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Fostering a Pragmatic Foreign Service in a VUCA world

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The party–state dynamic is a lasting feature in the South African foreign policy decision-making structure, thus influencing the way pragmatic engagements are pursued in relation to ideology. It is important to navigate this environment effectively. This policy brief highlights bureaucratic challenges for the foreign service in 2020, political deployment, the strategic use of resources and the recently passed Border Management Authority Act (2020). These challenges contribute to weak policy coherence and a lack of integrated strategy in South African foreign policy implementation. The recommendations are thus based on improving implementation through the recently passed Foreign Service Act (2019).

This policy brief is one of the outcome documents from the closed IGD meeting (28 July 2020), forming part of its flagship series on South Africa in the World, which charts and reflects on South African foreign policy annually. It thus contributes to a horizon scanning exercise, as well as to more resilience for actors in foreign policy networks through content sharing and debate. The strategic policy dialogue was held under Chatham House rules, which allowed participants to offer frank opinions on a number of topics. The over-arching theme that emerged from the presentations was the tension between ideology and pragmatism in South African foreign policy, which bears on decision-making and implementation. In this regard, this policy brief highlights the key challenges for 2020 in with a focus on the civil servant personnel who complement the foreign policy bureaucratic machinery. The recommendations are made on the basis of the Foreign Service Act (2019) which links the fundamental role of foreign service employees and the role of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO).

Key challenges for 2020, the party–state environment

The general domestic perception of the South African political landscape is increasingly pessimistic, with the added complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, bureaucrats and politicians are cloistered in a wait-and-see posture that does not facilitate a dynamic party–state environment or effective strategies in policy implementation. The prevalence of policy drift in the foreign policy establishment has led to a mismatch between capabilities and expectations, inadequate policy capacity and the overall diminution of effectiveness and efficiency.

Part of this challenge is linked to the long-term struggle between meeting national objectives pragmatically while remaining beholden to historical friendships and solidarist claims and an ideologically driven agenda. The long-term struggle between ideology and pragmatism has had an impact on DIRCO’s professional environment where the department has been politicised in various instances relating to the appointment of professionals and the deployment of cadres, which has cast a shadow over the core function of the role in managing the country’s foreign policy. The tensions between national and international policy demands and policy imperatives have contributed to an ambiguous foreign policy, aggravated by weakened analytical, intelligence and surge capacities. DIRCO’s identified institutional shortcomings may be compensated for in two ways:

1. Posting more experienced employees in strategic positions

In South Africa’s recent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) term, it was noted that DIRCO had taken into account concerns and critiques from the first two terms and sought to redress them in the third term. From news reports, analysts could see noticeable improvement from May 2019, once the mission was fully staffed. For example, South Africa had nuanced its position on the Council and shown that it could take an independent position. With specific reference to the situation in Sudan, it promoted the role of the African Union (AU), actively engaging as an African coalition, which included Cote d’Ivoire and Equatorial Guinea.

2. Providing rigorous training

The recently passed Foreign Service Act (2019) may address the issue of training through the role of the Diplomatic Academy.¹

Moreover, the South African foreign service has been critiqued for its absorption capacity and the practicality of having a broad foreign mission presence globally, which has put pressure on shrinking

¹ Foreign Service Act 26 of 2019, https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202006/43403gon642.pdf

resources. Some of these missions may be fulfilling a vanity project, where a mission's status may be out of sync with strategic rationale.

Another challenge is a demoralised environment resulting from cadre deployment. There is a risk of departmental brain drain as employees may become too frustrated and leave the civil service, thus losing key persons who have spent years in training. There is also an urgent need to address the pastoral care of diplomats at the junior, mid and senior levels. This may incorporate ensuring that employees are prepared with personal financial skills and emotional intelligence, as well as providing psychological support for employees who experience cultural shock once they are posted abroad.

And lastly, the lack of coordination between foreign policy and immigration policy through structures such as the Border Management Authority (BMA) Act² will have an impact on the work of DIRCO. Before the BMA Act was promulgated, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) explained that it needed to adopt a streamlined approach by the DHA to secure South Africa's porous borders to prevent illicit activities. While the Act relates to a number of other points, the predominant focus is on the movement of people and goods. However, the DHA has been severely criticised owing to the poor administration of the Department at national, provincial and local levels. The stakes are raised even higher because the DHA also needs to manage xenophobic and anti-African sentiments while ensuring delivery on core and expanded functions. Pertinent to the immigration–foreign policy interface, the core departments and employees liaising on a regular basis are Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Defence and Military Veterans; Environmental Affairs; Finance; Health; Police; State Security; Trade and Industry; Transport; and the South African Revenue Service. The decisions implemented at the borders are likely to affect South Africa's bilateral and multilateral relationships with broader implications for foreign policy priorities at the regional and global levels. The pandemic has slowed border operations, giving time for the DHA to institute a number of changes, and President Cyril Ramaphosa does not have to address the political implications of the bill during his chairing of the AU in 2020.

Recommendations

- The Foreign Service Act (2019) should be optimised to provide dynamic training and experiential learning. Training should not just take place using traditional methods; foreign service employees should be deployed to businesses and communities to understand and shadow the realities and needs of the various contexts. In addition, a more nurturing approach to caring for foreign service staff should be taken that links to developing life and financial skills in addition to required diplomatic and civil servant skills. In enriching the training experience, it is anticipated that the

² Border Management Authority Act 2 of 2020, <https://static.pmg.org.za/Act 2 of 2020 Border Management Authority Act 1.pdf>

impact of political appointments will be reduced and all missions will be able to function and coordinate optimally. Moreover, senior and experienced staff should receive recognition due to the critical inputs that they make and should be provided with efficient and transparent avenues for career development, as well as a rigorous senior threshold performance review process for promotions.

- South African representation abroad should become more dynamic in order to use resources more wisely. For example, mobile units can be coordinated and remain on standby to be dispatched on an ad hoc basis, especially where the basic functions of the embassy are consular services. This may address the issue of the limited and strategic use of resources that relate to the geographical-functional structures, and optimise relations with other government departments, reviewing the structures and operations of overseas networks.
- Lastly, the foreign service needs to anticipate the potential impacts from the BMA Act. DIRCO should be an active part of the inter-ministerial consultative committees (Border Technical Committee and Advisory Committee levels). In addressing shifting policy demands, it is vital to foster institutional preparedness so that DIRCO and other foreign service employees can both support and provide technical assistance, but more importantly provide planning and foresight for South Africa's bilateral and multilateral agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement and their implications for private sector engagement. In this, the Foreign Service Act (2019) has expressed that it has the authority to be part of such conversations because the Border Management Authority is incidental to the work undertaken by the foreign service. However, the department may face a technical difficulty in that the foreign service is related to representation abroad according to the definitions stated in the respective act, which is an added component to the general and even specialised competencies.



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The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

The IGD strives for a prosperous and peaceful Africa in a progressive global order through cutting-edge policy research and analysis, and catalytic dialogue and stakeholder interface on global dynamics that have an impact on South Africa and Africa.

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