



Characterising the Relationship between South Africa and China: A Reflection Based on a Global Studies Lecture

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Abstract

Bilateralism and multilateralism are critical concepts in shaping states' foreign policy articulation in world politics, each playing a fundamental role in shaping states' interactions and diplomatic strategies in global affairs. These concepts have become even more imperative in the current geopolitical landscape, marked by uncertainty and the rise of nationalist and protectionist policies. This note reflects on my experience teaching the Global Studies module at a university in South Africa, with a particular focus on an insightful question raised by a student regarding South Africa-China relations.

Keywords: Bilateralism, multilateralism, China, South Africa

Introduction

This note comes from a question raised by one of my students from a Global Studies course module at a university in South Africa. I teach Global Studies in the second semester to second-year students in the Development Studies programme. The module introduces students to the field of international relations within the broader context of global development. The study of international relations has traditionally centred on the role of nation-states as dominant actors in global affairs, particularly through the lens of geopolitics (Steinberger, 2015). In my lectures, I often highlight the United States and China as the two most influential economic powers in world politics. However, I have also emphasised the importance of considering the South African context, particularly in discussions about the roles of developing nations and emerging economies in global politics. South Africa and China are both significant players in the international system (Alden & Wu, 2014). They have been described as representatives of the developing countries in world politics. China remains the only developing country that has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council

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(UNSC) (Feltman, 2020). The country wields a considerable influence in key multilateral institutions of global governance. For instance, apart from being a significant actor within the UNSC, China holds a sizeable voting share of 6.09% in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which makes it the third largest member of the IMF, after the United States (US) and Japan (Shoba and Mlambo, 2024). South Africa and China are members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where both countries are playing an imperative role as leaders of their regions and developing countries in general.

During a classroom discussion on the topics of bilateralism and multilateralism, I pointed out that both South Africa and China are key diplomatic figures within global governance institutions, representing the interests of developing nations and emerging economies (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007). I had also written about the bilateral relations between the countries (Shoba, 2025). At this point, a student asked a thoughtful question: "Does the relationship between South Africa and China represent bilateralism, multilateralism, or both?" In my initial response, I explained that South Africa-China relations indeed encompass both bilateral and multilateral elements. This question intrigued me further and prompted me to explore the topic in greater detail.

Bilateralism in South Africa-China Relations

Under the quantity-based approach, bilateralism is considered a facet of, or closely linked to, the broader process of coordinating policies between two states. Bilateralism encompasses political, economic, or cultural exchanges between two nations. Scholars such as Tago (2017) and Ruggie (1992, as cited in Schertzer, 2015) assert that bilateralism primarily operates on the principles of preferentialism and adapts on a case-by-case basis. Bilateral engagements are tailored to specific needs or situational requirements, seeking more targeted reciprocity between the involved parties (Schertzer, 2015).

Lengro (2008) defines bilateralism as concerning relations or policies of joint action between two parties, while Ruggie (1992) emphasises specific reciprocity as its core principle. In the context of South Africa-China relations, this definition aligns with the development of joint working groups and declarations that promote bilateral cooperation on political, economic, cultural, and security issues. These bilateral interactions encompass political recognition, the exchange of ambassadors, and the foundation of relations, as exemplified by the number of agreements the two countries have entered. In this regard, the bilateral engagements between South Africa and China are characterised by the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1998, the signing of the Pretoria Declaration on Partnership in 2000, the establishment of the Bi-National Commission in 2001, the elevation of the

Partnership to a Strategic Partnership in 2004, a Programme for Deepening Strategic Partnership in 2006, and the signing of the Beijing Declaration on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2010.

Economically, bilateralism often revolves around preferential trade agreements. While South Africa and China do not have such an agreement, they have signed dozens of memorandums of understanding (MOUs) to enhance cooperation and trade between the public and private sectors. Notable MOUs include those between the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Standard Bank of South Africa, as well as between South Africa's Investec Bank Limited and the China Export-Import Bank, focusing on economic development (The Presidency of South Africa, 2015). In the realm of security, bilateralism involves agreements between states to support each other in the event of an attack or threat from a third party. South Africa and China have established robust bilateral security and defence mechanisms, including mutual visits, personnel training, joint exercises, and defence-industrial cooperation (China Embassy in South Africa, 2022).

Cultural and social development bilateralism is evident in people-to-people interactions between the two countries, fostered through social and cultural exchange programs. Migration has also increased from both sides, contributing to the establishment of Chinatowns and wholesale businesses across South Africa (Park, 2012).

Bilateralism encapsulates the interaction between two states based on shared mutual interests and national priorities (Altemöller, 2018). The emerging geopolitical unrest and uncertainty, as well as national interests, are argued to be the main drivers of bilateralism (Aggarwal, 2023). In this regard, states prefer to engage directly with other states in bilateral negotiations and establish bilateral agreements and arrangements, rather than participating in multilateral forums. South Africa and China share close strategic relations, symbolised by the high level of bilateral engagements in political, economic, and social spheres, as well as a strong strategic mutual trust between the two countries (Shoba & Mlambo, 2024; Wenjun, 2018).

South Africa and China are actively participating in the global arena (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007), serving as leaders of their respective regions (Petropoulos, 2013) and representing developing countries on the world stage (Stuenkel, 2016). Both countries are members of the G20, a strategic forum for international cooperation that includes both developed and developing economies (Siripurapu, Berman & McBride, 2024). South Africa, as the sole African state in the G20, represents the broader African continent in this forum (Shoba & Mtapuri, 2022). Its inclusion is based on the idea that South Africa, with its robust financial regulatory system and relative stability, serves as a gateway to Africa (Uzodike, 2016). China, as the world's second-largest economy and a leader among developing nations, wields significant

influence in East Asia (Petropoulos, 2013). The active participation of both South Africa and China in these global institutions underscores their roles as key players in world politics.

