

# MICROSTATE AND SUPERPOWER

## THE VATICAN IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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At the end of September, Pope Francis met with a triumphal reception in the United States. But while he performed the first canonisation on U.S. soil in Washington and celebrated mass in front of two million faithful in Philadelphia, the attention focused less on the religious aspects of the trip than on the Pope's visits to the sacred halls of political power. On these occasions, the Pope acted less in the role of head of the Church, and therefore a spiritual one, and more in the role of diplomatic actor. In New York, he spoke at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit and at the 70<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. In Washington, he was the first pope ever to give a speech at the United States Congress, which received widespread attention. This was remarkable in that Pope Francis himself is not without his detractors in Congress and he had, probably intentionally, come to the USA directly from a visit to Cuba, a country that the United States has a difficult relationship with.



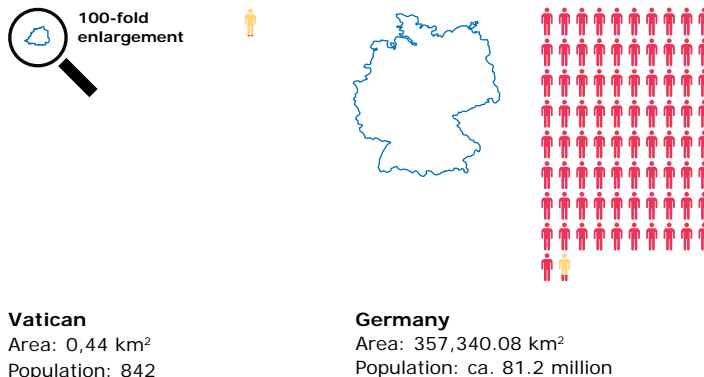
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Since the election of Pope Francis in 2013, the Holy See has come to play an extremely prominent role in the arena of world politics. The reasons for this enhanced media visibility firstly have to do with the person, the agenda and the biography of this first non-European Pope. The charismatic leadership by the head of the Church is indeed of great importance for the international agenda setting of the Holy See – and thereby an important prerequisite for the effectiveness of its foreign policy. However, based on its special role on the stage of world politics, the Holy See also has foreign policy resources and networks available that should not be underestimated. The Holy See has, in fact, been involved in central decision-making and events of world politics for a long time, acting patiently behind the scenes, particularly since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This article will attempt to shed some light on the phenomenon of Vatican foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> It will focus neither on the theological foundations nor the sources of legitimisation of the Holy See's foreign policy. Instead, the authors will seek to try to describe how Vatican foreign policy is shaped and what impact it has on the basis of some historical and current examples. We shall start by defining some key terms, to be used as the basis for subsequent explanations (I). In order to provide a better understanding of the current situation, we shall outline some features of Vatican foreign policy before the demise of the Papal States (II) as well as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (III). Subsequently, we shall illustrate the Holy See's current foreign policy on the basis of five policy areas (IV) before attempting to draw some conclusions with respect to the resources and modes of operation of the Holy See's foreign policy (V).

Fig. 1

### The Vatican in Comparison by Size



Source: Own illustration, © racken.

## I. DEFINITION OF TERMS:

### HOLY SEE, VATICAN CITY, CATHOLIC CHURCH, POPE

In everyday usage, the term *Vatican* usually refers to the territorially defined Vatican City State or the Roman Curia as its administrative apparatus (in the narrow sense also the buildings around Saint Peter's Square in Rome). But in foreign policy reporting, the term is also frequently used for the Holy See, which is the actual

1 | The scope covered must, however, remain limited, excluding the parallel diplomacy of the Catholic orders as well as the influence of the international Bishops' Conferences and only mentioning the foreign policy activities of the implementation organisations closely linked to the Holy See, such as Caritas, in passing.

subject in international law. “Vatican” is therefore a collective term. In this article, we only use it when we want to refer to the Holy See as an actor in international diplomacy, particularly in the context of “Vatican foreign policy”.

As mentioned above, the *Holy See* is the actual subject of international law, not the territorially defined Vatican State. The term does, however, also refer to the episcopal see of the diocese of Rome and therefore in the narrow sense to the Pope himself, but in the wider sense also to his Curia. In 2007, the British newspaper *The Economist* described the Holy See as the “biggest non-governmental organisation in the world” and called upon it to renounce its “diplomatic status”.<sup>2</sup> But to regard the Holy See exclusively as a political actor does not come easy. It is not only a civil society actor, in this case a religious-symbolic one (similar to the national churches), but also a

**The Holy See is not only a religious-symbolic actor, but also a subject of international law, with full diplomatic recognition by the states of the world.**

subject of international law, i.e. a state and government body with autonomy of action on the world stage and with full diplomatic recognition by almost all states around the world, far more than just the states with a predominantly Catholic population.<sup>3</sup> The Holy See itself has one of the most close-knit networks of foreign representations in the world: it is represented in 188 states by 176 nuncios, ten delegates and two representatives with special status. At the multilateral level, the Holy See further maintains diplomatic relations with the European Union and has permanent observer status at various organisations such as the United Nations, UNESCO, the WHO, the Council of Europe and the African Union.

