



# Four Conflict Prevention Opportunities for South Africa's Foreign Policy

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**What's new?\*** Midway through its term on the UN Security Council, and having just become chair of the African Union, the South African government led by Cyril Ramaphosa has a strong platform from which to reassert Pretoria's continental leadership in efforts to mitigate Africa's violent conflicts.

**Why does it matter?** As Africa deals with more challenges to regional stability than it can readily handle, South Africa's re-emergence as a leader in conflict prevention would be good for Pretoria, good for a continent that continues to prefer African solutions to African problems and good for the people of conflict-affected areas.

**What should be done?** South Africa should enhance its focus on Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, which lie at the intersection of national, AU and UN priorities. Pretoria should also redouble efforts to steer neighbouring Zimbabwe away from crisis.

*\* Crisis Group conducted the fieldwork for this briefing before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some dynamics examined in this publication may have changed in the meantime. Moving forward, we will be factoring the impact of the pandemic into our research and recommendations, as well as offering dedicated coverage of how the outbreak is affecting conflicts around the world.*

## I. Overview

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Wracked during Jacob Zuma's nine-year presidency by corruption, scandal and infighting at the uppermost levels of government, South Africa stepped back from its post-apartheid role as a diplomatic powerhouse on the African continent, with a particular commitment to preventing and mitigating mass violence. But there are signs that this could be changing. Cyril Ramaphosa's election to the South African presidency in February 2018 has afforded Pretoria an opportunity to chart a new course, and it has taken some steps to do so. One year into a two-year term on the UN Security Council, and just months into service as chair of the African Union (AU), Pretoria has assumed roles that carry both the expectation and the opportunity for it to heighten its focus on peace and security issues. An interim internal report com-

missioned by Ramaphosa suggests that South Africa has been derelict in its attention to regional stability. Certainly, there is more that Pretoria can do. It should start by focusing on four countries where historical ties and geography suggest that it can be particularly effective.

First, it should look to Burundi, where the framework for peace that Nelson Mandela helped broker in 2000 after he stepped down from South Africa's presidency has been strained by President Pierre Nkurunziza's repressive government. While Nkurunziza appears to be stepping aside in favour of a chosen successor in the May 2020 election, it is hardly clear that this change will lead to an opening of political space for the exhausted Burundian people. As AU chair, Pretoria should press for restoration of the High-Level Delegation that last visited Burundi in 2016, and through it lobby Bujumbura to admit human rights observers and military experts who can help assess whether conditions in the country are conducive to free and fair elections. Pretoria should also press Bujumbura to accept the deployment of election monitors.

South Africa should also consider how it might help prevent deadly conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As a major troop contributor to the UN peace-keeping mission in the DRC, it is well positioned to press for changes to make that mission more effective, particularly by encouraging the UN to devote greater resources to understanding the complex links between armed groups that are ravaging the country's east and the communities that live there. Pretoria should also discourage Kinshasa from inviting regional rivals Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda to step up their operations in the eastern DRC, which run the risk of starting a proxy war, and use its AU role to encourage broad regional support for a nascent mediation initiative to resolve differences among these rivals.

South Sudan, which at the end of February saw President Salva Kiir and his long-time rival Riek Machar reach an eleventh-hour deal that could help end a brutal civil war, is another place where South Africa is in a strong position to facilitate conflict prevention. Having flexed its diplomatic muscle in the run-up to the February deal, pushing Kiir to make a critical compromise on the demarcation of states within the country, Pretoria now needs to keep up the pressure, especially if Kiir's commitment to the agreed unity government begins to falter. South Africa may also be able to lend technical assistance to address the knotty problem of merging the two rivals' armed forces into an integrated whole, having had its own experience with this task in the years following apartheid.

Finally, in neighbouring Zimbabwe, where the government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa has married political repression to a program of economic austerity, Pretoria should pivot away from its traditional see-no-evil approach. Although it has begun making veiled references to impatience with poor governance and corruption in Zimbabwe's leadership, South Africa should up the pressure, including in public. Harare should be made to understand that its powerful neighbour is not providing cover for its misdeeds and that the only way Pretoria can help build bridges between Zimbabwe and alienated donors is if Mnangagwa begins to make meaningful progress toward cleaning up government.

## II. South African Foreign Policy from Mandela through Ramaphosa

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In the years immediately following the end of apartheid rule in South Africa, President Nelson Mandela's government (1994-1999) made significant investments in foreign policy, which it saw as important to help move the country from pariah status to full-fledged membership in the international mainstream.<sup>1</sup> Between January 1996 and July 1998, Mandela and his then-deputy Thabo Mbeki undertook almost 90 foreign visits as part of re-establishing bilateral relationships with states that, in many cases, had shunned it during the apartheid era.<sup>2</sup> Globally, Pretoria also expanded its diplomatic footprint. To this day, it maintains 109 embassies and high commissions and 97 consulates around the world, many established under the Mandela administration, giving it a level of representation that outstrips any other African country. South Africa, considered by many to be a gateway to the continent, hosts 134 embassies and high commissions, as well as 112 consulates.

