

## **Botswana and the Multilateral Foreign Policy**

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Botswana's 50<sup>th</sup> independence anniversary (30 September 2016), offered an opportunity to reflect on the country's achievements using multilateral diplomacy or multilateralism as a foreign policy tool, and the future relevance of that particular approach in promoting the country's national interest abroad. Evans and Newnham (1998) describe multilateralism as 'a system of coordinating relations between two or more states in accordance with certain principles of conduct... to realise objectives in a particular issue area'. Simply put, multilateralism refers to the voluntary involvement of more than two countries in addressing common challenges for mutual benefit based on agreed rules, usually under a specific institutional/organisational arrangement.

To place our assessment of the tool in the proper context, we should ask three questions. First, what did Botswana want from the international system (ie the country's foreign policy goals), second, what was the context (both domestic and external), under which Botswana pursued these goals. Finally, how did Botswana's foreign policy makers perceive and interpret the international environment around them based on their philosophical/conceptual worldview at the time (ie did they see only threats around them, a rosy world 'out there', or indeed a mixture of the two?). The type of conceptual 'lenses' that foreign policy makers wear (and consequently what they see), is critical because it determines the type of foreign policy choices they make (Heravi 2005).

First, what Botswana wanted in the international system was based on what the policy makers saw as key national interests, namely, national security (protection of territorial integrity and national sovereignty) and economic development. These key imperatives were pursued in the context of equally important national values of democracy, national unity and self-reliance, as well as internationally accepted principles of peaceful co-existence, peaceful resolution of conflicts and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

The chief focus of foreign policy was, therefore, the concrete goals of physical and economic security, as well as non-quantifiable attributes, in the form of national values which defined the country in the eyes of the world. These were practical goals, limited to the primary needs of the country at the time, but still relevant for any assessment of the country's performance in the foreign policy space today.

Second, the country operated in a domestic and external environment that tempered her foreign policy ambitions with reality, arising mainly from geography and resource limitations. This is in line with Kaplan's (2012) observation that 'a state's position on the map is the first thing that defines it, more than its governing philosophies even'. While Kaplan recognises the constraints of geography, he acknowledges that human agency can substantially influence the course of human events. Still, Botswana could not escape her sobering internal circumstances, then and today, for example, a small population, limited economic resources and opportunities, limited human resource capacity, and unfavourable climatic conditions. These limitations dictated, inter alia, that Botswana's foreign policy attaches great importance to regional and international cooperation. At the time of the country's independence in 1966 until 1994 the external environment was as inhibitive as it was threatening: a hegemonic apartheid state in South Africa and hostile minority regimes as neighbours, a landlocked geographical position, import dependency and other vulnerabilities.

These factors may not have totally derailed Botswana's foreign policy train, but they surely

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tempered with some of its cargo. For example, the country maintained technical level contacts with racist South Africa through the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), but had no formal diplomatic relations with the apartheid regime. Botswana's foreign policy achievements should thus be assessed in the context of this uncondusive domestic and external environment, elements of which still encumber Botswana's foreign policy choices today in the second decade of the new millennium.

Third, foreign policy makers can perceive the outside world in many ways, for example, as realists who generally believe that states will always use their economic power and political influence to pursue narrow national interest at the expense of others, or liberals who contend that shared common objectives can moderate states' parochialism in favour of the larger collective good (Keohane and Nye 1977; Hadfield and Dunne 2012). Many other shades of philosophical believes exist in between.

In my humble view, Botswana's foreign policy practitioners wore –and indeed still wear today –these and other conceptual lenses simultaneously, and saw the world as it really was, not as a static, predictable monolith, but an ever changing phenomenon, requiring that you adapt your tactics, within the parameters of your core principles, to situations as they arise, to protect national interest. This, therefore, made the country's foreign policy makers *pragmatists*.

As realists, they knew that national power (economic/military etc) was critical to guarantee physical and economic security, but as liberals they knew that additional leverage from regional and international mechanisms such as Southern African Development Community (SADC), Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and later African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN), was essential to succeed. Again as liberals they believed, in principle, in the moderating influence of international institutions over rogue states' behaviour, but as realists they knew that it was unrealistic to expect the UN or the OAU/AU to protect their country from neighbouring rogue states on a daily basis, and that a pragmatic foreign policy to help safeguard national security was needed. We, therefore, see a general trajectory –in the period under review –where practical considerations often trumped ideological orthodoxy in foreign policy making and execution.

