



ENHANCED DIPLOMATIC COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND SOUTH AFRICA IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

This study explores the extent diplomatic relations between China and South Africa strengthened significantly in the early 21st century, transitioning from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership (2006). This transformed China into South Africa's largest trading partner and a significant source of investment, consolidating both countries' positions in global politics. Since China and South Africa established diplomatic relations, the relationship between the two countries has achieved remarkable development, transcended the scope of bilateral relations and become increasingly influential. Particularly in recent years, China-South Africa relations have consistently maintained a high level, with mutual political trust, practical cooperation, cultural exchanges, and strategic coordination deepening. This study utilizes a combination of primary and secondary data, along with statistical analysis and comparisons of official literature, academic research, and media sources. The study concludes by discussing and predicting the factors influencing the strengthening of diplomatic relations between China and South Africa in the current period.

Keywords:

China, South Africa, diplomacy, cooperation, increasing influence.

1. Introduction

In the early years of the 21st century, China and South Africa have strengthened diplomatic cooperation through various means, including establishing a strategic partnership, promoting economic, trade and investment cooperation, and increasing coordination in international forums. These relations are underpinned by common interests in promoting economic development, balancing Western influence and building a multipolar world order.

China's diplomatic influence over South Africa grew significantly in the first two decades of the 21st century, primarily through deepening economic ties, particularly in trade and investment, and through strategic cooperation in multilateral forums like FOCAC. This shift was driven by China becoming South Africa's largest trading partner, creating a relationship based on mutual economic interests, infrastructure development, and a shared political narrative of a "win-win partnership". While economic influence was the main driver, this also extended into diplomatic and security cooperation.

Both South Africa and China have aspirations and a commitment to adopting innovative ways to boost trade, investment, poverty reduction, infrastructure building, capacity building,

human resource development, food security and hi-tech industries on the continent. Both countries have also invested significantly in their own right on the continent. In the New Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which is set out in the Beijing Declaration that was signed in 2010, the two countries expressed the desire to further strengthen and deepen cooperation in both political and regional affairs by establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership based on equality, mutual benefit and common development. The agreements range from political dialogue, diplomacy, trade, investment, mineral exploration and agriculture to joint efforts in the global arena, such as in the United Nations and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. [2].

Diplomatic cooperation between China and South Africa is anchored in an "All-Round Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era," established in 1998, with China as South Africa's largest trading partner. Key areas of cooperation include high-level political dialogues (BNC), trade, infrastructure, and technology, with 2026 marking a focus on people-to-people exchanges. Enhanced diplomatic cooperation between China and South Africa in the early 21st century was driven by the 2000 Pretoria Declaration, establishing a Bi-National Commission and elevating relations to an "All-Round Strategic Cooperative Partnership". This solidified economic ties making China SA's largest trading partner bilateral, military, and cultural exchanges.

South Africa and China enjoy strong diplomatic relations, anchored in the All-Round Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era. The BNC at the Deputy Presidential level was established in 2000 as the highest-structured bilateral mechanism for consolidating diplomatic, economic, and sectoral cooperation between the two nations. 2024 marks 26 years since the establishment of South Africa's formal relations with China. While South Africa has relations with all major powers and is also a member of international groups and instruments such as the United Nations, G20, BRICS and the International Criminal Court, its relationship with China has increasingly become prominent and compares favourably to South Africa's relations with countries that are perceived as China's competitors.

This study aims to explore the diplomatic influence of China on South Africa and the process of strengthening diplomatic cooperation through various forms, by combining research data to assess and predict the factors impacting the strengthening of diplomatic relations between China and South Africa in the current period.

