



POLICY BRIEF

Leading through consensus South Africa chairs the AU

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South Africa will chair the African Union (AU) in 2020 while also serving as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This will be an opportunity for South Africa to improve AU-UN relations and drive its priorities for the continent. However, it will have to show progress in the fight against xenophobia back home in order to achieve consensus at the level of the AU.

Key findings

- ▶ The role of African Union (AU) chair has evolved over time. Success depends largely on the initiatives taken by the designated country and the quality of its leadership.
- ▶ One of South Africa's main challenges will be to get buy-in from key AU member states for its chairship, given the consensus-driven decision making in the AU.
- ▶ During its chairship, South Africa will also have to contend with inefficiency at the AU Commission, whose job it is to provide the necessary technical support.
- ▶ Africa's partnerships remain a contentious and pending question for the continent.
- ▶ The xenophobic attacks in South Africa will be a major impediment to the country's chairship.
- ▶ The theme of the year, 'Silencing the guns, creating conducive conditions for Africa's development', will be difficult to implement, given the protracted and intricate nature of ongoing continental peace and security challenges.
- ▶ Focus is expected to be on the African Continental Free Trade Area, infrastructure, and revitalising Agenda 2063.

Recommendations for South Africa

- ▶ Choose a few key priorities for 2020 with clear and tangible objectives and ensure buy-in from key players on the continent.
- ▶ Work closely with the AU Commission and ensure the implementation of AU institutional reforms.
- ▶ Pursue and intensify efforts towards Africa's regional integration agenda.
- ▶ Speak resolutely and decisively on behalf of the continent throughout 2020.
- ▶ Continue efforts to promote AU-UN relations, particularly on peace and security matters, and on conflicts such as Libya where collaboration has faltered.
- ▶ Showcase South Africa's success stories in promoting peace and security in Africa.
- ▶ Take further steps to minimise the fallout from xenophobic violence in South Africa.
- ▶ AU organs hosted by South Africa such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), the African Peer Review Mechanism and the Pan-African Parliament should be supported and strengthened.
- ▶ Showcase South Africa's priorities and achievements through media engagement.
- ▶ Show commitment to the AU by fielding candidates for key positions within the AU Commission for 2021.

Introduction

Nearly 18 years after former president Thabo Mbeki chaired the African Union (AU), South Africa is officially taking over at the helm of the pan-African institution in February 2020. South Africa will not only assume the chair of the AU, but it will also assume this position for the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) as well as the Committee of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change.

During its chairship of the AU, South Africa will have a mandate to speak on behalf of the continent. As it will also remain a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as well as a member of the G20 and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) groupings, South Africa will also be the voice of Africa in those fora.

This will give South Africa a formidable platform to take continental priorities forward and align them with its own priorities. This includes boosting its economy and those across the continent through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

During 2020, South Africa will also be in a good position to enhance relations between the AU and the UN, which is a priority for South Africa in the UNSC. It can also showcase its success stories when it comes to peace and security in Africa.

South Africa's image on the continent has been tarnished by the waves of xenophobic attacks

However, the AU presents a major challenge. Given the AU's strong emphasis on collective decision making, it will not be an easy task for South Africa to build consensus among AU member states and to get their buy-in. South Africa's image on the continent has been severely tarnished by the various waves of xenophobic attacks in the country and accusations that the government isn't doing enough to protect other Africans living in South Africa.

The legacy of former AU Commission chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma at the helm of the AU, as well as the relative absence of South Africans in the

institution, also influences how South Africa is seen in Addis Ababa.

The aim of this policy brief is to provide an analysis of the rotating position of chair of the AU, its prerogatives and what the practice has been, particularly during the past two years. It looks at the expectations of South Africa's chairship, as well as the opportunities and challenges for its term.

The research shows that South Africa will be able to lead on key African priorities such as regional integration, peace and security and AU reforms if it is able to garner the necessary consensus and buy-in for taking decisions and implementing them.

Evolving role of the AU chairperson

The rotating chairperson of the AU is, according to the 2002 amended AU Constitutive Act, charged with 'representing the Union and promoting the objectives and principles of the AU.' The chair is assisted by a bureau of four members, who, together with the chair, represent the five regions of the continent.

