CHAPTER 17

Revisiting the Debated China-Africa Relationship in South Africa's International Relations Considering Trump's Second Term

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Introduction

Reviewing Rodney's now-classic book analysing Africa's Europe-sponsored woes, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, South African Sociologist, Prof. Bernard Magubane posits,

> "But here at last is a book that confronts and exposes the ugliness of imperialism, not to let us hang our heads in shame but to point the way forward to a better future. Africa need not mourn about the rape Europe visited on her, but she must put herself together, as they say, and begin to repair the damage to her economic, political and social fabric" (Magubane 1973: 132).

Since Africa's anticolonial and decolonial struggles, there have been many questions about the path the continent, or even its individual countries, could and should take. The Cold War offered African countries a choice between capitalism and socialism, as a new scramble for the continent ensued between these two

political-economic forces, but disastrously left Africa economically marginalised at the end of the Cold War. Part of Africa's challenge in the early fights against imperialism was a proper diagnosis of the continent's underdevelopment. Here, Frantz Fanon's work ([1952] 1967) became crucial, providing a propaedeutic to the psychology, history and symbolic violence of race, an ideology that made the world work (Fanon [1952] 1967). A second helpful diagnosis was economic, coming from Rodney's (1972) pen in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Here, as per Magubane's review above, Africa finally had a book that correctly provided a cross-disciplinary analysis of history, and began to propose social, economic and political interventions to overhaul the continent's condition at a point when many African countries were gaining their independence.

In South Africa, one such attempt at reconstruction in the post-1994 period has been to deploy diplomacy as a strategy by associating with countries that could aid its development. In this period, arguably, the two primary allies that SA has sought to work with have been the US and China. Politically, these three countries have had many disagreements on global issues, with, for example, SA clashing with the US over the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars. Yet, despite such disagreements over the past 30 years, SA has benefited significantly from trade agreements with the US, such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) (Fabricius 2018), which are designed (in principle) to benefit SA more than the US, as a means of aiding SA's economic growth. With China, SA seems to have found a strange bedfellow—one that has frequently been accused of being undemocratic, or at best, showing a weak commitment to democracy internally (Yang, Zhou and Chu 2024), which clashes with SA's stance on promoting democracy throughout the world. On the other hand, China's membership in BRICS has been highly strategic and beneficial to SA.

One cannot properly explain US-SA and SA-China relations without analysing US-China relations. The nature of International Relations demands a multipolar analysis because an event in one relationship can trigger ripple effects in others. For example, during Trump 1.0, Chinese companies were barred from using Google services in the US. While this resulted from a conflict between the US and China, or more precisely, between Trump and China, SA felt the impact. Such an observation is important because it illustrates how disputes between global hegemons inevitably impact Africa; she has always been on the losing end. Other examples are the Scramble for Africa and the Cold War. The attention

South Africa is currently getting from China and the US, amongst others, is a strong indicator that the Scramble for Africa might only have started, and not ended, with the Berlin Conference. This reality shows why the original BRIC countries needed a 'gateway into Africa' (Kahn 2011). Thus, the question arises of how South Africa should approach its foreign policy attitude towards China and the US, especially under Trump 2.0. This period does not appear to be conducive to South Africa's foreign policy of non-alignment and friendliness with all major powers. This is further complicated by the world's polycrises (Le Grange 2024), in which nations have had to be self-reliant or form strategic alliances. An example of this was the supply of COVID vaccines, where SA was assisted by China and Russia rather than by the US, which only offered assistance at a later stage. Thus, this paper adopts an interpretive and decolonial paradigm, centralising SA's self-preservation. As will be clear later in the paper, a qualitative and decolonial attitude towards other states helps us interpret the receipt of aid and the pursuit of trade that is framed as benefiting SA. This viewpoint is elaborated on via a theoretical foundation. One may note that this paper opens with somewhat dated literature to address a current problem. This is intentional, pointing to how long Africa has had to contend with these challenges, which, unfortunately, have not yet been addressed sufficiently, either in theory or in practice.

