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**Developing a Contextually Relevant Concept of  
Regional Hegemony:  
The Case of South Africa, Zimbabwe and  
“Quiet Diplomacy”**

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## **Developing a Contextually Relevant Concept of Regional Hegemony: The Case of South Africa, Zimbabwe and “Quiet Diplomacy”**

### **Abstract**

South Africa's "quiet diplomacy" has been often used to reject the notion of South African leadership or regional hegemony in southern Africa. This article finds that this evaluation is founded on a misguided understanding of regional hegemony, which is based on conventional hegemony theories that are mostly derived from the global role of the United States after World War II. Alternatively, this article uses a concept of hegemony that, for example, takes into account the "regionality" of South Africa's hegemony, which both allows external actors to impact on regional relations and allows South Africa to pursue its foreign policy goals on the global level of international politics. This concept helps to systematically analyze South Africa's foreign policy in the Zimbabwean crisis and to better integrate this policy into the broader framework of its regional and global ambitions.

Keywords: regional powers, hegemony, South Africa, Zimbabwe, quiet diplomacy

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Entwicklung eines kontextbezogenen Konzeptes von Regionalhegemonie: Südafrika, Simbabwe und die „stille Diplomatie“**

Die Idee südafrikanischer Hegemonie wird häufig mit dem Hinweis darauf abgelehnt, dass Präsident Mbekis „stille Diplomatie“ gegenüber Simbabwe gescheitert sei. In diesem Beitrag wird im Gegensatz dazu argumentiert, dass eine solche Ablehnung hauptsächlich auf einem Missverständnis des Konzeptes von Regionalhegemonie beruht. Das Konzept wird gewöhnlich im Sinne konventioneller Auffassungen von Hegemonie verwendet, die fast ausschließlich von globaler, US-amerikanischer Hegemonie abgeleitet wurden. Dies vernachlässigt, dass Südafrikas Hegemonie auf regionaler Ebene stattfindet, was beispielsweise externen Akteuren per Definition erlaubt, Einfluss auf die Region zu nehmen. Südafrika kann ebenfalls nicht nur auf der regionalen Ebene agieren, sondern außenpolitische Ziele auch auf der globalen Ebene verfolgen. Werden diese und andere Faktoren einbezogen, kann dies hilfreich sein, um die südafrikanische Politik gegenüber Simbabwe im Gesamtzusammenhang von Südafrikas regionalen und globalen Ambitionen systematisch zu analysieren.

# Developing a Contextually Relevant Concept of Regional Hegemony: The Case of South Africa, Zimbabwe and “Quiet Diplomacy”

Miriam Prys

## Article Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Reconceptualizing Regional Hegemony
- 3 South Africa’s Zimbabwe Policy
- 4 Conclusion

## 1 Introduction

The end of systemic bipolarity and, thus, of superpower overlay in various regions of the world has sparked a debate about the role of these regions and their core powers in the new, unipolar order.<sup>1</sup> Regional powers have been studied both as facilitators of and obstacles to regional institutionalization, and their role as middle or emerging powers in global governance and international institutions has been discussed (Pedersen: 2002).<sup>2</sup> Other research has looked more closely at the regional level and discussed the subsystemic emergence and maintenance of “security complexes” dominated by one state (Buzan and Waever: 2003, Lake: 1997). Despite these and manifold previous debates, theories and concepts that are tied to the regional level of analysis are nevertheless in short supply. While, for instance, the idea of “regional hegemony” is frequently used to analyze or describe the roles and behavior of states such as South Africa or Brazil, the literature has largely failed to properly incorporate “the region” into the concept of hegemony.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Louise Fawcett, Dr. Gero Erdmann, and the members of the Regional Powers Network at the GIGA German Institute for Global and Area Studies for their useful, constructive comments.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of different approaches and projects see: Detlef Nolte, *Macht und Machthierarchien in den Internationalen Beziehungen: Ein Analysekonzept für die Forschung über regionale Führungsmächte*. GIGA Working Paper No. 9 (Hamburg: GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2006).

This article argues that this is among the key reasons that states categorized as regional hegemons often do not act according to what is generally expected from them: they do not provide public goods, such as order and stability, nor do they have an extraordinary impact on the behavior of other states in their region. States such as South Africa that are preponderant across a vast range of indicators within their regions—southern Africa in the case of South Africa—frequently seem to struggle to transform these advantages into actual influence.<sup>3</sup> Chris Alden and Mills Soko wonder, for instance, about the paradox of South Africa's "singular failure in the case of the management of the Zimbabwean crisis" to achieve some of the key objectives attributed to hegemons (Alden and Soko 2005: 388). Across the literature we find that regional powers are a bit of a "let-down" and that the concept of regional hegemony in particular is often rejected (Adekeye and Landsberg 2002, Mitra 2003, Naidu 2003, Alden and Schoeman 2003, Emmers 2005).

This article looks at regional hegemony and the ambivalence of the foreign policy of potential regional hegemons through the prism of South Africa's Zimbabwe policy. Hegemony is preferred over other terms as it encompasses a particular power constellation in hierarchical systems which is qualitatively different from leadership and is not included in the terms "regional great power," "emerging regional power," or others. Moreover, the concept is in fact commonly used in contemporary analyses of regional relations and thus needs to be better understood to be of any value. In the earlier stages of the discipline of international relations the term was in fact used to describe a certain type of big state–small state relationship, across different levels of analysis and even referring to bilateral relations, rather than being applicable to the United States only (Triepel 1938, Perlman 1991).

While this article will thus contribute empirically to a better understanding of South Africa's Zimbabwe policy, its core interest is a conceptual one. First, a conceptual tool will be provided to make more sense of the ambiguous situation in which South Africa, as a regional hegemon, finds itself. The key addition is that the proposed conceptualization of regional hegemony takes into account the embeddedness of regions and, thus, of the regional hegemon in the international system, which has a significant impact on how regional hegemons can exercise their power and to what extent they have an impact on the region. Definitions of regional hegemony are offered in the literature. For instance, Myers defines regional hegemons as "states which possess sufficient power to dominate subordinate state systems."<sup>4</sup> His publication is based on a realist approach, which neglects both the internal workings of such a regional order and as-

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<sup>3</sup> Southern Africa, as defined through membership in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), is the reference region. Only in southern Africa does South Africa have a unique material advantage; no second or third competitor in terms of size of population and GDP is present. Southern Africa also has a distinctive regional organization and a dense, historically based network of transport and other infrastructure as well as patterns of migration that extend within the boundaries of the region. Gretchen Bauer and Scott D. Taylor, *Politics in Southern Africa: State and Society in Transition* (Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 5; Larry W. Bowman, The Subordinate State System of Southern Africa, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 12, No. 3 (1968).

<sup>4</sup> David J. Myers, ed., *Regional Hegemons: Threat Perception and Strategic Response* (Boulder: Westview, 1991), 3.

pects such as acceptance, followership and the role of ideas, which are central to most other understandings of hegemony. No differentiation is made between regional and global hegemony, and no particular rules for hegemony on the regional level are developed. Colin Elman and John Mearsheimer understand regional hegemony as a second best to unachievable global hegemony and define it as "dominance of the area in which the great power is located."<sup>5</sup> According to their offensive realist view, there can only be one regional hegemon in the world at any time. The regional level of analysis in itself is, as in most neorealist thinking, insignificant. This paper argues that regional hegemons play a dual role at the nexus of regional and global politics and thus have to accomplish (at least) two main tasks: the exclusion of external actors from their "sphere of influence" as well as the accommodation of the same actors in order to achieve both their global and regional foreign policy goals. Before introducing the notion of embeddedness, the article will, as a second contribution, operationalize hegemony in a way that makes it applicable to very concrete cases and situations. While, without doubt, the notion of hegemony has been widely discussed, also in terms of its regional adaptation, most definitions remain abstract, referring to the condition or shape of the system as a whole rather than the concrete consequences for the actors' foreign policy or the relations between two or more states.<sup>6</sup> In essence, the aim here is to show that an inappropriate application of general hegemony theories has led to misdirected expectations of what regional powers, in the developing world in general and South Africa in particular, can and want to achieve within their regions. By taking a deliberately regional approach, this article will suggest how South Africa's policies in response to the Zimbabwean crisis correspond to what we should expect from a regional hegemon.

