

South African foreign policy and China: converging visions, competing interests, contested identities

Corresponding author: Professor Chris Alden (J.C.Alden@lse.ac.uk)

Department of International Relations, London School of Economics

*Senior Research Associate, South African Institute of international Affairs and
Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, South Africa.*

Co-author: Yu-Shan Wu (Yu-Hsuan.Wu@wits.ac.za)

*Researcher, Foreign Policy Programme at the South African Institute of international
Affairs, Jan Smuts House, East Campus University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa.*

*Doctoral candidate, Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, corner
Lynnwood Road and Roper Street, Hatfield, South Africa.*

Abstract

South Africa's burgeoning relationship with China exposes the increasing complexities of its post-apartheid international relations. On one hand bilateral relations have deepened since 1998, due to the increasing complementarities with South Africa's foreign policy priorities that emphasize developmental pragmatism and a Southward orientation within the broader African context. On the other hand this relationship emphasizes the deeper schisms within South African society itself, where divergent and multi-layered perspectives on South Africa's post-apartheid identity and relationship with China, the country's largest trading partner, remains unresolved. This article maps out the nature of China-South Africa relations through a thematic approach. This allows for nuanced consideration towards South Africa's contemporary foreign policy, one that remains compressed between a combination of external and domestic factors.

Keywords: South Africa, China, identity, BRICS, convergence, China-Africa, foreign policy analysis

South Africa's relationship with China is, in recent years, one of the most remarked aspects of its expanding international relations. It is viewed in some circles as emblematic of an overall re-orientation of post-apartheid South African foreign policy away from Western-based humanistic values to one aligned with the developmental pragmatism, if not the authoritarian agenda, of the strongest member of the BRICS configuration.¹ While these critical judgments are principally derived from an assessment of South Africa's conduct as a two-term non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and on 'hot button' issues like the Dalai Lama, the actual content of South African ties with China are much more complex and nuanced than this simplistic reading suggests. In fact, it is a relationship that finds a growing measure of convergence in its global outlook and developmental concerns while experiencing direct competition in commercial areas as well as generating controversy on specific issues within South African society. This complex perspective is shaping an elite vision of a new South African identity that is framed in terms of its Southward orientation within the broader African context that increasingly looks to China for support to meet its own foreign policy agenda and development aspirations.

Assessing the impact of relations with China on South Africa is part of a larger debate on how the country's foreign policy identity is evolving in the post-apartheid period. Scholarship recognises that foreign policy plays a foundational role in the creation of national identity through its articulation and implementation of policies on sovereignty, interests and national values that it promotes internationally (Wallace, 1991, p.65; Weldes, 1996, p.303). Elite articulation of national interests provides the structure for specific foreign policy action and concurrently reflects the image and identity of a given country in the international system while counter-vailing domestic audiences contest these perspectives based on their particularistic interests and understanding of national identity (Bischoff, 2003, pp. 189-190).

An examination of South Africa's foreign policy and its gradual strategic re-alignment towards China highlights these features. On the one hand, this 'pivot' to China is an

expression of South Africa's development needs and the strengthening of its identity as 'Africa's representative' in global events as well as fortifying its position within the Global South (Alden and Schoeman, 2013). Aligning more closely with the world's leading emerging power, with its considerable financial resources and capacities, matches well with South Africa's own development ambitions at home and in Africa. On the other hand, there is on-going unease in some South African circles with the nature and depth of these ties. Issues ranging from economic competition with South African businesses to public concern over the opaque nature of diplomatic relations converge to a position that is generally at odds with the Zuma administration's foreign policy orientation towards China. These differing perspectives resonate with divergent and multi-layered perspectives on South Africa's post-apartheid identity, a debate that remains unresolved.

Past as prologue: historical review

Contemporary relations between South Africa and China have roots that stretch back to the late nineteenth century when Chinese labourers were brought in to work on the gold mines and formed the basis for the first settled Chinese community in South Africa.

With the election of the National Party in 1948, the Afrikaner led National Party government instituted a more systemised and comprehensive racial policy towards 'non-whites' in the country. The small Chinese community in South Africa found itself subject to the myriad of racist legislation implemented gradually under apartheid, including the group areas act and separate education (Yapp and Man, 1996). South Africa's growing international isolation factored into Prime Minister PW Botha expansion of formal diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) in 1980, creating regular military-to-military links with Taipei as well as encouraging stronger economic ties (Geldenhuys. 1994, p.281). On the former, the cooperation on research into nuclear power featured through a series of high level exchanges and agreements but was curtailed after 1987 (Tseng, 2006, pp.214-215). Regarding strengthening economic engagement between South Africa and ROC, this included providing incentives for entrepreneurs to set up businesses in the 'bantustans', efforts that attracted a growing tide of Taiwanese investment (Pickles and Woods,

1989). Two-way trade grew enormously over the next few decades, from US\$30 million in 1979 to US\$5.8 billion in 1995 (Alden, 2001, p.121).

During this same period, the divisive politics of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s was manifested as support for the African National Congress (ANC) by Moscow and Beijing's support for a rival liberation movement, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). After discussions with Mao Zedong, China had invited several UmKhonto we Sizwe members for military training, though as divisions in the international socialist movement began to manifest, this programme was later abandoned (Ellis, 2013, p.28). The Sino-Soviet dispute brought about the severance of ties between the South African Communist Party (SACP) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the relationship became 'very bad' (Pahad, personal interview, 2014). However, following a meeting in Lusaka between Premier Zhao Ziyang and OR Tambo in 1982 the climate changed sufficiently to allow for the restoration of party-to-party relations with regularised contact and even limited Chinese financial assistance to the SACP (Maloka, 2002, p.55).

With the end of white minority rule and the onset of democratic elections in April 1994, the expectation was that the ANC-dominated government of national unity would switch diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the Peoples' Republic of China as a matter of course (Alden, 2001, pp.119-135). Inexplicably, this did not occur; indeed the Mandela government gave assurances that formal ties with Taipei would continue indefinitely in 1995. At the same time, his government embarked on a quixotic campaign to convince Beijing of the merits of 'dual recognition' (Alden, 2001, pp.129-131). Competing promises of trade, aid and investment by Taipei, countered by Beijing, ensued. Subsequently, it was revealed that during his July 1993 visit to the island, Mandela made a personal appeal to Taiwan's leader, Lee Teng-hui, for financial support to the cash-strapped ANC to fight the upcoming elections, resulting in a contribution of US\$10 million (followed by an additional request for US\$5 million) (Viljoen, 2010, p.165).

