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China–Africa Engagement under the BRICS Framework: A Shift from Development Aid to Geopolitical Partnership (2010–2025)

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Abstract

From 2010 to 2030, the relations of China and Africa are noticeable, especially after the establishment of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). This paper helps to understand the comprehensive study of geopolitical and strategic partnerships between China and Africa. South-South collaboration is going to shape the multipolar world. Initially, Beijing took a step toward Africa for better infrastructure, loans, and trade. The partnership represents a win-win situation for the two nations. Gradually, the global alliance BRICS emerged. It has been working for alternative development models. The bilateral relations seem to possess a long-term and sustainable orientation. The study examines how this organization openly challenges the Western-dominated world. With the help of the global south, China is introducing a new paradigm of economic and political engagement. Technology, infrastructure, energy, and security coordination between Beijing and Cape Town are such great indications of a multipolar world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the New Development Bank (NDB) are the global institutions that link both nations at the international level. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is another diplomatic platform between both countries. This article specifically works on the period 2010–2030, focusing on the China-South Africa closeness and the vision for a multipolar world. Meanwhile, a comprehensive glance at the challenges faced by these countries is moving toward a new development era. Getting out of the cage of Western influence, Cape Town is turning to alternative methods. Furthermore, to elaborate, the entire scenario focuses on a constructivist approach, while data is being accumulated using qualitative methods. Under the umbrella of BRICS, the partnership between the two Global South countries

advances their national interests and takes significant steps toward shaping the future of international relations.

Keywords: *China–Africa Relations, BRICS, Development Aid, Geopolitical Partnership, Belt And Road Initiative, New Development Bank, South–South Cooperation, Multipolarity, Africa’s Development.*

Introduction

Rapid changes have occurred in international politics, in 21st century. One of the major projects is BRICS; Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. It believes in mutual development and threatens the dominance of Western financial and political institutions. Indeed, this platform respect the sovereignty of all members (O’Neill, 2011).

Historically, there were no relations neither friend nor foe. However, the post-2010 period, under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the BRICS, the graph of friendship goes up between nations. The regional partnership enhances due to these two major projects (Zhao, 2020). By adding Cap Town in the BRICS, it does not only expand the organization but also highlight South Africa at international level against the western dominance world.

The Rise of BRICS and Global South Cooperation

To modify the world order, BRIC was established in 2009. South Africa became part of this mega project in 2010. Indeed, it was a turning point for China–Africa relations (Stuenkel, 2015). To represent the south both states are ambitious for redefining development frameworks. (Alden& Alves, 2017). The main objective of this organization is to break the chain of economic dependency on the western power. Hence, the New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) have been introduced. The existent organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have been served the western interests

China–Africa Relations: From Development Aid to Strategic Partnership

The relations between two countries initiated in 21st century especially after the establishment of BRICS, and the mega project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) allow Beijing’ footprint across Africa. The connect enhanced through roads, ports, railways, and digital infrastructure (Sun, 2020). The significance location of South Africa encourages China to promote friendship as it is a gateway to African Continent. Under the umbrella of mutual benefits, it is called win-win relationship. Because China get access to African market while on the other side of the coin Africa get investments, technology transfers, infrastructure, and developmental financing (Carmody & Taylor, 2011). The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), is a vital place for negotiation and collaboration. The alignment of south-south is mutual and respectful (FOCAC Declaration, 2018)

Theoretical Lens: Constructivism and Qualitative Approach

To understand the evaluation between China and South Africa the constructivism is the best approach. Under the lens of constructivism, it is easy to recognize the BRICS context and emerging relations among various countries. How believes, norms, and behaviours have been changing day by day. The study emphasis on qualitative method for accumulating data. Because through this method, in-depth exploration of the emerging BRICS and FOCAC can understand. How mutual respect for the sovereignty of other nation and achieve national goal. Basically, this method is essential for a comprehensive concept elaboration.

