



An exploration of the political, economic and social dimensions of South Africa's bilateral relations with China

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Abstract

Despite its contemporary challenges, China remains a dominant actor in world politics as the second-largest economy in the world after the United States. The country is pivotal in global politics and the world economy, representing developing and emerging economies. African nations like South Africa now look to China for political and economic cooperation and developmental aspirations. China remains Africa's largest trade partner, with South Africa being its most important ally. In this regard, South Africa's engagement with China has become one of the most debated aspects of its activism in bilateral relations. As the bilateral relations between the two countries intensify, questions are being asked: 'What has South Africa benefited from its relations with China?' 'Has the country reaped any political, economic or social benefits from these relations?' Many attempts have been made to provide answers to these questions. Problematically, the majority of these attempts have been based on generalisations drawn from media reports and uninformed public opinions. Therefore, this article explores the political, economic, and social aspects of South Africa's bilateral relations with China to provide a more nuanced picture of this bilateral relationship. In doing this, the paper engages 20 participants with knowledge and expertise on South Africa-China relations. The information gathered from these engagements was supplemented with a literature review on the relationship between the two countries.

Keywords: South Africa, China, bilateral relations

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1. Introduction

In a recent analysis that focused on “China’s economy” and its position in the “global economy”, the US Bank (2025) found that China is still a dominant player in the global economy. The country remains the second-largest economy in the world, after the United States of America, despite its contemporary challenges, such as economic downturns and the trade war it faces from the United States of America (USA) under Donald Trump’s administration (US Bank, 2025; DiPippo, 2025). In their study, Shoba and Mlambo (2024) expounded that China has long become a significant rising global superpower and emphasised that the country has a pivotal role to fulfil in global politics and the world economy (Zhang, 2022) as a representative of developing countries and emerging economies (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007). In the economic realm, China plays a crucial role in the world economy, contributing prudently and pragmatically to the world’s economic growth (Global Times, 2024) and serving as the vital locomotive for global development (Mammadov, 2024). China’s share of global gross domestic product (GDP) is 19.6%. It is projected to reach a significant 22.1% by 2029 (World Economics, 2025), just ahead of the imperative year 2030, which will mark the conclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set for the world. China’s overall contribution to global development has remained around 30% over the years, thus providing a strong and sound impetus for the world economy (Qiang, 2024).

Whilst its economic rivals, such as the USA, are adopting an inward economic focus – pursuing nationalist and protectionist policies (Ottaviano, 2024; Palacios-Civico, 2025), China’s economic policy and strategy remain globally oriented (Mammadov, 2024) and focused on achieving a multipolar world order (Shoba & Mlambo, 2024) thus, demonstrating its pragmatic leadership as one of the major actors in world politics. China remains the only developing country to hold veto power in the United Nations (UN) as a permanent member of the Security Council (Feltman, 2020). Within the broader UN system, China has cooperated with its allies such as Russia and broader BRICS partners to advance the agenda for reforms and affording the developing countries and the broader global South more voice and representation in the important institutions of global governance (Stuenkel, 2016; Shoba, 2023). Within the Security Council, China has formed a strategic alliance with Russia (Maizland, 2022), which Shoba and Mlambo (2024) argue has elevated both countries’ importance in world politics. Moreover, China actively participates in other multilateral institutions of global governance. For instance, Shoba and Mlambo (2024) noted that China held a sizeable voting share of 6.09% in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), thus positioning it as the third most prominent member of the IMF, after the US and Japan. Furthermore, China demonstrates its leadership, global responsibility, and commitment to multilateralism in other important organisations such as the

World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Economic Forum (WEF), World Health Organisation (WHO), etc. Addressing the recent WEF meeting in Davos, Chinese Premier Mr Li Qiang accentuated:

“In today’s world, countries have very close economic linkages, which means their macroeconomic policies have more notable spillover effects. In the face of global crises, fragmented and separate responses will only leave the world economy more fragile. As such, it is crucial that, in making and executing macro policies, countries around the world, especially major economies, step up dialogue and communication, take more coordinated and effective measures, firmly uphold the multilateral trading system, jointly improve global economic governance, and foster new drivers of global growth.”

