

Policy Paper

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# The New South in a Multipolar World Multi-Alignment or Fence Sitting?

Lessons from South Africa, India, and others

By Len Ishmael

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Like many countries of the Global South, South Africa espouses an independent, non-aligned approach to foreign policy. This approach has been criticized during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war as a superficial excuse to be 'soft' on Russia. Deeper reflection and analysis however, points to a finely calibrated *multi-alignment* strategy, which allows South Africa to secure its national interests while carefully balancing relations with the United States (U.S.), European Union (EU) and other western allies, with those of Cuba, China, and Russia. The latter are longtime allies with which the modern state of South Africa has enjoyed solidarity on a range of issues, including the concept of independence, the rights of sovereignty, and multilateralism as a tool for more inclusive forms of global governance and power sharing. This paper, presented in two parts, examines how South Africa's engagement on the diplomatic, political, and economic fronts underscores the country's strategic approach to its foreign policy, which is both nimble and well-crafted for this period of heightened tensions and Great Power competition, and why picking a side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict would undermine the interests of the state. South Africa, India, and others also provide models for a deeper understanding of why countries of the Global South, particularly regional and middle powers are seizing *this* moment—despite its many challenges—to expand their spheres of influence and leverage their agency to influence global power dynamics and the institutions that will shape the future. In so doing, they are creating a multilayered multipolarity in the international structure. *No longer the Third World or Global South of old, today we see emergence of the New South. These countries are not fence sitting, but are actively engaged in multi-alignment to secure their interests in a highly fluid environment.*



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## **POLICY PAPER**

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## PART 1

### I. CRAFTING A NEW STATE

Much of South Africa's DNA as a modern state can be traced to the period of new state building following decades of an apartheid regime, and the country's reintegration into the international community in 1994. Years later, the legacy of this period is visible in South Africa's statecraft, its approach to its African neighbors, its identification with the Global South, the call for multilateral institutional reform, and the importance it places on mediation and reconciliation as pathways to conflict resolution. No longer a 'Western outpost' at the tip of Africa, important political relationships are throwbacks to the apartheid era with states that were important in supporting the liberation struggle. The former Soviet Union and Cuba, for example, were brothers in arms, supplying the African National Congress's (ANC) fighters with arms and military training. China too provided solidarity during the decolonization process, as did many countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of the 1950s and 1960s. While relations with Western countries are also important, these are generally of an economic nature. Memories remain of the roles of the U.S., United Kingdom and others in supporting the white minority state and the institutionalization of apartheid.

Loyalty to old friends and solidarity are thus important principles of South Africa's foreign policy, demonstrated in its consistent branding of the U.S. embargo of Cuba as unlawful. The country's muted response to Western sanctions on Russia following the latter's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 should also be understood in this context. Both examples also point to South Africa's consistency in its stance on unilateral sanctions. When the mega-yacht *Nord*, owned by sanctioned Russian oligarch Alexey Mordashov, cruised into Cape Town in October 2022, South Africa refused to impound the vessel, observing that the country would not act on unilateral sanctions imposed by individual jurisdictions in the absence of the legal basis of UN endorsement<sup>1</sup>.

Advocating reform of multilateral institutions to respond to the challenges faced by developing countries has been part of the majority black-led country's strategy from inception. South Africa's call for reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations (UN), and other Bretton Woods institutions is therefore persistent. Its call for dialogue with Russia, rather than sanctions and condemnation, over the country's invasion of Ukraine, is also consistent with its approach to conflict. Mediation not confrontation was a powerful tool in healing a deeply divided country in the aftermath of apartheid, an approach grounded in the state's foreign policy of 2010 around the ideals of "*diplomacy of Ubuntu*," a concept of shared humanity which stresses "*collaboration, cooperation and partnership rather than conflict and confrontation*" in advancing domestic priorities<sup>2</sup>.

South Africa's foreign policy includes a number of priorities: a focus on the immediate neighborhood of Southern Africa and the African continent; engagement with the countries of the Global South in addressing challenges of underdevelopment; promoting equity and social justice; developing more genuine partnerships with the West; and transforming the multilateral system to better reflect global diversity. These are supported by key principles including the independence of states, South-South solidarity and Pan-Africanism, poverty alleviation, rejection of the abuse of power in systems of global governance, and comprehensive reform of

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1. Olive Enokido-Lineham. Sanctioned Russian Oligarch Alexey Mordashov allowed to dock superyacht in Cape Town. Sky News. October 26, 2022 <https://news.sky.com/story/sanctioned-russian-oligarch-alexey-mordashov-allowed-to-dock-superyacht-in-cape-town-12730637>

2. Government of South Africa. The Draft White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/17816/>

multilateral institutions, “including the UN and Bretton Woods Institutions to make them more effective, legitimate, and responsive to the needs of the developing world”<sup>3</sup>. While these original tenets have been updated and refined, they have set the compass that has guided South Africa’s actions at home and abroad.

## II. MEDIATION NOT SANCTIONS—THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAY

South Africa is the most advanced and developed economy within the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and the dominant security anchor with an important role in mediating regional and continental conflict across Africa. Insecurity in several parts of Africa is a recurring challenge. The continent has faced eight coups in the last three years, most recently in Niger and Gabon, creating instability across large swathes of the continent. Southern Africa has also faced bouts of localized violence and region-wide instability. Over the last five years, South Africa’s skills in mediating conflict have played an important role in ending political instability and ensuring a peaceful transition of power in Lesotho<sup>4</sup>, while more recently, South Africa has hosted peace talks between the Ethiopian government and Tigray representatives in a continuing effort to end hostilities.

South Africa’s call for mediation as a means to end the war in Ukraine is therefore consistent with its approach to conflict at home. Hours after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Pretoria issued a statement requesting that Moscow withdraw, pointing to the inviolability of national sovereignty and the principles of territorial integrity. No public comment has been made since. South Africa was one of 17 African countries that abstained from the March 2, 2022 UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote on the resolution calling on BRICS partner Russia, to withdraw forces from Ukraine<sup>5</sup>. South Africa’s UN Ambassador objected to the resolution on the grounds that the phrasing “*does not create an environment conducive for diplomacy, dialogue and mediation*”<sup>6</sup>. South Africa also abstained from previous votes on the war<sup>7</sup>, including, most recently, when it joined India, China, and 32 other countries in abstaining from the vote of February 23, 2023 demanding that Russia withdraw from Ukraine<sup>8</sup>.

