UTILISING SOUTH AFRICA'S SOFT POWER IN PURSUIT OF SADC'S DEVELOPMENT AGENDA: TOWARDS A REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT APPROACH WITHIN FOCAC

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all my departed loved ones, especially my mom, Lhina. Enkosi MamCirha for who I am becoming!

My beloved husband, Mongameli, you mean the world to me! Your love, support, and, above all, your dedicated prayers carried me through, as always.

To my children, Avuya and Likuye, I genuinely leave my life for you!

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how South Africa, in coalition with SADC member states, can strategically leverage its soft power and middle-power diplomacy to promote a regionalised approach to the FOCAC. Amid evolving global dynamics and the growing importance of regionalisation driven by regional agency, the research identifies synergies between the SADC's RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035. It examines how a coordinated, region-led strategy can optimise FOCAC opportunities, particularly with the support of emerging economies and development institutions.

Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study analyses regional policy and governance frameworks, diplomatic engagements, and scenario-based assessments to evaluate opportunities and challenges in aligning SADC's development priorities within multilateral forums such as FOCAC.

Findings reveal that RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035 prioritise infrastructure, industrialisation, and human capital development, offering a strong foundation for convergence. The study further highlights the role of triangular cooperation in bridging development gaps, promoting equitable resource-sharing, and enhancing South-South collaboration. However, policy incoherence, fragmented coordination, bilateral project implementation, financing constraints, asymmetrical power dynamics, and limited regional agency hinder SADC regional integration efforts. To overcome these challenges, the study recommends institutionalising a structured pre-FOCAC consultation mechanism among SADC members to unify regional priorities, improve policy alignment, and amplify Africa's bargaining power. It also advocates for the integration of FOCAC initiatives with continental frameworks such as AU Agenda 2063, AfCFTA, PIDA, and RISDP. The study advocates for increased collaboration with emerging partners to promote sustainable and inclusive development.

South Africa's leadership is positioned as pivotal in this process, with its diplomatic influence, normative appeal, and convening power enabling broader stakeholder participation, including non-state actors. Ultimately, this research presents a strategic framework for deepening regional integration, strengthening Africa's agency in China-Africa relations, and fostering a more balanced, development-oriented South-South cooperation agenda that can extend beyond SADC to other RECs and the AU.

This study highlights key areas for future research, including addressing challenges to SADC's agency and regional integration in global partnerships and exploring the role of strategic autonomy and decolonial thought in advancing regional self-determination, policy coherence, and sustainable development.

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AU	African Union
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
APRM	African Peer Review Mechanism
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CADFund	China-Africa Development Fund
CDB	China Development Bank
EXIM	Export-Import Bank of China
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
G20	Group of Twenty
IOs	International Organisations
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOFCOM	Ministry of Commerce
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
PRC/China	People's Republic of China
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
RISDP	Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan
ROs	Regional Organisations
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SEZs	Special Economic Zones
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa's transitional democratic foreign policy, shaped during the presidencies of Nelson Mandela (1994–1999) and Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), laid the foundation for the country's regional and global engagement. Rooted in the principles of democracy, human rights, peace, and equality, this foreign policy approach aimed to position South Africa as a constructive global actor (Sidiropoulos, 2012a; Republic of South Africa, 2011). Both leaders consistently prioritised multilateral diplomacy, conflict resolution, and regional cooperation, particularly within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and across the African continent (Erlank, 2011; Mandela, 1993). Mandela focused on promoting democracy and human rights, while Mbeki's African Renaissance aimed for African activism in advancing regional development towards self-reliance, particularly in southern Africa (Gumede, 2005; Mbeki, 2004). South Africa leveraged the global transition around the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union (Landsberg, 2005). As per its national interests, the country had earlier, in 1994, committed itself to peace, security, sustainable development, and prosperity of SADC and the African continent, as set out in its obligation to the African Agenda.

Endowed with soft power due to its negotiated transition to democracy, various authors (see, e.g., Adebajo, 2017a; Sidiropoulos, 2014; Smith, 2012) contend that the principles and policies that South Africa adopted and the iconic moral stature of Nelson Mandela, facilitated South Africa emergence as a regional and global leader. South Africa's economic resilience, marked by its status as one of the continent's largest economies and its diversified industrial base, coupled with its strategic military capabilities, has positioned the country as a regional power on the continent (Pretorius *et al*., 2022). South Africa's reintegration into the international community and its active engagement in multilateral institutions from 1994 was shaped by the emergence of a unipolar world order – defined by the dominance of the United States after the Cold War - the acceleration of globalisation, and the expansion of multilateralism (Landsberg, 2022; Sidiropoulos, 2018; Alden & Schoeman, 2015).

This global context created favourable conditions for South Africa to reposition itself to engage in global governance through the UN, Commonwealth of Nations, AU, World Trade Organisation (WTO), the G20, and SADC, aligning its diplomacy with emerging global trends (Scholte, 2005; Ikenberry, 2001). As such, South Africa re-established diplomatic relations

with many countries and, notably, formalised ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1998 (DIRCO, 2011).

This relationship culminated in a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2010 and an All-Round Cooperative Strategic Partnership in the New Era in 2024, signaling the depth, scope, and future trajectory of the diplomatic ties between the two nations. (The Presidency, 2024; Reuters, Sept 2024).

The South Africa-China partnership is rooted in the principles established at the 1955 Bandung Conference.[1], which authors such as Shinn & Eisenman (2012) and Lee (2011) claim laid the groundwork for South-South cooperation. This conference emphasised solidarity among developing nations and promoted economic, political, technological, and cultural collaboration - a concept that resonated with Africa's political and socio-economic aspirations. As China's economic expansion accelerated, its engagement with Africa deepened, complementing the continent's market liberalisation efforts and development agenda (Brautigam, 2009; Alden, 2007; Taylor, 2006).

According to (2011) and Alden (2007), FOCAC was established in 2000, bringing together China and 53 African states with formal diplomatic ties, with Eswatini remaining the sole exclusion due to its recognition of Taiwan [2]. This institution formalised the longstanding Sino-African relationship, fostering trade, infrastructure, and development cooperation. Biniza (2018), Large (2008) Shelton & Paruk (2008) suggest that FOCAC offers a platform for mutual diplomatic, political, economic, and socio-cultural exchanges. The African Union (AU) officially joined FOCAC in 2012, but various scholars have differing perspectives on the role of the continental body, underscoring the complexity of the AU's involvement. While some authors like Mthembu & Wekesa (2017) and Naidu (2015) believe its role is largely symbolic, constrained by FOCAC's bilateral structure and coordination challenges, others, such as Omolo (2022), Adem (2013), Anshan *et al*. (2012), and Ikome (2010) highlight opportunities for

[1] According to Shinn (2012:33), the 1955 Asian African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, marked China's first serious involvement in Africa. Bandung was a turning point for Chinese diplomacy in its relations with Africa (Larkin, 1971: 16–26; Nasser-Eddine, 1972: 60–94, 117–20). Hence in this study and in foreign relations practice, this conference is often referenced.

[2] The potential participation of Eswatini in a future SADC–FOCAC sub-regional framework could be diplomatically navigated through careful negotiation, particularly in light of China's firm adherence to the "One China Principle" and Eswatini's growing interest in expanding economic relations with Asian partners, including China (Alden & Wu, 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2024; Musi, 2024; Mpako & Ndoma, 2024).

greater AU influence. Notwithstanding, Ampiah and Naidu (2008) intimate that FOCAC remains central to economic collaboration, infrastructure development, and poverty alleviation, aligning with SADC's regional development priorities.

SADC's Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2030 builds on its predecessor, RISDP 2020, to advance regional integration through industrialisation, infrastructure development, and economic diversification, enhancing trade and competitiveness (SADC, 2020). Originally adopted in 2003 as a long-term strategic framework aligned with the SADC's vision and the AU's Agenda 2063, the revised 2020–2030 plan reflects shifting economic and geopolitical priorities (AU, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021). According to the World Bank (2022), market integration, financial harmonisation, and alignment with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) promote regional value chains, digital transformation, and cross-border investment to drive sustainable and inclusive growth. Van Staden *et al*. (2018), Nagar & Paterson (2013), and Brown (2012) believe that there seems to be a convergence between FOCAC priorities and SADC's RISDP objectives that provide South Africa with an avenue to assert regional leadership and enhance collective African agency in Africa-China[3] relations, shaping multilateral outcomes.

Hence, this study explores how South Africa can leverage its partnership with China to advance a regional approach in FOCAC by strengthening SADC's institutional agency and fostering a unified African voice. Through this approach, South Africa can ensure that China's investments align with African priorities and benefit the region long-term. The study will assess South Africa's strategic role, policy options, and pathways to integrate regional interests into FOCAC's framework.

1.2 LITERATURE OVERVIEW

This section offers a preliminary literature review, assessing scholarly work and policy documents on fundamental concepts relevant to the research. It briefly highlights South Africa's foreign policy on regional integration, focusing on its soft power - a core concept underpinning this study which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, and middle-power diplomacy. It explores South Africa's diplomatic influence, economic leadership, and

[3] The study would refer to Africa-China relations irrespective of how the scholarly material consulted framed the relations. This is prompted by academics including Kupe's (2017:1) and Wariboko's (2020:152) assertion that common reference to China-Africa relations reinforces Chinese dominance in the relation and downplays the advancement of African agency through framing discourse, in the spirit of equal partnership.

institutional engagement to shape its role within SADC and its approach to fostering regional agency. The discussion further outlines FOCAC's potential underlying opportunities and challenges in advancing SADC's development agenda. Ultimately, it contextualises South Africa's role as a pivotal regional actor balancing the role of poly-lateral diplomacy in FOCAC to promote regional aspirations for sustainable development.

1.2.1 *South Africa's Foreign Policy on Regional Integration*

South Africa's regional integration foreign policy is shaped through its historical commitment to Africa's stability, unity, and economic development. As the most industrialised economy in Africa, Bradlow *et al*. (2020) and Alden & Schoeman (2015) contend that it has a vested interest in fostering economic diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and political stability within SADC and the AU. Mangu (2020b) asserts that, since 1994, South Africa's foreign policy has emphasised regionalism, evident in its leadership initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

While promoting the AfCFTA supports its aim of reducing external dependency and boosting intra-African trade, Hendricks & Majozi (2021), Zondi (2020), and Matseke (2018) suggest that South Africa's cautious approach to leading within the SADC reflects a desire to balance its regional influence with sensitivity to concerns about economic dominance. Zondi (2012) further denotes that the country's dual identity as a regional economic powerhouse and an advocate for African development necessitates a structured approach to leveraging FOCAC, ensuring that regional integration remains central to Africa-China cooperation. Notwithstanding its advocacy for African unity and economic self-reliance, Bradlow *et al*. (2020) contend that South Africa's leadership within SADC is sometimes perceived as dominant, raising concerns among smaller regional economies. Recent studies by Mapogo (2024) and Zubane *et al.* (2021) reinforce these concerns, noting that while South Africa plays a significant strategic role in SADC, its influence is shaped by perceptions of asymmetry and policy disparities. Bosl *et al*. (2008) also highlight the lack of a coordinated Southern African strategy to harness FOCAC opportunities, emphasising the need for a more inclusive regional approach aligned with the AU Agenda 2063.

