South Africa: *Regional Hegemony* and Defense

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Abstract: This paper seeks to elucidate why certain middle powers with regional influence do not pursue regional hegemony, contrary to theoretical expectations. Offensive Realism and Historical Sociology posit that states are compelled to maximize their power, particularly in terms of material capabilities. This study examines the case of South Africa, a notable example of a state reducing its defense budget and material capabilities within an unbalanced multipolar order. From a realist perspective, a low threat level is a key variable explaining a state's decision not to enhance its capabilities. However, this factor alone is insufficient to fully account for South Africa's behavior. A domestic perspective, focusing on elite decision-making processes, is also necessary.

Key-words: South Africa; Regional Hegemony; Defense.

África do Sul: Hegemonia Regional e Defesa

Resumo: Este artigo busca elucidar por que certas potências médias com influência regional não buscam hegemonia regional, contrariamente às expectativas teóricas. O Realismo Ofensivo e a Sociologia Histórica postulam que os Estados são compelidos a maximizar seu poder, particularmente em termos de capacidades materiais. Este estudo examina o caso da África do Sul, um exemplo notável de um Estado que reduz seu orçamento de defesa e suas capacidades materiais dentro de uma ordem multipolar desequilibrada. De uma perspectiva realista, um baixo nível de ameaça é uma variável-chave que explica a decisão de um Estado de não aumentar suas capacidades. No entanto, esse fator por si só é insuficiente para explicar completamente o comportamento da África do Sul. Uma perspectiva doméstica, com foco nos processos de tomada de decisão da elite, também é necessária.
Palavras-chave: África do Sul; Hegemonia Regional; Defesa.

Sudáfrica: Hegemonía Regional y Defensa

Resumen: Este artículo busca dilucidar por qué ciertas potencias intermedias con influencia regional no buscan la hegemonía regional, contrariamente a las expectativas teóricas. El Realismo Ofensivo y la Sociología Histórica postulan que los Estados se ven obligados a maximizar su poder, particularmente en términos de capacidades materiales. Este estudio examina el caso de Sudáfrica, un ejemplo notable de un Estado que reduce su presupuesto de defensa y sus capacidades materiales dentro de un orden multipolar desequilibrado. Desde una perspectiva realista, un bajo nivel de amenaza es una variable clave que explica la decisión de un Estado de no aumentar sus capacidades. Sin embargo, este factor por sí solo no es suficiente para explicar plenamente el comportamiento de Sudáfrica. También es necesaria una perspectiva nacional, centrada en los procesos de toma de decisiones de las élites.
Palabras clave: Sudáfrica; Hegemonía Regional; Defensa.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine why certain countries do not strive for regional hegemony despite possessing the material capabilities necessary to do so, as predicted by the premises of Offensive Realism. Do such states instead prefer a diplomatic or soft power approach to achieving regional leadership? Is threat level insufficient to motivate the development of greater capabilities? Could internal coalitions and the preferences of political elites explain why these states pursue alternative strategies?

The paper begins with a neorealist account of key concepts, followed by an appraisal of South Africa's capacity-building efforts and regional projection within this conceptual framework. This study adheres to the neorealist perspective, wherein the state is considered the principal actor and inter-state relationships and patterns constitute the most significant phenomena in international relations. However, the state also comprises various stakeholders, whose interests emerge from a bargaining process among competing coalitions, leading to decisions ultimately shaped by the country's elite. Several scholars endorse this coalition-based perspective, but it is important to emphasize that this paper focuses on the senior players - defined as those whose decisions and interests are dominant within society (Allison, Halperin, 1972).

Accordingly, the next two sections investigate state behavior through a neorealist lens, beginning with Waltz's general theory of international politics and extending to Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, alongside insights from Historical Sociology. This analysis seeks to provide a neorealist explanation for why South Africa is not an expansive regional power. A neorealist interpretation may argue that the country's low threat level - understood through Mearsheimer's conceptual framework - accounts for its limited material ambitions. However, the central tenet of Mearsheimer's theory - that states are compelled to seek regional hegemony - does not hold in South Africa's case. The external environment is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to explain South Africa's reduction in material capabilities and the scaling back of its global and regional ambitions.