While South Africa is said to be ‘cool’ on the matter of implementing western sanctions against Russia, this stance is also consistent with its approach to sanctions, which is founded on more than loyalty. The country has consistently voted to uphold the Russian co-sponsored Resolution

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3. Ibid

4. Club of Mozambique. SADC mediation efforts in Lesotho, Eswatini, progressive and constructive: Naledi Pandor. July 20, 2022. <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/sadc-mediation-efforts-in-lesotho-eswatini-progressive-and-constructive-pandor-221107/>. As recently as July 2022, a number of conflicts involving SADC appointed mediators were in play including that between the Kingdoms of Lesotho and Eswatini, and outbreaks of terrorism in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.

5. Vicky Stark. South Africa criticized for abstaining on UN Ukraine resolution. VOA. Africa. March 03, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-africa-criticized-for-abstaining-on-un-ukraine-resolution/6468748.html>

6. Ibid

7. Kate Dent. University of Cape Town News. March 07, 2022. South Africa also abstained from UNGA Resolution 68/262 following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and in 2021, regarding UNGA Resolution 75/29 relating to the militarization of Crimea, the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov and city of Sevastopol. <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2022-03-07-sas-un-voting-record-set-the-stage-for-its-position-on-ukraine>

8. Brazil was the only member of the BRICS to vote in favor of the resolution. Al Jazeera

36/10 (adopted in 2017)<sup>9</sup> that seeks to prevent individual states from imposing sanctions on another state because of the harm caused to the citizens of the sanctioned country. There is also the perception, held by South Africa and other Global South countries, that sanctions are coercive tools deployed by powerful countries in their self-interest, and that not all conflicts are treated equally. The timing of the EU's and the U.S.'s recent undertaking to review sanctions on Venezuela's President Maduro, and to allow resumed exports of the country's oil in an effort to replace Russian gas and oil, has no doubt hardened this view. Sanctions have created untold hardship for the Venezuelan people. Seven million people have been displaced, left to seek refuge across Latin America and the Caribbean, and as far away as the U.S., and countless lives were lost during the global pandemic due to Venezuela's decimated health system.

This perception of inconsistent application of rules resurfaced, recently, around the BRICS Summit hosted by South Africa in Pretoria (August 2023), as a result of the warrant given by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to secure the arrest of Russian President Putin. While the latter joined the Summit virtually, South Africa had previously pronounced on the inconsistent application of ICC rules to violations in other countries, such as Iraq, which have not generated similar warrants.

### III. MULTI-ALIGNMENT IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL INTERESTS

Like many developing economies (India being a notable exception), South Africa's economy was beset by challenges prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. And while the economy is recovering somewhat, growth was sluggish at 1.9% in 2022, with weaker growth of 1.2% forecast in 2023<sup>10</sup>. Inflation is higher than at any other time in the last 13 years because of the effects of both the global pandemic and war in Ukraine, and the outlook is clouded with risks. Unemployment of 35.3% at the end of 2022 disproportionately affects young people (aged 15-24), 66.5% of whom are without jobs<sup>11</sup>. The country faces one of the highest levels of persistent inequality in the world with a Gini coefficient of 0.63 in 2022<sup>12</sup>. Acute shortages of affordable housing, chronic power outages, weak governance in the energy sector, rising debt servicing costs, and currency depreciation place significant constraints on growth<sup>13</sup>. While a commodities boom has boosted tax revenues allowing an extension of the Social Relief Distress Grant and other temporary measures to soften the impact of inflation to March 2024, debt is over 70% of GDP, and debt servicing represents 15% of government spending<sup>14</sup>.

#### 3.1 Domestic Economic Interests: The Priority

While resolution, rather than confrontation, is South Africa's preferred approach to conflict,

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9. Kate Dent. University of Cape Town News. March 07, 2022. South Africa also abstained from UNGA Resolution 68/262 following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and in 2021, regarding UNGA Resolution 75/29 relating to the militarization of Crimea, the Black sea, the Sea of Azov and city of Sevastopol.

10. World Bank. The World Bank in South Africa economy 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr>

11. Lillian Roberts. More could be done: Combatting south Africa's record high unemployment. Reported in Forbes Africa. [https://www.forbesafrica.com/current-affairs/2022/04/06/more-could-be-done-combating-south-africas-record-high-unemployment/.South Africa is the most unequal country in the world ranking 1st out of 164 countries as a result of the impact of race on education and labor market entry thirty years after apartheid.](https://www.forbesafrica.com/current-affairs/2022/04/06/more-could-be-done-combating-south-africas-record-high-unemployment/.South%20Africa%20is%20the%20most%20unequal%20country%20in%20the%20world%20ranking%201st%20out%20of%20164%20countries%20as%20a%20result%20of%20the%20impact%20of%20race%20on%20education%20and%20labor%20market%20entry%20thirty%20years%20after%20apartheid.)

12. World Bank. The World Bank in South Africa Economy 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr>

13. OECD. South Africa OECD Economic Outlook Projection Note. Volume 2022 Issue 2: Preliminary Version. November 20, 2022. <https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/south-africa-oecd-economic-outlook-projection-note>

14. Ibid



there are also compelling national interests in pushing for peace in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The war follows other crises. National treasures and social protection systems are overstretched. Against this reality, the return to stability and economic growth are key priorities for South Africa and the countries of the Global South. The World Bank's warning that these countries face a *Lost Decade of Development*<sup>15</sup> compounds this sense of urgency. Images of the deadly violence on the streets of Sri Lanka as it approached default on its sovereign debt underscored the fact that the inability to safeguard the livelihoods of citizens constitutes a major threat to the social and political stability of countries of the Global South, a fact governments can ignore only at their peril.

