

# **From Xenophobia to Afrophobia: French Warfare and South Africa – Geo-strategic and Non-Kinetic Repertoires**

Andre ZAAIMAN

## **Abstract**

*Donald TRUMP has framed violent crime in South Africa as white genocide. Achille MBEMBE (2015) has framed anti-migrant violence in South Africa as Afrophobia, Black-on-Black racism and a creeping pogrom. Both accusations are factually false. Both are categorical reductions deployed for political effect. Beginning from MSOMI's (2026) Sunday Times warning that South Africa's reputational damage is real, growing and inadequately answered, this article asks why such reductions are gaining traction now and whose strategic interests they serve. Drawing on LENIN (1917), PATNAIK and PATNAIK (2017, 2021) and DESAI (2013), and on the empirical record carefully maintained by ACMS at WITS (Xenowatch, 2024; LANDAU, 2010, 2011; MISAGO, 2017), the article argues that the South African political and socio-economic problem is real, that the African Union's integration regime is philosophically and infrastructurally inadequate, and that an external non-kinetic strategic contest is using both to compound the country's reputational and developmental damage. France, recently expelled from much of West Africa and the Sahel, is repositioning across Southern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean. Its repertoires combine kinetic capabilities projected from Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, La Réunion, Mayotte and the Scattered Islands, with non-kinetic instruments: branding, narrative warfare, media acquisition and summit-format diplomacy. Following CLAUSEWITZ, the first judgment a state must make is to recognise the kind of war it is in. South Africa, this article argues, has not yet made that judgment, and its national security system seems to lack the will and the capability to do so. A companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026a) argued that such a judgment must be made in the context of a pernicious colonial economic structure that produces chronic poverty, inequality and joblessness; a private sector that skews political-economic alignment; an economy that is neither secured nor securitised; and an outdated national security doctrine that does not comprise the comprehensive security required for modern grayzone, non-kinetic and kinetic warfare in a conjuncture of an anxious declining West and rising Eurasia. The consequence is poor anticipation, management and governance of threats such as social friction, strategic information-infrastructure protection, and foreign interference and non-kinetic offensives. South Africa cannot, however, blame its poor economic performance on economic migrants.*

## 1. Introduction

MSOMI (2026) warns, in the Sunday Times, that South Africa's reputational damage on the question of anti-migrant violence has reached a point at which the rest of the African continent has begun to act on it. Ghana has formally requested that the African Union place *xenophobic attacks against African nationals* on its agenda. MSOMI's diagnosis is direct:

*“The reality is that, for much of Africa, South Africa has become a poster child for Afrophobia – a damaging reputation that poses a long-term threat to the country's relations with its neighbours, the broader continent and Africans in the diaspora.” (MSOMI, 2026)*

He adds that the government has, beyond statements of condemnation after incidents, *failed to develop a comprehensive strategy to counter this perception*, and that *diplomatic engagements alone will not stem the tide of growing hostility and resentment* (MSOMI, 2026). His warning deserves to be taken seriously.

The question this article poses is sharper than the one MSOMI raises. Donald TRUMP suddenly began framing violent crime in South Africa as *white genocide*. Achille MBEMBE (2015) had earlier framed anti-migrant violence in South Africa as *Afrophobia*, *Black-on-Black racism* and a *creeping pogrom*. Both accusations are factually false, and both rely on extreme reductionism to produce misinformation and disinformation. They differ in author and politics, but they share the same operational logic of categorical falsification.

TRUMP is a white-nationalist politician in a settler colony, known for bluster, fabrication and a penchant for narrating his way out of predicaments. His *white genocide* framing serves an identifiable interest: heavily influenced by the Israel lobby in the United States (MEARSHEIMER and WALT, 2007), he has sought to paint South Africa as *genocidal* against white farmers in apparent retaliation for South Africa's prosecution of Israel at the International Court of Justice for genocide in Gaza, a case in which the Court found in its provisional measures order of 26 January 2024 that at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa were *plausible* and ordered Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent acts of genocide (ICJ, 2024). The framing is propaganda, not description.

MBEMBE is a different matter. He is a respected academic at a South African university engaged in serious academic work expected to meet standards of scientific rigour and academic discipline. The 2015 essay produces neither proof

nor systematic evidence of either xenophobic or Afrophobic intent. The fact of violence, and of anti-immigration sentiments directed principally at economic migrants – often triggered by the involvement of some economic migrants in crime – does not translate into xenophobia, Afrophobia or a pogrom. Coming from a reputable academic who, from 2021 onwards, has unproblematically moved into the defence and active facilitation of the French state's continental repositioning (Africanews, 2021; HOFNUNG, 2021; TOURÉ, 2021), the 2015 framing casts serious doubt on the underlying analytical method. One would expect, from an academic and a long-term South African resident, a nuanced attempt at explaining the complexity of clearly unacceptable events – just as one would expect a responsible and competent government to address the problem in a much more effortful, visible and capable manner.

South Africa and the African continent have documented foreign interference in the sphere of narrative and cognitive campaigns. BELL POTTINGER (United Kingdom) constructed the *white monopoly capital* Twitter and influence campaign for the GUPTA family in 2016-2017, was expelled from the UK Public Relations and Communications Association in September 2017, and collapsed into administration weeks later (PRCA, 2017; THE BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM, 2017). HAVAS (France), a Bolloré Group subsidiary, has been investigated for political communications work in francophone African elections (Screen Daily, 2018). BLACK CUBE (Israel), founded by former Israeli military intelligence officers, was implicated in operations against opposition figures in the 2015 Nigerian elections via CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA (UK PARLIAMENT, 2019) and subsequently in operations across more than sixty countries including NGOs in Africa (OCCRP, 2021). These are not speculation, hyperbole or inference. They are documented fact.