Literature review

China's role in BRICS

China's peaceful rise in the last seven decades is well captured by Kandhari (2023: 2) when she says that 'China's economy has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past 70 years, catapulting the country from its predominantly rural roots to a vibrant, urbanised industrial powerhouse.' China's position as the second-largest economy in the world and the biggest economy within the BRICS+ bloc provides ample reason for an intense examination of its role in BRICS+. It is argued, among other things, that, in BRICS+, China has found powerful allies to challenge the Western democratic system and cultural dominance, as well as its technological pre-eminence (Sarpong and Sibiri 2024). To further its aims of challenging Western dominance, China, Brazil, Russia and South Africa supported the expansion of the BRICS bloc to include countries

such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. The inclusion of these countries was not without controversy. India objected to the expansion of the group; however, it was outnumbered. Indian policymakers have also raised other concerns, such as China's economic activities and naval presence in the Indian Ocean, which threaten India's influence in the region as well as its national security (Bhatt 2024). Consequently, the rivalry between India and China makes India wary of and concerned about China's influence in BRICS+.

The developments and contradictions emerging from within BRICS+, along with China's handling of these matters, give China more leverage in global affairs. This is because China always seeks peaceful and diplomatic ways to deal with confrontational situations. Moreover, China has been able to successfully use BRICS+ to further its broader strategic vision of shielding itself from Western powers and the intricacies of a multipolar world (Sarpong Sibiri 2024). Given that BRICS+ summits are held annually, China has been able to use these summits to discuss challenges not only concerning BRICS+ member states but also those confronting the world. Part of China's strategy is to counter Western influence and that of some multilateral bodies, such as the UN, G7 and G20. In its pursuit of reshaping multilateral bodies, China seeks to push for a reform agenda. Among other things, it is advocating for the recently established New Development Bank (NDB) and the contingent reserve arrangement (CRA) for BRICS+ countries and the developing world, which have been and continue to be excluded by the Bretton Woods institutions. These newly developed economic institutions seek to challenge the mainstream financial institutions by making funds available to developing countries for economic and infrastructure development without imposing conditionalities (Wang 2022). In recent years, China has moved away from its commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. This signals a move towards being a global leader. A case in point is China's involvement in trying to push one of its strategic allies within BRICS+, namely Russia, to end the war with Ukraine. The active role taken by China in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is part of its strategy to project its power and authority not only to BRICS+ countries, but to the world at large. China thus hopes to navigate its geopolitical rivalry with the United States by making use of its role in BRICS+ (Biba 2022).

China's role in South Africa and Africa

The relations between China's role in SA and Africa have generated and continue to generate many positive and negative debates. Amongst the positive sentiments argued in many circles is that because China became its biggest trading partner in 2009, surpassing the United States and Germany, South Africa benefitted in many areas, such as infrastructure, aid and loans. Subsequently, in 2010, China invited South Africa to attend the then BRIC summit in China and to accept full membership, which led to the group being renamed as BRICS (Xiong 2012). South Africa, like many other African states, has hugely benefited from China's credit openness (its 'open checkbook') in the form of aid, loans and trade. China has also assisted with many infrastructure projects on the continent (Msimango 2016). Many analysts question the inclusion of South Africa in BRICS, instead of Egypt or Nigeria, emerging economies with proven reserves of strategic resources such as oil. Xiong (2012) provides a compelling argument for South Africa's inclusion, postulating that this was because

> …"economically, South Africa provides China with an export destination and is a source of raw materials much like the rest of Africa; however, being a regional power, it also presents China with the strategic opportunity to expand its outreach into Africa. China's markets provide South Africa with a channel to diversify traditional north-south economic relations and draw investment from alternative sources."

Therefore, to date, statistics published in the China-Africa Economic Bulletin (Moses et al. 2024) indicate that imports and exports in Africa-China trade have grown significantly, from about US$11.67 billion in 2000 to about US$257.67 billion in 2022. This has led African countries to see China as a significant partner in their quest for development. In addition, Msimango (2016) published a study focusing on Africa-China relations, in which he highlights that the positive aspect of China-Africa relations is that the Chinese do not impose themselves on the internal affairs of any of the African states. Over and above that, the Chinese are investing in sectors such as manufacturing, health,and industrial sectors, which are sectors that Western countries have been and continue to be reluctant to invest in.

However, there are many scholars and analysts, particularly from some African and many Western countries, who hold the view that the role of China in South Africa and Africa is detrimental to the development of the continent. Carmody and Taylor (2010) have long noted that China's aggressiveness in securing external resources has been part of its strategy since realising that its internal resources would no longer meet its developmental needs. Therefore, scholars and analysts such as Li (2007), Ayenagbo (2015) and Benabdallah (2018) hold the view that China's quest for mineral resources to fuel its industrialisation has led China to aggressively penetrate Africa in ways never seen before. They further elaborate that because China provides Africa with an alternative market, China, much like Western countries, continues to extract raw materials from the continent and then returns manufactured goods to it.

