

# Is Quiet Diplomacy an Effective Conflict Resolution Strategy?

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*We live in a world of nation states which are both immortal and incompetent, political entities that act as a focus for the loyalty of the citizen but cannot by themselves meet those citizens' needs.*

Douglas Hurd<sup>2</sup>

*Nations have pursued self-interest more frequently than high-minded principle, and have competed more than they have co-operated. There is little evidence to suggest that this age-old mode of behaviour has changed or that it is likely to change in decades ahead.*

Henry Kissinger<sup>3</sup>

One of the main duties of the South African government is to safeguard the country's security in order to enhance the quality of life of citizens and protect their property. The government has a duty to protect South African citizens abroad. However, those who do business or travel outside the country must also acknowledge that Pretoria's ability to shape the course of events in other countries is limited.

South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' approach (trying to influence the behaviour of others by secret negotiations or by refraining from taking a specific action) indicates Pretoria's reluctance to engage or project its power to impose solutions on African problems. Simply put, Pretoria is careful not to be seen to be throwing its weight around, particularly by bullying deviant African regimes like Zimbabwe into submission. This may seem ironic to some, as at the same time South Africa is extending its international diplomatic commitments in countries such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Côte d'Ivoire, Iraq and the Middle East. These foreign policy commitments are unprecedented in scope and reach.

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<sup>2</sup> Hurd D, *The Search for Peace — A Century of Peace Diplomacy*. London: Little Brown, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Kissinger H, *Diplomacy*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.

## **Approach to foreign intervention**

South Africa's foreign policy strategy seems to some to be one of isolationism and/or cautious engagement in its immediate neighbourhood and commitment and active engagement elsewhere in the continent and the world. Strategic national interests, defined as developments that could affect the lives of South African citizens, underlie this strategy. However, closer to home there have been calls for South Africa to take robust action and intervene in Harare.

The 'softly softly' approach (or what has come to be known as 'quiet diplomacy') has resulted in heated debate, both locally and abroad. Indeed nothing has been more contentious than the issue of using quiet diplomacy as an instrument to influence foreign policy outcomes in Zimbabwe. To its proponents, quiet diplomacy is a preferred means to bring civil and other conflicts to just and durable conclusions, and thus secure enduring peace at the national, regional and global levels. Helping to build peace in a way that reduces international tensions in the long term is one of the centuries-old challenges for international diplomacy. Foreign Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Foreign Affairs Portfolio Committee Chairman Pallo Jordan have repeatedly argued that Pretoria's approach is informed by a desire to avoid further collapse in Zimbabwe and bring about durable peace and stability.

It is vital to note that quiet diplomacy is not only unique to Pretoria. If anything it is a commonly-deployed approach in pursuit of different objectives. Not surprisingly it has been centre stage in a variety of contexts. These range from the Zimbabwean crisis to Britain's approach to the US on a range of issues such as the Kyoto Protocol; to the non-attendance of President George W Bush at the World Summit on Sustainable Development and his approach to the war on terror and Iraq.

In this chapter, I unpack some of the main reasons and/or assumptions held by those who argue for the abandonment of the 'quiet diplomacy' approach towards Harare, and those who vote to retain it. After weighing the implications of both arguments, I suggest the course that prudent diplomacy needs to take.

## **The case against quiet diplomacy**

First, one of the underlying assumptions is that South Africa would serve its values best by promoting democracy, good governance and the rule of law throughout Africa. This would position Pretoria as a true beacon for the rest of the continent, and advance the objectives of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). International investor sentiments and global public opinion would become favourably disposed both towards Africa and its efforts to rejuvenate itself from within.

