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QUIET DIPLOMACY: SOUTH AFRICA'S WAY OF DEALING WITH ZIMBABWE DURING THE PRESIDENCY OF THABO MBEKI

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Abstract

This article focuses on the various forms of interactions taking place between the governments of South Africa and Zimbabwe since 1999. It aims to unveil the particular actions that South Africa has taken to ensure that its neighbour stays on the path towards democratization, and tries to provide reasoning for any such action. Furthermore, unveils a particular strain of diplomacy deployed by authorities in Pretoria, one that values secrecy and in which contestation is avoided. South Africa is the regional hegemon, nonetheless, its interactions with Zimbabwe are non-intrusive to the point that they become difficult to quantify or qualify. The use of soft power and carrots, rather than sticks is due to a long-standing relationship between the two countries, both political and economic, rendering it difficult to force transition upon Zimbabwe, without risking a backlash, and without endangering both regional security and that of the citizens of Zimbabwe. With that in mind, the article concludes that the approach of Pretoria's government towards Harare is not necessarily detrimental to South Africa's long-term aspirations, even if it does not quench the thirst of critics calling for rapid democratization techniques.

Keywords: quiet diplomacy, foreign policy, soft power, Southern Africa

Introductory remarks

In the early 2000's Zimbabwe was facing a full-blown financial and economic crisis. The economy of the country was nearing collapse, partly "aided" by Harare's decision to militarily intervene in Congo, and partly due to bad macro-economic management from behalf of President Mugabe and his party-regime. This could have proven the perfect opportunity for South Africa to try to encourage the spread of democracy at a more rapid pace

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throughout the whole of the continent. However, following Mandela's lead, Mbeki preferred to use the tools of "quiet diplomacy", failing to swiftly deal with one of the vital issues in its neighborhood, and, at the same time, stalling the progress South Africa hopes for in the democratization process of the entire region. In short, many critics call this one wasted opportunity to speed up the consolidation processes in what is regarded as one of the last undemocratic spaces of the planet. It must be noted, however, that a set of characteristics specific to the Southern African region, delved upon herein, have impeded using the rapid democratization technics that the West has called for.

To understand the issue and why the government in Pretoria uses this form of "ultra-soft power", one needs to observe how quiet diplomacy came to existence, how it was utilized by Mandela, and only later, can its use by Mbeki be studied. This will be dealt with in what follows. Another part of the paper focuses on the specificities of quiet diplomacy as understood and applied by Thabo Mbeki. This particular way of interaction between the governments in Pretoria and Harare is analyzed and the reasons behind it are explained, as are its advantages and disadvantages.

Mandela and the birth of quiet diplomacy

Even since the election of Mandela, the international community had high hopes for South Africa, and envisaged the country assuming the role of regional hegemony, with all its implications. The major hopes were that South Africa would become the leading peacemaker and peacekeeper of the continent, that it would revitalize organizations such as the African Union (AU) - at that time the Organization for African Unity - and that it would be an economic engine for the rest of the continent, but especially for southern Africa[1]. Mandela was quick to observe that Africa in general, and southern Africa specifically were central to the interests of South Africa, and admitted that "the concerns and interests of the continent of Africa should be reflected in foreign policy choices"[2]. He also reassured the United Nations that South

[1] J. Barber, "South Africa's Political Miracle: The International Dimension", *South African Journal of International Affairs,* Vol 7(1), 2000, p.65.

[2] Nelson Mandela, "South Africa's Future Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 72(5), 1993 [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/49408/nelson-mandela/south-africas-future-foreign-policy], retrieved 12 May 2015.

Africa is its partner and that ensuring peace, prosperity and democracy were common goals for the two actors[3]. This came at a time when the world order had recently been shifted and was sustained by one pillar of power, namely the United States of America. The USA, nonetheless had yet to fully grasp its role of sole hegemon, even though it had begun acting as a global policeman since 1991[4]. In this international climate, South Africa was increasingly becoming a valuable partner for the West – for it apparently had similar values articulated in similar discourses.