The *role of the US in SA and Africa*

South Africa stands at a significant crossroads of profound significance. Having overcome the difficult years of colonialism and apartheid, it now faces several new critical challenges. Firstly, it needs to find its place in a world entering a new era of great power competition between China and the United States of America, and at the same time it needs to deal with Europe and Russia's influence in Africa. Secondly, the post-apartheid state is susceptible to opportunistic governance, crime, corruption, inequalities and social and moral degeneration. The relations between South Africa and the United States, in general, have had and continue to face difficulties. With the second term of the Trump administration (2.0), relations are at their worst (Ray 2025). Historically, the US has, to some degree, assisted South Africa and Africa in various ways. For example, in 2003, the US introduced the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to assist, in particular, South Africa, which had and continues to grapple with HIV/AIDS. The assistance of PEPFAR complemented the work and resources of the South African government by supporting non-governmental organisations and employing health workers to work within the public health system to strengthen HIV services (Chiliza et al. 2024). However, President Trump has signed several executive orders cutting funding to critical areas around the globe under the pretext of saving money and reducing wastage. Among the executive orders President Trump signed was a ban on foreign assistance to South Africa, claiming

that the South African government was engaged in race-based discrimination against the white minority, after President Ramaphosa signed an expropriation bill into law (Gavin 2025).

The Land Audit Report of 2017 provides disturbing statistics of land ownership, despite the African National Congress government promising to distribute the land. The report indicates that:

> "Whites own 26 663 144 ha or 72% of the total 37 031 283 ha farms and agricultural holdings by individual landowners; followed by Coloured at 5 371 383 ha or 15%, Indians at 2 031 790 ha or 5%, Africans at 1 314 873 ha or 4%, other at 1 271 562 ha or 3%, and co-owners at 425 537 ha or 1%."

Despite these statistics being available and the South African government's response to the issue, President Trump has been convinced by AfriForum that, indeed, white South Africans are persecuted. Moreover, President Trump has also indicated that a further reason for his halting of financial support is 'South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ)', which he sees as 'an aggressive position' (Mbembe and Gilmore 2025), as well as South Africa's alignment with forces said to be anti-West, such as the BRICS bloc and the Non-Aligned Movement. The cost implications of the 'termination of funding to PEPFAR are catastrophic for South Africa. Studies predict this could result in more than half a million unnecessary deaths and up to half a million new infections' (Mbembe and Gilmore 2025).

To further punish South Africa, the US has boycotted the G20 summit currently taking place in South Africa. Bates (2025) states that:

> "The US absence poses a significant challenge to the G20's effectiveness. As the world's largest economy, the US has traditionally played a pivotal role in coordinating *[sic]* global economic policies and addressing pressing international challenges. Without active US participation, the G20's ability to lead global economic cooperation *[sic]* may be severely compromised."

It has also been suggested that the US will use the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), signed by former President George W. Bush in 2000, to reprimand SA. The aim of the act is for sub-Saharan African countries to access

the US market duty-free on certain goods (Ray 2025). There is a widely held view among South African analysts that if AGOA is renewed while under the Trump Presidency, it is possible that SA will be excluded. There are other signs that the Trump administration's stance towards Africa is hostile and anti-African, such as the proposed closing of about ten embassies and seventeen consulates across Africa (*New York Times* 2025).

Why the US is worried about China in Africa

In 2010, China surpassed the US as the largest trading partner in Africa, and this milestone worries the US in many ways. It signalled, in practical terms, the decline of US power and the rise of China's hegemony and influence not only in Africa, but around the globe (Msimango 2016). What is particularly worrying the US about China's rise is that it is peaceful, persuasive and without internal interference in the affairs of African states and all states in general. Moreover, China's influence in Africa means that it has access to Africa's resources to fuel its industrialisation, and that does not sit well with the US. Scholars such as Ayodele and Sotola (2014) and others have long documented how China, much like the US and Europeans, is extracting raw materials to fuel its industrialisation and to return cheap manufactured goods to the continent. Therefore, China's access to vast African mineral resources, making it possible to compete with US technological advancement, is another issue worrying the US. Qadri (2024) comments that 'the US-China tech war is not merely a commercial competition but also a geopolitical struggle, as both countries strive for leadership in the technologies that will shape the future—5G networks, AI and quantum computing. The simultaneous product launches by Huawei and Apple represent a microcosm of this larger battle for technological superiority".

