

FOREIGN POLICY: ADVANCING SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL INTEREST WITHIN BRICS

The nature of South Africa's constitutional democracy is taken as a starting point in determining the interests of South Africa as a nation. But *Narnia Bohler-Muller* asks: are these socioeconomic and political interests adequately provided for in the country's international relations strategies so as to advance South Africa's constitutional values within BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa)?



These values are expressed in the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as follows:

- Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

Given this starting point, valid questions can be asked as to whether an African Agenda pertaining to continental integration, and the diplomacy of ubuntu, are international relations strategies that adequately take into account South Africa's national socioeconomic and political interests; and whether current policies sufficiently advance the national values of dignity, equality, freedom, democracy and the rule of law as articulated in the constitution.

The main problem appears to be that South Africa is trying to serve too many international and regional agendas and is thus overextended in its global engagements. This overextension contributes to the lack of a clear foreign policy focus.

South Africa is trying to serve too many international and regional agendas and is thus overextended in its global engagements.



National Development Plan

The National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 (NDP) argues that the formulation of foreign policy should be informed by principles that both reflect and support national interests. The three main concerns emerging from the NDP are that South Africa needs to grow its economy; reduce poverty; and improve the quality of life for South Africans – the 'better life for all' principle embodied in the preamble to the constitution.

In broad terms, we need to address inequalities in South Africa. How do we do this while building a capable and developmental state?

Chapter seven of the NDP deals with South Africa's 'place in the world'. It says the country must honestly re-evaluate its regional and global positioning to ensure that foreign policy objectives help it achieve its constitutional vision of a better life for all. The NDP suggests that a more consistent,

less ambiguous approach to international relations could be achieved by adopting the principle that the national interest is paramount at all times.

Despite referring to 'the world', the focus is almost exclusively on economic diplomacy in the context of Africa and regionalism. There is very little reference to the complexity of South Africa's myriad global interests, including the IBSA Dialogue Forum – an international tripartite grouping for promoting international co-operation among India, Brazil and South Africa – and BRICS.

The African Agenda and the place of BRICS

South Africa is a leading champion of the African Agenda that aims to end the marginalisation of the continent from the rest of the world. One way of doing this is to use BRICS as a platform to raise the African voice.

However, each BRICS member country has its own regional agenda and economic and geopolitical interests to protect. There is also the new 'scramble for Africa' to consider, which has resulted in intense competition among BRICS members for natural resources on the continent.

The foreign exploitation of these resources can be damaging to the continent and does not necessarily advance the interests of Africans. On the other hand, if governed well by Africans, it is a good opportunity for development on the continent.

In promoting its African Agenda, South Africa has proclaimed itself both the leader and bridge-builder on the continent, and through its membership of BRICS, the primary gateway to Africa. This stance has been challenged, even though South Africa was successful in securing the chair of the African Union (AU) Commission in 2012.

Given the challenges of unilaterally adopting a political and economic leadership role in Africa (a role that could equally be fulfilled by Nigeria, for instance) and the lack of clarity on how central the values of democracy and human rights are to this process, it would be preferable to adopt a more nuanced approach with respect to global and continental priorities. This would mean positioning national interests at the centre of the debate rather than using the interests of BRICS or any other multilateral body as a yardstick.

This more balanced and nuanced approach can be glimpsed in what the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) calls a 'diplomacy of ubuntu' that foregrounds common humanity, relationship-building, interdependence and interconnectedness.

Diplomacy of ubuntu

The values that inspire and guide South Africa as a nation are deeply rooted in the long years of struggle for liberation. As a beneficiary of many acts of selfless solidarity in the past, South Africa strongly believes that what it wishes for its people should be what it wishes for the citizens of the world. The ultimate aim should be to contribute towards the building of a better South Africa, a better Africa and a better world.

The international relations department's policy states that the philosophy of ubuntu reflects the idea that people affirm their own humanity when they affirm the humanity of others. This approach should inform South Africa's

actions within multilateral fora including the UN, AU and BRICS. This could be done by ensuring a more collaborative environment that emphasises participation, collaboration and consultation. The policy defines ubuntu in this particular context as the 'recognition of the interconnectedness and interdependency of humanity'.

Thus, South African foreign policy should be framed by respect for common humanity and the diversity of nations.

The South African Council on International Relations

The establishment of the South African Council on International Relations (SACOIR) indicates a move towards enhanced participation of the people in the state's foreign policy processes.

The council was created as a domestic advisory body on international relations to further the international relations department's objective of maximising domestic participation in such matters. It is meant to serve as a consultative forum in which non-state actors and government:

- provide a platform for generating public debate on foreign policy;
- provide a consultative forum for regular review of South Africa's foreign policy; and
- advise the minister of international relations and cooperation.

The active and substantive participation of civil society and the private sector in the formulation of international relations may change the game by further entrenching thinking around the interconnectedness of national interests and regional and international agendas.

It is not necessary to sacrifice the national vision as encompassed in the constitution in the pursuit of global recognition and influence.



A principled approach

There is no hard and fast rule, except to ensure that South Africa's foreign relations and priorities do not stray far from its domestic commitments to democracy and the values underpinning political and socioeconomic rights to ensure a principled approach to determining South Africa's 'place in the world'. It is not necessary to sacrifice the national vision as encompassed in the constitution in the pursuit of global recognition and influence.

It is submitted that the diplomacy of ubuntu as articulated by DIRCO has the potential to balance these national, continental and international interests in a manner that benefits all South Africans. ■

Author: Professor Narnia Bohler-Muller, acting executive director, Democracy and Governance programme, HSRC.