## 2 Reconceptualizing Regional Hegemony

At the core of this "reconceptualization" of regional hegemony lies the pragmatic focus on commonalities among the many different definitions and theories of hegemony (Prys 2008, Joseph 2008, Rapkin 1990).<sup>7</sup> First, hegemony is mostly regarded as an outflow of relative superior material power—in terms of the economy and the military—on the global level of international politics or, regionally, in a geographically limited area of the world. Second, he-

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<sup>5</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Colin Elman, Extending Offensive Realism. The Louisiana Purchase and America's Rise to Regional Hegemony, in: *American Political Science Review* 98, No. 4 (2004).

<sup>6</sup> While, for instance, Jonathan Joseph identifies the problem, his approach is not particularly amenable to concrete empirical studies of specific events. Jonathan Joseph, Hegemony and the Structure-Agency Problem in International Relations: A Scientific Realist Contribution, in: *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008): 122 ff.

<sup>7</sup> While there is much eclecticism in the debates about hegemony, we find that on most levels the different notions of hegemony are not as incommensurable as often thought. The underlying idea of the commensurability of different definitions and concepts has been influenced by Colin Wight, Incommensurability and Cross-Paradigm Communication in International Relations Theory: 'What's the Frequency, Kenneth?', in: *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 25, No. 2 (1996) and Gary Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

gemony is understood as a political order in which one way of thinking, the most powerful one, dominates, thus minimizing coercion (Joseph 2008: 109, Showstack Sassoon 1982: 94) This article proposes that the three dimensions of "perception," "projection," and "provision" adequately describe what differentiates a hegemonic relationship from other forms of hierarchical power relations, such as domination or imperialism. These three dimensions are necessary and, in combination with the anterior condition of material preponderance, jointly sufficient for constituting hegemony.<sup>8</sup> Some amendments, however, have to be made to capture the regional perspective on hegemony. We have to, for instance, consider that *regional* public goods might not always correspond to typically hegemonic *global* public goods such as the provision of free trade and economic stability.<sup>9</sup> The picture is further complicated by the fact that regional systems are by definition open, politically contingent systems that are embedded in the larger global system. Their borders are permeable for both internal and external actors, which has consequences for both the concept and the actual exercise of regional hegemony. The article therefore includes a discussion of the consequences of the regionality of hegemony in its conceptualization of regional hegemony.

## 2.1 Perceptions

The dimension of perceptions includes both the self-perception of the regional hegemon and the perceptions of the respective secondary powers of the region. Most conceptualizations of hegemony take it for granted that in order for a state to be hegemonic it needs to possess the political willingness to be so; they do not take into account, for example, the limits within which this willingness can be explicitly addressed by the regional power. More importantly, a focus on "willingness" forces us to simply assume an active pursuit of a hegemonic role by definition, which does not leave room for the possibility that a regional power is pushed into assuming a hegemonic role by external actors, particularly in the post-cold war period where the absence of superpower rivalry has left a "power vacuum" in many regions of the world (Myers 1990: 3). Rather than an explicit formulation of a willingness to lead, we will look at the self-conception of the regional hegemons. This means that while on the one hand we acknowledge that a certain readiness and capacity to carry the "burdens of hegemony" has to present, we recognize this does not have to go hand in hand with explicit plans, strategies, or ambitions for regional leadership. In the case of India, for example, one can argue that the regional predominance is regarded as a burden, yet the Indian government is still aware of its outstanding resources in comparison to its smaller neighbors and is prepared to act upon it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Empirically, the boundaries between "projection" and "perception" are partially blurred. As they are fundamentally different features of hegemony, however, they need to be kept analytically separate.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Kindleberger's view on this is characteristic, see, among many others, Charles Kindleberger, International Public Goods without International Government, in: *American Economic Review* 76, No. 1 (1986).

<sup>10</sup> The neighboring countries are the main recipients of Indian development assistance. Garth Price, *Diversity in Donorship: The Changing Landscape of Official Humanitarian Aid. India's Official Aid Programme* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2005), 6. India has financed much of the infrastructure such as roads and rail-

In contrast, this discussion looks at references to "special responsibilities" (Holsti 1970: 261): an emphasis on the country's own unique historic or other experiences or, in other words, a sense of exceptionalism, particularly in comparison with the neighboring states (Lipset 1996: 18). For this purpose, interviews were carried out with experts, political commentators, and government officials during a field trip to South Africa in 2006.<sup>11</sup> The speeches, interviews, and statements have been selected taking into account both South Africa's general self-conceptions and the more specific role accounts with regard to its Zimbabwe policy. All sections in which reference is made to the role of South Africa have been analyzed.<sup>12</sup> The case-specific role conceptions are interpreted with the help of the more general role conceptions from sources such as the constitution, official defense or foreign policy papers, or the annual reports of the relevant ministries.

Most theories of hegemony assume that there is no hegemony without "followership." Cooper and Higgott define followership as an "intertwining of the followers" interests with those of a leader, which means that "these followers are likely not simply to defer and acquiesce to the leader, but to willingly follow" (Cooper/Higgott/Nossall 1991: 397-8). Yet, this needs to be put into perspective. In general, states are hesitant to "joyfully embrace" the lead of others (Triepel 1938: 144-5). Most of the time, the acceptance of a hegemon is founded on utility or necessity and, above all, on the secondary states' realization of their own weaknesses. Consent is not required from every single unit in the system. Resistance to or fear and suspicion of the materially privileged state, both of which are often historically anchored, are features in many hierarchically ordered regions. With this in mind, we find that "regional acceptance" of the hegemon's special role and the consequential demands on it to

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ways in Nepal and continues to do so through community-level grants provided through the Indian Embassy in Nepal. Priyanka Singh, India-Nepal Relations: Rickety Roadmap, in: *World Focus* 317, No. 27 (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Twelve officials from the South African Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and the Presidency have been interviewed. Interviews with 15 experts and scholars, three of whom were formerly employed by the government and a majority of whom are regularly consulted by government, have also been carried out, as well as interviews with one journalist and two business lobbyists. Anonymity for all interviewees has been guaranteed. Other resources such as government documents and statements, newspaper articles, interviews, and secondary literature on both states and the regions have also been analyzed. I also had, somewhat limited, access to the archives of the DFA, particularly with regard to documents on Zimbabwe from the 1990s. Further, research institutes with large collections of newspaper clippings, grey literature, and other primary resources have also been consulted. This material has been complemented by extensive use of the online portal of the South African government ([www.info.gov.za](http://www.info.gov.za)), which contains press releases, speeches, and statements of members of the South African government dating back to the late 1990s, as well as Questions in Parliament answered by government officials. For methodological guidance, see Deborah W. Larson, Research Note: Problems of Content Analysis in Foreign-Policy Research. Notes from the Study of the Origin of Cold War Belief Systems, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 32, No. 2 (1988). To infer the interviewees' or speakers' actual beliefs and perceptions, Larson suggests combining more spontaneous, less influenced speeches and statements, such as interviews and parliamentary debates, with speeches for which the context, audience and goals of the given situation have to be considered. Also: M.D. Young and Mark Schafer, Is There Method in Our Madness? Ways of Assessing Cognition in International Relations, in: *The International Studies Review* 42, No. 1 (1998).

