

# AFRICA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND NATION BRANDING: REGIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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*Brands incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviors*  
– Phillip Kotler and David Gertner

## **Abstract**

Whether they know it or not, countries are viewed through the lens of branding. Their brand equity lies in the norms and ideas that they project, as well as the actors (leaders) who champion such ideas and norms. Countries embody signs, beliefs, values, and imageries about what they stand for in the global system, and it is this that has an effect upon the imagery and preferences of others rather than merely marketing techniques. As such, countries carry — or project — a 'persona' that expresses their identity, ideas, values, and norms.

This article focuses on the regional dimensions of South Africa's brand value and leadership. This is precisely because regions are crucial platforms through which countries project their ideas, norms, and leadership. It is also here that they build their brand equity. As such, this article examines the kinds of norms that South Africa projects through the region, and understands how these are perceived. Further, it analyses the predominant ideas that South Africa articulates.

## **1. Introduction**

Nation branding is an important consideration in foreign policy articulation and diplomatic practice. The study of how nations brand them-

selves and the effectiveness of such activity for foreign policy is still a relatively new field. This article looks at South Africa's leadership projection in the region from the point of view of nation branding. Nation branding is different to the branding exercise undertaken for tangible products, because nations value and embody their intangible assets such as identity, culture, and values. The 'feel' of a nation is not the same as that of a product. There might be something about the look and feel of the log or flag, but this is not what ultimately shapes or alters perceptions about the country to outsiders.

The leading nation branding expert, Simon Anholt, notes that "A nation's brand image is its most valuable asset: it is national identity made robust, tangible, communicable, and — at its best — made useful" (Anholt 2002: 187). The interest of this article is to look closely at foreign policies as embodying a country's national identity and value system.

While there is value to marketing a country — the beauty of its geography, the richness of its history, the friendliness of its people, and its business climate — this is but a composite aspect of what nation branding is about. Unlike products, countries are complex organisations whose interaction with the world reflects both internal political contestations (between different political persuasions and among the fractions of the elite), conception of their identity, and how they perceive their place in the world to be.

Nation branding, as Anholt (2002) argues, needs to be based on a long-term strategy for the country and its place in the world. Policy thrust, organisational coordination, and execution are all critical in successfully projecting a nation's brand. This article reviews South Africa's regional leadership from a nation branding point of view. It then identifies challenges and opportunities in executing this task.

The rest of the article is structured along four sections. The first makes a case for why nation branding should explicitly form part of foreign policy. This section also offers a conceptual definition of nation branding and traces the sources of its influence. Second, I take a brief overview of South Africa's regional involvement, and how the lack of a conscious nation branding effort limits the dividends that the country could potentially harvest. Third, I highlight the challenges that nation branding is confronted with, focusing on the role of leadership and the emergence of city-branding. Fourth, I offer some tentative ideas on how South Africa's foreign policy could incorporate a thinking on nation

branding, and thereby enhancing its place and role in the world. The final section is a conclusion, which pulls together some key insights on nation branding and foreign policy.

## 2. Why nation branding is important for foreign policy?

The shrinking space of the nation-state in the global system has catapulted into prominence the discipline and practice of nation branding. In this article, nation branding is understood as entailing a nation's perceived identity, values, and priorities. The field of nation branding has many influences, and traces its origins in studies on country of origin, place or destination branding, public diplomacy, and studies on national identity (Dinnie 2008; Fan 2006; Melissen 2005; Kotler and Gertner 2002). Nation branding should not be seen as just about place or destination branding, where emphasis is laid on the external attractiveness of a country, especially for tourists. Rather it is comprehensive and encapsulates the identity, values, and goals or priorities of a country — all the elements that are part of foreign policies of countries. It, therefore, makes sense that the study of nation branding is given a place of pride in foreign policy analysis rather than be an exclusive preserve of marketing and international communication. Unlike with a product, nation branding is not directed at others so they could buy a piece of the country or even its products, although exports may be a part of it, but crucially it sells a particular idea — or ideology<sup>1)</sup> of a country — as part of a legitimating discourse of signs, meanings, and representations. Logos, colours, textures, certain sloganeering are all part of it, although they are not its totality.

