

African Diplomacy and the Development of Self-Awareness

Written by Stephen Chan

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STEPHEN CHAN, NOV 8 2017

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With the exception of Ethiopia, all of Africa has undergone one form or another of colonialisation – and the Italians had a good go at Ethiopia. The inclusion of Africa in the globalisation of the 18th century involved the European and American slave trade, the outreach of Christian missionaries, trading and resource expropriation projects, and the creation of spheres of influence on the part of individual European powers. This was undertaken differently in North Africa, where there were 'recognisable' state structures of great antiquity, and Sub-Saharan Africa, which was generally viewed as uncivilised, if not savage in its peoples and organisational structures – despite the fact that fully-articulated 'kingship states' existed in many parts of West, East and Southern Africa, and some sent ambassadors to Europe to plead with rulers and the Vatican for a cessation of invasion and slaughter. The Ashante Kingdom in what is now Ghana even traded independently on the futures and commodities markets in London, before that capacity was seized by British colonialism. The palm wine exports to international markets were taken over from the Ashante by British commercial concerns.

At the Berlin Conference of Christmas 1884 to New Year 1885, the European powers agreed to divide Africa formally into colonial territories – doing this according to spheres of influence already achieved, or by the expedient of drawing straight lines on a map. The political cartoons of the day had the negotiators making merry and drinking spirits while carving up both Christmas turkey and a continent. The noteworthy point was that, at that stage, Africa was not considered worth going to war over, and the speed and efficiency of the division was seen as an example of multilateral diplomacy at its successful best. The outcome – today's Africa of 55 independent states which follow closely the boundaries agreed at Berlin – has meant not only a coming to statehood in the impoverished years after World War II, and amidst the turmoil of the Cold War, but coming to statehood with incomplete, divided, or partial nations within the state territory. New 'nations' had to be created to fit the new states, and somehow not repudiate the history of 2000 earlier ethnic and linguistic groups. It has been a diplomatic triumph to make all this work even as well as it has worked till now, and some states, like Zambia, have been huge successes in nationhood despite 72 pre-colonial ethnicities and languages.

The Wind of Change

Ghana had already become independent in 1957, led by Kwame Nkrumah who, as a student in the US, had been exposed to the ethos of the Harlem Renaissance and the work of Marcus Garvey. He even appropriated Garvey's Black Star emblem for the national flag of Ghana. Most of all, he absorbed the idea of a pan-Africanism, even a pan-blackness. There had been a century of Pan-African Congresses, held in the US and the UK, the Manchester Congress of 1945 being the most important as the nationalist leaders realised that a countdown to independence was one of the results of World War II – the world seeking to make a new start and be rid of the legacy of the old.

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Those Congresses had included figures such as the black US thinker W.E.B. Dubois, and in 1945 several of the future leaders of Africa. They were a form of Track II or unofficial diplomacy, that all the same was closely linked to what became Track I or official processes and governments. Nigeria and a number of former French colonies gained independence in 1960 and the waves and winds of change seemed unstoppable. Except in Apartheid South Africa.

Insofar as Africa achieved any kind of unity, it was against the racism of the remaining territories in the hands of white minority populations who discriminated against the black majority. The ferocity of that discrimination was certainly enough to galvanise a one-issue unity. Wider unity, despite Nkrumah's inclinations, would take many years longer. But it was not Nkrumah or any other black leader who went to South Africa in 1960 to urge a reconsideration of Apartheid. It was the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. His speech to the South African Parliament was one of those elegant British *tours de force*, understated in tone, careful and precise in wording, but breaking out of obfuscation at just the right moment to be very forceful and direct. Macmillan said a "wind of change" was sweeping the continent. He warned against being swept away. His speech, however, had no effect.