In international law, the Holy See is a “non-governmental sovereign power”, the only instance in international law where a natural person (the Pope) is accorded the status of a subject of international law by virtue of their current office, which is not derived from a higher-level subject of international law (such as a state). In international relations, the Holy See represents the secular *Vatican City State* – which is not identical to the historical Papal

2 | “Papal diplomacy: God’s ambassadors”, *The Economist*, 19 Jul 2007, <http://econ.st/JwPOu3> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

3 | Mariano Barbato, “Licht der Welt? Der Heilige Stuhl in der postsäkularen Weltgesellschaft”, in: Ines-Jacqueline Werkner/Oliver Hidalgo (eds.), *Religionen – Global Player in der internationalen Politik?*, Wiesbaden, 2014, pp. 111-140. Only Afghanistan, China, Mauritius, Somalia and Saudi Arabia currently do not maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See, Vietnam only to a limited extent.

States. The City State is an absolute elective monarchy, with the Pope as head of state and government. However, the Vatican City State does not appear on the political stage. Foreign diplomats are accredited directly to the Holy See. The purpose of the Apostolic Nunciatures is to represent the Holy See abroad and not the spiritual leadership of the Catholic Church or the territorial state of Vatican City with a potential claim to secular power. This City State is the world's smallest independent state with a mere 44 hectares of land area and a population of currently 842. Vatican City only has very limited financial resources, but enjoys enormous symbolic power at a religious, cultural and social level.

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This power is based on the territorial, historical, theological and political link between Vatican City and the *Catholic Church*. Particularly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church has developed into a true global player due to the strong global population growth. With the world population having doubled since the 1970s, the proportion of Catholics has remained stable in percentage terms as the membership of the Catholic Church has grown at a disproportionately high rate particularly in the Global South, balancing out the continuous fall in numbers in the Western world. Today, some 20 per cent of the world population are Catholic, 50 per cent of them living in North and South America, 25 per cent in Europe, over 15 per cent in Africa (with numbers rising) as well as a little over ten per cent in Asia.<sup>4</sup> When one looks at those figures, one can say that the Catholic Church with close to 1.2 billion members represents the largest organisation in the world – which adds to the importance of the Vatican's foreign policy.

The hybrid role the *Pope* plays in foreign policy is due particular consideration. He fulfils several organisational, diplomatic and religious functions by holding a number of offices: head of state (of Vatican City), head of government and head of the government

4 | By comparison: 32 per cent of the world population are Christian (including Protestants and Orthodox), 17 per cent are Muslim. Cf. Segreteria di Stato (ed.), *Annuario Pontificio 2012*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012. See also Giuseppe Nardi, "32 Prozent der Weltbevölkerung sind Christen, 84 Prozent gehören einer Weltreligion an", *Katholisches.info*, 20 Dec 2012, <http://katholisches.info/2012/12/20/32-prozent-der-weltbevölkerung-sind-christen-84-prozent-gehören-einer-weltreligion-an> (accessed 15 Oct 2015); Barbato, n. 3, pp. 120-121.

administration (the Curia), sovereign subject of international law (embodiment of the Holy See) and head of the Catholic Church (Papal Supremacy as Bishop of Rome). These roles are not always clearly distinguishable to outsiders because they tend to overlap in practice.



St. Peter's Square: Not only Catholics follow the performances and activities of the Pope. Through media coverage the Pope's message reaches also people of other religions and atheists worldwide. | Source: © Vandeville Eric, picture alliance / abaca.

## **II. BEFORE THE DEMISE OF THE PAPAL STATES: CLASSIC PROFILE OF INTERESTS AND SECULARISATION OF FOREIGN POLICY**

The Investiture Controversy (1076 to 1122), which resulted in the definitive separation of Church and state in Europe, represented a step change, affecting the universal claim to power of the Holy See (also in foreign policy matters).<sup>5</sup> However, for a better understanding of the foreign policy history, we need to take a look at an earlier process: the "territorialisation" of the Papal States underlying the Holy See's striving for secular power. The associated foreign policy interests and instruments had significant consequences for the relationship between Church and state powers and their projection within Italy, Europe and beyond.

5 | This is a key event in the European history of freedom. Cf. Heinrich August Winkler, *Die Geschichte des Westens. Von den Anfängen in der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Munich, 2015.

Since their establishment in the 8<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>6</sup> the Papal States had developed into a fundamentally typical territorial state with the corresponding interests (not least territorial) and instruments of power projection (not least military). The Holy See had thereby risen to become a political actor in the arena of medieval powers, albeit with the difference that its secular and spiritual powers were inextricably linked and reinforced each other.

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The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 established the concept of co-existing sovereign nation states; this had the effect of challenging the exclusive secular and spiritual mandate of the Holy See not only in domestic but also in foreign policy matters.

The loss of secular power from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as well as the limited power resources of the Papal States combined with the continued strengthening of the nation states caused the influence of the Holy See in matters of foreign policy to steadily diminish, forcing it increasingly onto the defensive. The French Revolution initiated a process that ultimately resulted in the demise of the actual Papal States.<sup>7</sup> Particularly in the Napoleonic era, the Papal States suffered political and territorial losses. Despite various reforming endeavours, they were among the socio-economically most backward states in Europe.<sup>8</sup> The territorialisation of the Holy See came to an end in the Italian *risorgimento*, which culminated in 1870 and saw the Papal States being absorbed into the new Italian nation state.