As Fan (2006: 3) puts it, "a brand is more than just a name; it is a complex bundle of images, meanings, and experiences in the mind of people". It is about representation of something other than just a country as a physical space. According to Kotler and Gertner (2002) brands differentiate products; they represent a promise of value; and they incite beliefs, evoke emotions, and prompt behaviour. What a country stands for matters in international relations. It affects how others regard it. It does matter whether a country is seen as an honest broker in international negotiations and the extent to which it delivers on its commitments. So, the notion of nation branding is more textured than that of selling a product abroad. It shapes and informs the language of foreign

policy, and the art of diplomacy, although not everything that goes by the name of diplomacy lends itself positively from a brand equity point of view.

Although they are distinct concepts, public diplomacy and nation branding share conceptual boundaries with a great deal of overlap. Public diplomacy targets the general public, including individuals and non-governmental organisations, in foreign societies, while nation-building is identity-focused and goal-directed — and often directed at both state and non-state agencies. According to Melissen (2005: 6), "public diplomacy is initiated by practitioners, whereas branding is about the mobilization of all nation's forces that can contribute to the promotion of its image abroad". Like nation branding, public diplomacy is a soft instrument. They are both aimed at winning hearts and minds. In this sense, they exhibit soft power, which as Nye points out, "rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2004: 5).

As such, soft power, a crucial ingredient in both public diplomacy and nation branding, seeks to influence the imaginary and perception of others in a congenial direction. Essentially, soft-power is more about attractiveness rather than influence, since the latter can be achieved by various other means, including through coercive instruments. Building a nation's brand is about cultivating the power of attractiveness of the extant political leadership, the values that a country embodies, its identity, its cultural resources, its material symbols (such as commercial brands) and its physical spaces. Indeed, the sources of soft power are culture, political values, and foreign policy, especially its legitimacy and the credibility of those who preside over it (Nye 2004: 11). In this respect, soft-power can be seen as a marrow of nation branding.

There is another way in which nation branding becomes a powerful socialising tool to gain cooperation of corporate entities through, for example, reference to the importance of building a country as an Inc.<sup>2)</sup> So, reference to South Africa Inc, India Inc, America Inc — blends, symbolically, powerful commercial entities and state elite projects across the border. This could find expression in the execution of commercial diplomacy, where state representatives and business leaders work together to conquer markets abroad, but doing so in a way that sells the country as a credible commercial actor. In another sense, it could also be projected in global networks such as the World Economic Forum where business leaders and state elites congeal and share platforms. The cohesiveness of fractions of elites of a country could be something

that others see as attractive. The idea here regarding a SA Inc is that even though corporates and the state elites may have fundamental differences domestically, to the eye of the outsiders they must be seen to be making a positive impression by being seen to be speaking with one voice on certain issues, usually defined by state elites. This should not be the end of it since, if such an appearance of cohesiveness is not authentic, the veneer will soon wear off. Crucially, there is a need for government and business to have a shared platform of legitimate social purpose that, primarily, is aimed at boosting national economic competitiveness and enhancing the credibility of the country's economic policies both domestically and internationally.

Some of the objectives that countries pursue in promoting nation branding include: attracting tourism, stimulating inwards investment, and boosting exports, restoring international credibility and investor confidence; and promoting international stability (Chernatony 2008; Olins 2005). According to Olins (2005: 170-179), the three key areas over which countries' brands compete are exports, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and tourism. It does matter what a country exports, since this is always associated with the country of origin, for example South African wine, Scotch whiskey, German automobile, Cuban cigar, or Korean or American electronics. There is also a subtle tinge of nation branding in geographic indications, for example, which have protection in international trade law.