<sup>12</sup> This analysis has been assisted by the QSR N6 software for qualitative data analysis. Cf. Udo Kelle, Computer-Assisted Analysis: Coding and Indexing, in: *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*, edited by Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (London: Sage, 2000).

act in accordance with that role are more appropriate and empirically observable features of regional hegemony, particularly if we take into account that secondary states could also decide to "balance" or contain the regional power with the help of outsiders (Ayoob 1999: 251-2). Indicators for level of acceptance are, for instance, the acceptance of help from the regional hegemon by the secondary state rather than from extra-regional actors, and also the demands on the regional power to take on more responsibility, particularly in financial and administrative issues. On the societal level, regional hegemons often have an appeal in terms of cultural products and educational institutions. Methodologically, these perceptions will also be assessed through an analysis of the speeches and statements of regional governmental leaders and other relevant primary and secondary resources.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Projection

The projection of values and interests, rather than their imposition, is another defining feature of regional hegemony. Projection is generally associated with a process of "socialization." The study of the socialization of the secondary states into accepting the values and rules of the hegemon as the "right thing to do" is challenged by two factors (Checkel 2005: 804). First, socialization is, above all, a long-term process, which is not always deliberate but rather "happens" over time, whether stimulated by an underlying, deliberate strategy or by a series of unintentional consequences. Second, what we generally perceive as socialization is a very difficult, little understood, and under-studied subject. Most studies that apply theories of socialization in the realm of international politics are informed by a constructivist research program which often tends to neglect the more power-political aspects of the change in substantive beliefs, the key factor in hegemonic socialization. Ikenberry and Kupchan assume that the best and probably only way to go about "measuring" hegemonic socialization is through a "nuanced reading of history and efforts to infer beliefs from statements and behaviours" (Ikenberry/Kupchan 1990: 294).

This is not feasible for a study of contemporary events. Instead, this paper proposes to assess hegemonic projection by focusing on the specific activities of the hegemon that promote its own vision and values for the region, such as the establishment of institutions and agenda-setting within those institutions; mediation of conflicts; and financial assistance and, if relevant, the conditions attached to it. A more immediate form of value projection is the direct construction of a similar political system in the secondary states.<sup>14</sup> The advantage of focusing

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<sup>13</sup> While extended travels to other southern African countries were not part of this research, I have, for instance, met a few southern Africans residing and working in South Africa. In addition, secondary resources will be drawn upon in assessing the perception of and the demands on South Africa by its neighbors (see n.18 above).

<sup>14</sup> This procedure does not elaborate on the mechanism underlying the projection of values and the conditions for success. For more, Ikenberry and Kupchan's extensive work on hegemonic socialization is illustrative. G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, Socialization and Hegemonic Power, in: *International Organization* 44, No. 3 (1990); John G. Ikenberry, The Future of International Leadership, in: *Political Science Quarterly* 111,

on projection rather than socialization is that we can assess the hegemonic qualities of a specific interaction in a specific situation. While this, obviously, breaks hegemony down into a matter of singular events, it seems to be the only way to study the consequences of hegemony in particular cases, such as South Africa's Zimbabwe policy. Projection will be assessed in two steps. The discussion will first look at the more concrete interests of South Africa with regard to the Zimbabwean crisis; second, it will evaluate whether attempts have been made to project these interests not only on Zimbabwe but also on the other South African Development Community (SADC) members.

### 2.3 Provision

Lastly, hegemony, whether regional or global, is differentiated from other forms of hierarchical power relations by a unilateral provision of public goods. Conventional theories of hegemony associate very specific goods with a hegemonic order, such as an open trading system and the maintenance of a structure of exchange rates, and expect the hegemon to serve as a "lender of last resort" (Kindleberger 1986: 841). The goods that regional hegemons provide may be very different and context specific, which means that the criteria of nonexclusiveness and nonrivalry, which are the defining features of a public good, must be applied at this level without a preconception of what specific types of goods might be provided.<sup>15</sup> Also, while, for instance, the theory of hegemonic stability links political willingness with a quasi-automatic production of public goods, public goods provision should be seen and assessed independently from perception and projection. Regional hegemons might also be pressured into providing these goods, by inside or outside actors, while being unwilling to do so. These goods might, for instance, include the provision of a regional identity, or a hub for identification and solidarity, but they could also include more concrete examples such as the creation of consensus over a course of action, the provision of transport and infrastructure or of regional security through enhanced military capacity, or other ways of enabling regional and domestic stability and economic progress (Ferroni 1999). Mere financial assistance will, however, be discussed in the dimension of projection as it is exclusive, rival, and often conditional.

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No. 3 (1996); John G. Ikenberry, Institutions, Strategic Restraints, and the Persistence of American Hegemony, in: *International Security* 23, No. 3 (1998).

<sup>15</sup> There can also be "impure" public goods that only partly meet the criteria of nonexclusiveness and nonrivalry. However, "this expanded conception of public goods is widely accepted in the literature." Patrik Stalgren, *Regional Public Goods and the Future of International Development Co-Operation. A Review of the Literature on Regional Public Goods*, Working Paper 2000: 2 (Stockholm: Expert Group on Development Issues, 2000), 9.

## 2.4 The Regionality of Hegemony—the Outside-in and Inside-out Dimensions

The embeddedness of regions in the international system has an important impact on how regional hegemony exercise their power.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, this is an issue with which regional hegemony around the world are confronted. Nevertheless, it has remained surprisingly absent in the literature on regions and regional power. Embeddedness can offer both opportunities and constraints to the regional power's hegemonic position. First of all, it suggests a two-way dynamic in which we have to consider not only external actors' impact on the region, but also the attempts of regional powers, for instance, to use their regional predominance as a stepping-stone to a broader global role while simultaneously trying to fend off external intrusion into their own region. Regional hegemony thus pursue their foreign policy goals on both the regional and the global level, with the strategic requirements for each level at times contradicting each other.

With regard to outsiders' influence on regional hegemony, the idea of systemic pressure and superpower overlay has certainly played an important role in realist theories and, for instance, in regional security complex approaches (Buzan and Waever 2003: 61). The central example of the impact of these pressures is the containment of the regional power by a great power through the support and economic and/or military backing of the regional power's main competitor in the region (Ibid.: 46-7). This article takes, however, a broader perspective on the *outside-in dimension* of regional hegemony or, in other words, on the impact that the global level can have on regional dynamics. External actors, including states and international organizations, can also lend support to the regional hegemon, by acknowledging its special position, by providing privileged access to global multilateral institutions, or by raising expectations on the regional hegemon to take care of its own backyard. This global support has multiple effects on the regional hegemon's capacities. On the one hand, privileged access to the "global playing field" can allow the regional hegemon to influence decision making that will affect the region. On the other hand, treatment as representative or as natural regional leader by external actors can also impact negatively on regional relations, for example, by arousing jealousy and suspicion (Alden/Vieira 2005: 1081).