Ironically, this deterritorialisation shielded the Holy See from the ideological turbulences of the subsequent decades and centuries, thus ensuring the Vatican's survival. This is because the deterritorialisation of the Papal States entailed a desecularisation and, in this sense, depoliticisation of the Holy See. This prepared the ground for concentrating on the spiritual sphere, which then enabled the Holy See to exert a global influence for the very reason that it was no longer contaminated by secular compromises and political machinations in the arena of international politics. One could say: territorial limitation makes for greater scope for action.

6 | The deeds of gift of Pepin the Younger from 755 are considered the "deed of foundation" of the Papal States (*stato pontificio, stato della Santa Chiesa*).

7 | Ralph Rotte, *Die Außen- und Friedenspolitik des Heiligen Stuhls*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Wiesbaden, 2014, p. 34.

8 | Erwin Gatz, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 35.

### III. THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: NEW DEFINITION OF FOREIGN POLICY AND GREATER EMPHASIS ON VALUES

The demise of the Papal States with their territorial claim therefore went hand in hand with the emergence of the Vatican as an actor focused on values with purely symbolic power. The end of territoriality saw an end to the classic profile of foreign policy interests: land seizure, military action, alliance forming and realpolitik had become obsolete. It also entailed the end of domestic policy as there was no longer a population to speak of that needed governing. Issues relating to people's economic, social and political participation, which rocked the other European nation states on the path towards democracy no longer played a role for Vatican City and meant that the Holy See saw itself relieved from numerous administrative and political tasks. However, the Vatican faced new challenges. How could a state without a conventional power base now hold its own in the concert of powers? The Pope would have to take on the lead role.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic social teaching increasingly saw itself as the Third Way between liberalism and Marxism.<sup>9</sup> And so the Holy See took up a clear position of opposition to the nascent (militantly atheist) communism in the political arena.<sup>10</sup> Pius XII saw the outcome of the Yalta Conference predominantly in terms of the expansion of Soviet influence and advocated a position that was subsequently described as "containment" and "roll-back" in Cold War terminology. While not uncritical towards the West, that Pope can therefore be considered a Cold War warrior *avant la lettre*.<sup>11</sup> The Polish Pope John Paul II in particular was ascribed an important role in the collapse of communism, or at least in helping to accelerate the end of the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> This underscores the highly effective and powerful synergy between the political and spiritual dimensions of the Holy See's foreign policy activities.<sup>13</sup> It also illustrates how the Holy See's power of action extends beyond the Church through the Pope's role as political spokesman.

9 | Mariano Barbato, *Pilgrimage, Politics and International Relations: Religious Semantics for World Politics*, Basingstoke, 2013, p. 48-50.

10 | Churchill once commented that the Pope had joined the fight against communism. Coppa, quoted in Ines-Jacqueline Werkner and Oliver Hidalgo (eds.), *Religionen – Global Player in der internationalen Politik?*, Wiesbaden, 2014, p. 125.

11 | Cf. Barbato, n. 3, p. 125.

12 | Otto Kallscheuer, "Der Vatikan als Global Player", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 7/2005, 5 Feb 2005, p. 7-14 (printed edition), <http://bpb.de/apuz/29232> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

13 | Barbato, n. 9, p. 128.

The rise of the Holy See as an influential political actor in the international community of states after World War II was strengthened further by decolonisation. While the European powers had to withdraw from their colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, the Catholic Church and the Holy See under Pope John Paul II succeeded in extending their presence in the Global South. The nature of the Catholic Church as a global, living and growing religious community is one of the central symbolic and political power resources of Vatican foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

**During decolonisation, Pope John Paul II succeeded in extending the Holy See's presence in the Global South.**

In this context, the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) represents a milestone in the Holy See's endeavour to position itself in the international community of states. The signalling effect of the Council was and still is enormous, reaching far beyond the ecclesiastical or purely religious spheres. The Council sought to open "the windows to the world" and represented the first high point of the internal reforming movement in the Catholic Church (*aggiornamento*), codifying the separation of religious identity and political power for good.<sup>15</sup> The Council and its key document, the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes*, must be seen in the context of the global movement of social renewal, the "global 68". In fact, the Second Vatican Council resulted in the conscious abdication of claims to power by the Church, while the papacy became a global supranational actor at the same time.<sup>16</sup>

With the development of liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s, this dogmatic opening up and practical repositioning were complemented by a social-progressive change of focus towards the poor of this world. The liberation theology was a reaction to the political and social situation in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s in what was then the intellectual powerhouse of Catholicism ("Option for the poor"). Although it was initially opposed by the Holy See in Rome because it also employed some Marxist reasoning and terminology, liberation theology was subsequently

14 | It is estimated, for example, that six million people had cheered the Pope in Manila at the final mass of his trip to the Philippines in January 2015. "Rekordmesse von Franziskus in Manila: Komm zu Papa", *Spiegel Online*, 18 Jan 2015, <http://spon.de/aepPT> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

15 | The long disputed declaration "*Dignitatis humanae*" represented a key component in the opening up of the Second Vatican Council with respect to the modern concept of freedom, although it faced resistance from within the Church for a long time. Cf. Kallscheuer, n. 12.

16 | *Ibid.*



integrated into the magisterium.<sup>17</sup> These two last examples also illustrate the large symbolic capital the Holy See acquires through the Catholic Church as an adaptable religious community.<sup>18</sup> They also illustrate how an ethically founded leadership stance provides the Holy See with a power of action that can have an impact far beyond the realm of the Church.