The second area is that of corporate activities, in particular national champions both at home and abroad. In the case of India, Tata, Mahindra, and Infosys come to mind; General Electric and international oil companies in the case of the United States (US); China's telecommunications giant Huawei and computer manufacturer, Lenovo; and South Africa's telecommunications and retail giants on the African continent. The third one is tourism, which is about place destination or cultural attractiveness of a country.

The currency of nation branding has also increased on the back of what Cerny (1999) characterises as the emergence of a 'competition state'. According to this perspective, the functions of the state are redefined to create conditions that are attractive to international capital, and that present the state as appealing — a form of branding. The competition state, as Cerny (1999: 206) points out, exhibits four types of policy changes: a shift from macro-economic to micro-economic interventionism; pursuit of competitive advantage as distinct from com-

parative advantage; emphasis on inflation targeting and general neo-liberal monetarism; and a shift from public welfare maximisation to the promotion of enterprise, innovation, and profitability in both private and public sectors. This is a re-articulation of a perspective laid out by Cox (1987) much earlier, when he suggested that, "The world market had become a realm of competition among unequal giants capable of manipulating demand and of mobilising varying degrees of economic power and political influence". In the modern era, nation branding becomes a facility to shape perceptions in the external environment through the use of soft power.

Quite clearly, nation branding plays an important role "as a means to promote national identity while encouraging the economic benefits necessary to compete in a modern globalized world" (Aronczyk 2008: 43). Government elites would promote a country's brand for several reasons or to achieve a number of goals that are aimed at generating goodwill from outsiders and to reap economic dividends from such efforts. Further, governments want to be seen by their citizens to be promoting domestic economic priorities, something that nation branding can be used as a lever for.

In an age where there is so much importance attached to global rankings, a country's standing, for example on the World Bank Doing Business Index, Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, and World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index among others, is appropriated for branding purposes if it is positive (and overlooked if negative) — to differentiate a country from those that are perceived to be doing poorly. Branding through association or alignment is another mechanism to build brand capital. Being part of prominent international groupings and clubs such as the G20, the African Union (AU), and the BRICS is seen as an asset for shoring up a country's identity and sense of prestige on the global stage. In this way, considerations of nation branding can influence approaches to foreign policy. Similarly, foreign policy choices, especially if they turn out to be positive, help to further reinforce brand equity.

Further, involvement in the G20 is instrumentalised to project South Africa as a system stabiliser, and a champion for Africa's interests; its participation in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), apart from articulating its own economic interests, has lent South Africa the status of a middle-power and a bridge-builder between the developing and the developed world; its activities in the AU positions it as an African coun-

try first and committed to continental leadership; and in the BRICS, it lends itself to perceptions of a country that is on the rise and associated with increasingly influential countries in the world. Those who may want South Africa to be a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) may be driven by consideration that this would place the country in a favourable light as part of an exclusive rich-nations club that is a global standard setter, even though the domestic reality may narrate a different story. Punching above its weight in international *fora* has enabled South Africa to build brand equity. For citizens, a country's participation in global processes, and scoring good points in these avenues, could help to infuse a sense of confidence amongst the citizens or important social groups, even though these endeavours may not be accompanied by any tangible economic gain. It could be argued that much of foreign policy work is an exercise in nation branding.

Branding is an exercise that helps to transform the national and international image of a country (Aronczyk 2008: 44). It is possible that to the eyes of the citizens, a country's external relations may appear good, and they may very well have a positive sense of esteem about the role their country is playing on the continental and global stages. Yet, what is also important is how the outsiders view the country, in other words, what image does the country project outside its borders. In addition, it is also important how foreigners within national borders perceive the country's identity and value system. As Szondi (2008: 12), put it: "One of the features of nation branding is that it considers domestic and foreign citizens as equally important targets". It is not sufficient to view one's identity only inwardly. Making improvements in nation branding requires a great deal of attention to the effect a country's policy has on the conceptions and preferences of those outside the country.