In March 2022, President Ramaphosa disclosed that he had been invited by Russian President Vladimir Putin to mediate in the conflict with Ukraine. Mediation, supported by a Council of Eminent Persons, was a proposal also advanced by South Africa's Minister of Foreign Affairs<sup>16</sup>. In June 2023 President Ramaphosa joined six other African leaders in pushing an African Peace initiative which included visits to the leaders of Ukraine and Russia. While this initiative is yet to yield results, it was discussed during the Second Russia-Africa Summit (July 27-28, 2023) hosted in St Petersburg<sup>17</sup>. President Ramaphosa used that occasion to directly address the need for peace and to bring an end to war, noting: "*we have a right to call for peace. The ongoing conflict also negatively affects us*"<sup>18</sup>. India, Brazil, and China are also pushing for a negotiated end to the war, as have others, including former G20 President Indonesia's Joko Widodo. These countries all desire an end to this protracted war so that global conditions supportive of stability and growth can resume<sup>19</sup>.

### 3.2 Picking A Side Is Not an Option: Every Theatre Matters

South Africa and the countries of the Global South are leveraging this period of Great Power competition to secure their interests. Picking a side is a luxury few countries can afford. While the previous Russia-Africa Summit (Sochi, 2019) led to the signing of twenty contracts related to arms, training, security, and defense consulting, the most recent summit (St. Petersburg, 2023) yielded a plan of action for the Partnership Forum and a Russian commitment on food security by ensuring an uninterrupted supply of Russian cereals to Africa, including an undertaking to provide free grain to six of the continent's least-developed countries<sup>20</sup>. These benefits were complemented by pledges of investment and logistical support via the expansion of the North-South Corridor (linking Russia and Central Asia via a shorter route through ports in Iran and India), to include a distribution hub in North Africa, and further investment in rail and other infrastructure to move goods between Africa and Russia, effectively bypassing Europe and the Suez Canal. A Russian commitment to invite the African Union (AU) to join the G20 as a full member was also realized at the recent Summit of Leaders in New Delhi (September 9-10, 2023), under the Indian G20 Presidency.

15. Allan Rappaport. World Bank warns of lost decade for global economic potential. New York Times. March 27 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/27/business/economy/world-bank-lost-decade-growth.html#:~:text=The%20World%20Bank%20projected%20in,first%20decade%20of%20this%20century>.

16. Council of Foreign Relations. A conversation with Minister Naledi Pandor of South Africa. Washington DC. September 14 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-minister-naledi-pandor-south-africa-0>

17. The summit was attended by forty-nine African delegations, including South Africa's President.

18. Mark Trevelyan and Kevin Liffey. African Leaders Tell Putin: 'We have a Right to call for Peace.' Reuters News. July 29, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-tells-african-leaders-moscow-is-studying-their-ukraine-proposal-2023-07-28/>

19. Len Ishmael. *A World Divided. A Multilayered, Multipolar World*. In Len Ishmael (ED) *Aftermath of War in Europe The West Vs. The Global South?* Policy Center for the New South. January 2022

20. This announcement followed Russian disengagement from the agreement to allow shipment of Ukraine cereals through the Black Sea.

Like every other regional grouping, South Africa and other African countries utilize all theatres to advance their interests and secure greater shares of resources for their development priorities. In recent times these have included not only the Russia-Africa Summit previously discussed, but also the U.S.-Africa Meeting held seven months previously (13-15 December, 2022), the Africa-EU Summit (February 2022) and the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, November 2021). Every theatre within which their interests can be secured has value, a further reason why it is not in their interests to pick a side in this period of Great Power rivalry.

### 3.3 Defense and Military Arrangements Multi-Alignment in Practice

While South Africa is not party to any formal military alliance, its international alignment behavior is a prime example of its strategy of multi-alignment in practice. While the state formally adopts a non-alignment principle—indeed, an early ANC foreign policy document proclaimed, “*a democratic South Africa will be non-aligned and will not affiliate to any international military blocs*”—the country engages in “*close and complex*” inter-state collaborations<sup>21</sup>. A study examining South Africa’s approach to alliances found that it departs from the traditional (Western) approach to alliances in that “*alliances are driven by mutually shared political and developmental objectives rather than an external security threat. These objectives, combined with a perception of new economic opportunities, have led to an increase in the importance of South Africa’s strategic partnerships with rising powers, and reinforced its multi-alignment diplomacy*”<sup>22</sup>.

True to this approach of multi-alignment, South Africa hosted joint exercises in the Indian Ocean with the navies of China and Russia from February 17-27, 2023, a move which generated much Western criticism given the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine and the coincidence with the war’s first anniversary. South Africa’s Minister of Foreign Affairs described the training sessions as a normal progression of relations between friends, concluding: “*all countries conduct military exercises with friends worldwide*”<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, overlooked and not reported is the fact that joint training sessions had been held previously with these countries as recently as 2019, and South Africa regularly participates in joint exercises with Western and Eastern countries. The South African navy has held at least four joint exercises with the US since 2011 (most recently in July 2022), and with France and Germany. It also undertakes biannual exercises with India and Brazil<sup>24</sup>.

South Africa also uses bilateral defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) to engage in defense-policy coordination, joint military exercises, arms procurement, research and development, and information exchanges. These focus on peace and security, training, and capacity building of military personnel through exchanges of instructors, observers, and trainees<sup>25</sup>. Agreements are in place with a number of African countries and non-African countries including Cuba, with which South Africa participates in Operation Thusano, which covers all initiatives between the

21. Christopher Williams, Mihaela Papa. Rethinking alliances: The Case of South Africa as a Rising Power. *African Security*. Vol. 13, 2020. Issue 4 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19392206.2020.1871796>

22. Ibid.

23. Naledi Pandor. Minister of International Relations and Cooperation. South Africa. January 18, 2023. Pretoria.

24. Christopher Williams, Mihaela Papa. Rethinking alliances: the Case of South Africa as a Rising Power. *African Security*. Vol. 13, 2020. Issue 4 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19392206.2020.1871796>  
Ibid.