Spurred on by divisions within the Department of Foreign Affairs, elements in the ANC governing alliance, business and academic interests lined up on different sides to argue the case for or against recognition. Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo's trip to Beijing in March 1996 (Singh, 1997), which Chinese government expected would

signal the switch in diplomatic ties but rather was intended on the South African side to promote the notion of 'dual recognition', produced a swift reaction. At the delegation's final meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, his terse declaration that 'the apartheid government made more effort to recognise China than you have', signalled the beginning of a harder line (Anonymous, personal interview, 2014). From 1996 onwards, South African diplomats were reporting back to Pretoria that South Africa's consulate status there might be negatively affected by the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 while at home questions were being raised as to Taiwan's commitment to support its much publicised investment plans in the Eastern Cape (Botha and Dietrichsen, 2010, p.183). In the end, Mandela's surprise decision to grant official recognition to Beijing, made in November 1996, gave Taiwan thirteen months' transition before the switch and allowed incoming President Thabo Mbeki to forge a new relationship with China unencumbered by the legacies of the recent past.

Diplomacy and bilateral ties

The opening of formal diplomatic ties in January 1998 was marked by an escalating series of official declarations highlighting the intensification of bilateral cooperation with only limited results in realizing these ambitions. The Pretoria Declaration² was announced during an official visit by President Jiang Zemin in April 2000 (Shelton, 2008, p.260). The focus of the declaration was on the establishment of a bi-national commission with a more generalized commitment to improve the conditions for mutual economic benefit in the form of expanding trade and investment, especially in the area of natural resources, mining and manufacturing (Huajie, 2000, p.2). On Africa, both countries agreed to collaborate on improving continental security and development while promoting a more equitable international order based on non-intervention and mutual interests.

Formal relations evolved quickly from the Pretoria Declaration, with the first bi-national commission meeting in December 2001 followed by the elevation of ties at the second bi-national commission in June 2004 to that of a Strategic Partnership (Department for International Relations and Cooperation, 2004). As part of the Strategic Partnership, South Africa decided to grant China 'market status' – an important step that narrowed the parameters to pursue certain kinds of trade

disputes in terms of World Trade Organization (WTO) criteria – and that coincided with the opening of negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). The two sides committed themselves to ‘intensifying’ interaction and consultation between their foreign ministries, as well as taking steps to promote agricultural exports and education.

However, President Thabo Mbeki’s diplomatic focus during this time was directed towards a grand strategy of continental initiatives, starting with the articulation of the African renaissance in 1998 and the New African Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) whose central aim was to strengthen aid and investment ties with the G8 countries. As a result, the position of China was relatively neglected by Pretoria. This was despite the launching of China’s Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in November 2000 and a growing Chinese economic presence in the rest of the continent. The G8-Africa Summit held in Edinburgh in 2005, where China’s invitation to participate only came at the last minute, underscored the degree to which the global focus on China-Africa relations remained obscured.

During this time, the Mbeki presidency maintained a largely cordial if not especially close relationship with China. This reflected in part divisions within the Office of the Presidency and the South African government more generally between those who enthusiastically supported the relationship and those more suspicious of Chinese intentions on the continent (Anonymous, personal interview, 2007a). Mbeki, while supportive of the FOCAC process (Pahad, personal interview, 2014), nonetheless articulated his own concerns about China in a widely publicized speech in the aftermath of the successful FOCAC III (Davies, 2008; BBC News, 2006). In his address to the South African Students Congress in December 2006, Mbeki cautioned that ‘in its relationship with China, Africa must guard against merely becoming a supplier of raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods’ (Mail and Guardian, 2006). Hu Jintao’s hastily organized visit in February 2007, in which the Chinese president gave what amounted to a pointed rebuttal of Mbeki’s commentary, highlighted the anxieties and strengths in the relationship at the time:

It is natural that new issues and new challenges may arise. Yet, compared with the larger interests of China-Africa cooperation, these issues, which

occur in the course of advance, can surely be resolved through friendly consultation and deepened cooperation. China takes seriously the concerns about the imbalance in the structure of China-Africa trade and the scope of Chinese investment.³

In regional terms, South African involvement in continental peace and security issues as well as the growing commercial competition between South African and Chinese companies were complicating factors in bilateral ties (Corkin and Burke, 2008, p.45). Moreover, key African states, which were developing closer ties with Beijing – notably Zimbabwe, Sudan and to a lesser degree Angola - had problematic relationships with Mbeki's government, and this introduced tensions in Pretoria. This was most evident in the case of Darfur, where Beijing's obdurate defence of Khartoum in the early 2000s differed from the South African approach (Le Pere, 2008, p.16). This disquiet was exacerbated by the experience of South African businesses both at home and on the continent, as these businesses began to complain about losing contracts and market share to Chinese interests in Africa.⁴ Warnings were even sounded by leading South African 'friends of China', as to the negative impact that Chinese migration would eventually have on diplomatic ties (Botha, 2004, pp.63-64). With regard to Zimbabwe, South African officials were suspicious of China's growing involvement in an economy that was still dominated by South African interests (Anonymous, personal interview, 2007b). The nadir in relations came with the disclosure of Chinese armament shipments to Zimbabwe in April 2008 at the height of sensitive elections in that country, bringing a hail of criticism from South African and Southern African Development Community (SADC) leaders.

Within a few months however, there was a shift towards closer cooperation on Zimbabwe between Beijing and Pretoria. According to a senior Chinese official, active coordination between top Chinese and South African officials over the Zimbabwe issue in the aftermath of the G8 Summit held in Japan in June 2008 helped bring Robert Mugabe to the negotiating table with rival Morgan Tsvangirai. Specifically, Britain and the US publically repudiated Mbeki's 'quiet diplomacy' towards Zimbabwe at the G8 Summit and introduced a resolution at the UN Security Council aimed at strengthening sanctions against Mugabe's government. Chinese and South African officials, working together (as South Africa was a non-permanent

member of the Security Council at that time) arrived at an approach that saw Beijing veto the resolution in New York but privately make it clear to Mugabe that it would not block future resolutions (Anonymous Chinese diplomat, personal interview, 2008). Hemmed in, the Zanu-PF leader went on to sign the Global Peace Agreement with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change under the auspices of South African-led mediation.