As he led South Africa out of international isolation, Mandela strove to show how Pretoria could play a critical role in some of the continent's bloodiest conflicts. Shaken by the experience of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, he stepped in to mediate between the dictatorial leader of Zaïre (now the DRC) Mobutu Sese Seko and his nemesis Laurent Kabila in 1997, when it looked as if the country would descend into a major round of bloodletting.<sup>3</sup> When the mediation effort failed, with Kabila prevailing to take power by force of arms, Mandela shifted his energies to Burundi's civil war.<sup>4</sup> There, he brokered the 2000 Arusha peace accords between Bujumbura's Tutsi-led government of the day and Hutu rebels. This deal reached fruition after he left office.

While Mandela often carried South Africa's foreign policy on his own shoulders, his successor as president Mbeki (1999-2008) accelerated the process of enshrining the country's foreign policy aims within multilateral organisations.<sup>5</sup> The crowning achievement of Mbeki's work on multilateralism was perhaps his role in the AU's formation in 2002. The AU's Constitutive Act, with its provisions permitting the organisation to intervene militarily in order to stop mass atrocities, was in large part a product of Mbeki's vision.<sup>6</sup> In 2003, a year after the new organisation was stood up, Pretoria led the drafting of an AU mandate for a peacekeeping mission in Burundi in 2003. Then, in 2007, South Africa was elected for the first time to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesley Masters, Siphomandla Zondi, Jo-Ansie van Wyk and Chris Landsberg (eds.), *South African Foreign Policy Review*, vol. 2 (Pretoria, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Scott Firsing, "Remembering Mandela's Foreign Policy", *International Policy Digest*, 6 December 2013.

<sup>3</sup> "Communiqué from Mobutu-Kabila talks", Reuters, 5 May 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°13, *The Mandela Effect: Prospects for Peace in Burundi*, 18 April 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Alden and Garth le Pere, "South Africa's Post-Apartheid Foreign Policy: From Reconciliation to Revival?", Adelphi Paper n° 362, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Article 4(h) of the AU's Constitutive Act sets out the "right of the Union to intervene in a Member State ... in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity". Historically, however, member states have been reluctant to approve military or other action against a government, even if mass atrocities are being committed, as in Darfur (2004-2005) and South Sudan (2013-2014).

There were limits to how far Mbeki could take his diplomacy, however. His high-profile role as AU mediator in Côte d'Ivoire was unpopular with members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), who considered his efforts an intrusion into their regional affairs. Mbeki's position as mediator was terminated in 2006, although he was subsequently reappointed amid a deepening crisis in 2010, after his presidency was over. He again angered West African countries by pushing for more mediation when regional leaders had already declared Alassane Ouattara the legitimate president of Côte d'Ivoire and stated that this position was "non-negotiable".<sup>7</sup>

South Africa's foreign policy during Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009-2018) was marked by a number of trends that played out amid a growing distance between Pretoria and Western counterparts as well as a decreasing appetite for taking stands against governments with poor human rights records.<sup>8</sup> South Africa's admission to the BRICS emerging markets group (a coalition that also included Brazil, Russia, India and China) and Zuma's close relationship to Russian President Vladimir Putin alienated Pretoria from Western capitals.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, under Zuma, South Africa retreated from commitments on human rights and democratic governance that dated to the Mandela administration, coming under scrutiny for its record at the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council for voting against or abstaining on resolutions to defend human rights. In 2017, Zuma drew criticism from human rights organisations when he did not call attention to a government crackdown on protesters demanding elections during a trip to the DRC. In the same year, his government voted at the UN Human Rights Council against renewing the mandate of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi.<sup>10</sup>

Under the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa, elected in 2018, Pretoria appears to be pivoting yet again. Echoing themes from the Mandela and Mbeki years, Ramaphosa's government has expressed a desire to use its foreign policy to bolster peace, security and governance.

In May 2018, in the wake of Ramaphosa's accession, then Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Lindiwe Sisulu established a ministerial review panel to assess how South African diplomacy could better serve national interests, including by advancing peace and security in Africa and elsewhere. The panel's March 2019 interim report, shared selectively by the government's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) after South Africa joined the Security Council in January, states that "in the recent past, South Africa has not lived up to its earlier promise" and "that the country has not sufficiently played the role it was ex-

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<sup>7</sup> In April 2011, forces loyal to Ouattara ousted incumbent Laurent Gbagbo, with the help of UN and French troops, after Ouattara was deemed to have won the November 2010 elections. See "Extraordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on Côte d'Ivoire, Final Communiqué", ECOWAS Commission, Abuja, 7 and 24 December 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, foreign policy experts, Johannesburg and Pretoria, February-March 2019.

<sup>9</sup> "BRICS aided Russia – SA ties: Putin to Zuma", *The Brics Post*, 29 August 2014. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, New York, September 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Dispatches: Can South Africa Live Up to Its Human Rights Promises", Human Rights Watch, 9 June 2014. See also Human Rights Watch's *World Report 2018*.

pected to play, or should have played in engaging a number of international issues”.<sup>11</sup> The report specifically finds that South Africa has not paid “sufficient attention to Africa”. That said, it offers few concrete suggestions as to what its peace and security priorities in Africa should be.