25. Defense Web. The Cuban Connection. March 16, 2022. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/the-cuban-connection>.



two militaries<sup>26</sup>. While the perception exists that the U.S.'s support for the apartheid state created obstacles in the development of a close relationship with South Africa in the establishment of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) on the continent, some engagement in U.S.-sponsored international military education and training does take place<sup>27</sup>. The current South African administration has taken a more nuanced, balancing stance in the relationship with China, no doubt also influenced by a change in rhetoric and tone from Washington's Biden Administration.

### 3.4 Arms Imports and Exports

South Africa's trade in arms and military hardware reflects a wide range of markets, partners, and clients. South Africa boasts a significant domestic defense industry and export capability, which can be traced to the apartheid era. Manufactured products range from ammunition to missiles and armored vehicles for its own military, and for countries around the world<sup>28</sup>. Many companies, such as majority state-owned Denel, operate joint ventures with German companies, while private companies such as the Paramount Group have close industry ties with Middle Eastern and Asian countries, and have executed agreements to expand development of local defense industries<sup>29</sup>.

In 2022, the South African Defense Industry company (SADI), exported 3.3 billion rand (\$179.3 million) worth of weapons, ammunition, and military equipment to more than seventy countries<sup>30</sup>. Major buyers include Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reportedly purchasing at least one third of South Africa's arms exports in recent years<sup>31</sup>, and North African countries including Egypt, with its lucrative \$4 billion market<sup>32</sup>. On the import side, while South Africa's arms contractor Armscor accounted for 18% of all Russian exports between 2016-2020<sup>33</sup>, important suppliers also include western companies in Germany, Italy, the U.S. and UK. When asked if Armscor would be selling arms to Russia during the current conflict with Ukraine, Defense Minister Thandi Modise responded by noting that Armscor would avail itself of "*commercial opportunities*" with countries, "*including Russia,*" subject to international treaties<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, African countries including Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt, Algeria, Angola, and Burkina Faso are among the top buyers of Russian military hardware<sup>35</sup>.

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26. Ibid

27. Ibid

28. Joe Bavier, Alexander Winning. South Africa amends arms export document after inspection row. Reuters. May 13, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-defence-idUSKBN22P1EH>

29. Peter Danssaert. Defense Related Companies in Africa. IPIS. Belgium. January 01, 2020. <https://ipisresearch.be/publication/arms-and-ammunitions-factories-in-africa/>

30. Defense Web. SA Arms and ammunition worth R1.4 billion plus exported in first half of 2022. September 8, 2022. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/sa-arms-and-ammunition-worth-r1-2-billion-plus-exported-in-first-half-of-2022/>

31. Ibid

32. Defense Web. South Africa and Egypt looking to strengthen defense cooperation. December 9, 2019. <https://sldinfo.com/2019/12/south-africa-and-egypt-strengthening-defense-cooperation/>

33. Mikhail Bushuev. Abu-Bakarr Jalloh. Cristina Krippahl. South Africa, Russia deepen military ties. Defense Web. Africa. January 23, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/south-africa-and-russia-deepen-military-ties/a-64489740>

34. Abdelhak Bassou. Military relations Between Russia and Africa, before and After the War in Ukraine." Atlantic Council. Africa Center. February 2023. [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Bassou\\_Military-relations-between-Russia-and-Africa-before-and-after-the-war-in-Ukraine.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Bassou_Military-relations-between-Russia-and-Africa-before-and-after-the-war-in-Ukraine.pdf)

35. Cara Anna. Russia Wants Allies, so it is hosting an African summit. Food Security and Wagner Group top the agenda. AP. World News. July 24, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-africa-food-grain-wagner-ukraine-6bc25ced94ba314dde125585600e6728>

### 3.5 Trade Partners

South Africa's trade also reflects a diversity of partners. Though one country, China, has emerged as the most-valued trade partner, with an export market of \$13.5 billion and \$19.2 billion worth of imports in 2021, western markets are also important. The U.S. (\$9.3 billion) and Germany (\$1.9 billion) ranked second and third in importance for exports, with reversed rankings with respect of imports, with Germany (\$7.5 billion) and the U.S. (\$6.5 billion) ranked second and third respectively<sup>36</sup>. Trade within the BRICS has increased significantly. In 2021, over 17% of South Africa's exports went to other BRICS countries, while over 29% of imports came from these countries, making the grouping among South Africa's most significant trade partners<sup>37</sup>. Within the BRICS, South Africa's trade is dominated by China (72.6%) and India (21.12%)<sup>38</sup>. Bilateral trade with Russia has also increased, moving from \$587 million in 2020 reaching \$1.3 billion in 2022<sup>39</sup>.

### 3.6 Cooperation in Space

South Africa's Space program also reveals cooperation with many actors, including the U.S. and fellow BRICS countries. On November 8, 2022, NASA and South Africa's National Space Agency (SANSA) renewed their Lunar partnership program, breaking ground on a new communications site—the Lunar Exploration Ground Sites antenna—to support NASA's Artemis spacecraft, which will have as missions sending humans to the moon and further afield. A joint statement between NASA and the South African Department of Science and Innovation was also signed to formalize the space exploration partnership, which is predated by South Africa's previous role in NASA's Apollo's missions to the moon, in the 1960s<sup>40</sup>. Since 2016, South Africa has also been working on the legal framework of a project for sharing satellite-provided space data with China and other members of the BRICS. The satellites are owned and controlled by the space agency of member states in the first phase of an initiative that includes commercial space cooperation<sup>41</sup>. While the second phases involve a higher level of ambition, including the development of a BRICS space agency, this may prove more challenging given ongoing tensions between India and China.

## PART 2

## MULTIPOLARITY: THE NEW SOUTH COMES OF AGE

While the preceding sections discussed South Africa's pragmatism in its approach to relationship-building across the ideological spectrum, on matters related to global governance, the country's stance aligns closely with those of fellow BRICS members and others of the Global South.

