



Thematic Paper

South Africa under the Government of National Unity: Whither South Africa-China Relations?

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Introduction

The paper looks at the likely fate of South Africa-China relations under the new ruling coalition in South Africa – the Government of National Unity (GNU). Of the parties involved in the GNU, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) enjoy dominance, aided by the fact that the next two biggest parties – the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and (MK) – snubbed the GNU. Thus, the paper will look at ANC and DA perceptions of China, and how these are likely to be addressed in what is a political marriage of convenience that is unlikely to bridge some of the fundamental differences that the leading suitors have. In some cases, the paper will refer to how the two parties look at South Africa’s place in the now expanded Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) group of countries. This is anchored on how the parties perceive China, a country that makes the biggest economic member of BRICS. The first section of the paper will set the scene by detailing events that brought about the GNU. The second section looks at the intriguing relationship between the ANC and China through history. The third section looks at the DA’s perceptions of China. The fourth section, further divided into three subsections, discusses how the ANC has sought to fortify its monopoly over shaping South Africa’s foreign policy and its relationship with China in particular, by making certain strategic appointments to the GNU cabinet. Following that section will be the conclusion.

The GNU – A Marriage of Necessity

This year marks three decades since the genesis of the democratic order in South Africa. Throughout this period, the country has held periodic elections that have entrenched South Africa’s credentials as one of Africa’s most consistent democracies. The relative stability that South Africa enjoys, coupled with its peerless distinction as Africa’s biggest and most industrialized economy, has been noted not only in Africa but the world over, and explains why South Africa remains one of Africa’s biggest recipients of foreign direct investment (FDI). Overseeing political stability has been the independent arms of government – the legislature, the judiciary and the executive.

For the first thirty years, the executive was led by the African National Congress (ANC), a former liberation movement that was voted as the leading ruling party in 1994. As Figure 1 below shows, the ANC’s performance at the polls has been on a steady decline since 2009, after reaching its highest percentage in 2004:

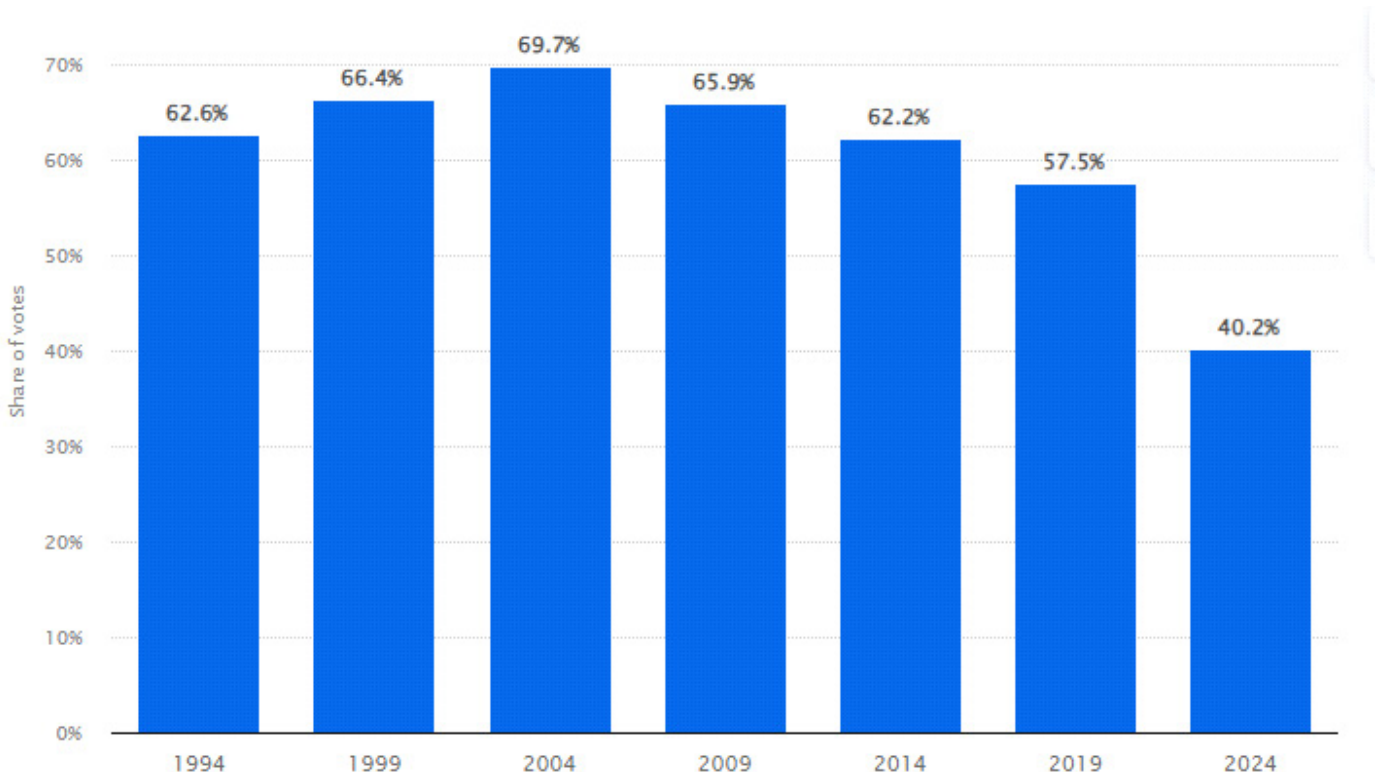


Figure 1 ANC General Elections results in South Africa (1994-2024): Source: Statista

Leading into the 2024 elections, pollsters published research that inspired a sense of foreboding in the ANC. The Rivonia Circle polled 2000 voters in November 2022 and established that if elections were held at that time, “the ANC’s share of the vote would drop to 41% from the 57.5% it obtained in 2019 national election” . That the ANC got 40.2% in May 2024 election shows that on this score, the Rivonia Circle was very close to the mark. It is noteworthy that some of its predictions were wide of the mark: the EFF was predicted to increase its share to 15% from 10.8% in 2024. Ultimately, the EFF got 9.52% of the vote, a reduction of more than 1% from 2019, rather than the 4% increase forecast. The DA, the Rivonia Circle study revealed, would lose votes from 20.8% in 2019 to 18% in 2024. In fact, the DA increased its tally to 21.81% in 2024.

Voter turnout was predicted to be around 65%. It turned out to be 58.64%. These forecasts, it must be said, were done before Jacob Zuma, former ANC and South African president, formed the Umkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK), which, within months of its existence made a startling showing at the polls, getting 14.58%, most probably luring voters from the ANC and the EFF. The results were a shock to the ANC, as it no longer enjoyed the parliamentary majority that had made its previous elections of the national president a perfunctory exercise. The party announced that it would form a government of national unity (GNU), a collection of parties that would form more than 50% of all parliamentarians. Eleven political parties, including the second-biggest the DA, agreed to be party of the GNU. The GNU is a curious improvisation, engineered out of necessity, considering that it incorporates parties that have fundamental and knotty differences, expressed in diametric differences on issues of affirmative action, economic policy and foreign policy. The ANC and DA differ markedly on these issues. Of these issues, the current paper looks at foreign policy and how the GNU is likely to deal with it. The paper singles out the fate and place of South Africa’s relations with the country’s biggest trading partner – China.

The ANC and China: Chequered History, Diplomacy and Necessity

The African National Congress (ANC) was formed in 1912 in South Africa as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) as a leading African movement against colonialism. This was two years after the formation of the Union of South Africa, a creation of the country’s citizens of European descent – mainly those of British and Afrikaner/Dutch stock. In 1913, a year after the movement’s formation, the Union passed the Native Land Act, an egregiously unjust and racially repugnant legislation that permitted the expulsion of black South Africans from their lands. While Europeans were offered vast tracts of land for agriculture, black South Africans were crammed into what later became known as Bantustans or homelands in which they were presided upon by local leaders some of whom were puppets or unwitting collaborators of successive apartheid administrations. The consequences of this act have scarred South Africa for more than a century, and to many South Africans the extant struggle for land remains a painful reminder of how circumscribed the 1994 triumph over apartheid was.