Establishing and pursuing a handful of concrete priorities is where Pretoria should be placing its efforts. South Africa has neither unlimited influence nor unlimited resources, especially given that years of budgetary and personnel cuts have taken their toll on DIRCO and the South Africa National Defence Force.<sup>12</sup> Still, there are a number of simmering crises in places where South Africa’s proximity and/or long history of engagement make it especially well placed to lead regional prevention and mitigation efforts.<sup>13</sup> Four particular countries that meet these criteria are Burundi, the DRC, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.

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### III. Four Priorities

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#### A. *Burundi*

South Africa’s mediation efforts were, as noted above, pivotal to ending the civil war between ethnic Tutsi and Hutu political and armed factions that ravaged Burundi between 1993 and 2005. In October 1999, Nelson Mandela – who by then had stepped down as president – became the mediator in the Arusha peace talks. South Africa was a guarantor of the 28 August 2000 Arusha agreement, which provided for a three-year transitional government to be followed by elections that were held in 2005.<sup>14</sup> That agreement opened the way for deploying international peacekeeping troops in the country. When the UN Security Council unexpectedly did not authorise such a force to support the political accord, South Africa stepped into the breach. In October 2001, 700 South Africans deployed to Burundi to protect political opposition leaders.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, these troops became the nucleus of an AU peacekeeping force.<sup>16</sup>

South Africa remained heavily engaged in efforts to stabilise Burundi into 2009. In 2003, South Africa negotiated the entry into government of Burundi’s current ruling party, Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie (CNDD-FDD), which had not signed the Arusha accord. Pretoria

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<sup>11</sup> “Interim Draft Report, Foreign Policy Review: A Strategic Reflection and Critical Appraisal of the Orientation and Implementation of South Africa’s Foreign Policy”, 30 March 2019.

<sup>12</sup> DIRCO has suffered high turnover amid a proliferation of political appointees under Zuma and a stagnating budget. South Africa’s Department of Defence has warned that repeated budget cuts hamper its ability to fulfil its domestic and international responsibilities. Crisis Group interviews, DIRCO and other officials, Pretoria, October 2018.

<sup>13</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°151, *Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020*, 7 February 2020, for details on possible priorities in sub-Saharan Africa for the AU.

<sup>14</sup> The Arusha agreement between Burundi’s Hutu and Tutsi elites established an ethnic quota system for state institutions, including the army, and established a two-term presidential limit.

<sup>15</sup> “South Africa’s Role in the Burundi Mediation: From Nyerere to Mandela”, Centre for Mediation in Africa, June 2015.

<sup>16</sup> In 2003, the South African forces were integrated in the African Mission in Burundi (AMIB), the first AU-mandated armed peacekeeping operation, consisting of 2,870 troops from South Africa, Ethiopia and Mozambique.

laid the groundwork for drafting the 2005 constitution and supported the August 2005 indirect presidential election.<sup>17</sup> South African advisers also counselled Burundi on reforming its security sector, using the integration of South Africa's former liberation fighters after the end of apartheid as a partial blueprint for restructuring Burundi's army. Finally, starting in 2008, South Africa's then safety and security minister, Charles Nqakula, conducted talks with Burundi's last active rebel leader – Agathon Rwasa – that led Rwasa to demobilise.

But after South Africa withdrew its last troops from Burundi in 2009, its involvement there diminished across the board.<sup>18</sup> It stayed out even when Burundi entered a period of violence and political turmoil in 2015.<sup>19</sup> In April 2015, when President Pierre Nkurunziza sparked months of unrest by announcing that he would run for a third term – notwithstanding a constitutional provision that he serve only two – Pretoria showed limited appetite for using whatever influence it enjoyed in Bujumbura to de-escalate the violence. While Zuma cautioned Nkurunziza against his decision, he was late in doing so and did not push for talks between the Burundian president and the opposition.<sup>20</sup>

At the regional level, South Africa also ducked out of participating in the inter-Burundi Dialogue among the government, the opposition, civil society and other interested parties facilitated between 2015 and 2019 by the East African Community (EAC). Although Zuma led an AU-mandated High-Level Delegation to Burundi in February 2016 – comprising the presidents of Gabon, Mauritania and Senegal, as well as the Ethiopian prime minister – the Dialogue remained stalemated, as Crisis Group has noted elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, under Ramaphosa's leadership, Pretoria has given off mixed signals regarding its stance on Burundi. Although conditions are hardly conducive for free and fair elections – given that political repression is still rife – in June 2019 Jerry Matjila, South Africa's ambassador at the UN Security Council, nevertheless uncritically commended the Burundi government for its election preparations.<sup>22</sup> That is only part of the picture, however. South Africa has also fought (over Bujumbura's objections) to keep the situation in Burundi on the Security Council's agenda and, in an October 2019 Council debate, offered remarks on election preparedness widely seen as indicating that conditions do not exist for fair elections.<sup>23</sup>

With Burundian elections set to take place in May 2020, and with Nkurunziza finally making way for an anointed successor, Evariste Ndayishimiye, to stand as the ruling-party candidate, South Africa has an opportunity to steer Bujumbura toward steps to bolster the elections' legitimacy and create a better and more stable post-election atmosphere among exhausted and disaffected Burundians.