South Africa's internal constraints have limited its capacity to effectively prioritise and implement foreign policy objectives aimed at advancing SADC regional integration (Makhanya & Naidu, 2022; Pillay & Vally, 2022; Buhlungu, 2021). Furthermore, Shoba & Mtapuri (2022)

and Matambo (2020) cite that economic asymmetries in their relations with China necessitate careful diplomacy to ensure balanced cooperation. To address these challenges, Mthembu & Wekesa (2017) suggest fostering equitable partnerships, strengthening governance institutions, and ensuring FOCAC initiatives align with Africa's long-term interests. South Africa's leadership, therefore, hinges on a strategic, consensus-driven approach that may be derived through harnessing its soft power diplomacy that balances regional priorities with domestic stability to enhance regional integration.

1.2.2 *South Africa's soft power and foreign policy strategies of middle powers*

South Africa's soft power and foreign policy strategies, reflected through its middlepowership[4]. It emphasises diplomacy, regional cooperation, and norm entrepreneurship to advance national interests and broader African developmental goals. Its middlepowership is expressed in bilateral and multilateral engagement within frameworks such as BRICS, the AU, FOCAC, the United Nations (UN), and the Group of Twenty (G20)[5] (Alden & Schoeman, 2015). The country's post-1994 democratic transition and moral authority bolstered its diplomatic influence, as Van der Westhuizen (2016a) argues, enabling mediation in conflicts and human rights promotion. However, Masters (2021) highlights inconsistencies in its normative commitments, particularly in its engagements with China and Russia, which create tensions between democratic ideals and economic pragmatism.

Habib (2019) observes that efforts to integrate emerging partners into Africa's development through triangular cooperation[6] face challenges, including internal SADC political conflicts and economic constraints. According to Landsberg (2020), while BRICS membership has reinforced South-South cooperation, concerns persist over South Africa's perceived paternalism in Africa and reliance on China within FOCAC. Mlambo and Dlamini (2022) concur that these issues raise questions about policy autonomy and sustainable regional integration, necessitating a recalibration of its soft power strategy to balance economic partnerships with regional priorities and reduce over-reliance on China-led frameworks.

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[4] Middlepowership refers to the ability of states that are neither great nor small powers, like South Africa, to influence regional and global affairs through multilateral engagement, coalition-building, and soft power rather than coercion (Jordaan, 2003; Schoeman, 2007).

[5] This study will refer to AU, BRICS, FOCAC, G20 and UN groupings as international partnerships platforms.

[6] Triangular Cooperation as a modality of development cooperation framework through which South Africa in collaboration with China and other emerging nations, can facilitate regionally-owned development initiatives with SADC – leveraging shared knowledge, and resources will be further expanded in the later chapters of the study. (OECD & UNOSSC, 2029; Mawdsley, 2019)

Bradlow *et al*. (2020), Tella (2018), and Ogunnubi (2015) perceive South Africa's soft power as rooted in its democratic constitutionalism, industrial strength, and regional influence. Its political stability and constitutional order generate international goodwill, advancing foreign policy interests. Nye (2004, 1990) conceptualises soft power as shaping preferences without coercion, with Hill (2016) emphasising its long-term transformative potential. Smart power strategies, blending soft and hard power, further influence global engagements (Nye, 2011). Tella (2018) and Ogunnubi & Amao (2016) suppose that socioeconomic challenges such as corruption, xenophobia, and diverse leadership perceptions constrain South Africa's influence. However, Bodomo (2009) believes an asymmetric soft power dynamic favours China within FOCAC, necessitating a strategic framework that balances regional diplomacy through vertical and horizontal engagements.

However, South Africa has projected its soft power through agenda-setting by advancing the interests of developing countries in various multilateral forums, including symbolic global engagements like hosting the AU Founding Summit in 2002, the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and COP 17. Naidu (2014), cited in Mthembu & Wekesa (2017) and Ogunnubi (2015), implies that the effectiveness of soft power depends on incorporating non-state actors, including civil society, think tanks, and private entities, to enhance credibility and contribute to trade, investment, and peacekeeping efforts to strengthen regional integration.

1.2.3 *SADC Development Agenda*

SADC's development agenda prioritises economic cooperation, poverty eradication, and regional stability, guided by RISDP 2020-2030 frameworks, SADC Vision 2050, and the Industrialisation Strategy 2015-2063 (SADC, 2015). Mlambo and Dlamini (2022) reason that effective implementation of these strategies could enhance China-Africa engagement within FOCAC at a sub-regional level. Taylor (2020) and Zeng (2020) argue that although scholars may overlook the SADC's role in FOCAC, the forum structurally limits deeper regional engagement. A shift toward regionalised engagement, where SADC coordinates negotiations, could help address this gap and align FOCAC projects with regional integration goals (Makonnen, 2015). Hence, Naidu (2021) contends that a more unified SADC approach could maximise FOCAC's benefits and strengthen Africa's agency in global economic governance. Tracy *et al*. (2010) observed that while the 2006 Windhoek Declaration on SADC-International

Cooperating Partners[7] did not explicitly prioritise China as a development partner, subsequent developments, including the 2019 Framework Agreement and increasing diplomatic ties, have significantly strengthened formal engagements between China and SADC. Despite China's commitment to aligning FOCAC with NEPAD's objectives and the accreditation of Chinese Ambassadors as Special Representatives to the SADC Secretariat (Chinese Embassy in Botswana), Shelton and Paruk (2008) believe that RECs remain on the periphery of China-Africa cooperation strategies. Recent summits and action plans show that FOCAC initiatives prioritise bilateral relations and national-level engagements (FOCAC, 2024).

A more deliberate Sino-subregional approach could enhance coordination, economic growth potential, and regional integration, particularly in infrastructure development. Nonetheless, Van Staden *et al*. (2018) highlight sovereignty concerns and conflicting national and regional priorities as key barriers. Yet, Taylor (2020) outlines that Africa's fragmented approach to FOCAC, characterised by bilateral rather than collective negotiation, undermines its bargaining power. Engagement remains inconsistent and reactive rather than strategic, without a unified regional policy on China. South Africa often prioritises domestic interests over SADC-wide initiatives but is expected to lead in aligning regional priorities within FOCAC. Bradlow *et al*. (2020) note that it leverages such partnerships to advance national and regional goals.

1.2.4 *FOCAC – Prospects and Challenges in Advancing a Sub-Regional Approach to the Partnership*

FOCAC presents opportunities for SADC's regional integration, particularly in infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and capacity-building. However, it faces challenges in making a sub-regional approach work effectively. Alden & Large (2019) believe the SADC can advance cross-border projects that enhance regional connectivity and economic growth by leveraging China's financing mechanisms and technical expertise. FOCAC's structured three-year action plans provide aid, trade, and investment framework, aligning with Africa's broader integration efforts through initiatives like the AfCFTA (Reuters, 2024; Du Plessis, 2014). However, scholars such as Hwang (2020), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), and Alden & Wu (2017) argue that the lack of structured pre-FOCAC consultations within SADC undermines the

[7] SADC-ICP partnerships facilitate regional development and integration by aligning international cooperation partners—including multilateral institutions, emerging economies, traditional donors, and non-state actors—with SADC's strategic priorities in areas such as infrastructure, trade, governance, and peace and security (SADC Secretariat, 2020).

region's ability to present a unified, strategic agenda, limiting its influence in shaping China-Africa cooperation to address Southern Africa's specific development challenges.

The 2012 FOCAC Declaration emphasised engagement with regional bodies like the AU and NEPAD, indicating a potential for regionalised cooperation (FOCAC, 2012; Taylor, 2014; Alden & Large, 2019). This shift signalled China's growing recognition of Africa's collective development frameworks and the role of multilateral institutions in shaping cooperation beyond bilateral engagements (Gadzala, 2015). However, to maximise FOCAC's benefits, SADC must move beyond fragmented bilateralism and adopt a unified regional strategy that strengthens its collective bargaining power (Qobo & Soko, 2021). As a middle power, South Africa is crucial in advocating this shift, ensuring that FOCAC aligns with SADC's long-term developmental goals. Additionally, Taylor (2020) asserts that triangular cooperation with emerging partners such as India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Gulf States.[8] can enhance knowledge transfer and reduce dependency on traditional donors in a way that drives regional ownership.

FOCAC's structural limitations pose challenges to a sub-regional approach. Brautigam (2020) deems China's preference for bilateral agreements sidelines SADC as a collective entity, reducing its influence in negotiations. Naidu (2021) highlights that internal disparities among SADC member states further contribute to fragmentation, while political and economic tensions weaken regional cohesion. Gazibo and Mbabia (2012, cited in Du Plessis, 2014) highlight that transparency remains a challenge, with limited quantifiable data on Chinese development assistance raising concerns about accountability and dependency risks. Despite South Africa's efforts to push for a more balanced partnership, African RECs remain peripheral in FOCAC decision-making processes (McDonald, 2012, cited in Du Plessis, 2014; Anshan *et al*., 2012). If FOCAC strengthens institutional coordination, Tull (2006) intimates it can enhance transparency, shift to regional engagements, mitigate asymmetric power dynamics, and better support Africa's long-term developmental prospects. As Archer (2001) stated, strengthening Africa's agency within FOCAC requires institutional evolution and collective strategies prioritising regional interests over individual state gains. To augment this argument, the 2024 FOCAC summit highlighted China's pivot toward high-quality, sustainable development and increased private sector involvement. Ultimately, to avoid marginalisation

[8] Emerging partners, such as India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Gulf States, are middle-income countries expanding their global influence through South-South cooperation, trade, and investment (Gray & Gills, 2016; Mawdsley, 2019). They offer alternatives to traditional Western donors in global development (Cooper & Farooq, 2015).

and ensure FOCAC outcomes align with Africa's development goals, the continent must assert strategic agency early in the negotiation process, guided by a unified voice and anchored in Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA (De Kluiver, 2024).

1.2.5 *South Africa's Leadership Role in Driving Regional Agency*

South Africa is pivotal in the SADC's regional leadership, leveraging its economic and political influence to drive the regional agency. Nathan (2013) and Alden & Schoeman (2015) maintain that, as the largest economy in the region, it has been instrumental in mediation efforts and spearheading economic integration initiatives such as the AfCFTA. The country's engagement in multilateral platforms, including the AU and BRICS, further enhances its diplomatic leverage and middle-power status (Van der Westhuizen, 2016a). However, notwithstanding these aspirations, South Africa faces challenges in consolidating regional agency. Gumede (2021 and 2022) claims that domestic political instability, sluggish economic growth, and governance issues hinder regional leadership. Additionally, Fabricius (2017) underlines divisions within SADC, particularly in response to security crises, which complicate consensus-building. South Africa's foreign policy fluctuates between pan-African solidarity and strategic pragmatism, which, according to Landsberg (2012), leads to inconsistencies in regional engagements.

While South Africa's leadership remains constrained by regional scepticism and global power asymmetries (Habib, 2013), a cooperative leadership model, such as a "troika of leaders" approach suggested by Zondi (2012), could mitigate concerns of dominance and enhance collective agency within FOCAC. Nevertheless, Hill (2016) contends that challenges such as political will, bureaucratic inertia, and a preference for bilateral engagements persist. Strengthening structured regional mechanisms is crucial for South Africa to effectively leverage FOCAC and advance SADC's development agenda. However, Ngoma (2019) asserts that South Africa's dominance is often met with doubt from smaller SADC states, which perceive its leadership as unilateral. Effective regional leadership, therefore, requires balancing national interests with inclusive cooperation with other member states to strengthen the SADC's collective agency.