Mandela's approach in dealing with the Nigerian Dictatorship in the mid 1990's implied a certain degree of unilateralism from the onset, but, after negotiations failed with military leader Abacha, the country stayed somewhat isolated from its neighbors and pushed to handle the issue alone. Mandela believed on the onset that quiet diplomacy and arranged visits would enable South Africa to gain enough influence as to later exert it; that is why he sent Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Thabo Mbeki - Deputy President at the time – to lobby on South Africa's behalf. However, these tactics failed, and a number of activists accused of plotting a coup were executed in Nigeria, drawing Mandela some international criticism[5]. South Africa then pushed for the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth and withdrew its high commissioner from the country in protest, leaving the majority of members of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to blame what they considered a form of isolationism. South Africa was starting to have the leverage it had aspired for inside the OAU, but its willingness to use it, in conjuncture with pressure put on Nigeria was deemed tardy. In addition, Mandela was criticized for engaging the Abacha junta, and leaving aside, or neglecting Nigeria's democratic movement[6]. Mandela's failure resided in his wrong reading of Nigeria's dictator, and the assumption that the latter was willing to accept foreign intervention. South Africa soon

[3] Nelson Mandela, Address by the President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Nelson Mandela to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 3 October 1994.

[4] In 1991, the first battles of a coalition led by the USA against Iraqi forces invading Kuwait commenced, marking US's armed involvement in the Gulf War.

[5] See J. Barber and B. Vickers, "South Africa's Foreign Policy", in A. Venter (ed.), *Government and Politics in the New South Africa*, Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 2001, p.339.

[6] Chirstopher Landsberg, *The Quiet Diplomacy of Liberation*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media Ltd, 2004, pp. 172-173

realized that in order for its diplomatic efforts to be successful, it required partnerships with the rest of the members of the OAU and the abandonment of unilateral approaches. This way of approaching Abacha was backed by a twofold argument: Nigeria had been a constant partner of Mandela's party - the African National Congress (ANC) - in its push for ending apartheid and there was a firm belief that speaking out against the illegitimate regime would only make it lash out even further, endangering the lives of many of its citizens.

The Lesotho intervention from 1998 demonstrated that South Africa was only inclined to resort to military action after shuttle diplomacy had failed and only in cases in which its security was at stake[7]. If Mandela hadn't intervened to contain the coup, South Africa was to be faced with a spillover of refugees and the threat of a national war program fallen under wrong hands. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mandela offered support to rebuild the country, as Kabila, the new leader faced domestic contestation. South Africa's reluctance to provide military assistance, continuously requested by Kabila, made countries in the region consider it was using a double-standard[8], by comparison with what had happened in Lesotho.

In his relation to the leadership in Harare, Mandela utilized, however, different methods of engagement. In the first part of his presidential term, he occasionally visited Zimbabwe. On several occasions, he publicly thanked the people of Zimbabwe and Mugabe, for their constant support in the liberation struggle, as Zimbabwe had been, similarly to Nigeria, a country that had aided the ANC. Of course, Zimbabwe, at that time, was showing but few signs of an economic meltdown. It can be argued that the ruling, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party had done a good job of hiding their constant corruption and their poor resource management from external actors. Moreover, in the period leading to Zimbabwe's economic meltdown, its leaders were somewhat more restrained from full-blown anti-democratic practices. Furthermore, Mandela's actions as President of South Africa were not only praised by the international arena: his democratization mission in Africa was

[7] *Ibidem*, pp. 164-165.
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 166.

met with skepticism by autocratic leaders, who considered it a clear threat to their political survival and tried to –even succeeding to some extent – delegitimize it by connecting it to a Western agenda.

Mbeki – a continuator of quiet diplomatic behaviour

After Mbeki's 1999 election, it was decided that Pretoria engage the DRC both from a military standpoint –by sending peacemaking troops in the region – and from a political one – by trying to create a transnational government. Thabo Mbeki came to power with the vision of a financially prosperous continent which would also be politically independent, with South Africa at its core. The idea of an "African Renaissance" – concept coined by Cheikh Anta Diop, whom develops a blueprint to cure some hardships faced by African nations, be them economic, scientific or cultural[9] - implied that resolution of conflict would be achieved, that a new, inclusive regime predicating open markets and free trade would come across the region and that principles of good governance such as democratization and promotion of human rights will be respected[10].