**The shuttle diplomacy of the Holy See succeeded in bringing the Argentinian-Chilean conflict about Patagonia to a peaceful conclusion.**

The fact that this power of action can make an impact even in situations where there is little overlap with progressive social teaching but where there is deep respect for the head of state and head of the Church instead was shown in the dispute about the Beagle Channel in 1978. Both Chile and Argentina had laid claim to this strategically important region of Southern Patagonia since gaining independence. An international court of arbitration was set up in 1971 to decide on the definitive boundaries and pronounced its judgement in 1977. However, Buenos Aires subsequently denied the court's legitimacy and began making preparations for a military occupation of the channel and the offshore islands in December 1978. This was the situation when, out of concern about a potential conflict in the Western camp, the Holy See under John Paul II decided to take the initiative and offer its services as mediator. The shuttle diplomacy undertaken by one of its representatives succeeded in bringing the conflict to a peaceful conclusion. This example illustrates the convening power of the Holy See, i.e. the ability to bring the competing sides in a conflict together by appealing to their common (in this case Catholic) world view. But the example also illustrates the prestige of the Holy See in international relations, which made such a mediator role possible in the first place.

17 | At the same time, the two last Popes distanced themselves from Marx and included the following elements in the catholic social doctrine: (1) a particular focus on the poor, (2) a turning towards the liberal-pluralistic social order without condoning the dominance of capital in the market economy, (3) a renewal of Church Law (nomination of bishops exclusively centrally, primacy of the Pope in the College of Cardinals) and a new catechism.

18 | However, religious community building increasingly deviates from Western and Northern traditions. A radical evangelical, charismatic "cultish" Protestantism of the Pentecostals and a theologically rather orthodox, yet socially engaged Roman Catholicism represent the two growth sectors in the Global South. Kallscheuer, n. 12, p. 14 (printed edition).

#### **IV. SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR: CHANGED GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION AND FURTHER INCREASE IN INFLUENCE**

With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the ideological blocks, the Holy See's scope of action in international politics has widened significantly. The claim to political independence in Vatican foreign relations remains. Pope Francis (albeit reluctantly) thus recognised the Palestinian Territories as the state of Palestine in May, and he granted an audience to the autocrat Lukashenko in March on condition that political prisoners would be released in Belarus – which did indeed happen in August.<sup>19</sup>

As the East-West divide became less and less the lens through which to look at the global situation, however, and it became more and more a North-South divide, you get a different set of priorities. There were indications of this as early as the late 1960s under Pope Paul VI.<sup>20</sup> Today, Vatican foreign policy is showing increasing signs of moving its focus towards the message of universal peace, political and interreligious dialogue, the provision of humanitarian aid and the engagement for refugees as well as the preservation of the integrity of creation. The topic of disarmament may have originated in the Cold War, but it is taking on new relevance in the era of proliferating crises and technological advances. Whether it wants to or not, the Holy See cannot remain on the side-lines of the conflicts of this world.

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#### **Policy of Peace**

One current example of the Holy See's policy of peace is the rapprochement between Cuba and the United States, particularly since 2014. This rapprochement owes a great deal to the mediating efforts of the Holy See, which is seen as an honest broker by the two opposing sides. In 2014, Pope Francis wrote letters to both President Obama and Cuba's head of state, which not only dealt with humanitarian issues. Rome was aiming for "a new phase in relations". Direct U.S.-Cuban meetings in Canada

19 | Simone Brunner, "Lukaschenkos kleine Geste", *ZEIT Online*, 24 Aug 2015, <http://zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-08/weissrusland-aleksandr-lukaschenko-opposition> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

20 | Robert McCahon, "The Pope's Soft-Power Push", interview with Kenneth Himes, Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Sep 2015, <http://on.cfr.org/1izGect> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

and in the Vatican followed, resulting in diplomatic relations being re-established. Papal diplomacy is continuing in its persistent efforts to have the sanctions against Cuba lifted and for Cuba to be integrated into the community of states.



Pope Francis and President of Cuba Raul Castro: In the recent rapprochement between the enemies USA and Cuba, the Holy See has played an important mediating role. | Source: © picture alliance/abaca.

As far back as 1998, during a visit by Pope John Paul II to Cuba, a precisely calculated charismatic offensive by the head of the Church had been complemented by negotiations about universal standards of religious, civil and political freedoms conducted professionally by Vatican diplomats. The shared experience of those negotiations served as an icebreaker between the communist (and atheist) Cuban government and the Holy See, which still maintained its anti-communist stance. During the negotiations, the two sides could refer back to the peace encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which had served as a conceptual basis for the rapprochement between the Holy See and the Soviet Union. The Holy See had been involved in a process of détente between West and East as far back as the period during and after the Cuban Crisis of 1952:

“The policy of peace of Pope John XIII during the Cuban Crisis not only [initiated] the Holy See’s new policy towards the East, it also [enhanced] the course of détente in the East-West conflict. During the most dangerous phase of the Cold War,

this approach stood out as a model of public and behind-the-scenes diplomacy and underlines the special role of the Holy See, which is adept at leveraging its legitimacy as a religious power to exert diplomatic and political influence, which is also used by others.”<sup>21</sup>

Creating space for dialogue and diplomacy instead of military or political antagonism is a classic objective of the Holy See. Besides the power with which his office endows him, Pope Francis employs above all his charisma and his strong conviction that it is possible to resolve political crises by appealing to Christian values and ethics of conciliation and non-aggression. During his trip to the United States and to Cuba in September 2015, he used his symbolic power of action purposefully as well. Visiting both countries in the same trip can be seen as a political signal indicating that Pope Francis does not regard his important role of mediator in the most recent rapprochement between the former sworn enemies to be over. His visit was welcomed in both countries – despite the complicated bilateral relations between them. It was no coincidence that the White House announced a softening of the sanctions against Cuba shortly before the Pope was due to start his trip.