36. Global Edge. South Africa Trade Statistics. 2021.(global edge.msu.edu) <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/south-africa/tradestats>

37. Pranjal Sharma. South Africa is the Bridge in Brics. The Sunday Guardian. November 5, 2022. <https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/south-africa-bridge-brics>

38. TRALAC. Org South Africa's Global Trade 2021 Update. <https://www.tralac.org/documents/publications/trade-data-analysis/4471-south-africa-global-trade-update-2021/file.html#:~:text=In%202021%20total%20trade%20was,Steel%2C%20Chemicals%20and%20Mineral%20products.>

39. OEC. Russia – South Africa Trade. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/zaf>

40. Al Feinberg. NASA, South Africa's Space Agency Renew Lunar Partnership. NASA Headquarters. Washington. November 16<sup>th</sup> 2022. <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/NASA-SANSA-Renew-Lunar-Exploration-Partnership/>

41. Juan Pons. China speeds up the activation of a cooperative satellite network with Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa. Atalayar. New Technologies Innovation. June 6, 2022. <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/new-technologies-innovation/china-speeds-activation-cooperative-satellite-network-russia-india-brazil-and-south-africa/20220606163720156766.html>

## IV. TRANSFORMATION OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND POWER

South Africa, like other rising powers, uses alliances not only to further its own interests but also strategically to “create platforms for collective statecraft to change the system of global governance”<sup>42</sup>. A review of South Africa’s position on the subject of global governance points to consistent advocacy in favor of multipolarity to ensure inclusiveness and space for the interests of developing countries. This has been a long-standing concern. The ANC response to the collapse of the Soviet Union for example, lamented that there was “no longer a bloc of socialist countries which could serve as an alternate pole around which developing countries could construct trade, aid and strategic relations”<sup>43</sup>. A 2011 Foreign Policy paper discussed the role of the BRICS in “reshaping Global and Economic power”<sup>44</sup>, while an ANC policy report (2015) concluded that Chinese-led growth of rising economies provides “a new dawn of hope for further possibilities of a new world order”<sup>45</sup>. South Africa seeks a multilateral approach to global governance, and a “transformation of the Global Order from one based on power, to one based on rules”<sup>46</sup>, sharing a concern, previously discussed, that the rules of the Western-led liberal world order are applied inconsistently, a view that resonates with other countries.

### 4.1 Multilateral Reform

South Africa is a long-standing advocate for reform of the Bretons Woods institutions. Breaking the UN Security Council (P5) glass ceiling is an important and regular fixture on the call for multilateral institutional reform. South Africa’s Minister of Foreign Affairs makes the case that Africa, a continent of fifty-four sovereign states sharing three rotating non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council is far from acceptable: “Come on!”<sup>47</sup> Almost 80 years since its establishment, the Security Council continues with the same five permanent seats occupied by members who no longer lead the global economy. Though President Biden has recently indicated support for expansion, shattering the P5 structure may be difficult to achieve. South Africa’s Foreign Minister has also advanced the idea that the world’s largest economies and important global actors, including the U.S., China, and India, should also be part of the multilateral framework to focus on the global agenda.

At the end of the Second World War, much of Africa was still colonized, as were many countries. Those who won the war took power, establishing institutions to coordinate rules pertaining to multilateral governance structures fashioned to support the Western-led liberal world order. Decades later, the Global South’s share of output and wealth is growing, while that of the West is in decline, and bundles of economic growth are being transformed into political power

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42. Christopher Williams. Mihaela Papa. Rethinking alliances: The Case of South Africa as a Rising Power. *African Security*. Vol. 13, 2020. Issue 4 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19392206.2020.1871796>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

43.

44. Deputy Minister E. Ebrahim. Rationale of South Africa’s BRICS Membership. Presentation to the Portfolio Committee on International Relations <https://static.pmg.org.za/docs/130212bricks.ppt>

45. ANC International Relations: A Better Africa in a Better and Just world. International Relations No 7. NGC 2015 Discussion Documents <https://www.anc1912.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NGC-2015-Discussion-Documents-International-Relations.pdf>

46. Council of Foreign Relations. A conversation with Minister Naledi Pandor of South Africa. Washington DC. September 14 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-minister-naledi-pandor-south-africa-0>

47. Ibid.

which is tilting from West to East. Persistent calls have been made by non-western countries for reforms to ensure that multilateral institutions include greater representation, and rules which are transparent and fair and that incorporate a change in philosophy around a more inclusive concept of the greater good.

In November 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa called for an Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver as a practical solution to bottlenecks in vaccine production and distribution<sup>48</sup>. As part of the Africa Group, together with Cuba and India, South Africa on February 10, 2022, circulated a Communication titled: *Strengthening the WTO to Promote Development and Inclusivity*<sup>49</sup>. This details aspects of a WTO reform agenda, challenges facing the WTO and threats to multilateralism, disruptions to global trade due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of debt, and the need to safeguard the principle of trade as a tool of development.

## V. RISE OF THE NEW SOUTH

The renewed interest of all major powers in securing support and partnerships with countries of the Global South is shown by the spate of recent African engagements with world leaders including those of the U.S., Russia, China, and the EU, the invitation to Brazil, India, Turkey, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia to attend the G7 Copenhagen Summit (June 2023) as observers, recent comments by U.S. President Biden indicating an openness to discuss UN Security Council reform, G20 enlargement to include the AU, and the flurry of shuttle diplomacy by Western powers to Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. This carries a significance which transcends the Ukrainian conflict. The West seeks to shore up supplies of critical raw materials (CRM) in the race with China in the transition to green energy, high tech, and artificial intelligence. But these encounters are also designed to woo countries away from China and Russia during this period of heightened tensions.

In addition, the steady stream of summits involving countries of the Global South, including the BRICS, G20, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the recently concluded two-day G77+China 'South Summit' held in Cuba, also point to a growing multipolarity and diffusion of world power and a coming together of the Global South around an agenda of core interests, notwithstanding their differences. There is a growing realization that the increasing weight of these countries can no longer be ignored.