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<sup>17</sup> Members of the National Assembly and Senate chose the new president of the republic for a five-year term. Nigel Watt, *Burundi: The Biography of a Small African Country* (London, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> "South Africa's Role in the Burundi Mediation", Centre for Mediation in Africa, June 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, DIRCO official, Pretoria, November 2019.

<sup>20</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°122, *The African Union and the Burundi Crisis: Ambition versus Reality*, 28 September 2016.

<sup>21</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°278, *Running Out of Options in Burundi*, 20 June 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Statement by Jerry Matjila, permanent representative of South Africa, 14 June 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, South African diplomat, November 2019 and February 2020. "Statement from Minister Pandor", UN Security Council Open Briefing on Burundi, 30 October 2019.

First, Ramaphosa, as AU chair, could work to resurrect the AU High-Level Delegation, which last visited Burundi in 2016. South Africa should volunteer to lead the Delegation and use it to reopen a dialogue between Nkurunziza and African heads of state with a twin focus on the upcoming elections as an immediate goal and curbing repression and opening political space as an overarching objective.

Secondly, Ramaphosa could encourage the Delegation to restart discussions with Burundian officials concerning the deployment of AU military experts and human rights observers, in the context of elections. Although the Delegation met with little success on dialogue when it visited Burundi in February 2016, it secured an agreement from Bujumbura for the deployment of 100 AU human rights observers and 100 military experts.<sup>24</sup> But as of February 2020, only nine human rights observers and two military experts remained on the ground.<sup>25</sup> The Delegation should encourage Bujumbura to allow in the full complement of observers and experts to monitor the security situation and assess preparations for the May 2020 elections. It should also press Burundi to accept the deployment of AU election observers, a proposal yet to be tabled with Burundian authorities.<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, the Delegation could encourage certain confidence-building measures to help open up the political space. One in particular that may be within reach is the elimination of the forced contributions system Nkurunziza established in 2017 to fund the elections. Although in the summer of 2019 the government declared an end to this burdensome, non-transparent and often arbitrarily administered informal taxation system, which Burundians suspect is used to fund the repressive Imbonerakure youth militia, Crisis Group's reporting suggests that the decision was never implemented and collection continues to this day.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Pretoria should consider other sources of influence it might have over the leadership in Bujumbura. It could, for example, make clear that failure to take certain steps to make the May elections more credible would weigh significantly in its calculations about whether to support Burundi's request for membership in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

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<sup>24</sup> Communiqué of the Visit of the AU High-Level Delegation to Burundi, 29 February 2016; "Zuma: African Union to send monitors to Burundi", Al Jazeera, 28 February 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, AU official, February 2020. In October 2018, 37 human rights observers and seven military experts had been deployed. "Support to the African Union Human Rights Observers and Military Experts Mission in Burundi", The African Peace Facility Factsheet, European Commission, undated.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, AU official, January 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Burundian political analysts, January and March 2020; Crisis Group interviews, Burundian diaspora and Western diplomat, Brussels, February 2020. See also "A Façade of Peace in a Land of Fear: Behind Burundi's Human Rights Crisis", Burundi Human Rights Initiative, January 2020 and "Rapport sur la gouvernance et les droits socio-économiques au Burundi: le candidat du parti CNDD-FDD aux présidentielles, Evariste Ndayishimiye spolie la population lors de ses tournées en provinces", Forum pour le renforcement de la société civile, February 2020.

## B. *The Democratic Republic of Congo*

While the transfer of power from Joseph Kabila to Félix Tshisekedi at the beginning of 2019 was relatively smooth – despite serious questions over the election results' legitimacy – the DRC is not at peace.<sup>28</sup> Armed groups plague the eastern provinces and rival neighbours threaten to bring their disputes into the country.

As a first priority in the DRC, South African policymakers should turn their attention to better tailoring the role of the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in the UN peacekeeping mission. This task has been uppermost on Tshisekedi's agenda, which is focused in particular on neutralisation of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a shadowy Ugandan rebel group that has massacred scores of civilians in the FIB's area of operations since 2014 and continues to elude the DRC's army and UN troops. The FIB has come under greater scrutiny from the UN's leadership in recent years, after losing dozens of blue helmets to ADF attacks. It is increasingly distrusted by the civilian population, who accuse it of being ineffectual.<sup>29</sup>

Dealing with the ADF is tremendously difficult for MONUSCO and the FIB. Some UN military officials, including South African FIB commanders, make the case that the ADF is a jihadist organisation, noting that it has cultivated links to regional mosque-based recruitment networks and violent movements such as the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> This line of argument – which may in any event be overstated – has proven counterproductive in some respects. In particular, it has driven the FIB to look at the ADF as a primarily military challenge, which is likely to be inadequate for countering a group that is deeply embedded in local communities through political, economic and even marital ties. Using those relations, it manipulates local power disputes among rival chiefs, sells its services to opposing sides, and forges alliances with both anti-government militias and national army officers with whom the UN believes it is making common cause.<sup>31</sup>