Consider the following examples: on international relations, countries such as Canada, Australia, and Scandinavian countries were regarded as middle-powers, not so much for the size of their economies, but for the kind of identity and role they were seen to be playing on multilateral issues. These countries were regarded as honest brokers, less hard-edged about advancing their narrow interests and more concerned about brokering deals that are fair, and with deep commitment to multilateralism both as a principle and a process of resolving differences (see Cooper 1997; Van der Westhuizen 1998). At some point,

South Africa was viewed through the same lens, in particular with respect to the role that it played in multilateral trade negotiation from the late 1990s to the beginning of the Doha Round.

When the International Marketing Council of South Africa (IMC) was established in August 2000, this was with the intention of closing the gap between how the country was perceived and its reality in the global market place (Johnstone 2008: 5). In a sense, conscious nation branding is something that is still relatively new in South Africa, although the country has been projecting a particular brand to outsiders, both before democracy and after the democratic government came into being in 1994. As Johnstone (2008: 5) points out, developing a compelling national brand, defining the relationship between the core brand custodian and other activities that may have also been involved in brand promotion, for example destination marketing and setting out a clear strategy to follow in promoting nation branding, were at the heart of the work of this agency at its creation. Changing international perceptions, and ensuring congruence between this perception and the commitments of the country were some of the goals of this brand building endeavor.

Nation branding is not an end in itself, but a means to project identity, values, goals, and a sense of purpose in international relations. Anholt (2008: 22) warns that, "governments should never do things purely for brand-related reasons; no action should be dedicated to image management alone". It is not just the style and pomp that matters, nor being seen in every international event, but it is the identity and the purpose that a country articulates on international platforms that is important. It is thus important that nation-building is approached strategically rather than functionally or tactically as a matter of techniques to win the game of recognition. This point is aptly made by Szondi (2008: 5), when he points out that nation branding should be seen in terms of "strategic self-presentation of a country with the aim of creating reputational capital through economic, political, and social interest promotion at home and abroad".

Anholt (2013: 1-2) identifies three components of nation branding. The first is what he refers to as strategy, which entails knowing who a nation is and where it stands today (both in reality and according to internal and external perceptions). The second is substance, which is about effective execution of that strategy in the form of new economic, legal, political, social, cultural, and educational activity. The final one is



symbolic action, which covers particular species of substance that happen to have an intrinsic communicative power, including innovations, structures, legislation, reforms, investments, institutions or policies that are suggestive or memorable. Measured against these, South Africa would appear limping: there are still inconclusive debates about South Africa's precise identity, and still battles with external (continental) perceptions that it is anti-African in the way it treats nationals from other African countries, either through hurdles in the visa system or hostility of South African citizens towards outsiders, especially of African origin. There seems to be no clear substance of ideas that is compelling in South Africa's foreign policy stance, and its rationale both in the African continent and the world has lost its edge.

An important challenge for South Africa is to consciously cultivate brand-building as part of its foreign policy, and to work to sustain its power of attraction. Nye (2011: 100) has cautioned that, "Sustained attraction — being a city on a hill — requires consistency of practice with values. Going further to project attraction, frame agendas, and persuade others is even more difficult". If a country cannot frame its agenda coherently, there is no clear sense of purpose about its foreign policy, and it is hard to discern where it stands on important issues in the world, its nation branding exercise is an act in futility. South Africa's foreign policy since Zuma's administration has declined in stature. This is compounded by domestic political and economic challenges that seem to be intractable.

### 3. Nation branding and outlines of regional leadership

There is no doubt that South Africa's foreign policy has evolved in important ways since the country became a democracy in 1994. Despite its setbacks in the last seven years, the nation-brand equity is still much better than it was in the days of *apartheid*, although that is hardly a worthy benchmark to use since *apartheid* was condemned as a crime against humanity.

Post-*apartheid*, South Africa's international relations are shaped by the view that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. The consideration that the country's development priorities and values should inform international relations is at the core of government's thinking. The African continent is identified as the centrepiece of South Africa's

foreign policy, with greater weight placed on Southern Africa, including efforts to deepen regional integration. As the White Paper on Foreign Policy (2011) points out: "Since the birth of democratic South Africa in 1994, the country has prioritised an Afro-centric foreign policy rooted in national liberation, the quest for African renewal, and efforts to negate the legacy of colonialism as well as neo-colonialism".