The above comments from the Chinese Premier demonstrate that China remains committed to multilateralism as an avenue for achieving global prosperity. It further exemplifies China’s global responsibility as it seeks to coordinate macroeconomic policy among countries to construct and strengthen synergy for global economic development. Initiatives such as China’s Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) further demonstrate China’s global responsibility. These initiatives focus on “improving global peace and security, promoting socio-economic development, and contributing to global governance reform” (The Presidency of South Africa, 2024). The African continent has been one of the primary beneficiaries of China’s pragmatic leadership and global responsibility of trying to build a universally beneficial and inclusive world economy. In this respect, Chinese Premier Mr Li Qiang remarked:

“We Chinese people believe that benefits should be mutual. True and good development is development for all. We need to implement the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development fully, strengthen global development cooperation, bridge development gaps, and create new cooperation highlights in areas such as poverty alleviation, food security and industrialisation, to benefit the people of all countries with more fruits of cooperation.”

The foregoing comments reaffirm China’s commitment to building a universally beneficial and inclusive world economy to achieve sustainable development as encapsulated in the SDGs. In Africa, China contributes significantly to the continent’s economic growth and development through frameworks and initiatives such as the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the African Union (AU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is Africa’s largest trade partner. In this regard, South Africa is the largest trade partner to China on the continent, and China is South Africa’s

largest trade partner globally. The two countries share closer political and economic ties. The extent of the bilateral trade between these countries typifies the economic ties. The frequent official high-level state visits from both countries exemplify the political ties. Shoba and Mtapuri (2022) noted that the frequent reciprocal official state visits by Heads of State indicate the importance of the relationship between the two countries. Moreover, China's frequent engagement with South Africa through bi-national commissions and working groups such as the China-South Africa Joint Working Group (JWG), Inter-Ministerial Joint Working Group, and the Joint Economic and Trade Committee (JETC) are indicative of the importance of South Africa to China in the context of its relations with the broader African continent. As such, the relationship between the two countries has become a subject of public debate and scholarly discourse both in the country and abroad.

There is a public perception that closer ties between the two countries in the political and social realms have translated into increasing bilateral trade between them. However, in economic terms, the relationship between them is highly asymmetrical. In this context, the characterisation is that South Africa is heavily dependent on China. While China has a pragmatic agenda and a prudent approach within this relationship, South Africa lacks a clear strategy. Therefore, the growing public discourse is that South Africa remains subordinated to China's will and control, and the country cannot direct and affect the outcomes of its bilateral engagements in this regard. This characterisation implies that the country's benefits from this bilateral relationship are limited. Some have boldly argued that the country has not reaped any meaningful political, economic and social benefits from its engagement with China. Such characterisations are often generalised based on media reports and sometimes political commentaries from those opposed to engagements between these countries. Scholars who have researched this phenomenon have pinned their argument against this relationship on the nature and structure of exports and imports in relation to China. On the one hand, South Africa exports mainly raw materials and unfinished goods to China. On the other hand, China's imports into the country are mainly goods and services. Critics have pointed out that this situation leads to high trade deficits between South Africa and China. Therefore, this article explores the political, economic and social dimensions of the bilateral relations between the two countries.

2. Methodological approach

The main aim of this article is to illuminate what South Africa has benefited from its engagement with China. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants were those who partook (or are still involved) in South Africa-China relations directly or indirectly as individuals and institutions for the relations between

the two countries. The engagement with participants covered various issues and aspects of the relationship. However, the results presented in this article focus on illuminating how South Africa has benefited from this relationship, specifically in the political, economic, and social spheres. Therefore, a purposive sampling approach was deployed within the scope of qualitative research (Benoot et al., 2016). This approach was adopted because it enables the researcher to choose information-rich cases that would yield insights and an in-depth understanding of the topic under study (Patton, 1990; Palinkas et al., 2015). The study's sample size comprised 20 participants, including high-profile diplomats and government officials from South Africa and China, South African business executives, academics from South Africa and the United Kingdom, and representatives from civil society organisations based in South Africa. A sample size of 20 in this study was in line with Creswell's (1998) understanding that for qualitative studies, '20 to 30' interviews are sufficient to reach an informed conclusion. This assertion agrees with Bernard (2000), cited in Sarfo et al. (2021, p. 61), that "between ten and twenty knowledgeable participants are sufficient to uncover and understand the fundamental categories in any distinct cultural domain or study of lived experience." The interview guide was deployed to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The data collected through the interviews was corroborated with secondary sources. In doing so, the themes and notions of the study guided this process to ensure that only data related to the themes under study were considered. The gathered data were therefore analysed and intertwined throughout the study using a thematic approach as propounded by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3. National interest, foreign policy and soft power in the making of South Africa-China relations