This article takes MSOMI's diagnosis as its starting point and asks a question that reaches beyond domestic policy. South Africa's reputational exposure on migration is not occurring in a strategic vacuum. It is occurring at a moment when France, having been expelled from much of West Africa and the Sahel, is repositioning across the African continent and the Western Indian Ocean (Anadolu Agency, 2025; LE BON, 2025). The argument advanced here is that the South African political and socio-economic problem is real, the reputational damage is real, and a non-kinetic strategic contest is using the second to compound the first.

The deeper structural question is the inadequacy of the African integration regime governing the cross-border movement of people. The African Union, inheritor of

the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), inherited a continental project that had focused on, and largely succeeded in, the liberation of the continent from colonialism perpetrated by Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Italy and Spain. The AU's mandate is integration and development. It has not, however, developed the appropriate regime and frameworks to facilitate African integration. Its African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), philosophically aligned with the orthodox economic school whose application to late-developing countries fosters underdevelopment rather than national economic wealth (CHANG, 2002; PATNAIK and PATNAIK, 2021), is a case in point – an argument developed empirically in the companion piece (ZAIMAN, 2026a). African integration requires new conceptual, technological and infrastructural innovations capable of building regional networks and an appropriate movement regime. AU shopping lists will not suffice.

Unlike the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, West Africa and East Africa have long histories of dynamic, large-scale trade networks that move goods and people across borders as a matter of course (BACH, 2016; ECDPM, 2021). Southern Africa's regulatory and endorsement mechanisms, including entry, exit and the domestic-economic interface, have not adapted at the pace required. This is properly a project for the Regional Economic Communities and the African Union, and it cannot be displaced onto the categorical question of whether South Africans are *xenophobic* or *Afrophobic*.

MBEMBE (2015) closes his essay with the imperative: *No African is a foreigner in Africa. No African is a migrant in Africa*. The statement is correct as a normative claim. As empirical description, it is false. In no African country can Africans simply move in, start a business and compete on equal terms with nationals. South Africa is, on the data, the norm and not the exception; its mobility regime is more restrictive and less coherent than some, more open than others. Israeli passport holders enter South Africa visa-free; Palestinian passport holders do not. Ghana, the complainant in the present AU agenda dispute, was itself on the receiving end of one of the largest mass expulsions in modern African history when Nigeria, under President Shehu Shagari, expelled an estimated two million undocumented immigrants in the 1983 *Ghana Must Go* episode, the majority of them Ghanaian (MSOMI, 2026). The continent has a problem with its regulatory regime for the movement of people. The South African problem is one instance of a continental problem.

Domestically, much South African public discourse still conceives of the rest of the continent as an economic playground or *terra incognita* for South African business expansion. That framing is itself colonial in shape. It is part of why the country may be perceived – sometimes correctly and sometimes not – as being national-chauvinistic. The problem needs to be understood properly and addressed at the national, regional and continental scales in an integrated manner, if the African continent is serious about integration, unity and development.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 maps the conceptual terrain of *xenophobia*, *Afrophobia*, *négrophobie* and *national-chauvinism*. Section 3 traces the genealogy of *Afrophobia* and MBEMBE's 2015 intervention. Section 4 situates MBEMBE's subsequent role in the 2021 New Africa-France Summit. Section 5 addresses the South African colonial-apartheid inheritance and the post-1994 policy failures that produced the substrate of societal friction and violence – creating a complex problem that cannot simplistically be reduced to *xenophobia* or *Afrophobia*. Section 6 develops the imperialism frame, including the PATNAIK and PATNAIK (2021) argument that imperialism actively blocks the developmental capacity of late-developing countries. Sections 7 to 13 examine narrative warfighting, France's recovery in Africa, its Western Indian Ocean military footprint, its non-kinetic repertoires, the Canal+/MultiChoice transaction and the wider infrastructure envelope. Section 14 returns to the Clausewitzian question of diagnosis. Section 15 concludes.

## **2. Xenophobia, Afrophobia, Négrophobie: A Conceptual Map**

*Xenophobia*, in its classical political and legal usage, refers to fear, hostility or prejudice directed at non-nationals or strangers as such, regardless of phenotype. The term is content-neutral as to race: it describes a relation between insider and outsider mediated by citizenship or perceived national belonging (CRUSH, 2008; LANDAU, 2011). South African scholarship has long argued that the post-1994 attacks on African migrants are not adequately captured by this neutral frame, since the targets are selected on phenotype and accent rather than nationality alone (WA KABWE-SEGATTI, 2008; ADJAI and LAZARIDIS, 2013).

Three related concepts cluster around xenophobia and need to be distinguished:

- **Afrophobia:** in francophone usage, hostility specifically directed at people of African descent; in South African usage following MBEMBE (2015), the targeting of Black African migrants by Black South Africans, treated as a phenomenon distinct from generic xenophobia.
- **Négrophobie:** a francophone term with a longer intellectual lineage in DIOP, TOBNER and VERSCHAVE (2005) and TOBNER (2007), denoting anti-Black discourse rooted in the colonial archive, from the *Code Noir* through to contemporary French public debate.
- **National-chauvinism:** MBEMBE's (2015) preferred description of the South African case, in which the citizen-foreigner distinction is racialised and weaponised in conditions of inequality and weak state capacity.

These distinctions are not merely terminological. Each label assigns responsibility differently and prescribes a different remedy. To call the phenomenon *Afrophobia* is to relocate it inside an anti-Black racism frame and to render the South African polity morally delinquent in continental terms. To call it *xenophobia* permits a more conventional discussion of immigration management and regulatory reform. To call it *national-chauvinism* opens the question of statecraft, citizenship and political economy. The labelling is therefore consequential in itself.