The early developments saw the country showing greater inclination towards an idealistic thrust, with various policy documents giving greater premium to issues related to human rights and peace-building. These remain pillars of South Africa's foreign policy. In underscoring the importance of the African continent for South Africa's economic diplomacy, during his 2013 budget speech, Pravin Gordhan, the former finance minister, pointed out that: "Africa is our home, and it is our future. It is a market of over one billion people and it is growing rapidly". He particularly highlighted the fact that the African continent accounts for roughly 18 per cent of South Africa's total exports, and nearly 25 per cent of its manufactured exports. Investing in the African continent holds possibilities for stimulating South African exports, while supporting development in those countries. South Africa's medium-term strategic framework for 2014-2019 underlines the country's intention to "continue to support regional and continental processes to respond to and resolve crises, promote peace and security, strengthen regional integration, significantly increase intra-African trade, and champion sustainable development in Africa" (Presidency 2014).

There is no doubting South Africa's desire to achieve these objectives; the South African government has been consistent in expressing this posture. What is lacking, however, is a strategic orientation in the form of a credible leadership, clear ideas, and effective strategies to realise these objectives. It lacks the social power necessary to effect change in its immediate region. Steven Lukes (2005) saw one dimension of power as about ideals and beliefs that help to shape the initial preferences of others. Other African countries are not acquiescing to South Africa's putative leadership in the continent. South Africa has not cultivated a powerful brand that expresses what Nye (2011: 207-208) refers to as smart power, which is about the ability "to combine resources into successful strategies in the new context of power diffusion and 'the rise' of the rest".

As Nye (2011: 2008) points out, smart power is predicated on five key questions: first, what key goals and outcomes are preferred?

Second, what resources are preferred and in which contexts? Third, what are the positions and preferences of the targets of influence? Fourth, which forms of power behaviour are most likely to succeed? Fifth, what is the probability of success. There is no evidence of strategic process in foreign policy formulation and planning in South Africa that takes a total view of these questions, and ensures the alignment of various agencies (including business and NGOs) and other government departments that are active externally to achieve clearly defined outcomes that position the nation brand favourably.

On the commercial diplomacy front, South Africa needs to combine both hard power (trade) and soft power to achieve outcomes. The hard-edge elements of South Africa's branding which, no doubt, would appeal more to its citizens, are those to do with commercial or economic diplomacy — export, investment, and tourism promotion. The National Development Plan (2012) asserts that South Africa should aggressively expand trade and investment in the region, on the continent, and globally. Currently, much of South Africa's foreign policy is focused on processes, agreements, and events. These include the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and the AU. In the past, South Africa has not consciously approached its regional relations from a nation branding point of view. It has also not appropriately gauged the perceptions of other African citizens and elites of its role on the continent, leading to self-aggrandising rhetoric that has little resonance with the reality of its engagements on the continent.

Scholars such as Ahwireng-Obeng and McGowan (1998: 12) have argued that South Africa's regional role can be understood in no other terms than as a selfish hegemon. They cited its dominance in key economic sectors in the sub-region, structural imbalances between South Africa and the rest of the sub-region, and the conduct of South Africa in trade negotiations, and concluded that, "there is a moral obligation for the new South Africa to engage Southern Africa in a positive manner". This may be stretching the point regarding South Africa's actual intention, but a deliberate branding exercise that includes a communication strategy helps to dispel some of the misconceptions about the country. Take another study, for example, that yields responses that are unflattering for South Africa. A field-based study by African scholars has revealed that "there is a marked difference between how South

Africans as people and as a government see themselves and how the rest of the continent perceives them" (Schoeman, Kefale and Alden 2017).