Nine years after the formation of what was later called the ANC, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was formed in China in 1921. As the ANC was waging its struggle against colonial and apartheid rule, the CPC was waging its own struggles against foreign – mainly Japanese occupation. After the end of World War II and the surrender of Japan simmering tensions between the CPC and Chinese nationalists – called Kuomintang – broke out into all-out civil war. In 1949, unable to stem the CPC onslaught, the nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek fled mainland China and re-established his Republic of China on the island of Taiwan, leaving the most populous piece of land on earth under the communist leadership of Mao Zedong. Feeling a sense of solidarity with Africa’s struggles against foreign/colonial and minority regimes, the CPC committed its modest help. Members of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were hosted in China in 1955 after the celebrated Bandung Conference in Indonesia.

The solidarity between China and the ANC-SACP alliance was shattered during the Sino-Soviet split (which started around 1956 and escalated between 1960 and 1961). The SACP was a beneficiary of the Soviet Union and thus its side was decided. The ANC followed suit, to China’s chagrin. China struck up relations with the lilliputian Pan African Congress of Azania (PAC), a South Africa liberation movement that had broken away

from the ANC in 1959 citing communist infiltration and takeover in the ANC. Judging from how badly racked the PAC was with internecine fighting, its less prominent role in the struggle against apartheid, and its anti-communist origins, China's support was nothing more than to support any player that was not under Soviet largesse. In the *African Communist*, a journal of the SACP, China was denounced by contributors who called it an ideological apostate that was eager to please the United States (the biggest capitalist ogre). Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China seemed to confirm that China was poised to consort with the biggest capitalist country in the world if this meant embarrassing or isolating the Soviet Union. Expectedly, some of China's close ideological allies, Albania for one, were unnerved by this development.

The downfall of Nikita Khrushchev and his death in the Soviet Union in 1971, the death of Mao in 1976 and China's reforms and renunciation of doctrinaire socialism paved a way for a thaw in Sino-Soviet tensions, and ipso facto China's relations with the ANC and SACP. In 1975, Oliver Tambo, who was ANC president at the time, visited China with the intention of repairing relations between his party and the Communist Party of China (CPC). A follow up meeting between the two parties was held in Zambia's capital – Lusaka – in 1982. As mentioned, the deaths of Khrushchev and Mao made the reconciliation easier. It is also possible that China had realized the futility of alienating the ANC – a leading South African liberation movement. If China wanted to be on the right side of history vis-à-vis the future South Africa, then its best bet lay with the ANC. Renouncing the zealotry of Mao-era dogmatism allowed new pragmatic Chinese leaders to extend overtures to erstwhile foes – both ideological and political. Declassified documents have recently shown that at the time when the ANC was mending fences with China, China was involved in clandestine deals (in arms, mineral communication system etc.) with apartheid South Africa even though publicly the two did not share formal relations. In fact, Taiwan's diplomatic relations with South Africa were used by the communist to win diplomatic battles against the Kuomintang.

China's reconciliation with the ANC received a fillip in May 1994 when the ANC won South Africa's first democratic elections. However, it took almost four years before South Africa and China established relations in January 1998. The period leading to that was fraught with diplomatic quandaries for the ANC government. Taiwan had reportedly given campaign donations to the ANC before the 1994 elections, forcing Nelson Mandela to consider dual recognition of Taiwan and China. This consideration was an impossibility on China, which considers Taiwan its inalienable if renegade territory. Complicating the issue was Taiwan's consolidation of democracy, with the crucial 1996 elections when for the first time Taiwanese directly voted for their president. China remained an authoritarian regime hostile to national elections. However, history and pragmatism came into play in South Africa's ultimate decision to dispense with Taiwan in favour of China.

That China did not have relations with apartheid regimes was an endearing fact that disadvantaged Taiwan. Secondly, democratic South Africa wanted to maintain its close economic ties with Hong Kong, a region that would be returned to China in 1997 after 150 years under British colonialism. Thirdly, China's diplomatic battles with Taiwan had been successful with only a handful of African countries recognizing Taiwan. Fourthly, China's economy was on the ascent and its market was the biggest the world over. If South Africa wanted to match in tandem with the current of global diplomacy while also cultivating relations with players that could help the country overcome centuries of economic injustice and alienation – especially for the majority black South Africans - China more than Taiwan offered this promise. It was thus that Mandela announced South Africa's decision to sever ties with Taiwan and establish them with the mainland.