1.2.6 *Poly-Lateral Diplomacy in FOCAC: Implications for SADC's Regional Agency*

FOCAC's triangular cooperation, when viewed through the lens of poly-lateral diplomacy**,** presents possibilities and constraints for regional agency in Africa, particularly within SADC. According to Hocking (2006) and Wiseman (2004), poly-lateral diplomacy extends beyond

state-to-state relations by integrating regional bodies (e.g., SADC, AU), non-state actors, and external partners, fostering a more inclusive approach to global governance. According to Kwan (2015), China prioritises state-to-state relations with its diplomatic framework, which is hierarchical and government-driven. China increasingly operates in a poly-lateral approach, engaging multiple sectors including business, multilateral institutions, and regional organisations. For example, China's role in revitalising infrastructure and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in certain countries highlights the dual nature of triangular cooperation Gadzala (2018). While this revitalisation creates opportunities for economic integration, it also reinforces financial and infrastructural dependencies on Chinese funding.

Frameworks like the AU's Agenda 2063 and SADC's RISDP seek to institutionalise African agency in external partnerships (SADC, 2020; AU, 2015); they operate largely within traditional state-led diplomacy and, in practice, encourage a hybrid diplomatic approach involving multiple stakeholders (Brautigam, 2019). In theory, Sending *et al.* (2011) charge that poly-lateral diplomacy could enhance regional ownership of development initiatives, but power asymmetries often limit equitable participation. Engaging regional bodies like SADC and the AU introduces a more inclusive approach. Still, China's preference for state-centric diplomacy often limits the decision-making power of African regional institutions. Moreover, despite efforts to institutionalise African agency through frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and RISDP, the hybrid nature of diplomacy means that non-state actors—including businesses and multilateral organisations play an increasingly significant yet underregulated role.

1.3 RESEARCH THEME

1.3.1 *Research Hypothesis*

The central hypothesis of this study posits that the regional development of SADC, through FOCAC-backed triangular cooperation initiatives, can be significantly enhanced by South Africa's strategic deployment of its soft power and middlepowership. South Africa can elevate SADC's capacity to address its pressing developmental challenges, navigate global economic integration more effectively, and strengthen its regional agency by leveraging its diplomatic influence and ability to coordinate regional priorities within FOCAC. This study argues that these mechanisms can help reduce SADC's dependency on external powers and facilitate more autonomous, sustainable regional development.

1.3.2 *Research Question*

The central research question that guides this study is: How can South Africa leverage its normative middlepowership—combining soft power, regional leadership, and ideational influence—through SADC-led triangular cooperation to maximise FOCAC opportunities for regional development?

The core question will be explored through the following sub-questions:

(i) How can South Africa's soft power be strategically utilised within the FOCAC framework to promote regionalisation and enhance the collective agency of SADC member states in achieving the objectives of the SADC RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035? Linking South Africa's soft power to the regional development goals of SADC and the broader objectives of FOCAC, the question probes how South Africa can use its influence within the regional and international cooperation framework to advance shared goals.

(ii) What are the key sources of South Africa's soft power, and how can it leverage these to facilitate SADC's collective response to China's FOCAC initiatives? The aim is to examine how South Africa's soft power, through cultural, diplomatic, and economic influence, can be leveraged to foster a coordinated response from SADC member states concerning FOCAC, aligning with the RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035.

(iii) What are the developmental needs and challenges facing SADC member states, and how can South Africa use its middle-power status to build consensus towards a unified sub-regional approach to FOCAC that enhances regional integration within the context of triangular cooperation with other emerging countries? Addressing SADC's development challenges and the coordination required to respond to opportunities presented by FOCAC initiatives effectively. The question explores how South Africa can act as a middle power to build strategic coalitions and unify member states within the FOCAC framework, ensuring sustainable regional development drawing from the strength of strategic external partnerships.

(iv) What strategic options does South Africa have as a middle power to influence China and other international actors to align FOCAC's long-term goals (Vision 2035) with the SADC development agenda (RISDP 2030), and how can this foster more effective triangular cooperation for regional growth? These questions explore South Africa's ability to influence global and regional development initiatives, focusing on how it can shape the direction of FOCAC Vision 2035 to ensure it aligns with SADC's RISDP and promotes sustainable growth through triangular cooperation with China and other global actors.

Key Themes and Sub-Themes

The study is organised around the following key themes:

(i) Regionalisation and Regional Organisations: These concepts are embedded throughout the questions, which focus on the roles and functions of regional bodies like SADC, AU, and the FOCAC in promoting regional development and integration. The questions emphasise the role of regional integration in influencing SADC's development objectives, particularly addressing regional challenges through collective action.

(ii) FOCAC and SADC Synergy: The study investigates how FOCAC's objectives align with SADC's development goals, highlighting opportunities for synergies between FOCAC's Vision 2035 and SADC's RISDP 2030. It also identifies potential obstacles to aligning these frameworks and emphasises how South Africa can use regional frameworks and FOCAC initiatives to support regional development and address the developmental needs of SADC.

(iii) Soft Power and Middlepowership are concepts that examine South Africa's ability to leverage its ideational power status to influence regional development and cooperation, particularly through FOCAC. They focus on South Africa's capacity to influence both regional and international actors, facilitating alignment between SADC's objectives and broader global development frameworks, which is central to these questions.

(iv) Triangular Cooperation - highlights the role of triangular cooperation between South Africa, China, and SADC member states in enhancing regional development. It specifically focuses on economic integration, infrastructure development, and technology transfer. The concept of triangular cooperation is linked to enhancing African agency. South Africa plays a pivotal role in fostering collaboration between China, SADC, and other global actors to increase African influence over development outcomes.

1.3.3 *Research Motivation and Contribution*

This study will assess how South Africa, leveraging its soft power and middlepowership, can help drive a more effective and coordinated SADC-led approach to FOCAC. Focusing on triangular cooperation will explore the potential for SADC to reduce its dependency on traditional powers, ensure more sustainable economic development, and enhance the region's integration into global economic and political systems. The research will contribute to the literature in the following ways:

(i) Clarifying and strengthening South Africa's unique role as a diplomatic intermediary between SADC and powers like China, India, Brazil, and the Gulf States, facilitating a coherent and

aligned sub-regional approach to FOCAC that is aligned with Africa's long-term developmental goals.

(ii) Addressing intra-regional fragmentation and fostering closer cooperation within SADC by proposing actionable strategies, ensuring that its member states work together effectively to navigate FOCAC opportunities.

(iii) Providing insights into how SADC can strategically engage with FOCAC to enhance regional agency, reduce passive reliance on external partners, and promote self-sufficiency through sustainable development policies.

(iv) Proposing policy recommendations for SADC and South Africa to better position themselves in shaping FOCAC agreements, aligning regional interests, and maximising developmental outcomes based on the findings.

(v) Identifying areas of further research that will solidify SADC regional development and cooperation by exploring the challenges regarding strategic autonomy and decolonial thought as key pillars for advancing regional self-determination, policy coherence, and sustainable development.

Research Motivation

This study is driven by the SADC's limited success in leveraging FOCAC for regional development. It examines South Africa's role in aligning SADC's interests within FOCAC, assessing how its soft power and middle-power diplomacy can shape regional development. The research aims to unravel the literature on triangular cooperation and regional integration, highlighting what Flockhart (2006) and Nye (2004) claim is the often-overlooked role of middle powers in advancing regional agency. It also provides practical recommendations for enhancing South Africa and SADC's engagement with FOCAC to strengthen regional cohesion and sustainable economic growth.

The research seeks to fill a critical gap in understanding the implications of a lack of regional monitoring and implementation framework for FOCAC projects within the SADC developmental and integration agenda. This is done through further evaluating the benefits and challenges of regional coordination efforts and assessing whether FOCAC, in its current structure, supports such a model within its framework as regional integration is about the bloc. While China has provided substantial opportunities, the study will assess if these can be expanded should South Africa strategically mobilise its diplomatic influence to coordinate SADC's position. Some SADC states that engage China lack South Africa's institutional

leverage (Mambo & Dlamini, 2022); given smaller economies' limited bargaining power; therefore, the study would unpack if South Africa's normative diplomatic influence is sufficient to ensure equitable partnerships and keep regional integration central to FOCAC's developmental framework (Ogunnubi, 2015).

1.3.4 *Methodology Overview*

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, employing content analysis and case study methods to analyse key documents and policies. A qualitative approach is ideal for examining complex concepts such as soft power and triangular cooperation, allowing an in-depth understanding of South Africa's role in the FOCAC framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The scenarios will contextualise the setting of regionalisation and South Africa's strategies and its influence within SADC on FOCAC (Yin, 2018). Primary data sources include official documents from South Africa, SADC, FOCAC, and relevant regional organisations (e.g., AU, UN). Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and policy reports, provide additional insights into the broader theoretical and empirical context. Data will be analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) to identify patterns and examine the role of South Africa's soft power in shaping regional development.

Data Quality and Considerations

Ensuring data reliability is a priority in this study. Publicly available primary and secondary sources are used to maintain transparency and credibility. Data triangulation and rigorous methodologies address ethical considerations, such as minimising researcher bias (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2001). Given the sensitivity of international relations, the study adheres to ethical standards while maintaining objectivity and confidentiality (Sarantakos, 2013). Stenmark and Winn (2015) emphasise the importance of ethical considerations in research, particularly on sensitive topics. Therefore, the study ensured transparency, objectivity, and professionalism in examining Africa-China relations. This study follows key ethical principles: Firstly, while relying on publicly available sources, it ensures proper attribution through in-text referencing and a comprehensive bibliography (Rekdal, 2016). Secondly, a systematic approach prioritising peer-reviewed academic sources and diverse perspectives minimises bias. Thirdly, the research acknowledges the influence of the researcher's values on the selection of subject matter, data sources, and interpretations, aligning with NESH's (2016) recommendations. Finally, considering the sensitivity of China-Africa relations, the study remains cautious to avoid

conflicts of interest, with continuous self-evaluation to uphold ethical integrity throughout the research process. Real-world scenarios and examples are used to capture the dynamics of regionalisation and soft power projection. Data sources included government documents, SADC and FOCAC frameworks, reports from regional organisations, and scholarly literature. Diagrams and visualisations supported insights into regional integration, international cooperation, institutional frameworks, and Africa-China economic relations.

Limitations of the study

As a mini dissertation, this study is constrained by limited scope, word count, and time, which may restrict the depth of analysis and generalisability of findings. The use of qualitative methods may also introduce subjectivity and interpretive bias (Babbie, 2001). Despite these limitations, the study offers insight into the potential value of a sub-regional approach to SADC's engagement with FOCAC and proposes strategic recommendations for South Africa's leadership role. The methodology and conceptual framework are applied rigorously, with the flexibility to refine research questions and data collection to address the subject matter's complexity.