By 2009, following the abrupt ousting of Mbeki from the ANC leadership in December 2007 and his subsequent replacement as South African president by Kgalema Motlanthe in 2008, Beijing was anxious to 'upgrade' the relationship. On the South African side, the implications of the global financial crisis and China's ability to weather it began to sink in⁵, with Jacob Zuma's presidential campaign touting the lessons for South Africa from adopting an Asian-style 'development state' approach. Early insights into the incoming Zuma administration's aspirations for the relationship can be gleaned from a presentation on South Africa's future economic relations with China made in November 2009 by Minister of Economic Development, Ebrahim Patel. He framed ties with China in terms of a set of domestic economic priorities, including the need for Chinese policies towards South Africa (and the continent as a whole) that would meet its needs for large-scale infrastructure development and employment creation. Fundamentally, he called for efforts to ensure that the current structure of trade, whereby South Africa was a supplier of raw materials and Europe and North America were exporters of manufactured goods, was not replicated with China (Patel, 2009, p.13).

During President Zuma's first state visit to China in August 2010, China and South Africa announced a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', which formally elevated bilateral ties from the previous 'Strategic Partnership'. The Beijing Declaration, as it became known, signed by both presidents during the 'upgrade' in relations (Davies, 2008), expressed the desire to deepen and strengthen cooperation and exchanges between the two countries through a set of concrete measures. With regard to political and regional affairs, the two countries committed to enhancing joint efforts in the global arena, such as in the United Nations and FOCAC, and the presidents agreed to maintain frequent contact in order to enhance mutual understanding of and support for each other's positions and interests (Stratsis Incite, 2010). Specifically, the declaration outlined 38 bilateral cooperation agreements, ranging from political

dialogues to trade and investment to mineral exploration and agriculture, most of which were identical to or elaborations of the areas identified in the strategic cooperation agreement six years beforehand (Alden and Wu 2014, p.10). Behind the decision to push forward in formal diplomatic relations from that of a strategic partnership and later a comprehensive strategic partnership was the recognition of their shared outlooks in international affairs underpinned by economic interests and a concomitant desire by Beijing to strengthen coordination and planning between the two countries (Anonymous, personal interview, 2013).

The establishment of a Joint Inter-Ministerial Working Group (JIMWG) on China-South Africa Cooperation at the meeting in Beijing in 2010 was aimed, according to the South African Foreign Minister, to 'identify and work through any obstacles to the implementation of our bilateral commitments' (Republic of South Africa, 2010). Zuma appointed five Cabinet Ministers to serve on the South African. The new arrangement envisaged bi-annual meetings of deputy president/prime minister and annual meetings at ministerial levels, coupled with more regularised contact between South African officials and Chinese diplomats, which would build trust and facilitate better cooperation. The two countries formally ratified the JIMWG only in March 2013 (see below). The practical implementation of this initiative remained problematic, however, with South African officials sometimes unable to attend or fully participate in joint events. This led one senior Chinese diplomat to suggest that the excessive workload of civil servants was contributing to occasional breaches in protocol by the South Africans (Centre for Chinese Studies 2007, p.104). Despite this issue, DIRCO officials and their counterparts in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs met annually between 2008 and 2013 (Business Day, 2013).

During the same Zuma visit to China (accompanied by 370 representatives from the South African business community), South African and Chinese companies signed more than a dozen agreements covering investments in railway, power transmission construction, mining, insurance, telecoms and nuclear power. Most importantly, his trip was the last of a series of visits to the other BRIC countries that gave Zuma an opportunity to personally make the case for inclusion in the BRICs grouping, an initiative that was to pay dividends in late 2010 (see next section) (Stuenkel, 2013, p. 311). And yet later, at the 2012 FOCAC ministerial, international media coverage of

the event focused on Zuma's comment that China-Africa relations were 'unsustainable' as they stood, reflecting not a lack of confidence in the ties but rather a shared view with Beijing that the contemporary economic foundation of the relationship needed to shift away from the pattern of unequal exchange if it was to thrive (The Presidency: the Republic of South Africa, 2012).

Though only a minor feature of bilateral ties, military-to-military relations have also followed the pattern of gradual upgrading during the decade and a half of official diplomatic ties. The first meeting of the China-South Africa defence committee, a forum created in 2000 with the Pretoria Declaration, was held in April 2003 and it was only a year later that a formal agreement was signed allowing for training of South African soldiers and a donation of electronic equipment to the SANDF (Ntuli, 2003). By 2010, the fourth China-South Africa defence committee meeting in November expanded security cooperation towards the continent. Under Zuma, acknowledgement of China's expanded role in peacekeeping and supportive position on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and at the African Union (AU) has resulted in greater enthusiasm in military circles for cooperation. South African Major-General Ntakaleleni Sigudu declared his appreciation of the Peoples Liberation Army's (PLA) contribution to achieving 'the AU's objectives of building its own strong, effective and efficient peacekeeping capability' and endorsed the desire for closer coordination between the two militaries in bringing stability to the continent (Radebe, 2013).

In parallel, since the signing of the Beijing Declaration in 2000, commercial transactions between South Africa's armaments manufacturer, Denel, and the Chinese military have increased. The PLA has taken delivery of South African technologies related to anti-aircraft gun ammunition, anti-tank guided missiles and air-to-air missiles while South Africa's aerospace industry has also established strong links in China, such as in developing unmanned aerial vehicle programmes (Grevatt, 2010). Chinese pilots also received flight training from ex-South African air force and navy personnel in Mafikeng starting in 2010. ⁶

Nevertheless, while there has been an increased exchange of military personnel at this stage there is little trade in military goods between the two countries, as South Africa manufactures much of its own military equipment while continuing to source

the remainder from the European Union (Centre for Chinese Studies, 2007, p.111). Indeed, despite opening an office in Cape Town in the late 1990s, the Chinese industrial equivalent to Denel has been notably unsuccessful in penetrating the South African market.