### 3. The Genealogy of *Afrophobia* and MBEMBE's Intervention

The term *afrophobie* circulated in francophone anti-racist work well before its South African application, including in Council of Europe usage where it denotes anti-Black racism in Europe (Council of Europe, 2017). Its English transliteration as *Afrophobia* entered South African public debate after the 2008 attacks, and was given canonical academic form in MBEMBE's CODESRIA Bulletin essay of 2015. MBEMBE is a Cameroonian-born, French-trained philosopher and political theorist, a French national, long resident in Johannesburg as Research Professor at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, and a leading figure in contemporary French critical theory (Holberg Prize, 2024).

MBEMBE's 2015 piece is a moral-political intervention rather than a sustained empirical analysis. It opens with a rhetorical question: is the violence *Afrophobia*, *Xenophobia* or *Black on black racism*? He answers: *all of that at once* (MBEMBE, 2015, p. 29). He names the phenomenon a *creeping pogrom*, an *unfolding pogrom*, and warns that impunity is the *shortest way to genocide* (MBEMBE, 2015,

p. 30). He concludes with a continental imperative:

*“No African is a foreigner in Africa! No African is a migrant in Africa! Africa is where we all belong, notwithstanding the foolishness of our boundaries.” (MBEMBE, 2015, p. 30)*

The critique advanced in the Introduction can now be developed in three concrete points:

1. The framing compresses distinct phenomena – national-chauvinism, racialisation of the foreigner, criminal opportunism, and breakdown of law enforcement – into a single moral category, which loses analytical purchase on each (LANDAU, 2011; MISAGO, 2017).
2. The vocabulary of *pogrom* and *genocide* is categorically inaccurate as description of the South African phenomenon. The empirical record carefully maintained by the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at WITS, through its Xenowatch platform, records 952 incidents and 644 deaths since 1994 across 28 years of monitoring (Xenowatch, 2024). Each death is a tragedy. The aggregate, however, describes a multi-causal social-economic crisis with episodic, locally driven violence and weak police response, not an organised campaign of state-tolerated extermination. It is significant that even the WITS-OXFORD research infrastructure on migration – supported through Open Society Foundations, the Mellon Foundation, EU and UK research councils, and UNHCR engagement (ACMS, 2024) – produces a record that does not sustain the pogrom or genocide framing. The labels do rhetorical work, not descriptive work.
3. The call for supra-national jurisdiction at The Hague positions South Africa as a continental delinquent without addressing the political-economic conditions that produce the friction. LANDAU (2010, 2011) and MISAGO (2017), working with the same body of evidence, place the violence inside the longer story of statecraft, citizenship and the post-1994 political economy. As a structural analyst working from Johannesburg, MBEMBE was well placed to provide a similar reading.

The two categorical reductions – TRUMP's *white genocide* and MBEMBE's *creeping pogrom* – point in opposite political directions. They share a logic of categorical moral indictment in place of structural argument, and both produce reputational damage to South Africa that the country's national security system has not yet learnt to contest.

#### **4. MBEMBE, Macron and the Politics of *Civil Society***

From early 2021, MBEMBE accepted Emmanuel Macron's invitation to lead preparations for the New Africa-France Summit held in Montpellier on 8 October 2021 (Africanews, 2021; Institut Montaigne, 2021). The summit broke with precedent: no African heads of state were invited; MBEMBE convened consultations across twelve countries and selected eleven young African and Franco-African interlocutors for the plenary session with Macron (TOURÉ, 2021).

The format was widely read as constructing a *civil society* interlocutor that could substitute for compromised francophone heads of state, give the appearance of horizontal dialogue, and validate policy continuity (HOFNUNG, 2021; BOUOPDA, 2021). The Institut Français des Relations Internationales noted that the substantive policy content amounted largely to a *superficial reframing*, with *solidarity investment* replacing *development assistance* (TOURÉ, 2021). African intellectuals, including BOUOPDA (2021), criticised the summit as a repackaging of *Françafrique* that lent intellectual legitimacy to continuity rather than rupture.

The point worth registering is structural rather than personal. The vocabulary that delegitimises South Africa in continental terms is associated with an intellectual who, from 2021 onwards, worked closely with the French state on its African repositioning. This is not a claim of orchestration. It is an observation about how concepts circulate between scholarship and statecraft, and about the differential uptake those concepts can acquire when their author is simultaneously a Macron interlocutor.

#### **5. The South African Problem in Historical Perspective**

The contemporary friction has structural origins that long predate the post-1994 settlement. The invention of *race* as an administrative and economic category, the construction of cheap labour through pass laws and reserves, and the spatial fixing of populations through the Group Areas Act produced a society organised around exclusion (MAGUBANE, 1979; WOLPE, 1972). France, while not a direct coloniser of South Africa, belongs to the same Western imperial order: its *Code Noir*, its *mission civilisatrice* and its post-independence *Françafrique* arrangements form part of the same archive (VERSCHAVE, 1998; TOBNER, 2007).

The 1994 transition did not dissolve the colonial-apartheid economic structure. Macroeconomic policy in the orthodox paradigm, from GEAR onwards, stabilised that structure rather than transforming it (BOND, 2014; MOHAMED, 2010). The

result is a two-tier economy with chronic unemployment, deep inequality and a state with limited fiscal and developmental capacity. The argument for an alternative, heterodox developmental paradigm is developed in the companion piece (ZAIMAN, 2026a).

The economic basis of national security in a developing and transitioning economy is non-negotiable. A growing population requires growth in the national wealth, accompanied by fair and equitable wealth-distribution systems, governed and managed competently and without corruption. Where these conditions are not met, the resulting underdevelopment becomes the primary national security problem of the country, and the substrate for every subsequent vulnerability examined in this article. Reputational damage, anti-migrant violence and external non-kinetic offensives all sit on top of that substrate; none of them can be resolved without addressing it.

