

Foreign policy needs tactical thinking

The strategic imperative of South Africa's
2018 Brics chairship

Philani Mthembu

THIS year will be one of South Africa's busiest on the diplomatic calendar since democratisation in 1994. While it offers many possibilities and opportunities for newly sworn in President Cyril Ramaphosa and his administration, it will also test the state's strategic thinking when it comes to utilising its international partnerships to achieve domestic and regional priorities.

While South Africa maintains a large diplomatic presence in the world, question marks persist as to whether the country's foreign policy brings about tangible benefits for the broader society.

This question is especially pertinent in tough economic and political times. South Africa finds itself chairing the Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group of countries, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (Iora), and has recently put through its bid for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2019 - 2020.

These multiple responsibilities place an obligation on the foreign policy community to craft a coherent and consistent strategy in line with the country's domestic and regional priorities.

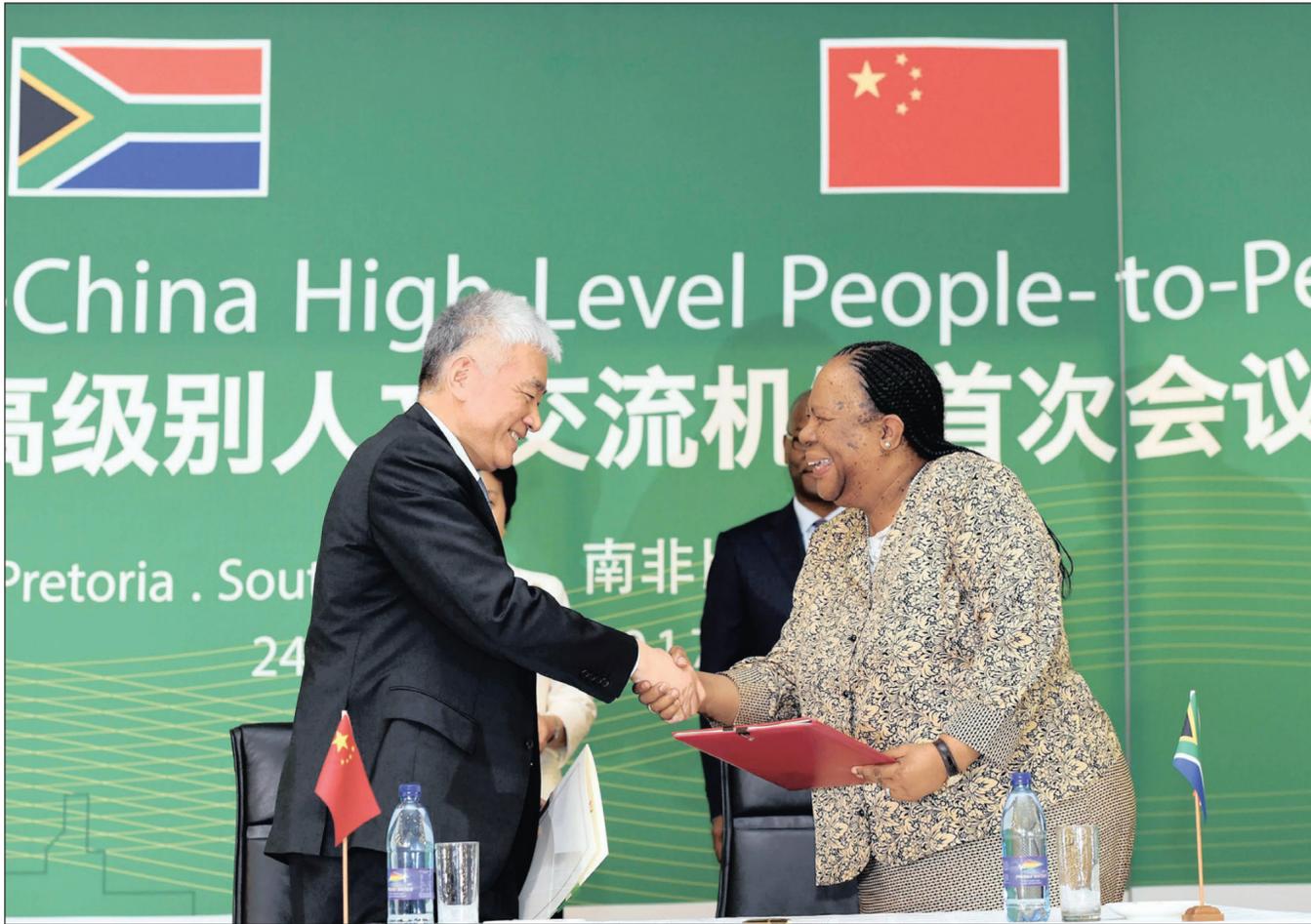
While the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco) remains the central focal point for South Africa's international relations, sub-national spheres of government such as cities and provinces have become increasingly important foreign policy actors, while the role of parliament remains crucial in ensuring oversight.

