

UBUNTU AS FOREIGN POLICY

The Ambiguities of South Africa's Global Identity



My main concern is based on the extent to which South Africa can and will continue playing an influential and consequential role on the global stage that is normatively defined and morally driven.

By Garth L le Pere

South Africa's foreign policy since 1994 is often extolled as one of the most inspiring and progressive aspects of its public life. Its success has been grounded on the mutually reinforcing pillars of the struggle against apartheid and South Africa's transition to democracy and constitutional rule. However, in recent times there has been growing consternation that the carefully crafted script of values and principles that have underpinned and guided the conduct of South Africa's foreign policy have increasingly been compromised on the altar of expediency and convenience.

There are even worrisome symptoms concerning the institutional locus of South Africa's foreign relations. For example, in the *Sunday Times* of 2 October 2016, there was an article which contained some disturbing allegations about erratic expenditure patterns in the Department of

International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). It was alleged that the Auditor-General found that there was irregular expenditure of R338 million while expressing concern that a procurement contract worth R347 million did not meet the criteria defined in the original specifications. South Africa's Auditor-General is known as a model of probity and prudence and while only allegations, they do cast aspersions on DIRCO's ability to manage a strategic portfolio of public affairs. Not only does this denote gross dereliction in the management of DIRCO's supply chain, but it also has profound implications for the department's image as the custodian of South Africa's foreign policy.

This custodianship is embodied in the 2011 foreign policy White Paper entitled, *Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu*. Within the philosophical and normative remit of *Ubuntu*, the white paper is an

attempt to place the affirmation of the humanity of others as central to the affirmation of a South African humanity. This humanist dialectic in *Ubuntu* is complemented by the principle of *Batho Pele* (putting people first) and takes into account the fashioning of a diplomatic calculus in the service of promoting certain values, the most critical being human rights, democracy, reconciliation, and eradicating poverty and underdevelopment. According to the White Paper, the essential tenets of *Ubuntu* as diplomacy will unfold in the context of promoting Pan-Africanism, South-South solidarity, global equity and justice, building partnerships with developed countries, and helping to strengthen the multilateral system.

However, in this article I want to argue that the virtues and values of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele* have been poorly served and executed in South Africa's foreign policy if viewed through the prism of building and developing a global identity as a middle power which is committed to an active multilateralism. A strong argument can be made that the erosion of South Africa's identity as a purveyor of certain norms and values – whose contours took on increasing shape during the Mbeki presidency – has a lot to do with the decline of its multilateral profile, most crucially in the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. While obviously a broader problem and dilemma for the government, we cannot discount DIRCO's culpability, especially its troubled institutional profile, its weak managerial and political leadership, and its human and analytical constraints.

As a matter of fact, the first draft of the chapter dealing with foreign policy in the National Development Plan provided a critical but fair diagnostic assessment about South Africa's global image, namely, that its diplomatic capacity was over-stretched; that its power and influence had declined in relative terms; that it was viewed as Janus-faced in Africa where its bona fides were suspect; and as a consequence, the country had suffered material losses in bargaining power and had lost trade and investment opportunities not only in Africa but more broadly.

The chapter was withdrawn and

subsequently revised ostensibly following dissent and protest about its accuracy by the DIRCO Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashebane. However, the initial diagnosis was suggestive of a country whose moral and political currency was depreciating. This depreciation, in my view, has become even more pronounced and evident under the Presidency of Jacob Zuma since 2009. The perception and reality has gathered pace of a new ruling aristocracy that has been more concerned with the trappings of power, self-enrichment, and wealth accumulation much to the detriment of South Africa's global image and reputation. This has become a creeping cancer that has undermined the very substance and neutrality of public power. The ANC government finds itself at an intersection where many South Africans feel that their hopes and aspirations for a better life have been betrayed, exacerbated by growing social alienation, anger, and discontent among the country's poor and marginalised. These impressions have been reinforced by the outcomes of the recent local government elections which in a sense was a referendum on the ANC's moral authority to govern South Africa, a gain that was painstakingly won since its establishment in 1910.

