

Research summary PNR42+

Designing Swiss-South African Relations – A Comparison across Time

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Summary of most important findings

The research project studied the designing of Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa from 1968 to 1994 and asked how the policy has changed over time and how the changes and constants observed can be explained. Designing policy, as we understand it, means not only the policy pursued toward South Africa in regard to design of its content but also the political processes in the Swiss political system that formulated this policy. Thus the study concentrated on the domestic dimension of Switzerland's South Africa policy but also seeks to include the international context into the analysis as an important frame of reference for policy formulation in Switzerland. From an epistemological viewpoint, the study pursued an approach that oriented its focus on political ideas and convictions. It seeks to explain policy through attitudes toward values and problem perception (including approaches to solutions foreseen for them) by the people and organizations occupied with this policy.

From this viewpoint, two basic convictions can be determined that decisively marked Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa throughout the entire period studied: condemnation of the apartheid system in moral terms as well as the rejection of economic sanctions as a matter of principle. Both these guidelines of Swiss South Africa policy were supported by a broad coalition consisting of the Federal Council, the federal administration, the parliamentary majority, bourgeois parties, and business circles.

1. The policy of moral condemnation

The policy of moral condemnation was based until the 1980s on the declaration of a Swiss delegate, Ambassador August R. Lindt, as he expressed it in the name of the Swiss authorities at the UN Human Rights Conference of 1968. At the time Lindt condemned the apartheid system as contradictory to the prevailing Universal Declaration of Human Rights and asserted that Switzerland, from a moral standpoint and owing to its democratic and humanitarian tradition, could only condemn apartheid. In view of Switzerland's normally very reserved stance on the international stage at the time, the declaration of 1968 was formulated in an astonishingly sharp manner. It was in part criticized in the Swiss press and from bourgeois deputies in the National Council as meddling in South Africa's domestic politics. Yet the UN Human Rights conference in

general and the Swiss declaration specifically stirred up little interest in the Swiss public. On the other hand, the declaration of 1968 formed the basis for the Federal Council's policy: "moral condemnation" of apartheid, as it described it during the 1970s and 1980s in connection with international conferences and in answering parliamentary interventions.

2. Rejection of economic sanctions

Switzerland actually rejected economic sanctions against South Africa since the outset of international discussions arising on such measures within the UN framework in the 1970s. The justification for this disapproving position was as a matter of principle based on three arguments: 1) Switzerland's years-old practice of not participating in sanctions imposed by individual states or groups of states, 2) the conviction that sanctions are not a suitable means to bring about political change, and 3) the observation that, if sanctions actually work, they punish the wrong party (neighboring states and economically most disadvantaged population groups). However, the Federal Council only applied this position explicitly with a public declaration on the specific case of South Africa in September 1986. In view of the several pending parliamentary interventions on the topic and the fact that most Western countries had taken economic measures against South Africa, the Federal Council at the time felt itself obliged to explain its position on South Africa. The declaration of 1986 made the discrepancy between the policy pursued by Switzerland and those of other Western states obvious, even if the Western measures were seized above all in economic sectors where they were expected to benefit their own economy – or at least to avoid harming it. Yet economic sanctions were still seen as a clear political sign of Western states wanting to take a tougher position against the apartheid regime.

3. The federal coalition behind the South Africa policy

The two major lines of Swiss South Africa policy were supported by a broad-based coalition. They did not even change at the outset of the 1990s, as Switzerland saw itself subjected to international criticism because of its position toward South Africa. The Federal Council at the time approved the export of sixty Pilatus PC-7 aircrafts to the South African Defense Ministry, though the UN sanctions committee spoke of a breach of the UN weapons embargo of 1977. However, the Federal Council and the parliamentary majority supported the position that the PC-7 did not amount to war material in keeping with Swiss law and was therefore not covered by the Swiss weapons embargo against South Africa of 1963.