Second is the assumption that South Africa's constitutional and ethical values impose upon the country an obligation to insist on the universal applicability of these values, especially within the African continent. It is largely through its position on moral issues that Pretoria has had the confidence to position itself as a force for good in leading efforts to find a peaceful solution to the dismantling of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and a way of averting a war on Baghdad. Since its readmission into the global arena after its first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa has championed the interests of the poor in the UN, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In Africa, Pretoria's strength and leadership have been so dominant that most of the continent's initiatives to reinvent itself (for example, in establishing Nepad and the African Union) are largely an embodiment of South African norms and values. Pretoria has also led the call for developing countries to have an equal say in crucial global decisions, through the restructuring and democratisation of the architecture of global financial and political governance. This imposes an obligation on Pretoria to lead by example and embed its constitutional norms and values in its neighbourhood.

Third, from a geo-economic perspective it is perceived as being within South Africa's capabilities and in its best national interest to ensure good governance, democracy, human rights, and law and order prevail as indispensable prerequisites for the success of Nepad. It is also generally believed that South Africa has the capacity to exert pressure and influence on other African countries, not least because of the economic, political and military power it wields. South Africa's GDP of \$126 billion is almost a third of Africa's total GDP of \$460 billion, and comprises approximately two-thirds of Southern Africa's GDP. On the basis of this balance of economic power, it is argued that South Africa can and must insist on adherence to the universal democratic values on which its new constitution, politics, economy and society are founded.

Fourth, the above argument is usually linked to reminders of the historical legacy of the struggle against apartheid, during which the international community was rallied to impose sanctions on the oppressive racist settler regime of the National Party. In terms of this view, abandoning quiet diplomacy in favour of active intervention is as simple and straightforward as pressing a button and reading the riot act to Mugabe.

## **Implications**

But how valid are some of these assumptions? Some have argued that attempts to draw simplistic and naïve parallels between Zimbabwe, Nazism and the apartheid regime are as unhelpful as they are

intellectually dishonest. They even undermine the credibility, force and strength of the argument for tough action against Mugabe. Indeed some of those who criticise Mugabe have been his greatest supporters because of the naivety of their arguments, which have tended to win Mugabe more sympathisers and supporters. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, Mugabe was cheered by fellow heads of state as he launched a broadside against Tony Blair. Members of the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of countries threatened to boycott a meeting with EU parliamentarians in Brussels if their Zimbabwean counterparts were not allowed to attend. In February 2003 he was welcomed by President Jacques Chirac (to Blair's annoyance) at the Franco–African summit in Paris despite smart sanctions on Mugabe and his cabinet. This was followed by a positive reception in Kuala Lumpur at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit. All these events, if anything, seem to suggest that it is as misguided as it is dishonest to equate apartheid and Hitler's Nazism with Mugabe's regime.

Some critics of quiet diplomacy masquerade as the champions of black farmworkers and starving peasants, whereas they are conspicuously silent about the oppression and exploitation of black workers on South African farms, and the condition of hundreds of thousands of starving rural South Africans. Peter Bruce of *Business Day* recently reported on the plight of starving South Africans in Eastern Cape. Unfortunately when such objective reportage is made, the issues raised are quickly cast in a racial or quasi-ideological mould. This is uncalled-for. There is a need to engage in honest and robust debate over the critical issues of the time.

The school of thought that presents South Africa as a beacon and as a champion/crusader for its values reflects an underlying belief that South Africa has the continent's best system and institutions of governance, law and order, justice and human rights culture. According to this reasoning, the rest of Africa simply has to emulate the new South Africa to achieve prosperity and international respectability. For this to be the case there must be common and shared norms and values among African states underpinned by the political will and commitment to practise them. Post-apartheid South Africa's architecture of political and economic governance offers a model worthy of emulation by the rest of Africa.

The notion of quiet diplomacy requires us to raise fundamental questions about the nature of diplomacy. First, why has it been called 'quiet'? Second, does it imply the existence of 'loud' or what others have called 'megaphone' diplomacy? Third, what is the essence of diplomacy? Fourth, when is it appropriate to apply a particular form of diplomacy and when is it not? Fifth, who should decide what form of diplomacy to utilise, and on what basis should such a decision be made?