The late Nelson Mandela is regarded as one of the world's most decorated and celebrated leaders. World leaders such as the Chinese President Xi Jinping described Nelson Mandela as "an accomplished politician of global standing" and openly referred to him as "an old ally of China". Nelson Mandela was the first democratic President of South Africa. He established the contemporary relations between South Africa and China in 1998 (Shoba, 2023), following the end of apartheid in South Africa (South Africa History [SAHO], 2015). The relations between the two countries were established relatively late after South Africa transitioned to a democratic dispensation in 1994 (Jiang, 2021). When considering the challenges that led to the delay in configuring the relationship between South Africa and China, the following concepts come to mind: national interest, foreign policy, and soft power. A note on these interrelated concepts is required before describing the formation of South Africa-China relations under the Mandela administration.

First, national interest revolves around states' perceptions of the world and articulating and pursuing their policy ambitions and objectives (Kotze, 2024). The concept denotes the state's interest in world affairs. Osgood (1953:10) states that "national interest is a state of affairs valued solely for its benefit to the nation." Second, national interest guides foreign policy formulation, as states often derive their foreign policy from it. In the words of Wara and Gul (2025: 181), foreign policy "donates domestic invigorated foreign actions taken by the state to achieve specific interests in the international arena." From this perspective, it can be argued that foreign policy articulates the nation's policy ambitions and objectives in world affairs. Conversely, the notion of soft power traverses both national interests and foreign policy. Nye (2005) describes soft power as the state's ability to utilise co-option and attraction in international affairs. Drawing from this definition, Wara and Gul (2025:181) observed that "soft power... can be defined as the power of influence rather than coercion, the power of motivation instead of force, or the power of enticement instead of enforcement."

Accordingly, the main reasons behind the delays in forming official relations between these countries are as follows. Shoba and Mlambo (2024) opined that soon after winning the country's first general elections, a twofold foreign policy dilemma concerning China confronted the South African government under Nelson Mandela's administration. The government had inherited the apartheid foreign policy that recognised the Republic of China (ROC)/Taiwan instead of the People's Republic of China (PRC). As a result, the Mandela administration had to first decide whether to embrace relations with the ROC and simultaneously establish ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), forming a foreign policy that recognises a dual China. Second, the Mandela administration had to decide whether to eliminate bilateral relations with the ROC and opt for a foreign policy acknowledging that there is only "One China", a policy that the PRC advances. Nevertheless, whatever foreign policy formulation is presented in this regard presents its own implications for the country to consider when making such an imperative foreign policy decision. President Mandela, being the pragmatic leader that he was, endeavoured to deploy soft power to diplomatically talk South Africa out of this foreign policy dilemma, advancing the idea of forming ties with both ROC and PRC, as encapsulated in the following excerpt:

President Mandela has expressed complete confidence in the leaders of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) and support for their efforts to resolve the China question ... It is on this basis that the South African government would hope to strengthen and improve the relationship with the People's Republic of China on the one hand, and the Republic of China on the other (quoted in press by Williams, 2018).

The above statement indicates that Nelson Mandela wanted to deploy soft power to advance a foreign policy that sought to advocate for the ideology of Two Chinas. It clearly shows that Mandela was pondering a foreign policy firmly rooted in South Africa's national interests more than anything else. This foreign policy would benefit South Africa at the expense of the PRC. The ROC was one of South Africa's most important trade partners at the time. So, the Mandela administration prioritised the country's economic interest as it attempted to pursue a foreign policy that would recognise both the ROC and the PRC. As Nelson Mandela remarked, "...South Africa wishes to have cordial relations with both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China on Taiwan. This principle has been based on the strong economic relations that South Africa maintains with both the People's Republic of China and with Taiwan" (Mandela, 1996). Indeed, the ROC/Taiwan was the sixth largest trade partner to South Africa and had made enormous financial contributions to Mandela's party campaign, leading to the general elections held in 1994 (Williams, 2018).