The position of chairperson of the AU dates back to the Organisation of African Unity when it was mainly a ceremonial role and had as its main duty to host and finance the ordinary summit of the organisation. This is no longer the case since the country that chairs the AU in any given year isn't automatically the one charged with organising the AU summit on home soil.¹

In addition to chairing the summits of the AU Assembly, the AU Constitutive Act² also assigns the role of representation to the chairperson. It states that 'in between sessions, the Chairperson of the Assembly [or AU chairperson], in consultation with the Chairperson of the Commission, shall represent the Union in conformity with the fundamental objectives and principles enshrined in the Constitutive Act.'³

The fact that the AU Constitutive Act covers a wide range of objectives and principles for the organisation leaves room for interpretation and technically gives flexibility to the chairperson of the AU to act in a number of areas and on a variety of issues. These include questions of 'continental policies, notably their monitoring and implementation; and political and economic integration,⁴ among others.

In the same vein, the Assembly's rules of procedure provide, in article 4d, that the chair can give directives to the Executive Council (composed of member states' foreign ministers), the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the AU Commission on appropriate action with regards to conflict situations including wars, terrorist and emergency cases, as well as determining sanctions in situations of non-respect of AU principles as enshrined in the Constitutive Act – and for unconstitutional changes of government.

Moreover, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights also provides that the chairperson of the AU may request an investigation into egregious human rights violations brought to his or her attention by the Commission on Human and People's Rights.⁵

It is important to note that while the head of state is the most visible during this year, it does not only involve him or her, but a whole range of officials, notably the foreign minister, or in the case of South Africa, the minister of international relations and cooperation, who will chair the Executive Council of foreign ministers. The ambassador in Addis Ababa will chair and convene meetings of the PRC, while staff at the South African embassy in Addis Ababa and at head office in Pretoria will prepare agendas and notes.

Leadership quality matters more than the economic or political weight of the country in the AU chair

Ultimately, existing continental frameworks confer the chairperson of the AU with non-negligible powers which he or she may exercise during their tenure. The hallmark of a chair of the AU is, for the most part, made by the personality of the individual head of state who assumes it and his or her continental vision and leadership qualities.

The economic weight of the country may also have an impact on the influence of the AU chairperson. However, the success of the Rwandese presidency of the AU in 2018 suggests that the quality of leadership matters more than the economic or political weight of a country in discharging its duties at the helm of the continent.

Rwanda's term has lessons for successors

Rwanda chaired the AU in 2018 and arguably elevated the position to a new, higher level. A part of Rwanda's success could be attributed to the context – the country having been tasked with leading the important dossier of AU institutional reforms, including its finances, as far back as 2016. Yet, many officials believe that Rwanda's success is for the most part the result of its thorough understanding of the chairperson's prerogatives (as per the continental provisions), proper planning and working towards implementation of decisions and plans.

The leadership style in the case of Rwanda played a central role in the way it fared as a chair. First, according to a senior diplomat in Addis Ababa, Kagame decided that he was going to 'take the position and responsibility with utmost seriousness, make a difference, impact the lives of Africans and leave a legacy.'⁶

Asking how he could achieve this, he set out his priorities,⁷ one of which – the AU institutional reforms – was already a work in progress. Other priorities included African regional economic integration with the launch of the AfCFTA in March 2018 and the signing of the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons. The year 2018 also saw the launch of the Single African Air Transport Market.

Rwanda's presidency also worked closely with the AU Commission that ensures the day-to-day running of the Union's activities. In fact, a close working relationship with the AU Commission cannot be overstated as it should provide the necessary support to the activities of the chairperson.

In that regard, Rwanda made a seemingly trivial but yet strategic decision to move its ambassador to the AU into the 19th floor at the AU Commission's headquarters, the office space reserved for the chairperson of the Union, located one floor up from the chairperson of the Commission. This physical proximity allowed the Rwandese to work for one year on a day-to-day basis with the Commission.⁸ Kagame also forged a strong working relationship with AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat.