As a top troop contributor to the FIB, Pretoria should press the UN to develop a more sophisticated approach to countering the ADF. As a threshold matter, it needs to shift its focus to understanding, first, the group's links to local communities and, secondly, the conflicts among these communities that necessitate mediation. This will require the UN to rethink some of its current priorities, which are premised on the idea that the ADF can be defeated on the battlefield, and accordingly emphasise improving tactical intelligence and operational capabilities.<sup>32</sup> South African FIB officers suggest that their failure to hunt down the ADF is due to a lack of signals intelligence

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<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "DR Congo: A Recount and Talks to Find a Way Out of the Crisis", 19 January 2019.

<sup>29</sup> "MONUSCO suffers the worst attack in its history", Congo Research Group, 10 December 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°148, *A New Approach for the UN to Stabilise the DR Congo*, 4 December 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. See also "Who are the killers of Beni", Congo Research Group, 21 March 2016; and "UN experts accuse Congo general of aiding attacks on civilians", Reuters, 14 May 2016.

<sup>32</sup> See "Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers", Lt General Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, 17 December 2017. The report by Santos Cruz, a former force commander of the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) was commissioned after an ADF attack on a FIB base on 7 December 2017. Its recommendations lean toward robust use of force, which therefore tilt the FIB toward an offensive mindset rather than one in which it is used to support political de-escalation of conflicts. Crisis Group interview, MONUSCO official, March 2020.

capacity and other equipment deficiencies.<sup>33</sup> But without a more granular understanding of the ADF and its links to local Congolese communities, the FIB's battle plans risk backfiring when its operations kick open local rivalries, which can lead to ADF-backed reprisals, including against the FIB itself.

For this reason, Pretoria should urge UN Security Council members and the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo to focus on developing a better understanding of the ADF and its links to community actors. It also should push for assigning to the FIB subject matter researchers with expertise on the ADF who can work with the force's military planners to ensure that they neither design operations that worsen local tensions nor support DRC army commanders with divided loyalties. Another priority should be mediation efforts targeting warring local communities in ADF-afflicted areas. These efforts would aim to reconcile these communities and then cooperate with them to develop more precise military operations against the ADF, who would also be more likely to demobilise if they lose local support.

Moreover, as part of its broader efforts to help Tshisekedi tackle armed groups beyond the ADF, South Africa should seek to de-escalate regional tensions in the Great Lakes, which could in turn affect peace and security in the eastern DRC. Those tensions are bubbling between Rwanda, on one side, and Uganda as well as Burundi, on the other. Kigali is trading accusations with Kampala and Bujumbura of support for different proxy armed groups operating in the eastern DRC. Each government sees in certain groups threats to its nation's security.<sup>34</sup>

Ramaphosa, as AU chair, is well placed to champion the mediation efforts initiated last year by President Tshisekedi and President João Lourenço of Angola. Thanks to these efforts, the presidents of Uganda and Rwanda came together and committed not to destabilise the other's country, but they have yet to fulfil their pledge.<sup>35</sup> With proxy armed groups still active in the DRC, Ramaphosa should seek backing for the mediation initiative by including it on the agenda of the AU's planned May 2020 extraordinary summit, which will be another forum for advancing the AU's "silencing the guns" initiative in Africa.<sup>36</sup> In the meantime, Ramaphosa could press Tshisekedi and Lourenço to absorb Burundi into the mediation effort given the destabilising rivalry between Bujumbura and Kigali that has played out through proxy contests in the eastern DRC. In parallel, he should lean on Nkurunziza to cooperate. To help with all these efforts, South Africa, which has had no special envoy for the Great Lakes region since 2016, should fill this position.

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<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group researcher's discussions in a former capacity, South African FIB military personnel, November 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°150, *Averting Proxy Wars in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes*, 23 January 2020.

<sup>35</sup> A memorandum of understanding was signed in Luanda between the Republic of Uganda and the Republic of Rwanda on 21 August 2019, by Presidents Paul Kagame and Yoweri Museveni and the facilitators, Presidents João Lourenço of Angola and Félix Tshisekedi of the DRC.

<sup>36</sup> South Africa, along with Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia, held an Arria formula meeting in October 2018 on the topic of "silencing the guns". The meeting was framed around "eliminating all wars, civil conflicts, human rights violations, humanitarian disasters and violent conflicts, and preventing genocide, as well as how the UN-AU partnership can make tangible progress in this regard". See "Open debate on 'silencing the guns' in Africa", Security Council Report, 31 January 2019.