In recent years, the relationship between the two countries has strengthened significantly in various areas, including social, political, and economic engagements (Shoba & Mlambo, 2024). These increased engagements contribute to shaping and informing their position and participation in important institutions such as the G20. This is demonstrated in how the two countries have continued to support one another in different areas of individual and mutual interest as they participate in institutions of global governance. Both countries assign greater hopes to their participation in the G20 and hope to support each other within this institution as bilateral partners. Furthermore, South Africa and China are members of BRICS (the intergovernmental organisation founded by Brazil, India, China, and South Africa). In the context of South Africa and China in relation to BRICS, two distinct forms of bilateralism can be observed. The first form involves the relationship between South Africa and China within the BRICS, on one side, and South Africa's engagement with each BRICS member country on the other. Moreover, bilateralism can manifest when South Africa decides to engage China within the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), collaborating with African countries to interact with China to influence policy initiatives within BRICS.

Moreover, the two countries cooperate bilaterally in the United Nations (UN). In addition to China remaining the only developing country in the world to hold veto power in the UN, it enjoys the support of South Africa and the African countries. China and African countries have supported each other in many strategic endeavours (Shoba & Mlambo, 2024). For instance, Africa supported China to unseat Taiwan from the UN in 1971 (MacLeod, 2022), and China supported African countries, such as South Africa, in their fight against Apartheid (Jiang, 2021). China is Africa's largest trading partner, and South Africa is strategically China's largest trade partner in Africa (Shoba, 2022).

Multilateralism in South Africa-China Relations

Multilateralism, as defined by Keohane (1990), involves the coordination of national policies among three or more states through ad hoc arrangements or institutional frameworks. Institutions play a pivotal role in multilateralism as exemplified by global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Health Organisation (WHO), and the United Nations (UN) and others, which govern a range of issues such as world trade, health, peace and security, climate change and a variety of other global affairs. Furthermore, multilateralism

is characterised by the coordination of relations among multiple states based on generalised principles of conduct (Rüland, 2018). The engagement of BRICS countries within the framework of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) exemplifies the essence of multilateralism. The collective management of global challenges becomes crucial in this context, particularly with the rise of cross-border issues such as climate change, migration, terrorism, pandemics, and more (Echle et al., 2018).

The decline of the United States' (US) global hegemony and challenges faced by the European Union have shaken the foundations of multilateralism (Moreland, 2019). On the one hand, some countries, including the U.S. under the leadership of Donald Trump, have adopted nationalist and protectionist policies, undermining rules-based multilateral order and key agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Agreement (Hersher, 2019; Laub & Robinson, 2019; Ottaviano, 2024). On the other hand, this shift presents an opportunity for South Africa and China, and their BRICS allies, to create a more inclusive and effective multilateral order that can address global challenges comprehensively. The BRICS framework, especially with the involvement of China and Russia, could play a pivotal role in realising a better, more inclusive, and representative multilateral order. Additionally, within the FOCAC platform, China and South Africa can mobilise African countries to actively participate in shaping the envisaged new global order.

Against this backdrop, I argue that South Africa-China relations embody elements of both bilateralism and multilateralism. This reflects their capacity to engage on multiple fronts, both in state-to-state interactions and in broader international affairs. I theorise that the evolving dynamics in world politics, along with shifting global circumstances, offer an opportunity for China, South Africa, and their allies in BRICS and the broader Global South to develop innovative approaches to global cooperation.

Discussion and conclusion

I have attempted to provide insights into South Africa-China relations with a specific focus on whether these relations are characterised by bilateralism or multilateralism, or a combination of both. I have outlined the difference between bilateralism and multilateralism, and demonstrated how South Africa-China relations encompass both of these dimensions. The strategic importance of South Africa as a gateway to Africa and its role in representing the continent in various international forums becomes relevant in conceptualising its relations (Uzodike, 2016). South Africa and China have elevated their presence in multilateralism, individually and collectively, as part of the BRICS group (Shoba, 2018). The engagement of the two nations within regional frameworks like FOCAC and G20, and the significance of

their participation in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adds complexity to South Africa-China relations. The duality underscoring this relationship (that it is multilateral as well as bilateral), where the two nations sometimes adopt multilateral approaches and at other times pursue bilateral agreements with individual African countries. This nuance adds depth to the analysis and illustrates the adaptability and flexibility of their diplomacy.

It is insightful to reflect upon South Africa-China relations within the context of bilateralism and multilateralism. It effectively showcases how these two nations have evolved from limited engagement to becoming influential global players with multifaceted interactions. Their roles in international institutions, such as the G20, the WTO, the UN, and BRICS, highlight their commitment to multilateralism, while their bilateral ties in trade, security, and culture underscore the importance of bilateral diplomacy. South Africa's unique position as a representative of Africa in global forums and China's expanding role as a global power further emphasise the complexity and depth of their relationship. The adaptability of these two countries in pursuing both bilateral and multilateral approaches to address diverse global challenges. While there is no specific data to examine the characterisation of this relationship, the reflection on the question opens up an ever-evolving dynamic of international diplomacy in a rapidly changing global landscape.

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