Unlike the West, which prioritizes values and ideological commitment as important pillars of their foreign relations, countries of the Global South prize relationships that deliver concrete benefits back home and contribute to raising standards of living by way of investments, job creation, enhanced trade, and overall development. These are prized since prospects for growth and development contribute to political stability and reduce the potential for social unrest. A popular comment making the rounds around the time of U.S. Vice President Harris's whirlwind tour of Africa in March 2023 was that when the Chinese visit they build bridges, when Americans visit they give lectures; values while important, are not bankable assets: *"what good are values when people are starving?"*<sup>50</sup>

More to the point is that the West is slowly facing the reality that Western interests are no

48. WTO. General Council 7-8 (21-8770). October 2021. WT/GC/M/193 22 November 2021. docs.wto.org. M193.docx

49. WTO: (22-1289) General Council. WT/GC/W/778/Rev 4. February 11, 2022.

50. Personal Communication

longer *de facto* those of the rest of the world, and that the risk of losing global power and influence is real<sup>51</sup>. Recent moves by Saudi Arabia to keep oil prices high (having just broken the \$95/b/d mark) by continuing to reduce supplies in tandem with Russia, underscore this reality, showing the determination, even by a long-time western ally, to champion its own financial interests over those of traditional allies. Like South Africa, India, and many others, Saudi Arabia is unabashedly multi-aligned in pursuit of its domestic interests.

## 5.1 Tipping Point

In some ways the war in Ukraine and this period of crises has been a tipping point, a watershed moment of sorts. After nineteen months of war, escalation, not peace, is the reality. Already disproportionately affected by climate change, a global pandemic, unmanageable debt, historically high inflation, unaffordable interest rates, worsening poverty, food and energy insecurity, recent western calls for friend-shoring, decoupling and de-risking which imply further disruptions to supply chains and global trade, are all disconcerting. Countries representing the bulk of the world's people have opted for another path. They have deepened relations in non-western groupings. Alliances have become more transactional, more superficial, and have multiplied. Western sanctions on Russia have spurred alternatives to stockpiling the yen, dollar, euro and sterling, even among countries of ASEAN. Instead countries are deciding to settle trade debts in local currency, to use cross border platforms other than Swift, to build new trade routes, invest in each other, and build new institutions. The rules of engagement include non-interference in internal affairs. The Western-led liberal rules-based order is losing appeal when rules are subject to change *"simply because the referee no longer likes them"*<sup>52</sup>. Democracy too needs fixing at home; the light at the top of the hill burns less bright. The choice between 'us and them,' good and evil - seems no longer quite so clear cut.

In choosing not to pick a side, the New South is focused instead on pursuing initiatives that further domestic interests while remaining loosely aligned to the wider interests of the group. This is based less on idealism and more on realism. It is less about values and more about options that offer tangible benefits to the development of their countries. The New South is also aware of its increasing agency. Growing economic and political clout provide space to have more of a say in the terms of engagement with Western partners. Middle powers have also seized this moment opportunistically, growing their spheres of influence, engaging with all sides, disrupting the *status quo*, while using this period as a call to action on a range of issues including equity, social justice, and inclusion. Through their leadership, new points of multipolarity have been introduced in the international structure, and with these, more choice.

India, as a middle power, is a template for the New South in action. The country skillfully used its 2023 G20 presidency to advance its stature as a global actor and as an opportunity to focus on the challenges facing the countries of the Global South. Convening the 'Voices of the South' conference in January 2023, President Modi posed a rhetorical question: *"surely 85% of the world's population should not be destined to be poor forever"*<sup>53</sup>. The conference attracted delegates from 125 countries from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Europe, and placed Global South concerns on the G20 agenda.

51. Len Ishmael. *A World Divided. A Multilayered, Multipolar World*. In Len Ishmael (ED) *Aftermath of War in Europe The West Vs. The Global South?* Policy Center for the New South. January 2022

52. Council of Foreign Relations. *A conversation with Minister Naledi Pandor of South Africa*. Washington DC. September 14 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-minister-naledi-pandor-south-africa-0>

53. India Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Voice of Global South Summit*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/voice-of-global-summit.htm>

While there is a suggestion that India may be using this period to compete with China for leadership of the group, China and India occupy different positions in the international structure. While they are both members of the BRICS, share certain interests, and both advocate on behalf of poorer countries, conflict arising out of domestic issues surfaces from time to time. And while India has emerged as an advocate and leader in the G20, China plays a leadership role in the G77+China configuration as the recent (September 2023) summit in Cuba affirms. China is in a class of its own as the other superpower in a bipolar configuration. Providing an alternate pole of world power is a powerful attraction, as can be seen by Saudi and other Gulf State initiatives to deepen relations with China, and the Saudi participation in the Chinese-brokered peace accord with Iran. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), unveiled in 2013, has delivered more than \$1 trillion in investments around the world, and China continues to be ranked as the first or second most important trading partner for many of the world's countries—a point underscored by Singapore's President Lee Hsien Loong in defending his country's decision not to choose between the U.S. and China, adding "*the world would lose*"<sup>54</sup>.

There is no doubt however, that India has attained increasing importance as a global actor, not only as a result of the influence it exerts in the New South and its agility in managing a multi-aligned foreign policy strategy. Its economy has also shown remarkable resilience, despite global uncertainties, to become the world's fastest growing economy over the last ten years, overtaking the UK as the world's fifth largest economy in 2022<sup>55</sup>. At this rate, India is on track to be the world's second largest economy by 2075<sup>56</sup>. The country's strategic importance can be seen by the U.S.'s designation of President Modi's most recent visit as a 'State' visit—the highest expression of friendly bilateral relations. And while the AU's accession to full G20 membership is attributed to the successful behind-the-scenes diplomacy on the part of India in seeking to represent countries of the New South in an increasingly divided world, the U.S. also provided support in engineering consensus on the final G20 communiqué, helping to seal Modi's declaration of success.