Rhodesia

As South Africa, disregarding Macmillan, lurched towards the massacre at Sharpeville and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, its neighbours prepared for huge changes. Northern Rhodesia achieved independence as Zambia in 1964. Southern Rhodesia was meant to be next but, in 1965, the white minority government under Ian Smith declared "not in a thousand years" would there be black majority rule¹⁵ – and the minority regime made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence that immediately created an international diplomatic crisis. It became a largely unrecognised government; it was illegal; but it caused huge political problems in the region. Immediately adjacent to Apartheid South Africa, it could serve as a buffer zone for the regime there, and South Africa could make it impossible for international sanctions against Rhodesia to be effective. An impoverished Britain, now led by Prime Minister Harold Wilson, and having to go hand-in-mouth to the IMF for its economic survival, was not going to send in the army. So armed rebellion broke out in Rhodesia, led by two liberation movements. Immediately, the black states in the region had a problem as to which group they should support. And Zambia had a problem, as all its transport routes for its exports and imports ran south through white territory, and its economy could be strangled in a moment. Yet it was staunchly in favour of liberation – while, problematically, President Kaunda was also staunchly a Christian pacifist. Diplomacy became key to Zambia's survival, but it was dangerous diplomacy.

Kaunda hosted one of the two Rhodesian liberation factions (and its army) on Zambian soil, alongside both the exiled African National Congress (ANC) and the South West African people's Organisation (SWAPO) – the two fighting against South Africa, SWAPO for independence in occupied Namibia. But he ordered his own soldiers not to return fire if attacked by marauding Rhodesian or South African commando units, and his air-force not to intercept Rhodesian warplanes flying over Zambian territory. This caused huge resentment within his military, so there was the possibility of domestic problems as well. But he got away with the balancing act, both hosting the antagonists to the white regimes and not directly threatening those regimes himself. Kaunda worked assiduously within the Commonwealth as a multilateral diplomatic organisation, then led by the brilliant Guyanese jurist, Shridath Ramphal.

India, on its own independence in 1947, refused to join anything called a 'British Commonwealth'. The 'Commonwealth of Nations' was thus born, without any British leadership role. In fact, over the Rhodesian issue, the Commonwealth became a primary vehicle for criticising Britain for its inaction.

Even so, there was little progress to show for Commonwealth efforts and, in the mid-1970s, it was Henry Kissinger, and then an Anglo-American diplomatic effort led by David Owen and Andrew Young, that sought to find a solution to the Rhodesian problem. There were talks in Geneva. Kaunda himself hosted negotiations on the border between Zambia and Rhodesia (on the Knife Edge Bridge that spanned the two sides of the Victoria Falls, in a railway carriage parked over a line that indicated the border – but no one crossed the line to the other side). Negotiations were leading nowhere, and it took two elements to change the diplomatic stalemate. Robert Mugabe's guerrilla army, operating out of Mozambique, was beginning to tie down the Rhodesian army into a war of attrition. Margaret Thatcher was elected British Prime Minister and declared she wanted to be rid of the Rhodesian albatross, even if it meant recognising a government led by Ian Smith which now, cosmetically, included black faces but was not widely

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considered to represent a freely-chosen majority rule. A diplomatic furore immediately erupted.

It is well recognised that the 1979 Lusaka Commonwealth summit represented a watershed for the Commonwealth. Leaders came to do battle with Margaret Thatcher over Rhodesia and threatened the demise of the Commonwealth. But it was also a signal moment for African diplomacy. Firstly, there was the role of the summit host, Kenneth Kaunda; secondly, there was the preparatory work Zambian diplomats had put into the occasion, very deliberately to rival and countermand the British preparatory work; and, thirdly, it was an occasion where an African diplomatic effort took place within a fully multilateral, i.e. not only African, environment, with the need to gain allies from far afield, brief interested parties, etc., All these ingredients are needed on such occasions when outcomes are otherwise unpredictable.

There was also the signal role of Commonwealth Secretary-General, Shridath Ramphal, who masterminded many of the tactics at the summit; and the key Zambian diplomat who conducted a pan-African 'shuttle diplomacy' before the summit, garnering support for various options, was Mark Chona. But, put briefly, the occasion was a triumph for diplomacy in an African setting, to say the least – and a triumph for Zambia's role in diplomacy to address an African problem. Peace negotiations were, as a result, convened at Lancaster House in London.