As a small country, Botswana placed a high premium on multilateralism to protect and promote her national interest in the international system. For small countries, multilateralism comes naturally as an effective tool for survival in international politics. This is due to the fact that small nations, acting individually or unilaterally, do not possess adequate material resources and political power to influence international relations in their favour. Their international leverage derives largely from solidarity –or acting together.

Botswana conducts multilateral diplomacy in the context of international organisations such as the UN, AU, the Commonwealth as well as regional mechanisms such as SADC (which Botswana played a critical role in establishing), to promote national interests abroad. The UN, the largest of these, confers universal legitimacy across the widest possible spectrum of collective human undertakings.

Following the perennial instability and bloodshed visited on central Europe by their ancient era leaders 'in pursuit of a mixture of personal, dynastic, imperial, and religious ambitions (Kissinger 2014), the successor Westphalian order of 1648 created the nation state as the new source of sovereignty and legitimacy. The new state system paved the way for, among other things, liberal institutionalism (cooperation through international institutions using multilateral diplomacy as a *modus operandi*) as one of the global governance mechanisms of the liberal international order, aimed at enhancing dialogue, cooperation and peace among states.

This multilateral approach is anchored by rule-based international institutions tied together by shared interests of states (Ikenberry 2011). However, multilateralism or liberal institutionalism has its critics, who strongly maintain that international politics is still primarily driven by individual states' interests, and

disproportionately influenced by the interests of more powerful nations, in these international institutions. This critique notwithstanding, the opposite institutionalised international cooperation viewpoint, according to Keohane and Nye (1977) and Keohane (1984), firmly holds that states, while primarily motivated by national interest, are also capable of pursuing common interest, where they see mutual benefit. Pursuit of common endeavours (common security, economic integration etc), has become even more imperative as a result of increased economic interdependence and globalisation generally. Multilateralism allows in principle, every nation, irrespective of size or resources, the legitimate right to be heard, and an expectation to have its plight addressed, if not resolved. Having emerged initially as the antithesis of unilateralism, multilateralism has come to complement bilateralism and regionalism, which remain important channels for advancing interstate relations.

For example, if a country did not find redress in bilateral or regional problem solving mechanisms, it could always approach the UN –the embodiment of multilateralism and universal dispenser of international legitimacy –for resolution. Botswana has had recourse to the UN (and other multilateral bodies) –not as a substitute for bilateral or regional approaches, which she continues to maintain with her allies, but as the most appropriate tool for a specific purpose under given circumstances –to advance her foreign policy goals.

To make our assessment more comprehensive, we look at achievements in terms of Botswana's benefits from, and contributions to, the international community, through multilateral diplomacy. I also wish to venture that achievements not be countenanced only in material terms. Indeed, many would argue that Botswana's greatest contribution to international relations, in the last 50 years, was in being a good example on issues of ethical conduct and governance, than in quantifiable ways.

Botswana embraced multilateral diplomacy due partly to her belief in a collective approach to international relations, and partly as an international strategy for national development. The country's founding president, Sir Seretse Khama, speaking about the UN, said in September 1969 that 'The UN offers many advantages to a state like ours. The UN enables us to keep in touch with international opinion and to put our views before the world.... [T]ogether with its specialised agencies, it is also a major source of development finance and technical assistance from which Botswana benefits greatly' (Khama 1969). In this, and other policy literature, Botswana's enduring logic and vision for multilateralism had been firmly laid down.

Multilateralism has afforded Botswana a broad array of opportunities –political, economic and security –on the international stage. First, the concept of peaceful resolution of conflicts in Botswana predates the country's independence (*ntwa kgolo ke ya molomo* or 'we jaw jaw not war war'). The espousal of this national precept and worldview by established multilateral bodies or international diplomacy, has served as both an inspiration for, and validation of, Botswana's foreign policy on a major fundamental international principle. Second, Botswana's resolute political stance on decolonisation and apartheid, earned her international respect on the world stage, including at the UN, OAU, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Commonwealth.