Party to party relations, on the other hand, thrived throughout this period. The SACP invited the CCP to the first party congress held in South Africa since its unbanning and return from exile and, along with the ANC, maintained close ties thereafter (Pahad, personal interview, 2014). SACP Secretary General, Blade Nzimande, visited President Jiang Zemin in Beijing in November 1998 and they launched a mutual consultative mechanism, the 'first of its kind' for the CCP according to some sources (Le Pere and Shelton, 2007, p.163). This relationship, manifested through annual exchanges and participation in party conferences, became a channel for discussion of international issues. In 2010, the ANC leadership signed an agreement to send the all members of its National Executive Committee to Beijing for three weeks training in management and organizational skills.⁷ This move reflects a broader interest on the part of the ANC in learning from the Chinese experience, which resulted in a longstanding programme to send government officials from various ministries for training with their counterpart ministries in China (Ubuntu Radio, 2015).

Finally, it should be recognized that the depth of diplomatic ties between South Africa and China went beyond the central state to include provincial links (Chen and Jian, 2009). South African provinces like Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape partnered with Chinese provinces and cities. In the course of interaction, for instance, the Gauteng Economic Development Agency conducted eight missions to China between 1998 and 2002 as well as opening a 'China desk' to manage ties (Cornelissen, 2006, p.131). Indeed, the incoming ANC premier of Gauteng, addressing a gathering of leading businessmen in May 2014, expressed his administration's specific desire to encourage more Chinese FDI into the province (Bizos, personal interview, 2014).

Multilateral ties – UNSC, FOCAC, BRICS and G20

In 2009, at a media briefing, previous Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma summed up the positive attitude felt within South African circles regarding their position vis-à-vis China in multilateral affairs (Republic of South Africa, 2009):

We are strategic partners and we co-operate in a whole range of areas – the economic level in terms of promoting trade and investments between our two countries; people to people and cultural exchanges; science and technology; and a whole range of other areas. We...co-operate in the multilateral arena – China has been very supportive of our engagement in Africa in peace and security areas besides Africa-China co-operation so we value and think our relations are very important...’

Echoing this sentiment in 2012, outgoing Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed the view that China and South Africa share common interests in many international contexts, and China hoped to co-operate with South Africa in the UN, G20, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and other international forums to increase the collective voice of developing countries and propel the international political and economic order toward a more fair and reasonable direction (People’s Daily Online, 2012). Indeed, the strengthening of South Africa-China cooperation on global affairs is a hallmark of the relationship. These positive expressions of mutual support were given concrete meaning through four particular multilateral forums - the UNSC, FOCAC, BRICS and the G20.

During South Africa’s first tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2007-2009), the shared perspective on many global issues became more evident in its conduct and voting behavior. Certainly the positions it adopted on emotive issues like Myanmar and sanctions were characterized by South African and foreign critics as a sign of growing proximity of interests with China (Mail & Guardian, 2007). This was hotly denied by Pretoria, which argued that it ‘was not a vote against the people of Myanmar’ and it would not endorse isolating the military regime through sanctions (a stance that was arguably vindicated when the severest critics – the US and the European Union – shifted their own policies a few years later to one of ‘constructive engagement’) (Republic of South Africa, 2007). The case of

Zimbabwe and sanctions is another example of where South Africa worked cooperatively with China to block Western-inspired sanctions (see above). Of particular significance from a South African perspective was the experience of working with China on African security, which for one diplomat involved with the South African mission underscored the willingness of the Chinese to genuinely seek out, consult and integrate South African (and African) views in formulating UN Security Council positions (Anonymous South African diplomat, personal interview, 2010). In its more recent tenure as a non-permanent member (2011-2013), the South African support for UNSC Resolution 1973 on Libya, which paved the way for NATO-led 'regime change', corresponded with a Chinese abstention that at least in part reflected consultations with African and Arab regional bodies, even if the action went against Beijing's preferred position (Swaine 2012, p.6). Following a heated national exchange demonizing the decision, Pretoria thereafter took a series of positions more consciously aligned to BRICS approaches in the UNSC (Alden and Schoeman, 2013).

With regard to FOCAC, South African involvement has reflected a desire to ensure that African – or at least South African – perspectives were incorporated in the ministerial meetings. South African officials are regularly lauded by Chinese officials as being the most active of delegates amongst the African ambassadors based in Beijing. Over the years, this activism has translated into the incorporation of measures calling for beneficiation as a feature of Chinese investments in the resource sector, improved terms of trade and greater adherence by Chinese firms to environmental and labour standards implemented at the bilateral level. South Africa's hosting of FOCAC VI on 4-5 December 2015 – the first FOCAC summit on African soil after apparent resistance by Beijing – provided a further opportunity for Pretoria (who co-chairs until 2018) to make its influence felt.

South Africa's ascension to the BRICS grouping in late 2010 followed an intensive lobbying campaign with its members and, reportedly, came against the backdrop of China's unsuccessful attempts to join the IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) grouping (Games, 2013, p.383). The Zuma presidency picked up the idea of a BRICS Development Bank, an Indian initiative endorsed by the BRICS Summit in New Delhi in 2012, and made it a centre piece of its hosting of the Durban Summit in 2013 (Alden and Schoeman, 2013). While agreement was reached on some aspects

of the BRICS New Development Bank, notably the capital requirements of members and its headquarters in Shanghai (a major disappointment for South African officials, even with a decision to set up a regional office in South Africa), a fuller rendering of its activities (most likely infrastructure development) remained mired in negotiations at the time of the Durban Summit (Wood, 2014). Regarding BRICS and global issues, as the various summit declarations ⁸ highlighted, the two governments shared similar positions on the need for example to 'democratise' international institutions and the necessity of an approach to climate change which took into account developing countries, interests. On controversial foreign policy issues like Libya (or later Crimea), while there was no conformity of position expected, disagreements were to be expressed behind closed doors and not for the world to see so as to retain the image of BRICS unity. ⁹