### C. *South Sudan*

South Sudan's peace deal finally appears to be back on track. In February, the country's two warring leaders, President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar, agreed to form a unity government in accordance with a 2018 peace deal.<sup>37</sup> The agreement builds upon the landmark ceasefire between the two that has largely held since late 2018, but which was under threat due to the political deadlock between Kiir and Machar that twice led to missed deadlines for the government's formation. Although the peace deal's collapse has been averted for now, much more work from African and donor countries is needed to keep the fragile Kiir-Machar truce intact.

Pretoria can help, as it has proven in the recent past.<sup>38</sup> It played a critical role in getting Kiir and Machar to compromise. Because the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regional bloc, the official mediator of the process, often struggled to close the gap between the two men amid the region's own internal crises and disputes, many African officials encouraged South Africa to assume a larger role.<sup>39</sup> Pretoria had the added advantage of being both AU chair and chair of a group of five African countries, also including Nigeria, Rwanda, Algeria and Chad, and known as the "C5", which the AU mandated to bolster IGAD's efforts.

Pretoria focused on removing a key obstacle to a deal between Kiir and Machar, namely a dispute over how many states the country should be divided into. During the war, Kiir had redrawn boundaries to create an initial 28 and then 32 states, prompting opposition accusations that he was favouring his Dinka ethnic group. South Africa, on behalf of the C5, chaired the Independent Boundaries Commission that was mandated to negotiate a compromise but disbanded in failure in mid-2019. From late November 2019 to early February 2020, in coordination with IGAD and the regional states' special envoys, Ramaphosa's special envoy to South Sudan, Deputy President David Mabuza, travelled to Juba each month to chair talks between party delegates to find a solution.

Thanks in part to Mabuza's efforts, Kiir relented on the issue of states just a week before the 22 February deadline for reaching a unity government deal. As the South African deputy president ramped up pressure, other South Sudanese signatories to the peace deal also all came together on a unified position on state numbers and boundaries, leaving Kiir isolated and reducing his options for forming a government with parties other than his arch-rival Machar. As a result, and also due to lobbying by regional heads of state and IGAD, Kiir agreed to return the country to its pre-war internal boundaries demarcating ten states, albeit alongside three additional special administrative areas. This concession paved the way for formation of the unity government, with Kiir at the helm and Machar as first vice president.<sup>40</sup> Behind the scenes, Ramaphosa had also been busy, meeting Kiir and Machar in Addis Ababa on the sidelines of the AU summit in early February, where he discussed the issue of states.

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<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "A Major Step Toward Ending South Sudan's Civil War", 25 February 2020.

<sup>38</sup> South African leaders have longstanding ties to South Sudan and many top ANC officials identify closely with the country's independence struggle. In January 2018, South Africa signed a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation with South Sudan. "SA, South Sudan sign military defence agreement", SABC, 30 January 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa and elsewhere, 2018-2019.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "A Major Step Toward Ending South Sudan's Civil War", op. cit.

Ramaphosa has expressed a clear intent to consolidate the Kiir-Machar agreement, stating that he would in his capacity as AU chair make the peace process in South Sudan one of his top foreign policy priorities of 2020.<sup>41</sup> Much of what Pretoria has to offer is old-school diplomacy, using its influence to keep the deal on track. In particular, Ramaphosa should be ready for further personal intervention if the situation requires it. For example, he might mediate between Kiir and Machar if and when their fraught relationship threatens the unity government's stability. As such, Ramaphosa should seek assistance from Kiir's main backer in the region, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, and encourage him to make clear to Kiir that he must uphold his commitment to sharing power.

South Africa should also use its dual position as AU chair and chair of the C5 countries to push the parties to make progress on the outstanding issue of reforming the country's divided army. Kiir and Machar had previously promised to unify their many forces, but this process has met with significant delays and political hurdles, although some forces have arrived at joint training camps. In addition, both sides have recruited heavily from civilian ranks to inflate their numbers. Meanwhile, the government is not yet committing its core force to the process, while some of Machar's forces are also refusing to come to designated sites.<sup>42</sup> South Africa should encourage both the parties and IGAD to screen out new civilian recruits from the unifying forces and commit to a detailed reunification roadmap. As this plays out, Pretoria should try to persuade both parties to refrain from flooding the capital city Juba with troops during the transitional process. This would increase risks of conflict if disagreements break out, as occurred in 2016 when clashes between Kiir and Machar forces sent the country back into civil war.

#### D. *Zimbabwe*

Next door to South Africa, the removal from power of Zimbabwe's long-time strongman Robert Mugabe in November 2017 generated hopes for reform and recovery. These rapidly faded. The presidency of Mugabe's successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has been marked by repression, corruption and economic crisis. Zimbabwe is more politically polarised than ever, its economy is failing and over half the population is now food-insecure.<sup>43</sup> Discontent has risen as the state proves unable to provide basic services or adequate pay to civil servants and levels of dissatisfaction within army ranks reportedly increase.<sup>44</sup> As public resentment boils over, the government is re-

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<sup>41</sup> "Keynote Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the South African Heads of Mission Accredited to African Countries Conference, OR Tambo Conference Centre, Tshwane", Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 28 January 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, South Sudanese government officials, opposition officials and commanders, and ceasefire monitors, October 2019-February 2020.