To address this gap, the third section shifts focus to political elites and their conception of South Africa's role in the region. Although the international system has undoubtedly become multipolar, thus increasing incentives for both internal and external balancing, we argue that senior decision-makers in South African defense and foreign policy have instead opted for multipolarity, regional stability and diminishing its internal balancing capacities.

1. Theoretical insights and state behavior

Kenneth Waltz (1959; 1979) argued that the international system should be viewed as a distinct domain. Otherwise, as he contended in his critique of Elman (1996), international politics would be reduced to foreign policy analysis, with its myriad variables. Elman sought to integrate international politics and state behavior, whereas Waltz insisted that international politics is systemic, with units interacting under the overarching principle of anarchy. According to Waltz (1979), there is functional equivalence among these units (states), meaning their role in the international system is essentially the same. The central rule, in Waltz's view, is the imperative of survival: states must survive to achieve any of their goals, whether that goal is mere survival or the pursuit of world domination.

Within this framework, states are free to act as they choose. Drawing on a market analogy, Waltz argued that those states choosing not to act may face severe consequences, including the possibility of ceasing to exist. We, among others, argue that there is a latent theory of state behavior implicit in Waltz's formulation, one that has been further developed by scholars such as Resende-Santos (2008). Balancing, whether external or internal, is central to understanding Waltz's predictions regarding state behavior: states will balance against the strongest actor in the system (Waltz, 1979). They do this by strengthening their own capabilities and forming alliances.

Our objective here, however, is not to conduct an in-depth investigation of Waltz's formulation. Rather, it is to understand states that choose not to engage in external or, more importantly, internal balancing. This is significant because, even if a state possesses allies, that does not guarantee ultimate protection, as defection is always a plausible possibility, as historical

analysis demonstrates. Although Waltz did not formulate a complete theory of state behavior, he argued that the international system is governed by the relative distribution of capabilities, which can be translated into material resources.

As argued previously (Dall'Agnol, 2024), this is the most effective way to measure a country's relative position and, *ceteris paribus*, the level of threat it faces. In this paper, however, we aim to step back from theoretical generalization and consider the specific factors that determine state behavior. To this end, we draw on insights from Mearsheimer's work (2001; 2018). According to Mearsheimer, every state seeks to become the most powerful actor in the system - the hegemon. However, in his formulation, no single state can attain this status. This is primarily due to two factors: no state holds an absolute advantage in nuclear power, and the "stopping power of water." To dominate a territory, one must invade it with troops, and the stopping power of water serves as a significant impediment to such efforts, as amphibious maneuvers are inherently dangerous and prone to failure. Consequently, being geographically insulated by water and lacking threatening neighbors affords a state greater security.

A state's actions within the international system are strongly related to its position in the relative distribution of power. The level of threat correlates closely with state behavior, prompting responses through various mechanisms, such as those previously mentioned. However, there are intervening variables that must not be overlooked in analyzing South Africa and its capabilities. Among these, geography stands out as a crucial intervening variable in systemic stimuli for behavior. Geography is thus an important factor when considering specific cases and their defense apparatus. A classic example is the British emphasis on naval development, in contrast with Germany's focus on land power. In the case of South Africa, the stopping power of water is a factor that directly influences its military posture. Internal bureaucratic interests and the consensus among major stakeholders regarding defense policy constitute additional variables that shape policy and capability development. Moreover, the country and its firms - whether private or public - must possess the capacity to sustain a Defense Industrial Base aligned with the its defense

policy, with or without the collaboration of allies. While imports are an alternative, they inherently generate dependency.