Non-state entities such as think tanks, research centres, the private sector, NGOs, and broader civil society also cannot be ignored given the multiple tracks of diplomacy in contemporary summitry and international relations.

The task of the South African state will thus be to ensure a coherent whole of government approach underpinned by a clear grand strategy on South Africa's international relations.

The state will thus have to demonstrate an ability to co-ordinate within and outside of government to make use of the available human resources involved in thinking through and implementing South Africa's foreign policy.

During the recent State of the Nation Address (Sona) debate on the February 19, Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor laid out the foreign policy priorities



Former minister of science and technology Naledi Pandor signing an agreement with the Chinese Minister of Science and Technology Wang Zhigang at a South Africa-China High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism last year. The exchange seeks to enhance mutual trust, friendship and strategic partnership between the people of both countries. Pandor said at the Sona debate that under South Africa's Brics chairship, the country would prioritise the promotion of value-added trade and intra-Brics investment into productive sectors.

PICTURE: JACOLINE SCHOONEE /AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY (ANA) ARCHIVE

of the current administration led by Ramaphosa.

She makes mention of the implementation of the Tripartite Free Trade Area (Tfta), which combines the markets of 26 countries and more than 600 million Africans as a key priority, while noting the importance of negotiating the Continental Free Trade Agreement (Cfta) in order to secure value as a block for African interests in the global political and economic landscape.

Pandor then noted that under South Africa's Brics Chairship, the country would prioritise the pro-

motion of value-added trade and intra-Brics investment into productive sectors, while pointing out that under its Chairship of SADC it would prioritise implementing the SADC industrialisation strategy and developing an infrastructure roadmap.

Given the focus of the Brics New Development Bank (NDB) in funding sustainable infrastructure, the country will have to explain to its African partners to what extent the Africa Regional Centre (ARC) of the Bank now headquartered in Johannesburg would contribute to filling

the infrastructure gap in the region.

This will remain a focal point given the expectation on the continent that projects funded would not only be located in South Africa, but have a regional focus. In this regard, Pandor calls for the country to address the notion that it does not share the benefits of Brics sufficiently nor those derived from its membership in the G20.

While some within and outside of South Africa have argued that the country's Brics membership constitutes a turn towards the east (read China) and a shunning of relations

with partners in the north (read EU and the US), Pandor sought to show that this was not the case.

She states that "fals we work to further strengthen the Brics partnership, we will certainly not neglect other valued and established partnerships such as the one with the EU, which continues to be an important trading, investment, development cooperation and dialogue partner for South Africa".

Her balancing act is more in line with the empirical reality of South Africa's international engagements, where more than 70% of the

country's foreign direct investment (FDI) continues to come from countries in the EU.

This line of reasoning also takes into consideration the reality that the EU remains the number one source of funding for regional economic communities (RECs) and the AU. Perhaps this signals a more pragmatic approach that balances the country's engagement with global reformers in the Brics and established powers in the global North.

In this approach, Brics is not romanticised as heralding an over-

turning of the global system, but instead plays a role in the country's overall grand strategy and positioning in global politics.

This would be in line with the ANC's historical role in the non-aligned movement (NAM).

Given the contemporary geopolitical landscape, characterised by continued unipolarity of the US in the military realm, and multipolarity in the economic sphere, this may be a more welcome approach to foreign policy given that the country does not face any real pressure to choose between North and South.

The real pressure thus lies in crafting a pragmatic foreign policy.

Whether one is a Brics optimist or a sceptic, and there are many sceptics within and outside South Africa, the reality is that South Africa is a member of the Brics grouping, and its 2018 presidency will usher in the beginning of the second decade of the Brics partnership.

While some will remain sceptical of the country's role in Brics, the only way to allay the anxieties of sceptics will be to demonstrate a type of diplomacy that sees Brics membership not as an end goal in itself, but as part of a web of international engagements synchronised with delivering on South Africa's domestic and regional priorities.

Foreign policy thinkers and those responsible for implementing the country's foreign policy must thus use 2018 to inculcate a culture of strategic thinking and engagement on the global stage that brings about tangible benefits to the country's citizens.