Rwanda managed to achieve a successful chairship despite increasing its Addis Ababa mission's capacity only by two people. The mission was however reorganised around the portfolios they had put in

place for the purpose of their AU chairship.⁹ An unprecedented number of meetings also took place in Kigali, Rwanda in 2018.¹⁰

During Kagame's term, the concept of an AU Troika – the past, the current and the future chairpersons of the AU – became a new practice in the AU, although this is not institutionalised through the AU Constitutive Act. The troika was established to allow for proper continuity in the management of the AU's affairs and based on the idea of a small group of leaders that can fast-track decisions and represent the continent. It is also a key part of the Kagame-led AU reforms.¹¹

Rwanda's chairship succeeded despite increasing its capacity in Addis Ababa by only two people

This notion, however, led to a backlash from some member states, notably within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), who believe that the practice does not comply with the consensus-driven decision making that has been part of the culture within the AU since its inception. Kagame's convening of so-called 'retreats' of heads of state ahead of the AU summits to fast-track decision making was also rejected by many states since it went against the practice of first referring discussions to the PRC and Executive Council before being tabled at the Assembly.

Egypt worked towards African solutions

Egypt chaired the AU in 2019. This chairship brought a change to the AU since it is the first time in many years that one of the major funders of the AU was chosen to lead the organisation.

When it took over the AU in early 2019, Egypt outlined six priority areas it was to focus on: building bridges among Africa's people; cooperating with partners; economic and regional integration; economic and social development; institutional and financial reform of the AU; and peace and security.

Speaking at the UN General Assembly in September 2019, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi summed up his country's action as AU chair as follows: '[We] have worked on consolidating the principle of African solutions to African problems. This aims to formulate a comprehensive approach which lays the foundation for development through a continental vision that is based on our common history, unity of destiny and confidence in our ability to achieve progress towards integration and upholding the progress of our people.'¹²

He highlighted the launch in Cairo of the AU Center for Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development and the upcoming Aswan Forum for sustainable peace and development in Africa to be held in Aswan, Egypt in December 2019. Both are flagship initiatives of Egypt's chair.



AS 2019 AU CHAIR,
EGYPT FOCUSED ON 6
PRIORITY AREAS

During its term Egypt played an active, albeit controversial role in its attempt to mediate the situation in Sudan. Some divergences emerged between the PSC and Egypt's position regarding Sudan's Transitional Military Council's place in the transition. However, Egypt was astute enough to avoid formally overstepping its boundaries of AU chair – for example deferring decisions to the PSC, the legal entity that decides on sanctions against an AU member.¹³

Egypt also took a number of initiatives, including instituting meetings twice a week of the PRC in Addis Ababa and keeping its own records of those meetings. The aim of this undertaking was to keep abreast of progress with the implementation of AU decisions and discuss any emerging issues facing the continent. This is particularly important given the inefficiency within the AU Commission when it comes to implementing decisions. In many instances there are also no minutes of meetings at the AU.

Fears that Egypt would abandon the project of AU institutional reforms did not materialise

Finally, Egypt's chair also oversaw the ratification and launch of the AfCFTA in July 2019. Even if it was not the direct driving force behind this process, its own ratification illustrated its commitment to intra-African trade. Meanwhile, fears that Egypt would abandon the project of AU institutional reforms did not materialise. Instead, discussions and work continued, although with less intensity than under Rwanda.

South Africa faces expectations and challenges

Expectations in Addis Ababa – both from diplomats and AU Commission officials – about South Africa's chairship differ sharply. There are sceptics who note what they consider a disappointing performance by Dlamini Zuma as chairperson of the AU Commission and therefore expect little of South Africa¹⁴ and those who believe that South Africa has the gravitas required to lead the Union.¹⁵

It is important to note that the roles of AU Commission chair, a position Dlamini Zuma occupied from 2012

to 2017, and AU chair are very different. Yet there is a perception that her performance is an indication of what South Africa can or cannot achieve.