According to Mearsheimer, land power is essential for a state to become powerful in the international system. His theory further posits that every significant campaign has been determined by armies rather than naval battles (Mearsheimer, 2001). Any country aspiring to achieve regional hegemon status must rely on a strong land force. For this, ground troops are indispensable, as occupying territory necessitates such forces. As Mearsheimer (2001) asserts:

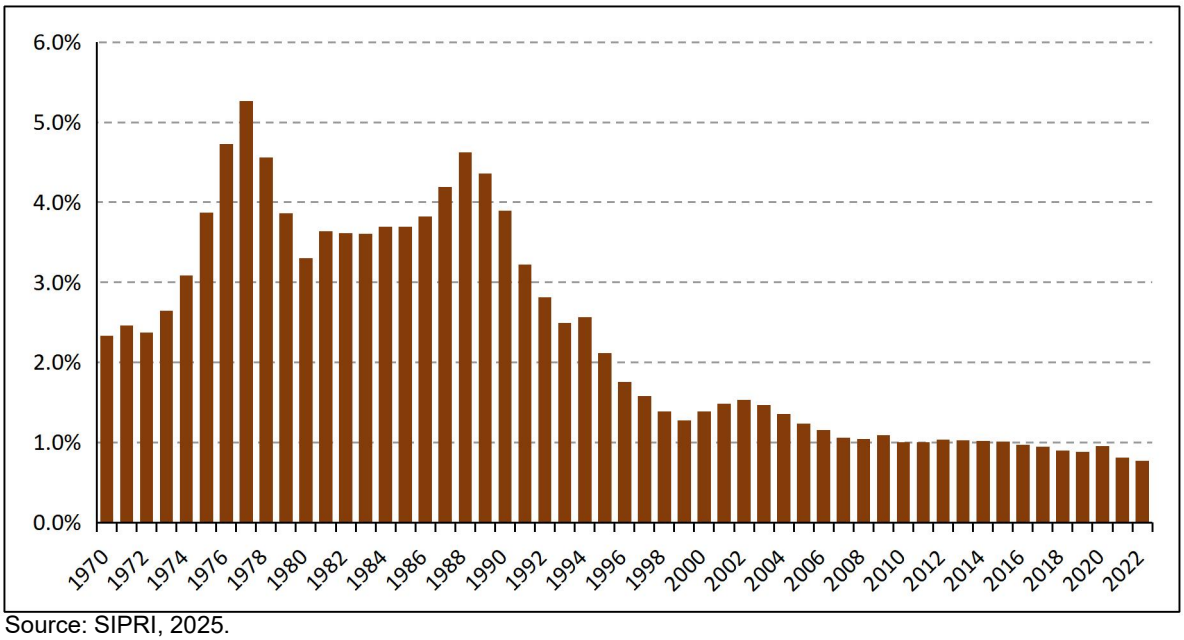
> Land power is the dominant form of military power in the modern world. A state's power is largely embedded in its army and the air and naval forces that support those ground forces. Simply put, the most powerful states possess the most formidable armies. Therefore, measuring the balance of land power by itself should provide a rough but sound indicator of the relative might of rival great powers. Second, large bodies of water profoundly limit the power-projection capabilities of land forces.

This implies that geography, alongside the relative distribution of power, are key variables in explaining state behavior. Given the stopping power of water, regional balances of power become essential for understanding power dynamics related to state-building and the mobilization of resources and personnel, since threat - as Mearsheimer contends - has a strong regional dimension.

2. The South African case

If Mearsheimer is correct, states will pursue regional hegemony and the ultimate goal is to achieve the position of the only regional hegemon in the world. Otherwise, another option is to *bandwagon* - reserved for very weak states - or even more rarely, they will be *status quo* powers. A state can form alliances, although these are much more volatile than capacity building. So, what is the case with South Africa?

Graph 1- Military Expenditure as a share of GDP (Constant $2022)



Source: SIPRI, 2025.