India's stance is reminiscent of the role the country played during the Cold War years, when Prime Minister Nehru joined forces with a few other countries of the so called 'Third World' to establish the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Though standing apart from the two competing blocs of the day—the U.S. and the Soviet Union—NAM successfully maintained communications and ties with both. The strategy of multi-alignment is perfectly suited to these times of heightened competition and tension, except that today, the countries of the New South have significantly more agency. For middle powers including India, Turkey, Brazil, and others, having open lines of communication with an array of ideologically diverse partners provides the opportunity to broker deals. By the close of its G20 presidency, India had distinguished itself in a new role as broker of geopolitical consensus among "*a very broad, very diverse grouping with a spectrum of views and interests*"<sup>57</sup>.

Multi-alignment brings other dividends. India's economy has benefited from access to cheap oil from Russia, despite Western sanctions, with imports growing from under \$10 billion in

54. Lee Hsein Loong. America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation. Foreign Affairs. June 2020

55. World Bank. Indian Economy Continues to show Resilience Amid Global Uncertainties. Press Release. April, 2023. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/04/04/indian-economy-continues-to-show-resilience-amid-global-uncertainties#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%2C%2004%20April%202023,Bank%20India%27s%20biannual%20flagship%20publication.>

56. Lee Ying Shan. Goldman Sachs says India will overtake the US to become the world's second-largest economy by 2075. CNBC. Stock Market and Business. July 10 2023 <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/07/10/india-to-become-worlds-second-largest-economy-by-2075-goldman-sachs.html#:~:text=India%20is%20poised%20to%20become,investment%2C%20and%20rising%20worker%20productivity.>

57. Steven Borowiec and Kiran Sharma. India Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar in: G20 Summit Showcases India's fence-sitting foreign policy. NIKKEI Asia. September 13, 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/G20-summit-showcases-India-s-fence-sitting-foreign-policy>



2022, to more than \$45 billion in the year ending March 2023<sup>58</sup>. Yet India's ties with the U.S. and the West have not suffered. On the contrary, in 2022, Indian exports to the U.S. approached a high of \$80.23 billion, and the U.S. replaced China as India's largest trading partner<sup>59</sup>. While middle powers like India are too important to ignore today, the West also considers India to be a strategic partner and a bulwark and counterweight to China.

India's strategy of multi-alignment parallels that of others of the New South, prompting South Africa's presidential spokesperson to comment, at the conclusion of the G20 Summit that, "we have expressly stated that we are not aligned to any particular global power; what India has done is very much in line with our own foreign policy"<sup>60</sup>. India's strategy of multi-alignment is reflected in its membership of diverse groups. It is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with Australia, the U.S., and Japan in the Indo-Pacific, ostensibly to balance China. India is also a member of the BRICS, and SCO, led by China and Russia. It participates in the North-South Corridor initiative to move goods between Russia, Iran, and North Africa bypassing the Suez-Canal and Europe, and has recently brokered deals with the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the EU for a mega initiative: the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which many see as a challenge to China's BRI.

New-found agency is being exerted not only by important, large states such as India and South Africa, but also by small countries such as the previously lower middle-income country of Guyana, a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Discoveries of oil and gas have transformed Guyana's future trajectory, making it a lucrative market for investors, and a major player in the energy security of the Americas. Guyana's new-found importance was underscored by the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on July 6, which brought pledges of closer ties and investments focused on energy security, an issue of strategic importance to the U.S., especially given Guyana's geographic location in a largely left-leaning continent in which China's footprint looms large. This most recent visit marks the second in three years by a high-ranking U.S. official, underscoring Guyana's increasing geostrategic and economic importance. However, two weeks after the visit by Secretary of State Blinken and his participation in a CARICOM Summit of Heads on July 5, and Vice President Harris's meeting with Caribbean leaders in the Bahamas in June, Guyana's President Irfaan Ali paid a visit to China. During the one-week state visit, President Ali discussed a number of cooperation issues, including financing for infrastructure, security, and technology, and the establishment of a Shanghai Investment desk in Guyana. He also brokered deals with Chinese tech giant Huawei to establish an ICT college and research center in Guyana.

## VI. THE NEW SOUTH IS ACTIVELY ENGAGED

There is a sense that current geopolitical conditions of competition, rivalry, and tension have spurred deeper engagement with the New South, but that this might be 'just a moment and not a movement' if the leaders of the New South are unable to build relationships "on something more than expediency"<sup>61</sup>. The diversity within the group also raises questions about

58. Ibid.

59. Trading Economics. India Exports to United States 2022. Updated September 2023. <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/exports/united-states#:~:text=India%20Exports%20to%20United%20States%20was%20US%2480.23%20Billion%20during,COMTRADE%20database%20on%20international%20trade>.

60. Nikkei Asia. G20 leaders agree on declaration after softening Ukraine language. September 9, 2023. [https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/G20-summit-2/G20-leaders-agree-on-declaration-urging-durable-peace-in-Ukraine?utm\\_campaign=IC\\_one\\_time\\_free&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=NA\\_newsletter&utm\\_content=article\\_link&del\\_type=3&pub\\_date=20230909010000&seq\\_num=2&si=604d92f4-7c59-4521-8a43-cbe4865ee64e](https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/G20-summit-2/G20-leaders-agree-on-declaration-urging-durable-peace-in-Ukraine?utm_campaign=IC_one_time_free&utm_medium=email&utm_source=NA_newsletter&utm_content=article_link&del_type=3&pub_date=20230909010000&seq_num=2&si=604d92f4-7c59-4521-8a43-cbe4865ee64e)

61. Martin Wolf. We Need the G20 but – what is it for? Financial Times. Wednesday 13 September 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/53256c79-5d17-48f0-b604-80c28a2c1a48>

its durability. At a superficial level, these would seem to be fair comments, especially since relationships within the group seem to be transactional and fluid, and countries are engaged in multiple, overlapping groupings. But expediency has made for odd bedfellows in international relations in the past, and to suggest that this somehow negates the potential for durability, or mutual wins, is shortsighted. Diversity of interests also create tensions within other blocs as well. Despite belonging to a treaty-based regional grouping, the recent decision taken by EU member state Poland to ban imports of Ukraine grains in a bid to protect local producers, followed by the declaration that the country will no longer provide arms and other weapons to its neighbor in support of the war with Russia, is illustrative.