Quiet diplomacy is the oldest form of diplomacy in the sense that the word itself is to some synonymous with things that are done and resolved

behind the scenes. Indeed President Mbeki has asserted that he has never heard of 'loud diplomacy'. As soon as you shout from the rooftop you cease to be diplomatic. The onslaught against quiet diplomacy logically implies the existence of another type of diplomacy — what some have called loud or megaphone diplomacy, or what Woodrow Wilson called in his Fourteen Points, a diplomacy based on public and transparent engagement, conducted not secretly by experts, but on the basis of 'open agreements, openly arrived at'.

The emergence of the notion of quiet diplomacy needs to be understood against the backdrop of the inability of nation states like Zimbabwe to provide either prosperity or a safe and decent environment for their people. The incapacity of such nation states has in turn exposed the inadequacy of the international community, especially its ability (underpinned as it must be by the political will and commitment), to ensure adherence to international norms and values of good governance, democracy, human rights, law and order, and justice. Thus questions are being raised about the appropriateness or otherwise of the international community's response to the conduct of leaders in countries like Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Iraq and North Korea.

One of the reasons that Pretoria's quiet diplomacy approach towards Zimbabwe is still being intensely debated is South Africa's leadership of Nepad, which is founded on high principles and ideals which require practical implementation. For Nepad to be successful, it needs to be as strong on realism as it is on idealism. This requires the political will and commitment of all member states to enforce adherence to its norms and values on all African countries. The League of Nations failed simply because it did not have a mechanism to enforce its principles. As a result it lasted for only 20 years instead of a 100, as the brutality of the Nazis and Fascists swept away its pretensions. Nepad can and must avoid this fate.

Some analysts are starting to raise questions about Africa's capacity and willingness to enforce the principles that underpin Nepad and the African renaissance. What is required is a commitment to robust responses to civil wars, corruption, breakdowns of law and order and abuse of human rights in African states. Zimbabwe is often cited as exemplifying all of these evils.

Having examined the case against quiet diplomacy, we now need to examine the case for it.

### **The case for quiet diplomacy**

Proponents of quiet diplomacy argue that it is in South Africa's national interest to avoid any course of action that could lead to the further

collapse of Zimbabwe, as that would adversely impact on South Africa's domestic situation. For example, mass immigration by political and economic refugees and the negative effects on trade between the two countries are to be avoided if possible.

Second, the sovereignty argument is also used to support Pretoria's stance. Proponents of this view remind us that Zimbabwe is not the tenth province of South Africa: it is a sovereign state — meaning that it is legally equal to all other sovereign states, regardless of its economic, political and social standing. The notion of sovereignty as established in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia gives countries equal membership of the international society of states, with similar rights and obligations. All states, regardless of size and strength, are equals theoretically and therefore entitled to run their affairs autonomously without external interference. The fact that every sovereign state has one vote in the UN General Assembly is a concrete expression of this legal equality. Although it has been argued that globalisation heralds the end of sovereignty, a fairer assessment is that while some core elements of sovereignty remain firmly in place others have been transformed, in ways that are not insignificant.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Mugabe's ability to destabilise South Africa covertly as a form of retaliation is another factor to bear in mind. Members of his notorious Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) operate unhindered, wherever and whenever they choose. In early 2003, a spate of armed robberies allegedly committed by Zimbabwean gangs in South Africa were cited by proponents of this view as examples of the destabilisation that could be unleashed on the country. There were also concerns around the degree of support Mugabe enjoys within left-wing nationalist political circles in South Africa which campaign for radical approaches to South Africa's land reform process.

Fourth, from a geostrategic perspective Zimbabwe's military alliance with Namibia, Angola, the DRC and (some argue) Mozambique means that the balance of forces in the region (at least militarily) would be in Mugabe's favour. A carefully considered approach to Harare is therefore required. Pretoria has had to tread carefully to allay the fears of its weak and sometimes paranoid neighbours, who sometimes exaggerate or misread Pretoria's intentions in its efforts to help the continent assume its rightful place on the world stage.

