transition; a background and description to the Sub Council on Foreign Affairs; an overview of some of its work; and finally the important role the sub-council played in guiding the foreign policy of a democratic South Africa.

The background to South Africa's transition

South Africa's successful transition from apartheid to democracy between 1990 and 1994 occurred at a time of enormous global upheaval in international politics. The fall of the Berlin Wall

triggered the demise of international communism, and destroyed the underpinnings of the bipolar, superpower dominated world order. The international status quo had been shattered, and western models of liberal democracy, with the USA as its standard bearer, took their place as the unchallenged hegemonic political system. In 1991, it prompted President George Bush Senior to herald the 'prospect of a new world order'. The onset of this 'new world order' marked a shift in thinking about international relations, with a move away from the old ideological underpinnings of the Cold War, towards a greater focus on multiparty democracy, human rights, and multilateralism.

These changes had profound political effects on Southern Africa, where the battle to end white minority rule in the region had been played out against the spectre of superpower rivalry. With the international isolation of South Africa increasing, the country's economy under siege, and the ideological foundations of white minority rule removed, the writing was on the wall for apartheid and the National Party. At the opening of Parliament on the 2 February 1990, against the backdrop of these swiftly evolving world events, South African President F. W. De Klerk, unexpectedly announced the unbanning of the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress. After thirty years of exile this sudden development took the liberation movements by surprise. Nelson Mandela described the unbanning as:

'a breathtaking moment, for in one sweeping action [De Klerk] had virtually normalised the situation in South Africa. Our world had changed overnight'

The unbanning of the South African liberation movements was the starting point in the process of negotiations which sought formally to end apartheid. Various stages occurred in the negotiations, beginning with the Groote Schuur Minute in May 1990, and culminating in the TEC being established in November 1993.

The transition has been widely studied, producing a diverse literature on this momentous era in South African history. However, one period of the transition, the TEC, and more importantly the activities of its sub-councils, has been neglected despite having profound ramifications for what occurred in South Africa after April 1994. In short, while its role in, and impact on the transition was extremely important, the activities of the Sub Council on Foreign Affairs remains a largely untold story. As the negotiations unfolded, the attention of the media and the academic world instead focused on the dramatic domestic political transformation. From the documentation available, it is evident that a substantial number of academics, journalists, politicians and civil servants were aware of the sub-council on foreign affairs and its international activities. Yet, with the excitement of the

elections and the inauguration of the ANC government, its important behind the scenes work went publicly unnoticed. This paper aims to rectify this.

The formation of the TEC and SCFA

Months of negotiations between the apartheid government and various political parties culminated in the TEC being established in October 1993. The TEC had no precedent in the world, as it brought together the previous belligerents in a surprisingly harmonious fashion, who helped to guide South Africa through to its first democratic elections. The mandate of the TEC was, and I quote:

'to facilitate and promote, in conjunction with all legislative and executive structures at all levels of government in South Africa, the preparation for and transition to, a democratic order in South Africa'

After the TEC had been formally announced, *The Star* newspaper wrote that *'the TEC, and [its] sub-councils do, therefore, have powers that could be significant and will be binding'*. Reinforcing the uniqueness of the TEC was the fact that it was served by eight sub-councils, much like the departments of an elected government, which included the supervision of defence, finance, and foreign affairs. Each consisted of either six or eight members nominated by their respective parties, ranging from apartheid era politicians to former exiled liberation activists. In order to maintain equality, no party was allowed to have more than one member on each sub-council.

However, at this juncture, I must point out that the existing National Party government was officially still in power, but its decision making was subject to endorsement by the TEC. Any government department that wanted to accomplish a task had to seek first the approval of either the TEC or the appropriate sub-council before it could be implemented. As I will explain later, this was an important factor in the foreign policy discussions that occurred during this period.

Setting the scene

The first meeting of the sub-council on foreign affairs was held in Cape Town on the 22 December 1993, and was attended by all six of its members (*see PowerPoint*), along with the Foreign Minister Pik Botha, the Director General of the Department of Foreign Affairs (known as the DFA) Rusty Evans and several other senior DFA officials. The recognition that the sub-council could have a significant impact on the DFA's own work was demonstrated by the number of high ranking

attendees at its inaugural meeting. The duty of the sub-council was to attain the broadest possible consensus on matters affecting South African international interests. In doing so, it was tasked with discussing and securing appropriate agreements with the international community that would benefit the country. Once the election was over, the aim was that the incoming government would be able to 'hit the ground running'.

