



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **South Africa's national interest must be people-centred and pragmatic**

**By Dr Klaus Kotzé**

The national interest is a useful concept that does not receive sufficient critical engagement. Conceptually, it is considered to express the ambition or reason of a state. States must perceive, articulate and pursue their national interest. In the early 1990s, the world consolidated around the Western-led *rules-based order*. South Africa joined by embracing a human-centred approach guided by the value-based Constitution. This turn to democracy ushered in a new political reality and a new national interest.

Thirty years later, the world is fracturing, and South Africa is again pivoting. The Government of National Unity comprising several parties demonstrates a reboot in the national political environment. It ushers in a seminal moment to recast policy and governance. The turn from the ideological dominance of a single party to the Government of National Unity's broadly representative pursuit of a national project, as guided by its *Statement of Intent*, demonstrates a reorientation of the state. Changed internal dynamics, as well as the increasingly fluid landscape between states, necessitate a revision of South Africa's national interest.

An appropriate formulation would locate South Africa's national interest on two sets of axes; a domestic/international axis and a realist/idealist axis.

Conceptually, national interests have been closely associated with foreign policy; national tactics in an international environment. In a crude, zero-sum understanding where states pursue their interests in an environment where others are doing the same, national interests have translated to the pursuit of *power over others*.

Yet, national interests have a decidedly domestic guise as foreign policy exists to serve domestic needs. An independent state cannot perceive itself and its interests using external logics or paradigms. National concepts must be locally formulated, considering the (comprehensive) political reality while giving expression to domestic identity and policy. A suitable expression of its national interest will delineate South Africa's understanding and pursuit of power.

Official documentation foregrounds South Africa's national interest in common humanity, relationship-building and interdependence. The 2012 *White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy* describes South Africa's foreign policy as a *diplomacy of ubuntu*. It claims that it is in "our national interest to promote and support the positive development of others". The *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest*, released by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation in 2022 defines South Africa's foreign policy as pursuing *principled diplomacy*. Instead of the realist 'power over', South Africa pursues an idealist 'power with' approach.

The ubuntu diplomacy, an expression of internationalism, has seen South Africa steadfastly campaign for the continent on the global stage, whether at multilateral fora such as the United Nations or during bilateral engagements with global powers. Its promotion of global ideals has actively sought to sustain

and strengthen the multilateral system. By aligning and building this arrangement South Africa has contributed to the substantiation of modern internationalism, advancing its soft power.

Whereas it was fortuitous to do so in the 1990s and 2000s when the world embraced a collective, idealist moment, the (impending) end of this moment is reason to reflect and pivot. The new administration should not simply depend on ideals. It must pursue a pragmatic approach to give expression to the national Constitution. One that commands public officials and citizens to give expression to Constitutional ideals.

The new minister of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Ronald Lamola, has indicated that South Africa will pursue pragmatic idealism when in a recent speech he said: "South Africa, with its unique policy of active non-alignment, is not reactive but proactive in its pursuit of peace. This approach is not about being neutral or abstaining from world affairs, but about leading a unifying agenda through dialogue".

South Africa's principled diplomacy of ubuntu and active non-alignment does not account for hard power (power over), but rather a relational and cooperative (power with) approach. Such a formulation of power is not imposed but exalted, claimed. While the state should formulate and guide this pursuit, it is strategically expedient to extend responsibility to as a diverse and inclusive a constituency as possible. The people, the citizens of South Africa, and those committed to its ethos have a central role in fulfilling the Constitutional ambitions. They are the means of South African power. The means of pursuing the ends of the state. To build a transformed and developmental state. Such an inclusive perception of power is not only progressive and pragmatic but also fundamentally human-centred. It brings the pursuit of the national interest into the home of the individual citizen. With the national interest emerging from context, there is no more immediate context.

The 2012 White Paper alludes to the central and participatory role that South Africans must play. It remarks that: "The business of national interest cannot be the purview of the state alone, but it can encourage an enabling environment of dialogue and discourse among all stakeholders to interrogate policies and strategies, and their application in the best interests of the people".

Greater effort needs to be made to bring the national interest into the daily lives of the people. For South Africa to expediently pursue its strategic ambitions of 'power with', it must be clarified how citizens can best give expression to ideals and thus pursue interests. For this, the state requires representatives who are skilled in drafting, communicating and executing people-centred strategic frameworks. Such a process should not be ad hoc or issue-specific. Instead, a national interest strategic framework should be initiated, and a national interest framework document should be formulated at the beginning of each new administration, to facilitate expedient expression.

Such a framework document would give expression not to defence (hard power or power over) but to ubuntu (soft power or power with). The nation's goals will be served by a pragmatic, human-centred approach, guided by values.

It is important, in the South African spirit of discursive democracy, that the framework documents be debated and enacted by a wide cross-section of society. They need to be people-centred, forward-looking and pragmatic.

At its most profound and yet at its most foundational, such a framework document would marshal resources and offer direction by describing an example. The 2012 White Paper points in this direction when it says that: "South Africa's greatest asset lies in the power of its example. In an uncertain world, characterised by a competition of values, South Africa's diplomacy of Ubuntu, focusing on our common humanity, provides an inclusive and constructive world view to shape the evolving global order".

The ultimate task of a strategic framework document would be to lead the state and its citizens in the discharge of their Constitutional duties. To reveal to them, as the assets (means) of the state, how to enact principled diplomacy and active non-alignment. This expression of power is not only expedient in the context of South Africa's assets but will increasingly be valuable in an evolving world defined by asymmetry, fluidity and relationships.

***Dr Klaus Kotze is a research associate at the Inclusive Society Institute, This article is an extract from the Institute's soon to be released occasional paper "South Africa's national interest: People-centred and pragmatic Pursuing a progressive policy with realist considerations".***