On the basis of the growing cynicism and despair fuelled by the Zuma Presidency, it seems that there has been a drift away from the ethical foundations of South Africa's foreign policy into an instrumentalism and 'unprincipled pragmatism' which accords more with public relations, perfunctory diplomacy, and ceremonial ephemerals than with the normative internationalism which has shaped South Africa's foreign policy and concurrently, its global standing since 1994. We would do well to remember that since 1994, South Africa has pursued an activist foreign policy – informed by the historical antecedents in the struggle against apartheid – that saw a strong moral convergence (in its beliefs) and ethical compatibility (in its behaviour) with regard to the promotion of human rights, democracy, solidarity politics, and its own developmental needs.

On this basis, South Africa's credibility and uniqueness on the

international stage was built on three axiomatic factors: a relatively peacefully negotiated transition to democracy; Nelson Mandela as the global embodiment of reconciliation; and South Africa's emergence as a strategic multilateral actor under President Mbeki. In essence, these were the vectors that provided South Africa with vast reserves to act and behave as a 'norm' entrepreneur in international relations. The country was thereby able to exercise considerable regional and global influence which was quite disproportionate to its population size, material capabilities, and geographical location.

This was very much in keeping with the moral principle relating to a manifest sense of duty and obligation that came with South Africa's transition to democracy and the manner in which the ruling party chose to position the country on the global stage; or put another way, South Africa was able to meet the demands of what Immanuel Kant called a 'categorical imperative' which underscores conduct that is based on a universal precept and which advances the ends of human existence informed by a common good. And here we find a certain complementarity and resonance between the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and basic Kantian maxim which enjoins us to act in line with principles under the reasonable assumption that those principles are logically applicable to everyone else.

However and to repeat the point, the role of moral discourse has been eroded in South Africa's foreign policy in favour of a more instrumentalist and functional type of diplomacy that is lacking in energy, spirit, and direction. And herein lies the dilemma for the White Paper and whether *Ubuntu* could provide the necessary impetus to recapture the lost discursive moral ground. Here we are not simply talking, for example, of a successful hosting of international events like the soccer World Cup, joining BRICS, providing regional public goods such as the North-South corridor, delivering development assistance, or participating in peace missions.

My main concern is based on the extent to which South Africa can and will continue playing an influential and consequential role on the global

stage that is normatively defined and morally driven. Such a role has a direct impact on its identity as a country that represents and upholds certain values and principles in foreign policy. The country was able to build and develop its reserves of soft power based on the essential purposes and ambition of its foreign policy project in a difficult and mercurial global environment where less developed countries and people, but especially those of Africa, have been subject to greater structural vulnerability and insecurity in the form of poverty, conflict, disease, environmental degradation, economic stagnation, social dislocation, underdevelopment, etc.

The legitimacy and power hierarchy of the international order is still defined and dominated by America and the West. To the extent that it can be challenged, there is an imperative to move away from or at least contest the realist dictates of international relations. While still early to assess its exact foreign policy contours, it would seem that the Trump presidency will be based on an unequivocal assertion of the preponderance of American hard power and its vital interests in the high politics of war and peace. If this is the case, the call for normative agents to raise their collective voices cannot be exaggerated since a President Trump could turn the world into a more dangerous, volatile, and unjust place than it already is.

In his *Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides fills his epic of the war between Athens and Sparta with tales of heroism and brutality, victory and defeat, brilliance and stupidity, and honour and deceit; these binaries in many ways continue to shape world politics. But there is also an underlying cynicism that the brutal suffering of the Melians at the hands of the Athenians represents an ongoing dominant logic of realist thinking where the powerful get what they desire and the weak suffer what they must. It is in the interstices of these consequentialist extremes where we need to locate our critique about the nature of moral duty and the correctness of actions. As a consequence normative agency in international relations still matters a great deal since it defines the parameters in which collective action can take place.