In addressing the first working meeting, Pik Botha insisted, and I quote, that the country's *'international relations should be apolitical and that we should have a non-partisan foreign policy'*, further adding that '*in the field of foreign relations we should not allow internal political differences to weaken the solidarity'*. The sub-council members were also told that they should subsume their political differences and aspirations so that they could pursue initiatives that would benefit the whole country and not those of one party. Apparently the sub-council and the DFA's civil servants achieved this with surprising ease. This interpretation is supported by Tom Wheeler, who was a high ranking civil servant in the DFA, a former diplomat, and someone who was actively involved in the sub-council as a liaison officer. His conclusion was that the TEC process allowed the DFA and the members of the sub-council to engage constructively with one another on both a professional and social level, allowing them to make progress with the task at hand. This meant, in Wheeler's words, that *'they weren't a strange bunch of people who were a threat to us'*.

The strength of this emerging relationship was aptly demonstrated in Singapore during one of the sub-councils many overseas trips. During the visit, the delegates embarked on a cruise around Singapore harbour, which turned into a raucous evening of drinking and karaoke. A report of the trip, detailing the events of the evening's entertainment, claimed that those present, through the power of song, had *'set about nation building'*. This example illustrates the growing personal ties that were forged during the transition, and offers an indication of how political differences were put aside. Through its activities, the working relationship also developed into a social relationship, and as Wheeler put it to me, they became *'drinking partners'*. The sub-council was thus one way in which the old and new administrations began the important process of integration. This particularly paid off in the case of Aziz Pahad, who became South Africa's Deputy Foreign Minister; the result was that he already knew the internal dynamics of the department and the people serving him, enabling him to start work immediately.

What is particularly interesting is that Pahad had served the ANC in exile, and was a high ranking member of the movement's National Executive Committee. An intriguing point to consider is the extent to which such a senior ANC official was guided during the transition by DFA officials. The formulation of the ANC's own foreign policy, had gone through a number of transformations during

the transition, and although connected, is a different story. But put simply, the ANC's stance was seen to be at odds with the more conservative and pragmatic approaches favoured by the western international community. Yet the DFA's guidance of the sub-council is an extremely important but neglected issue. The efforts by the DFA to influence the sub-council could be best described as part of a wider process of 'domestication' underway in South Africa at this time. The effectiveness and impact of this process of 'domestication' becomes increasingly apparent as the DFA, in tandem with the international community, sought to imbue the sub-council with the prevalent international norms of the early 1990s.

Importantly, the sub-council did not have a mandate to formulate foreign policy itself; it was only a bridge to future policy formulation. Nevertheless the sub-council was in practice highly influential, and the DFA was obliged to work closely with it in order to advance its own agenda. From 1990 onwards, the DFA, with varying degrees of success, had sought to break South Africa's isolation and reintegrate the country back into the international community. The DFA's approach was very much attuned to the thinking of the 'new world order', which was based largely on neo-liberal economics, leading the Department to coin the phrase that 'the flag will follow the trade'. What became apparent in this 'new world order', is that despite the rhetoric of democracy and human rights, economics was far more crucial than ideology. So, with only a matter of months until the elections, and taking into account the ANC's purportedly 'radical' international outlook, the DFA was loath to see its efforts hampered by inexperienced politicians. Having recognised the power of the sub-council to shape South African foreign policy, the Department did its utmost to influence its final recommendations, in accordance with its own and the international community's perspectives of the world. Wheeler argued that there was nothing malicious in the DFA's actions, claiming that:

'it was an interactive process. There was no hostility mutually between us; we worked very well with them, and so it was useful to the old government until the change came, to have this body that would legitimise what they were doing'.

Shaping the transition

A pertinent example of how the DFA influenced the sub-council on foreign affairs was through the flow and provision of information to its members. The members regularly requested information and advice from the DFA as a means of assisting them in reaching their conclusions on a variety of issues. The DFA was eager to oblige, and did so in a variety of formats, through meetings, seminars, presentations, reports, and documents. All were clearly useful tools for the sub-council, helpfully synthesising vast quantities of information. Despite the obvious benefits to the sub-council,

there was an ulterior motive. As the DFA created the documentation and organised the meetings it was very clearly in control over the flow and content of information. This is not to claim that the sub-council did not have access to other sources of information concerning foreign policy, but what was provided by the DFA was extremely significant. Wheeler described these reports as having been:

'drafted by the desks, perhaps at the request of the TEC, or perhaps to guide the way the TEC thought'

Thus, Wheeler explicitly described exactly what the DFA was trying to achieve during the TEC process. By exercising a degree of control over the flow and nature of information to the sub-council, it allowed it to play a role in shaping and influencing the final outcomes. Although the sub-council was supposed to be independent of the old government structures, the DFA attempted to guide the process in favour of its own preferred international outlook.