Interestingly, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) were allies, and the CPC supported the ANC and other liberation movements and the struggle in South Africa against apartheid. Mandela had debuted his official trip to China as the President of the ANC after his release from prison. Mandela had meetings with the President of China and leaders of the CPC. Although no records are available regarding what was discussed at this important meeting, all indications are that the One China Policy took centre stage. Therefore, CPC did not anticipate forming ties with South Africa would be challenging. In this regard, Jiang (2021) argues that even before the general election in South Africa in 1994, a Chinese delegation came to South Africa to meet with Mandela and other ANC leaders to discuss how the relations would be formed. Jiang (2021) states that the Chinese delegation had notes that would be included in the bilateral agreement between the two countries. However, Mandela's administration indicated that it wanted more time to consider the issue of ROC/Taiwan, given the country's economic ties with Taiwan. However, South Africa eventually decided to terminate its relationship with ROC/Taiwan and established official diplomatic relations with the PRC under the administration of the CPC. Ever since then, the extent of bilateral, political, social and economic reach between the two countries, propelled firmly by Jacob Zuma's foreign policy and fuelled by China's increasing global influence under Xi Jinping, deepened drastically in the second decade of the twenty-first Century. Correspondingly, the relations between the two countries have since evolved from the usual state bilateral relations form of engagement to reach a "strategic partnership" and further elevated to a "comprehensive partnership" and ultimately "comprehensive strategic partnership" under Zuma and Jinping (Shoba & Mtapuri, 2022).

The relations between the two countries continue to evolve even further under the current geopolitical dispensation characterised by chaos and uncertainty. South Africa and China, as well as their BRICS partners, would look to expand their engagement in different areas of mutual interest and cooperation as these countries, especially South Africa, China and Russia, face increased attacks from the United States under the Donald Trump administration. Nevertheless, as South Africa and China expand their political and economic ties, they also explore other avenues of bilateral engagement in areas such as energy, science, and technology. The people-to-people form of engagement also deepened, with several Chinatowns and communities mushrooming in many parts of South Africa (Shoba, 2022). Some say this manifests Chinese influence over South Africa (Alden & Park, 2013). From a political perspective, the elevated bilateral partnership between the two countries has become one of the principal axes of the current evolving world order, particularly due to their cooperation within BRICS and other important institutions of global governance.

4. Results

The section is devoted to the discussion and analysis of the three sub-themes that emerged under the central theme of the dimensions of South Africa's bilateral relations with China.

4.1. Economic Dimensions

The economic dimension of South Africa's bilateral engagement with China is the most debated aspect of its bilateral activism. South Africa has relations with many countries, including the US, its second-largest trade partner after China. However, the country's bilateral relations with China dominate the discourse regarding its bilateral engagements with other states in world politics. The focus has always been on what economic benefits befall South Africa because of its elevated comprehensive strategic partnership with China. Indeed, since diplomatic relations were established between the two economies, economic cooperation has mushroomed in all aspects of their engagements. This is exemplified in the engagement between the two countries in exports and imports. The fact that China is South Africa's largest trade partner in the world and South Africa is China's largest trade partner in Africa accounts for the country's exports and imports are concentrated mainly in China. In line with this, most participants emphasised that South Africa's bilateral relations with China portend economic prospects and challenges for the country. Furthermore, one of the key participants posited that China offers South Africa considerable economic benefits through trade and investments. This view was concretised by one participant in the following excerpt:

“Economic opportunities for South Africa are ubiquitous in its relationship with China. First, Chinese companies doing business in South Africa create several jobs for locals. For instance, as of 2014, a Chinese entity called First Automobile Works (FAW) created over 500 jobs in the first phase of its operation in South Africa and promised to multiply this number in the following years. Second, South Africa massively benefits from the colossal tax imposed on foreign businesses operating in the country. So, this gives the country more revenue generation and collection streams. Third, South African companies could also engage in market opportunities offered by this relationship, where they could export their products to China.” (13 January 2020)

Indeed, as narrated above, the success story of the Chinese companies operating in South Africa is a remarkable example of the economic impact on South Africa because it engages with China. In addition, one participant stated that South Africa stands to benefit massively from Chinese imports. This was articulated by a South African business executive in the following excerpt:

“It is general knowledge that exports and imports are important for economic growth and development. So, one significant opportunity provided by our relationship with China is in Chinese imports because of their low prices and hence affordability, especially for poor South Africans. We cannot shy away from the fact that we have high unemployment in the country and that has a direct impact on consumer spending –an important component of economic growth and development. When I was in government, I realised that some Chinese imports could be 80% cheaper than similar imports from our traditional trading partners. These imports could also be 50% cheaper than the locally made stuff.” (13 January 2020)