According to some of the interviews undertaken by these scholars, many Africans expressed disappointment with South Africa's conduct on three fronts. The first is with respect of the spate of xenophobic attacks that took place in both 2008 and 2015, with authorities taking longer to formulate a clear strategy to respond to these. The second is South Africa's perceived focus on its narrow interests in its participation in the BRICS and the G20, and ignoring wider African interests. The third is that South Africa's foreign policy has contradicted itself at the United Nations (UN) Security Council and in the AU, citing South Africa's support for resolution 1973 that authorise Nato's (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) intervention in Libya as an example. Further, according to the views gathered by these scholars, South Africa is perceived as acting in a manner that bullies other small African countries in the AU. These may not be based on hard evidence, but the mere fact that such perceptions exist and are strongly expressed is indicative of South Africa's waning credibility on the continent, and this bodes ill for its brand.

The point is not for South Africa to brand itself as either a benign hegemon whose task is to simply dispense aid or to aggressively push commercial interests in the region, but to be more nuanced and balanced on how it articulates its own interests as part of doing good for the continent, and to confidently market its positive attributes. This nuanced approach is set out in a research report by Smith-Hohn and De Kock (2015: 4) of Brand SA. The highlight pillars of South Africa's good reputation: professionalism in its hard power resources such as the military; maintaining a credible multilateralist profile across the continent, something that is a soft power attribute; and sustaining a normative drive in foreign policy engagement. It is also important that South Africa listens more, engages more empathetically with its counterparts, places less emphasis on formal leadership while gathering strength to assert its moral leadership and soft power, supported by good governance, effective stewardship of its economy, and credible leadership domestically. None of this should mean South Africa loses its will to lead, and ceases to identify and pursue its interest with a sense of purpose and determination in the African continent.

## 4. Challenges to nation branding

South Africa has not consciously thought about its regional leadership in terms of nation branding. There are instances where this thinking has been implicit, and tacitly expressed. There is a need to close the gap between nation branding and projection of regional leadership. In cases where South Africa's regional leadership has improved the country's brand value, this has not been proactively cultivated.

There are various challenges that would need to be considered in thinking about nation branding. Chernatoy (2008: 16), notes that "successful brands thrive because the people delivering the brand act in a manner that reflects the promised value". The first challenge is that of leadership and its conduct. If the political leadership of a country is perceived negatively, the nation as a brand suffers. It makes it harder to build productive international relations or to attract foreign direct investment if political leadership is perceived to be corrupt or corruptible, or if trust in public officials is very low, and if state-society relations are fractious. One of the key questions in measuring the strength of brand equity should thus be the perception of a country's political leadership at any point in time.

This also applies to internal and external perceptions about corporate leaders. Are they seen as shining examples in adhering to corporate governance standards? How do they measure on corporate social investment? Are they viewed in a positive light with respect to stakeholder engagement? Are they a force for good or a force for bad for society? And do they comport themselves well across the border? All these factors, both political and commercial, have an impact on the quality of nation branding. Importantly, a country needs to maintain consistency between the message (and values) it articulates in rhetoric, and what it does in the conduct of its foreign policy abroad. It is also for this reason that government needs to engage stakeholders — especially business stakeholders — in setting out the outlines for its branding, and in executing its economic diplomacy abroad.

It is worth highlighting aspects of the National Planning Commission's (2012) National Development Plan (NDP) report that have a bearing on the country's international relations, and that reveal the weaknesses of foreign policy leadership. Chapter 7 of the National Planning Commission's (NPC) NDP report is devoted to international relations. It proposes that international relations be driven by the coun-

try's domestic economic, political, and social demands, if challenges such as eradicating poverty, lowering inequality and creating jobs are to be achieved.

Accordingly, it recommended that the country's national priorities be defined. In addition, it asserted that South Africa should aggressively expand trade and investment in the region, on the continent, and globally. This is something that can be achieved if there is better coordination across the different agencies dealing with economic issues, enhanced interaction with industry, and there is sufficient technical capacity within the foreign ministry to drive economic diplomacy — all of which are currently lacking.

