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Coherence of Switzerland's Policy Towards South Africa

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Introduction

During the era of apartheid in South Africa, the attitude assumed by the Swiss government differed from that of the international community. There were claims that Swiss policy towards South Africa was incoherent because, while repeatedly condemning apartheid, Switzerland refrained from imposing sanctions. Based on document analysis and expert interviews, this study takes a critical look at coherence of Swiss policy towards South Africa between 1985 and 1994. The focus lies on questions of coordination with regard to particular issues as well as on goal conflicts and clashes of interests within the Swiss federal administration with regard to the relations to South Africa. The analysis assumes that a high degree of coherence is contingent on a suitable institutional framework and on congruous role conceptions of the actors involved. These two conditions need to be met simultaneously if coherence is to be ensured.

Key Findings

- High Coherence Within Policy Areas

The comparison of four policy areas – namely human rights and transition, positive measures, diplomatic as well as economic sanctions – showed that Swiss policy within each of the subject areas was mostly coherent and the authorities involved were usually well coordinated. In general, the key actors pursued a common overreaching goal and refrained from imposing their own interests. Often, coordination took place on a voluntary basis and was even actively searched. Furthermore, there was a lively exchange of information between all the actors involved in internal administrative decision-making procedures. The only coordination problems identified concerned the area of economic sanctions, where information flows were less intensive. This may have been due to the fact that the set of actors was heterogeneous, i.e. they belonged to three different departments and each of the sub-groups of actors was relatively autonomous.

Even though coherence within the policy areas under consideration was generally high, there were instances in which certain administrative units took the role of the single leader. They defined the goals and implemented the policies in relative autonomy, while the other units involved had no choice but to follow them. In these cases, endeavours to coordinate and create coherence were usually made at lower levels of the hierarchy and tended to be informal in character, whereas the willingness for cooperation at the top of the administration

was rather weak. Furthermore, the analysis uncovered latent differences in opinion between certain administrative units.

The factors that turned out to be most important to high coherence within policy areas are a limited number of actors involved; intensive participation of all units concerned by an issue and close relationships between them; a high degree of centralisation; and strong congruence in the way in which the actors interpret particular situations and assess their scope of action. In general, the exchange of information in informal networks at lower levels of the hierarchy proved to be more important to policy coherence than institutionalised and formal consultation procedures. Furthermore, having a state secretary at the top of the hierarchy in overall charge of strategic issues and prepared to make decisions on individual cases if necessary could offset or at least reduce the disadvantage of heterogeneous and loosely integrated set of actors. The absence of resource conflicts and the joint use of existing resources, such as information and money, further encouraged mutual agreement and coordination within the administration.

- Low Coherence Between Policy Areas

While internal coherence was generally high, coherence between the policy areas under consideration was rather low. Even though a declaration of the Federal Council of September 1986 actually laid down a common – although fairly vague – goal and strategy with respect to Switzerland’s policy towards South Africa, alignment of the different sectoral and departmental policies with this overall strategy never occurred. Interaction of both the formal and informal kind was less intensive between than within the different policy areas. No central coordination or control was in place. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, which claimed to have the role of leader, was considered to be weak both by the Federal Council as by the administration. Overall coordination, based on effective, institutionalised, intensive and regular contacts at the head of the administration was missing. On the one hand, this prevented any interdepartmental discussions about strategies and appropriate policy interventions. On the other hand, it meant that individual actors enjoyed great autonomy in the design of their own policies.

It is a combination of factors that is responsible for the low degree of coherence between the policy areas under consideration. First, the principle that dominated the relationships between the different departments and sometimes even between different units within the same department was that of mutual non-interference. The authorities in charge of Switzerland’s policy towards South Africa were neither aware of the interdependence between the policy areas under consideration nor of the necessity of coordinating their political strategies and the instruments used in policy interventions. Exchanges between different departments or policy areas were most intensive at lower hierarchical levels. They usually took place on an informal and ad-hoc basis. Second, certain administrative units came to assume a central role in Swiss policy towards South Africa, actually facilitating harmonisation. However, such central points of reference only emerged where the same actors were involved in various policy areas. Apart from this, hardly any interdepartmental consultation procedures were observed in this analysis.

Third, extensive institutional and cognitive departmentalism within the federal administration precluded coordination at the highest level. This meant that, fourth, there was no need at the strategic level to resolve the differences in opinion with respect to policy content and direction and with respect to the responsibilities of the different administrative units. The

actors justified their activities with reference to the ideological superstructure of traditional foreign policy maxims. Like this, they managed to avoid conflicts about appropriate strategies and instruments in the policy towards South Africa even though an orientation toward common goals was largely missing.

Conversely, one factor that turned out to foster coherence was the fact that some civil servants went through various departments during their careers. First, personal contacts and the relatively small size of the federal administration at that time had a balancing effect and were conducive to mutual understanding for the different positions taken by the various administrative units as to Swiss policy towards South Africa. Second, personal connections and smallness facilitated establishing and maintaining regular and informal contacts to other administrative units.