4.2. Political dimensions

Two most important periods and events, one towards the end of the 1990s – the formation of official ties with China – and the other, a relatively recent political event towards the end of the 2000s – the election of Jacob Zuma as the President of South Africa – are often suggested by academics as crucial occurrences in contemporary China-South Africa relations (Shoba, 2023). Whatever occurrence marked the beginning of closer political ties between China and South Africa, the relations between these two countries have gained significant impetus over the past two decades. This relationship has been marked by unprecedented Presidential visits by Xi Jinping to South Africa and Presidential visits by Zuma and Ramaphosa to China by the two recent Heads of State of South Africa. So, how have the relations between the two sides impacted South Africa politically? According to scholars interviewed for this study, since the advent of Zuma 2007 as the President

of the ruling party in South Africa, the diplomatic and political ties between South Africa and China have been growing closer. There was a consensual view among participants that the emergence of Zuma dramatically altered South Africa's foreign policy outlook and orientation toward China and developing countries, as articulated by a participant in the following excerpt:

"Zuma was instrumental in forging and cementing both economic and political ties between South Africa and China. Zuma believed China's model of development was the best way to go for South Africa. His election in 2007 as the President of the ANC and ultimately the President of the country in 2009 marked a paradigm shift in South Africa's engagement with the world. Zuma strongly emphasised that we should look to the South and East and not to the West and North for developmental aspiration. He believed that China's growth could be replicated in South Africa." (10 November 2019)

The foregoing assertions agree with those of Wenjun (2018), Mpungose (2018), Shoba and Mtapuri (2022) and Shoba and Mlambo (2024) on the notion that the advent of Zuma culminated in the dramatic impetus of China-South Africa relations. One participant emphasised that the political impacts of South Africa's relations with China have been significant. One of the key participants had this to say:

"There were reports that the ruling party in South Africa was receiving both political and monetary backing from the governing party in China. Specifically, leading toward the 2009 South African general elections, it was reported that the ANC was receiving monetary support from the CPC for the election campaign. That signalled the potential emergence of a strategic Sino-South Africa under the administration of Zuma should he be elected President, and he was indeed elected." (10 October 2019).

A remarkable example of how South Africa's political ties with China have mushroomed since 2007 is demonstrated by the fact that South Africa became China's leading trade partner towards the end of 2009. This is further exemplified by the closer political ties between the two nations in multilateral forums such as the G20, BASIC, and UNSC. Uzodike (2016) stated that South Africa's admission to BRICS, sponsored by China, also demonstrated how political ties have become strong and strategic between the two nations. One participant stated that political ties between the two countries are also demonstrated in their close collaboration within the FOCAC framework. The significance of closer ties between South Africa and China in different global forums was articulated by one of the key participants in the following excerpt:

“South Africa has gained so much from its relations with China. There are several events that account for this. For instance, during the climate change negotiations in 2009, South Africa, together with Brazil, India, and China, formed the BASIC bloc, which played a crucial role in driving and shaping the negotiations on global climate change. Surely, South Africa alone or without being part of a group that included China would not have been able to meaningfully engage the United States and Europe. China has given South Africa an amplified voice and standing in the global economy. South Africa claims to be a gateway to Africa, and the voice for Africa in the global economy and politics; its relations with China and admittance to BRICS greatly concretised its position and belief that it represents and acts on behalf of Africa and developing countries.” (11 May 2019)

While participants agreed that China has significantly impacted South Africa, most stressed that the country must exploit its relations with China more usefully. This was emphasised by a participant in the following extract:

“China needs South Africa and Africa’s entire natural resources to propel and support its exponential growth and sees South Africa as an important and strategic ally in Africa. South Africa claims to be a gateway to Africa, and indeed, this claim has some merit. You know South Africa is the only country in Africa that sits with big boys at the G20, and it’s the only African country in BRICS. China sees our country as a gateway to tap into African resources... that’s a fact, I’m stating. Therefore, South Africa must use its strategic advantage to propel its growth and development.” (12 December 2019)

Likewise, one participant from the business sector agreed that South Africa has been missing the opportunity presented by its ties with China. South Africa could redefine the terms of its engagement with China, which “may help the country get out of the mess it is in today.” The participant further articulated this as follows:

“South Africa holds a strategic position on the continent, and with its closer political ties with China, the country can create a situation where it defines the terms of South Africa-China relations and gain more than just state-funded loans and grants from this relationship.” (23 June 2019)

The former South African government official interviewed for this study argued that whilst challenges surrounded the country’s bilateral engagement with China, opportunities abound for the country, and the relations between the two countries were buoyant in all respects.