Trade and investment

The momentum building behind more than a decade and a half of diplomatic relations is producing closer, more pragmatic economic ties. Two-way trade has accelerated since 2008, from R121 billion to R270 billion in 2013 (including a 32% jump from the 2012 figure of R205 billion), thereby making China the country's largest global trading partner (Republic of South Africa, 2014b; Ensor, 2014). Reinforcing this trend are various factors such as South Africa's own changing foreign policy approach which has elevated the importance of economic links, as reflected by President Zuma's 'all-embracing' attitude towards economic ties with China while other aspects such as participation in peacekeeping have decreased (Grant-Makokera, 2015, p.2). On a global level, Pretoria's formal recognition of China's market economy status in the aftermath of Beijing's decision to join the WTO, led to the upgrading of its strategic partnership in 2004 (Nkoana-Mashabane, 2013, p.4). Two-way trade also has flourished partially due to the contraction of global trade following the 2008 financial crisis. In the first half of 2009 it was calculated that there had been a 32.8% drop in imports from major import economies, such as the EU and US (International Trade Centre, 2009, p.4). In this context China became the largest bilateral trading partner of both South Africa and the region – and as noted above is even regarded to have supported South Africa in weathering the global economic crisis. ¹⁰

Investment on the other hand forms a more modest portion of economic relations. South African Reserve Bank data reveals¹¹ that China was a modest source of FDI for South Africa from 1997–2010 when compared to countries like the United Kingdom, United States and Germany – with the exception of 2008, when it was the top source (Sandrey 2013, p.3; Meibo and Ren 2013, p.10). There were hopes of the expansion of economic links when the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) took a 20% stake (\$5.5 billion) in South Africa's Standard Bank in 2008 – said to be one of the largest equity investments into the country (The Economist, 2014; Alden and Wu, 2014, p.21). Yet the deal can be construed as not being 'employment-generating' FDI; moreover expectations of the deal generating high revenue have thus far proved to be inflated (Alden and Wu, 2014, p.21; Africa Confidential, 2010, p.2).

According to Shelton and Kabemba (2012, p.77), up until 2012 South African firms invested approximately R8.48 billion (\$800 million at 2010 rates) in China, mostly in the mining sector (iron ore, zinc, coal and precious metals), the food and beverage industry, and telecommunications and media. The South African presence in China includes the media conglomerate, Naspers and its majority stake in China's largest Internet company, Tencent (Boehler 2014). Multinational corporations such as SAB-Miller (beverages) and Anglo-American (mining) whose capital base and management structure was originally South African but are now listed internationally, are also significant investors.

The investment front also demonstrates the extent to which the recipient milieu is in fact impacting Chinese interests. Although South Africa is a resource-rich country, it is viewed in industry terms as maturing, so opportunities for outside investors are limited (Bezuidenhout, personal interview, 2014). Moreover, its regulatory environment is considerably more complex than that of other African countries, and is reasonably well enforced. Coupled to this is a rigid labour market and the strong position of trade unions, which make life difficult for the Chinese (as with their Taiwanese predecessors) operating textile factories for example (Mail & Guardian, 2013). Mbeki's promotion of black economic empowerment (BEE), which requires businesses to provide company assets to black South Africans, also served to inhibit some investors. For novice Chinese entrepreneurs, these factors have presented obstacles that have taken some time to overcome.

These factors are evident in the cautious approach adopted by Chinese companies to investing in the South African mining sector where China seeks to enter into joint ventures ¹² or arrangements with suppliers in South Africa with the aim of obtaining long-term, stable sources of resources (Shelton and Kabemba, 2012, p.79). Coupled with China's engagement is the ANC's interest in opening up the South African mining sector to new foreign investors like China and Russia, according to an ex-DTI official, to break the dominance of long-established mining companies whose practices remained largely framed by the narrow extractive approaches of the past (Qobo, personal interview, 2014).

While the modalities of Chinese investors remain much the same, there have been signals of diversification since the stabilisation of the severe market turbulence of 2009. This was partly encouraged by Zuma's foreign policy strategy, involving a more conscious leveraging of Chinese financial resources in pursuit of South Africa's industrialisation (such as the announcement of a multi-billion dollar National Infrastructure Plan in infrastructure in 2012) and African Agenda (Republic of South Africa, 2014a). The result seems to be a surge in Chinese capital investment into South Africa, according to one report (Ensor, 2014), which totalled at R13.33 billion by 2014.

New areas of investment include the acquisition of media (China's StarTimes acquired the struggling pay-tv operator, TopTV), vineyard (Val de Vie estate) and even a prospective multi-million dollar mixed-use residential, retail and light-industry facility east of Johannesburg by Shanghai Zendai Property (Ferreira, 2014; Shih, 2014). Moreover, Chinese financing for local beneficiation through a steel plant in Phalaborwa anticipates a new trend aimed at employment generating investment for South Africans, ¹³ and is also echoed in discussions for the revival of the Coega Industrial Development Zone in East London that could generate 4600 jobs (Fabricius, 2014; Herald Live, 2014). Importantly, many of these developments are still unfolding and thus their full impact remains undetermined.

Diplomacy – though little concrete action – took aim at outstanding areas of difference, such as the continued trade deficit and the structure of trade (Gonzalez-Núñez, 2010). China imports minimally value-added products (such as minerals and agricultural products) from South Africa, while South Africa mainly imports Chinese

manufactured products (such as clothing, data processing machines, bull dozers and motor vehicles).¹⁴ Notably since the 2010 Beijing Declaration, both countries indicated commitment to ensure the inclusion of more value-added products in South Africa's exports to China (DTI, 2012).

During President Xi Jinping's state visit to South Africa in March 2013, both sides finally signed the Terms of Reference for a JIMWG and a Technical Committee on Trade Statistics with the aim of coordinating and ensuring implementation of major projects, solving challenges related to such projects and supporting bilateral trade through practical cooperation¹⁵ – an important issue being the inconsistencies in (calculations of) economic data from both sides (Gelb 2010, p.6; Sandrey, Mpitsa, Vermaak and De Beer, 2013, p.5). China also pledged R94 billion in trade and investment to South Africa during Xi's second state visit on 3 December 2015. Whilst the intention to address South Africa's economic concerns is clear, it is not yet commensurate to the rapid rate of growth in economic links.