Another strategic battle that China relentlessly pursues with the US is the arms race. The US is considered to have the strongest military, highly skilled and employing sophisticated weaponry. When the US Department of Defence published a report in 2024 on Military and Security Developments, it indicated that China is the only competitor to US military power. China has the intent and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order. China is modernising and indigenising its aircraft and unmanned aerial systems rapidly, matching US standards. This shows that China is fast advancing its military capabilities, not

only for its defence, but also for protecting its interests abroad. China has opened a military base in Djibouti, Africa, to ensure that its exports are safely passing through the Gulf of Arabia and to show its military strength (Igbinoba 2016).

BRICS+ decolonial imperative

BRICS+ countries are not homogeneous countries that follow the same political and economic system; some countries are democratic, while others are autocratic. Moreover, some countries rely heavily on the private sector, while others rely heavily on a state-driven economy. However, what they have in common and have agreed upon is a minimum programme of transforming the global South, which has been excluded for far too long by countries in the global North. Zondi (2019) states that 'BRICS' efforts to design a new global governance should entail more fundamental transformation than merely reforming institutions and adjusting some rules', a view supported by Carnegie Foundation for International Peace (2025, par. 2):

> "BRICS avowedly seeks to challenge Western-dominated institutions of global economic governance, as well as to displace the U.S. dollar from its entrenched role in the world economy. Many analysts, therefore, depict BRICS expansion as a watershed moment in the shift to a more egalitarian international system."

This is exemplified by the establishment of new financial institutions, the New Development Bank (NDB), widely known as the BRICS Development Bank, to fund countries of the global South in their efforts towards development. Arguably, BRICS+ are relentlessly fighting to break (or delink, as explained later in the chapter) from Euro-American hegemony, which has dominated the world order since the end of World War II.

Research methods

According to Mingst, *McKibben* and *Arreguin-Toft* (2019), International Relations can and should be analysed at three levels at least: Individual (micro-level), Regional (macro-/country level, considering the actions and influence

of powerful actors), International (macro-level, considering the actions and influences of other countries towards each other, and how these influence any particular country's foreign policy). This paper analyses SA's foreign policy, based on the levels of analysis put forth by Mingst, *McKibben* and *Arreguin-Toft* (2019). The constitutions of SA and the US specify that the presidents of these countries hold the final authority over their respective foreign policies (SA Constitution 1996; Pfiffner 2008). Similarly, Article 11 of the Chinese Constitution stipulates that the President of the People's Republic of China stands as a representative of the Chinese people, including playing the primary role in pursuing International Relations. Thus, taking the argument of Mingst, *McKibben* and *Arreguin-Toft* (2019) into consideration, the work and personality of these leaders become key actors in International Relations. As such, the chapter's research methodology considers key statements, both verbal and written, expressed by these actors.

Furthermore, this chapter considers various communication channels and communiqués relating to foreign policy debates, attitudes, decisions and analysis appearing across various communication channels. Thus, sources of data include the governments'/presidents' communiqués on official government platforms like their websites, policy documents, and social media channels. Moreover, their speeches and media interviews provide important insight. For example, since President Donald Trump's Second Term, from January 2025 to April 2025, much of his communication has been driven through social media channels.

The chapter considers international relations, international relations-related discussions, and other key archival and current foreign-relations-related statements from the countries' key actors. At the macro-level, the chapter considers the policies and policy positions of each country and considers their influence on each other. The collected data includes bilateral policies, statements, discussions, etc. Apart from considering the officially documented foreign policy decisions and communiques of these three countries, this paper also considers their attitudes towards each other. Sibizo's (2023) findings prove important in this regard. Describing the relations between the US and SA under Trump 1.0, she explains that, while official policy statements were phrased to seem as if SA was the primary beneficiary in the relationship, the US also benefited from the relationship. With 'Make America Great Again' as a priority (Fabricius 2018), the administration needed to frame itself as being in a strong position in all its international engagements, both in its attitude and policy documents. Thus, a

focus on official policies, along with communications in the common media, helps unmask what each of the communication channels may hide if considered in isolation from each other. It is for this reason that the interpretive paradigm is important, as it helps to decipher what may be hidden in each actor's messaging.

Findings

To explain the positions and influence of countries around the world, Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) proposed the World-Systems Theory (WST). This theory of International Relations posits that there are three bands, or tiers, of countries in the world. There is the core, composed of a select group of industrialised countries with good healthcare systems and sustainable social and economic institutions, along with international non-governmental organisations (Mingst, *McKibben*; *Arreguin-Toft* 2019).