4.3. Social impact

Participants agreed that a series of adverse media reports on China-South Africa relations or China-Africa relations in recent years has given rise to the politicisation of the discourse on whether China's impacts on South Africa are positive or negative. One key participant from the academic fraternity interviewed for this study posited that the social impacts of China on South Africa are both positive and negative. The participant encapsulated his view on this as follows:

"On the positive side, close ties with China offer South Africa the opportunity to learn and adapt to the Chinese way of doing things. South Africa could easily assimilate Chinese norms and practices. And gain valuable lessons that the country may use for its benefit. Chinese people are said to be very hard-working people, and how China has been able to rise to the echelons of global power is attributed to the resilience and work ethic of its people. This relationship provides South Africans with room to absorb and integrate Chinese culture. Culture is very imperative as its influence ranges from economic practices, politics, and ideology to religion. It has a profound impact on how people behave and carry themselves." (10 October 2019)

About negative social impacts, the participant indicated that the Chinese population has been growing in South Africa since the establishment of official ties between the two countries, and this may become a burden on the already troubled South African economy. Validating this finding are Park and Chen (2009), Alden and Park (2013), and, more recently, Jiang (2021), who revealed that South Africa has the largest population of Chinese in Africa.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

The main aim of this study was to explore the social, political and economic dimensions of South Africa's bilateral relations with China. The focus was on what benefits South Africa could receive due to its closer political, economic, and social engagements with its strategic ally, China. The study noted that there has been a remarkable intensification in bilateral and diplomatic engagements between South Africa and China over the past two decades. The study confirms that China remains a key economic partner to South Africa and *vice versa*, especially in Africa-China relations, where the two sides coordinate the FOCAC. The findings of this study show that since diplomatic relations were established between the two countries, cooperation has mushroomed in every aspect of their engagements (Alden & Park, 2013; Wenjun, 2018; Shoba & Mtapuri, 2022; Shoba & Mlambo, 2024). This is exemplified in the export and import engagements between the two countries.

The study found that South Africa is not just a recipient of Chinese goods but also actively engaged China in exports and other activities as far back as 2009 (Bodomo, 2009; Shoba & Mlambo, 2024). This positively impacts South Africa as exports and imports are important components for economic growth and development (Panta, Devkota & Banjade, 2022). The study found that Chinese imports positively impact South Africa because of their low prices and affordability, especially for poor South Africans. This implies that Chinese imports could drive consumer spending in South Africa due to their affordability for the lower-income locals. However, while affordable Chinese imports could contribute to consumer spending and consumption in the country and thus ultimately drive economic growth and development, there are criticisms that Chinese penetration of South Africa's market is detrimental to the country's manufacturing sector. This aligns with the findings of Edwards and Jenkins (2015) that imports from China have replaced imports from South Africa's traditional partners, but this has been at the expense of local industries. Moreover, Edwards and Jenkins (2015) found that Chinese penetration into South Africa's markets led to significant job losses in the manufacturing and textile industries because of the replacement of local production by imported goods.

Accordingly, South Africa's comprehensive partnership with China portends significant implications because of the economic asymmetry between the two countries. This view hinges mainly on a trade imbalance between the two countries, as South Africa exports raw materials to China. Meanwhile, the country imports mainly finished goods and products from China. However, the findings of this study contest the Western media sensationalism discourses that tend to depict the engagements between South Africa and China or China and African countries as 'exploitative' without essentially disaggregating the numerous interests involved. This study entirely agrees with Chang (2014) and Shoba (2023) that African countries actively participate in this relationship with China. This contradicts the sensational media reports about "a unified China taking over Africa" for self-centred economic gains. The results show that China has provided much-needed FDI and aid devoid of conditionalities and state-funded loans with low interest rates to African countries. These prove that Chinese engagements with South Africa and other African countries economically benefit African states. This is unlike traditional trading partners' foreign aid and loans over the years to African countries (Ado & Su, 2014).