<sup>43</sup> "Once the breadbasket of Africa, Zimbabwe now on the brink of manmade starvation, UN rights expert warns", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, press release, Geneva, 28 November 2019.

<sup>44</sup> "Zimbabwe: Hungry soldiers spark govt fears", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 8 November 2019; "Zim soldiers close to starving", *Sunday Times*, 10 November 2019; "Panicky army chiefs deploy special forces", *Zimbabwe Independent*, 7 February 2020. Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert; interviews, civil society experts, Bulawayo; diplomat, Harare, all February-March 2020.

sorting to greater violence to put a lid on it.<sup>45</sup> Of almost certain concern from South Africa's perspective is that this tumult is driving a new wave of migrants from Zimbabwe into its territory.<sup>46</sup>

South Africa may have to take a more assertive stance with respect to Zimbabwe's internal affairs than it has tended to do. Pretoria is seen by many Zimbabweans as tolerant, if not implicitly supportive, of incumbent governments in Harare. During the Mugabe era, South Africa facilitated talks between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), but also maintained a policy of non-interference even when it disapproved of Harare's repressive practices.<sup>47</sup>

That posture continues to this day. When Mnangagwa seized power in 2017, South Africa, like many countries, avoided describing it as a "coup". Pretoria remained silent in the wake of the July 2018 elections, when Zimbabwean security forces shot and killed at least six people during MDC protests ahead of an announcement that Mnangagwa had won.<sup>48</sup> Pretoria then endorsed the dismissal of the MDC's petition contesting the election results.<sup>49</sup> Zimbabwe's security forces went on to attack crowds protesting rising fuel prices in January 2019, killing thirteen people, while beating, abducting, torturing and raping civilians, and arresting over 1,000.<sup>50</sup>

Since then, political and social tensions have mounted further amid ongoing repression and a government economic reform program that has imposed major austerity measures.<sup>51</sup> With the MDC continuing to refuse Mnangagwa recognition as the duly elected president, the government is managing political dissent by prohibiting protests and intimidating the opposition.<sup>52</sup> Several prominent MDC, trade union and civil society leaders face subversion and treason charges, amid a slew of abductions by shadowy elements connected to the security services peaking in August and September 2019.<sup>53</sup> The government's Transitional Stabilisation Program (TSP), a set of structural and fiscal policies introduced in October 2018, has also collapsed the value of earnings and savings, heaping more difficulties on Zimbabwe's people.<sup>54</sup> Mean-

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<sup>45</sup> "The New Deception: What Has Changed? A Baseline Study on the Record of Zimbabwe's 'New Dispensation' in Upholding Human Rights", Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, August 2019.

<sup>46</sup> "Renewed exodus of Zimbabweans amid economic woes", Anadolu Agency, 27 October 2019.

<sup>47</sup> South Africa was appointed by the SADC as facilitator of talks between ZANU-PF and the MDC in 2007, and subsequently, along with the AU, as guarantor of the Global Political Agreement that laid the basis for a power sharing deal between the two parties. This deal was not fully implemented. In 2013, having endorsed the outcome of that year's elections, which saw Mugabe gain another term, SADC and South Africa officially stepped back from further direct involvement in Zimbabwe. Stephen Chan and Judith Gallagher, *Why Mugabe Won: The 2013 Elections in Zimbabwe and Their Aftermath* (Cambridge, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Piers Pigou, "After Elections, Zimbabwe Government's Legitimacy in Limbo", Crisis Group Commentary, 21 August 2018.

<sup>49</sup> "Ramaphosa urges Zimbabweans to accept election ruling", SABC, 25 August 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Piers Pigou, "Revolt and Repression in Zimbabwe", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 January 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interviews and communications, Zimbabwean opposition, civil society activists, Western diplomats, February and March 2020.

<sup>52</sup> "Zimbabwe police ban another protest against economic woes", Al Jazeera, 15 August 2019; Crisis Group communications, senior MDC officials, 17 January and 4 March 2020.

<sup>53</sup> "USA says serious human rights abuses rife in Zimbabwe", VOA, 13 March 2020.

<sup>54</sup> "Zimbabwe: Reviewing govt's Transitional Stabilisation Programme", *The Zimbabwe Mail*, 1 November 2020. Crisis Group communication, Zimbabwean economist, 16 March 2020.

time, the economy continues to shrink rapidly. Civil servants have effectively stopped working, many unable to afford even the transport fare to get to and from their jobs. Health and education systems are barely functioning.<sup>55</sup>

Against this backdrop, one question for Pretoria is what position it should take on the U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on Harare in response to human rights abuses and political repression.<sup>56</sup> Historically, Pretoria has opposed sanctions levied against individuals and companies, arguing that they are too tough on the Zimbabwean economy.<sup>57</sup> The government in Harare also drew the support of South Africa and other neighbours when it mobilised street protests against sanctions in October 2019.<sup>58</sup> While formally maintaining an anti-sanctions position, however, Pretoria seems to be increasingly (and helpfully) attributing the economic crisis to Harare's own governance as well.<sup>59</sup>