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The Holy See also plays a peacemaking role in the Colombian peace process. It is acting as mediator in the rapprochement between the (Marxist) FARC guerrillas and the (secular) Colombian state. Ironically, Cuba is also involved in the peace process, namely as neutral ground for the negotiations between the opposing parties. In this case, the Holy See took on the mediator role at the invitation of the opposing parties. At the international level as in this case, the Holy See does not derive its power primarily from the uniting force of faith – although Catholicism is deeply embedded in Colombian society. Its soft power is based on its reputation as an honest broker, a role whose impact has been increasing since the end of the Cold War. Both are examples of the capability of the Holy See to actively influence the international agenda and to have a very practical impact in deescalating conflicts through the prestige the Pope enjoys.

## Political Interreligious Dialogue

In the course of interreligious dialogue (during papal pilgrimages, for instance), the Holy See also deals with political topics. In the Middle East conflict, the Holy See's policy objectives are not restricted purely to peacemaking but also to ensuring the protection of the holy sites of Christianity. For this purpose, it uses its special relationship with Israel and with the Palestinian Territories. In 2014, for instance, both the Israeli President and the Palestinian President attended peace prayers in the Vatican Gardens at the Pope's invitation. Even though this did not bring about any progress in the negotiations, it still represented a diplomatic coup on the part of the Pope, where he openly deployed the moral authority of his role as the head of the Church in his personal fight for peace. In this particular case, the Franciscans play a special role in supporting and strengthening Vatican foreign policy as guardians of the Holy Sites.

In fact, the Pope's advocacy for interreligious dialogue in the Holy Land is fundamentally political. Once again, it is about conciliation instead of confrontation. In 2010 for instance, the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* referred to Pope Benedict as "pope, pilgrim, politician" on the occasion of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land.<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis similarly acted in the role of political mediator

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during his first trip to Israel in May 2014. He obviously sought to go beyond the confines of his religious office to change the world using the peace-promoting engagement of the Holy See. The Vatican's peace policy is therefore fundamentally strategic and does not depend on any particular personal configuration. When Pope Francis decided to not (only) stand at the Western Wall but to also make an unscheduled stop at the eight meter high concrete wall separating the Palestinian Territories from Israel in Bethlehem, this represented a brief yet telling manifestation of his political agenda. The photograph went around the world. There is therefore some doubt as to whether this was a "purely religious" pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as had been stated by the Holy See.<sup>23</sup>

22 | Stefan Ulrich, "Nahost-Reise von Benedikt XVI. Der Papst als Pilger und Politiker", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 May 2010, <http://sueddeutsche.de/politik/1.458507> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

23 | Cf. also Peter Münch, "Friedensbotschaft aus dem politischen Minenfeld", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 May 2015, <http://sueddeutsche.de/politik/1.1974415> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

Benedict XVI also repeatedly pointed out in 2010 that there were more aspects uniting Jews, Christians and Muslims than separating them. He is said to have acted by providing “spiritual leadership on values in the interest of the world”,<sup>24</sup> with the dialogue with Islam in the course of the pilgrimage considered particularly promising. Benedict thereby showed that moderate, tolerant cooperation with Islam is possible. Israel, on the other hand, was disappointed about his restrained, less personal comments on the Holocaust while still openly advocating a new Vatican Council. When Pope John Paul II visited the country on a pilgrimage in 2000, he went to the Holocaust memorial of Yad Vashem, where he offered a highly symbolic *mea culpa* for of the Church's past wrongdoing (the Inquisition, religious wars, the Holocaust). During the Holy Year, this was a personal confession of guilt by the Pope as a Pole and as a Christian. However differently the popes express their personal stance towards the Holocaust (or to Palestinian statehood), this does not have a permanent detrimental effect on the institutional relations between the Holy See and Israel and, respectively, the Palestinian Territories. This illustrates how robust these relations are – an important basis for the continued engagement of the Holy See in the Middle East conflict.

Like the popes preceding him, Pope Francis also uses his soft power rather than state sanctions or means of political pressure. He has a firm belief in the power of the word and explores every avenue to try and revive the negotiations between Israel and Palestine, which have recently stalled yet again, or to at least raise new hope. While Israelis and Palestinians shied away from talking face to face, the Pope invited Presidents Shimon Peres and Mahmud Abbas to jointly attend peace prayers in Rome. He called upon both parties to demonstrate courage to seek peace, keen to acknowledge both Israel's right to exist and the Palestinians right to statehood. How should one interpret his role and his self-image? While acknowledging the needs of both parties, Pope Francis calls for bridges to be built between the opposing parties and for the concrete wall in Bethlehem to be overcome. Interestingly, his engagement for the Holy Sites in Jerusalem does not represent an impediment in this context but a guarantee of the Holy See's intent to remain committed to the region and to finding a resolution to the conflict even under difficult circumstances.