According to the Oxford IR scholar Andrew Hurrell, a central theme of current world history is the struggle by revisionist states (also known as ‘middle or emerging powers’) for equal rights which are often overtly or covertly subverted by the more powerful developed countries. Without discounting the concerns of military confrontation between major powers and the nature of asymmetric conflict after the 9/11 assault on New York and Washington DC, the idea has gained traction that the global community of states and people should strive to promote shared values and purposes in the provision of global public goods in an international order where the divisions between rich and poor countries are more pronounced than ever before. How is it possible that in an age of unprecedented global prosperity, more than 2.7 billion people – mostly located in the developing world – still have to live on \$2 a day or even less?

And paradoxically, this level of destitution coincides with a rapid expansion of the circuits of global governance: there has been an exponential increase in the number of international institutions; in the growth of the scope, range, and intrusiveness of global rules and norms; in the growing diversity of global compacts; and in greater demands for collective action in the UN to deal with global problems and challenges.

Hence, the normative quest for greater equity and justice in international relations has been closely linked to the articulation of new and different forms of state legitimacy and authority where emerging and middle powers have increasingly challenged traditional forms of statecraft and foreign policy. As such, new forms of soft power have been privileged and new forms of diplomacy have been rewarded insofar as these forms attempt to redress the structural and institutional deficits that exist in international relations, especially as these define the ongoing marginalisation and disempowerment of developing countries in the international system.

It has been argued that the efficacy of such new forms of soft power and new forms of diplomacy have to be commensurate with and constitutive of a strong sense of self-esteem and identity.

What the French philosopher and social theorist, Michel Foucault, has called ‘governmentality’ provides the basis for self-esteem and national identity and this has to do with how the business of government is conducted with respect to such matters as managing the economy, executing social policies on poverty and unemployment, providing welfare services, putting incentives in place to encourage the private sector and so on. In many ways, ‘governmentality’ is closely aligned with the *Batho Pele* principle of putting people first.

As such and theoretically at least, domestic policy is mirrored or refracted in foreign policy since ‘governmentality’ at home informs the values and identity narratives which a state projects abroad. An important Foucaultian syllogism suggests that while the operation of

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power can and must be a positive force dispersed throughout society, similarly that positive force can be projected onto the global stage to solve global systemic problems like poverty, human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, disease pandemics, environmental degradation, food and energy insecurity, transnational conflicts, financial instability and so on. Such a characterisation conforms to the concept of national role conception which relates to how a domestic consensus evolves to generate shared views, norms, and understandings of the role a country should play as part of a social collective on the global stage and in terms of an imperative of burden sharing and joint responsibility. Such a role conception is further defined and

informed by a sense of identity which encourages certain forms of behaviour that promotes emancipatory problem-solving in the international arena.

This involves the shaping of symbolic, ideational, and psychological parameters that derive from the security of subjects with regard to their sense of well-being, continuity, stability, and safety in the domestic regime. Where a state is secure and confident about its own existence in a community of states, logic suggests that it will be able to affirm a global personality that is based on a consistent sense of identity and self-esteem in its international relations. In other words, the imperatives of citizen security focused on welfare and physical safety mutually reinforce a country’s global personality represented and enhanced by coherent narratives of society, and its role and place in the world; this dialectic is often referred to as the ‘intermestic’, represented by a close affinity between the international and the domestic.

In terms of this logic, we can equally assert that where there are high levels of social insecurity as exists in South Africa in the form poverty, inequality, and unemployment, even coherent narratives of society will buckle under the weight of evidence to the contrary and hence strain the credulity of the country’s projected global personality. In this way, foreign policy becomes inextricably interwoven with the values and identity of a country and *ex hypothesi* with its subjective sense of dignity, honour, recognition, and standing.

In the case of South Africa, there has been an erosion of the fabric that hold its citizen security and its global personality together, with serious implications for the White Paper’s *Ubuntu* underpinnings and for the status of its identity and stature. We can refer to several incidents and events which shape perceptions about the country and which have recently damaged South Africa’s sense of self-esteem, self-image, and national identity.