Twenty six years later, the ANC remains a staunch defender of China and its relationship with South Africa. Trade between South Africa and China has grown, and China has now been South Africa's biggest trading partner for 15 years. In 2022, China accounted for 9.4% of South Africa's exports and 20.2% of imports. Xi Jinping, who has visited South Africa four times, has vaunted profound political mutual trust and fruitful practical cooperation in various fields as the lynchpins of South Africa-China relations. The two countries, he went on to say in his message of congratulations to his South African counterpart Cyril Ramaphosa after the 2024 elections, have set "a fine example of solidarity and cooperation among developing and the Global South countries". Indeed, this solidarity was on full display when China and South Africa jointly condemned Israel's bombardment of Gaza in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel. It also found expression

in China's donation of electricity generators to South Africa in November 2023 at the time when South Africa was engulfed in rolling power cuts that gnawed at the popularity of the ANC government.

Party-to-party relations between the ANC and the CPC have also continued apace. As will be seen below - under International Relations and Cooperation – Ronald Lamola (ANC) - even when South Africa and China are discussing issues of national proportions, the two sides are not shy to address political party matters. From 20 June to 24 June 2024, Chen Wenqing, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and head of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CPC Central Committee, visited South Africa and held talks with the ANC's Secretary-General Fikile Mbalula and former President of South Africa and deputy president of the ANC Kgalema Motlanthe. However, the monopoly over shaping South Africa-China relations and presenting them in glowing and adulatory terms could have slipped somewhat with the elections of 2024, and the inclusion of the DA as part of government in South Africa. The next section shows why this could be so.

The Democratic Alliance on China: Faultlines

The Democratic Alliance traces its origins to the Progressive Party (PP) which was founded in 1959. The PP, most memorably through Helen Suzman, opposed the National Party (NP) and its apartheid policies. Crucially, in the racially sensitive South African politics, the PP was led by white liberals. The DA, in its current format founded in 2000 has been associated with white interests, much to its consternation. The party has been lambasted to opposing affirmative action (a policy meant to give preference to qualified members of previously disadvantaged racial demographics), the nationalization of key economic institutions and entities, and its championing of liberal economics. In other words, the ideological DNA of the DA is a copycat of what obtains in the West, more pointedly the United States. To the ANC and China, to toe the American line is akin to endorsing a system that for more than a century has been to the detriment of the developing world.

The DA has always been uncomfortable with the ANC's close relations with China which, so the argument goes, undermine South Africa's democracy and occasionally threaten to erode South Africa's sovereignty. A case in point was the invitation of Lobsang Sangay President of the Central Tibetan Administration to visit South Africa. Sangay was invited by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), an opposition party in South Africa. As Sangay was using an American passport and hence did not require a visa to enter South Africa, the South African government could not easily block his entry. The Chinese Embassy launched an uncharacteristically furious broadside at the South African government. Allowing Sangay's visit, the Embassy complained, "undermined the political mutual trust between China and South Africa. It runs against the common interest of SA-China relations, and will undoubtedly discourage Chinese investors' confidence in South Africa, undermine SA's efforts for poverty reduction, and cause grave harm for the interest of South Africa and the South African people".

The DA, through its member Sandy Kaylan, responded with equal outrage at the Chinese Embassy, accusing it of "overstepping" on South Africa's sovereignty. Regarding the threat that Sangay's visit could undermine Chinese investment in South Africa, Kaylan said "If China wants to go, it should go. The time for non-South Africans to hold the South African Government to ransom is long gone". Visits of Tibetans to South Africa had been blocked on prior occasions. Most sensationally, the Dalai Lama could not visit South Africa in 2011, as the country vacillated over his visa application, neither granting it nor turning it down, leading the cleric not to come. He had been invited by his friend and fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu slammed the ANC government, describing it as worse than apartheid, and over eager to kowtow to China while being insensitive to the plight of Tibetans. Tutu's concerns mirrored those of the DA, and seemed to hint that China had a damaging effect on South Africa's democracy and sovereignty. Arguably, such self-censorship on China's close economic allies reflection of how China directly interferes in the domestic political processes of its partners and also puts conditions on investments and other deals.