**Engagement for the Holy Sites in Jerusalem is a long-term guarantee of the Holy See's intent to find a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.**

## Disarmament Policy

Since the end of the Cold War, the Holy See's appeals for peace and diplomacy have been aimed mainly at the reduction in the arsenals of weapons of mass destructions. In his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015, the Pope advocated nuclear disarmament and the primacy of diplomacy. Currently, the most relevant issues in this context are the Iranian nuclear program and the wars in Ukraine and Syria.

The Iranian delegation to the Holy See is one of the largest. Encouraged by these intensive connections, three U.S. bishops met with four high-ranking ayatollahs in Iran in March 2014. The meeting was arranged to take place in Iran's spiritual center, at the Supreme Council of Seminary Teachers of Qom. With the backing of the Holy See and the blessing of the U.S. State Department, the attendees used the four-day meeting to establish a dialogue about nuclear weapons and the role of religious leaders in the process of diplomatic rapprochement.<sup>25</sup> While this was para-governmental diplomatic action in the narrow sense, such probing, informal contacts by non-diplomats can prepare the ground for more official cooperation, not least in the nuclear area. This illustrates the breadth and depth of the Vatican networks in the area of foreign policy as well.

**Instead of backing the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church, Pope Francis transferred his nuncio from Kiev to Switzerland – apparently at Russia's request.**

The Holy See has also intervened in the conflict in Ukraine, appealing to President Putin to find a resolution to the conflict. However, instead of backing the Ukrainian-Greek

Catholic Church, which maintains a strong anti-Russian stance, Pope Francis appealed against politicising the Church and transferred his nuncio from Kiev to Switzerland – apparently at Russia's request as he is considered an anti-Russian activist there.<sup>26</sup> By employing these de-escalating measures, Pope Francis is attempting to keep diplomatic channels to Russia open at a time when their number is dwindling and Russia is engaging increasingly in nuclear sabre-rattling. In doing so he demonstrates that he wishes to seek and create the conditions for dialogue and peace in his own camp as well.

25 | Victor Gaetan, "The Political Pope. How Francis Was Thrust Into The World's Most Intractable Conflicts", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 Sep 2015, <http://foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-09-25/political-pope> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

26 | Ibid.

In addition to these issues, Pope Francis appealed to both Russia and the United States to find a non-military solution to the war in Syria while attending the G20 summit in Saint Petersburg. While the Russian intervention in Syria currently appears to make the situation on the ground worse, President Obama had ultimately backed away from implementing his announcement of military intervention in Syria after the U.S. government had condemned the government of Bashar al-Assad for using chemical weapons. The Holy See is currently attempting to bring together Iran, the USA and Russia for talks about Syria. Despite the complexity of such conflicts, the Holy See is not giving up on its efforts to provide mediation in the region. Recently, Iran's Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi, for instance, stated that Pope Francis "has the ability to bring nations closer together, and through this, perhaps he can influence governments".<sup>27</sup>

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### **Humanitarian Aid and Advocacy for Refugees**

One important element of Vatican foreign policy is humanitarian aid, which involves providing assistance during conflicts and natural catastrophes in a non-bureaucratic manner, whatever the religion of the people affected. The most important implementation organisation is Caritas Internationalis, the umbrella association of the 165 national Caritas associations. The Holy See has direct (above all personal) rights of codetermination in this body. Further important actors of Catholic development cooperation are organised at a national level (in Germany, for instance, there are Misereor and Adveniat) and differ in their closeness to the Holy See. But the Churches fund most of their development cooperation work from their own resources and from donations.

Church-backed NGOs act below governmental level and frequently remain in trouble spots for longer than governmental development cooperation actors, as is currently the case in Syria. The Church relief organisations often still have some scope of action where governmental development cooperation actors are no longer able or permitted to act – particularly under adverse political conditions. Not only do humanitarian campaigns improve the situation on the ground, they also generate a great deal of international goodwill towards the Catholic Church and the Holy See, as well



as political capital locally – thereby in turn strengthening the Holy See’s role as mediator in military conflicts.

In 2013, Pope Francis’ first official trip outside Rome took him to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, where he spoke to refugees about their situation. He cast a wreath into the sea from the Italian coast guard vessel on which he arrived to honour the refugees who had drowned. He encouraged the Church to show greater involvement on behalf of refugees and migrants, which also needed to include a stronger political support. Before setting off for Cuba in 2015, Pope Francis met with a Syrian refugee family, whom he had arranged to be housed in a flat owned by the Vatican. The family of four, who are members of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, had reached Italy on the very day that Pope Francis called upon all Catholic parishes to receive at least one refugee family. In the United States, the U.S. Episcopal Conference declared the reform of immigration legislation a priority. The vast majority of the migrants from Latin America are Catholic. The Holy See, however, clearly advocates for providing humanitarian aid to all those caught up in the current refugee crisis, whatever their religion. The rationale is that aid must be given to all those who are suffering, in this case the refugees.



Pope Francis with relatives of victims and survivors of the Lampedusa tragedy: More than 500 refugees drowned in 2013 off the coast of the small Mediterranean island. | Source: © picture alliance/AP Photo.