The critics do not expect that South Africa will necessarily have a particularly memorable chairship or have an impact on how the AU Commission is currently operating, beyond the ongoing AU institutional reforms. An AU official contends that 'South Africa will not do much as AU chair. We had placed a lot of expectations in Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma as an experienced politician and public servant in her country, but her leadership of the Commission was rather disappointing.'¹⁶

Others however expect that South Africa will make an important contribution in leading on the pressing issues facing the continent, including the broad theme of 'Silencing the guns'. One diplomat in Addis Ababa said: 'South Africa can decide on one or a few issues it wants to tackle and link it to the theme of the year.'

Both groups – South Africa's detractors and its supporters – are of the opinion that South Africa's presidency of the AU could be an opportunity for the country to move beyond the legacy of Dlamini Zuma's tenure at the AU Commission and to repair the country's image tarnished by xenophobia.

The attacks on foreigners in Johannesburg during the first week of September 2019 again brought this issue sharply to the forefront of discussions in the Addis Ababa diplomatic community. Many are of the view that the South African government's passiveness in combating xenophobia and protecting both economic migrants and asylum seekers has emboldened those who carry out attacks against other Africans living in South Africa.

This poor image might seriously impact South Africa's ability and legitimacy to lead the AU next year, as this latest round of attacks drew widespread condemnation within the diplomatic community and a sense that this was one too many times for such occurrences. A debate about xenophobia in South Africa was held by the PSC on 11 September 2019.

Key priorities for South Africa in 2020

South Africa takes up the chairship of the AU at a crucial time for the institution when much needed reforms have to be implemented before a new set of leadership is elected in February 2021. A wide range of other issues

is on the table for 2020, but South Africa will necessarily need to prioritise. The focus is expected to fall under the following broad categories:

Silencing the guns

The theme for the AU in 2020, adopted at the Executive Council meeting in July 2019, is 'Silencing the guns, creating conducive conditions for Africa's development'. South Africa has been involved in a wide range of initiatives in this regard over the past two decades and can use this opportunity to showcase some of its success stories.

Tangible results in 2020 will go a long way towards reviving South Africa's image as a peacemaker on the continent. Discussions around the AU Roadmap for Silencing the Guns¹⁸ are expected to continue in 2020 with a number of high-profile events in Addis Ababa and elsewhere. The success of these will be crucial for South Africa.

South Africa has an opportunity to move beyond the legacy of Dlamini Zuma's tenure at the AU Commission

Experience over the past few years has shown that the theme of the year has received an uneven uptake amongst member states and the AU Commission. South Africa can change this and take concrete action towards the effective implementation of the theme of the year.

Strengthening relations with the UN

A key challenge for the AU has been strengthening its relations with the UN. As a non-permanent member of the UNSC in 2020, South Africa will be exceptionally well placed to further this agenda. This is important particularly in the domain of peacekeeping and peacebuilding on the continent. By far the most UN peace operations are in Africa and the continent occupies the majority of discussions at the UN Security Council in New York.

A number of mechanisms and institutional arrangements are in place in order to improve relations between the AU and the UN, such as a bi-annual meeting between the UNSC and the PSC.¹⁹ Members of the UNSC travelled to Addis Ababa in October 2019 to meet with the AU PSC during South Africa's presidency of the UNSC – an important milestone for South Africa.

These meetings helped to improve the relationship, but there are still sticking points, notably on the issue of the financing of African peace support operations through UN-assessed contributions, which will again come up throughout 2020. In this regard, South Africa could make an important contribution by lobbying for more contributions to the AU Peace Fund.

Promoting good governance through the APRM

South Africa will also be chairing the APRM in 2020 – an important opportunity to continue repositioning the APRM and addressing governance challenges on the continent.



AS A SECURITY COUNCIL
MEMBER IN 2020, SA CAN
BUILD AU-UN RELATIONS

The APRM now has an enhanced mandate as a fully-fledged AU organ, which will provide it with more predictable funding than in the past. Earlier this year the first Africa governance report was launched that raised expectations about a stronger role for the APRM.

Governance remains a major challenge for the continent, with elections becoming a source of instability and a site for battle, while bad governance and corruption adversely affect socio-economic development and foster instability. South Africa can use this opportunity to enhance the role of the APRM by, for example, ensuring that statutory meetings of the APRM heads of state on the margins of the summits of the Assembly do take place, since some of these have been cancelled in the past.