In the realm of business, this will also mean ensuring a greater role of the country's small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa's economic diplomacy, which tends to be the preserve of large South African corporations.

A more systematic engagement with think tanks and empirical research will also be important, especially leading up to the Brics Academic Forum in May.

The South African Council of International Relations (SACOIR), established through the White Paper on Foreign Policy, and Dirco's Policy Research and Analysis Unit (Prau), both important interfaces between Dirco, think tanks, and civil society formations, will thus play a greater role in ensuring inclusivity and a greater level of strategic thinking and implementation of the country's foreign policy.

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Who will stand up for us in this valley of silence?

Benedict Xolani Dube

TO PARAPHRASE American linguist, cognitive scientist, historian and political activist Noam Chomsky: "The ANC in KwaZulu-Natal is stumbling around the province in a fog of mystification."

Indeed, KwaZulu-Natal is "headed to hell in a handbasket" as British essayist TS Elliot might have said.

The citizens of KwaZulu-Natal by and large are clinging to a threadbare cloth.

A frightful fall is imminent, the consequences of which we will endure for generations.

Desperation has primarily enveloped the African community. Constant ear-splitting cries of the condemned from the sinkhole of vulnerability and despair raise goosebumps.

Frail hands of the ill-fated still endeavour to touch the fringe of our community leader's garments. Regrettably, our so-called African leaders collectively feign blindness and deafness. They have forsaken their leadership obligations. And in so doing, they have only increased the burden of shackles that pin down the natural progression of our community.

Journalist O Jeffrey, in his book titled *After The Darkest Night Comes The Day: Change*, quotes a heart-piercing speech by Dr Martin Luther King Jr on March 31, 1968, when addressing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the Episcopal National Cathedral, Washington DC.

He said this: "On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question, 'Is it politic?' and Vanity comes along and asks the question, 'Is it popular?' But Conscience asks the question 'Is it right?' And there

comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor political, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right."

In the past, we rallied around political goals conceptualised from an ethos of ubuntu, the African conception of humanism which proclaimed "an injury to one is an injury to all". Does it still apply nowadays?

We Africans must ask ourselves some hard questions, in particular about what is right and what has gone terribly wrong in our province.

"We are sick and tired of working without being paid. Transnet is getting millions from eThekweni municipality... but every month we are not getting paid on time," said Nhlahlhla Bhengu.

Bhengu and his fellow drivers on February 1 in 2016 were referred to as "nonsensical" as they blocked the flow of traffic in eThekweni city centre.

There was no public outcry regarding their grievances. These breadwinners were stripped of their dignity and manhood, and disempowered as the protectors and providers of their families.

Contemplate in totality the repercussions of a man who says, "I am in debt now because I have to borrow money to buy groceries." While these breadwinners, embarking on strikes, were confronted with the harsh realities of failing to provide the basic needs to their dependants such as school uniforms, school fees and other household needs, community leaders and politicians stuck their heads in the sand.

Church leaders, meanwhile, failed to stand up and defend the exploited. The recent crop of social justice and empowerment groups like Mazibuye African Forum, In-

jenje YamaZulu, Imbumba Business Forum, Amadelangokubona, and many other black professional organisations that claim to speak for the exploited were conspicuously silent.

Meanwhile, the injustice was not meted out by Indian, White or coloured business people, but in fact by a company owned by an African family. There was no "injury to one is any injury to all". Where is our ubuntu now?

eThekweni Municipality councillors are being pompous and arrogant. They pretend to know little about poverty. It is sad that almost all of them have forgotten that they come from the most humble family backgrounds.

They are today's Marie Antoinette, the queen consort of Louis XVI. Remember the aborted, sinful boat cruise where 40 councillors were expected to board the MSC Sinfonia for a cruise to the Portuguese Islands between March 4 and 7 in 2016?

That cruise was to have been at the expense of ratepayers.

The aborted cruise is one of many excruciating kicks in the teeth of the destitute.

The same councillors have been accused, by their own bodyguards, of ignoring challenges confronting their protectors: "We have been raising our salary predicament since 2005. We have raised it with management; the city manager is aware of it."

Are the souls of our African academics, intellectuals and community leaders in covenant with cowardliness, expediency and vanity? The hope and soul of the community is wretchedly laid bare for the prophets of mirage to feast on. Our historical quest to attain social justice for all has been forsaken on the floor, to be stamped on by scound-

rels who masquerade as voices of the downtrodden.

Who has the courage and the will to pick up the ethos of social justice among the current crop of African community leaders? Who monitors the most excruciating injustices meted out against citizens in KwaZulu-Natal?