The efforts made by the Pope on behalf of the refugees represent an expression of his approach based on liberation theology, the “Option for the Poor”, which focuses on the needs of the poor and considers poverty an injustice rather than a case of misfortune or adversity. According to an article in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*: “Humanitarian service, as opposed to political action, has been the Catholic Church’s standard response to cataclysm. For Francis, though, the church should take a more proactive geopolitical role. With priests and religious leaders being kidnapped and murdered, while thousands of believers are forced to flee ancient communities in the cradle of Christianity, Vatican intervention is not optional.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Climate Change, Sustainability and Ecology**

The most visible expression of the new focus of Vatican foreign policy on the topics of climate change, sustainability and ecology is the new encyclical *Laudato Si*, which was published in June 2015 and was authored by Pope Francis himself. It derives a political mandate to take action to limit climate change and to protect the environment from the duty to preserve the integrity of creation and makes explicit mention of this duty requiring a rethink ahead of the upcoming climate summit in Paris. According to the Holy See, there is a need to finally acknowledge the anthropogenic causes of the warming of the climatic system and take appropriate measures at an international level, including binding contractual obligations on states to limit greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>29</sup>

This position reflects the intensive involvement of the Holy See in environmental issues that already manifested itself in the 1960s, not least in the context of the United Nations, particularly at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the so-called “Earth Summit”, in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro as well as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August/September 2002. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI had also spoken out on environmental protection issues, but Pope Francis is the first head of the Church to speak up about such a topical and hotly disputed political topic as climate change at the highest diplomatic level. With its climate encyclical, the Holy See is conducting active climate politics. This has evoked some

**Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI had also spoken out on environmental protection issues, but Pope Francis speaks up at the highest diplomatic level.**

28 | Ibid.

29 | Migliore/Chuttlkatt, quoted from Rotte, n. 7, p. 344.

criticism from people who consider Pope Francis a left-leaning ideologist – particularly as it squares with his criticism of financial market capitalism expressed openly in the encyclical.<sup>30</sup>

Pope Francis – already referred to as “Climate Warrior” and “Climate Pope” in the media<sup>31</sup> – does not speak out against the market economy as such, but sees a connection between society’s focus on short-term profits, the consumer culture, the destruction of the environment and the technocratic paradigm that are currently dominating political and economic life. Consequently, the Pope sees a need for protecting the environment and providing support to those affected – particularly the poor and the developing countries. What is new about the Pope’s approach is not so much the fact that he draws attention to the issues, but the stridency of his tone.<sup>32</sup> Placing these issues onto the global agenda and calling them to the attention of politicians follow on logically from Pope Francis’ reforming papal agenda – and once again illustrate the soft power approach of the Holy See.

## **V. CONCLUSION: OUTLINE OF A SPECIFICALLY VATICAN FOREIGN POLICY**

At first glance, the Vatican is a microstate without massive resources. Be that as it may, it does have a great deal of symbolic power, not least thanks to it partially sharing its identity with a world religion, which makes it a superpower after all, religiously, culturally and socially. As we have seen, the Holy See’s hybrid function as a sovereign subject of international law and a transnational actor focused on values also gives rise to a number of special features of its foreign policy activities.

As could be seen from the above descriptions, the Holy See’s influence has increased steadily since World War I. It intervened regularly at decisive junctures during the course of the trans-

30 | Many conservatives in the USA, including some presidential candidates (Donald Trump, Rick Santorum), are climate change deniers and refute the argument that human activities have caused the earth to warm up. Cf. “Appell für Umweltschutz. Entwurf von päpstlicher Umwelt-Enzyklika enthüllt”, *ZEIT Online*, 16 Jun 2015, <http://zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-06/papst-enzyklika-entwurf> (accessed 15 Oct 2015); Ruby Russell, “Papst Franziskus geht Klimawandel an”, *Deutsche Welle*, 16 Jun 2015, <http://dw.com/p/1Fhp4> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

31 | Cf. Gaetan, n. 25.

32 | Marco Ansaldo/Evelyn Finger, “Klimawandel auf Katholisch”, *ZEIT Online*, 16 Jun 2015, <http://zeit.de/2015/23/papst-enzyklika-oekologie-klimawandel-umwelt> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

formation of the conflict between East and West, developed its own anti-communist stance, yet became one of the preferred dialogue partners for the Eastern Block because it had distanced itself enough from the West as well. It had and still has an agenda that is independent of that of the West, and even under anti-communist Pope John Paul II it felt free to criticise military interventions by the United States and its allies. Pursuing such a “Third Way” between Marxism and liberalism gives the Holy See influence on the world stage today – particularly in the Global South – for the very reason that it does not make common cause with any of the globally dominating ideologies.

The Holy See has the oldest diplomatic service in the world. Only few other actors of international politics take a similarly clear and consistent stance with respect to global challenges. Also, no other religious community or secular world view has produced an institution that comes close to the Catholic Church in terms of durability, centralisation, global presence and membership.

To summarise, one can state that Vatican foreign policy is based mainly on unconventional resources of power:

- The Pope’s political leadership role and its ethically founded claim to leadership on specific issues endow the Holy See with concrete power of action that extends far beyond the realm of the Church (soft power).
- Thanks to its peacemaking and mediating role, the Holy See also has convening power as well as prestige in international relations. This is a manifestation of the relational character of power, constituting “power by attribution”.
- The Holy See can also leverage large amounts of symbolic capital through the Catholic Church as a faith community, which guarantees it global attention and credibility for its national and international agenda setting.