1.3.5 *Research Structure*

This study is structured into five chapters, systematically guiding the investigation of SADC-led FOCAC projects through the lens of triangular cooperation, regional agency, and power dynamics, focusing on the overall contribution that South Africa's soft power leadership could bring to such projects.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Setting the Tone for the Study

Chapter One establishes the foundation of the study by introducing the research theme, background, and significance. It provides a literature overview, examining South Africa's foreign policy on regional integration, its soft power strategies, and the SADC development agenda. The chapter also explores the prospects and challenges of advancing a sub-regional approach to FOCAC and South Africa's leadership role in driving regional agency. It defines the study's scope and identifies the methodological approach to the research theme outlined through the hypothesis, key research questions, study aims, and contribution. Additionally, the chapter discusses the research motivation, methodology, and overall structure of the dissertation, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis. This chapter also situates the research

within broader debates on South-South cooperation, middlepowership, and regional integration.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Foundation for the Study

Chapter Two provides a literature review and conceptual framework, focusing on regionalisation, regional organisations, soft power, and middlepowership. It begins by defining regionalism and regionalisation in Africa, tracing their evolution, dynamics, and role in regional integration. The chapter then explores the functions of regional organisations through theoretical perspectives, including Archer's (2001) concept of actor, arena, and instrument. Middlepowership is examined in the context of international relations, regional influence, and enablers of middle-power impact. Lastly, soft power is analysed, including its sources, conversion into influence, and role in middle-power diplomacy. This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for assessing South Africa's role in FOCAC and SADC's regional development agenda.

Chapter 3: FOCAC, SADC, and South Africa: A Triad of Mechanisms, Frameworks, and Influence

Chapter Three examines the institutional mechanisms of FOCAC, SADC's regional development framework, and South Africa's soft power. It begins with exploring Africa-China relations, the formation of FOCAC, and its institutional structures, including key actors, coordination mechanisms, decision-making processes, and funding methods. The chapter then analyses SADC's development agenda, cooperation with China, institutional dynamics, and strategic priorities such as the RISDP. Finally, it evaluates South Africa's soft power profile, identifying its sources, relevance, and strategic role as a middle power in influencing regional integration and shaping FOCAC's alignment with SADC's development goals.

Chapter 4: Strategic Convergence: SADC RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035 Underpinned by Triangular Cooperation

Chapter Four analyses the potential synergy between SADC's regional development agenda and FOCAC's priorities, emphasising South Africa's role in harnessing this alignment through its soft power and middlepowership. It reviews the SADC RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035 frameworks, drawing lessons from regionalisation and regional organisations. The chapter critically assesses institutional challenges, SADC's integration efforts, and its interplay with the African Union. It explores opportunities and obstacles in aligning SADC's

objectives with FOCAC while evaluating South Africa's soft power influence and diplomatic strategies for regional integration. The chapter concludes by setting the stage for recommendations.

Chapter 5: Summary of Findings and Recommendations: Prospects for Bridging Borders: SADC-led regional development involving triangular partnership within FOCAC, harnessed through South Africa's soft power

The final chapter synthesises key findings and provides recommendations on how South Africa can leverage its soft power to shape regional engagement within FOCAC. It also outlines strategies for enhancing African agency through state and non-state partnerships. It suggests areas for further research on triangular cooperation, soft power, and regional integration within African-China relations.

South Africa's leadership in the SADC regional agenda is central to its role as a middle power. As the region's most developed country, Sidiropoulos (2012b) believes South Africa benefits from fostering stability and cooperation, enhancing regional integration and economic security. South Africa can drive regional development and address collective challenges, such as trade barriers and security issues, by positioning itself as a key advocate for African-led solutions (Southall, 2017; De Coning, 2014). Through its soft power, Brett (2016) argues that this engagement enhances South Africa's global standing and fosters regional prosperity. Therefore, this study investigates SADC-led FOCAC projects, emphasising triangular cooperation with emerging nations such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Gulf States and their influence on regionalisation within SADC. The research explores the possible role of non-state actors through poly-lateral diplomacy or a hybrid approach that involves non-government organisations (NGOs), academia, think tanks, and the private sector, drawing from the impact of internal SADC conflicts on regional cohesion.

2 CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Pan-Africanism, as highlighted by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:180-190), has been central to Africa's decolonisation struggle and has shaped regionalism since the 1960s and is rooted in ideals of unity and solidarity. It laid the foundation for the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to counter neocolonialism and fragmentation, fostering political and economic regional development. African leaders prioritised political liberation over economic aspirations, driving regionalism and regionalisation toward continental integration Lee (in Mulaudzi, 2009:1).

Against the background of the above quotation, this chapter establishes a conceptual framework for understanding the interplay between regionalisation, roles and functions of regional organisations, soft power, and middlepowership strategies in international relations. It situates these concepts within the study's focus— leveraging South Africa's soft power to maximise FOCAC opportunities for advancing SADC's development agenda. A nuanced grasp of these dynamics is crucial for analysing the acceleration of regional cooperation and development in Southern Africa, supported through strategic partnerships. The literature review builds from the preceding chapter and introduces the main themes of the study.

2.2 THE CONCEPT OF REGIONALISATION

The rise of regionalisation[9] has redefined global governance, with regional organisations at the forefront of deepening integration and cooperation to achieve political and socio-economic collective progress. The section will examine the concepts of regionalisation and regional organisation[10] to frame the basis of identifying the SADC-FOCAC nexus in promoting regional integration.

2.2.1 *Conceptualising Regionalism and Regionalisation in Africa*

Regionalism and regionalisation are critical to understanding regional cooperation, power dynamics, and integration processes. Hettne and Söderbaum (2000:462-468) define regionness as a framework that captures varying degrees of regional interdependence and institutional development. According to Acharya (2014) and Söderbaum (2004:151), regionalism refers to the deliberate efforts of states and non-state actors to establish institutions, policies, and

[9] Regime, regionalism, regionalisation, and regional integration play a critical role in international relations by shaping how states interact and form regional organisations under various regimes, influencing political, economic, and security dynamics on a global scale (Keohane & Nye, 2011; Matti, 1999; Laursen, 2003; Gochhayat, 2014a).

[10] Though Archer's framework primarily applies to international organisations, it can also be applied to regional organisations like SADC, with their actions being geographically focused within their respective regions. In case of this study, reference would be made to regional organisations.

agreements that foster political, economic, and social cooperation. Katzenstein (2005:123) suggests that regionalisation is the organic process of deepening regional interactions and networks, reinforcing regionalism. Therefore, regionness emerges from the interdependence of regionalism and regionalisation, shaping regional integration and cooperation.

Different theoretical lenses offer insights into the drivers and implications of regionalism. According to a realist perspective, regionalism reflects state interests, security concerns, and power competition (Adebajo, 2017b; Murithi, 2015:78). Liberalists, such as Ndungu'u (2015:3) and Soludo (2012:120), argue that regionalism facilitates economic cooperation, peace, and institutionalised collaboration.

Meanwhile, constructivists like Grant *et al.* (2022) and Tshimpaka *et al.* (2021) contend that regionalism is a social construct shaped by shared norms, identity, and values. These perspectives provide a critical foundation for analysing how regional actors navigate regionalism within Africa, particularly in SADC and FOCAC. Söderbaum (2004:151) categorises regionalism into various forms:

(i) Economic regionalism focuses on trade and investment, e.g., AfCFTA, SADC, and ECOWAS (Luke, 2020).
(ii) Political regionalism emphasises governance, security, and policy coordination (Acharya, 2014).
(iii) Cultural regionalism fosters shared identity and cultural exchanges (Katzenstein, 2005:123).
(iv) Security regionalism addresses regional defence and conflict resolution (Buzan and Waever, 2003:45).

Africa's regionalism, essentially institutionalised by the AU and the RECs, remains shaped through historical legacies, economic disparities, and sovereignty concerns. Scholars debate the extent of political will, the trade-off between regional integration and state sovereignty, and the inclusivity of regional decision-making processes within African regional organisations (Taylor, 2020; Mkandawire, 2015). Unlike old regionalism, which was state-centric and focused on security and economic imperatives, new regionalism is characterised by openness, interdependence, and multi-actor participation (Mansfield & Milner, 2018; Mulaudzi, 2009:3). Söderbaum (2016) highlight the role of non-state actors—civil society, businesses, and epistemic communities as key drivers of regional development.

Understanding the interplay between regionalism and regionalisation is central to this research, particularly in examining how South Africa can leverage its soft power within FOCAC to promote SADC's economic and political integration. The study builds on new regionalism to understand how state and non-state actors shape cooperation strategies, navigating opportunities and challenges in Africa's evolving geopolitical landscape.

2.2.2 *Unpacking the Concept of Regionalisation*

In the dynamic tapestry of global interactions, regionalisation orchestrates the interplay between nations and reshapes the contours of international relations. This complex phenomenon, with its transformative potential, continues to shape the future of an interconnected world. Vivares & Dolcetti-Marcolini (2016:5) conceptualise regionalisation as the formation of regions through factual, material, and ideational interrelationships among social forces, productive capacities, and the movement of people, goods, services, investments, and ideas. This section critically examines how domestic, geographic, economic, political, and cultural factors converge to shape regional cooperation, development, and integration. It further explores regional organisations as mechanisms through which regionalisation unfolds, analysing their institutional functions and the dynamics underpinning their operations.

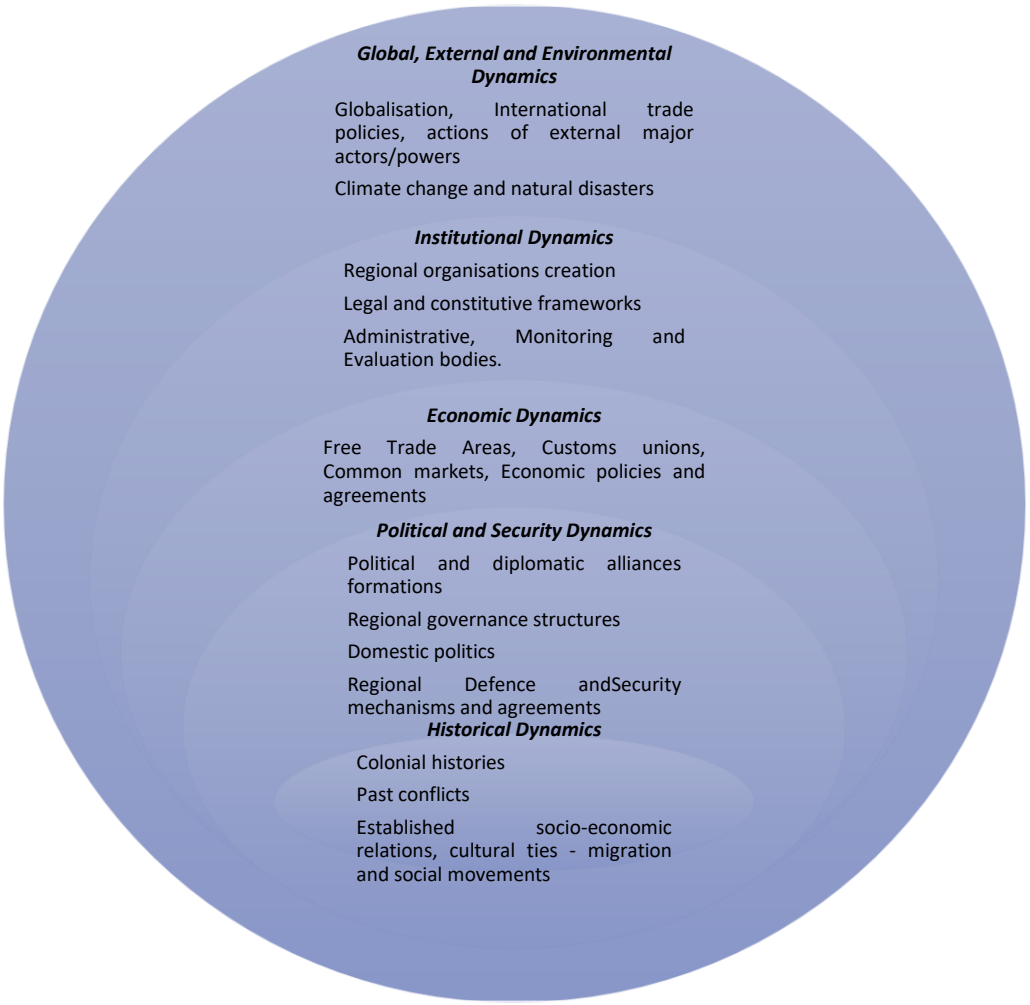
2.2.3 *The Evolution of Regionalisation*

