



SA: the friend of all nations



Eric Naki

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President Cyril Ramaphosa this week received the letters of credence from a whopping 18 heads of missions designated to represent their countries in South Africa.

This large number of diplomats is an indication of how the world regards South Africa. There is no doubt this country, despite its own goals around immigration, safety and security and unreliable electricity supply, is still highly regarded outside.

Instead of foreign countries backing off, they frequently send various missions to the country – be they ambassadors, trade missions and high-level state visits by heads of state, so one gets the sense that South Africa is performing well at a diplomatic level. Perhaps, then, credit should go to SA's chief diplomat, Dr Naledi Pandor's firm leadership in the cooperation and international relations portfolio.

This month, we are going to have a significant royal visit by King Philippe and Queen Mathilde of Belgium.

The royals will tour Gauteng and the Western Cape and meet Ramaphosa, his Cabinet and public sector leaders.

Further engagements will be with numerous civil society, business, culture, environmental, academic and investment groups and leaders.

In my frequent interactions with diplomats based here, I am always left with no doubt about their positivity towards South Africa, despite its many troubles.

Many seem to understand why South Africa is in situation it is in. Load shedding and its impact on investments, along with crime, remain a source of worry among diplomats.

The fact that all continents are represented in South Africa is a credit to our policy of being a friend to all nations.

South Africa's policy of nonalignment pre-

vents it from taking sides in conflicts, including the war in Ukraine. For this reason, the country is able to maintain good relationships with both Russia and Ukraine, without being pressured to abandon one side at the expense of the other.

It is against this background that this country hosts embassies for both Israel and Palestine, and Morocco and Western Sahara.

While able to publicly express its position with regard to how Israel dealt with Palestinians and Morocco with the Western Sahara, Pretoria is still able to maintain its relationship with all sides to these conflicts.

SA's nonaligned foreign policy should not baffle critics. Look at the example of Turkmenistan, one of three small Central Asian countries previously part of the former Soviet Union.

While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan opted to align with Moscow, perhaps because they are poor, Turkmenistan choose the middle ground.

Turkmenistan, which is rich in natural gas, adopted permanent neutrality towards the big powers, undertaking not to be influenced to participate in any war except in self-defence. Because of its economic strength, it is able to decide its foreign policy without being dictated to by the West or the East.

Similarly, South Africa had been participating in military drills with several countries of the West and most recently with Russia and China.

Pretoria's nonaligned foreign policy, which goes back to Nelson Mandela's time when SA joined the Non-Aligned Movement, is misunderstood by people inside and outside the country.

They believe that it should take sides – the side of the West, which is impossible considering the history of the ANC and the former Soviet Union.

Rather leave South Africa alone to decide how it should handle its affairs – especially foreign policy.