2.1. Land Power and Threat Level

Since the possibility of a terrestrial invasion is one of the most significant factors defining a threat to a country, assessing South Africa's and its immediate neighbors' land forces and personnel is essential for determining potential threats along the country's borders. South Africa shares frontiers with a relatively large number of states: Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Eswatini, and Lesotho. The latter two do not possess significant land power.

South Africa's land power (IISS, 2025), in terms of both troop numbers and technological sophistication, surpasses that of its neighbors; thus, they do not represent a serious risk of land invasion. An analysis of infantry forces, for example, reinforces this point. South Africa's infantry - which is the most critical branch in direct land confrontations - maintains a considerable advantage.

Military expenditure and resource mobilization indicate that South Africa is not actively pursuing a clear objective of regional hegemony. At the international level, while protected by large bodies of water, South Africa cannot

expect to be left entirely alone. In practice, the country is forging alliances - such as IBSA and BRICS - and acting in multilateral forums, exercising a form of soft balancing[2]. However, as argued earlier, alliances are volatile; governments change rapidly, and ultimately, a country must rely on its own forces for its defense.

Historical Sociology, closely aligned with Mearsheimer's thought, would argue that the mere preservation of social existence, under conditions of free competition, demands constant expansion. Those who do not rise will fall. Expansion entails domination over proximate entities, reducing them to a state of dependency (Elias, 1993). Charles Tilly (1990) argued that a state's capacity to respond to international competition depends on its resource base and the strength of its organizational core. Tilly, along with other historical sociologists, maintains that the political-organizational form of states (or other sovereign units) is determined by both internal and external requirements. States make war, and war makes the state. In Tilly's conception, the primary function of the state is war and war preparedness, which requires the extensive mobilization of the state's organizational, extractive, and material capacities.

According to Tilly, war was the main activity of European nation-states during their five centuries of existence, consuming approximately 80 to 90% of national budgets until the 19th century. Some of the main theories in International Relations and related fields would thus expect South Africa to balance internally and externally, enhance its military capabilities, and emerge as a regional power. So, what explains South Africa's decision to slow down and diminish its capabilities?

Given the large bodies of water and the low land-power threat, the best neorealist explanation for South Africa's lack of expansionism is the low level of threat. Threat drives expansion, both from the perspective of material power distribution and within historical sociology. It incites innovation, which in turn demands higher levels of defense expenditure. As postulated by this approach,

[2] Soft balancing is a concept first put forward by Robert A. Pape and it refers to other means of balancing counterposing "hard balancing". It refers to multilateralism, diplomacy and the use of international institutions to counter more powerful states (PAPE, 2005.)

those who do not rise, fall. Potential regional hegemons are expected to expand and maximize power and security. We argue that the explanation provided by a neorealist and historical sociology account is insufficient to explain a demobilization of a potentially regional hegemon such as South Africa. Low level of threat must be combined with an assessment of domestic decision making for a more accurate analysis.

Waltz's defensive realism, expressed clearly in his debate with Colin Elman (1996), asserts that foreign policy is analysis, not theory. States are expected to act in certain ways, but they are not obligated to do so. Robert Gilpin argued that "the economic/foreign policies of a society reflect the nation's national interest as defined by the dominant elite of that society. My state-centric position assumes that national security is and always will be the principal concern of states" (Gilpin, 1981, p. 18). In this sense, one must turn to the domestic angle of analysis: the realm of bureaucratic and coalition-based decision-making. The next section addresses this dimension in order to explain South Africa's policymaking.

3. Domestic Decision-making and South Africa's defense policy

In order to understand South Africa's regional behavior, it is essential to distinguish between two analytically distinct periods between the apartheid regime and the post-apartheid democratic state. We make this separation not only because of the institutional rupture that followed the democratic transition, but because the nature of the strategic threats perceived by the ruling elites - and the instruments chosen to respond to them - shifted dramatically between the two eras. During apartheid, the state's foreign and defense policies were shaped by an insulated security elite whose approach to external relations was largely coercive, secretive, and focused on regime survival. In contrast, post-1994 South Africa embraced multilateralism, institutional integration, and the pursuit of regional stability through diplomacy rather than force, even though it retained the military capabilities to act otherwise.