It can also give a higher profile to the governance report and ensure steps are taken to implement the findings. South Africa is yet to sign host country agreements with the APRM and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), both based in South Africa, leading to logistical challenges for these AU organs.²⁰

Getting the private sector on board

South Africa is one of the 27 African countries that have so far ratified the AfCFTA and as one of the continent's most industrialised nations, with large exports to and investments in the continent, it has a lot to gain from this initiative.

Given the strength of SA's private sector, the country needs to play its part in implementing the AfCFTA agenda in 2020

Studies show that the AfCFTA can have a major impact on African economies. By 2050, it will be the biggest contributing factor to economic growth and to reducing extreme poverty in Africa – more than, for example, boosting agriculture, social grants or manufacturing.²¹

During its chairship South Africa is expected to prioritise the AfCFTA, notably by pushing for more signatories and for synergy between the AfCFTA and various regional trade zones.²² It is also expected to prioritise building cross-continental infrastructure to facilitate intra-African trade.

The role of the private sector is also very important for South Africa.²³ Given the strength of the country's private sector and its presence and interests in various parts of the continent, it will need to play its part in implementing the continental integration agenda in the coming year.

Revitalising Agenda 2063

One of the key issues that South Africa is expected to deal with during its chairship is the attempt to revitalise Agenda 2063.²⁴ Its flagship projects include the AfCFTA and Silencing the Guns by 2020.

Agenda 2063

SA IS EXPECTED TO
PROMOTE THE AU'S
FLAGSHIP INITIATIVE

A number of 10-year plans have been drawn up but these have largely fallen into disuse. The aim would be to put them back on the agenda. Dlamini Zuma successfully popularised Agenda 2063 through Africa-wide marketing campaigns. It has since become recognised by African member states and at the level of the UN as 'Africa's blueprint for a peaceful and prosperous continent'. South African officials have indicated that there are plans in the pipeline to revive these campaigns.

Implementing AU reforms

Despite much opposition, the institutional reforms of the AU are slowly but surely being implemented.²⁵ One of the main challenges has been greater streamlining of the AU Commission in Addis Ababa.

As part of the reforms, adopted in January 2017, it was decided to reduce the number of AU commissioners from eight to six and changing some of the portfolios. The major change is the planned merger of the departments of Peace and Security and Political Affairs – two key departments that deal with the most complex issues that the AU is trying to cope with on the continent. A new merit-based system for the election of commissioners has also been adopted.

Meanwhile, the reforms saw changes to the mandate of the APRM and Nepad, which is now called the AU Development Agency-Nepad (Auda-Nepad). Both these institutions are based in Midrand, South Africa and seen, to a large extent, as the brainchild of the five founding fathers of the AU in 2002. As chairperson of the AU in 2020, South Africa will have to keep in mind these institutional changes in Addis Ababa and Midrand in order to navigate sentiments amongst member states and implement decisions.

Linking expectations with capacity

As chair of the AU, South Africa has a lot to offer but it will have to contend with some negative perceptions of how it acted in the past and send strong signals that it is resolutely dealing with the xenophobia problem domestically. This balancing act is further complicated by the complexities inherent to leading the AU – an organisation with 55 member states that differ widely in terms of size, economy, political culture, language and historical trajectories.

South Africa can achieve a lot during its presidency but it has to muster the necessary diplomatic capacity and clout to do so. The capacity of the South African mission in Addis Ababa to align its work with the requirements of chairing the Union will be crucial.

Capacity also needs to be created in Pretoria, through an inter-ministerial committee or task team dedicated to the 2020 chairship. Heavyweight officials with foreign policy experience should be associated with this initiative, both in the presidency and the department.

Clearly, South Africa will have to work tirelessly to garner consensus around its actions.²⁶ This will involve deepening consultation with key actors in Addis Ababa, on the continent and abroad. To a large extent, South Africa's diplomatic apparatus will have to be mobilised and work in synergy from Pretoria to Addis Ababa, as well as New York.

