



Thematic Paper

**China and South Africa
in the Global Context**

September 2024



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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

China and South Africa have become significant actors in the world economy by taking advantage of their distinct positions in international cooperation, economics, and geopolitics. The outcome has been the establishment of a friendly connection between the two nations. This thematic paper examines how South Africa's relationships with China and its standing in the international system have brought attention to the country during its 30th anniversary of democracy. BRICS cooperation, development cooperation, and a common vision of global change are all currently enjoying strong economic relations between China and South Africa. Inequalities do exist in the relationship, nevertheless, especially with regard to South Africa. Economic disparities, geopolitical forces, and sustainability issues are the three perspectives from which these can be regarded. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that China and South Africa play a crucial role in determining the course of the world, with their collaboration illustrating more general themes of growth, collaboration, and the shifting power dynamics from the West to the East.

The first section of the paper looks at South Africa's and China's political systems, drawing similarities and differences. This will create context for what follows in the rest of the paper, a discussion of what explains the two countries' seeming closeness despite some divergences in political makeup. The section will talk about how the expanded Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) group of countries reflects on South Africa's stated commitments to democracy and global justice. Of particular focus will be South Africa's and China's presence in the BRICS. The third – penultimate section – will be a discussion of how domestic politics and association in BRICS reflects on South Africa. It will also bear a discussion of why South Africa touts an authoritarian China as a close ally. The final section will conclude the paper.

South Africa and China: Domestic Political Systems

From 1948 to 1994, the racialized system of apartheid characterized South Africa's political structure. South Africans of European descent enjoyed all the perquisites that come with democracy – politically, socially and economically – while the rest of South Africans suffered the detriments of what was a racially stratified system. From 1994, South Africa has been a democratic country to the extent that it has a relatively free society, and the three organs of state – the executive, judiciary and legislature – conduct their business with some appreciable level of freedom and autonomy. The media, as a key component of democracy also has freedoms that are unheard of in more closed societies. This, of course, is not to say that South Africa as a democracy has been a stellar performer. The country has been blighted by continued structural inequalities – most of them of inherited racial divisions -, corruption by the political and economic elite, and economic difficulties that have led to alarming levels of crime and apathy.

The People's Republic of China was established in 1949, a year after South Africa instituted apartheid. An avowed socialist country with a strong sense of kinship towards anti-colonialism, China did not have relations with apartheid South Africa. The defeated Republic of China, ensconced on the Island of Taiwan, took up formal relations with South Africa. The victory came at a cost of almost three decades of communist struggle against the Chinese nationalist, the Japanese occupiers, and a bitter civil war that flared into sharp focus after the 1945 defeat of Japan and end of the Second World War. The Communist Party of China (CPC) was the undisputed and sole leader of China; to this day, it does not brook political opposition. Hence, China has been an authoritarian state, if the liberal definition of democracy – with its insistence on separation of powers and multiparty contestation – is to be applied. China and democratic South Africa established relations in 1998, after an awkward four-year period since the end of apartheid, during which South Africa vacillated between maintaining relations with an economically smaller but democratic Taiwan, and an economically bigger but authoritarian China. Pragmatism and a general trend of international diplomacy, which favoured China, carried the day and South Africa renounced its formal ties with Taiwan.

On the democratic score, South Africa fares better than China. Where China is exceptional is in its economic success, a result of the reforms that the country embarked upon in 1978, two years after Mao's death and the effective end of his doctrinaire ideology that, according to China scholar Roderick MacFarquhar, kept China

poor but pure ideologically. Though China was born as an affirmed socialist state, its economic success is a result of a hybrid economic blend that some have described as state capitalism, while the Chinese have settled on the term “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This cocktail of economic and Chinese characteristics helps to explain the coexistence of the capitalist aspects of the country’s economy that were borrowed from the West and the authoritarian traits that are Chinese and have seen the country limit the political and social welfare of its citizens. The developing world, South Africa included, has looked admiringly at China’s economic success. This unnerves China’s rivals who fear that this admiration might lead to emulation. In essence, this emulation might also mean a depletion of democracy in China’s admirers. The most elite group or collection of countries that seem to have massive regard for China’s success is BRICS in which both South Africa and China are members.

South Africa and China in the BRICS: Impact on South Africa’s Democratic Credentials

The original countries comprising BRICS were regarded as regional leaders in their respective continents. In the aftermath of the Cold War dichotomy between the United States and the Soviet Union, regional powers were expected to be the harbingers of a more decentralized international system. In Africa, South Africa and Nigeria, though small economies from a global perspective emerged, as reasonable claimants to regional powers, even though they were reluctant to claim such a position, hobbled as they were by internal weaknesses and the reluctance of other African countries to defer (Nolte and Schenoni 2024). In the background was the expectation that these countries would conform with Francis Fukuyama’s end of history, by espousing the triumphant liberal democracy and market economics.