2. Literature Review

China's relationship with African countries has attracted considerable attention from domestic and foreign researchers such as: author Hoang Mai in the article "China's Policy towards Africa", author Ly An Son with the research "Practice of policy towards Africa in China's global strategy", author Ngo Chi Nguyen with the article on "China-Africa relations at the end of the 20th century - beginning of the 21st century"... These studies have summarized the China-Africa relationship with its long history, many cultural values and historical experiences as well as efforts to promote equal and mutually beneficial bilateral relations on a stable cooperation mechanism. At the same time, the studies also point out the nature of the relationship between China-Africa cooperation in China's global strategy. [7,9,8]

Authors Nguyen Thanh Hien and Ha Thi Phuong, in their research paper "Strengthening China-Africa relations in the political-diplomatic field since the end of the Cold War," pointed out the expansion and strengthening of China's relations with African countries. Although the focus and mainstay was economic relations, China also promoted relations in the political-

diplomatic and social fields. The research clarified the strengthening of China's political-diplomatic relations in Africa from the end of the Cold War to the first decade of the 21st century. [2].

Regarding the issue of South Africa-China diplomatic relations and their impact on the global stage, in the article "Perspectives on South Africa-China Relations at 15 Years," author Funeka Yazini April clearly outlines the relationship between South Africa and China based on four pillars: China's contribution to the defeat of colonialism in Africa, particularly apartheid in South Africa; the shared strategic approach of China and South Africa to global issues and international relations; and China's support for African development efforts, consistent with South Africa's foreign policy commitment to the African agenda and the BRICS alliance (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). At the same time, research confirms that the China-Africa relationship remains dynamic in many respects. China's focus on infrastructure development with the construction of roads, bridges, hydroelectric and irrigation works, schools, hospitals, health centers and a range of government buildings has made a clear and practical contribution to improving the lives of people across Africa. Continued economic and political growth will be a major step forward in the foreign policy of both countries. With the new BRICS group, relations between South Africa and China have entered a new era where they have the opportunity to strategically shape economic and political interests for the continent and for the global platform. [2].

In his article "The Process of Establishing Diplomatic Relations between China and South Africa," author Jiang Lu Shu Zhan emphasized that South Africa was one of the African continent's countries that established diplomatic relations with China very late, especially after the overthrow of the apartheid regime and the establishment of the new South African government. This delay in establishing diplomatic relations with China was unexpected by many in both China and South Africa. Through examining the history of China-South Africa exchanges, it can be seen that South Africa's complex domestic situation, particularly the apartheid regime implemented by the previous white government, the process of exchanges between China and South African national liberation organizations, and the Taiwan issue, were the main reasons why it took more than ten years from the resumption of contact in the 1980s to establish diplomatic relations. Furthermore, President Mandela's personal qualities also played a crucial role in establishing diplomatic relations between China and South Africa. [12]

In his study "Strategic Choices for Establishing Diplomatic Relations Between China and South Africa," author Yang Li Hua emphasizes that since establishing diplomatic relations with continuously deepening consensus and cooperation, China and South Africa have formed a strategic partnership based on political trust, mutual economic benefit, and mutual support in the international arena. The two sides have progressed from enhanced understanding to deeper understanding, sharing broad common positions and a basis for cooperation on each country's national governance policy views, as well as the needs and interests of developing countries in international affairs, while also establishing an effective consultation mechanism. [6]

In the study "The Difficult Journey of Establishing Diplomatic Relations Between China and South Africa," author Lu Miaogang outlines the arduous process of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the international situation underwent significant changes. Under domestic and international pressure, the white South African government under De Klerk began adjusting its policies. Domestically, they eased hostility with liberation organizations; internationally, they expanded their efforts to improve their precarious situation. The Chinese government responded accordingly to South Africa's

attempts at contact, and the prolonged isolation between China and South Africa gradually began to change. On January 1, 1998, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Africa dealt a heavy blow to the "flexible pragmatic diplomacy" that the Taiwanese government had been vigorously promoting at the time. February 1999: The three Chinese consulates general in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban officially opened. [3]

A study by author Liao Shuting indicates that China's economic diplomacy with South Africa contributes to expanding Chinese investment in Africa, strengthening Sino-African economic relations, and enhancing China's influence in Africa. However, while the two sides engage in economic cooperation, some disharmonious elements have emerged. Resolving the Sino-South Africa trade conflict is a new challenge facing China's economic diplomacy with South Africa. [11]

The studies presented above contribute to clarifying the formation, difficulties, and challenges in China-South Africa relations from the establishment of diplomatic relations to the early 21st century. This is a necessary and useful source of information for us to continue our in-depth research on China-South Africa diplomacy in the current context, especially the strengthening of diplomatic cooperation between China and South Africa in the first two decades of the 21st century.