However, the papacy itself is the most visible and evident embodiment of Vatican foreign policy action. The influence exerted on world politics does depend greatly on the identity of the incumbent. Pope Francis’ visible and activist profile has brought about a clear increase in the global political influence of the Holy See. While this type of charismatic leadership has been

**Pope Francis’ visible and activist profile has brought about a clear increase in the global political influence of the Holy See.**

evident since the long papacy of John Paul II, Pope Francis is taking a more active role than his predecessors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intervening where he sees serious social ills. This focus on values originates directly from the Pope's biography. He is the first Jesuit and Latin American in the office, a circumstance from which he derives a claim to exerting political influence for the Catholic Church and the Holy See that goes far beyond pure religious (missionary) goals. The use of the moral authority of his office as head of the Church in the personal fight for peace (including social peace) in the world as well as a more modest Church, which has shifted its focus towards the poor and the excluded, represent mainstays of his reform papacy.



Pope Francis at the 70<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly in New York on 25 September 2015: Few players in international politics take such clear and consistent positions on the global challenges of our time. | Source: © Michael Kappeler, picture alliance/dpa.

While the spirit of liberation theology of this papacy is new in its urgency, it fits seamlessly into the development of Vatican foreign policy over recent decades. It was only subsequent to the deterritorialisation that Vatican foreign policy lost its realpolitik

outlook. The Holy See has since developed increasingly into a purely “ideational actor”. Since the Second Vatican Council, this “symbolic power of ideas” has come to increasingly override the “institutional power over Church members” since the Second Vatican Council.

Since the end of the Cold War, this development has intensified further with the focus on the message of universal peace and on the preservation of the integrity of creation. In the diplomatic arena, the Holy See appears as a value-focused rather than a religious actor. The influence of Vatican diplomacy should not simply be equated with the influence of the Catholic Church. One could go further and state that there are clear indications of efforts being made under Pope Francis’ leadership to reach out beyond the faith by putting forward ethical-universal arguments rather than Catholic-moral ones. This points to a further intensification of the role of the papacy, with arguments based on universal ethics playing an ever greater role not only in interreligious dialogue but also in the dialogue with secularism itself. Consequently, the Holy See is developing into an informal authority on moral standards reaching far beyond the boundaries of Catholicism.

The number of high-ranking secular office-holders and dignitaries attending the inauguration of a pope is an indicator of the foreign policy achievements of the Holy See in its dual function as transnational actor focused on values and sovereign subject of international law. At the inauguration of Pope Francis on 13 March 2013, the diplomatic world assembled once again. Besides close to 200,000 faithful, a total of 132 government delegations from all around the world attended the event.<sup>33</sup> The (media) interest and the political attention were also an indication of the Pope’s practical power of action, which is further enhanced by his popularity.

Today, we are seeing a globalising papacy,<sup>34</sup> which takes full advantage of the options offered by our networked world. While the foreign policy positions of the Holy See, which are derived from Catholic social teachings, have remained unchanged, there has been a degree of personalisation as well as an increase in the passion and effectiveness

**While the foreign policy positions of the Holy See have remained unchanged there has been an increase in the passion and effectiveness of Vatican foreign policy activities.**

33 | “Gleich nach Hollands Prinz war Merkel an der Reihe”, *Die Welt*, 19 Mar 2013, <http://welt.de/114560725> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

34 | “A globalising papacy. Easter is for extroverts”, *The Economist*, 5 Apr 2015, <http://econ.st/1VUzKRO> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

of Vatican foreign policy activities.<sup>35</sup> This development is set to increase further and should further enhance the power of the Holy See.

What underlies the power and worldwide influence of the Holy See?

- Firstly, it results from the professionalism of its institutional foreign policy apparatus. Besides the professional Secretariat of State, this particularly includes the well-informed nunciatures acting behind the scenes. Further sections in the Roman Curia provide support for the Vatican foreign policy activities, for instance the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.
- Secondly, acting in the role of moral spokesman, the Pope is currently one of the most popular global leaders, who derives his power from his personal charisma rather than from hard power.

It is precisely the fact that the Pope does not command any divisions<sup>36</sup> that gives him his strength. One could say that papal peacekeeping needs no tanks. If we take the role of the Holy See to be acting as an informal authority on moral standards even beyond the realm of the Church, the encyclical no longer appears to be an internal epistle but a key instrument of Vatican, or more precisely papal, foreign policy action. In this document, the author addresses the global public not just as head of the Church and head of state but as a moral authority. This directly produces symbolic and political capital, which the Holy See can then invest elsewhere. Furthermore, the Pope's charisma and the classic foreign policy institutions of the Holy See remain valuable assets to help fulfil the Vatican's mission of universal peace.

35 | Interview mit John L. Allen Jr., "Under Pope Francis, Vatican Flexes Its Global Political Muscle", *World Politics Review*, 21 May 2015, <http://worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/15827/pope> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).

36 | Cf. "How many divisions does the Pope have?", Stalin asked disparagingly at the Yalta Conference (1945). Cf. Berthold Seewald, "In Jalta machte sich Stalin über den Papst lustig", *Die Welt*, 3 Feb 2015, <http://welt.de/137067853> (accessed 15 Oct 2015).