The substrate on which contemporary anti-migrant violence grows can be characterised through five interacting elements:

1. The colonial-apartheid economic inheritance, which structured the labour market, residential geography and capital accumulation in racialised form.
2. Post-1994 policy and strategy failures, which preserved that structure under macroeconomic orthodoxy and a narrow social compensation model.
3. A weak state, plagued by capacity loss, corruption and lack of strategic direction, unable to deliver basic services consistently in the affected localities (Public Service Commission, 2022).
4. A massive, uncontrolled influx of economic migrants, against which the regulatory and endorsement mechanisms have not adapted (CRUSH, 2008; MISAGO, 2017).
5. The absence of innovative conceptual, technological and infrastructural work at the level of the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), conceived strategically and holistically in an integrated and focused manner. AU shopping lists, in the absence of such strategic work, will not deliver African integration.

The result is societal friction, blame-gaming and episodic violence. These are real and serious problems. They are not adequately explained by the categorical move from *xenophobia* to *Afrophobia*; they are explained by the interaction of these five elements with an inadequate African integration regime.

## 6. Imperialism, *Françafrique* and the Blocking of Development

LENIN (1917) defined imperialism as the monopoly stage of capitalism, characterised by the export of capital, the territorial division of the world among great powers, the fusion of bank and industrial capital, the dominance of finance capital, and the formation of international monopoly capitalist associations. PATNAIK and PATNAIK (2017, 2021) reformulate the theory for the post-colonial period. Imperialism functions through the imposition of *income deflation* on populations of the global South, so that primary commodities can be obtained at non-inflationary prices for Northern consumption. DESAI (2013) recasts the field as *geopolitical economy*, tracing how attempts at single-power dominance fail and produce multipolar contests.

PATNAIK and PATNAIK (2021) add a sixth dimension to LENIN's schema. Imperialism, in their formulation, actively blocks the potential, possibility and capacity of late-developing countries to develop. The mechanisms are not only economic. They include trade rules that lock in primary-commodity dependence; intellectual property regimes that constrain technological diffusion; financial governance that enforces austerity in the periphery; and ideological enforcement of orthodox economic doctrine that delegitimises the developmental state. The argument connects directly to the heterodox economics tradition, particularly CHANG's (2002) *Kicking Away the Ladder*, which documents how today's developed economies systematically deny late-developers the very policy instruments they themselves used to industrialise. The companion piece develops this argument in the South African context (ZAIMAN, 2026a).

*Françafrique* – the post-1960 system of monetary, military and political tutelage France maintained over its former African colonies – fits all of these frameworks. The CFA franc tied West and Central African monetary policy to Paris until its 2019/2020 reform; French troops underwrote compliant regimes; French firms dominated extractive sectors and ports (VERSCHAVE, 1998; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018). African underdevelopment, on this reading, is not a residual problem of governance to be solved by good policy alone. It is, in part, the output of an imperial system that continues to require the continent in a particular form, and to block alternative developmental trajectories.

France's contemporary presence in Southern Africa cannot, on this analysis, be treated as ordinary commercial diplomacy. It is the continuation of an imperial pattern by other means: non-kinetic instruments, mediated through investment,

branding, narrative and elite cultivation.

## 7. Narrative Warfighting and Cognitive Campaigns

Modern warfare is not principally kinetic. It is integrated, multi-domain, and centred on the cognitive and informational environment (SINGER and BROOKING, 2018; NATO ACT, 2023). The objective is to shape perception, set the terms of moral debate, and degrade the adversary's legitimacy before, or instead of, force is applied. Reputations are battle objects. The grayzone, in which South Africa now finds itself, is precisely the domain in which this kind of contest is fought (MAZARR, 2015; HOFFMAN, 2018).

Three operational features of this domain matter for the argument:

1. Narratives travel faster than policy responses. MSOMI (2026) makes this point directly: stirring presidential words at Freedom Day are displaced in public memory by viral video of stick-wielding marches.
2. Categories are weaponised. The shift from *xenophobia* to *Afrophobia* in continental discourse is a categorical move with strategic effects, even when its authors operate in good faith.
3. Real grievances are leveraged, not manufactured. South Africa's two-tier economy, weak state and uncontrolled migration are real. The non-kinetic operator's task is to amplify, frame and direct the resulting reputational damage.

South Africa's most important national security problem is therefore not transnational "terrorism" or external invasion. It is structural underdevelopment, compounded by a weak state and unmanaged migration, generating visible disorder that an external narrative campaign can convert into reputational ruin.

## 8. MSOMI's Diagnosis and Its Strategic Significance

MSOMI (2026) catalogues the reputational damage with care. Ghana's request that the African Union address South African *xenophobic attacks against African nationals* is, on his reading, less significant for what it alleges than for the standing it gives the allegation in continental forums. South Africa, he argues, has become a *poster child for Afrophobia*, and the government has failed to develop a comprehensive counter-strategy.

Two of his observations are strategically decisive:

- Diplomatic engagements alone will not stem the tide.

- South Africa's positions on contested international issues, set against a domestic record of visible disorder, leave it exposed to coordinated isolation.

Read alongside TRUMP's *white genocide* claim and the reported G20 exclusion attempts, the muted continental response MSOMI documents indicates that the country's relations with the rest of Africa are weaker than its self-image suggests.

## **9. France's Recovery and Repositioning in Africa**

France was expelled from much of West Africa and the Sahel between 2022 and 2024. Operation Barkhane was terminated in 2022; military agreements with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were severed; Chad ordered French withdrawal in November 2024; Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire signalled the same in 2024-25 (Anadolu Agency, 2025). Macron's response, articulated at the Djibouti base in December 2024, was to *reinvent* the French footprint as an Indo-Pacific projection point and to redirect attention to Anglophone and Lusophone Africa (Africanews, 2024).