The *inside-out dimension* encompasses the way in which the regional power itself deals with its embeddedness and how it relates to the global level. The regional hegemon has, in principle, two key options. First, it can use the region as a "stepping stone." In this case, it will likely try to use its regional predominance as a springboard for a broader global role, for instance, by presenting itself as the representative of a specific region of the world and thus as a potential member of the UN Security Council. These global ambitions, again, can have a

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<sup>16</sup> The term embeddedness is borrowed from systems theory and refers to the status of an actor or a subsystem nested within another system. It is sometimes discussed with respect to the EU's embeddedness in the international system when looking at the effects of international systemic pressures on the institutions of the EU. Michèle Knodt, International Embeddedness of European Multi-Level Governance, in: *Journal of European Public Policy* 11, No. 4 (2004).

corrupting effect on the predominant role of the regional hegemon and its perceived, desired, or factual leadership in the region (Zimmermann 1972: 19). The second, and potentially contrary, option is an emphasis on the boundaries of the region in an effort to differentiate and "gatekeep" the region in order to ensure the regional hegemon's role as the *primus* and to strengthen its exclusive influence on its neighborhood. In previous studies of regional hegemony in southern Africa or elsewhere in the developing world, it has been widely overlooked that these multiple interconnections exist and create constraints and opportunities that differentiate regional hegemony from hegemony at the global level.

### 3 South Africa's Zimbabwe Policy

The Zimbabwean "crisis" has been the poster case for many scholars aiming to show how little influence South Africa has in southern Africa and how easily it was "snubbed off" by the resilient President Mugabe of Zimbabwe (Alden/Schoeman 2003, van Wyk 2002).<sup>17</sup> The downward spiraling of Zimbabwe's economy, rising political violence, and rapidly decreasing standards of living, as well as the failure of President Mbeki of South Africa to meet international expectations that he would play the role of a "point man" on Zimbabwe, are drawn upon to contest South Africa's regional leadership and, more specifically, regional hegemony (Adekeye/Landsberg 2003: 1-2). The period between 2000 and 2005 has been vital for the developments in Zimbabwe and, thus, South Africa's Zimbabwe policy. In 2000, illegal and violent farm occupations occurred and remained largely uncharged. Western governments began to withdraw economic aid over continuous rights abuses as well as Mugabe's land policy, and the Zimbabwean government became more and more isolated. Over the next few years, political repression of opposition forces, labor union leaders, and journalists increased. In March 2002, Mugabe was reelected in the presidential elections, which were condemned as seriously flawed by Commonwealth observers. The year 2005 saw another contentious victory of the leading Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in parliamentary elections. This crisis of human rights, the rule of law, freedom of the media, and democracy has damaged South Africa's international "good name," and many claim that South Africa, with its material power advantages in the southern African region, has failed Zimbabwe. South Africa is accused of having "undermined any speedy resolution of the problem" by basing its diplomacy on a "public excusing of Mugabe's human rights record" (Taylor 2002: 345). At the center of the international criticism of South Africa's approach towards Zimbabwe is its "quiet diplomacy."<sup>18</sup> Quiet diplomacy is defined as a combination of measures that in-

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<sup>17</sup> For more details on the developments in Zimbabwe: Rok Ajulu, Zimbabwe at the Crossroads—What Next?, in: *Global Insights* 12 (2001); Linda Freeman, South Africa's Zimbabwe Policy: Unravelling the Contradictions, in: *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23, No. 2 (2005).

<sup>18</sup> At first, the term quiet/silent diplomacy was embraced by the South African government: "The President engages the President of Zimbabwe in silent diplomacy and any public pronouncements on the detail of discussions might be counterproductive." South African National Assembly, Parliamentary Question No. 618 for

clude behind the scene engagements, secret negotiations, and subtle coaxing (Dlamini 2001: 171). In the case of South Africa and Zimbabwe, this refers, for example, to a series of bilateral meetings between the presidents and senior officials, South Africa's defense of Zimbabwe from criticism in international organizations, the endorsement of questionable election results, and the provision of a "lifeline" in terms of financial and energy resources. The stated goal of these policies is to facilitate change within Zimbabwe by the Zimbabweans themselves rather than imposing it from the outside. Yet, as this policy is by its nature not a public procedure, it has often been perceived as an excuse for inaction in the face of a looming crisis (Taylor 2002: 345).

Thus, the main question which arises is why South Africa has used quiet diplomacy in a situation in which, apparently, the values of democracy and human rights were threatened and it risked the loss of reputation at the international level. Various answers have been suggested, among them the historical ties between the two liberation movements, the African National Congress (ANC) and Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF, and President Robert Mugabe's untouchable status as a liberation hero in all of the southern African countries. Others argue that the ANC is suspicious of labor movements such as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), being faced with factional struggles within the ANC itself as well as within the coalition government of South Africa.<sup>19</sup> McKinley finds that South Africa is busy "securing the economic [...] interests of an emergent black South African bourgeoisie," which benefits hugely from rescue packages extended to its Zimbabwean counterparts (McKinley 2004: 362). This article will show that, while all of these points have some explanatory value, we can gain a clearer and more compelling picture of the situation by applying a reconceptualized notion of regional hegemony.

### 3.1 Perception: Self-perception—Exceptionalism and Responsibility

In this section, I consider the self-perception of South Africa's foreign-policy makers with respect to their role in the Zimbabwean crisis. Interviews, official documents, and statements have been used to deduce the extent to which South Africa's self-positioning conforms to this paper's notion of regional hegemony, including the acknowledgment of its special position in the region and a sense of exceptionalism.<sup>20</sup> Overall, one can find a division on the rhetorical level between the emphasis on the role as an "equal partner" in southern Africa and

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Written Reply, 15 May (Cape Town: 2000). Yet, after 2001, this was turned around: "SA has never pursued either so-called 'silent' or 'quiet' diplomacy [...] [it] is a creation of the media." South African National Assembly, *Parliamentary Question No. 6 to the President of the Republic, 30 May 2001* (Cape Town: 2001).

<sup>19</sup> For a more extensive summary of alternative explanations of quiet diplomacy see: Freeman, SA's Zimbabwe Policy, Wilfred Mhanda, Relations among Liberation Movements: SA and Zimbabwe, in: *South Africa Yearbook of International Affairs 2002/03* (SAIIA, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> This section focuses on the perceptions of and opinions on the topic that are prevalent among the majority of interviews, statements and documents. The combination of different sources, both spontaneous and official ones, ensures, to the greatest possible extent, a certain verifiability. Specific quotes have been picked according to how well they represented the tone of the discourse on self-perception in South Africa (see n.18 above).

the embracing of the country's obvious material preponderance by the political leadership. As a general rule, however, the self-conception as the responsible and unique actor prevails in key documents of the South African government.<sup>21</sup> This type of self-perception is also reflected in the country's various initiatives in southern Africa and Africa, for instance, the reform of SADC, the establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Renaissance program, and the restructuring of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union (AU) (Akopari 2004, Kajee 2004, Geldenhuys 2006, DFA 2001). None of the interviewees has denied either the material preponderance of South Africa in its region or the responsibility that comes with it, both with respect to Zimbabwe and with regard to its long-term position in the region. This view was recently reiterated in The Pew Global Attitudes Project's *Global Opinion Trends 2002–2007*, in which 25 percent of South Africans named South Africa as the most trusted actor to solve Africa's problems.<sup>22</sup> Yet, what this "responsibility" means in specific terms is unclear or even contested.