3. Research Methodology

This study examines the strengthening of diplomatic cooperation between China and South Africa in the first two decades of the 21st century, exploring the nature and scope of China's influence on South African affairs, as well as its positive and negative impacts on the country's economic, political, and social situation.

This article employs a literature review method: through reviewing and analyzing official documents, industry reports, and previous academic research to build a theoretical foundation. In addition, the author uses primary and secondary data analysis, combining newly collected information with existing data to increase reliability and provide a comprehensive context for the article.

Comparative and statistical methods are used to compare data between different sources, periods, or groups of subjects, using statistical tools to identify trends. Furthermore, the study employs logical and inductive reasoning to connect disparate data, thereby synthesizing and generalizing them into theorems and conclusions.

4. Research results and discussion

4.1. Conditions and context for the increase in China's diplomatic influence over South Africa.

other characteristics of relations between nations, creating a mechanism of interdependence between countries, regions, and continents in the international community. In this context, the interdependence between economies is increasingly evident, creating favorable conditions for countries to expand their foreign relations, seek markets, raw materials, and strategic partners. For China, globalization is a crucial opportunity to accelerate international integration and expand its influence abroad through investment, trade, and development cooperation. In Africa, particularly in South Africa, China is leveraging this trend to increase its economic presence through infrastructure projects, resource exploitation, and the promotion of bilateral trade.

For Africa in general and South Africa in particular, multipolarization opens opportunities for countries in the region, including South Africa, to diversify their partners and reduce their dependence on Western countries. China has taken advantage of this opportunity to build an image as a "non-interference" development partner, thereby expanding its political and economic influence. The relationship between China and South Africa is therefore not only economic but also strategically significant in reshaping the global balance of power toward a multipolar future.

Since the early 1990s, and especially from 1992 to the present, Africa has undergone significant political and economic transformations. Therefore, the United States has considered Africa one of the most important markets in the coming century. Meanwhile, China believes that "Africa has overcome its period of political turmoil and most countries have an increasingly important role in the world," and hopes to establish comprehensive relations with Africa as it enters the 21st century.[1]

Africa is increasingly becoming a geopolitical battleground between global powers, notably the rivalry between China and the European Union (EU) as they seek to expand their influence and secure strategic interests. This competition is driven by economic, political, and other strategic interests, with both sides seeking to expand trade, investment, and diplomatic relations across the continent. In 2024, the competition between China and the EU intensified as both sides sought to assert their presence through infrastructure development, trade agreements, and diplomatic activities. [4]

In South Africa, following the end of apartheid, the country faced the urgent need to restore and boost economic growth, while simultaneously restructuring its economy towards modernization and international integration. In this context, the nation focused on exploiting external resources, attracting investment, expanding markets, and enhancing its international standing.

In foreign policy, South Africa pursued a policy of independence, self-reliance, multilateralism, and diversification of international relations. This allowed the country to avoid dependence on any single center of power, while flexibly establishing cooperative relationships with various partners, from developed countries to emerging economies. In particular, South Africa actively participated in regional and global cooperation mechanisms, thereby affirming its role as a leading power in Africa.

Against this backdrop, China's foreign relations with Africa are increasingly strengthened. The two sides share many similarities in development interests and perspectives on international issues, creating a favorable foundation for bilateral cooperation. China has become one of South Africa's important economic partners, not only in trade but also in investment, infrastructure development, and technology transfer. This provides South Africa with additional resources to boost economic growth and enhance its competitiveness in the context of globalization.

Furthermore, China pursues ambitions to reshape the international order in a way that benefits developing countries, with itself playing a central role. Major initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative are clear evidence of this effort, connecting regions of the world through a network of infrastructure, trade, and finance led by China. As a rising superpower, China is continuously expanding its global strategic space, with Africa and Southern Africa

playing crucial roles. Through economic, political, and diplomatic activities, China is progressively increasing its influence, aiming to become one of the world's key power centers in the 21st century.