SA can achieve a lot during its presidency but needs the diplomatic capacity and clout to do so

The role of the South African ambassador in Addis Ababa will be crucial, particularly his ability to be diplomatically savvy and build amicable relationships across PRC (and PSC) members.

Finally, South Africa will also have to speak for and about the continent for one year. It cannot afford to be silent on key issues and challenges on the continent as this is an essential part of chairing the AU. It should lead in strengthening Africa's relationship with its partners, including the UN, EU and others.

Notes

- 1 For example South Africa hosted the AU summit of June 2015 in place of Chad, which was supposed to host the summit as representative of the Central African Region but felt it wasn't ready to do so. This summit was an opportunity for Dlamini Zuma to launch a number of initiatives, particularly around gender issues in the AU. The chair was then held by former president Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. He succeeded President Mohamed Abdelaziz of Mauritania.
- 2 Rules of Procedure of the Assembly of the Union, 2007, Rule 16 (1).
- 3 Ibid, Rule 16 (2).
- 4 D Lecoutre, *La Présidence en exercice de l'Union Africaine, Enjeux et perspectives d'une institutionnalisation*, *ISS Papier* 208, 2009.

- 5 African Charter on Human and People's Rights, article 58 (3).
- 6 Interview with a senior diplomat, 30 August 2019, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Interview with senior diplomat, 30 August 2019, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Mahamat said during the closing press conference of the Extraordinary Summit of the AU in November 2018 that no fewer than 17 meetings had taken place in Kigali in 2018 regarding the AU reforms.
- 11 Kagame was strongly criticised for his lack of consultation with the wider AU membership during his term as chairperson but also throughout the period of AU reforms. Already during the AU summit of July 2016 in Kigali, Kagame tried to fast-track decision making by organising so-called 'retreats' of heads of state ahead of the summits of the Assembly to adopt certain reforms without following the normal route of first allowing for debate within the Executive Council of ministers and the PRC. This method, however, led to a backlash against the reforms by many member states, notably in SADC.
- 12 Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, speech at the 74th United Nations General Assembly, 24 September 2019, <http://webtv.un.org/watch/egypt-president-addresses-general-debate-74th-session/6089079938001/?lan=arabic>.
- 13 Egypt initially recommended a three-month delay before the AU would impose sanctions against Sudan, following the coup d'état on 11 April. The PSC, in early June, however, believed the military rulers' crackdown against protesters merited a suspension, which was subsequently carried out, without opposition from the chair.
- 14 Interview at the African Union Commission, 29 August 2019, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 15 Interview with a senior diplomat, 30 August 2019, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 16 Interview with a senior AU Commission official, 27 August 2019, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 17 Interview with a senior African diplomat, 29 August 2019, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- 18 See more on the roadmap in *Silencing the Guns beyond 2020, PSC Report*, 5 August 2019, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/silencing-the-guns-beyond-2020>.
- 19 Beyond the PSC-UNSC meetings there are also other avenues for strengthening the relationship, such as the annual AU-UN meeting and the joint task force meetings. See Forti, D and Singh, P, *Towards a more effective UN-AU partnership on conflict prevention and crisis management*, Institute for Security Studies and International Peace Institute, October 2019, www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/1910_UN-AU_Partnership-1.pdf.
- 20 Interview at APRM headquarters, Midrand, 16 September 2019.
- 21 P Fabricius, *Will free trade be Africa's economic game changer?*, ISS Today, 23 May 2019, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/will-free-trade-be-africas-economic-game-changer>.
- 22 Interview with former South African ambassador, Niamey, 7 July 2019.
- 23 As chair of SADC in 2017-2018, South Africa chose as its theme: 'Partnering with the private sector in developing industry and regional value chains' – an indication that this is an ongoing priority for South Africa.
- 24 Interview with former South African ambassador, Niamey, 7 July 2019.
- 25 Niamey summit sees the slow implementation of AU reforms, *PSC Report*, 12 August 2019, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/niamey-summit-sees-the-slow-implementation-of-au-reforms>.
- 26 Interview with a senior diplomat, 30 August, 2019.

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