And here the case of Zimbabwe comes into question. If South Africa was pursuing such goals, how could it stand witness to the situation in Zimbabwe and not push, even aggressively for a solution that would guarantee the above-mentioned principles are respected in the region?

To complete this very important part of the paper, an elaborated part on diplomacy, its functions and its relation to power could prove useful, but the issue will not be tackled now; instead diplomacy will briefly be defined as a peaceful instrument that helps the fruition of foreign policy objectives. Its purpose is to mediate differences and avoid or resolve disputes.

Quiet diplomacy is a form of diplomatic interaction, characterized by moderation[11]. It can also be defined as "discussing problems with officials of

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[9] See Cheikh Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance*: *Essays in African Culture* & *Development, 1946-1960,* London : Karnak House, 1996.

[10] Thabo Mbeki, address to the Corporate Council Summit, Chantilly, Virginia, April 1997, *The African Renaissance,* Occasional Papers, Konrad Adeneur Stiftung, Johannesburg, May 1998, pp. 9-11.

[11] T. G. Otte, "Kissinger" in G.R. Berridge, M. Keens-Soper and T. G. Otte (eds.), *Diplomatic Theory from Machiavelli to Kissinge*r, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p.198.

another country in a calm way"[12], generally by avoiding media exposure. Thus, some other features of quiet diplomacy include: personal or direct encounters between heads of state, government or high-ranking officials, the appearance of limited action, a context of bilateral or multilateral relations and the need for a calm atmosphere that allows and encourages dialogue to exist. Furthermore, a great deal of back-channeling is deployed. This is exactly the pattern of behavior identifiable in the case of Mbeki when dealing with the government of Zimbabwe. Quiet diplomacy, seemingly, has one trait that differentiates it from other forms of diplomacy, namely secrecy. While diplomatic conduct usually takes place in the lime-light, quiet diplomacy involves working in the background, with only some results made public, if such results are pleasing to one of the counterparts seated at the negotiation tables. Of course, if there is a blatant failure to achieve a result, what has happened behind closed doors can surface, fact which may delay or cancel further discussion.

If the principal foreign policy priorities for Mandela's government had been solving conflicts throughout the region and reintegrating South Africa into the global community, Mbeki wanted a greater sense of unity amongst African states, and, most importantly, between southern states. In his opinion, closer economic ties and a form of economic integration would prove beneficial for all the countries involved[13]. After coming to power, the regime rapidly realized that a more pragmatic approach was needed in order to accomplish any of the above objectives, thus, while the continuous commitment to promoting democracy and human rights was not abandoned, national interest became an equally relevant driving force for external action[14].

African Renaissance also came with the rhetoric of respecting state sovereignty and boundaries[15]. This kind of approach, solely reliant on soft power has both advantages and clear flaws. One advantage is that states

[12] P.H. Collin, *Dictionary of Government and Politics*, Middlesex: Peter Collin, 1997, p. 89.

[13] D. Van Niekerk, G. Vand der Waldt, and A. Jonker (eds.), *Governance Politics and Policy in South Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 236.

[14] Barber and Vickers Op. cit. p. 362.

[15] G. Evans, "South Africa's Foreign Policy After Mandela: Mbeki and his Concept of an African Renaissance", in *The Round Table,* No. 352, 1999, p. 627.

usually perceive other states that "leave them alone" as benign actors and are inclined to involve themselves in negotiations more easily with such actors. The major disadvantage is that any turn-around of policy from benign actors automatically hurts their image both regionally and internationally. Shifts in the foreign policy doctrine of one nation have repercussions globally, and turning from a non-combatant stance towards that of an aggressive player can prove risky, especially in post-colonial places, where the perennial memory of direct state intervention in another state has left deep scars. Furthermore, interference can end up legitimizing unforeseeable actions from behalf of a government, if it finds its existence threatened by another or its power decaying.