To varying degrees, South Africa, India and Brazil seem to have bought into liberal democracy. The acronym BRIC was coined by British economist Jim O’Neill. The “S” was added after South Africa joined the group in December 2010. Since the members started convening summits, the BRICS has gained massive momentum and dozens of countries have been applying to be included. For the first time since South Africa’s 2010 inclusion, in August 2023 the BRICS countries sent invitations to Argentina, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran to join the group. The number of countries clamouring to join testified to the popularity of the BRICS as a voice of the developing world and a possible alternative to the Western-led international system.

Of the countries that were invited, Argentina turned down the invitation after Javier Milei became president in December 2023. The expansion of the BRICS cast the organization into scrutiny because of the political temperament of the new members – mostly Iran. The curious attention on BRICS and its expansion has been provoked by the political differences between members - Iran and South Africa for example. Indeed, politically, Iran, Russia and China often make sense as a cohort of countries that chafe at Western impositions of liberal democracy. While South Africa has often taken umbrage at perceived injustices that benefit the West in global affairs, it has nevertheless continued to toe the line of liberal democracy, market economics and a high premium on human rights. This, to some degree, pits South Africa against some of its controversial BRICS counterparts. Its continued membership, which some would reasonably think does not translate into tangible benefits for South Africa and its democracy, has been explained as a contribution towards making the international system a more just affair than has been the case under Western predominance. Former South Africa president Jacob Zuma, under whose presidency South Africa joined BRICS, has argued that the group’s intent is “to change the world into a better way of life (sic). He argued that South Africa’s accession was “a great thing” that has shaken the world.

In the calculation of the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa’s ruling party from the end of apartheid in 1994, for South Africa to be totally independent, it must match in political tandem with regions that share its history of colonialism and minority rule. This means distancing itself, at least in rhetoric and association, from the West. This, obviously, was weighed against the realities of the end of the Cold War and how it spelled the triumph of Western political and economic mores. Democracy, then, for countries such as South

Africa, entails political independence of the developing and previously disadvantaged regions. The BRICS seems to be an identikit for this interest, and it explains why South Africa is not discomfited by being aligned with the likes of China and Iran in the BRICS. Furthermore, that China, coming on the back of about three decades of annual growth averaging 9 percent, shares a large fraction of the BRICS total economy, has inspired admiration in countries such as South Africa where appreciation of strong leadership, if it spurs growth, seems to be taking root.

According to The Economist's Democracy Index, a median of 50% of South Africans expressed the opinion that "a system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts" was a good way to govern (Democracy Index 2021 2022). The index referred to was coincidentally titled The China Challenge, and said the following:

The Chinese economic miracle of the past 40 years has created a formidable competitor to the US, whose position as global hegemon is increasingly being called into question by China's growing economic might and geopolitical clout. As a result, a consensus has emerged that the Western democratic capitalist model faces a challenge from China that is at least comparable to that posed by the Soviet Union during the 20th century. A judgement about the superiority of one political system over another is ultimately a moral one. Any system must be judged by the degree to which it maximises humankind's ability to live "the good life".

The trend towards endorsing the Chinese model of economics forms a fundamental part of South Africa and the BRICS. What has enhanced BRICS even further is a trend that is developing outside the group; the reemergence of insular and protectionist politics and economics in the West. The trend was brought to the surface most vividly when Britain left the European Union, and was followed by America's election of Donald Trump. Curiously, the election of Jair Bolsonaro in BRICS member Brazil was also a continuation of this trend. Milei's election in Argentina in 2023, and his withdrawal from joining BRICS is one of the more recent examples of the recent rise of insular and ultranationalist instincts in the West. BRICS countries, with South Africa's vocal participation, are convinced that the needs of the developing world are undermined by the West under these circumstances. Thus, South Africa has drawn even closer to China and vice versa – Xi Jinping has visited South Africa four times since becoming president in 2013. The close association between the two countries has been crucial to furthering the argument that an America-led international system is petering out, to be replaced by a multipolar international order in which China will play a significant and epoch-defining role. Due to China's forbidding political terrain, there are fears that the likes of South Africa are likely to play down their own claims to democratic fidelity in order not to offend their powerful partner.