More than any other dimension of the bilateral economic relationship, the experience of South African manufacturing firms confronted with Chinese competition has become illustrative of some of the problems between the two countries (Munemo, 2013, p.305; Alden and Wu, 2014, p.22). A sector that in 1995 employed 230 000 South Africans and was the country's sixth largest exporter, suffered between 75 000 and 85 000 job losses through direct competition with Chinese imports (Shelton & Kabemba, 2012, p.110). The continuing job losses to Chinese imports in the manufacturing sector has made the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) one of China's most vocal critics (Shelton & Kabemba, 2012, pp.111-112). While some unionists within COSATU are more sanguine about the Chinese impact (Masuku, personal interview, 2013), noting more positive impacts emerging over the long term from deepening economic engagement with China, especially in terms of learning and technology transfer (thus reflecting changes within the union's leadership). The South African government's public concern over the adverse impact on manufacturing has been tempered by privately held beliefs that sectors such as textiles are not sustainable in a globalising trade environment.¹⁶

Moreover, both countries compete commercially in Africa. In fact South Africa ranks as Africa's biggest investor, and not China as popularly perceived (Defence Web,

2010). In recognition of the need for transport infrastructure in Africa, South African companies such as Grindrod have ventured into rail infrastructure investment in Africa; meanwhile Chinese firms have also signed deals to undertake railway construction (Munshi, 2014; Wildau, 2015). There is, however, the possibility that Chinese FDI in South Africa is producing impacts that may offset these commercial losses. For instance the use of South Africa as a site for FAW's (motor manufacturer) auto assembly has produced a market for its vehicles and a platform for exports into other regions in Africa that could eventually fulfil many of South Africa's stated ambitions to harness employment through FDI (Alden and Wu, 2014, p.20). Importantly, the trade front is a reminder that China has other crucial trading partners on the continent; in 2012 its main African trading partners were South Africa (30%), Angola (19%) and Nigeria, Egypt and Libya (all at 5%) (Tralac, 2013). This leads Sandrey et al (2013, p.4) to note that 'South Africa is not as important to China as the converse of China to South Africa'.

Finally, the recent 'normalisation' of China's economy (Michelson, 2015; Kilpatrick, 2015) prompts South Africa to assess the burgeoning relationship between the diplomatic and economic fronts in terms of Zuma's stated goals to prioritise domestic industrialisation as both domestic and foreign policy driver. There are signs of such recognition and possible expanding links with other parts of Asia, as reflected by South Africa's Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa's visit to Japan in August 2015 to promote trade and investment and consolidate the African agenda by strengthening the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) partnership, just a month after his state visit to China to discuss issues such as financial cooperation, the BRICS New Development Bank and South Africa's hosting FOCAC VI (Ramaphosa, 2015; RDM News Wire, 2015).

State-society relations

Public engagement is increasingly important in China-South Africa relations. Both countries are generally taking more interest in public diplomacy (albeit China to a larger degree) (Alden and Wu, 2014, pp.23-24). With respect to bilateral relations, policymakers recognise the need to increase people-to-people engagement as reflected by the remarks by China's ambassador to South Africa, Tian Xuejun (2012):

The Chinese government has attached great importance to people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and Africa, actively helped Chinese and African people to meet with each other, know each other, and become friends with each other, so that everyone would advocate, participate in and promote China-Africa relations

As China's communication with foreign publics increases, so will the public's reaction to Chinese engagement become more assertive. Howard French (2014) sees that Africa's vibrant advocacy and civil society groups are the very stakeholders that will challenge formal representations of the relationship as 'win-win'. Additionally the Chinese community in South Africa - reported as the largest in Africa, estimated to stand at more than 350 000 in 2012 (although official numbers are difficult to determine) - is projected to increase in the coming decades (Park and Alden, 2013).

Public participation in China-South Africa relations is both complex and less developed than the formal economic and political links. It is important to assess different levels of interaction (which are not, however, mutually exclusive) that include the interaction between Chinese and South African publics, China's engagement with its 'own public' and the nature of South African government-public interaction. It is such elements that together, complicate the government-public nexus in bilateral relations - and thus require further interpretation.

China-South Africa ties are not merely high-level engagements driven by elite interests. There are also informal and subtle spaces, described by Park and Alden (2013) as the 'downstairs' dimension, where un-orchestrated engagements potentially shape the agenda of the more formal relationship. In particular the links and understanding between Chinese and South African publics remain limited and snapshots of emotive commentary reflect this (Wu, 2013). For example, following the 2012 public outrage over the 455 rhinos that had been killed illegally for their horns in South Africa, the journalist Julian Rademeyer commented 'there's this stereotype being sold in South Africa of these evil, Fu Manchu Asians trying to kill our wildlife' (Powell, 2012). The popularised term 'Fong Kong' has also become part of the South African lexicon, denoting goods that are cheap imitations and cannot be trusted (McNamee, Mills, Manoeli, Mulaudzi, Doran and Chen, 2012, p.24). This has been

linked to goods originating from China. The phrase even became the title of a popular kwaito (local music genre) hit in 2010, reflecting the transforming relations between the continent and China (Sosibo, 2010). The long-standing perception of inferior quality is in turn impacting China's business presence in South Africa (Zhigang and Jiabao, 2014, p.19; Lianxing, 2014, p.21) Linked to this is the notion that in a country where there is nearly 25% unemployment, 'Chinese workers are increasingly taking jobs away from unemployed South Africans' (Slabbert, 2012). South African civil society is also outspokenly critical when Chinese actors have acted in ways that diverge from the interests of local actors. For instance is the important role of South African civil society in the 2008 campaign to prevent a Chinese vessel, the *An Yue Jiang*, from offloading weapons destined for Zimbabwe's defence force (Fritz, 2009).

Apart from events that generate emotive responses¹⁷, are also perceptions that are deep-seated and linked to specific interests. This was highlighted in a 2010 Afrobarometer perceptions study (Gadzala and Hanusch, 2010, p.2-3) that noted amid contrary views of China as a welcomed partner or an exploiter of the continent, the lesser-known motivations and the reasons behind such perceptions (that is, the fact that China's engagement in Africa has produced both economic winners and losers), which can affect relations. In terms of the South African business reaction to China's economic engagements, there are generally more positive views of China in the primary materials sector (agriculture and mining) than in manufacturing, where competition is most acute; the service sector manifests mixed feelings (due to partnering with local financial services and Chinese firms competing directly with South Africa on the continent).¹⁸ A 2013 online questionnaire on China's business practices in Africa by the Ethics Institute of South Africa (2014) similarly found that the majority of the 1 056 respondents (from South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya) were concerned about the business impact of China on the continent – with South African respondents being the most concerned (Louw-Vaudran, 2014).