South Africa should also be more vocal in advocating improvements in economic governance, which would be good both for the country and for its relations with potential donors such as the U.S and EU. Officials in Pretoria say that Ramaphosa's speech to the March 2019 meeting of the Bi-National Commission in Harare, where he referenced South Africa's own experience of "state capture", was a coded way of encouraging Mnangagwa to tackle corruption.<sup>60</sup>

But veiled messages go only so far. Ramaphosa should openly press Mnangagwa to root out corruption, while at the same time improving transparency and accountability around revenue and expenditure as well as foreign exchange flows by bolstering the Auditor General's office and the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission. If Zimbabwe can make meaningful progress on these fronts, South Africa could more credibly lobby for debt relief for its north-eastern neighbour, as well as the possible lifting of some sanctions.

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<sup>55</sup> "IMF predicts economy will shrink 7,1% in 2019", *fin24.com*, 16 October 2019. See also "IMF Executive Board concludes 2020 Article IV Consultation with Zimbabwe", International Monetary Fund, 26 February 2020, for details of IMF warnings about Zimbabwe's lack of reforms and worsening humanitarian and economic crisis.

<sup>56</sup> "Zimbabwe sanctions: Who is being targeted", BBC, 25 October 2019. Two prominent government figures added to the U.S. OFAC sanctions list in March 2020 are retired General Anselem Sanyatwe and State Security Minister Oliver Ncube, whom U.S. authorities linked to the 2018 and 2019 crackdowns.

<sup>57</sup> Separate U.S. measures would block international financial institution lending to Harare, although the impact is unclear since Zimbabwe cannot borrow more money until it pays off its \$2.3 billion in arrears. See the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (2001) directing the U.S. to block international financial institutions granting loans to Zimbabwe "except as may be required to meet basic human needs or for good governance".

<sup>58</sup> "SADC Day of Solidarity with the Republic of Zimbabwe", Department of International Relations and Cooperation, SADC, media statement, 25 October 2019.

<sup>59</sup> South Africa's foreign minister, Naledi Pandor, stated in November 2019 that Zimbabwe's "political dynamics are inextricably linked to the economic". South Africa's ambassador to Zimbabwe, Mphakama Mbete, stated that more action was required on reforms in Zimbabwe. See "SAS warns Zimbabwe over reforms", *Daily News*, 22 February 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "State capture" refers to systemic political corruption where private and political interests influence the state's decision-making to their own advantage. See also "Opening Remarks by President Cyril Ramaphosa", SA-Zimbabwe Bi-National Commission, Harare, 12 March 2019. Crisis Group interviews, foreign policy adviser, foreign policy experts, Western diplomats, Harare and Pretoria, November 2019, January and February 2020.

Pretoria also should do all it can to push Harare to facilitate renewed dialogue between ZANU-PF and the MDC in order to de-escalate political tensions that could translate into violent protests. In the wake of the January 2019 violence, the government initiated a political dialogue, but this process has been boycotted by the MDC.<sup>61</sup> Zimbabwe's Council of Churches has also attempted to bring political and civil society actors together, but the government and ruling party have resisted their calls for an inclusive forum.<sup>62</sup> South Africa, with SADC's backing, ought to offer to broker fresh dialogue between the MDC and ZANU-PF.<sup>63</sup> If any intervention of this nature by Pretoria is to have credibility, it should avoid perceptions of ANC and South African government bias in favour of ZANU-PF.<sup>64</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

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South Africa can play an important role in mitigating some of Africa's seemingly intractable conflicts and crises, especially if it leverages its position at both the UN Security Council and the African Union (AU) to help deliver tangible gains for peace and security. In prioritising its efforts, it should look first to conflicts and crises with which it has long historical involvement and experience. These include the situations in Burundi, the DRC and South Sudan – all countries on which South African diplomats say Pretoria is ready to work and where there is more than enough work to be done. In its own backyard, South Africa should also help steer Zimbabwe onto a more stable and potentially prosperous path. With the AU focused on “silencing the guns” in Africa, the time is right for the Ramaphosa administration to take up these challenges and begin forging a new legacy for South Africa as a leader in preventing and mitigating the region's conflicts.

**Johannesburg/Nairobi/Brussels, 27 March 2020**

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<sup>61</sup> “Nelson Chamisa speaks of joining POLAD”, Bulawayo 24 News, 28 February 2020.

<sup>62</sup> “ZANU PF dismisses Christian Denomination's Proposal”, *Pindula News*, 10 October 2020; Crisis Group communications, civil society actors, December 2019 and February 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Former President Thabo Mbeki met with Mnangagwa, MDC leader Nelson Chamisa, other political and civil society actors in early December to scope the possibilities for further dialogue. “Mbeki ready to resume Zimbabwe political dialogue”, *The Zimbabwe Mail*, 13 February 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Mbeki's policy of quiet diplomacy was criticised for not calling out abuses perpetrated under Mugabe's presidency. Crisis Group interviews, Zimbabwean and South African analysts, September-October 2019.

## Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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