We aim to demonstrate how South Africa's foreign and defense policy evolved not simply in response to structural changes in its environment, but as a result of deliberate elite decisions regarding the role the country should play in the region. We focus on the post-apartheid period, since it is in this time framework that the Country's elites shifted from a military capability resource mobilization and a more aggressive foreign policy, towards the demobilization of its defense capabilities.

The convergence of these trends - the end of white rule, the dismantling of the nuclear program, the withdrawal of Cuban and Soviet influence, and the regional realignment under SADC - created the conditions for a new phase in South African foreign and security policy. The next topic turns to this post-apartheid period, examining how decision-making was put in place, who the key actors became, and how South Africa sought to redefine its role through diplomacy, multilateralism, and regional engagement. This transition marked a clear departure from the confrontational and elite-driven security paradigm that had characterized the apartheid era.

Following the end of apartheid, South Africa faced the challenge of redefining its international role amidst a rapidly changing regional environment. Unlike other historical cases of regional powers, the country did not seek to affirm its leadership by military means. Instead, it systematically invested in diplomacy, institutional cooperation, and regional integration. This posture reflected a deliberate strategic choice by the new democratic leadership, even as South Africa retained the material capabilities that would have allowed it to pursue regional dominance by traditional hard power instruments.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), into which South Africa formally integrated in 1994, played a central role in this recalibration. While originally focused on economic coordination, the organization's mandate expanded significantly in the post-apartheid era to include political and security matters. South Africa viewed this institutional framework not merely as a platform for regional cooperation, but as a strategic vehicle to consolidate its regional influence through rules-based engagement. The 1996 White Paper on National Defence explicitly outlined the link between South Africa's domestic transformation and its regional responsibilities,

emphasizing that “the country's national security is inseparable from the stability and well-being of its neighbors” (South Africa, 1996). This was echoed in the 2015 Defense Review, which reinforced the idea that effective regional governance, multilateral diplomacy, and integrated development were central pillars of national security policy (South Africa, 2015).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, South Africa actively participated in the institutional deepening of SADC, supporting the creation of formal mechanisms like the Organ on Politics, Defense and Security Cooperation (OPDSC) and contributing to the region’s evolving security and mediation architecture. However, this engagement was not without contestation. Several SADC members, notably Zimbabwe and Angola, advocated for a more militarized, defensive posture. South Africa, in contrast, promoted a vision of common security based on political dialogue and preventative diplomacy. The eventual compromise between these perspectives allowed South Africa to shape the organization’s structure while projecting itself as a stabilizing force rather than a coercive actor (Africa, 2013).

This preference for diplomatic leadership was not only a matter of external perception - it was institutionalized in South Africa’s strategic planning. The Framework Document on South Africa’s National Interest (2022) reaffirmed that the promotion of regional stability and integration was not an extension of hegemonic ambition, but a core interest of the state itself. It defined South Africa’s national interest as encompassing “the protection and promotion of its constitutional order, the prosperity of its people, and a better Africa and world” (South Africa, 2022). Accordingly, the country’s regional engagement was framed less as a geopolitical competition than as a process of shared development and multilateral responsibility.

While South Africa’s military remained one of the most capable on the continent, the country systematically reduced its defense expenditures. From nearly 4.4% of GDP in the apartheid era, military spending fell below 1.5% by 2004 and reached just 0.7% by 2023 (SIPRI, 2025). This trajectory diverged from what one might expect of a regional hegemon facing structural resistance and balancing by neighboring states. It signaled that the post-apartheid elite did

not perceive traditional military power as the principal tool for consolidating regional influence.