The focus on economic and high political interests (and the South African public focus on erratic emotive cases) means that the traditional sources of public diplomacy - such as the promotion and interaction of one another's cultures, tradition and values - are absent. It is such concerns over the gap between formal and trans-societal links that have motivated a heightened government response in order to – in

the words of a South African official – remove the ‘venom ... between the two societies’.¹⁹ One such initiative is the ‘South Africa Year in China’ in 2014 and ‘China Year in South Africa’ in 2015, a set of cultural events designed to strengthen bilateral relations and foster multi-sectoral cooperation (Wu, 2015).

Another element is China’s engagement in the South African context through the Chinese diaspora. There are various local South African Chinese associations that have become unofficial interlocutors between Beijing and the broader South African society, such as the Chinese Association which co-ordinates cultural events like the Chinese New Year celebrations (Milo, 2013; Pon, 2014).

There are nonetheless limitations in the extent to which the Chinese diaspora can help leverage closer relations. The Chinese community in South Africa is complex, consisting of various ethnic Chinese groups who have entered the country under different conditions; they also share very diverse origins and different levels of political, economic and social assimilation (Alden and Wu, 2014, p.27; Park, 2012). These distinctions are exacerbated by the varying levels of perceived ‘closeness’ to the Chinese state and interest in developing greater China–South Africa relations. The diversity within the Chinese community reinforces the divided views on what being ‘Chinese’ means, highlights the complex dynamics between members of the diaspora and local people, and even the disjuncture’s that exist within diaspora communities themselves. The public reaction to a Constitutional Court ruling that allowed Chinese South Africans to become eligible under the BEE programme, which misconstrued the small numbers potentially involved (under 10 000) to being a concession and even incentive to all Chinese entering the country, underscores the sensitive domestic dynamics at play (Chang, 2008).

Linked to this case is the factor of South Africa’s own internal politics. In particular is the public perception of government transactions as being non-transparent and driven by elite interests, which could also impact China-South Africa relations. Indeed the publicity surrounding the activities of a small number of individuals and their commercially minded interaction with top South African officials is not unique to China-South Africa relations. In 2013 several South Africa media reports pointed to the Gupta family’s close-knit ties with the ANC leadership and their use of an official military airbase to fly in wedding guests from India in a private jet. (Tripathi, 2013;

Hlongwane, 2013). Accusations of the alleged demand for South African diplomatic passports for Gupta family members and government spending on advertisements in the Gupta-owned newspaper, the *New Age*, as well as the paper's 'business breakfast briefings,' highlighted the symbiotic nature of the relationship (Ngalwa, Matlala and Shoba, 2013).

Similar questions were raised over the purchase of Independent News and Media, formerly owned by the Irish Independent group, by the Sekunjalo Independent Media consortium. Described as a 'private and commercial transaction', there was a reported 25% ownership by the ruling ANC and 20% by 'Chinese state instruments', sparking concern over possible implications for the media environment.²⁰ In particular, it led to suspicion over the governments' interests in acquiring shares in a private media company and the nature of the deal. The concern over the Sekunjalo Consortium's buying into one of the four largest media companies in South Africa is rooted in deeper socio-historical fears. Indeed, South Africans' experience of censorship under apartheid makes any suggestion of the violation of the right to freedom of expression a highly emotive issue (Lloyd, 2013).

More recently in 2015 there has been public debate over the introduction of Mandarin in South African schools. Such discussions have centred around, on the one hand, the need for South Africans to learn Mandarin, which is becoming an important medium in a globally connected world; and, on the other, a more inward-looking perspective commenting on the asymmetry of bilateral relations and the lesser degree of attention paid by government to preserving South Africa's 11 official languages in education (Times Live, 2015; Nkosi, 2015; Vlok, 2015, pp.106-107). The tensions between these perspectives reflect on South African identity in a transforming international order, on the one hand actively globalising in step with the world's leading emerging power or on the other hand focusing on a more narrowly preservationist and culturally defensive approach.

Conclusion

Geldenhuis (2012, p.30) states that understanding a country's foreign policy and external conduct requires the consideration of a range of domestic factors such as: national attributes, government orientations and national experiences. It is the points

and variety of intersects between China-South Africa, informed by such domestic factors that make this a uniquely complex strategic partnership.

As demonstrated through this examination of South Africa's relationship with China, the actual (as opposed to rhetorical) deepening of diplomatic and economic ties with Beijing followed upon a period of sustained foreign policy activism in continental and global affairs led by the Mbeki administration that barely factored China in. With the conscious assertion of an agenda under the Zuma government that sought to instrumentalise foreign policy for domestic development purposes, coupled to the global financial crisis and its impact on the traditional Western partners, the time was ripe for a stronger embrace of China. Re-aligning South African foreign policy to cooperate more closely with Chinese interests became a manifestation of its development needs and provided a source of legitimacy, which strengthens its leadership credentials as 'Africa's representative'. There remains public recognition that 'the two countries would continue to regard bilateral relations as a strategic focus and priority in their respective foreign policies, as expressed in the 2014 '5-10 Year Strategic Programme on Cooperation' (South Africa and China, 2015). A 'normalising' Chinese economy that moves away from manufacturing opens relations to a deepening development partnership at official levels underwritten by substantive Chinese engagement beyond trade.

However, in keeping with the scholarly assertion that elite positions on foreign policy and identity are often contested by domestic elements – be they counter-elites or societal groupings – there is criticism of these developments by ANC dissidents, opposition parties, as well as some elements of business and civil society – whose perspectives and interests converge to a position that is generally at odds with the Zuma administration's foreign policy orientation towards China. This is reinforced by the dismay in South African and influential Western circles with the drift away from what they characterise as an explicitly value-laden foreign policy under Mandela.