One of the core concerns of South Africa's international self-positioning is the pursuit of broadly defined human rights (ANC 1994). This pursuit is directly linked to the worldwide promotion of democracy, the adherence to international law, and the support of peace and disarmament initiatives (DFA 1999, Government of South Africa 1994). The promotion of democracy and human rights are central ambitions that are reflected in all outlines of South Africa's foreign policy doctrines such as the White Paper on South African Participation in International Peacekeeping Missions and Nelson Mandela's early outline of the ANC's foreign policy in 1993 (Mandela 1993, DFA 1999). Yet, this broad self-perception as a "good international citizen" is sometimes contradicted by South Africa's ambition to be a "good regional citizen" when principles of human rights and democracy clash with South Africa's ambition to place the "concerns and interest of the continent of Africa" at the forefront of its foreign policy choices (Mandela 1993: 87).

With respect to South Africa's self-positioning in the Zimbabwean case, these contradictory stances are again reflected in its demeanor as, on the one hand, a responsible actor that mediates between the West and southern Africa and, on the other hand, as a genuinely African state that opposes external interference in African or southern African affairs. Both conceptualizations of its own role have in common, however, a sense of South Africa's unique position to influence events in southern Africa in general and in Zimbabwe in particular which is present and consistent across time and mediums. Claims such as "South Africa must do all it can to act in the best long-term interest of the people of Zimbabwe and the SADC re-

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<sup>21</sup> For example: ANC, *Foreign Policy Perspective in a Democratic South Africa* (Pretoria: 1994); Department of Defence, *South African Defence Review* (Pretoria: Department of Defence, 1998); Department of Foreign Affairs, *White Paper on South African Participation in International Peace Missions* (Pretoria: 1999); Department of Foreign Affairs, *Strategic Plan: 2002-2005* (Pretoria: 2001); Department of Foreign Affairs, *Strategic Plan: 2005-2008* (Pretoria: 2004); Nelson Mandela, South Africa's Future Foreign Policy, in: *Foreign Affairs* 72, No. 5 (1993).

<sup>22</sup> The United Nations came second with 23 percent and the United States third with 21 percent. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Global Opinion Trends 2002-2007: A Rising Tide Lifts Mood in the Developing World*, edited by Pew Research Centre (Washington: Pew Research Centre, 2007), 70.

gion" are common (Government Communication and Information System 2002, Pahad 2002). This article argues that, particularly in more spontaneous statements, we can find strong evidence of a sense of responsibility that is tied to South Africa's material advantages and its historical burden rather than to its commitment to universal human rights.

We have all sorts of [national] problem, which we must attend to. But we are better than many African countries. And I think we should not be begrudging in saying: "Let's share a little bit of what we have", to assist with regard to the development of the rest of the continent. And it is a challenge we have got to meet (Mbeki 2003).

This view also prevails when the potential influence of global actors that, according to most government officials, do not understand the situation in Zimbabwe as South Africa does is taken into account. Until recently, the South African government rejected the view that its Zimbabwe policy had failed and instead complained that its critics themselves had so far been unsuccessful in furthering a viable alternative (Pahad 2003).<sup>23</sup>

South Africa's role conception as an "African state" can be linked to its struggle with its own identity, and its continuous attempts to gain acceptance among its neighbors. This was vividly reflected in its troublesome interactions with Nigeria in 1995/96 (Black 2003: 51, Peters-Berries 2002: 185). This episode of South African diplomacy has shaped the government's self-positioning and foreign policy making with regard to the Zimbabwean crisis over the past few years. Multilateralism and consensus building are emphasized as the norm of "African solidarity" is upheld.<sup>24</sup> Thus, South Africa is trying to do things the "African way," which, according to Foreign Minister Dlamini-Zuma implies with regard to Zimbabwe that "if your neighbour's house is on fire, you don't slap the child who started it. You help them to put out the fire."<sup>25</sup> Being an African state also means taking particularly strong stances with regard to racism and "neocolonialism" by the West, particularly as problems with the rule of law, human rights and electoral fraud are neglected in countries like Swaziland and Malawi where a white majority is not among the perceived victims.<sup>26</sup> While the literature and some South African scholars emphasize that Mugabe has "instrumentalized race, and people in South Africa have bought it,"<sup>27</sup> we can find that, in fact, many ANC leaders and members of the South African government assume "anti-Western" positions when it comes to Zimbabwe.

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<sup>23</sup> A strong view on this was also expressed in an interview with a government official at the DFA, Pretoria, August 14, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Maxi van Aardt describes this norm as "unwritten law [...] that African states do not turn on each other in international fora, such as the UN, but close ranks when attacks are made against them." Maxi van Aardt, A Foreign Policy to Die For: South Africa's Response to the Nigerian Crisis, in: *Africa Insight* 26, No. 2 (1996): 115.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in: Victoria Graham, How Firm the Handshake? South Africa's Use of Quiet Diplomacy in Zimbabwe from 1999 to 2006, in: *African Security Review* 15, No. 4 (2006): 120.

<sup>26</sup> Interviews with government officials, Pretoria, August 2, 2006, and with ex-diplomat, Johannesburg, July 6, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Expert interview, Johannesburg, July 24, 2006.

In sum, the contradiction between the requirements of being an "African state" and being a "norm-conforming, responsible state" seems to be among the key reasons for South Africa's moderation and its insistence that Zimbabwe's domestic problems need to be solved by Zimbabweans themselves.<sup>28</sup> The following statement is representative:

Even when a head of state or a country is violating human rights and violating all the values that SADC stands for, you are not able to reprimand that head of state [...] you have to practically balance certain things. South Africa cannot afford to be aggressive as in telling other heads of state where to get off. That would be disastrous by the mere fact of us being relatively powerful and provoke anger and jealousy among the other states, and we would actually create more problems than solve problems.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, the frequent verbal rejections of a leadership role do not necessarily negate South African regional hegemony. Rather, a "strategy of denial" is adopted. This requires, on the one hand, the emphasis on partnership, sovereignty, and African solidarity. On the other hand, South Africa ensures that it significantly influences the terms of engagement in the case of Zimbabwe by playing the key role in all aspects of regional and international dealings with the crisis.

South Africa uses its power in more subtle ways [...] the dominant thing we do is that on the one hand we want to build partnerships and on the other we subtly want to be in charge of these partnerships.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 Perception: the Regional Level of Acceptance

South Africa's status as the regional power is, at least in material terms, undeniable, and its neighboring states have to position themselves in a particular way towards this hub in their midst. What differentiates hegemony from domination and force is a certain level of acceptance of that power. This can, on the societal level, take the form of attraction to some of the hegemon's attributes, such as its political system, its social structure, and/or its wealth. This is particularly the case for many Zimbabweans. Millions of them are currently seeking refuge in South Africa, a far greater number than in any other southern African country. South Africa might, arguably, simply be the best of many bad options; yet, hegemony is, above all, an expression of relative power advantages.

Seen from the north of the Limpopo River, South Africa is mesmerising. Its glittering skyscrapers, superhighways, vast, well-stocked shopping malls and leafy suburbs look like a veritable paradise, heaven on earth. For Africa's multitudes increasingly exposed to South Africa's opulence through the growing flood of South African soap operas, sitcoms and music videos, South Africa is the place to be (Mbeki 2004).

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with government official, Pretoria, July 31, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Expert interview, Johannesburg, July 18, 2006.