Regionalisation has evolved through diverse phases, shaped by global, economic, political, and institutional shifts. Initially driven by security alliances and political cooperation (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000), it later transitioned towards economic integration, as seen in the EU and ASEAN (Acharya, 2014). In Africa, Shaw (2003) claims colonial legacies and Pan-Africanism laid the foundation for regionalisation, while external actors like the EU and the US, including China, through FOCAC, have influenced its trajectory. Institutional frameworks such as the AU and RECs have attempted to advance integration, but overlapping memberships and sovereignty concerns persist (Clapham, 2001). Constructivists such as Söderbaum *et al*. (2001) and Mshomba (2017) argue that regionalisation fosters regional identity and institution-building. However, economic disparities and security challenges necessitate adaptive governance and stronger intra-regional coordination. As globalisation intensifies, regionalisation continues to evolve, balancing external influences with the regional agency to enhance development and stability.

2.2.4 *The Dynamics of Regionalisation*

Regionalisation is a multidimensional process impacted by interrelated dynamics, including global shifts, institutional frameworks, economic factors, political and security concerns, and historical legacies. In Africa, these factors influence the effectiveness of regional integration efforts. The figure below summarises the dynamics involved in regionalisation towards regional integration. Each of these dynamics is subsequently discussed.

Figure 1: Regionalisation Dynamic Framework (Source: Researcher's own)



(i) Global and External Dynamics: According to Shaw (2003), external actors, such as China, the EU, and the U.S., play a crucial role in shaping Africa's regionalisation, driving the need for stronger coordination to enhance global competitiveness. Environmental factors, including climate change and geopolitical shifts, further push regional blocs toward collective strategies (Acharya, 2014). However, Muntschick (2012) and Farrell (2005) assert that external dependencies can either facilitate or undermine regional agency, depending on how regional actors navigate these partnerships, as follows:

(ii) Institutional Dynamics: Institutions provide the legal and operational framework for regionalisation. The AU and RECs structure regional governance, negotiate agreements, and coordinate policies in trade, security, and infrastructure (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). However, Clapham (2001) suggests overlapping REC memberships create inefficiencies and hinder policy coherence. Strengthening institutional frameworks is key to ensuring sustainable regional cooperation.

(iii) Economic Dynamics: Luke & Macleod (2019) and Mshomba (2017) argue that trade liberalisation and infrastructure investment drive economic integration, as seen in initiatives such as the AfCFTA and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). Mulaudzi (2009) and Nnadozie (2015) imply that economic disparities between member states can create tensions, with weaker economies struggling to compete in liberalised regional markets.

(iv) Political and Security Dynamics: Political stability and security cooperation are essential for successful regionalisation. David (2006) and Murithi (2005) claim that the AU and RECs play critical roles in conflict resolution, as instability undermines regional integration. Power asymmetries within regional blocs often allow dominant states to shape the agenda (Keohane, 2005), while structural inequalities, weak domestic consensus, and divergent interests continue to undermine unified agenda-setting—highlighting that political will alone is insufficient without economic alignment and cohesive leadership (Alden & Vieira, 2005).

(v) Historical Dynamics: Africa's regionalisation is shaped by colonial legacies and Pan-Africanism, which have influenced integration policies and regional solidarity (Adebayo, 2002; Mazrui, 1986). While Pan-African ideals promote unity, historical economic and political divisions still present obstacles to deeper integration.

Regionalisation offers benefits but faces challenges, including national sovereignty concerns, economic inequalities, and institutional weaknesses. The two-level game theory, developed by Putnam (1988) and expanded by Kahler (2009) and Moravcsik (2003), shows how domestic political priorities often conflict with international commitments, complicating regional cooperation. Additionally, external dependencies can dilute regional agency, reinforcing asymmetries with global powers (Doidge, 2011; Börzel & Risse, 2009). Therefore, the success of regionalisation in Africa depends on strengthening institutions, reducing external dependencies, and promoting intra-regional cooperation.

While regionalisation presents opportunities for economic growth, governance reform, and security collaboration, persistent challenges—such as political fragmentation, economic disparities, and institutional inefficiencies—must be addressed. Achieving deeper regional integration requires balancing national interests with collective goals, enhancing regional agency, and adopting innovative governance models that align with Africa's developmental priorities. Future research could explore governance models that promote regional agency while addressing structural constraints.

2.2.5 *Regional Integration and Cooperation in Regionalism*

Regional integration and cooperation are key strategies in regionalism, where states engage in agreements to enhance collective development. These processes involve joint decision-making, shared norms, and the establishment of institutions to achieve integration. Muntschick (2012) argues that modern regional integration organisations prioritise economic bloc-building across various sectors. In contrast, regional cooperation entails states collaborating on specific issues of mutual interest, often leveraging resources, technology, or expertise. While some scholars, including Gochhayat (2014b) and Lambrechts & Alden (2005), debate the conceptual distinction, regional integration is commonly associated with community-building, policy harmonisation, and economic coordination. These contribute to developmental goals by facilitating global market access, attracting investment, and fostering economic and social progress.

Hettne & Söderbaumm (2000) introduced the concepts of regionness and regionhood[11]emphasising identity formation as a precursor to regionalisation. Regionness describes how a geographic area transitions from a passive entity to an active regional actor capable of articulating transnational interests. It encompasses regional coherence, identity, and institutional development.

Regionhood represents the established status of a region as a political, economic, or cultural entity with shared norms, institutions, and agency in global affairs. Van Langenhove (2003) expands on this and defines regionhood as requiring (i) intentional political agency, (ii) quasi-state properties, (iii) institutional consolidation, and (iv) collective identity. Söderbaum &

[11] The concepts of regionness and regionhood are crucial for understanding SADC's evolution from a passive entity to an active actor in regional integration and international cooperation, especially in the context of FOCAC, where SADC seeks to assert its identity and influence global agendas.

Fredrik (2016) argue that regionhood motivates states to cede aspects of sovereignty for the collective good, strengthening regional integration. These concepts are crucial in understanding how regions emerge, evolve, and function as political, economic, and social entities. SADC, for example, has transitioned from soft regionalism—characterised by informal cooperation—to institutionalised regionalism, with structured governance mechanisms. Hettne & Söderbaum (2000) suggest that higher levels of regionness and regionhood correlate with deeper regional integration, as seen in Africa's RECs through economic initiatives and political coordination. The AU's Agenda 2063 exemplifies regionhood as a result of consolidating Africa's identity and autonomy on the global stage, enhancing its actorness.

In the African context, fostering Pan-Africanism and continental solidarity strengthens regionness, enabling RECs and the AU to achieve deeper political, economic, and security integration. The success of initiatives like the AfCFTA depends on technical aspects of regionness, such as trade harmonisation and the symbolic power of regionhood in cultivating a collective African identity. Applying this regional integration framework allows for an assessor's role in fostering integration and cooperation within SADC. This may involve examining how FOCAC initiatives align with SADC's objectives in promoting intra-regional trade, enhancing infrastructure connectivity, and facilitating economic development. Incorporating insights from Van Langenhove (2003) and Hettne & Söderbaum (2000) within the African context highlights how regionness and regionhood strategies can maximise regional cooperation, address challenges, and advance collective aspirations. Strengthening these dimensions enables Africa to harness its regional potential for sustained economic growth and geopolitical influence. Both draw attention to the role and relevance of regional organisations in global politics, as outlined in Figure 2 below.

2.3 REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS: ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

Regional organisations serve multiple roles and functions. They are pivotal in advancing cooperation, integration, and development within regions. This is particularly significant in Africa, where organisations such as the AU, SADC, and various RECs facilitate dialogue, policy formulation, and cooperation among member states to address shared challenges, including economic underdevelopment, political instability, and infrastructure gaps (Alden & Large, 2011). International organisations (e.g., UN, WTO) operate globally and shape norms, while regional organisations (e.g., SADC, AU) focus on regional integration within context-specific strategies (Acharya, 2014; Keohane, 2005).

Sentosa (2001) critiques Archer's reliance on institutionalist theory, suggesting that a more critical lens, perhaps informed by realism or post-colonial perspectives, would better highlight these organisations' limitations and power imbalances, particularly for global South countries. Though regional organisations may work within international organisation frameworks, they have distinct mandates. Both function as arenas for diplomacy, instruments for state interests, and actors with independent influence in governance (Archer, 2014). Though international organisations provide broader legitimacy, regional organisations enhance agency by aligning cooperation with regional priorities (Börzel & Risse, 2016). Considering the study's focus on SADC-FOCAC collaboration, regional organisations are more relevant as arenas for regional diplomacy, instruments for African agency, and actors shaping engagement with China and emerging partners.

In the context of FOCAC, these organisations play critical roles in shaping the development trajectory of African countries, mainly through triangular cooperation—a form of collaboration that involves South-South cooperation between African states, China, and emerging countries.

2.3.1 *Theoretical Perspectives on Regional Organisations*

Several theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into regional organisations' role and effectiveness, particularly in Africa's developmental challenges and the opportunities presented via international platforms like FOCAC. Theoretical perspectives on regional organisations offer critical insights into their role and effectiveness:

(i) Global South highlights regional organisations' historical and structural inequalities, often shaped by colonial legacies. Calls for reform emphasise the need to empower marginalised nations and ensure a more equitable distribution of power and benefits (Prashad, 2013; Mbembe, 2001).

(ii) Pluralists argue that regional organisations are arenas where competing and cooperating actors, including middle powers and smaller states, interact. This highlights the importance of inclusive governance structures allowing diverse interests to be represented (Easterly, 2006; Finnemore, 2003).

(iii) Neo-realists contend that regional organisations have limited influence due to the international system's anarchic structure, where state power remains the primary determinant of action and outcome (Crockett, 2012; Layne, 2006).

(iv) Neoliberalism suggests that regional organisations facilitate cooperation, particularly in economic integration, by offering states incentives for collaboration (Soderbaum, 2004;

Keohane, 2005).

(v) Constructivists argue that regional organisations shape state identities and interests through socialisation, fostering norms that guide state behaviour (Rumelili, 2007; Nabers, 2003).

A comprehensive approach integrating these perspectives can enhance SADC's ability to leverage FOCAC for sustainable regional development, balancing power dynamics while strengthening economic and institutional cohesion.