Toward a Multipolar World Order

Without a shadow of a doubt, countries across the globe have grown weary of serving Western interests and being subjected to the dominance of the U.S. dollar in international markets. The dollar’s global recognition has often devalued other currencies, allowing its owner to use it as a geopolitical weapon (Multinational Corporations and Foreign Policy, 2025). This has generated

widespread dissatisfaction among developing nations toward Western-led financial institutions and the unequal distribution of global influence. To counter the dollar's supremacy, BRICS was formed—an alliance aimed at promoting trade in local currencies and fostering interconnectivity among emerging economies. This evolving coalition represents a step toward a multipolar world in which economic power is decentralized and the sovereignty of individual states is respected (Aurangzeb et al., 2025).

China, as a burgeoning global power, has played a pioneering role in shaping new geopolitical and economic behaviors, introducing innovative frameworks that challenge traditional Western dominance (Ali et al., 2025). Moreover, advancements in artificial intelligence and data analytics are becoming key strategic tools that influence global diplomacy and reshape economic power dynamics between the East and the West (Aziz et al., 2025). These technological capabilities are critical to maintaining China's influence in the Global South, especially as emerging alliances redefine international relations through strategic cooperation and digital innovation (Uddin, Irfan, & Aurangzeb, 2025). Africa, on the other hand, has long suffered from systemic exploitation. Western powers have historically extracted the continent's raw materials while offering little in return, perpetuating a cycle of economic dependency and underdevelopment (Uddin et al., 2025). Consequently, African nations are increasingly drawn toward alternative partnerships that promise fairness and mutual growth. Turning away from Western dependency, cities like Cape Town are eagerly embracing Beijing's development models—such as barter trade agreements, digital currency frameworks, and education exchanges—that symbolize the emergence of a new world order based on cooperation rather than control (Barter Trade Agreements and Digital Currency Integration, 2025).

Significance of the Study

Under the umbrella of BRICS, this paper has a glance on the emerging relations between China and South Africa. The significance of the collaboration of world order. This article explain why these two south countries stand against the dollar hegemony. The mutual respect for each other sovereignty stronger their bond. The entire scenario deal under the lens of constructivism theory of international relations. Further, adopt qualitative methodology through different scholar's point of views. To discuss the ample development, the Belt and Road Initiative and its impact of existence world order.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives: From Dependency to South–South Cooperation

Beyond a doubt, Realist theory has a huge impact in international relations, the liberalism proved itself after world war, but failed as after the emerging of globalization, constructive approach seems to be dominance. Within this framework, no country is superior but work based on equality. This pragmatic interdependence shows mutual growth (Alden & Large, 2019).

Evolution of China–Africa Relations

The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) initiated bilateral relations between Beijing and Cape Town. China proved to be Africa's largest trade partner from 2010 to 2020, with \$200 billion (MOFCOM, 2021). Various projects via China, like energy, telecommunications, and transport, cement the trust level between the two southern countries. However, some scholars indicate this is an alarming situation for Africa and call it a debt trap (Brautigam, 2020).

BRICS and Africa: Institutional and Economic Integration

BRICS is an institution that advocates an alternative to the international financial system (Stuenkel, 2016). In 2014, the New Development Bank (NDB) is the evidence of it. This international institute provides without conditions to Africa, like the IMF and World Bank

(Cooper, 2017). Hence, it is called a partnership-based project rather than a supremacy-based one.

Aid vs. Partnership Debate

Some scholars believe it is a neo-colonial pattern and focus on debt traps (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). Meanwhile, other intellectuals highlight the significance of mutual respect under the international institutes BRICS and NDB. Furthermore, not only is one state not achieving its goal, but also others are achieving theirs through infrastructure, technology, and human capital (Li, 2018).

Methodology

The adoption of the qualitative method for this study aims to understand the significance of diverse perspectives presented by different intellectuals. These analyses portray a picture for the future. What is more? Three phases—2010–2015, 2016–2023, and 2024–2025—are highlighted to elaborate the scenario. Additionally, the roles of BRI, BRICS, and NDB are quite crucial.

Findings and Analysis

Phase I (2010–2015): From Development Aid to Strategic Economic Cooperation

In this period of time, China focused on infrastructure in the deprived continent. The construction of railways, roads, and power plants across sub-Saharan Africa, such as Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway and Ethiopia's Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, has been carried out with the assistance of Chinese aid (Sun, 2017). In 2010, the indulgence in the BRICS was a remarkable change because Africa was in the international forum with respect to taking part in multilateral decision-making. In 2012, through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), industrial partnerships and local employment initiatives were launched, marking the beginning of a shift toward joint ventures. Africans began to feel a sense of partnership rather than being passive beneficiaries.