Discussion

30 years after the advent of democracy, millions of voting age South Africans, without any lived experience of the pre-democracy dispensation, have been born. Their appraisal of the political landscape is in some ways radically different from those who lived through the morass of apartheid. For the so-called born-free generation, political freedom has to be seen to deliver the tangibles of economics, education, health, security and employment. For them, democracy rings hollow if the only thing it claims to present is an election every five years. Thus, the ANC, as ruling party, has been scrambling to find a workable political-economic formula that sustains the country's multiparty democracy (thus pleasing the Western purveyors of this political system), while at the same time meeting the daunting challenge of the economy that should improve the fortunes of millions of South Africans who are out of work, trapped in poverty, and endure the inequality that is so patent (a challenge that China confronted and succeeded).

Combining political rectitude and economic success is what explains South Africa's inclusion in BRICS. From a purely political – rather than moral – and economic sense, BRICS seems to make sense. South Africa's trade with some BRICS members does not even come close to its trade with the United States and the European Union. It is worth noting, though, that China has been South Africa's biggest trading partner for 15 years. Even though South Africa's inclusion in a group of countries that includes blatantly authoritarian states might pose a threat to the country's democratic credentials, South Africa's domestic affairs remain sturdily demo-

cratic. The BRICS has nevertheless provided South Africa with a platform through which it tries to champion the interests of a developing world. In its political calculus, this BRICS-led crusade is democratic in that it endeavours to create a just international order. The clearest expression of this has been South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice against Israel's war in Gaza.

When in November 2023 South Africa convened a special BRICS virtual meeting on Israel's conflict with Gaza, China made public a rebuke of Israel by stating that the war was a result of Palestinians being denied their rights of existence, return and citizenship. By condemning Israel, South Africa was by extension condemning Israel's backers led by the United States. This was bound to, and it did, impress China as China is also mired in its own tussles with the United States for global prominence and over the fate of Taiwan. These are formidable areas of intersection whose protection is worth it even if it puts a spotlight on South Africa's claims of being a defender of democracy. South Africa's democratic identity and its close relationship with an authoritarian China are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, nations, according to Alexander Wendt, have multiple social identities whose salience and prominence fluctuate according to whom they are relating with at a particular time (Wendt 1984). This partly explains South Africa's confusing stance on sovereignty; it promoted the sovereignty of Palestine, but it vacillated over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which threatened Ukraine's sovereignty. The plausible explanation for this was that South Africa shared certain identities with Russia that discouraged it from rebuking Russia.

Thus, in its dealing with the West, South Africa will continue to flaunt its democratic credentials. The hotly contested 2024 national election bears this claim out. In its relationship with China, the country will underscore identities that bind the two countries – such as a shared history of foreign domination, racial violence and economic injustice for the previously colonized regions. In this particular relationship, claims of multiparty and liberal democracy, which the two countries clearly do not share, will be relegated to a less prominent place. In addition, while China impinges on South Africa's economy, its chances of compromising South Africa's democratic credentials are minimal, regardless of the admiration that China enjoys among several South African parties. Left-leaning parties such as the ANC, the Economic Freedom Fighters and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK Party) consider China as a champion of interest of the developing world in a system that has been dominated by Western economics. In addition, the Chinese Consulate in South Africa invites a spectrum of South African political parties to its events. In fact, the different parties that admire China harbour intentions of one day being governing parties in South Africa and, as things stand, that could only happen if South Africa remains a multiparty and liberal democracy anchored on a credible separation of powers and strong democratic institutions. Apart from the interests of political parties in South Africa to sustain the country's democracy, South Africa also has a vibrant media and civil society that could prove their mettle as defenders of South African democracy should the country's relationship with China threaten to be damaging. Thus, if South Africa's international conduct demonstrates admiration and closeness to authoritarian regimes, the same cannot be said about the country's internal political system, which is veritably democratic.

Conclusion

This thematic paper set out to establish if South Africa-China relations are a threat to South Africa's democracy. This is a reasonable concern as the two countries have radically different political system. China has a closed political terrain in which the Communist Party of China is undisputed as national leader. South Africa has a vibrant democracy characterized by multiple political parties, legislative debate and judicial independence. To the extent that China has influence on South Africa's claims to be a democracy, this happens at the international level at which South Africa associates, and shares BRICS membership, with the likes of China, Iran and Russia. When it comes to domestic democracy in South Africa, China does not have readily discernible clout to do a lot of damage. This is because the tenets of democracy have been entrenched in South Africa, and changing the country's political makeup is not in China's immediate interests as it already has access to South Africa's markets and is the country's biggest trading partner for the last 15 years.

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