The negotiations at the end of 1979 were tough, but African presidents such as Kaunda, Samora Machel of Mozambique and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania played pivotal behind-the-scenes roles, not only in diplomatic pressure on the British, but pressure also on the liberation parties. Afterwards, in the ensuing military truce and election campaign, African states sent election observers in the world's first coordinated electoral observation – in this case organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat; and Kenyan troops also played a role in the peacekeeping that accompanied the truce. The election of Robert Mugabe, unexpected by the British, satisfied African opinion as his guerrilla army had been perceived as bearing the brunt of the military struggle. It was a victory won by both force of arms and negotiation, and Africa felt it had come of age in the fight against white minority rule. There remained only the huge bastion of South African Apartheid.

Negotiations with the Apartheid Government: a Meditation on Deliberate Naivety

Track II, informal and unofficial discussions were held in Lusaka in 1984, as two 'deniable' South African emissaries were sent to form an opinion as to whether substantive negotiations with the ANC were feasible. These were H.W. Van der Merwe, a professor at the University of Cape Town, and Piet Muller, editor of a conservative newspaper. They arrived without any real preparation. In a real way, they were naïve about what to say and how to say it. Even so, as a result, a series of Track II meetings ensued in other parts of Africa in the following years, e.g. involving business leaders in Dakar, but South Africa was also involved in a twin-track process, launching its 'Total Strategy' military onslaught between 1982 and 1984 in an attempt to intimidate all regional governments to the extent that they would neither threaten South Africa themselves, or support liberation movements who did. A principal target was the Marxist government in Angola, host to a Cuban army that had, in the final battles for independence from Portugal in 1975-6, fought an earlier South African incursion to a standstill. Borrowed from the French attempt to suppress the Algerian uprising, South African Total Strategy ruined large parts of the region. The Zimbabweans, whose air-force had been destroyed by South African saboteurs in 1982, fought against a South African proxy guerrilla force in Mozambique but it was really as late as 1988, with the mass battle lines and clashes around the Angolan city of Cuito Cuanavale, that the Cuban forces – aided by the Soviet air-force – finally forced South Africa to a proper negotiating table. 1986 Commonwealth efforts by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, now the Nigerian Emeka Anyaoku, and a Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group co-chaired by former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, were unsuccessful – even with the threat of sanctions in tow. The post 1988 talks were led by the US diplomat, Chester Crocker. These were talks of South African military disengagement and withdrawal from non-South African territories – such as Namibia – but they did not concern a peace in the region that would emanate from majority rule.

Even so, the upheaval in the ranks of the Apartheid government was immense. President Botha was forced to resign. In his place was appointed the largely unknown F.W. de Klerk and, in 1989, he sent private messages to President Kaunda, asking for peace talks. In the same year, talks were also proceeding with Thabo Mbeki in the south of England. These were secret, but the talks with Kaunda were milked by Zambian and international media. De Klerk

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needed Kaunda to leverage Mbeki's ANC, but also to secure a buy-in to any peace deal from the 'frontline' states of the region that had both confronted South Africa and been militarily destabilised by it.

De Klerk, reputedly, entered these talks at Livingstone by the Victoria Falls, with five ring-binders of comprehensive notes on President Kaunda. By contrast, Kaunda went in without any briefing whatsoever. Both his Ministry of Foreign Affairs and staff at State House had not expected the rise of de Klerk, and neither had any information on de Klerk. Kaunda didn't ask for any either. So, as intimated at the end of the preceding chapter, he went in entirely trusting on his intuition, his moral position on behalf of peace and equality – and against the advice of his colleague presidents such as Tanzania's Julius Nyerere; they certainly had no trust in the South Africans, and could point to a long list of bad faith on the part of the Apartheid regime, i.e. there were rational reasons not to negotiate. For Kaunda, rationality evolved during the talks themselves, and this might be just as well as, essentially, his starting point was not only one of openness but deliberate naivety. Mandela was released early the next year, and the ANC unbanned in South Africa. How much this was due to Kaunda, how much to Mbeki, and whether any of this could have happened without Cuban victory at Cuito Cuanavale, can be debated. The three probably went together. Although it should be said that Mbeki, having spent most of his adult life outside South Africa, could not fully maintain a stance that he was negotiating for South Africans. He and Kaunda were negotiating for a place for the ANC in a democratised South Africa; and Mbeki had the leverage of insurrection and rebellion. The release of Mandela, the completion of the anti-colonial and anti-minority-rule project allowed African diplomacy to begin its coming of age.