The repositioning is active across multiple theatres. France played a leading role in the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya whose consequences continue to destabilise the Sahel. It maintains an assertive posture on Ukraine, including arms transfers and training. Its naval forces deploy in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz region through the EUNAVFOR Aspides operation (IHEDN, 2025). In April 2025, Macron toured Mayotte, La Réunion and Madagascar, addressing the fifth Indian Ocean Commission summit, and in November 2025 he conducted a five-day African tour stopping in Mauritius, South Africa for the G20, Angola and Gabon (LE BON, 2025; The Diplomat, 2025). The pattern is not retreat. It is redistribution.

## **10. The French Geo-strategic Footprint on South Africa's Eastern Flank**

France's military presence in the Western Indian Ocean is denser than casual observers assume. France retains sovereignty over La Réunion, Mayotte (claimed by the Comoros), the Scattered Islands of Tromelin, Juan de Nova, Bassas da India, Europa and the Glorieuses (claimed by Madagascar), and the sub-Antarctic islands of Crozet, Kerguelen, Saint-Paul and Amsterdam. These territories together account for approximately 2.6 million square kilometres, or approximately 25 per cent, of France's Exclusive Economic Zone, the second-largest in the world after that of the United States (LE BON, 2025). France permanently deploys around 3,700 troops, naval forces and combat aircraft in the Indian Ocean Region, and maintains military bases in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates under bilateral agreements (LE BON, 2025).

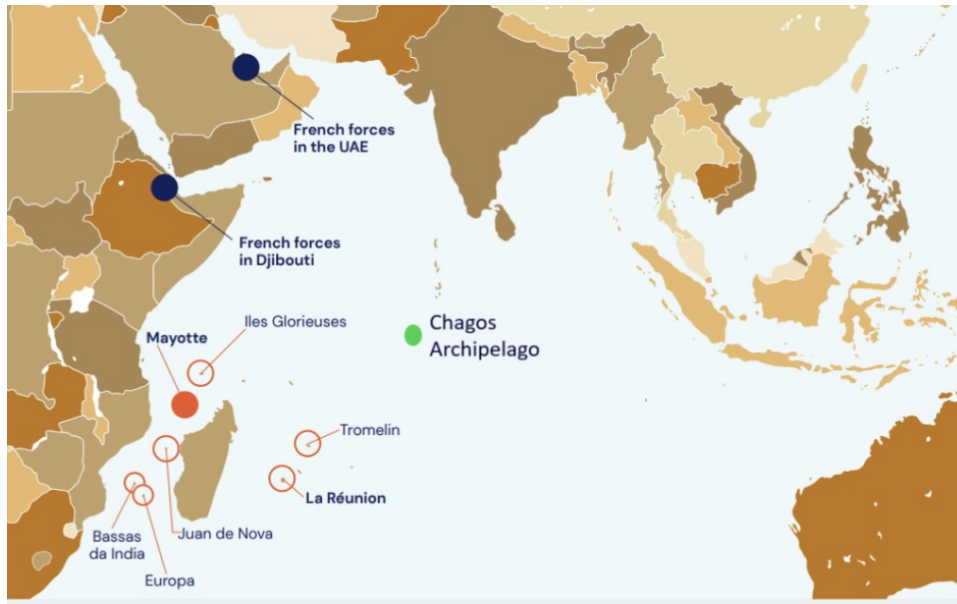


Figure 1. French military and territorial presence in the Indian Ocean Region (LE BON, 2025).

The map illustrates the geometry of the position. From Mayotte, France sits inside the Mozambique Channel chokepoint between the Comoros, Madagascar and the African mainland. From La Réunion, it commands the south-western approaches. From the Scattered Islands of Juan de Nova, Bassas da India, Europa and the Glorieuses, it holds EEZ rights along the Mozambican coast and around Madagascar. From Djibouti and the UAE bases, it covers the Bab el-Mandeb and the approaches to the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. The Chagos archipelago, recently subject to a sovereignty deal returning it to Mauritius while preserving the Anglo-American Diego Garcia base, sits in the centre of the same theatre (The Diplomat, 2024).

France justifies this footprint partly through the language of “terrorism” in East Africa and great-power competition with China in Djibouti (LE BON, 2025). The implication for South Africa is direct. France can survey, monitor, and if it chose to, interdict shipping along South Africa's eastern flank from sovereign territory. It conducts surveillance and signals intelligence across the region. South Africa's eastern maritime approaches and the Cape sea route, around to its western flank, are within French operational reach.

The geometry of maritime chokepoints carries strategic weight in the current conjuncture. The Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Malacca have demonstrated, in the events of 2023–2025 (Red Sea Houthi operations,

Iran-related tanker incidents and intensifying competition over the Malacca traffic), how thin the margin between commercial flow and strategic exposure can become (MAHAN, 1890; KAPLAN, 2010). The Mozambique Channel and the Cape sea route belong to the same family of chokepoints. Their contemporary contestation is not only kinetic. The decisive battlespace in the current conjuncture is socio-economic and informational: control over shipping and tariff regimes; over the data and narratives that move through subsea cables landing at chokepoint coasts; over the reputational standing of littoral states. France's repositioning from a defeated Sahel posture into the Indian Ocean Rim must be read in that frame, not as a residual colonial habit.

## 11. Non-Kinetic Repertoires

The French toolkit on the continent extends well beyond uniformed presence:

- **Economic strangleholds:** monetary tutelage through the CFA franc until its 2019/2020 reform (PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018), strategic equity in extractive sectors, and conditional development finance through the Agence Française de Développement.
- **Branding and reputational pressure:** the framing of African states as either reformist partners or delinquent outliers, communicated through francophone media and the cultural-academic circuits of *civil society* dialogue (BOUOPDA, 2021).
- **Corporate-political controversy:** the Bolloré group has been the subject of long-running French judicial proceedings in connection with port concessions in Togo and Guinea, with subsidiary communications firms drawn into the case file (Screen Daily, 2018).
- **Justification through “terrorism”:** French military presence in the Sahel and East Africa was repeatedly justified through the language of “terrorism”, even where the underlying conflicts had complex political-economic causes (LE BON, 2025; PIGEAUD, 2017).
- **Co-optation through summit diplomacy:** the Montpellier 2021 format, designed to bypass heads of state and engage selected interlocutors, is the prototype (TOURÉ, 2021).