On the political level, we can again find a tension between resistance to and endorsement of South African leadership. Everywhere in the world, a drastic imbalance of powers such as that in southern Africa would create tension and jealousies, and southern African states – even a more “like-minded” state such as Botswana – have been at times eager to show their independence from Pretoria (Landsberg 2000: 115). South Africa’s role in the history of the region is of course an important factor in this scenario and is often a reason for South Africa’s caution in its interactions with its neighbors. Also, predominantly in the early post-apartheid years, South Africa caused a stir in neighboring countries with its calls for democratization and the rule of law, which often contradicted the rules and values of its more autocratic fellow SADC leaders. Further discord is created by demands for payback from South Africa’s neighboring states for the damage inflicted on them during their support of the ANC’s liberation struggle. Many states still feel that the ANC is indebted to its neighbors, and the southern African countries generally seem to object to being “lectured” by South Africa on democracy and the rule of law. Graham similarly comes to the conclusion that if the ANC government had threatened President Mugabe’s government with punitive measures, other regional states would have been furious (Graham 2006: 121, Makoa 2001: 48). This feeling is reinforced by the complaints about South Africa’s attitudes towards African and especially Zimbabwean immigrants and accusations of xenophobia.

At the same time, we can find that there is an implicit and, at times, explicit recognition of the potentially beneficial impact of South Africa in regional relations which is also reflected in calls by the leading figures of southern Africa upon South Africa to take up its responsibilities as a larger, more resourceful state. For instance, the former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere demanded at South Africa’s National Assembly that South Africa play a more active role on the continent. He dismissed fears of a Big Brother South Africa and stated that the country’s superior comparative power is a responsibility. The country should not hide behind false modesty as isolationism is often an excuse for selfishness (Fabricius 1997). We can, for example, deduce that with regard to common complaints about the recklessness of South African businesses in the neighboring states and the threat they are posing to local enterprises, at least some of these accusations are directed at domestic audiences, as, simultaneously, most southern African countries have at some point emphasized the importance of South African investment for their economies.<sup>31</sup>

Again, this general pattern is reflected in the neighbors’ reactions to South Africa’s leadership role. While rhetorical resistance exists, common statements at SADC summits show that South Africa’s leader status, both in terms of its engagements with President Mugabe and the MDC and in terms of representing SADC on the global level, is acknowledged among its neighboring states. Most SADC meetings have expressed clear-cut support for President Mugabe, pointing to neoimperialist tendencies on part of the West and expressing

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with South African business representatives, August 3 and 8, Johannesburg.

"serious concern on the continued foreign interference in the international affairs of [...] Zimbabwe which has embarked on an agrarian reform programme aimed at addressing the problem of poverty" (SADC 2002, 2003).<sup>32</sup> The *Times of Zambia* commented on April 4, 2005 that "Zimbabwe is neither a member of the EU nor a colony or province of the United States. It is a member of SADC and a neighbour of South Africa." The US and the EU should support President Mbeki's efforts rather than undermining them.

Two aspects stand out with respect to the regional level of acceptance of South African leadership in the Zimbabwean crisis. First, due to its economic decline, Zimbabwe is, and will increasingly be, in less and less of a position to reject South Africa's offers of both financial help, potentially linked to conditions, and mediation between the government and opposition forces. Second, neighboring states generally seem to recognize that they benefit not only from South African involvement in political negotiations with global-level actors but also, regionally, through investment by South African businesses. We can therefore conclude that a feeling of goodwill prevails rather than anti-South Africanism, despite the country's apartheid past. This conclusion has been affirmed in interviews with South African government officials.<sup>33</sup> An opinion poll has also shown that at least in Tanzania, a member of SADC, 73 percent of the population have favorable views of South Africa and 78 percent believe that President Mbeki makes the right decisions in world affairs (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2007: 71-2).

### 3.3 Projection

In the assessment of projection as a dimension of regional hegemony, we have to deduce, first, the relevant values and interests that South Africa might project; second, who is the target of this projection; and, third, whether or not projection has in fact taken place. An important source for understanding South Africa's interests and values is the perceived origins and reasons for the crisis in Zimbabwe. While external, Western actors focus on human rights violations, electoral fraud, and the breakdown of the rule of law, South Africa generally describes the problem as one of unequal land distribution and the failure of Great Britain to meet its postcolonial responsibilities. In addition, South Africa focuses on regional coherence and stability and the avoidance of a spillover of Zimbabwe's crisis into the rest of the region (Mbeki 2001). Internationally, South Africa has realized that its interests would be best served if the UK and Zimbabwe resolved their issues through negotiations and if Zimbabwe reestablished its relations with the international donor community, in particular the IMF and the World Bank (Botha 2004).

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<sup>32</sup> It has become clear that while the demeanor of SADC as a whole has been characterized by an emphasis on unity and consensus, the debates behind closed doors have apparently been more controversial. Direct pressure has been exerted on President Mugabe. At times some countries, in particular Botswana, have expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of progress. Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman, *The Hegemon That Wasn't: South Africa's Foreign Policy Towards Zimbabwe*, in: *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 25, No. 1 (2003).

<sup>33</sup> Interviews with government officials, Pretoria, July 27, July 31, August 8, and August 14.

The South African government has a plethora of potential measures and incentives at hand to influence the Zimbabwean government. On a few occasions it has used open criticism, such as in mid-2001 when it helped to defeat a motion of Libya's Head of State, Qaddafi, to back Zimbabwe during a meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (Peters-Berries 2002: 195). Also, South Africa formed part of the Commonwealth troika that decided to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth Council on March 20, 2002 after the Commonwealth observer team came to the conclusion that the presidential elections in Zimbabwe were not conducted in a fair and free manner. Another indicator that there is more going on than meets the eye is the arrest of an alleged South African intelligence agent in Zimbabwe in mid-January 2005. The spy was supposedly cultivating a "network of ZANU-PF MPs and officials" to prepare for a soft landing of the regime after the resignation or death of President Mugabe (IRIN News 2005).

These more coercive forms of dealing with Zimbabwe are, however, largely overshadowed by South Africa's engagement in quiet diplomacy. This involves, above all, nonpublic personal or direct diplomacy between the two heads of state or senior officials and "actively assisting the Zimbabwean government to overcome this situation" (National Assembly 2000). The South African government has attempted to facilitate communication between the MDC and the government and to encourage links with international financial institutions (Mbeki 2002). South Africa's attempt to project through a method of "constructive engagement" is exemplified by the negotiations between both South African and Zimbabwean finance ministers and central bank governors to negotiate an aid package of between US\$200 and US\$500 million, proposed by the South African government in August 2005. The package was conditional on a series of reforms and new elections. Even though Zimbabwe desperately needed financial assistance to repay its debts to the IMF, it rejected the money, arguing, "If South Africa wants to help us in good faith, fine, but if they try to hold us to ransom then we won't put up with that" (Business Day 2005). In fact, many of South Africa's attempts to play an important part in the solution of Zimbabwe's struggles have been rejected by President Mugabe. This was publicly admitted by President Mbeki in 2001 (Government Communication and Information System 2001):

BBC: Mr President, you mention Zimbabwe. You have been trying to persuade Robert Mugabe to moderate his actions. You've been embarrassed by his actions in Zimbabwe, why do you think your talks with him have not proved effective?

TM: I don't know. What I know is that we can't afford a complete collapse of Zimbabwe on our borders, so we've got to try and do whatever we can to assist them to get...

BBC: ...he's not listening, is he?

TM: Well he hasn't.