In summary, the main hypothesis as to inter-policy coherence was corroborated. This is to say that an inappropriate institutional framework together with the fact that actors' role conceptions differed substantively in crucial respects resulted in a rather low degree of inter-policy coherence.

Policy Recommendations

The main conclusion of this study is that policy coherence first requires appropriate procedural structures and second a minimal congruence among administrative actors with respect to their cognitive role conceptions. In the following, a number of recommendations will be derived from our detailed findings. The recommendations take the form of practical and feasible suggestions of how inter-policy coherence in Swiss foreign policy could be improved.

- Early and Transparent Information

Overall, the exchange of information across the different administrative units in the area of foreign policy was limited. In order for the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs to assume a leadership role, take on coordination functions and to keep the overview of ongoing developments, an intensive exchange of information between the administrative units and departments involved is indispensable. Early, transparent and complete reciprocal information can avoid incoherence, but only if the information received is ultimately translated into the necessary actions by the federal administration. As fundamental decisions are usually taken during the first stages of planning, it is particularly important that mutual information takes place as early as possible. Furthermore, given that inconsistency and incoherence are generally not considered to be grave by the civil servants as long as their scope of action remains untouched coordination needs to be promoted proactively. Therefore, the exchange of information should be intensified both in the framework of interdepartmental committees like the ones that already exist (e.g. 'comités de pilotage') as well as through administrative consultation procedures.

- Interdepartmental Strategic Coordination Board Between State Secretaries

Within the different policy areas examined, processes were managed centrally by the state secretaries, whereas such effective, institutionalised overall coordination between these policy areas was missing at the highest level of the administration. One possibility to strengthen strategic coordination towards common objectives would be the creation of a cross-cutting

board as high as possible in the hierarchy, i.e. at the level of the state secretaries or directors of the federal offices. Such an interdepartmental coordination board would provide a platform for transparent and early information and consultation between the political actors at strategic level. The board would be responsible for the flow of information within the administration and would have to deal with fundamental questions regarding overall foreign policy strategy, coordination, and planning, thereby identifying existing gaps. The board should not be given the power to take decisions. Rather it would provide a forum for the articulation of conflicts of interests. In short: the board would lay the foundations for the resolution of existing differences and the strengthening of coherence in foreign policy.

- Horizontal and Project-specific Coordination at Lower Levels

Coordination at operational level was found to be less reliant on formal consultation procedures than on trust among the actors as well as on the relatively limited size of the federal administration, which facilitated the use of informal channels. Information flows were more intensive at lower than at higher levels of the hierarchy, but in many cases information was still rather random, ad hoc and strongly dependent on personal connections between the actors involved. In addition to the informal exchange of information, it is necessary, therefore, to systematically strengthen inter-departmental coordination at operational level. Coherence at this level is best ensured through horizontal, project-specific coordination and through setting common goals which the actors are committed to. The main emphasis is to be put on early coordination of all the departments involved in activities concerning one particular region or country. In order to coordinate these activities, the administration can take advantage of the various existing inter-departmental committees.

- Promotion of Inter-departmental Careers

One of the few structural characteristics promoting coherence at inter-policy level was the fact that many of the key actors had been working for different departments during their career in the civil service. First, these actors tended to have a better understanding for and awareness of the interests and concerns of other administrative units and departments with respect to foreign policy. Second, inter-departmental careers seemed to facilitate the informal exchange of information between different units within the administration. Finally, actors who had made an inter-departmental career were more likely to take into account the perspectives of the different administrative units when making their own decisions, thus contributing to more congruent interpretations of specific situations. Therefore, it seems to make sense to take measures in order to strengthen inter-departmental careers in the area of foreign policy. Such measures could, for example, include the creation of interdepartmental internship programmes for those entering the civil service and of exchange programmes between different administrative units for civil servants at a later point in their career.

- Evaluation of the Ordinance Concerning the Organisation of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

The Federal Council came in for criticism because of the lack of coherence in Swiss foreign policy. This is why recently measures to improve coherence have been introduced, such as the strengthening of the coordination function of the Federal Department of Foreign affairs.

On 29 March 2000, the Federal Council issued an ordinance concerning the organisation of this latter department, which states that the Department of Foreign Affairs has to collaborate closely with the other departments and administrative units and to coordinate their activities in order to ensure coherence in Switzerland's foreign policy. However, it remains uncertain whether the measures contained in the ordinance have actually been implemented. This is why a systematic evaluation of the organisational ordinance seems necessary in order to determine and subsequently introduce appropriate steps for improvement and learning processes. To ensure foreign policy coherence, the administrative units and the coordinative bodies ought to be obliged to evaluate their activities and to report regularly to the Federal Council. Furthermore, if necessary, an external evaluation of the organisational ordinance is to be considered.