4.2. Methods for expanding influence

China currently maintains a system encompassing eight channels of cooperation with African countries: diplomatic cooperation, trade cooperation, investment cooperation, development assistance, monetary cooperation, military cooperation and assistance, migration, and cultural promotion. This eight-channel system is divided into three interconnected and interacting layers of mechanisms. The diplomatic cooperation layer is crucial for the other two mechanisms. Maintaining and developing bilateral diplomatic mechanisms significantly impacts economic relations between African countries and China; conversely, the development of economic relations further strengthens bilateral diplomatic relations.

Africa plays a particularly important role in China's recent development strategies aimed at further expanding its influence and enhancing its global standing, such as the "Belt and Road Initiative," which aims to usher in a new era where China will become a geopolitical and geoeconomic superpower in the world. This includes the Central Asia strategy, with Turkey, and the "Maritime Silk Road," which will connect Chinese ports with the African and Mediterranean coasts. Africa is home to many countries that support China's implementation of these projects, with the fewest conditions. Once completed, the "Belt and Road Initiative" will give China a strong influence in Africa.[10]

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared Africa the Year with the motto "Truth, Reality, Friendship, and Sincerity." In December 2015, Xi Jinping visited Africa and attended the 6th FOCAC Forum in South Africa. The main theme of this forum was "China and Africa Progress Together, Cooperating for Common Development," aiming to strengthen the close ties and cooperation between the peoples of China and Africa. At this forum, China and African countries identified five pillars and ten major cooperation plans to promote the China-Africa Strategic Partnership, specifically in the areas of: industrialization, agricultural modernization, infrastructure development, financial services, green development, trade and investment facilitation, poverty reduction and public welfare, public health, people-to-people exchanges, peace, and security.

On December 8, 2015, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released its second policy document on Africa. This document outlines seven directions and measures to promote comprehensive cooperation: i) Strengthening political trust and maintaining close high-level exchanges; enhancing exchanges on governance experience and improving consultation and cooperation mechanisms; strengthening exchanges between political parties, the military, and local governments; ii) Deeper cooperation on international issues and strengthening coordination within international mechanisms; iii) Deepening economic cooperation, supporting Africa's industrialization and agricultural modernization, participating in infrastructure development, strengthening pre-existing financial cooperation, facilitating trade and investment, deepening cooperation in energy and raw materials, and expanding maritime economic cooperation; iv) Increasing development aid; v) Expanding exchanges and cooperation in culture, sports, tourism, broadcasting, academic exchange and research; vi) Promoting peace and security in Africa, strengthening military cooperation, and supporting

Africa in responding to non-traditional security challenges; and vii) Enhancing cooperation in consular, migration, judicial, and law enforcement fields...[10]

China is expanding its influence in Africa in general and South Africa in particular through a comprehensive strategy in which economics plays a central role and politics and diplomacy play a supporting role. First, China is aggressively providing preferential loans and direct investment in infrastructure in these countries, such as railways, ports, energy, and telecommunications, addressing infrastructure deficiencies – a major obstacle to development – while also facilitating China's access to natural resources and expanding its markets for goods. However, dependence on capital and technology from China has also led many African countries into economic dependence, indirectly increasing China's influence in important decision-making.

Furthermore, China has strongly promoted trade relations with South Africa in a mutually complementary manner: South Africa exports raw materials such as oil and minerals, while China provides inexpensive industrial goods and technology. While this relationship benefits both sides, it also exacerbates imbalances, as some sectors of the South African economy remain dependent on the export of raw resources. The construction of hospitals, schools, public works, and the deployment of Chinese experts not only contribute to improving the lives of South Africans but also help China build an image as a friendly and reliable partner. In particular, China's policy of "non-interference in internal affairs" sets it apart from Western countries, which often link aid to conditions related to democracy and human rights. This is why South Africa and many other African nations consider China a more suitable partner in their pursuit of domestic political stability.[9]

4.3. The reality of China's increasing diplomatic influence over South Africa.

Historically, despite the vast geographical distance, ties between China and South Africa were established very early on. Chinese people were present in South Africa from the 17th century, primarily engaged in labor, trade, and later, mining. In the early 20th century, tens of thousands of Chinese laborers were brought to South Africa to work in gold mines, significantly contributing to the region's economic development. However, under the apartheid regime, the Chinese community suffered many injustices and were classified as "people of color," lacking political rights.