When the second outbreak of COVID-19 engulfed Guangzhou in China, rumours of Africans being discrimi-

nated against – on ground that they were the vectors of the second wave - swirled. According to some reports, Africans were prohibited from accessing amenities such as restaurants while some were summarily evicted from their accommodation. Noko Masipa, a DA parliamentarian, released a statement inveighing against what he argued was China’s Afrophobia. He also urged the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) to clarify “South Africa’s current relationship with China in light of the recall of the Chinese Ambassador from South Africa” . The last part referred to the seemingly sudden recall of Lin Songtian who was ambassador to South Africa. There was speculation surrounding Songtian’s withdrawal with some speculating that the Chinese government recalled ambassador as a protest against the South African government for failing to post an envoy in Beijing for more than a year. Lin was subsequently appointed as president of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. Apart from bilateral friendships that China has built, the most prominent multilateral one with like-minded partners is the newly expanded BRICS.

In August 2023 BRICS sent invitations to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to join the group. Argentina declined the invitation when far-right Javier Milei became president in December 2023. The DA, longtime critic of BRICS, was on hand to slam the invitation of certain countries. The party’s spokesperson on international relations Emma Louis Powell criticized Ramaphosa for failing to condemn the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in the BRICS countries. This was a thinly veiled reference to China’s alleged oppression of the Uyghur minorities in the country’s Xinjiang region. In its condemnation of an expanded BRICS, the DA specifically targeted the inclusion of Iran and Saudi Arabia, stating that “While only three of BRICS’s five member states can currently be considered free democracies, namely South Africa, India, and Brazil, the addition of two new member states run by authoritarian regimes with concerning totalitarian tendencies may tip the scales in favour of an illiberal, oppressive, and autocratic approach to foreign relations and trade” . Powell argued that as a liberal constitutional democracy, South Africa had no place in such company.

With the aid of figures, Powell revealed that South Africa’s FDI is still dominated by the West, and not BRICS. In sum, the DA has been against BRICS; it has anchored its position on economic realities, human rights, democracy, and how South Africa’s inclusion in the group has prevented the country from mobilizing global solidarity against some atrocities being perpetrated by BRICS members. This, the DA argues, is at variance with the international support and solidarity that the ANC mobilized in isolating the apartheid regime. The two positions presented in this paper, a pro-China one held by the ANC, and an anti-China and anti-BRICS one held by the DA, present an interesting case study of how the GNU will govern South Africa. The next section presents how the two parties might position China in their joint cabinet.

South Africa-China Relations under the GNU

While in Durban in November 2023, Cyril Ramaphosa made flattering statements about Chinese citizens that surely would have pleased the ANC, but were caustically criticized by some sectors of South Africa. The president urged his listeners to be “patriotic” like the Chinese. “We must be like China” the president stated. “In China nearly everyone is a messenger — every Chinese is a messenger for their country, they never badmouth their own country. Never badmouth your country”. This instruction was meant to discourage some media houses whose reportage the ANC government found uncomfortable. It is also indicative of the inkling that, despite running the country jointly with other parties, some of which are sceptical of China, the ANC’s admiration of the People’s Republic will reassert itself. Popular media host Stephen Grootes lambasted Ramaphosa for his statement, stating that “Only someone who lives in the warm, expensive embrace of the VIP Protection Unit could make such an ignorant claim”.

Observing how enthusiastically successive ANC administrations defended China, Ramaphosa’s pronouncements in Durban were not a faux pas. They demonstrate both admiration with China and the CPC’s omnipotence, and frustration with South Africa’s vibrant democracy which allows a variety of views which, judging from the results of the 2024 elections, have increasingly gone against the ANC. How the ANC would navigate

the China conundrum was centred mostly on how the GNU cabinet would be configured. Ideologically, the ANC is close to the EFF and MK, two parties with leaders who are erstwhile high-ranking members of the ANC. The EFF, which has been invited to various events by the Chinese Consulate, has publicly lavished adulations on China, not unlike in the way Ramaphosa did in Durban. Zuma, leader of MK, has stated how proud he was that South Africa's inclusion in BRICS happened under his presidency. That the two parties could not join the GNU presented the ANC with a difficult choice of courting parties that negative views of China and BRICS. When 11 parties agreed to be part of the government, attention turned to what portfolios the participants would occupy in the new government.