The NPC decries what it sees as South Africa's "relative decline in power and influence in world affairs", further noting that "South Africa lost a great deal of the moral authority — as a power source — that the country enjoyed in the period immediately after the 1994 elections". The NPC went on to state that South Africa's foreign relations are becoming ineffective, with the country experiencing a drop in global competitiveness and moral standing. It attributes this decline to what it calls "the overall demise of the golden age of [South Africa's] African diplomacy, spanning 1998 to 2008". According to the NPC's assessment, even on the African continent, South Africa's standing has declined, with the country having a weak grasp of Africa's geopolitical situation, and with "policy makers vacillating between leading and muddling through on issues of integration and cooperation".

While this critique may be harsh, it does underline weaknesses in the country's policy thrust, coordination, and strategy execution — all critical functions of leadership. These have a bearing on the country's brand equity. Second, in the contemporary world nation branding has a competitor in the form of city-branding. The role of cities as magnets for foreign direct investment and tourism is growing in prominence. Kotler and Kotler (2014: 8) argue that, "City building, not nation building has been the key to the rise of emerging markets". This is especially so, as the two authors point out, since cities are intensively productive environments ripe for infrastructure development and various kinds of commercial activities. It is in cities that wealth is generated, that innovation sparks are ignited, and where cultural power of attraction lies (Kotler and Kotler 2014: 11).

Countries are increasingly viewed through the lens of their cities of opportunity. From a commercial point of view, it is cities or what are

called mega-cities where industrial clustering takes place, which in turn create an external appeal. Barber (2013: 4) makes a similar point in his observation that the city rather than the nation-state is the agent of social change, as it is where creativity is unleashed, community developed, and citizenship realised. Ohmae (2004: xxv) saw region-states (that is regions within countries or mega-cities) as "the best units of prosperity on the global stage". These sub-national entities attract cross-border businesses, they have thriving tourism sectors, and because of their openness they tend to be seedbeds for innovation.

It is important, therefore, that nation branding is promoted in close coordination with the external orientation of cities, and to also draw lessons from how city practitioners go about promoting their cities. If, as Barber (2013: 63-69) contends, cities are centres of commerce and trade, and are magnets that pull capital, technology, and talent, nation-states need to rethink how they go about building nation-brand, at times using thriving cities to reinforce the credibility of their message. This point is also emphasised by De Kock and Peterson (2016) who contend that perception of cities reflect on the national brand and its reputation, and thus they need to consciously contribute to its cultivation.

While it is a reality that cities are growing in prominence, this should not be seen as portending the liquidation of the nation-state by forces of globalisation that privilege cities, and that nation branding efforts are superfluous. On the contrary, the rise of cities should be regarded as an asset. Importantly, as Anderson (2006: 3) has observed, the rally about the end of nationalism or the nation-state is far from materialising, and nation-ness remains "the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time". What this means is that there should be a great deal of cooperation between the national and city level in promoting a country's place in the world and projecting a positive identity.

## **5. Key policy considerations for an efficacious nation branding in foreign policy in South Africa**

Policy coherence is essential across the key departments that have relevance for foreign policy execution, starting with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). More resources need

to be devoted to managing both economic diplomacy and strengthening relations with key partners on the continent. In light of the fact that nation branding is about effective expression of soft power, South Africa should advance its leadership consciously and purposefully to drive ideas about change on the continent.

Without clear communication of the country's strategy and approach to the region, it will be difficult to harvest gains from nation branding. Part of communications should be a deliberate strategy to actively highlight the country's positive contribution towards Africa's development, including the contribution of South African companies in corporate social investment projects in various parts of the continent.

