



www.flickr.com: President Jacob Zuma with his Chinese Counterpart President Xi Jinping ahead of the BRICS Summit. (Photo: GCIS)

The 'soft' power of China and South Africa

The focus of attention in discussions around the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – has generally been to point out the differences between members of the group in terms of ideologies and values. But there are more similarities than meet the eye, writes *Narnia Bohler-Muller*.

Both China and South Africa share similarities in their foreign relations around the use of soft power through accentuating the traditional philosophies of Confucianism and ubuntu. And both countries profess to seek global reform through this soft use of power.

The emergence and unavoidable significance of BRICS

With the move towards a more multilateral and polycentric world order since the Cold War, and towards achieving more equity for developing countries and the global South, the BRICS nations are emerging as global political and economic leaders. The primary stated aim of this relatively young grouping – which has been in existence since 2009, with South Africa joining in December 2010 – is to exert pressure on the international community to reform institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to become more democratic, effective and representative.

This article aims to analyse the value-oriented (governance, human rights, economics, security, etc.), foreign policy approaches of China and South Africa within the context of soft power diplomacy. Realistically, without 'winning' nations over to agree on certain principles, both in the North and the South, BRICS is sure to fail. It is clear that much work still needs to be done to ensure that levels of trust increase.

China's Confucian path

What lies at the heart of China's soft power, and cultural diplomacy, is whether as a member of BRICS it can inspire confidence in its ability to lead global reform. It is common

cause that a state's foreign policy needs an environment built on strategic trust and shared values to be successful. There are elements of Confucianism that strengthen China's influence within BRICS and with other reformist nations.

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The notion of 'harmony' (sometimes referred to as stability) in Confucianism, a value that clearly underlies China's economic reforms and foreign policy framework, is founded on the so-called three bonds, namely those of ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife. In Confucian thinking, these bonds are expected to enhance harmony within Chinese society itself, but this focus on harmony can also be seen in China's foreign policy.

Thaddeus Metz, humanities professor at the University of Johannesburg, points out that the hierarchical nature of the three bonds is palpable. Essential to the idea of harmony as a Confucian value is the recognition of 'higher' and 'lower' positions, with the governed, the young and women occupying the lower ranks.

This can be described as an acceptance of inequality as a part of society, which may be a reaction to the more radical elements of Maoism. Although there have been

strains of Confucianism that interpret the hierarchy in terms of unconditional obedience on the part of 'inferiors', more recently the emphasis has been on reciprocity and harmony, often expressed as 'win-win' relationships or mutually beneficial relationships.

Chinese foreign policy reflects this emphasis on harmony in relationships and mutually beneficial relationships, which resonates with South Africa's focus on ubuntu in its foreign policy. Another value underlying Confucianism is pragmatism, which is reflected in the prioritising of poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and stability in domestic and foreign policy. Besides hierarchy and pragmatism, Chinese thinking also has a secular tendency, as it lacks a strong religious base.

SA is probably the African country with the best claim to soft power.

South Africa's focus on common humanity

Since 1994, South Africa's moral authority and willingness to play an active role in the world gave it unique leverage with both the global North and the South. On the continent, South Africa is probably the country with the best claim to the exercise of soft power through its history, culture, political values and the legitimacy of its foreign policy.

SA's influence and moral persuasion come largely from soft power.

Pretoria's preferred instruments for advancing global priorities (Africa and multilateralism) have been consensus building, dialogue and negotiations, while avoiding resorting to force. Constructing bridges between positions that seemed irreconcilable has also proved a strong national trait. Given its middle ranking as a power, South Africa's influence and moral persuasion come largely from soft power, which would be achieved not only through public diplomacy, but by leading by example in both political and economic domains. Recent events, however, have placed South Africa in a difficult situation in terms of both internal and external diplomacy, with the failure to arrest the Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir at the AU Summit in June 2015.

Similar to the emphasis placed on history, culture and values in China, in the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) white paper, *Building a Better World: the Diplomacy of Ubuntu*, South African international relations are informed by the history of colonialism and the liberation struggle, as well as by the hard-won constitutional values of dignity, equality and freedom.

DIRCO's policy states that the philosophy of ubuntu means 'humanity', and is reflected in the idea that we affirm our humanity when we affirm the humanity of others, and that this value must inform South Africa's interactions within

multilateral institutions. South African foreign policy will be framed by respect for our common humanity and the diversity of nations. It is the recognition of the interconnectedness and interdependency of humanity. This emphasis on harmony is similar to that of Chinese Confucianism.

Despite scepticism, the BRICS nations share a willingness to lead within and beyond their regions.

Despite scepticism, all the BRICS nations share a willingness to lead within and beyond their regions. While capacity for such action is available, what remains sticky is the absence of a clear bestowal of a mandate by potential 'followers'. Although the BRICS member states have profound differences in their leadership style at the regional and global levels, they do have in common a reliance on soft power to influence other global and regional players. China and South Africa have used a values-based foreign policy strategy to win support for their positions on the global stage, and this strengthens the position of BRICS as a grouping.

Confucianism and ubuntu have the potential to act as counter-balances to aggressive neo-imperialist efforts.

Conclusion

Economic reforms under the banner of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' have made China a powerful global player and have resulted in a substantial improvement in the well-being of the Chinese people. As a result of this, China carries with it the responsibility of global leadership in the arenas of development and (sustainable) growth. It is hoped that through the responsible use of soft power it can bring to bear some benefits for all.

South Africa's political and cultural heritage also has the potential to contribute towards BRICS' growing influence. Despite being a small economy in relation to its BRIC partners, South Africa is ideally situated at the tip of Africa – often referred to as a 'gateway' to Africa – and has a moral authority that underpins its diplomatic successes. One hopes this moral authority remains intact as South Africa enters into new terrains, especially in terms of geopolitics.

The philosophies of Confucianism and ubuntu have the potential to act as counter-balances to aggressive neo-imperialist efforts and ensure an end to humanity's suffering. The question remains, is BRICS really doing things differently? ■

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MDG4: To ensure all children live long and healthy lives

**MINING: IMPACT OF
MECHANISATION**
PAGE 5



MDG 2015 AND BEYOND
PAGE 9



**TB THREAT: PATIENTS
ABSCONDING FROM
TREATMENT** PAGE 21