Thus, South Africa's (albeit moderate) efforts could not prevent Zimbabwe from going into a downward spiral of hyperinflation, unemployment, poverty, and international isolation. In

consequence, it seems obvious to conclude that South Africa's quiet diplomacy has been a failure and that the "President has no influence at all over Mugabe" (Volker 2003). Yet, while it would have been normatively desirable to prevent the current difficulties, if not atrocities, we need to be aware not to project our own aspirations onto what the South African government perceives as being in its own interest when we try to understand its approach to the Zimbabwean crisis. Within the South African government it was feared that "megaphone diplomacy," including sanctions and maybe even the involvement of the military, would disrupt any communication between the two states and, consequently, render the situation completely beyond South Africa's grasp. Thus, the choice of quiet diplomacy seems to be, at least from the South African perspective, unavoidable.

Consequently, it is necessary to stop short of an outright rejection of South Africa's hegemonic projection on this issue. First, attempts have been made to influence President Mugabe. Countless meetings, promises and visits by ministers, senior officials and the president himself have aimed to persuade Mugabe to secure fair elections, to restore the rule of law, and to eventually step down. Yet, irrespective of these attempts and against "common sense" Mugabe has rejected all help and decided to cling to power as long as possible. We can seriously doubt that any other actor would have made a stronger impression on President Mugabe. More importantly, and in line with South Africa's broader regional role, the quiet diplomacy approach has

allowed the South African government to stay tuned with pro-Zimbabwe sentiment in Africa and to buttress South Africa's status as a leading power. It has also helped to rest the canard that the ANC government is dominated by white interests and thus to claim its legitimacy as an authentic African power. Finally, it softens the impact of the aggressive outreach of South African capital on the continent (Freeman 2005: 152).

This is a very important achievement for a regional hegemon, even if it does not conform to the normatively desirable result in the Zimbabwean crisis.

### 3.4 Provision

In the case of the Zimbabwean crisis, we can again find some contradictions between what is generally perceived as hegemonic public good provision and how South Africa has performed. At first glance, the key public goods of regional security and regional economic development are both at stake. The regional costs of the crisis are enormous and it seems we cannot help but come to the conclusion that South Africa has failed to provide any regional goods and, by its nonaction, contributed to the impairment of economic stability and collective and individual welfare in southern Africa. Yet, while some form of activism on the part of the regional hegemon to prevent events from getting worse would certainly be desirable, as long as the provided goods are non-rival and non-exclusive in their nature, they do not need to conform to our criteria of justice and order. This article argues that we can find at least three distinctly re-

gional public goods provided by South Africa: solidarity against the West and domestic opponents, the prevention of political fallout in the southern Africa region, and SADC unity.

First, most southern African states share a resentment against perceived attempts by Western (donor) states to influence their domestic developments. Pressure has been put on Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Malawi, and Zimbabwe by freezing aid on the basis of democratic conditionality. The South African government has also faced Western criticism of its HIV/AIDS policies or, for instance, Mandela's visit to Libya in 1997 (Peters-Berries 2002: 198). President Mugabe's campaign against Western media and government therefore accrued massive support from other African governments by reiterating old anticolonial tunes. South Africa's quiet diplomacy not only provides a sense of regional unity and security against outsiders, but also, and probably equally important, against domestic opponents that are perceived to be supported by the West. Most of the political regimes are inherently instable; to be bolstered by a sense of loyalty and the assurance that South Africa will prevent external intervention and a forceful removal of the current government is a very important public good from which each of the secondary states, particularly Zimbabwe, benefits without really contributing to it. For instance, South Africa lobbied against the Zimbabwe Democracy Act after it was passed in the United States Senate on June 23, 2000.<sup>34</sup> It has also constantly criticized the imposition of sanctions as well as travel bans against the Zimbabwean political elite. Thus, South Africa, by "holding a protective hand" over Robert Mugabe, has provided a significant regional good on an intergovernmental, southern African level, despite this good's negative impacts on South Africa's international credibility and Zimbabwean citizens' welfare.

Second, the quiet diplomacy approach of South Africa has also helped to prevent negative political fallout for southern Africa. Among the more obvious examples is the potential negative impact of a breakdown of the Zimbabwean state on the social and economic systems of Zimbabwe's neighbors, for instance, through increased illegal immigration. While, overall, the economic damage of the crisis has been enormous, South Africa has guaranteed the survival of the Zimbabwean state through measures such as an extension of credits in the power sector through the parastatal ESKOM (Alden and Schoeman 2003). Again, while being normatively undesirable, on a state-to-state level this regionally contextual good is an aspect that we have to consider when assessing South Africa's hegemonic role. Among the other potential negative consequences of a more aggressive South African stance towards Zimbabwe would have been, first, a destabilization of uneasy racial relations, particularly in South Africa and Namibia but also in Zambia and Malawi, where the populist use of a racist argument by President Mugabe has received good reception (Lamb 2006). Second, a spread of the Zimbabwean crisis would have also threatened to bring up unresolved land reform issues in some of the neighboring states. The Zimbabwean land invasion has already served as a model for landless farmers in Malawi, who occupied parts of big tea estates in southern Malawi, as well as pres-

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from South African foreign minister Dlamini-Zuma to her Zimbabwean counterpart, July 5, 2000.

sure groups in South Africa (Peters-Berries 195-7). By keeping Zimbabwe economically alive and keeping President Mugabe within the circle of respected SADC leaders, these potential side effects of the Zimbabwe crisis have been, at least temporarily, forestalled.

The third regional public good provided by South Africa is the strengthening of SADC unity. In fact, "the closing of rank among SADC governments in the face of harsh criticism from both the outside and from within is impressive from the point of view of *realpolitik*" (Hammerstad 9). SADC has been able to undermine the sanctions placed on Zimbabwean politicians by refusing to go to international meetings if Zimbabwe was barred from attending. The SADC-EU ministerial meeting in November 2002 was moved from Copenhagen to Maputo so that Zimbabwe could attend, and the SADC members refused to sign a joint statement with the EU expressing concern at the plight of the people of Zimbabwe. By further avoiding a confrontational course within SADC, South Africa also makes other common projects, such as NEPAD or the restructuring of the SADC Organ for Defence, Politics and Security, more acceptable to its neighbors.

In sum, this article highlights the complexity that makes a clear-cut valuation of South Africa's hegemonic qualities difficult. Despite the evidence of regional public good provision presented here, we cannot overlook the damage that has been done to South Africa's and the region's international relations. Besides the more direct economic costs, the region has experienced the steep decline of one of its most important trading partners, and the process of regional integration has been slowed down as a consequence. Nevertheless, the argument that South Africa should have controlled and influenced Zimbabwe in order to conform to a conventional notion of regional hegemony or leadership and to be true to its own values and principles is put into perspective by this more context-specific notion of regional hegemony. At the beginning of this article, the idea that the embeddedness of regional hegemony in the international system is an essential component in this paper's concept of regional hegemony was developed. The next section will use the empirical evidence of the Zimbabwean case to see whether any of these factors matter and, if so, how.

### **3.5 Outside-in Dimension: Global Expectations, Interference and Support**

The first aspect to be considered is the impact of important global actors from outside the region on South Africa's relations with its neighboring states. Hence, we first need to assess the stakes of these actors in the Zimbabwean crisis.