African Union and Nigerian Diplomacy

The Commonwealth's role in international affairs as an organisation with a large membership but then still largely informalised modes of diplomatic intervention allowed both Ramphal and Anyaoku as Secretaries-General to act as scaled-down variants of the UN Secretary-General as epitomised by Dag Hammarskjöld. Those who followed Hammarskjöld never emulated his daring and diplomatic risk-taking, but it could be said that Ramphal (over the independence of Zimbabwe) and Anyaoku (over pressure on South Africa) did – in both cases confronting UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It could also be argued that Kofi Annan, of Ghanaian origin, sought to be a quiet and subtle form of Hammarskjöld and overcome the legacy of his immediate predecessors as UN Secretary-General who were loathe to be daring. It meant the advent of African-derived diplomatic leaderships in wider arenas than just Southern Africa.

Much of this had to concern peacekeeping and its allied diplomacy. Since 1960 there have been 18 fully-fledged civil wars, and 11 what have been called genocides. In the decade of the 1980s, there were over 3 million fatalities of such violence. At the beginning of the 1990s, 43% of the world's refugee population was within Africa.

Annan had not been successful or even urgent as Deputy Secretary-General over the early stages of the genocide in Rwanda, but that event was probably key in persuading the African Union, reborn from the Organisation of African Unity in 1999, to adopt a policy of non-indifference to regional conflicts. Before, the OAU had been unsuccessful in peacekeeping and peacemaking. Its 1977-82 efforts in Chad were its greatest foray into the realm of coordinated action, but was handicapped by logistical shortcomings and mobilisation problems. The OAU undertook its mission because it received permission from the government in Chad. Hitherto, the doctrine of non-intervention, drawn from the foundation principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which drew in turn from Zhou Enlai's 1955 Bandung speech, had prevented any unilateral peacekeeping, or even forceful diplomacy backed up by militarised preparation. The need to be invited into a state-in-conflict, rather than being able to intervene in an atrocious conflict on the grounds of human rights and humanitarian concerns; or on grounds of instability threatening surrounding states; was a huge question mark about the capacity and limits of OAU diplomacy. Even in Chad, although OAU mediation began in 1977, it took until 1981 before peacekeeping soldiers arrived, and they were never able to deploy in a sustained and supported way. Even in this case, the OAU followed a Nigerian initiative, accepted the Chadian government's formal position that it was at war with Libya, through Libyan proxies, and was not actually undergoing civil war. OAU peacekeeping forces of 1981 followed upon an earlier deployment of Nigerian soldiers in 1979. It marked Nigeria as having a diplomatic interest in the west and centre of Africa.

This was chiefly illustrated by other efforts at peacekeeping/making such as that which occurred from 1990 to 1997

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in Sierra Leone and Liberia. This was undertaken by the regional African Grouping, using armed forces under the ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group) banner, led mainly by Nigerian troops acting on behalf of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), that blasted its way in to a temporary form of peace in both Liberia and Sierra Leone – but which did not end violence and war in the region, especially in Liberia.

What it did was to cement Nigerian peacekeeping/making diplomacy as capable of militarised initiatives. Even so, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo relied on non-military diplomatic means, when Chairman of the African Union, 2004-6, on the issue of Darfur. The slaughters in that Sudanese province had horrified the world. Obasanjo hosted several summits of interested parties in his capital, Abuja. He had local reason to do so, as neighbouring Chad was beginning to host nearly a quarter of a million refugees from the Darfur conflict. But, by this time, the old OAU doctrine of non-intervention had given way to the new AU doctrine of non-indifference. Even so, although the AU in 2004 recognised that ‘the humanitarian situation in Darfur is serious’, it would not unilaterally intervene. In 2007, it did so in association with the UN, and the military side of peacekeeping depended on hybrid forces, involving not only African troops under AU colours but those from Europe and elsewhere under UN colours; but also involving the logistical means and equipment brought by those UN forces. The intervention required UN Security Council Resolution 1769, and this was an escalation from UN Security Council Resolution 1564, which was an ultimatum to the Sudanese government to accept AU peacekeepers in Darfur under the rubric of the AU Mission to Sudan (AMIS) – and these peacekeepers were first led by Rwandan and Nigerian soldiers. But what it meant was that, once again, the AU like the OAU before it was unable or unwilling to intervene unilaterally in a matter of grave humanitarian and diplomatic concern.