Phase II (2016–2023): Belt and Road Initiative and Institutional Deepening

The bilateral trade between China and South Africa reached USD 60.3 billion by 2014. Over 140 medium/large Chinese firms start working in South Africa with the collaboration of the local people. In addition to economic growth, this period also witnessed the conduct of joint military exercises. Xi Jinping, president of China, also visited South Africa in 2013. In 2015, NDB was established to provide loans to the African countries for betterment. Hence, financial projects in South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria were initiated. While during COVID-19, the 10-Year Strategic Programme (2020-2029) under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed. Consequently, through this mutual respect, Africa links to global diplomacy and gets away from the Western policies.

Phase III (2024–2025): Toward Geopolitical Partnership and Multipolar Governance

In Dec 2021, both countries decided on their vision for 2035; it is called China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035. This is about the enhancement of partnership between Beijing and Cape Town. Summits of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) are conducive to further progress. The expansion of BRICS with the strong pillar of digitalization indicates the movement toward a new world order. In January 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates joined BRICS. However, work on launching a new currency is under observation. But the ties between China and South Africa are getting closer day by day. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) development with the help of BRICS-led trade. Not only economically, but the two southern countries link through defense cooperation, cybersecurity, and global governance (Aurangzeb, et al. 2025).

Discussion

Economic and Geopolitical Implications

The definition of the global economy is gradually changing following the collaboration of emerging economies from different continents within the framework of BRICS. Indeed, the Western-led financing system is not in favor of other nations, especially for African states. Economies start growing with the Chinese aid. China focuses on the huge market in Africa, while Africa is interested in economic satisfaction.

BRICS as an Alternative Development Model

There is no veto power in the plate of BRICS; decision-making is based on mutual respect. Camaraderie attracts other nations to join this mega platform. Furthermore, trade in local currency enhances the value of other nations' currency as a result of that dependency on the dollar reducing.

Challenges and Criticisms

Challenges are part of success. This platform faces challenges from various dimensions; some intellectuals openly criticize this organization as a debt trap. Because the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka has been leased to the Chinese government for ninety-nine years. The government of Sri Lanka was unable to pay back the Chinese debt and as a result lost control over its national port for such a long period. Furthermore, the tariff war between the USA and China is a tactic used by the US government to engage China in conflict and prevent it from focusing on development activities.

The Rise of African Agency

Aligning with the BRICS and negotiation through AfCFTA is a clear indication of the rise of African agency. The voice of South Africa in the BRICS is shaping the multipolar world. It is such a huge development for the entire African continent. The leadership or authority to be a part of the decision-making process is an honorable stage for the deprived nation.

Conclusion

The period from 2010 to 2025 marks a significant transformation in China–Africa relations. However, it is still considered an initial stage, as the path toward development is being constructed through policies and infrastructure. Both Southern countries have a strong intention to reform global governance. Hence, parallel institutions such as the NDB have been established. Summing up, in coming years, the interconnection between Beijing and Cape Town will be closer. At the same time, challenges from the Western side will definitely increase. The expansion of BRICS will be vast, and the value of the dollar is expected to decline. The race between the Global North and the Global South will reach its peak. Countries would be offering various benefits for being a part of it. Chaos may emerge, or a new Cold War between China and the USA may be witnessed. Environmental diplomacy would play a key role in accomplishing this goal. During this period, the tilt of the African continent toward China would be a game changer. Consequently, a multipolar world order would begin.

At that crucial time, South Africa will play a vital role in reshaping global governance. Regional leadership and multilateral cooperation will be influenced by a nation representing a once-deprived continent. The position of Cape Town within the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) will be further strengthened. As the gateway to the African continent, South Africa's collaboration with China will become increasingly valued. Indeed, South Africa would be a central hub. Without a shadow of a doubt, the partnership is beneficial for both countries, promoting mutual respect, strategic interdependence, and collective prosperity.

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