In the early period after 1949, due to ideological differences and the context of the Cold War, the two countries did not establish diplomatic relations. The white government in South Africa chose to ally with the United States and Western countries, while not recognizing the Chinese government. Conversely, China steadfastly supported national liberation movements in Africa, particularly the struggle against Apartheid. During this period, China did not establish formal relations with the South African government but maintained contact with revolutionary forces.

From the 1950s onwards, China clearly demonstrated its support for the anti-apartheid movement. In 1956, Mao Zedong sent a telegram expressing support for the South African people's struggle. At Nelson Mandela's suggestion, Walter Sisulu, leader of the African National Congress (ANC), visited China, thereby establishing friendly relations between China and the Black liberation organizations. China provided support to these movements in many

ways political, moral, and material contributing to strengthening the foundation of bilateral relations in the unofficial period.

By the late 1980s, in the face of changing international circumstances and the post-Cold War *détente*, the South African government began adjusting its foreign policy and gradually engaging with China. In 1991, South African officials made a secret visit to China, marking a turning point in bilateral relations. Subsequently, both sides intensified informal contacts, establishing exchange mechanisms and research cooperation to prepare for the normalization of relations.

In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic general election, electing Nelson Mandela as its first black president, marking the end of apartheid. This event paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, due to the impact of internal political factors and the influence of Taiwan, this process was relatively complex. In 1997, South Africa officially recognized the "One China" principle, and on January 1, 1998, the two countries established diplomatic relations, opening a new phase of cooperation.

From 1998 to the present, relations between China and South Africa have developed rapidly and comprehensively in many areas. The two sides frequently exchange high-level visits and establish bilateral cooperation mechanisms such as the Intergovernmental Committee to coordinate relations. The relationship between the two countries has been gradually upgraded and by 2010 officially became a comprehensive strategic partnership.

In the relationship between China and South Africa, high-level exchanges play a crucial role in strengthening political trust and promoting bilateral cooperation. This is one of the effective methods for maintaining close ties between the leaders of the two countries, while also laying the foundation for expanding relations in other areas. In fact, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1998, the leaders of the two countries have maintained numerous high-level visits and regular contacts, notably the signing of the "Pretoria Declaration" in 2000 and the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2004, creating a basis for long-term cooperation.

Firstly, high-level visits, including official visits, working visits, and meetings on the sidelines of international conferences, provide opportunities for the leaders of the two countries to directly exchange views on strategic issues, cooperation directions, and matters of mutual interest. Through this, both sides can enhance mutual understanding, minimize differences, and build consensus on important issues. This is a key factor in strengthening political trust – the foundation of any sustainable foreign relations. Notably, meetings between the leaders of the two countries frequently take place on the sidelines of conferences such as BRICS and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum, thereby strengthening strategic exchanges and coordinating positions.

Furthermore, high-level exchanges serve as a driving force for promoting bilateral cooperation mechanisms. Many important agreements and cooperation programs between the two countries are often signed or launched within the framework of high-level visits. For example, the establishment of the "National-level Bilateral Committee" in 2000 and the signing of the "Outline for Deepening the Strategic Partnership" in 2006 were both linked to high-level contacts between the two sides. This shows that high-level diplomacy is not only symbolic but also has practical value in concretizing cooperation commitments.