From the outset of the sub-council, the DFA's Director General had ensured that at every working meeting there would be at least one member of his staff present. Therefore, as well as supplying information to the sub-council, the DFA was also observing its activities. The active participation of the DFA in the sub-council's work did not go unnoticed by the TEC. In a memo dated 5 March 1994, the overall Management Committee of the TEC took the sub-council on foreign affairs to task concerning this relationship, noting, and I quote:

'that the Department of Foreign Affairs attends all the meetings of the Sub-council. We are of the view that this is against the spirit of the Transitional Executive Council Act. We are therefore of the view that the Department should attend meetings only when summoned'.

This warning wasn't heeded, as it is clear from the minutes of the sub-council that the Department continued to be represented at all meetings right up until the elections. What it does aptly demonstrate is that there were real concerns about the sub-council's independence, and the DFA's role in the process.

Ensuring that South Africa's transition passed off smoothly, and the country re-integrated back into the international community, became an important issue on the global agenda during the early 1990s. The country had become the test-case for the principles of the 'new world order', and thus politicians and multilateral organisations were eager to ensure its success. It prompted David Ginsburg to argue that:

'we should not underestimate the extent to which the South African transition was shaped precisely by the fact that it gathered momentum just when alternative visions of democracy were becoming

discredited… Nothing could have played more into the hands of those Western powers anxious to shape the outcome of the transition'.

However, less idealistic motives were also at work. As mentioned previously, the ANC had started to formulate its own foreign policy during the transition, which was perceived as being relatively radical compared to the western status quo. The consequence of this was that prominent members of the international community began to both subtlety and overtly attempt to re-align the ANC's thinking through direct contact with the movement and starkly warning the sub-council away from such an approach. The clearest example of this was during a meeting between the Deputy Director General of the DFA and the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, E.P. Goussarov. In the confidential memo, South Africa was strongly advised to opt for continuity in its foreign relations:

'[the ambassador] added that it was essential for South Africa to demonstrate to the world that it could be relied upon as a solid partner, not only now but in the future. Continuity of foreign policy, in substance if not in style, was the very cornerstone of interstate relations. He could not emphasise too clearly the importance the world would attach to an unambiguous demonstration of reliability and continuity'.

This official message from Russia to South Africa is unequivocal. The key elements of Ambassador Goussarov's statement concerning South African foreign policy are 'continuity' and 'substance'. In effect, the Russian Federation informed South Africa that it could cosmetically change the way in which it presented its foreign policy, but the content should remain the same. For the DFA, this was unambiguous support from an international superpower for its favoured approach. What makes such a highly conservative message so significant is that Russia, as part of the former Soviet Union, had been a key supporter of the ANC during its exile, encouraging the latter's socialist orientation in its foreign policy. The message to the sub-council was clear enough, that a foreign policy that deviated from the international status quo would not be acceptable to the major trading nations of the world. It serves as a striking example of the 'domestication' process underway during South Africa's transition.

Experiencing the world

Although the DFA ultimately benefited from the sub-council, the department was initially less than enthused by the process. Wheeler recalled that as soon as the implementation of the TEC and its sub-councils was announced, Rusty Evans called a meeting of his Chief Directors within the department to discuss the situation, arguing that:

'we are now stuck with this TEC business, and we need to keep them out of our hair, I think what we should do is take them on a tour of the world... It was to keep them out of our way, so we could get on with our business. It was a misreading of how things were going to develop, but that was… how [Evans] saw it'.

The result, was that although the sub-council held numerous meetings in South Africa, it also embarked on three extensive trips abroad, all organised by the DFA. This offers another example of how the DFA exercised control over the process, allowing it to dictate the sub-council's itinerary. This power over the schedule ensured that the DFA could choose the appropriate international actors it should meet. The DFA sought to expose the sub-council to the opinions of the western international community, who it was assumed, would emphasise the importance of adhering to its principles.