These nations, most of which benefited from colonisation and slavery, are primarily located in Europe and North America, and often exploit semi-periphery and periphery countries through their multinational corporations and international institutions. The semi-periphery countries are on the second tier, and are made up of developing, industrialising economies that are not as rich as the core, but also not as poor as the periphery countries. These include countries that industrialised in the 1960s and 1970s, when the economic performance of various Asian countries improved significantly from high levels of industrialisation. Finally, at the bottom tier, there are the peripheral countries that are the poorest in the global economy. Periphery countries often hold the least power in the global economy and politics due to their low economic standing.

Wallerstein proposed that countries can move through the three bands, increasing or decreasing the countries' influence in the global economic system (Willis 2020). It is on such analyses that Rodney (1972) based his argument that Europe's development depended on Africa's underdevelopment. This type of manipulation was not limited to the colonial period, as Amin's Delinking Theory illustrates (explained below), and is in fact still happening in this century (Charbonneau 2008; Pereira and Tsikata 2021). Adopting this analytical tool would serve as a strategic framework for SA's approach to International Relations. The theory suggests that SA should approach its international counterparts as

equal partners whose primary concern is themselves. As such, very little benefit should be expected to result from SA's relationship with the US and China. Furthermore, it should be taken for granted that all three countries will seek the best possible profit-related outcome for themselves from the prevailing global capitalist system, as competition is inherently built into the system. Thus, less aid, more investment (not always to SA's long-term benefit) is the foundation upon which to build SA foreign policy.

In the Introduction to this chapter, we pointed to the need for South Africa to protect itself from foreign control. While SA needs to be part of the global economy, it also needs to protect its interests. We argued that Amin's (1987) argument for delinking offers SA inroads into this. Amin (1987) explains delinking as follows:

> "Delinking does not imply the rejection of any foreign technology, because it is foreign, in the name of any cultural nationalism. But it certainly implies that one is conscious that technology is not neutral, neither in regard to social relations of production, nor in regard to patterns of life and consumption… Lastly, delinking is not at all a synonym of refusing to participate in world scientific and ideological currents. The cultural nationalism addicted to the past is a symptom of crisis, not an answer to it. It shows the importance of societies, in a deadlock, which have not yet found their way, associating renovation efficiently with historical continuity" (Amin 1987: 444).

In recent months, the US President Donald Trump has uttered significant remarks about South Africa, an unusual break from the diplomatic and measured approach countries typically take when commenting on another country's internal affairs. For example, Trump remarked that 'terrible things are happening in South Africa' (Dolley 2025), citing SA's recently amended laws on Land Expropriation without Compensation. This is not the place to discuss the validity of Trump's statement, but rather what a statement of this nature says about one's attitude towards another country. This is especially important considering that Trump's utterances have been followed by his invitation to Afrikaners to move to the US as asylum seekers.

Moreover, Trump appears to have taken a stance that seeks to 'punish' South

Africa if it does not correct what he deems to be wrong in the country (Thompson, Sawahel and Manykwe 2025). This is an imperialist attitude— seeking to impede the sovereignty of South Africa through economic means by withdrawing aid and support in the health and education sectors, which has been a contentious policy towards South Africa. There have also been periodic disagreements concerning AGOA. These incidents suggest that Trump seeks to encroach on the country's domestic affairs, as well as his foreign affairs attitude. In contrast, China has not sought this kind of influence over SA; instead, it has adopted a quiet diplomacy that focuses on trade and co-operation instead of coercion. These interventions and utterances from Trump are profoundly different from China's silence on SA's domestic affairs, which also reflects SA's silence on China's contentious issues on democracy (Beckley and Brands 2021). China has continuously sought to strengthen relations with SA through channels like BRICS, thus offering an alternative to the US-SA relationship. The way in which SA has exercised its agency in choosing the countries with which it wants to maintain a relationship is a delinking strategy. Whether SA's decisions are correct is not under discussion here—only the fact that maintaining its sovereignty is primary.

Conclusion

A country's foreign policy is necessarily influenced by different considerations, including the strategies of the key actors, their view of other countries and their attitude towards those countries. When key actors hold negative attitudes towards countries, their policies shift accordingly. From an interpretive stance, this chapter broadly explored the relations between SA, China and the US. The focus of the paper was not the official policies of the countries, but the publicly available communiques of their key actors. Relations between key actors were analysed through introductory-level WST and Delinking theories to establish how the relations between these countries urge SA to keep a decolonial attitude towards its International Relations. Thus, this research does not argue for SA to isolate itself from more powerful countries in the global economy. Instead, it advocates a decolonial approach to analysing powerful countries, concluding that both WST and delinking theories offer coherent frameworks for examining the countries in the study.

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