South Africa's diplomatic interventions were often conducted under multilateral mandates, particularly within SADC and the African Union. Its role in shaping continental security architecture - including contributions to the African Standby Force and the African Peace and Security Architecture - demonstrated its commitment to rules-based regional governance (Burgess, 2021). The preference for institutional engagement over unilateralism was reinforced during crises such as the civil war in the DRC, in which South Africa refrained from military deployment while other SADC members intervened directly (Burgess, 2021).

This pattern of restraint persisted even when other states engaged in soft balancing against South Africa's influence. The establishment of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security in 1996 reflected, in part, an effort to contain Pretoria's leadership, particularly by actors such as Zimbabwe and Angola. Nonetheless, South Africa remained committed to institutional mechanisms and refrained from reacting with increased assertiveness (Paul, 2005; Costa, 2025).

Domestically, successive governments struggled to modernize and integrate the armed forces, particularly given the budgetary constraints and the legacy of conscription-era militarization. As a result, the SANDF faced difficulties in maintaining operational readiness and in participating in sustained peacekeeping operations abroad. The 2015 Defence Review acknowledged these shortcomings and emphasized the importance of adapting defense priorities to complex transnational threats such as border instability, criminal networks, and state fragility (South Africa, 2015).

The security strategy also evolved to include broader regional stabilization efforts, recognizing that South Africa's internal peace was directly affected by developments in neighboring states. The growing emphasis on political and socioeconomic drivers of insecurity - such as migration, poverty, and post-conflict reconstruction - was reflected in the state's continuous support

for preventive diplomacy and regional capacity-building (Söderbaum, 1998; South Africa, 2022).

A clear example of the region's progress in coordinating responses to domestic crises occurred in the 2009 political breakdown in Madagascar. Initially suspended from both the AU and SADC after an unconstitutional change of government, Madagascar became the focus of a regional mediation led by former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano under SADC auspices. The resulting agreement allowed for a transitional government and internationally recognized elections in 2013. As Schutz (2016) notes, the operation marked a turning point in the legitimacy and unity of SADC's interventions, with prior authorization, coordinated planning, and broad support among member states. For South Africa, this represented both a validation of its multilateral strategy and a demonstration of the organization's maturing political coherence.

This long-term orientation was reinforced by strategic documents such as the Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment, which underscored regional stability and economic integration as essential components of national security (South Africa, 2022). While South Africa remained active in multilateral forums and committed to African-led solutions to security crises, its leadership role was increasingly conditioned by internal challenges and the need to balance domestic priorities with external responsibilities.

Despite reduced military capabilities and occasional setbacks in regional diplomacy - as evidenced by the prolonged crisis in Zimbabwe or contested interventions in SADC - South Africa maintained its position as a central node in Southern Africa's security architecture. Rather than coercion, it relied on diplomatic authority, soft power, and multilateral coordination to project influence and preserve regional order (Burgess, 2021; Africa, 2013).

Concluding Remarks

Neither historical sociology nor offensive realism provides an elaborate explanation for countries like South Africa, which don't pursue expansion of its military capabilities. In Kenneth Waltz's formulation, foreign policy is analysis and not predictive, although, a country which denies the imperative of the international system would suffer, as firms who don't follow the functioning of the market, and potentially disappear. However, changes in units are not relevant for his systemic theory. In order to understand substantially individual unit behavior, one must count on other variables.

From a structural perspective, low levels of threat explain why South Africa does not have developed state capabilities in order to reach regional hegemony. However, combining the analysis with country's elites' decision-making, it becomes clear that the post-apartheid South Africa opted for multilateralism and regional stability. The elites after the 1990's attempted to build a foreign and defense policy in these terms. However, demobilization of the state's defense, in budget and state capacities, might prove itself not worthy when multipolarity and its perils may pressure the state for enhanced military enhanced defense capabilities, resource mobilization and response. Aligning realism's insights towards systemic and state behavior, with elite strategy, one might argue that a military build-up in South Africa would be feasible if threat level increases and the elite's response to the imperatives of the multipolar international system are adequate. For now, South Africa has left aside pursuing a strong regional hegemony built on material capabilities.

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