For China, maintaining a high frequency of high-level visits and contacts with South Africa is also an important way to increase diplomatic influence in the African region. Through these activities, China not only affirms its role as a strategic partner but also strengthens its image as a country that values relations with developing countries. At the same time, through South Africa, China can expand its network of relations and enhance its standing in the region. Recently, contacts between leaders of the two countries within the framework of international conferences, such as the 2023 BRICS Summit attended by President Cyril Ramaphosa and Chinese leaders, further demonstrate the importance of high-level diplomatic channels.[6]

The establishment and continuous upgrading of the strategic partnership between China and South Africa is one of the clearest manifestations of China's priority for South Africa in its overall foreign policy strategy in Africa. This is not only a development in diplomatic form but also reflects the increasingly deep convergence of interests, cooperation needs, and strategic visions of the two countries in a volatile international context. The development of the strategic partnership between the two countries has followed a relatively clear and consistent path. In 2004, the two sides officially established a strategic partnership with the orientation of "equality, mutual benefit, and shared development," marking a shift from conventional bilateral cooperation to long-term, oriented cooperation. By 2010, the relationship was upgraded to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," reflecting a significant increase in political trust as well as the scope and depth of cooperation. This upgrade is not only symbolic but also creates a guiding institutional framework that helps coordinate and maintain the stable development of bilateral relations in the long term.[9]

Besides economic and technological fields, cooperation in culture, education, and people-to-people exchanges plays a crucial role in strengthening the social foundation of bilateral relations. Academic exchange programs, human resource training, and cultural exchanges not only enhance mutual understanding but also contribute to creating a favorable social environment for the long-term development of relations. This is a factor that helps the strategic partnership exist not only at the state level but also spread throughout society.

In particular, the strategic partnership framework also facilitates increased coordination between the two countries on regional and global issues. Through forums such as BRICS and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum, China and South Africa can promote common positions, protect the interests of developing countries, and participate in shaping the international order. This coordination not only enhances the standing of each country but also contributes to increasing the overall influence of both countries in the international system.

From a strategic perspective, South Africa serves as a crucial "pillar" in China's Africa policy. As one of the most influential countries in the region, South Africa is not only a bilateral partner but also a bridge connecting China to the rest of Africa. Through South Africa, China can more effectively implement cooperative initiatives and increase its presence across the continent. However, it's important to recognize that this strategic partnership is not without its asymmetries. Differences in economic power and national interests can create significant challenges. Issues such as trade imbalances, competitive pressures on local businesses, and social factors can affect South Africa's perception and acceptance of China's growing influence.[6]

Overall, the strategic partnership between China and South Africa is both the result of a convergence of interests and an important tool for both countries to pursue their foreign policy

objectives in the context of globalization and strategic competition. This framework not only helps expand cooperation in many areas but also facilitates both countries in enhancing their standing and role in the international system, while reflecting the growing trend of strategic partnerships between developing countries.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the relationship between China and South Africa, coordinating positions at international forums is not only a manifestation of political consensus but also a crucial component of both countries' foreign policy strategies. This activity reflects a shift in how developing nations participate in global governance, and demonstrates the interplay of national and group interests in the context of a changing international order towards multipolarity.

The coordination of positions between the two countries can be understood as a form of “soft strategic alliance” within a multilateral framework. Unlike military alliances or tightly bound commitments, this coordination mechanism is based on shared interests and perspectives, allowing the parties flexibility to adjust while maintaining the necessary level of cooperation to increase influence. In the case of China and South Africa, the foundation of this coordination stems from their shared position as developing nations, facing the challenges of protecting national interests and enhancing their role in the international system.

At forums such as the United Nations, the coordination of positions between the two countries is clearly demonstrated through their shared support for the fundamental principles of international law, promotion of multilateralism, and opposition to unilateral actions. China, as a permanent member of the Security Council, has the advantage of institutional power, but also needs broad support from developing countries to enhance the legitimacy of its decisions and positions. In this context, South Africa – as a reputable nation in Africa – becomes a crucial partner in helping China expand its sphere of influence and strengthen its “alliance of positions” on international issues.

Conversely, South Africa participates not only as a bilateral partner but also as a representative of broader African interests. South Africa's foreign policy, from the Nelson Mandela era to Thabo Mbeki, has emphasized an “Africa-centric” approach, with South Africa having a responsibility to promote peace, stability, and development in the region. Through cooperation with China, South Africa can leverage China's resources, political support, and international standing to enhance its ability to fulfill this role. This is particularly evident in peacekeeping operations, conflict resolution, and development assistance in Africa.