2.3.2 *Archer's Concept of Actor, Arena, and Instrument*

The following analysis critically examines the roles and functions of international organisations, drawing on key theoretical perspectives and integrating Archer's (2011) concept of actor, arena, and instrument. Archer (2001) introduces a conceptual framework to understand the roles of international organisations, framing them as actors, arenas, and instruments that influence regional and global cooperation within global governance. These roles offer a nuanced understanding of how organisations like SADC operate within global governance frameworks like FOCAC.

Archer (2011) posits that international organisations offer the possibility of being active agents capable of shaping outcomes. From an actor-oriented perspective, regional organisations like SADC strategically align regional development goals with broader South-South cooperation frameworks. In the FOCAC context, SADC sets the regional development agenda, ensuring that priorities such as infrastructure, trade facilitation, and industrialisation are integrated into China-Africa cooperation. SADC influences FOCAC project design and implementation, advocating for regional interests by leveraging the diplomatic influence of middle powers like South Africa to champion a collective African voice within FOCAC. Scholars like Barnett & Finnemore (2004) argue that international organisations are autonomous actors with bureaucratic authority, influencing global governance beyond state interests. They develop norms, shape policy agendas, and exercise power through expertise and legitimacy. However, critics like Stone (2011) argue that international organisations remain constrained by the preferences of powerful states, functioning more as instruments of state interests than as autonomous actors. In the FOCAC-SADC context, while SADC may shape regional development priorities, its agency is often limited by external actors, particularly China's strategic interests.

Archer (2011) argues that international organisations serve as arenas where states and non-state actors interact, negotiate, and pursue collective interests. The SADC functions as an arena for African states to engage with China within FOCAC, ensuring regional priorities, such as development, trade, and infrastructure, are considered. This platform amplifies the voices of smaller member states, fostering inclusivity and aligning regional integration goals with collective aspirations rather than external influences. Nye (2011) and Keohane (2005) highlight international organisations as platforms for negotiation, enabling states and non-state actors to engage in dialogue and cooperation. This view aligns with FOCAC, where SADC provides a collective forum for African states to negotiate regional priorities with China. However, realists like Mearsheimer (1994) and Waltz (2000) contend that such arenas are dominated by power asymmetries, where stronger states dictate terms. Despite its arena function, SADC's influence in FOCAC is often shaped by South Africa's leadership and China's overarching interests.

Archer (2011) conceptualises organisations as instruments through which states achieve their objectives. In this capacity, SADC enables middle powers like South Africa to project influence on global development agendas. SADC facilitates FOCAC-backed projects, enhances regional integration, and secures technical, financial, and policy support through institutions such as the African Development Bank (AfDB), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), NDB, the UN, and NEPAD[12]. Strengthening its institutional capacity and strategic partnerships will further enhance SADC's agency in global forums, ensuring regional development aligns with collective priorities.

Regional organisations can also function as tools for states to advance national or regional interests. Börzel & Risse (2018) emphasise that states use regional organisations to delegate tasks, reduce transaction costs, and implement global policies. In the case of SADC, South Africa leverages the organisation to advance its middle-power diplomacy within FOCAC. However, dependency theorists like Bond (2020) and Mkandawire (2011) argue that such arrangements often reinforce structural inequalities, where African institutions remain dependent on external funding and decision-making, limiting actual agency. The literature review underscores the significance of regional organisations in shaping international cooperation by synthesising these perspectives. Strengthening institutional capacity and fostering strategic partnerships will enhance SADC's agency in global forums, ensuring that

[12] These organisations would be referred to as intergovernmental institutions for the purpose of this study.

regional development objectives are effectively pursued. Regional organisations also play essential roles in facilitating regional integration by providing technical, financial, and policy support that enhances the capacity of regional organisations like SADC to implement development projects. These organisations act as supportive structures that harmonise policies, resolve conflicts, and foster trade.

Contemporary analyses underscore regional organisations' dynamic and complex roles, highlighting their capacity to act autonomously, facilitate multilateral interactions, and serve as instruments for state-driven agendas. As actors, international institutions can shape policy agendas independently, though their agency may be limited by dominant state interests (Barnett and Finnemore, 2005). As arenas, they provide essential platforms for multilateral negotiations, albeit sometimes skewed due to power imbalances (Mearsheimer, 1994; Keohane & Nye, 1977). As **i**nstruments, they offer states a mechanism to achieve collective objectives, even if such mechanisms occasionally entrench existing inequalities (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Amin, 1976).

Figure 2: Combined Framework: Political Systems and Regional Organisations

Political System Component	IO Function	Example	Scholarly Reference
Input (Arenas) Participation and member states, non-state actors, and international stakeholders' aggregate interests, demands, and support.	A platform for diplomacy, policy deliberation, and multilateral engagement.	UN General Assembly as a diplomatic forum to debate security, human rights, and development policies, shaping global norms and agreements.	(Rittberger *et al*., 2019).
Conversion (Actors) Institutional agency and bureaucratic authority and legitimacy through international organisation constitutional and institutional structure and processes.	Policy formulation, developing frameworks, and decision-making that influence international relations independently of their member states.	WHO's independent role in shaping global health standards and coordinating pandemic responses – providing leadership and shaping global health governance outcomes.	(Barnett & Finnemore, 200 5).
Output (Instruments) Leveraging institutional mechanisms to achieve policy programmes, community representation, and operational and information activities that inform international politics.	Tools (technical, financial, and legal) that states use to enforce international agreements and coordinate policy actions efficiently - implementation and compliance with impact.	WTO dispute settlement mechanism for enforcing trade agreements and resolving disputes among member states.	(Abbott & Snidal, 1998).

The AfCFTA, under the AU's leadership, harmonises Africa's trade policies, while the WTO provides regulatory support (Songwe, 2019; Hoekman & Kostecki, 2009). Intergovernmental institutions oversee project implementation, enhancing transparency and effectiveness (AfDB, 2021 and 2018; Taylor, 2020). However, critics argue that the African agency remains limited, as China often dominates FOCAC's agenda-setting, albeit concrete regional frameworks (Mohan & Lampert, 2016).

Understanding regional organisations as political systems and their practical nature as instruments, arenas, and actors are complementary in that they simplify and structure approaches and research agendas concerning institutionalised international cooperation between states. This integrated framework highlights how regional organisations do not merely serve as passive structures but play active**,** interactive, and instrumental roles in global governance (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2018). Understanding regional organisations through this political systems model allows for a nuanced analysis of how they shape international policies, mediate multilateral cooperation, and execute global development strategies.

Regional organisations are indispensable for advancing regional integration and development in Africa. They provide the platforms**,** resources, and frameworks necessary for economic, political, and social development. SADC, in particular, plays a vital role in FOCAC, leveraging its position to ensure that Africa's priorities are integrated into global development initiatives. Regional organisations contribute to a more balanced international system by enabling smaller states and middle powers to assert their influence. However, to enhance their effectiveness, these organisations must undergo structural reforms that address power imbalances, ensure inclusivity, and strengthen governance mechanisms. This would facilitate a more robust and cohesive regional integration agenda, driving sustainable development in Africa.

2.4 UNDERSTANDING MIDDLEPOWERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

According to Cooper (2016:47), the concept of middlepowership has evolved since the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement, often associated with diplomacy, bridge-building, and multilateralism. Middle powers are defined based on their economic strength, diplomatic engagement, and institutional participation but lack the unilateral capacity to dictate global affairs (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Scholars distinguish between traditional middle powers (e.g., Canada, Australia, the Netherlands) – states with established diplomatic traditions and a focus on multilateral governance. Emerging middle powers (e.g., Brazil, Turkey, and Indonesia) are regional actors with growing influence in global and regional politics, often pursuing developmental leadership and strategic autonomy (Jordaan, 2003).

Middle powers are commonly identified by their strategic behaviour rather than strict material capabilities. Kríž et.al. (2019) argue that middle powers are best identified not just by their position in the international hierarchy but also by their foreign policy behaviour, normative influence, diplomatic engagement, and role in multilateral institutions. Spies (2016) and

Schoeman (2000:15) emphasises their use of niche diplomacy, coalition-building, and regional leadership. Alden & Schoeman (2015) note that while some states are middle powers globally, they exhibit great-power characteristics within their respective regions due to economic strength, diplomatic reach, and security roles. Although there is a lack of consensus on its precise definition, scholars agree on the strategic roles middle powers play in global governance. For Schoeman (2000:47-58), middle powers occupy an intermediate position in the global hierarchy—neither great powers nor small states—possessing sufficient economic, diplomatic, and military capabilities to exert regional influence while contributing to international stability.

Notwithstanding the general agreement on their characteristics, scholars diverge on the criteria and evolution of middle powers. Stephen (2013) argues that combining material power with a state's self-identification as a middle power is crucial for classification. Conversely, Jordaan (2017) contends that external recognition, rather than self-identification, determines middlepowership, emphasising their limited capacity for unilateral global influence. Kocadal (2022:2) introduces a regional perspective, suggesting that middle powers adopt distinct strategies based on their geopolitical contexts as follows:

(i) Enforcers (Realism) - states with hard power capabilities that seek regional dominance.

(ii) Assemblers (Neoliberalism) - states prioritising diplomatic and institutional frameworks for regional cooperation.

(iii) Advocators (Constructivism): states leveraging soft power to promote norms and multilateral engagement.

Hidayatullah (2017:113) presents a progressive framework, identifying three stages of middle power engagement: catalyst (initiating diplomatic cooperation), facilitator (coalition-building), and manager (institutionalising norms and mechanisms for governance). The dynamic nature of the middle power status remains a key debate. Some scholars argue that economic shifts and emerging powers such as India, Indonesia, and Brazil challenge traditional middle-power classifications. Others, such as Kocadal (2022), contend that middle powers' roles are expanding, particularly in a multiplex world where they can collectively influence global governance. Their success, however, depends on balancing regional leadership with constructive engagement at the global level. However, Alden (2015) contends that South Africa exemplifies this duality, acting as a norm entrepreneur on the global stage while assuming hegemonic functions in Southern Africa. Adebajo (2016) critiques South Africa's regional

leadership, discussing how its attempts to assert itself as a continental leader can sometimes be seen as hegemonic rather than a cooperative middle power. Kornegay (2015) delves into the delicate balancing act South Africa faces in trying to reconcile its leadership role in global forums like AU, BRICS, G20, and UN with its regional obligations within SADC, where its influence is undeniably more prominent.

Understanding middlepowership through these lenses is crucial for assessing how regional actors engage in global partnerships while balancing domestic and regional imperatives. In the context of SADC-led FOCAC initiatives, these dynamics shape South Africa's strategic positioning, soft power leverage, and ability to coordinate regional cooperation without reinforcing dependency structures.

2.4.1 *Middle Power Diplomacy and International Influence*

Middle powers are significant actors in multilateralism, leveraging their influence to mediate conflicts, shape international norms, and foster stability (Burges, 2012:116). Their diplomacy often revolves around the following:

(i) Niche diplomacy - focused engagement in specific issues such as peacekeeping, human rights, and climate change (Alden & Schoeman, 2015).

(ii) Multilateral engagement - active participation in international organisations like the UN and WTO to promote cooperative global governance (Chun, 2014).

(iii) Bridge-building - mediating between great powers and smaller states, forging consensus on critical global and regional matters (Stephen, 2013).