Having in mind the vast criticism received for intervening in Nigeria, even if the social unrest in Zimbabwe created deep worries in Pretoria, any type of military intervention was out of the question, because it would come at the risk of sacrificing South Africa's foreign policy goals. Thus, the chosen alternative was to convince the Mugabe regime to embark on a path of further democratization by carrots, rather than sticks. The only problem with such a decision was the limited availability of possible rewards. The issue was further complicated by pressures coming from the West, which was calling for swift, decisive action. Mugabe, on the other hand, understood the complicated position in which South Africa had placed itself, and started driving a hard bargain.

In short, there are three main point on which Mugabe's government was attacked by critics: the land restitution problem, the economic crisis and a continuous oppression of the political opposition. Land restitution is one of Zimbabwe's historical wounds. Several attempts have been made since the 1992 Land Acquisition Act was passed – which enabled the government to acquire land through compulsory action. However, the land reform was going slowly and no decisive government action was taken in this regard until the end of the 1990's[16]. In 2000, the majority of Zimbabweans, rallied by the opposing party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), voted against the new constitution proposed by Mugabe's regime, fact which sparked a series of occupations of white-owned farms. The regime called the

[16] P.L. Peters and N. Malan, "Caveats for Land Reform in South Africa: Lessons from Zimbabwe", in South *African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 7(2), 2000, p. 154.

occupations, led by war veterans "spontaneous" and did not admit any involvement, but it soon became clear that government was behind everything, in a desperate attempt to flex their muscles in order to deter the opposition from consolidating their position within national politics. In order to keep the opposition isolated, a violent campaign was launched by ZANU-PF leaders against the MDC[17] and their supporters. The economic crisis in Zimbabwe is also connected with the fast-track land reform, but is not solely tributary to it. Zimbabwe saw its GDP gain constant momentum in its first decade of independence, with a slowing down only visible in late 1990's. A series of taxes on luxury goods, the confiscation of accounts and the default on debt to the International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank, as well as lowering interest rates are all triggers of the crisis[18]. The economic situation was further deteriorated when the Mugabe government decided to award war veterans with bonus payments and higher monthly pensions. The IMF and the World Bank subsequently suspended their funding on allegations of corruption. The price of food was high, unemployment was continuously growing and the national currency had lost all strength. Eventually, people began to riot in 1998, but the initial rioters were suppressed by military forces[19]. In August, troops were deployed to the DRC, where action lasted until 2002, having catastrophic results for the Zimbabwean economy. The country was already in the midst of an economic crisis, investors were fleeing, a large part of the agricultural sectors had fallen in the hands of people unable to manage production and war just amplified the entire situation. In this context South Africa stayed quiet, or, better put, acted quietly, although things were starting to boil in Pretoria. The intervention in the DRC, to which Zimbabwe participated was conducted in the name of the South African Development Community (SADC), without consent from South Africa. This was a major turning point for the government in Pretoria, as it saw both its influence inside the SADC contested, and that the international institution steered on a path which was

[17] M. Meredith, *Robert Mugabe: Power, Plunder and Tyranny in Zimbabwe*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2002, p. 178.
[18] P. Bond, "Zimbabwe: Pretoria's New African Dilemma", in *Indicator South Africa*, Vol. 19(1), 2002, p.16.
[19] Brown, *op. cit.* p. 1226.

contrary to its interests. South Africa rallied Mozambique and Botswana by its side, as Zimbabwe was now standing with Angola and Namibia, but this two-pillar setting inside the SADC was not very comfortable, given South Africa's aspiration to be the regional hegemon.

Constant negotiation was carried out between officials of South Africa and Zimbabwe, all in the absence of public condemnation by the former towards the actions of Harare, which had placed the country in the above-mentioned situation - a situation that had begun to spill over throughout the region.

It can be argued that the signs had been there all-along, and the systemic crisis in Zimbabwe did not appear out of thin air, being rather the result of a series of never-ending bad government decisions. A report produced by the Africa Institute of South Africa in early 2001, discovered a three-layered crisis in Zimbabwe: a crisis of legitimacy, one of expectations and one of confidence[20]. The consensus built in the course of the liberation struggle had been eroded, the economic meltdown of the country left people with high hopes and little possibility for their fruition, and the confidence in Mugabe's party to redress the situation was spiraling downwards[21]. The apparition of the MDC, led by prominent trade union activist Morgan Tsvangirai, and supported by the white elites, in 1999, further complicated things for Mugabe, as the nascent movement gained momentum by publicly attacking the regime.