China views Africa as a crucial strategic partner, as evidenced by its policy documents and practical cooperation activities. Meanwhile, South Africa, as a regional power, participates in peacekeeping operations, development assistance, and promotes regional integration. The combination of China's economic resources and South Africa's political and regional role creates a coordinated mechanism capable of significantly impacting African affairs, thereby enhancing the influence of both countries.

However, this coordination is not entirely uniform and still has certain limitations. Differences in national interests, policy priorities, or pressure from the international environment may lead the two countries to adopt different approaches on specific issues. This reflects the flexible nature of the coordination mechanism, in which the parties both cooperate and adjust to ensure their own interests.

Overall, the international coordination between China and South Africa is a multifaceted strategic tool. Not only does it contribute to enhancing the standing of each country, but it also allows both countries to participate more deeply in shaping the international order, expanding their influence, and protecting the interests of developing nations in the context of increasing globalization and strategic competition.

Another aspect that needs to be emphasized is that multilateral diplomacy helps China diversify and mitigate strategic risks. In international relations, over-reliance on bilateral relationships can lead to risks if those relationships become unstable. However, when interests are “multilateralized,” that is, linked to many different actors and mechanisms, the level of stability is higher. In this case, China’s engagement with South Africa within multilateral frameworks ensures that even if there are certain differences at the bilateral level, overall cooperation can still be maintained.

Overall, multilateral diplomacy remains an effective tool for China to increase its influence through South Africa. Based on political trust, strategic partnership frameworks, and coordinated positions, China uses multilateral forums to expand its sphere of influence, enhance its standing, and gradually participate in shaping the international order. Through South Africa's bridging role, this influence is not only bilateral but also extends throughout Africa, contributing to strengthening China's position as a significant player in the contemporary international system.

Based on the synchronized implementation of various methods to increase diplomatic influence, China has achieved comprehensive results in its relations with South Africa. These results are reflected not only in the expansion of cooperation but also in the depth, level of engagement, and increasing sustainability of bilateral relations.

First, politically, China's influence is strengthened through the formation of a relatively solid strategic consensus with South Africa. Similarities in approaches to international issues – particularly the principles of protecting sovereignty, opposing intervention, and upholding the role of developing countries – have facilitated easier coordination between the two countries on important matters. This not only enhances political trust but also creates a "stable cooperation space" in which China can more easily pursue its foreign policy objectives. More importantly, through South Africa, China has the ability to amplify its voice on regional and global issues.

At the institutional level, relations between the two countries are increasingly standardized and operate within stable mechanisms. The establishment of regular consultation channels between governments, ministries, and specialized fields has helped translate political consensus into concrete action programs. These mechanisms act as an “institutional infrastructure,” ensuring that bilateral cooperation is not disrupted by short-term fluctuations. For China, this is crucial for maintaining its influence in a continuous, systematic, and long-term manner.

Economically, the results achieved are fundamental and have a strong ripple effect. The rapid increase in trade volume, coupled with China becoming a key economic partner for South Africa, has created increasingly close ties of interest between the two economies. Notably, China's influence is not limited to the exchange of goods but extends to strategic sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and industry. This allows China to deeply participate in South Africa's economic development, thereby forming a form of "structural influence"—that is, influence

tied to the fundamental elements of the economy. When the economic structure is interconnected, the ability to maintain influence becomes more sustainable and difficult to replace.

From a social perspective, cooperation in education, culture, and people-to-people exchanges has contributed to building a social foundation for bilateral relations. The increased understanding and goodwill of the South African public towards China not only reduces psychological barriers but also creates a favorable environment for the implementation of cooperative policies. This is particularly significant because diplomatic influence is only truly sustainable when strengthened at the societal level, not just at the state level.

At the regional and global levels, the cooperation between the two countries has contributed to enhancing China's standing in the international system. Through South Africa – an influential country in Africa – China can expand its sphere of influence beyond bilateral relations. Simultaneously, cooperation in forums such as the United Nations and BRICS helps China increase its ability to participate in shaping global issues. In the context of increasing competition for influence among major powers, securing the support of South Africa and other African nations gives China a significant advantage.