As Ado and Su (2014) highlighted, on the one hand, the West (traditional trading partners) and their institutions focus more on aid delivery and relief programmes than on fair, respectful and mutual trade partnerships and agreements. On the other hand, China and its institutions have focused on building mutual and respectful partnerships and agreements with African countries (Ado & Su, 2014). The Chinese have emphasised the importance of

mutually beneficial trade with South Africa and other African countries in their engagements (Wenjun, 2018). This contrasts with Bond's (2015) notion that China's engagements with African countries may have cataclysmic implications for the African nations. The findings show that Western relations with African countries have had catastrophic implications for some African states. However, the study also found that China's engagements in South Africa and other African states may not be entirely devoid of challenges. According to Bond (2015), one of the challenges associated with China's economic activism in Africa is the scramble for Africa's resources. Nevertheless, the study found that the economic challenges do not outweigh the economic gains that South Africa has been making from this relationship.

The study first noted that the official political ties between South Africa and China began in the 1990s and were further reinforced towards the end of the 2000s when Jacob Zuma was elected President of South Africa. Since then, these two countries' political relations have gained significant impetus. The relationship between South Africa and China has been marked by unprecedented presidential visits by Xi Jinping to South Africa and by Zuma and Ramaphosa to China, the two recent heads of state for South Africa. Thus far, President Xi has paid four official visits to South Africa, making South Africa the most visited African country by President Xi since his election in 2013. South African Presidents have also paid visits to China, with President Cyril Ramaphosa having been to China in 2024, wherein the two countries signed what they referred to as an *"All-Round Strategic Cooperative Partnership in a New Era"*. The signing of this agreement signals greater seriousness and commitment between the two countries to deepen their bilateral cooperation in this new era of opportunity. Such sustained, reciprocal visits indicate that the two countries have put concerted efforts into consolidating their political, economic and social integration.

The findings show that China has given South Africa an amplified voice and standing in global politics (Shoba, 2018). The country has gained significant political capital since it formed ties with China and other developing countries. The data shows that this was demonstrated during climate change negotiations in 2009. For instance, South Africa, together with China and other developing countries, played an important role in reshaping and propelling the negotiations on global climate change (Hallding et al., 2011). Given its economic and political standing, South Africa could not have meaningfully engaged the United States and Europe during the climate change negotiations if it had not been part of a group that included China. In terms of the social dimensions of this relationship, this study finds that South Africa has both positive and negative social impacts due to its relations with China. It notes that close social ties with China offer South Africa an opportunity to study and adopt some Chinese ways of doing things. South Africa could easily assimilate Chinese norms and practices and gain valuable

lessons that the country could use for its benefit. Most of the participants in the study indicated that the Chinese people are resilient and have a strong work ethic, which may be part of why China has ascended to the highest echelons of the global economy. This is expounded in the view that China's economic and political accomplishments have been earned by its own hands and in the form of win-win cooperation with other nations. The resilience of China and its people could also be demonstrated because China is the only developing country in the world that has achieved the important goal of eradicating extreme poverty. Therefore, this relationship provides South Africans with room to absorb and integrate the Chinese ethos of hard work, as the country is still battling the challenges of poverty and inequality. This is imperative because the influence ranges from economic practices, politics, and ideology to religion. This implies that ethos profoundly impacts how people behave and carry themselves.

Furthermore, the study found that the Chinese population has grown in South Africa since establishing official ties between the two countries, which may burden the already troubled South African economy. Data shows that South Africa has the largest Chinese population in Africa. The study findings also reveal that more of the Chinese population in South Africa is found in Johannesburg, the economic hub of Southern Africa. This agrees with Shoba's (2022) study, which found that Durban and Johannesburg are the homes of most of the Chinese population in South Africa. The study also found that some of the Chinese migrants in the country came from poor backgrounds in China and relocated to South Africa in search of business opportunities. This could be problematic for South Africa, as some Chinese may start to compete with locals over public goods. Also, the study found that most of the Chinese migrants in South Africa lack the cultural and linguistic skills and qualifications to permit them to actively contribute to the economy of the country (Shoba, 2022). Nonetheless, it was found that most Chinese migrants in South Africa tend to be involved in informal trade and are, therefore, creating much-needed jobs for the locals. While this is good, it may become a problem because the locals are also involved in the informal economy, and it may be difficult for them to compete with Chinese migrant traders. Conversely, the study found that while there are many challenges associated with the increase in Chinese migrants in South Africa, this could essentially serve as the cultural and linguistic bridge between the two countries. This study reiterates that, in light of the criticism of South Africa's close bilateral relations with China, especially with respect to the perceived trade imbalance or asymmetry that exists more particularly in economic terms, the country should work hard to place itself in a position to define the terms of engagement with China and put in place measures to demarcate such perceived asymmetry.

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