Since 2007, Thabo Mbeki was mandated by the SADC to mediate negotiations between ZANU-PF and MDC, in order to create the necessary conditions for free and fair elections the following year. After violent protests broke out in Zimbabwe in early 2008, a power-sharing pact became the topic of discussion between President Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai - Prime Minister at the time. In late 2008, a compromise was reached and a document was signed, thereby resulting in the national unity government of 2009. South Africa intervened in the process, mediating between the main parties, granted that the reconciliation of interests was not possible without foreign intervention. If South Africa had not previously played the card of

[20] Africa Institute, "Report on the Africa Institute of SA Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe", Pretoria, 2001, p. 5.
[21] *Ibidem*.

quiet diplomacy, it can be argued that Thabo Mbeki would not have been mandated by the SADC to broker a deal between the two large parties in Zimbabwean politics, nor would he had been seen as legitimate to be a broker, particularly by Robert Mugabe's party.

Reasons behind Pretoria's chosen behavior towards Harare

Why did Mbeki opt for quiet diplomacy? There are a multitude of possible reasons, but the most plausible ones will be detailed in what follows.

First and foremost, the officials in Pretoria had had enough time to study the personality of Mugabe, and had realized that he is a "proud and stubborn man and any public criticism of him would have deepened his stubbornness and provoked a denunciation of Mbeki as a tool of the imperialists"[22]. Being in direct contact with Mugabe's regime for over two decades, the ANC's leaders understood who they were dealing with, and decided to act in such a way as to obtain the most out of the negotiations. As in the case of Mandela, Mbeki chose not to corner Mugabe, because the results would have been unforeseeable and the dream of an African-wide Renaissance could have shattered at any moment. Mugabe still had enough credibility and influence inside the SADC and inside other regional fora, granted to the fact that he had been a respected fighter for liberation and was one of the continent's ruling elders.

Second, using sticks in the form of economic sanctions would have proven perilous for South Africa's economy, due to the fact that Zimbabwe was its most important trading partner[23]. In addition, numerous South African companies operated in Zimbabwe. Thus, the Mbeki government acted in self-interest, by also taking into consideration that further economic destabilization in Zimbabwe could imply waves of refugees wishing to be resettled in South Africa.

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[22] Allister Sparks, Jobless Time-Bomb, [http://www.news24.com/archives/witness/jobless-time-bomb-20150430], 2008, retrieved 21 may 2015.

[23] John Daniel, Jessica Lutchman and Alex Comninos, "South Africa *in* Africa*:* Trends *and* Forecasts *in a* Changing African Political Economy*"*, in Sakhela Buhlungu*,* John Daniel*,* Roger Southall and Jessica Lutchman (eds.)*, State of the Nation*: *South Africa*, Capetown: HSRC Press, 2007, pp. 516-517.

Third, self-interest in the matter of wealth distribution is also worth mentioning. The leadership in Pretoria shares similar ideas with regard to the challenge of redressing the effects of colonialism. Although South Africa manifests a clear dissatisfaction with the methods used by Mugabe, it becomes clear that the governments share similar goals, especially in relation with the land restitution issue. The policy in this specific domain is conducive to an empowerment of black citizens by land allocation, but, while in South Africa it was conducted on a "willing buyer, willing seller" basis[24], in Zimbabwe it could not proceed in such a way, given the fact the international donors which were supposed to carry the economic burden of such policies had expressed dissatisfaction towards the lack of transparency and had cut all funds. The invasion of white-farms which followed, made Zimbabwe an undesirable candidate for receiving aid, for all past donors.