Nation branding should not remain static. There are certain core values and ideals that form the essence of South Africa's identity that should be preserved. These include its commitment to the economic development of its citizens, peace-building and developmental partnership on the African continent, a human rights thrust, and a commitment to global stability and peace. These are values that are consistent with its Constitutional framework. How these are promoted, and through which messages and with what diplomatic instruments, is something that should not be cast in stone. Flexibility and adaptability is important for executing an effective nation branding strategy. Consider for example, the catch-phrase — "Alive with Possibility". This is vivid and projects a country of opportunity, but it could also be construed for other meanings, such as a possibility for nasty surprises or of politicians behaving badly, and so on. Those involved in crafting mottos or slogans that are aimed at promoting nation brand should closely monitor the political temperature, sensitise those in power to the damage the behaviour of leaders or certain policies may have on the nation branding. Importantly, they need to test the "look and feel" of their brand and adopt tactics that could help to keep it real.

Nation branding should be central to foreign policy thinking and determination. It should not just be a component in the cluster system of government. Proximity to the sanctum of executive power is necessary. The DIRCO-anchored Coordinated Forum on International Relations (CFIR), which is meant for sharing information on managing external engagements should have representation from the agency driving nation branding — Brand South Africa. The Cabinet Legkotla took a decision at the January 2007 meeting directing the International Relations, Peace, and Security Cluster to submit guidelines to cabinet on estab-



lishing effective measures to manage international engagements. This forum is comprised of senior officials and is designed to meet twice a year. Its mandate is to facilitate sharing of information regarding stakeholders' international involvement, policy statements, visits abroad, conferences, and summits; provide foreign policy guidance on international issues; planning and coordinating incoming and outgoing international visits; and create a platform for possible private sector/civil society engagement.

In the 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, DIRCO laments that "divergent measures emanating from South Africa on foreign policy" is a risk management issue. Poor coordination of international relations efforts, including contradictory approaches and duplication by sub-national entities could damage brand equity. The CFIR should move beyond administrative guidelines, and be re-oriented towards substantive policy engagement across various agencies doing work that have implications for the country's international relations. It is a structure that would be best placed in the Presidency, and to work closely with the stream of work on International Relations in the NPC.

The lack of vitality of the CFIR and its absence of policy levers could potentially have a constraining effect on nation branding. The South African Council on International Relations (SACOIR) should also place nation branding at the heart of its agenda, as this could help focus attention on such important aspects as identity, values, and priorities for international engagements. Ideally, this is a structure that would be best placed in the Presidency, as a repository of ideas, insights, and strategies at the high level.

There have been a number of studies undertaken by Brand South Africa on how the country is perceived by outsiders, with separate reports for Africa and the rest of the world. Drawing out insights from such studies and turning these into actionable plans, could help in advancing nation branding. Finally, South Africa needs to be explicit in communicating its achievements on the African continent, including those of its corporate entities, individual citizens, and non-governmental organisations, and appropriate these as part of its brand equity.

## 6. Conclusion

Many countries today view nation branding as integral to their foreign policies. Values, identity, and priorities are the substance of nation

brands, and they should be essential in the conduct of foreign policies. Much of South Africa's foreign policy is focused on processes, agreements, and events. These include SACU, SADC, NEPAD, and the AU. Apart from processes linked to continental institutions, considerable energy in South Africa's international relations has gone towards conflict resolution and peace-building efforts in both Southern and Central Africa.

South Africa has been adept at managing the political dimension of international relations on the continent, but the linkages between the political and the economic imperatives have generally been weak, leading to concerns that South Africa is not reaping sufficient economic dividends from its peace-building efforts on the African continent. Nation branding should generate value both in terms of influencing the perceptions of others about the country, and converting intangible resources for economic gains for the citizens. The ultimate effectiveness of nation branding should elevate the esteem of political leadership both in the eyes of outsiders and domestic constituencies.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that South Africa needs to frame a coherent agenda in its foreign policy, and be clear where it stands on important issues; be consistent in its messages; and crucially to ensure congruence between its professed values domestically and how it conducts itself abroad.

## Endnotes

1. Here ideology is used in the sense of Terry Eagleton (2007) use of it as a discourse that expresses meanings, signs and representations
2. This refers to positioning or branding the country as if it were a business.

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