(iv) Commitment to international norms - advocating for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law while maintaining strategic autonomy (Jordaan, 2017).

Middle powers in the developing world are critical actors in global governance and South-South cooperation, particularly in triangular cooperation frameworks. By engaging in multilateral diplomacy, peacebuilding, and regional development initiatives, they contribute to regional economic integration, conflict mediation, and peacebuilding and act as intermediaries between developing countries and global institutions, ensuring that regional development priorities are aligned with global funding mechanisms (Mlambo & Mlambo, 2018). Middle powers play a critical yet constrained role in regional and global governance. Their influence is determined by institutional capacity, regional legitimacy, and strategic positioning. While they act as regional stabilisers and bridge-builders, their effectiveness depends on navigating power

asymmetries, fostering consensus-driven leadership, and strategically engaging with regional and global actors.

Middlepowership remains a fluid and evolving concept influenced by geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic factors. While South Africa exemplifies middle power behaviour, its role within SADC and FOCAC requires careful navigation to avoid perceptions of regional dominance. Future research could explore how middle powers can leverage triangular cooperation to enhance regional agency, particularly in the Global South.

2.4.2 *Middlepowership and Regional Dynamics*

Middle powers play a significant role in regional and global governance, leveraging diplomatic influence, coalition-building, and multilateralism to shape outcomes. Jordaan (2003) opines that unlike great powers, which rely on economic and military dominance, middle powers exert soft power and institutional leadership to promote regional stability and global cooperation. Their role is particularly evident in regional integration, conflict mediation, and triangular cooperation, where they act as bridges between developing and developed nations. Middle powers often engage in regional leadership through regional organisations, economic partnerships, and security frameworks. However, their influence is determined through several dynamics. It follows that in terms of middle powers and regional dynamics:

(i) Middle powers must balance leadership and regional legitimacy, ensuring their influence is not perceived as hegemonic but as fostering collective regional agency (Flemes, 2007).

(ii) Their legitimacy is closely tied to their ability to promote consensus-building and avoid unilateral decision-making, reinforcing their role as facilitators rather than dominant actors (Flemes, 2007).

(iii) The effectiveness of middle powers in regional leadership is shaped by institutional and political constraints, as regional organisations exhibit varying levels of institutional cohesion and capacity for collective action (Acharya, 2014).

(iv) Domestic political dynamics, including elite preferences and national interests, influence how a middle power can effectively project leadership and align regional objectives with its foreign policy goals (Hurrell, 2006).

(v) Middle powers often operate within regional structures influenced or dominated by great powers, necessitating a strategic approach to navigating power asymmetries while safeguarding regional agency in global governance (Hurrell, 2006).

(vi) Their influence is primarily exercised through diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and cultural diplomacy, with an emphasis on norm-setting, governance frameworks, and development assistance to strengthen regional agency and cohesion (Gratius, 2008).

Thus, the influence of middle powers depends on balancing leadership with legitimacy and leveraging diplomatic, economic, and institutional tools. Key enablers of impact and influence, such as strategic partnerships and adaptive diplomacy, enhance their role in regional and global governance.

2.4.3 *Enablers of Middlepower for Impact and Influence*

Middle powers rely on specific enablers to enhance their influence within regional and multilateral settings. These include diplomatic agility, niche leadership, coalition-building, and the capacity to shape agendas. Such enablers empower middle powers to exercise agency, navigate complex global governance structures, and assert strategic influence in regional organisations through norm entrepreneurship and soft power diplomacy. Archer's (2003) framework for middle-power roles in regional organisations provides a useful lens to understand how these mechanisms function. In the context of the study, some of the enablers are discussed hereunder.

African Agency and Middle-Power Diplomacy

According to Brown & Hamman (2013), African agency refers to the continent's ability to shape global outcomes rather than merely responding to external influences. While African states assert collective interests, Nkrumah (2020) believes their agency is constrained by structural dependencies on foreign aid, trade, and security. Internal divisions within the AU and RECs weaken collective bargaining (Hope, 2021), as seen in stalled United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reforms (Gadzala, 2015). Moreover, Alden & Schoeman (2015) claim that African agency is often elite-driven rather than inclusive. Despite these challenges, middle powers like South Africa leverage African agency to influence global governance. Through regional leadership and coalition-building, South Africa advances African interests in global partnerships, strengthening Africa's global positioning (Brown, 2013). However, the actual agency requires economic self-sufficiency, unity, and broader societal participation to move from an agenda-taker to an agenda-setter in global affairs.

Middle powers such as South Africa rely on African agency and agenda-setting to exert influence within international organisations. They advocate for African interests while fostering

multilateralism by strategically aligning regional priorities with global governance norms. Archer's (2017) insights into middle-power diplomacy highlight their role as mediators and consensus-builders, reinforcing their capacity to shape international discourse. Ultimately, South Africa's leadership within African and global institutions underscores how middle powers can leverage regional agency to drive meaningful reforms in the international system.

Agenda-Setting as a Strategic Tool

Livingston (1992) defines agenda-setting as raising salient issues and guiding discourse toward preferred outcomes. This process involves leveraging 'agenda access points' and strategic

opportunities within international organisations where middle powers can introduce and sustain public diplomacy and policy discussions (Hidayatullah, et.al 2023).

Nye (2004) underscores that soft power manifested through persuasion and cultural influence plays a crucial role in this process and relies on its credibility, diplomatic networks, and alignment with broader African interests. Binder & Golub (2020) also argue that agenda-setting success depends on issue characteristics, institutional constraints, and the interests of key actors. South Africa's efforts in pushing African development priorities illustrate how agenda-setting effectiveness is contingent on regional coherence and international buy-in.

The AU and SADC serve as critical platforms for aggregating regional demands, reinforcing Africa's collective negotiating position in global institutions. Agenda-setting is a core mechanism through which middle powers influence regional organisations. Schoeman (2003) contends that middle powers drive specific issues onto global agendas by leveraging diplomatic capital and regional leadership. South Africa's proactive role in peacekeeping, climate change negotiations, and global governance reform demonstrates its ability to set and shape international debates.

Middle Powers as Mediators and Consensus-Builders

Archer (2017) conceptualises middle powers as mediators and consensus-builders, occupying an intermediary position between major and smaller states. Their ability to bridge divergent interests enhances global governance by fostering cooperation and stability. More recently, scholars such as Boucher & Ménard (2021) and Medeiros (2019) argue that this role is particularly evident in global partnerships where middle powers navigate competing agendas, balancing the interests of both major powers and smaller states, while advocating for equitable development and multilateral solutions. However, Jordaan (2017) claims their effectiveness

depends on institutional capacity, strategic alliances, and geopolitical constraints. Critics argue that middle powers often align with dominant actors rather than genuinely amplifying the voices of weaker states (Alden & Vieira, 2005). Thus, while they can influence global decision-making, their role remains contingent on structural power dynamics and regional legitimacy.

Harnessing Coalition Building and Other Strategies for Global Influence

Coalition building is a key strategy for states seeking more significant influence in global governance, particularly for middle powers and regional actors. Keohane (2005) argues that states with limited structural power enhance their bargaining position through strategic alliances. Nye (2011) highlights the role of soft power in coalition-building, where states leverage diplomacy, cultural ties, and economic partnerships to shape international norms.

According to Boucher & Ménard (2021), Medeiros (2019), Alden & Vieira (2005), middle powers mainly use multilateral engagement to amplify their voices in global forums, whether they demonstrate how coalition-building strengthens regional agency. However, critics such as Hope (2021) argue that coalitions often reflect exclusive interests, with uneven benefits across member states. Narlikar (2013) cautions that coalitions must be institutionally robust to avoid fragmentation and co-optation by stronger powers. While coalition-building enhances influence, its success ultimately depends on internal cohesion, strategic alignment, and adaptability within shifting global power structures.

Regionalism enhances middle powers' global influence by enabling them to pool resources, strengthen bargaining power, and coordinate collective action. Akum & Tull (2023) maintain that RECSs, such as SADC, serve as vehicles for consolidating regional agency and advancing shared interests. South Africa's role as a regional champion within the SADC underscores how middle powers can leverage regional coalitions to shape global governance frameworks. The strategic selection of international partnerships is also crucial. Akum & Tull (2023) state that middle powers assess partnerships based on comparative infrastructure, energy, and industrial development advantages. This pragmatic approach informs South Africa's engagement with emerging economies and traditional powers, such as ensuring that regional developmental needs align with global economic trends. Scholars, as outlined below, highlight bilateralism, multilateralism, and triangular cooperation as key strategies for regionalisation, each with distinct advantages and limitations:

(i) Bilateralism enables targeted, efficient cooperation but risks fragmenting regional integration. While scholars like Nye (2020) and Acharya (2014) argue that bilateralism strengthens local alliances, it often fails to address broader regional challenges. As Zondi (2018) and Landsberg (2012) noted, South Africa's strategic partnership with China can enhance SADC's integration agenda but requires alignment with collective regional goals.

(ii) Multilateralism fosters legitimacy, inclusiveness, and resource-sharing but is often slow and complex due to diverging national interests. Sidiropoulos (2019) underscores the necessity for global challenges like climate change, while Schoeman (2015) and Cooper (2011) highlight multilateral platforms like the AU and FOCAC as critical for advancing regional cooperation. However, bureaucratic inefficiencies may benefit larger states over smaller ones, necessitating strategic leadership within SADC.

(iii) Triangular Cooperation integrates external resources and expertise, promoting capacity-building and development. Zondi & Patel (2021) argue that this approach is practical in filling development gaps, while Li *et al*. (2019) and Moyo (2017) highlight its potential in SADC-China partnerships. Yet, concerns over dependency and power imbalances persist, requiring careful management to ensure sustainable outcomes.

In the SADC-FOCAC context, bilateral agreements with China can drive crucial projects but risk undermining regional cohesion if pursued in isolation. South Africa's soft power can harmonise these engagements, fostering collective regional strategies. Though essential for long-term integration, multilateral approaches face obstacles due to divergent SADC member interests. As a regional leader, South Africa can advocate for unified SADC positions within FOCAC, enhancing the bloc's bargaining power. Triangular cooperation offers an avenue for leveraging additional expertise yet risks of external dominance must be mitigated. South Africa's diplomatic leverage can align FOCAC projects with SADC's development agenda, ensuring infrastructure, energy, and education investments serve regional integration goals. Integrating bilateral, multilateral, and triangular cooperation, a hybrid model offers the most flexible path toward regionalisation. By strategically deploying its soft power, South Africa can mediate these approaches, ensuring that SADC-FOCAC cooperation strengthens sustainable regional development.

2.5 THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER

This section explores soft power and its sources, while the third examines middlepowership, focusing on how bridge-building states shape regional and global narratives. It outlines strategic options for middle powers to set agendas and drive agency in international affairs.

2.5.1 *Soft Power in Regional and Global Influence*

The evolution of soft power theory underscores its complexity and varied applications in international relations. Nye (1990) initially framed soft power as an influence through attraction rather than coercion, but scholars have expanded on its dimensions and applications. Zhang (2010) highlights China's cultural and ideological soft power, positioning its governance model as an alternative to Western liberal democracy. At the same time, Manners (2008) familiarised the concept of normative power, emphasising the EU's role in promoting values such as peace, democracy, human rights, and good governance in its external relations. Aggestam (2008) highlights the EU's ability to influence global norms and values through its foreign policies and international engagement. Yeo (2008) and Melisse (2005) stress the importance of public diplomacy and regional identity, particularly in ASEAN.