Fourth, The ANC and ZANU-PF share a historical connection, both being liberation movements turned parties. However, as some commentators[25] argue, the "blood ties" uniting the two liberation-movements turned governing political parties don't necessarily run as deep as other critics envisage[26], nor was their relation overwhelmingly harmonious. Despite this fact, the ANC wants to retain its central position in national politics, in the same way ZANU-PF does. Thus, it can be stated that ANC understands the importance of party supremacy, not only that of survivability. Whilst they will not engage their political opponents in the same way as ZANU-PF, they do not need to do so, granted the ANC's stronghold in national politics.

Finally, while South Africa can seemingly exert a great degree of leverage, an overall analysis of the two countries can bring some insight to the way in which they can interact amongst themselves, and in the international arena. There are quite a few traits that enable one country to wield political power, the most worth-mentioning being: the size of its economy, the size of its territory and population, the availability of

[24] Klaus Deininger, "Making Negotiated Land Reform Work: Initial Experience from Colombia, Brazil and South Africa" in *World Development,* Vol. 27, 1999, pp. 651-672.

[25] Martin Adelmann, "Quiet Diplomacy: The Reasons Behind Mbeki's Zimbabwe Policy", *in Africa Spectrum* ,Vol. 39, No. 2, 2004, pp. 256-257.

[26] Alec Russel, *Bring Me My Machine Gun: The Battle for the Soul of South Africa, from Mandela to Zuma*, New York: Public Affairs, 2009, pp. 416-417.

important resources – most notably gas or oil, the overall size of industry, its strategic position, its military strength, its track-record of dealing with issues relevant to global power-houses and key players and, of course – the capacity of one government to interact with others. In virtually all these fields, South Africa scores above Zimbabwe, and, starting with the mid 1990's the cleavage has only become clearer. In this context, Zimbabwe has managed for quite some time now to punch above its weight and determine South Africa to treat it, on occasions, as an equal partner, even having the upper-hand in numerous instances[27]. Thus, it becomes unclear whether South Africa has the necessary leverage over Zimbabwe to affect its domestic policies in such a way as to ignite the spark of rapid democratization that the West is waiting for.

Conclusive remarks

We are not certain that quiet diplomacy was the most efficient *modus operandi* that South Africa could have utilized in trying to tackle Zimbabwe's democratic deficit and its numerous slippages; however, we can observe that an aggressive, hard approach could have been detrimental for Pretoria's influence in the region and, subsequently, for its foreign policy objectives. Stating that any push to interfere in the national politics of another state can be perceived as an infringement of state sovereignty, we have observed that in the particular case of Southern Africa, such issues are not to be trifled with. Mugabe has certainly never refrained from voicing out his concerns, nor from attacking South Africa on the grounds of perceived imperialistic tendencies. Since the wounds of colonialism had not healed at the time, it would have been facile for other state leaders to join in and form a chorus of criticism, ultimately stripping South Africa from its title of benign neighbor and endangering the fruition of Mbeki's hopes for a renewed Africa with South Africa as its hegemon.

It must also be underlined that dealing with political leaders that have a strong, autocratic behavior will always constitute a difficult diplomatic endeavor. If such leaders also have a consolidated hold on state institutions, matters are further complicated. The government in Pretoria

[27] See Lloyd Sachikonye, *Zimbabwe's Lost Decade*: Politics, Development & Society, Harare: Weaver Press, 2011, pp. 179-200.

had observed that Mugabe was not accustomed to contestation and feared that, by cornering him in any way, he could act in a way which is detrimental for the security of South Africa.

Furthermore, South Africa needed to be perceived as a benign actor in the future, so that it could ask to be deployed in tense situations, both nationally and internationally. As each conflict in its immediate vicinity can lead to an undesirable spillover, being amongst negotiators - such as in the situation between the two main parties in Zimbabwe - is very valuable, for South Africa may both provide advice that is synchronized with its own foreign policy agenda, and avoid repercussions on its own security.

Sanctions and other compliance inductive means would have been a strategic mistake, for it would have further impoverished the population of Zimbabwe and would have also hurt South Africa's financial interests. To conclude, the government in Pretoria chose the slow, but safe way in approaching Zimbabwe, and while this has attracted high levels of both national and international scrutiny, we claim that another path would have been perilous.

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