## **12. Canal+ and the Acquisition of MultiChoice**

On 23 July 2025 the Competition Tribunal of South Africa granted conditional approval to Canal+, controlled by the Bolloré family through Vivendi, to acquire the remaining shares of MultiChoice Group at R125 per share, valuing the company at approximately R55 billion (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2025; Billionaires.Africa, 2025). MultiChoice was delisted from the JSE on 10 December 2025; Canal+ confirmed 94.39 per cent ownership in October 2025 and exercised compulsory squeeze-out (TechCabal, 2025; MultiChoice, 2025).

Canal+ is a private media empire under Bolloré family control rather than a French state company. That distinction matters legally. It does not, however, neutralise the strategic effect. The Bolloré group, through Canal+ in francophone Africa and now through MultiChoice in Anglophone and Lusophone Africa, has acquired decisive influence over what tens of millions of African subscribers watch (Index on Censorship, 2025; TechCabal, 2025). The group also controls right-leaning French television (CNews), radio (Europe 1) and publishing (Hachette), a phenomenon French commentators have termed *Bollorisation* (Index on Censorship, 2025).

The transaction gave the group access to South Africa's principal satellite broadcasting infrastructure, an extensive subscriber data asset, and the SuperSport sports rights portfolio. To approve such a transaction without explicit national security review of its strategic communications implications is, as MSOMI (2026) notes about the broader pattern, to disclose a state that does not yet see itself as a strategic actor in the cognitive domain.

## **13. Information Infrastructure as Strategic Infrastructure**

Narrative and cognitive warfighting cannot be conducted in the abstract. It requires control of the information infrastructure through which narratives travel. Submarine cables, satellite constellations, broadcast platforms and mobile telecommunications networks are not commercial assets in the ordinary sense. In a modern economy and a modern security environment, they are highly sensitive strategic infrastructure and strategic capabilities. Whoever controls them sets the terms on which the country can defend its reputation, conduct its diplomacy and develop its industries.

The submarine cable infrastructure landing at Cape Town and along the African seaboard carries the bulk of African internet traffic. Several major systems serving

the continent – including 2Africa, EQUIANO and ACE – are dominated by Western consortia and pass through landing points in territories where French and allied surveillance capabilities operate (Submarine Cable Networks, 2024). The proliferation of Earth-observation satellites, including French operators in the AIRBUS Defence and Space and CNES ecosystem, means that surveillance over Southern African maritime approaches and internet traffic flows is continuous.

The Canal+/MultiChoice transaction discussed in Section 12 must be read in this light. It is not merely the acquisition of a pay-television operator. It is the acquisition of the principal satellite broadcasting platform and subscriber-data asset serving Anglophone and Lusophone Africa, by a Bolloré vehicle headquartered in Paris. If current trends continue, MTN – the largest African-owned mobile telecommunications operator, with subscribers across more than fifteen African countries – is exposed to similar consolidation pressure from foreign-owned acquirers in the coming years. South African policymakers have not, to date, treated such transactions as national-security matters requiring strategic review and counter-strategy.

The strategic principle that follows is direct: information infrastructure must be secured. Securing strategic information infrastructure entails a layered set of capabilities – ownership and concentration screening for transactions in telecommunications, broadcasting, satellite and cable assets; physical and cyber protection of landing stations and exchange points; auditable assurance over routing, encryption and lawful-access regimes; sovereign Earth-observation and satellite-communications capacity; and a governance framework that treats subscriber data, content carriage and signalling intelligence as strategic-state matters rather than purely commercial ones. In the absence of such a framework, the country's ability to wage narrative and cognitive defence is preempted at the layer below the narrative itself.

Two further infrastructure manoeuvres deserve attention. French *investments* in the local assembly of trains and vehicles, in the established colonial pattern, secure markets and limit the scope for indigenous capability formation (PATNAIK and PATNAIK, 2021). The Inga 3 hydropower project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been actively courted by Paris through the Agence Française de Développement, which in February 2026 signed a Memorandum of Understanding to provide technical expertise on engineer training and spatial planning (Construction Review Online, 2026). South African and Congolese leaderships are reviving Inga 3 talks (African Business, 2023; Construction Review Online, 2026);

French participation in the technical envelope positions Paris on a project that is commercially central to Pretoria's energy strategy.

#### **14. The First Strategic Question: Which Kind of War?**

CLAUSEWITZ's first dictum is that the most far-reaching judgment a statesman must make is to identify the kind of war on which the polity is embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something alien to its nature (CLAUSEWITZ, 1976 [1832], p. 88):

*“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” (CLAUSEWITZ, 1976 [1832], p. 88)*

On the analysis advanced here, South Africa is engaged in a non-kinetic, grayzone contest of position, in which France is one actor among several. The instruments are reputational, financial, narrative, infrastructural, and intelligence-based. The objective is neither conquest nor regime change. It is to keep South Africa weak, dependent and morally delegitimised within Africa, so that it cannot lead a continental project of sovereign development.

If this diagnosis is correct, the implications for South African statecraft include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Recognising that comprehensive security extends beyond conventional military and policing into economic, informational and cognitive domains.
2. Building genuine narrative warfighting capability: not communications campaigns, but strategic capacity to set, contest and defend categories.
3. Treating major media, telecommunications and infrastructure transactions as national security matters subject to strategic review.
4. Developing a coherent African integration policy on the regulated movement of people, goods and capital, working with SADC, the AU and other Regional Economic Communities (RECs).
5. Resolving the underlying political-economic problem of the two-tier, colonial-apartheid economic structure, addressed in the companion piece on heterodox development (ZAIMAN, 2026a).