Zimbabwe started to become a concern to the European Union, particularly the UK, and the United States with its decision to intervene in the conflict in the DRC with 10,000 troops in 1998/99 (Stuebig 2007: 3). Almost simultaneously, the row between the UK and Zimbabwe about the funding of land reforms became an issue. Domestic developments in Zimbabwe that were increasingly framed as a violation of NEPAD aggravated the alienation between Western governments and Zimbabwe even further. This was decisive, as NEPAD was con-

sidered to be a major achievement in bringing about positive change in the relationship between Africa and the developed world. In the West, Zimbabwe was associated with human rights violations, infringements of the rule of law through the toleration of illegal occupations of land, and election rigging. At the same time, the end of cold war proxy confrontations in the region, for instance, in Angola, left behind a power vacuum and South Africa as a regional power was and is widely regarded to be the most desirable actor for the solution of arising problems.<sup>35</sup> Some indicators for this are rhetorical laudations, such as US president George W. Bush's designation of President Mbeki as his "point man" on Zimbabwe (US Department of State 2003). The EU has emphasized in its new strategic partnership with South Africa that "South Africa [...] has emerged as a leading nation and a peace broker in the region [and] South Africa therefore is a natural partner to Europe on the African continent and on a global level" (European Commission 2006). The Zimbabwe resolution of the European Parliament of 2002 is even more explicit in expressing its expectations. It describes "President Mbeki [...] in particular, as Zimbabwe's most powerful neighbour and economic partner, as chairman of the AU, and as a member of the Commonwealth Troika," who has "the opportunity and responsibility to show leadership in helping bring about urgent change for the better in Zimbabwe" (European Parliament 2002).<sup>36</sup>

In order to assess the actual impact of these expectations and support, it is important to consider how these expectations have been received by the South African government. On the positive side, we can find that the support for South Africa in practice means, for example, that South African government officials are consulted on Zimbabwe by most if not all international actors.<sup>37</sup> Another important aspect of this support is that it has granted South Africa some privileged access to international institutions. South Africa's position in the Zimbabwean crisis is enhanced by its ability, for example, to hold authoritative discussions with the World Bank and the IMF on the potential economic fallout of the Zimbabwean crisis and to build a bridge between Zimbabwe and these two organizations (All Africa 2000). This also extends to South Africa's special partnership with the G8. A majority of interviewees acknowledged that while neighboring states will not like the fact that South Africa has this access, they will have to live with it and make the best of it, particularly because, as the government officials interviewed insisted, South Africa argues on behalf of the whole region or continent in these forums.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, despite its normative orientation and its emphasis on human rights and democracy in its key foreign policy documents, in this specific case the South African government is rather

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<sup>35</sup> Other external actors with potential influence in the Zimbabwean crisis are China and Libya. Both have provided economic aid to Zimbabwe that has, at least in part, constrained South Africa in exercising its economic leverage in Zimbabwe. Dowden, however, comes to the conclusion that "while this helps Mugabe it does not provide him with the sort of aid that he needs, let alone a saviour." This savior can, as agreed in the literature, only be South Africa. Richard Dowden, Engaging with Mugabe, in: *The Round Table* 95, No. 384 (2006): 285, Joshua Eisenman, Zimbabwe: China's African Ally, in: *China Brief* 5, No. 15 (2005).

<sup>36</sup> Also: Interview with government official, Pretoria, August 3, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with government official, Pretoria, July 31, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Interviews with government officials, Pretoria, July 31 and August 2, 2006.

critical of these expectations. This skepticism is mostly linked to its negative experiences in its interactions with Nigeria in 1995/96. South Africa feels the need to distance itself from US and European pressures and, instead, to take part in (African) multilateral negotiations, as its regional neighbors expect it to. Also, the issue of African allegations of racism by the West is an important factor that impacts negatively on the possibility of South African agency, as it puts South Africa in the uncomfortable position of potentially being labeled a "black" puppet of the predominantly "white" West.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.6 Inside-out Dimension of Regional Hegemony: Stepping-stone and/or Gate-keeping

Looking at the "inside-out" perspective, or the way South Africa deals with its potential dual role on both the regional and the global level, we can see that the country has engaged with the global level on behalf of or with respect to Zimbabwe at three important international entry points—the Commonwealth, the IMF and the World Bank—as well as with the EU, in particular the UK, and the United States. It has thus limited the capacity of these actors to engage with Zimbabwe directly. South Africa has made clear that external actors should not interfere and, through its defensive posture, has effectively shielded Zimbabwe and the region from the interference of external actors. South Africa has demonstrated its aspiration to regional hegemony to the rest of the world by, for instance, emphasizing African solutions for African problems (SABC News 2007).

Unmistakably, South Africa is faced with competing priorities, and the expected role conflict between global and regional ambitions is, in fact, present. South Africa has clear ambitions to play a global role. It is pursuing a seat on the UN Security Council and has forged alliances with states that it perceives to share its global interests as well as its regional power position within the framework of the India-Brazil-South Africa trilateral alliance (IBSA). This is where the dual role and the tensions that come with it become most virulent. While on the one hand South Africa shares its normative orientations with regard to human rights and democracy with other global actors, namely the European Union and the United States, and has ambitions to play an important role, on the regional level it has to adapt at least in part to the locally prevalent arguments of noninterference and nonintervention in order not to completely alienate its neighbors. A regional hegemon has to strike a fine balance between satisfying these divergent requirements. Inconsistencies are often the result, as manifested, for instance, in South Africa's strong support for NEPAD and its African Peer Review mechanism and its simultaneous protection of Zimbabwe, which seems to break most of the rules embedded in both institutions. This has put South Africa's reputation as a good international citizen and as a reliable state in Africa, as well as its envisaged permanent seat on the UN Security Council, at risk (Spence 2006: 198).

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<sup>39</sup> Expert interview, Johannesburg, July 6 and 18, 2006.

#### 4 Conclusion

This article has developed a conceptual tool that allows us to analyze and deal with the ambivalence and ambiguity we often find in case studies of regional powers or regional hegemons and their foreign policy within their respective region. This tool has also provided indicators for this reconceptualized notion of regional hegemony that allow us to study concrete cases of regional hegemony in a comparative way. While this article has used South Africa's Zimbabwe policy as an illustration, the ambition is clearly to make this conceptualization applicable to other cases as well. I have found sufficient proof of the viability of the concept, in particular for the argument that, by definition, the impacts of the embeddedness of a region, focusing not only on external actors' impact on regional operations but also on the tensions between a regional hegemon's regional and global goals, have to be taken into account.

With regard to the empirical study of South Africa's role in the Zimbabwean crisis, the article has found that it is too easy to make normative statements about the "best" possible outcome in the Zimbabwean crisis and, thus, about the failure of South African regional leadership. When we look more closely at the various indicators of regional hegemony, we can find that, against the odds, South Africa has assumed the role of a regional hegemon in this case. South Africa is, for instance, projecting its interest and values and providing regional public goods, yet not necessarily in the way that powerful global actors want it to. Its policies conform to the larger picture of South Africa's ambition to "fit in" with its southern African neighborhood but to nevertheless exert control over what is happening in its sphere of influence. South Africa has a clear awareness of its material preponderance and follows up this preponderance with hegemonic leadership ambitions. It has also achieved recognition as a key actor in the Zimbabwean crisis on the global level, yet it has risked its international reputation as a good global citizen in the process. International embeddedness thus plays an important role in shaping South Africa's approach to the issue. Above all, international expectations have not helped South Africa to develop its leadership on this issue but have rather forced it to resort to a strategy of denial, as it needed to avoid being seen as a "Western puppet." Thus, "denial" might be an important element of all regional hegemons as predominant power is always seen with suspicion and jealousy. The inclusion of regionally relevant modifications of hegemony theory helps in understanding why South Africa reacted in its specific way in the Zimbabwean crisis. This way of looking at regional power hierarchies also tells us about the limitations and constraints of regional powers in the developing world in particular, as well as their continual need to straddle two worlds—the regional and the global.

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