This stance, however, also made the country a target for various forms of retribution by the neighbouring white minority regimes, including threats to her national sovereignty. But the endorsement and support of Botswana's political position by these established international bodies, served as a moral deterrence against threats to her sovereignty, as well as a source of international legitimacy for –and moral vindication of –her political values, beliefs and indeed actions in support of human freedom beyond her borders.

Third, international institutions extended to the then poor nation much-needed resources to alleviate various economic challenges associated with her support for decolonisation and democratisation

in Southern Africa, such as the sustenance and protection of refugees in the country. In 1969 President Sir Seretse Khama said that ‘The financial burden of doing so (maintaining refugees) would have been heavy were it not for the generous assistance we have received from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Khama 1969).

Fourth, the country benefitted from vital development assistance from the UN system and many other international and regional entities. In those early years, Botswana relied heavily on external financial support just to balance her national budget. Presenting the first National Development Plan (1968-1973), Dr QKJ Masire (as vice president and minister of Development Planning), said that ‘Almost all the expenditure proposed in this Plan is dependent on finance being raised from friendly Governments and agencies abroad... Unless we are successful in securing the assistance required, there is a real danger that Botswana will continue to remain a burden on international charity and without the benefits of real independence which derives from self-sufficiency’ (Masire 1968).

Botswana’s relative success in securing development support at this critical stage from, inter alia, international development and finance institutions, consistent with the country’s foreign policy pillar of *development*, represented a great achievement on the part of its multilateral economic diplomacy. The country continues to engage the world, at multilateral diplomacy level, on many important issues affecting national interests at home.

Other multilateralism driven foreign policy achievements include Botswana’s successful appeal to the UN for reparations against apartheid South Africa through resolutions S/Res/568 and S/Res/572 (UN Security Council 1985), following the regime’s unprovoked attacks on Botswana in 1985. Although the pariah apartheid state never paid, this was indeed a significant diplomatic victory. Another advantage was duty free access for Botswana’s exports to the European market under the current multilateral Cotonou Agreement, as well as its successor Economic Partnership Agreements; substantial international support for the country’s HIV/AIDS campaign following UN endorsement of Botswana’s appeal; the successful protection of Botswana’s diamond market abroad as a result of the country’s membership of the multilaterally negotiated Kimberly Process initiative, and many other achievements too numerous to mention here.

Botswana has not been a passive recipient of international goodwill. She has contributed and continues to contribute, through multilateral diplomacy, to regional and international causes, at the core of her foreign policy. As a member of various international organisations, Botswana is able to share with other member states, her own experiences on issues such as democracy and the rule of law, thereby acting as a force, albeit modest, of reform still needed in other parts of the world.

As a strong advocate for human rights, Botswana’s membership of various international bodies (UN Human Rights Council, International Criminal Court etc), not only helps to promote and safeguard basic freedoms, but also strengthens the voice for political reform and liberalisation at the international level. Through her participation in various regional and international conflict resolution efforts through mechanisms such as SADC, Commonwealth, and AU (the country is currently a member of the AU Peace and Security Council), including through her former presidents, Botswana contributes to international peace and security.

Botswana has acted, and will continue to act, in concert with other countries to explore global solutions –where a multilateral approach is better placed to yield meaningful results –to global challenges such as climate change, international terrorism and health pandemics without borders.

The most important contribution of all, perhaps, is the one identified by President Sir Seretse Khama in 1970. He said that ‘We see our development as a viable, united and non-racial democracy as a contribution –the only one we can make –towards progress, towards majority rule and self-determination throughout Southern Africa (Khama 1970). Botswana continues to make a contribution, however modest, to international relations in the twenty first century, obviously on an expanded contemporary global agenda.

### Conclusion

Botswana has employed multilateralism as a foreign policy tool to help guarantee her national security; to mobilise much needed external development support; to secure markets in other countries to sustain her development; to have her voice heard by more people around the world to advance her interests.

The country has also used multilateralism to contribute towards shaping a better world – a liberal democratic world order, not necessarily perfect, but the only one, at least for now, that offers hope for many (Ikenberry 2011 and Kagan 2018).

As a small country, Botswana will need multilateralism to help tame globalisation and create opportunities for sustainable development. She will need internationalism to help attenuate interstate conflict and advocate for a more stable, peaceful and united world – one that she needs to help protect and sustain her own chosen way of life.

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