## 15. Conclusion

MSOMI (2026) is correct that South Africa cannot ignore the reputational damage and that government statements alone will not stem the tide. The deeper problem is that the South African state has not yet diagnosed the contest in which it is engaged. France, alongside other powers, is operating across kinetic and non-kinetic domains: from Djibouti, the UAE, La Réunion, Mayotte and the Scattered Islands; through Canal+ and through summit diplomacy that engages African intellectuals in the work of repositioning a defeated *Françafrique*.

The critique of MBEMBE's 2015 framing offered here is academic and structural, not personal. The framing – *Afrophobia, creeping pogrom, shortest way to genocide* – is not factually accurate as description, and the empirical record carefully maintained by ACMS (Xenowatch, 2024) does not sustain it. Such categorical labels travel readily into hostile political contexts. The TRUMP *white genocide* claim and the MBEMBE *Afrophobia* claim are not equivalent in author or politics, but they are equivalent in operational logic: extreme reductionism producing misinformation. The more demanding intellectual task is to hold together four things at once: the moral seriousness of anti-migrant violence; the structural causes rooted in colonial-apartheid inheritance and post-1994 policy failure; the inadequacy of the African integration regime; and the strategic exploitation of all three by external actors.

South Africa's national security system is not currently configured to fight this kind of war. The SANDF, the State Security Agency, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation and the cluster departments that together constitute the national security system lack the doctrine, the capabilities and the integrated architecture to anticipate, detect, warn, respond and resolve in the grayzone. They are configured for conventional military, policing and diplomatic tasks. Non-kinetic warfare in its modern variants – information, narrative, cognitive, financial, infrastructural and cyber – falls between their mandates and their capabilities. The Canal+/MultiChoice transaction passing through competition review without strategic-communications security review is one illustration. The likely future trajectory of MTN is another. The absence of a coherent counter to the *Afrophobia* dossier in continental forums is a third.

The primary national security problem in the country is, and has been since 1994, underdevelopment and political-economic misalignment. As argued in the companion piece (ZAIMAN, 2026a), the persistence of an orthodox economic

paradigm that stabilises rather than transforms the colonial-apartheid economic structure creates the perfect conditions for social discontent and friction. Those conditions are then exploited by political parties and foreign governments alike. The *genocide*, *xenophobia* and *Afrophobia* labels, rooted in real underdevelopment, social friction, government and state failures and unregulated mass migration, are instances of information, narrative and cognitive warfare that South Africa does not currently have the capability to counter or fight.

The tasks for South African statecraft are fourfold:

1. Recognition: that the country is engaged in a non-kinetic, grayzone contest, not only a domestic policy problem.
2. Placing comprehensive security, and the resolution of the colonial-apartheid economic structure, at the centre of national strategy.
3. Developing the institutional capacity – across the SANDF, the intelligence services, DIRCO and the cluster departments – to anticipate, detect, warn, respond and resolve in the grayzone, including narrative warfare in defence of a continental developmental project.
4. Treating information infrastructure – submarine cables, satellites, broadcast platforms, mobile networks – as strategic infrastructure subject to national-security review, and supporting an African integration regime built on new conceptual, technological and infrastructural foundations.

Without those four steps, the next iteration of the *Afrophobia* dossier – and the next iteration of the *genocide* dossier – will be more damaging than this one.

## References

- ACMS (2024) *African Centre for Migration & Society: about and funders*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand. Available at: <https://migration.org.za/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- ADJAI, C. and LAZARIDIS, G. (2013) 'Migration, xenophobia and new racism in post-apartheid South Africa', *International Journal of Social Science Studies*, 1(1), pp. 192–205.
- African Business (2023) 'Scepticism over Grand Inga dam revival', 13 July. Available at: <https://african.business/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- Africanews (2021) "'Right moment": Scholar Mbembe on his role in France-Africa summit', 7 June. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- Africanews (2024) 'France's president sees new role for its Djibouti military base', 21 December. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).

- Anadolu Agency (2025) 'FACTBOX – Ouster from Africa: What is left of France's military presence on the continent?', 10 January. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- BACH, D. C. (2016) *Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, Institutions and Trans-State Networks*. London: Routledge.
- Billionaires.Africa (2025) 'Canal+ gets final nod for MultiChoice takeover', 24 July. Available at: <https://www.billionaires.africa/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- BOND, P. (2014) *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*. Revised and expanded edn. London: Pluto Press.
- BOUOPDA, P. K. (2021) 'Emmanuel Macron's Africa policies are still rooted in French colonialism', *Jacobin*, 8 October. Available at: <https://jacobin.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM (2017) 'For whom the Bell Pottinger tolls', 5 September. Available at: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- CHANG, H.-J. (2002) *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*. London: Anthem Press.
- CLAUSEWITZ, C. von (1976 [1832]) *On War*. Edited and translated by M. Howard and P. Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Competition Commission of South Africa (2025) *Commission recommends approval of MultiChoice/Canal+ acquisition*, 21 May. Available at: <https://www.compcom.co.za/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- Construction Review Online (2026) 'DRC Congo and South Africa set to revive \$10 billion Inga 3 dam talks', 20 March. Available at: <https://constructionreviewonline.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- Council of Europe (2017) *Lutter contre l'afrophobie, ou le racisme anti-Noir-e-s, en Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- CRUSH, J. (2008) *The Perfect Storm: The Realities of Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa*. Cape Town: Southern African Migration Project, Migration Policy Series No. 50.
- DESAI, R. (2013) *Geopolitical Economy: After US Hegemony, Globalization and Empire*. London: Pluto Press.
- DIOP, B. B., TOBNER, O. and VERSCHAVE, F.-X. (2005) *Nérophobie*. Paris: Les Arènes.
- ECDPM (2021) *The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Africa: Synthesis Report*. Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management.
- HOFFMAN, F. G. (2018) 'Examining complex forms of conflict: Gray zone and hybrid challenges', *PRISM*, 7(4), pp. 30–47.