What these critical societal and foreign voices tend to neglect is that the post-apartheid foreign policy vision is one which both trumpets a principle – human rights – while concurrently affirming an identity that is African and of the South (Mandela 1993). In many respects the re-alignment of South African foreign policy is anticipated in a reading of Mandela's formative article on post-apartheid foreign

policy in late 1993 and its call for an embrace of the imperatives of domestic development, the African continent and the South itself (Mandela, 1993). Seen from this perspective, the Zuma administration's focus on African leadership through leveraging Chinese power should be understood as an elite-led effort to reframe national identity towards this vision of post-apartheid identity through foreign policy activism. Under the Zuma presidency, principles like human rights are subsumed through foreign policy discourses on 'Ubuntu' and given a much more collectivist meaning that consciously draws on African values (DIRCO, 2011). Chinese endorsement of South Africa's leadership role in Africa and the resources it can bring to bear to realise the government's development ambitions.

Forging national identity such that it reflects the African and Southern sensibilities is a foreign policy task as much as it is a domestic one. The alarm with which the government met the outbreak of xenophobic violence across the country starting in April 2015 seems to underscore the elite character of this aim and the dissenting views held by elements of South African society. That the government's contemporary efforts to realise this re-orientation through foreign policy re-alignment, and the controversy it generates at home (and abroad), presses home the continuing contestation over the character of South Africa's national identity in this still fractured society.

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Notes

1. Examples, including various Zapiro cartoons during South Africa's joining of the BRICS grouping and hosting of the BRICS Summit in 2013.
2. For the full text of the Pretoria Declaration see www.peopledaily.comen/english/200004/25/3ng20000425_39697.html, accessed 17 May 2014.

3. For the full text of former President of the People's Republic of China Hu Jintao's speech, see: 'Enhance China - Africa Unity and Cooperation To Build a Harmonious World', Speech at University of Pretoria, South Africa, 7 February 2007, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2007/jintao0207.htm>, accessed on 26 September 2013.
4. One factor was the new trade rules that were negotiated at the WTO in 2005, which opened up many African textile sectors to market forces, see: Mutume, G. 'Loss of textile market costs African jobs', April 2006, <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2006/loss-textile-market-costs-african-jobs>, accessed 30 June 2014. Another example is the alleged dumping of coated paper originating in China and Republic of Korea, see: *International Trade Administration Commission of South Africa.* 'Investigation into the alleged dumping of coated paper originating in or imported from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Korea: Preliminary determination', 445, 20 August 2013.
5. As expressed by a DIRCO official at the South Africa–China: Diplomatic Relations at 15 Years Ambassadorial Forum, 19 September 2013.
6. Anonymous source. The training involved practice for landing on aircraft carriers, which the South African's had learned from sub-contracted work with US forces during the Iraq war. The US government allegedly tried to block parts for flight training equipment upon learning of the scheme.
7. Anonymous source suggested that President Jacob Zuma and SACP head, Gwede Mantashe had to exert pressure on NEC members to attend.
8. See 2011 Sanya Declaration, 2012 Delhi Declaration, 2013 Durban Declaration, 2014 Fortaleza Declaration and 2015 Ufa Declaration.
9. CCP delegation visit to SAIIA in February 2013.
10. As expressed by a DIRCO official at the South Africa–China: Diplomatic Relations at 15 Years Ambassadorial Forum, 19 September 2013.
11. Notably, analysts from China provide alternative figures based on Chinese estimates that are much higher, suggesting that China's FDI stock in South Africa has moved from \$44 million in 2003 to over \$4 billion in 2011. Yet a more recent media report states that China's total capital investment between 2003-2014 was of R13.33bn (see: Ensor, L. 2014, March 12. 'Bilateral trade with China on the increase', Business Day, retrieved from: <http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/trade/2014/03/12/bilateral-trade-with-china-on-the-increase>). Statistical anomalies like these are a continuing source of contention at ministerial level.
12. In a reflection of the Chinese response to changing mining regulations and BEE requirements for example, East Asian Metals, a subsidiary of Sinosteel, purchased a 60% share of ASA Metals in the Dilokong Mine in Limpopo (itself a joint venture with Limpopo province arranged in 1997); for more examples see Alden C and Y, Wu pp.18-22.
13. This is seen in the expansion of Hisense and the FAW automotive manufacturing plants *HeraldLive*, 'Chinese unveil plan for R18bn Coega investment', 18 March

- 2014, www.heraldlive.co.za/chinese-unveil-plan-for-r18bn-coega-investment/, accessed 22 June 2014.
14. Observation made by M Qobo, participant in the SAIIA-Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) event, 'China–South Africa: Unpacking a Strategic Partnership', SAIIA, November 2012, <http://www.saiia.org.za/events/china-south-africa-unpacking-a-strategic-partnership>.
 15. Also remarked by South African policymakers. Such as: Republic of South Africa. Department of International Relations and Cooperation Deputy Minister Marius Fransman, at the 'China–South Africa Diplomatic Relations at 15 Years: Pretoria's View', keynote address at South Africa–China: Diplomatic Relations at 15 Years Ambassadorial Forum, 19 September 2013, <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2013/frans0919.html>, accessed 3 October 2013 and Deputy Minister of Public Works Jeremy Cronin, remarks at the National Day of the People's Republic of China, 27 September 2013, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2013/chin0930.html>, 5 November 2013
 16. Numerous conversations with DTI officials.
 17. For other examples on public perceptions on China–South Africa, see Wu Y. 2013, March 1. 'The political and diplomatic implications of social media: The cases of China and South Africa', *African East-Asian Affairs (The China Monitor)*, pp. 70–87.
 18. As noted by Tony Twine (senior economist at Econometrix) in Campbell K, 'Some challenges ahead as SA's new "partnership" with China takes shape', *Engineering News*, 5 November 2010, <http://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/some-challenges-ahead-as-sas-new-partnership-with-china-takes-shape-2010-11-05>, accessed 30 January 2011.
 19. Remark made by a South African official at the South Africa–China Diplomatic Relations at 15 Years Ambassadorial Forum, hosted by AISA, DIRCO and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, Pretoria, 19 September 2013.
 20. For examples of public commentary see: Harber A, 'Chinese "soft diplomacy" enters South Africa's media space', *BDlive*, 27 June 2013, <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2013/06/27/chinese-soft-diplomacy-enters-south-africas-media-space>, accessed 1 July 2013; and Trehwela P, 'China–ANC alliance a threat to media freedom in SA', *Politicsweb*, 12 March 2014, <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71639?oid=565733&sn=Detail&pid=71639>, accessed 13 March 2014.

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