A noteworthy point is that these results demonstrate a qualitative shift in China's influence. While in the initial stages, influence was primarily based on expanding relations and increasing presence, in the current stage, it has been "structured" through political, economic, and social factors. This means that China's influence is not only broader but also deeper, more closely intertwined with South Africa's internal development processes.

Despite positive results, relations between China and South Africa still face structural limitations and challenges that directly affect the balance and sustainability of bilateral cooperation.

One prominent issue is the asymmetry in development levels and economic capacity between the two countries. With its superior economic scale, technology, and capital, China often plays a more proactive role in cooperation, while South Africa is more dependent on Chinese markets and investment. This disparity is not only reflected in the scale of cooperation but also in the ability to shape cooperation programs and allocate benefits. When one side has a greater advantage, the risk of imbalance in the relationship is unavoidable, potentially raising concerns about fairness and sustainability.

The trade structure between the two countries also clearly reflects this imbalance. South Africa's model of primarily exporting raw materials while importing industrial goods and manufactured products from China shows a complementary relationship that has not truly transformed into high-level development cooperation. In the long term, this could limit the ability to increase the added value of the South African economy and make it difficult for bilateral economic relations to reach a state of genuine balance. When economic benefits are not evenly distributed, this factor can negatively impact the political and social spheres.

At the social level, the increasing presence of Chinese goods and businesses in South Africa has generated multifaceted reactions. While some benefit from competitive pricing and investment opportunities, domestic businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), face significant competitive pressure. This has led to dissatisfaction from certain interest groups such as labor unions and domestic businesses. At the same time, problems

arising in the operations of some Chinese enterprises, such as labor standards, product quality, or compliance with local laws, have somewhat affected the image and diminished the effectiveness of soft power building efforts.

Bilateral relations are also significantly impacted by the volatile international environment. Increased competition among major powers in Africa diminishes China's exclusive sphere of influence, forcing it to adjust its approach to maintain its position. Simultaneously, global economic fluctuations, changes in supply chains, and geopolitical factors can disrupt or diminish the effectiveness of cooperation between the two countries. In this context, policy adaptability becomes a crucial factor determining the stability of the relationship.

Although China and South Africa share many similarities in their international stances, this consensus is not always absolute. Differences in national interests, policy priorities, or external pressures can limit the level of coordination on specific issues. This indicates that the bond between the two countries, while strengthened, still needs continued adjustment and balancing as it develops.

From a holistic perspective, the limitations and challenges in China-South Africa relations are not only short-term but also reflect deeper issues concerning economic structure, power dynamics, and the international context. This necessitates appropriate adjustments in policies and cooperation methods between the two countries, aiming to balance interests, enhance the quality of cooperation, and ensure the sustainability of bilateral relations.

The increasing diplomatic influence of China on South Africa is an objective trend, reflecting the dynamics of the international landscape in the context of a shifting world order towards multipolarity and multcenters. In this process, China, with its increasingly prominent role, has proactively expanded relations with developing countries, with South Africa holding a particularly important position in Africa. Therefore, the development of bilateral relations is not only a result of bilateral needs but is also closely linked to profound changes in the international environment.

It is noteworthy that this relationship is not entirely balanced, but rather a complex interplay of cooperation and adjustment. While China tends to increase its influence through economic, political, and diplomatic tools, South Africa simultaneously embraces opportunities for cooperation and must adjust to safeguard its national interests and avoid excessive dependence. This reflects a common characteristic in the relationship between rising powers and developing nations, where the "balancing of interests" plays a crucial role.

From a strategic perspective, China's diplomatic influence in South Africa is likely to continue to grow, but in an increasingly sophisticated and diversified manner, relying not only on economic power but also incorporating political, institutional, and social factors. Meanwhile, South Africa will continue to play both a partner and an adjuster, leveraging opportunities for cooperation while protecting its national interests. In this context, the China-South Africa relationship can be seen as a prime example reflecting the changing way developing nations interact with emerging powers. The development of this relationship depends not only on immediate interests but also on the ability to adapt, adjust, and balance within an increasingly complex and competitive international environment.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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