Harriet Martineau, in 1840, wrote Toussaint L'Ouverture's biography, *The Hour and the Man*. Toussaint L'Ouverture was a brave hero who led the slaves of St Domingo to "throw off the yoke of slavery".

We are stuck in an hour of desperation. The Xubera Institute for Research and Development still adheres to a belief that among the citizens of KwaZulu-Natal we have plenty of our own Toussaint L'Ouvertures, people who possess the spirit of bravery, honesty and integrity.

Benevolence

Africans cannot for ever survive on the benevolence of other community leaders. The silence of our community leaders was exposed by Professor McQuoid-Mason, president of the Commonwealth Legal Education Association, who took it upon himself to approach the public protector about the living conditions and ongoing killings in Glebelands Hostel, Umlazi, south of Durban. He did not seek political leadership directives or a government meeting for approval to tackle the Glebelands Hostel dilemma.

Dr Rama Naidu, of the Democracy Development Programme and Vasu Gounden, of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, have been at the coalface of untangling these social knots for decades. Their research institutes are non-partisan and financially

self-sustaining. They operate outside the confines of traditional academic institutions.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim and Quarraisha Abdool Karim have deservedly been honoured internationally for their sterling work in health science research. Their Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa has become an internationally recognised institution.

Dr Imtiaz Sooliman of Gift of the Givers is undisputed so far.

Advocate Kassie Naidoo, Professor Hoosen (Jerry) Coovadia, Ela Gandhi, Judge Zakeria Mohammed Yacob and Professor Ashwin Desai are determined and honest knights in shining armour on behalf of their community.

All the above-mentioned community leaders bear scars as a testimony of their resilience in a good cause. They do not mind going public and standing against a popular tide to speak the truth. Surely each and every Indian child wishes to emulate the character of these individuals?

Raymond Williams, a Welsh-born Marxist intellectual, observed that: "While it is true that those who hold material domination are also those who exercise spiritual domination, what is decisive is not only the conscious system of beliefs, meanings and values imposed, but the whole social process lived practically with these specific values and beliefs."

Material poverty imbued with hopelessness is spiritually disempowering, leading to a multiplicity of vulnerabilities. Toxic tentacles of political parties have encroached and enfolded the spiritual space. Political leaders have ascended to an incarnation of hope. The church principals have relegated them-

selves to midgets compared to political leaders. They are on their feeble knees with bowed spines, begging for mercy from political leaders.

In the recent xenophobia outbreak, the public took note of an assortment of church leaders, in their medieval regalia, being shepherded to the valley of nothingness by municipality officials and politicians. In the twinkling of an eye, without reporting a substantial solution emanating from their soliloquies with municipality officials, they disappeared to their respective bottomless holes.

Traditionally, church leaders are perceived as crusaders of truth and protectors of the vulnerable. Strangely, we have not heard them protesting against social ills, rampant government and corporate corruption and the prevailing apartheid system, that excludes and still thrive on dehumanising African people.

In this valley of silence, especially from church leaders, one recalls Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and an anti-Nazi dissident, who said: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

Karl Marx departed somewhat early, not having had the chance to witness the mutation of political parties to become the "opium of the people".

In African countries, after the de-legislation of colonial laws, the anointed liberation political party evolved into a super-social structure. It re-engineered the values, beliefs and norms of the country. Christopher Hadnagy eloquently summarises it as "social engineering is an art of human hacking". It further disempowers the oppressed. Subsequently the national symbol of citizenship and identity is re-

placed by that of the anointed political liberation party.

Scholars of sociology such as Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski, Harriet Martineau, Pierre Bourdieu, Alexis de Tocqueville and Herbert Spencer argue that it is precarious when impermanent social structures such as political parties redefine the identity, morals and ethics of any community.

The footprints of the National Party and National Socialist German Workers' Party are infamous examples.

The point of analysis converges to the reality that a lack of fearless truth-tellers within the African community is because of fear of ostracism. Let the conscience of African academics, church leaders, professionals, the business community, forward thinkers and many more, lead them to do the right thing by warmly embracing the frail hands of the condemned.

It is time for community leaders to take a "position that is neither safe, nor political, nor popular, but they must do what conscience tells them is right".

I still hold a belief that the African soul and integrity have not been devoured by the offers of impotent government appointments such as commissions, boards and other non-consequential committees.

Let each and every African citizen be Toussaint L'Ouverture by being brave and leading our beloved province to throw off the yoke of slavery. For the sake of the next generation, we must depart from this Earth knowing that we stopped Africans from salvaging randomly for hand-outs and crumbs from leaders of other communities.

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