- While still hotly debated, there is a school of thought which argues that South Africa’s intention to withdraw from the International Criminal Court signals a retreat from helping to strengthen the foundations of

multilateral governance. If anything, it is an attempt at asserting a form of 'credentialism' among an increasingly sceptical African audience. Moreover, South Africa will have great difficulty in advancing the principles of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele* in Africa as long as many of its citizens remain deeply intolerant and resentful towards immigrants and refugees from the African continent.

- It remains puzzling why South Africa has not ratified important human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the Optional Protocol of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. These failures bring into stark relief South Africa's refusal to support the UN General Assembly resolution to decriminalise homosexuality even though gay rights enjoy constitutional protection in the country.
- Harry Truman, the US President from 1945-1952 once said "the President makes foreign policy". In the cases of Presidents Mandela and Mbeki this certainly seemed to be the case given their exceptional leadership roles in guiding the country's external relations during a turbulent period of change at home and abroad. However, under President Zuma, it would seem that South Africa's international image has suffered serious harm; which other sitting head of state has 783 corruption charges hanging over his head? He has thus failed to build on the solid normative foundations inherited from his two predecessors and much of this has to do with his own failures to provide moral leadership by constantly being mired in controversies and scandals of his own making.
- South Africa's aggressive lobbying on behalf of Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma to win the Chair of the AU Commission turned out to be a very divisive exercise at a time when the country had reaffirmed the centrality of the continent as a fundamental principle in the foreign policy of *Ubuntu*. This violated and went against the grain of a standing

convention that large countries would not put candidates forward for the position but South Africa nevertheless went ahead in the face of growing acrimony and resistance to its tactical manoeuvres to subvert the convention. By all accounts, this incident aggravated South Africa's already dented image in some parts of the continent and among certain countries, causing its leadership bona fides to come under greater scrutiny.

- We cannot ignore the impact of any impending downgrade by ratings agencies, Standard & Poor and Fitch. South Africa's credit rating currently stands at BBB – which is one notch above junk status. Its low economic growth – which the Reserve Bank forecasts at 0% this year – has direct consequences for its *Batho*

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Pele social contract. However, the ratings agencies have expressed concern about how political tumult under the Zuma presidency has threatened policy and institutional stability and undermined structural reform, especially in bloated and mismanaged state-owned enterprises. South Africa's sovereign credit profile has been severely compromised and the country has lost its lustre as a primary destination for foreign investment, with direct ramifications for its global standing and stature.

These cases and examples are emblematic of a growing pathological syndrome of a state that has not been able to ensure the security of its citizens with consequent negative effects for its personality, image, and reputation in international affairs which

draws on a normative history of active multilateralism. This takes on added significance since South Africa has to strategically navigate its way between the modern world of realist geo-politics and power and the post-modern world of idealist images and influence.

If the German philosopher, Georg Hegel, would have us believe that the state is the incarnation of reason and rationality, then unreason and irrationality are incrementally creeping into the anatomy of the South African state in its current form. In Hegelian discourse, the South African state has not lived up to its calling as the "universal overseer", thus leading to an attenuation of its leadership and hegemony over society and this is closely tied in with the failures of the ruling party to maintain itself as an idea and reality among its support base.

Here Antonio Gramsci, the Italian anti-fascist thinker, is very instructive when he writes: "At a certain point in their historical lives, social classes become detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in that particular organisational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognised by their class (or faction of a class). When such crises occur, the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous because the field is wide open for violent forces, represented by charismatic men of destiny."

The recent developments and trends in the country's economy and polity will continue to be subject to delicate and dangerous unknown forces and thus represent the makings of an existential crisis in the South African state if left unchecked. And herein lie the ambiguities for the country's global image and identity: it will be a real struggle and challenge for DIRCO to realise the liberating ethos of *Ubuntu* and *Batho Pele* in the present environment and under the current leadership. But the endeavour will be worth it if it results in a different kind of social contract and political culture which advances the frontiers of citizen security in a manner that is commensurate with re-establishing South Africa's normative agency in international relations. ■