Subsequent AU efforts in Darfur to find a lasting diplomatic solution have been led by former South African President Thabo Mbeki (2009-14) and Mbeki sought to instigate a version of the power-sharing formula he had pioneered in both Democratic Republic of Congo (2002) and, contentiously, in Zimbabwe (2007-8) – but these have been unsuccessful. President Jacob Zuma of South Africa briefly attempted the same inclusiveness peace formula in the Libyan crisis in 2011, again under AU colours.

Norms such as the ‘responsibility to protect’ have had a hard time gaining unanimous adherence within the AU. Slowly, however, the norm is gaining traction and this owes somewhat to deliberations within the AU’s Peace and Security Council (established 2004), which has the African Standby Force as an associated programme. In fact the Standby Force is a series of regional such forces, and it was the Southern African Development Community (SADC) military initiative, involving South African and Tanzanian troops that engaged the Congolese M23 rebels – the most notorious of the many violent rebel groups in Democratic Republic of Congo – in 2013. Their success, under both SADC and UN Security Council resolutions, was treated as a military victory, but owed greatly to sustained diplomatic pressure on Rwanda’s President Kagame from the UN.

Annan in Kenya and Mbeki in Zimbabwe – and a Mediation on Values and Democracy as Mediated by Diplomacy

What Mbeki tried to do in Darfur echoed his controversial mediation in the aftermath of the extremely controversial Zimbabwean elections of 2008. This in turn was reminiscent of Annan’s mediation in the equally controversial elections aftermath in Kenya in 2007. Both men were the representatives of African multilateral diplomacy: Annan of the AU, and Mbeki of SADC. Both came up with similar ‘solutions’ – more like ‘settlements’ than solutions, but true solutions may well have been impossible in both cases. Annan took considerably less time, and left sanction and sting in the tail of his mediation, namely International Criminal Court (ICC) indictments of those involved in orchestrating electoral violence (although these cases before the ICC have largely failed).

But both mediations resulted in the continuation of Presidencies that had been in place before the elections, even though, in both elections, the opposition leader probably won, and should have been appointed President. Violence and rigging produced what were in all probability falsified results. Even so, in both cases, the rightfully ‘victorious’ opposition leader did not become President – but became instead a specially created Prime Minister, an office below that of the President and which did not previously constitutionally exist.

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Where electoral results were honoured was in a proportional representation, not in the European Parliamentary sense, but in the sense of numbers of seats in the Cabinet. The party with most votes had the most Cabinet seats. Neither main party was excluded from these spoils of office.

Mbeki in particular would have said that the outcome represented, in the Cabinet allocations, the spirit of democracy, and this – together with having both major political leaders in one administration as President and Prime Minister – represented an ‘African’ value of inclusiveness. It was an inclusiveness engineered in such a way that violence was removed from the power struggle, and with this removal came the end of slaughter. So that, as well as inclusiveness, the universal value of human lives was promoted.

It is a controversial formula. In neither country was this formula repeated in the elections that followed five years later. But the formula did ensure a discernible species of peace and, through peace, stability in each case for five years. Mbeki would say, and Annan would not disagree, that their ‘African diplomacy’ had purchased an ‘African solution’ that, all the same, championed the most basic of universal values. What this means is an African diplomacy, that has not only come of age, but brings something new – controversially so – that is perhaps of benefit to the continent, and possibly to the contemplation of just electoral outcomes in the wider world.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where ‘post’ was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).