- HOFNUNG, T. (2021) 'New Africa-France summit: The concealed continuation of Emmanuel Macron's Africa policy', *Ifri Editorials*, 27 October. Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales.
- Holberg Prize (2024) *Achille Mbembe: 2024 Holberg Laureate*. Bergen: Holberg Prize. Available at: <https://holbergprize.org/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- ICJ (2024) *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel): Order of 26 January 2024 indicating provisional measures*. The Hague: International Court of Justice. Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- IHEDN (2025) 'Djibouti, un carrefour géostratégique unique', *IHEDN Online*, 3 September. Available at: <https://ihedn.fr/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- Index on Censorship (2025) 'How a billionaire mogul pushed France's media to the right', 21 October. Available at: <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- Institut Montaigne (2021) 'President Macron's balancing act at the Africa-France summit', 14 October. Available at: <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- KAPLAN, R. D. (2010) *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House.
- LANDAU, L. B. (ed.) (2011) *Exorcising the Demons Within: Xenophobia, Violence and Statecraft in Contemporary South Africa*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.
- LANDAU, L. B. (2010) 'Loving the alien? Citizenship, law, and the future in South Africa's demonic society', *African Affairs*, 109(435), pp. 213–230.
- LE BON, J.-B. (2025) 'France in the Indian Ocean: Navigating national imperatives and regional ambitions', *The Diplomat*, 29 May. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- LENIN, V. I. (1917) *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Petrograd: Zhizn i Znaniye Publishers.
- MAGUBANE, B. M. (1979) *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- MAHAN, A. T. (1890) *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- MAZARR, M. J. (2015) *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press.
- MBEMBE, A. (2015) "'Afrophobia'? 'Xenophobia'? 'Black on Black Racism'? in South Africa", *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos 1 & 2, pp. 29–30.
- MEARSHEIMER, J. J. and WALT, S. M. (2007) *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- MISAGO, J. P. (2017) 'Politics by other means? The political economy of xenophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa', *The Black Scholar*, 47(2), pp. 40–53.
- MOHAMED, S. (2010) 'The state of the South African economy', in Daniel, J., Naidoo, P., Pillay, D. and Southall, R. (eds) *New South African Review 1: 2010 Development or Decline?* Johannesburg: Wits University Press, pp. 39–64.
- MSOMI, S. (2026) 'A reputation South Africa can no longer ignore', *Sunday Times*, 10 May, p. 1.
- MultiChoice Group (2025) *Notice of delisting from the JSE*, 10 December. Johannesburg: MultiChoice.
- NATO ACT (2023) *NATO's Approach to Cognitive Warfare*. Norfolk, VA: NATO Allied Command Transformation, Innovation Hub.
- OCCRP (2021) 'Meta bans Black Cube and other "cyber mercenaries" from its platforms', 17 December. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- PATNAIK, U. and PATNAIK, P. (2017) *A Theory of Imperialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- PATNAIK, U. and PATNAIK, P. (2021) *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- PIGEAUD, F. (2017) *Africaine France: Un mécanisme néocolonial*. Paris: La Découverte.
- PIGEAUD, F. and SYLLA, N. S. (2018) *L'arme invisible de la Françafrique: Une histoire du franc CFA*. Paris: La Découverte.
- PRCA (2017) *Bell Pottinger Private Limited: ruling of the Professional Practices Committee*. London: Public Relations and Communications Association, 4 September.
- Public Service Commission (2022) *Report on the State of the Public Service*. Pretoria: PSC.
- Screen Daily (2018) 'Former Canal Plus chief Vincent Bolloré placed in custody amid African corruption probe', 24 April. Available at: <https://www.screendaily.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- SINGER, P. W. and BROOKING, E. T. (2018) *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Submarine Cable Networks (2024) *African submarine cable landings: Inventory and analysis*. Available at: <https://www.submarinenetworks.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- TechCabal (2025) 'From first buy to final buyout: A 20-month timeline of how Canal+ took over MultiChoice', 21 October. Available at: <https://techcabal.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- The Diplomat (2024) 'What the Chagos Islands deal means for France's Indian Ocean territories and Indo-Pacific strategy', November. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).

- The Diplomat (2025) 'France and Mauritius: Strengthening ties in the Indian Ocean', 12 December. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- TOBNER, O. (2007) *Du racisme français: Quatre siècles de négrophobie*. Paris: Les Arènes.
- TOURÉ, A. (2021) 'New Africa-France summit: The concealed continuity of Emmanuel Macron's African policy', *Notes de l'Ifri*, October. Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales.
- UK PARLIAMENT (2019) *Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, HC 1791*. London: House of Commons.
- VERSCHAVE, F.-X. (1998) *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République*. Paris: Stock.
- WA KABWE-SEGATTI, A. (2008) "'Clandestins" et "makwerekwere" dans l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid: production de catégories, pratiques administratives et xénophobie', *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 48(189-190), pp. 113–140.
- WOLPE, H. (1972) 'Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid', *Economy and Society*, 1(4), pp. 425–456.
- Xenowatch (2024) *Xenophobic violence in South Africa: trends and data*. Johannesburg: African Centre for Migration and Society, University of the Witwatersrand. Available at: <https://www.xenowatch.ac.za/> (Accessed: 10 May 2026).
- ZAAIMAN, A. (2026a) *Economic Development: Theory and the Case of South Africa*. Companion paper, 5 May 2026.