The fate of South Africa-China relations centred mostly on the portfolios of international relations and cooperation, defense, and trade and industry. If the DA were ever to have a telling and transformative impact on South Africa-China relations, it would mostly likely have to occupy one of these portfolios and use the leverage they come with to press its issue. When the cabinet was finally announced, on 30 June, the above portfolios were peopled thus (with parties in brackets):

1. International Relations and Cooperation – Ronald Lamola (ANC)

Relevance for South Africa-China relations: This is the ministry that shapes and directs South Africa's foreign policy. Hence, South Africa-China relations and South Africa's membership of the BRICS fall under its purview. Previously, the minister was the highly respected Naledi Pandor who was the face of South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Twenty days before she left her position, Pandor met with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Nizhny Novgorod. During their meeting, Wang Yi congratulated the ANC for maintaining its position as South Africa's biggest political party. Pandor hoped that China would increasingly collaborate with Africa in the fields of infrastructure, digital economy, renewable energy and human resources.

2. Defence and Military Veterans – Angie Motshekga (ANC)

Relevance for South Africa-China relations: The ministry of defence incorporates the country's army, navy and air force. South Africa is a regular contributor towards peacekeeping missions under the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU). The defence force has been involved in military exercises and drills with countries such as Russia and China. The ten-day drills from 17 to 27 February 2023 off the South African coast aroused criticism in Western circles, as the period straddled the one-year anniversary of the commencement of Russia's conflict with Ukraine. In May Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun met with Chief of the South African Navy Monde Lobese in Beijing, and disclosed that "the militaries of the two countries [South Africa and China] have close exchanges and naval cooperation".

3. Trade, Industry and Competition – Parks Tau (ANC)

Relevance to South Africa-China relations: It is responsible for creating a climate that is conducive for trade and the development of enterprises. DTIC also manages the country's network of foreign trade and investment. South Africa's export-import portfolio falls under this department. This ineluctably touches on China which is a premium destination of South Africa's exports and genesis of its imports.

As could be seen, ministers of the portfolios most likely to touch on South Africa's relationship with China are members of the ANC. The likely outcome of this is that South Africa-China relations will remain on an even keel. As the GNU entailed intense negotiations, chiefly between the DA and the ANC, it is reasonable to surmise that letting the ANC to virtually run South Africa's diplomacy is one of the compromises made. The leader of the DA, John Steenhuisen, whom some thought would push to be the country's deputy president, was given the ministry of agriculture. With the cabinet duly picked, the stage was set for South Africa to hear what plans the GNU had to the country. Parliament provided the platform.

When Ramaphosa addressed the seventh parliament for the first time on 18 July 2024, one of the things that stood out was the paucity of reference to the country's international relations. The president never mentioned the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and the same was the case with BRICS. He made mention of South Africa's commitment to "strengthen economic diplomacy with our largest trading partners and potential trading part-

ners” and that the country “will prioritise the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area to increase our exports to the rest of the continent.”. The evasion of the two wars mentioned, and BRICS – which was expanded when South Africa hosted the group’s summit in 2023 – is clearly meant not to offend the ANC’s governing partners such as the DA and IFP that have shown to hold different views on the ANC’s international partnerships – specially its close relations with China. What is clear, though, is that the configuration of the portfolios that deal directly with international relations shows that the ANC intends to maintain and control South Africa’s international partnerships.

Conclusion

Being on China’s good side has been paramount to the ANC’s foreign policy since the establishment of South Africa-China relations in 1998. South Africa has been eager not to cause diplomatic offence to China; this explains the country’s dithering over issuing the Dalai Lama with a visa. The cabinet appointments that Ramaphosa made in the GNU point to this sensitivity. The foreign affairs ministry remained with the ANC. The DA has been historically vocal in its hostility to BRICS and China. Thus, placing the key international relations portfolio under the DA’s charge would have been a risky move for the ANC, one that could have jeopardized South Africa’s relationship with its biggest trade partner. Economic cooperation between the two countries has been the most vivid feature of the South Africa-China tandem. The ANC would want to keep this cooperation sustainable, even under the GNU framework. If the EFF and MK, rather the DA, had joined the GNU, the resultant government would have had a concerted voice on South Africa-China relations. The ANC would have more easily considered the possibility of putting an EFF or MK member as head of some of the ministries mentioned above. However, the party had to keep them to itself, lest giving them to the DA, or another anti-China GNU participant offended China.

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