Once abroad, the foreign meetings had several purposes. At some, the ANC's External Heads of Missions were given the opportunity to meet with DFA officials and ambassadors to discuss foreign policy concerns. By bringing the different parties together, it was yet another opportunity for the representatives to put aside their differences, and discuss the future. Such occasions played a crucial role in the assimilation process. Yet, despite several meetings involving the ANC, DFA and the sub-council, there was still a degree of apprehension in the DFA about them, specifically regarding the prospect of the ANC's involvement. Internal DFA documents expressed concerns about the ANC's role, because and I quote:

'the ANC will, subject to developments, be prominently represented. This raises questions regarding whether the ANC/and or PAC representatives are to be acknowledged or accommodated in any way, including socially, before or during the mission's visit'.

Quite clearly, some elements within the civil service had not yet come to terms with the imminent election of the ANC.

Another key aspect of the overseas visits was the opportunity they gave the DFA to introduce the South African delegation to the international community. During the course of three foreign tours which encompassed North America, Africa, Europe, and Asia, the sub-council met a wide range of individuals and international organisations including the UN Secretary General, members of the EC, as well as various presidents and foreign ministers. In doing so, the sub-council, and to a lesser extent the ANC, were given the opportunity to have individual discussions with some of the world's most influential politicians, whose own views could shape the future relationship with South Africa. For the international community it allowed them to meet with the sub-council, whose

recommendations could shape South Africa's foreign policy, and inform them of what would be expected of the country, once it was readmitted to global institutions. Once again the message was clear - South Africa's foreign policy would be best placed in the mainstream of international relations.

Conclusions

After the ANC was elected in 1994, the work of the Sub Council on Foreign Affairs came to an end. In five months the sub-council had embarked on a frenetic schedule: there had been twenty-one meetings covering a range of issues such as membership of the UN and South Africa's development status; it had met thirteen visiting foreign delegations to South Africa; and while on official visits abroad, had held numerous meetings with international diplomats, as well as participating in nine planning conferences. The meetings, agreements and copious recommendations from the sub-council significantly influenced the new government's approach to reintegrating South Africa into the international community. This act of re-engagement should be understood as one of the key successes of the ANC's foreign policy. However, this process would not have occurred so smoothly or quickly without the behind the scenes activities of the Sub Council on Foreign Affairs.

However, this paper raises questions about the extent to which the foreign policy, implemented by the ANC after the elections, was truly its own. The evidence points towards the significant influence of the DFA during the short lifespan of the sub-council. The DFA, whose own perspectives on foreign policy were attuned to the international status quo of the 1990s, did its utmost to direct and shape the sub-council's final recommendations. This process should be viewed as part of a wider programme of South Africa's 'domestication' during the transition. The DFA sought to place post-apartheid South Africa firmly on a path that adhered to ideals such as liberal democracy and free trade. It was concerned that a South Africa, led by former liberation activists, might act in a similar way to dissident countries such as Cuba or Libya in multilateral forums, which refused to tow the line internationally and were generally regarded as a nuisance. The sub-council process provided the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the great benefits that conformity would bring, while also warning South Africa about the dangers of pursuing a radical foreign policy. For the DFA and the international community, the process was a way of imbuing them with the normative ideals of the time, and a means of disciplining the country's political elite into a specific, internationally acceptable, approach to foreign policy. The sub-council process also offers an example of how entrenched elite interests captured the new South Africa's foreign policy for its own benefit. The notion of an elite capture constitutes a specific manifestation and demonstration of the

characteristics of a transition process, and is outlined in studies by Patrick Bond and Samuel Huntington.

The findings presented by the sub-council to the TEC ultimately provided the basis of the new post-apartheid South African foreign policy, in the years immediately after the elections. However, the influence of the sub-council on the new government has been completely ignored in the literature on the 'new' South Africa, even though its importance to South African foreign policy was highlighted retrospectively in the DFA's 1996 Green Paper, which stated that:

'the Subcouncil therefore became actively and effectively involved in the conduct of South Africa's international relations, as regards not only policy matters but also the creation of the new Department of Foreign Affairs, budgetary matters, senior personnel appointments, the opening of new missions abroad and other management matters of medium or long term importance'.

During the first few years of ANC rule in South Africa, the government implemented the vast majority of the sub-councils recommendations, accepting many of the tenets that had been proposed. However, the adoption of the sub-council's recommendations was a contradiction in terms, because they were at odds with the ANC's own agenda. As a consequence, South Africa was confronted by many conflicting tensions in its foreign policy during Mandela's presidency, prompting Tony Leon to observe that it *'lurched between high-minded principle and the lowest common dominator of Third World struggle solidarity*'.