Discussion on the PC-7 export again showed the typical conflict lines in Swiss South Africa policy: On one hand, a broad coalition from the Federal Council, the parliamentary majority, bourgeois parties, and business circles were committed to safeguard freedom of trade and personal responsibility to the largest possible. On the other hand, the political minority from political leftist parties (SP, PdA, POCH) as well as the solidarity and peace movements demanded a policy of greater state regulation of international trade and more sensitivity toward desires for solidarity in Swiss foreign policy (above all toward the international community and economically weak states and population groups). Indeed, an increasingly political and culturally important anti-apartheid movement also formed in Switzerland. However, it never achieved the necessary political strength in Parliament and vis-à-vis agencies of the federal administration responsible for specific sectors of Swiss South Africa policy to bring about basic change in Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa.

4. Explanatory factors

The steadfastness of the broad domestic policy coalition – a bloc responsible for the high constancy in designing Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa – can mainly be explained by the fact that various bureaucratic, political, and social circles showed a high convergence in their position against sanctions. Economic sanctions were strictly rejected within the very heterogeneously composed majority coalition, though in part for very different reasons. Of course, behind the emphasis on free trade and commerce and the trust in self-regulation of the free market’s “invisible hand” stood an economically characterized human image. Instead, emphasis on the ineffectiveness of sanctions tended to be based on a realistic viewpoint. A further reason to reject the sanctions stance was based on deductive derivation of this political decision from basic principles of Swiss foreign policy (neutrality, universality of foreign relations). And finally sympathy toward the apartheid system, which would have to be studied in depth anthropologically, could also be found within the political right. Those upholding these various convictions were complementary in part and were also to be found in combination among some individuals and organizations.

5. Radical change under special conditions

The Federal Council first introduced a basic change in the stance toward economic sanctions in 1990 as it for the first time imposed a comprehensive economic embargo against Iraq and Kuwait – i.e., at a time when Switzerland still rejected economic sanctions against South Africa as a matter of principle. It is indeed difficult here to compare the very differently situated cases. Binding UN sanctions were never imposed against South Africa – in contrast to Iraq in August 1990 – except for the weapons embargo of 1977. In the South African case, modification of the tried and true policy remained out of the question at the beginning of the 1990s. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that explanatory factors presented themselves quite differently in the case of the Swiss sanction decision against Iraq:

- The clear breach of international law in the Iraq case was undisputed. The Saddam Hussein regime’s invasion of a defenseless small nation obviously represented a fundamental violation of international law’s basic principles. In the South Africa case the legal verdict proved more difficult, and the human-rights violations of the apartheid regime were long regarded as a South African “domestic matter” in Switzerland.
- Swiss economic interests in Iraq and Kuwait were marginal at the time of Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait. On the other hand, established business relationships existed between Switzerland and South Africa that were of importance for individual enterprises and sectors.
- The sudden international crisis situation in Iraq during 1990 simplified a reformulation of policy on the sanctions issue in Switzerland. Switzerland perceived no such crisis situation regarding South Africa that would have simplified new solutions in redesigning policy.
- Generation change (particularly in the diplomatic corps), was anticipated through staff availability, and the great urgency of decision-making at the time of Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait during the Swiss holiday period. On the other hand, established actors with firmly set attitudes determined the design of the foreign policy pursued toward South Africa. Moreover, the situation began to improve in South Africa from 1990 on.

Empirical and conceptual bases

The research project was carried out between November 2001 and December 2003 at the Department of Political Science at the University of Zurich in connection with National Research Program 42+ "Relations between Switzerland and South Africa" and based mainly on analysis of 1967-1994 documents from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA, previously the Political Department) and Federal Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) as well as the Federal Military Department (FMD, later the Department for Defense, Civil Protection, and Sport, DDPS). The Federal Council decision of 16 April 2003, limiting access to the federal archives owing to a threatened class-action suit against Swiss firms in the USA, led to archive files not always being open to us. Minutes of meetings of the National Council and Council of State committees on foreign policy from 1960-1994 were available to us as was the archive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement of Switzerland. The documentary analysis was supplemented by 22 guideline based interviews with former and current representatives of the federal administration, Parliament, and scholars.

From a political science standpoint, the project belongs in research orientation on the domestic politics dimension of foreign-policy decision-making processes. In connection with the project, the "Advocacy Coalition Framework" developed by Paul A. Sabatier and Hank C. Jenkins-Smith to analyze domestic politics was applied in the foreign-policy sphere. Thus an empirical contribution to the current ongoing debate was made in political science research.