While this period of crises, compounded by the war in Ukraine and the far-reaching nature of sanctions on Russia, has been the tipping point in creating this moment, countries have been both pushed by a sense of shared grievance, and pulled by opportunities created by the growing prosperity and stature of several within the group, including India, Indonesia, and others, buttressed by the unparalleled rise of China, a superpower, and long-time ally of many. Countries of the New South are engaging with each other and those that can support their interests across the ideological spectrum, while chipping away at dependencies on the Western institutional architecture, which can be weaponized to unleash economic isolation, hardship, and political instability. Despite their inherent diversity, countries of the New South share a common agenda: a vision of multipolarity and diffusion of world power, of a rules-based world order based on right, not might, multilateral institutions more representative of today's world, trade which is open and terms which are equitable, labor which is priced fairly relative to capital, and raw-material wealth contributing to value added at home unlocking prospects for prosperity, rather than contributing to underdevelopment. Countries want partnerships that facilitate their moves up the value chain. The decisions they are taking to deepen relations between them, to form OPEC-like cartels to refine and sell CRMs, to settle debt in local currencies, open banks and invest in each other's countries, as is being undertaken by Africa and Caribbean countries, all bring consequences, which will be both far-reaching and long-term.

What is perhaps less understood by the West is that picking a side in this geopolitical environment reduces the opportunity to leverage agency in securing interests to be gained by working with more, not fewer partners. This is an approach that sits at the core of this group's push for a global architecture in which power is held by more, not fewer, hands. These countries are also mastering the art of navigating a complex global system that is in a state of flux. By developing a wider network of partnerships, they buffer the potential shock of unilateral movements by any powerful country or group of countries. None of these relationships are about working *against* any country or group of countries, yet this simple fact seems difficult to accept. The subject was addressed recently at the 10<sup>th</sup> Milken Institute Asia Summit in Singapore (August 2023) by the country's deputy Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong: *"All countries in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, are friends with both China and the U.S. We have close links with both countries and we want to maintain those links. We reject dominance by any single power. We avoid exclusive commitments with any single party. We just want to be friends with everyone"*<sup>62</sup>. The West, by continuing to make relations as a binary choice between two competing blocs, one evil one good, is missing the point. This is not how the rest of the world sees it.

As the world continues to fracture into different blocs, a new world order is in the making. The richer OECD world of the G7 stands at the helm, but whereas the G7 share of global GDP was

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62. Charmaine Jacob. Leaders in Southeast Asia say they want to be friends with both the US and China. CNBC. Politics. September 15, 2023 <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/09/15/singapore-malaysia-leaders-want-to-be-friends-with-the-us-and-china.html>

two-thirds in 1990, today it is closer to one-third. In the meantime, the countries of the New South are adding more muscle to the G20, and an array of non-western groupings—the BRICS, SCO, the G77+China—are gaining momentum, forging a new identity: The New South. Will this be a moment or a movement? Time will tell. But it is hard to dismiss the sense that change in the international structure is happening, greater multipolarity crafted by middle powers is evident, and The New South is very much part of this new chapter. Rather than being caught in great-power competition, these countries are incentivized to balance Russia, China, and the U.S., to their benefit. Far from being neutral, these countries are actively engaged in multi-alignment to safeguard their interests in a highly fluid environment.

# *About Policy Center for the New South*

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

As such, the PCNS brings together researchers, publishes their work and capitalizes on a network of renowned partners, representative of different regions of the world. The PCNS hosts a series of gatherings of different formats and scales throughout the year, the most important being the annual international conferences "The Atlantic Dialogues" and "African Peace and Security Annual Conference" (APSACO).

Finally, the think tank is developing a community of young leaders through the Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leaders program(ADEL) a space for cooperation and networking between a new generation of decision-makers from the government, business and civil society sectors. Through this initiative, which already counts more than 300 members, the Policy Center for the New South contributes to intergenerational dialogue and the emergence of tomorrow's leaders.

## **Policy Center for the New South**

Rabat Campus of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University  
Rocade Rabat Salé - 11103 Morocco  
Email : [contact@policycenter.ma](mailto:contact@policycenter.ma)  
Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54  
Website : [www.policycenter.ma](http://www.policycenter.ma)

## About the author,

### Dr. Len Ishmael

Ambassador, Dr. Len Ishmael is a Senior Fellow of the Policy Center for the New South and a Senior Fellow and Distinguished Visiting Scholar of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. She is the Global Affairs Advisor of the Brussels Diplomatic Academy and visiting Professor of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and the Mohammed 6 University, Morocco.

Dr. Ishmael is a Commissioner on the Lancet Commission on COVID-19's Regional Task Force for Latin America. She is the former Ambassador of the Eastern Caribbean States to the Kingdom of Belgium and European Union, and past President of the 79-member African, Caribbean & Pacific (ACP) Committee of Ambassadors in Brussels. She is a former Director & Head of the Regional Headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America & the Caribbean; Director General for the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, Alternate Governor of the World Bank and Director for the Foundation Leadership for Environment & Development (New York) of the Rockefeller Foundation. She is The Fletcher School Tufts University GMAP Endowment Fellow and member of The Fletcher School GMAP Advisory Council. She is the author of several publications and books on the Global South, Geopolitics, Africa-EU relations, China, and the Trans-Atlantic relationship. Her most recent publication as Editor and co-author: *Aftermath of War in Europe: The West versus The Global South?* will be released in December 2022. Dr. Ishmael was conferred a Doctoral Degree in Development Economics from the University of Pennsylvania, and Global Master of Arts in International Relations and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. She received a Master of Arts in Urban Planning from the City University of New York and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and Geography from the University of the West Indies. She was recognized by King Carlos with the Order of Merit of the Kingdom of Spain in March 2010 for her contributions to the Spanish-Caribbean relationship

## Policy Center for the New South

Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Rocade Rabat-Salé, 11103

Email : [contact@policycenter.ma](mailto:contact@policycenter.ma)

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : [www.policycenter.ma](http://www.policycenter.ma)