Fifth, perceptions that Pretoria is a quasi-European power that happens to be located in Africa are also said to affect South Africa's response to Harare. Pretoria is aware that these perceptions need to be dispelled if it is to lead Nepad and the African renaissance effectively. When the controversial Jonathan Moyo raised doubts about South

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson R (ed.), *Sovereignty at the Millennium*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

Africa's ability to lead the African renaissance, Pretoria was forced to issue a *démarche* to Harare in January 2003.

Sixth, South Africa's own domestic programme of land redistribution is said to affect its approach to Harare. Repeated assurances have been given by ANC leaders that Zimbabwean land grab tactics will not be tolerated in South Africa. If the land reform process is effectively implemented (and there are positive indications that so far it has been), South Africa will succeed in preventing the lawlessness and chaos that have been witnessed in Zimbabwe.

Above all, Pretoria has neither the unlimited resources (both human and financial) nor the mandate to intervene in Zimbabwe. In the international sphere there will always be more interests to protect than resources available. Even if Pretoria can do something, it cannot do anything and everything everywhere, all the time. Choices are inescapable. Scarce resources demand that. Pretoria's approach therefore also needs to be understood within the broader framework of resource constraints. Any strategy that results in unintended consequences that may ultimately put a further burden on resources needs careful consideration.

In terms of mandate, Pretoria has opted for multilateral rather than unilateral action in trying to resolve the Zimbabwe issue. By all accounts this is the best available strategy for dealing with a sensitive neighbour. Mingst tells us that in using diplomacy to project its power a state 'might turn to an international body to seek multilateral legitimisation for its position, thus enlisting the support of other states on its behalf'.<sup>5</sup> This is a vital element in most of Pretoria's foreign policy engagements.

## Conclusion

As to whether quiet diplomacy is effective in resolving conflicts, it must be appreciated that, by and large, it matters not whether Pretoria employs quiet or megaphone diplomacy. The debate is equally heated in either case. South Africa's interventions in Lesotho and Nigeria (when Ken Saro Wiwa was executed) and its current plans to deploy troops to the DRC for peacekeeping purposes are also strongly criticised in certain quarters. Intervention decisions in Africa are becoming increasingly complex, and hardly lend themselves to uniform and straightforward diplomatic formulas.

There is no universal answer to the question: Which is the most appropriate diplomatic strategy to use? There are times and places when and where a certain strategy is appropriate, and where it is not. But the

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<sup>5</sup> Mingst K, *Essentials of International Relations*. London: Norton, 1999.

complexity of a situation must not lead to immobility: not intervening becomes as much a policy choice as intervening, and, needless to say, carries consequences no less profound.

The challenge is to always deploy the most prudent diplomatic approach to achieve the required objective. Regarding the Zimbabwean situation, there is no consensus on the nature of the problem (a fundamental prerequisite for a lasting solution), let alone agreement on the desired solution and the means to achieve it. Until these issues are resolved the controversy over quiet diplomacy will continue unabated, and yield nothing at the end of the day — or, as it has been the case thus far, continue to generate more heat than light. What is required, in the final analysis, is consensus on the nature of the problem and its causes as well as the appropriate strategy to bring about an enduring solution. This in turn requires a diplomatic approach that is informed by accurate and objective analyses of the historical and contemporary political and economic context in Zimbabwe. Above all, the principles of Nepad and the African Union and the challenge of positioning Africa in the mainstream spheres of a competitive and globalising world should inform Pretoria and Africa's approach to Zimbabwe. To the extent that issues like Zimbabwe are handled efficaciously, Africa's esteem and credibility locally and abroad would be enhanced and the strategic objectives of Nepad promoted in the process.