Other scholars also critique soft power's limitations. Gallarotti (2022) explored soft power's relationship with economic and military power, warning that excessive reliance on hard power can erode soft power's appeal. Chitty *et al*. (2017) introduced "soft disempowerment," showing how credibility loss weakens, and moral authority sustains influence. These perspectives highlight that soft power is not static, requiring credibility, sustained engagement, and adaptability to remain effective. In summary, Kroenig *et al.* (2010) argue that soft power, often underestimated, is a strategic tool that must be systematically analysed and deliberately integrated into broader foreign policy to effectively influence international outcomes without coercion.

2.5.2 *Sources of Soft Power*

Nye (2008) identifies three key sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative. These elements enhance a nation's attractiveness abroad, with political values and institutional practices contributing significantly to its soft power. Li & Leng (2017) refine Nye's model, arguing that political values are central and supported by culture, while foreign policy serves as the vehicle for soft power strategy. Hall (2010) adds to this by introducing the concepts of institutional, reputation, and

representational power, which further broaden the understanding of influence. Vuving (2019) expands on this by identifying three power currencies—gratitude, admiration, and resonance with shared values—that form the basis of soft power in international relations.

Scholars such as Siniver (2022) and Nye (2011) explore the relationship between hard and soft power, suggesting that middle powers leverage “referent power” through strong relationships and “co-option power” via cultural and ideological attraction. Li & Leng (2017) argue that soft power also derives from establishing self-interested rules and systems that dominate international politics. A British Council Report (2020) emphasises the role of socio-cultural indicators, such as world-class universities, a free judicial system, and a reputation for being a force for good in shaping a nation's appeal and soft power. These scholars collectively enhance their understanding of soft power, showing that countries can influence global and regional outcomes through their economic or military power and leverage their culture, values, and diplomatic strategies.

2.5.3 *Soft Power Conversion into Influence: Middle-Power Strategies*

Scholars offer varied perspectives on how middle-power countries can effectively convert soft power into tangible influence. Nye (2011) argues that power conversion is a critical process where resources must be strategically translated into desired outcomes. He emphasises the importance of cultural diplomacy, values, and legitimate foreign policies in shaping international norms. Middle powers should focus on crafting attractive narratives and aligning their values with global interests to enhance their influence. Nye (2023; 2021) stresses that understanding context is key to harnessing a full range of power resources. Effective strategies require careful leadership, utilising tools such as communication, organisational skills, and strategic interdependence.

Nye (2011) outlines four primary channels for leveraging soft power: public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchanges, and assistance. Success relies on a selective focus on identifying key issues and actors, deploying resources with contextual intelligence, and navigating the diplomatic landscape to achieve specific goals. Gilley (2011) suggests that middle powers enhance their soft power by promoting good governance and human rights through both domestic policies and international examples. Cooper (1997) advocates for "niche diplomacy," where middle powers specialise in specific fields, such as climate change or peacekeeping, allowing them to "punch above their weight" and influence global outcomes despite limited

resources. Contemporary scholars have expanded on the concept of "niche diplomacy," with middle powers specialising in areas such as climate change, human security, and peacekeeping to enhance their global influence (Howe, 2021; Maitre, 2018). Thakur (2004) underscores coalition-building and multilateral diplomacy, where forming alliances amplifies a middle power's voice on the global stage. Karns & Mingst (2013) highlight that middle powers often assume bridging roles in regional organisations, facilitating cooperation among diverse actors.

Gallarotti (2022) stresses the importance of integrating soft power with economic and military resources, coining the concept of "smart power." This strategy is particularly relevant for middle powers, which can use their economic leverage to support soft power initiatives, such as funding international scholarships or humanitarian projects. Kahveci & Bonnenfant (2023) argue that middle powers must apply contextual intelligence to tailor their foreign policies, ensuring that hard and soft power elements align with their strategic interests. Teo (2022) suggests that middle powers leverage relative, relational, and social power to challenge power stratification, particularly against great powers, while strengthening their roles through functional differentiation. Muntschick (2012) cautions that disjointed strategies in interdependent issue areas can create policy externalities, undermining the effectiveness of middle-power actions. Hill & Beadle (2014) note that translating soft power into policy outcomes can be challenging, as misused soft power may provoke resistance or unintended consequences. A strategic balance of cooperation with like-minded states is essential to avoid overextension.

2.5.4 *Middlepowership Diplomacy*

Middle-power diplomacy, as defined by scholars such as Stubbs (2014) and Cooper (2006), involves focusing on specific areas of expertise to exert influence in global affairs. The niche diplomacy allows middle powers to address global challenges effectively without overstepping their material limitations. According to Cooper (2013) and Higgott (2006), coalition-building enhances a middle power's global relevance by forming alliances to achieve common goals. These coalitions, whether formal (e.g., FOCAC, BRICS, UN) or informal (e.g., issue-specific alliances like COVID-19 vaccines), amplify the voice of middle powers in global governance.

Entrepreneurial diplomacy, discussed by Evans (2011) and Woolcott (2010), emphasises the need for flexible and innovative approaches to foreign policy. Middle powers can build new relationships, respond to emerging challenges, and facilitate international cooperation. The

bridge-building strategy, highlighted by Sukma (2011) and Ping (2005), enables middle powers to foster dialogue and stability within regions, facilitating conflict management and cooperation.

Jentleson (2013) and Nye (2004) advocate combining hard and soft power—smart power—as an effective strategy for middle power. This approach leverages diplomatic influence and material resources to address global challenges. Middle powers, often constrained by limited resources, excel in this strategy by balancing soft power capabilities with strong diplomatic networks.

While middle powers face challenges balancing national interests with international responsibilities, they maintain significant global influence by focusing on their diplomatic strengths, coalition-building, and specialised leadership. These strategies—smart power, niche diplomacy, coalition-building, entrepreneurial diplomacy, and bridge-building—are essential for middle powers to exert influence and achieve their foreign policy objectives within regional and global frameworks.

2.6 CONCLUSION AND FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

This chapter has provided a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding key concepts such as regionalism, regionalisation, soft power, and middle-power strategies in the context of South Africa's role in advancing the SADC development agenda. It explored how regionalisation drives regional integration, intensifying regional economic, political, and social interactions. Regional organisations foster cooperation and development among member states as institutional manifestations of regionalisation. The concept of soft power is central to the discussion, as Nye (1990) articulated, which allows middle powers, despite lacking great power resources, to exert significant influence through diplomacy, cultural appeal, and normative leadership. The chapter also examined how middle powers, like South Africa, can leverage soft power by building coalitions, advocating for global norms, and leading niche areas of expertise to shape regional and international agendas.

The review highlights the dynamic relationship between regionalism and regionalisation, particularly in SADC-FOCAC cooperation. It argues that South Africa, through its soft power and middle-power diplomacy, is well-positioned to influence the terms of engagement within FOCAC, ensuring long-term benefits for the region. By aligning its diplomatic, cultural, and economic strengths, South Africa can drive regional integration and development within

Southern Africa. The chapter provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis in Chapters Three and Four, which will explore the institutional mechanisms of FOCAC, the SADC development framework, and South Africa's role in advancing regional cooperation through the FOCAC partnership.

3 CHAPTER 3: THE FOCAC INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM, SADC DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK AND SOUTH AFRICA'S SOFT POWER

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive analytical logic for understanding key concepts. A theoretical foundation was set to argue for South Africa's potential role in leveraging its soft power to promote SADC's development agenda within the FOCAC partnership. Africa-China relations have evolved significantly since the 1950s, transitioning from ideological solidarity to strategic partnership. FOCAC has been crucial in shaping this relationship, providing an institutional platform for political and socio-economic collaboration. The RECs, including SADC, have also emerged as key facilitators of economic integration, aligning with developmental frameworks.

South Africa leverages its ideational power to navigate influential relations within FOCAC to advance national and regional interests. Understanding FOCAC's institutional mechanisms—including coordination structures, funding models, and policy frameworks—is essential for assessing its impact on SADC's development agenda. This chapter explores the historical evolution of Africa-China relations, the institutional role of FOCAC, and the dynamics of SADC-China cooperation. It also examines South Africa's soft power potential in influencing regional integration, providing insights into strategies for maximising FOCAC opportunities to advance SADC's developmental objectives.

3.2 FOCAC INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

3.2.1 *Africa-China[13] Relations: Historical Context and Contemporary Dynamics*

Since the 1950s, Africa–China relations have evolved from a foundation of anti-colonial solidarity and South–South cooperation to a strategically complex partnership defined by economic pragmatism. China's early support for African liberation movements and participation in the 1955 Bandung Conference laid the groundwork for enduring political trust (Alden, 2007; Large, 2008). However, China's market reforms in the late 1970s marked a shift toward a trade- and investment-driven foreign policy (Brautigam, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

This shift was institutionalised through the launch of FOCAC in 2000, which formalised multilateral engagement and aligned Chinese development initiatives with African priorities

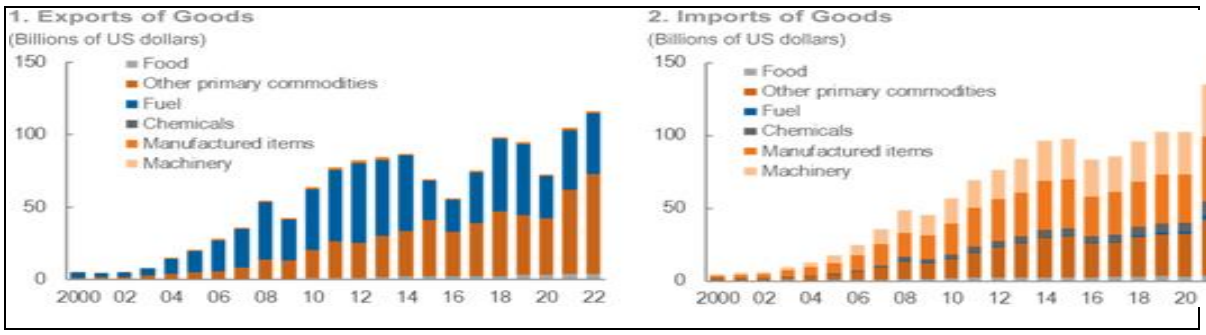
[13] The study refers to Africa-China relations irrespective of how the scholarly material consulted framed it. This is prompted by academics, including Kupe (2017:1) and Wariboko (2020:152) assertion that common reference to China-Africa relations reinforces Chinese dominance in the relation and downplays the advancement of African agency through framing discourse, in the spirit of equal partnership.

(Lefifi, 2023). Since then, China has become Africa's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching US$282 billion in 2023 and FDI exceeding US$40 billion—a 100-fold increase since 2000 (SA NewsGov, 2024). While resource extraction remains central (Taylor, 2019), recent trends show diversification into manufacturing, digital infrastructure, and critical minerals essential for the global energy transition (Zhang *et al*., 2022; Reuters, 2024).

Although China's total FDI stock in Africa remains modest compared to Western counterparts, its targeted focus on green and digital infrastructure, often through the BRI, reflects a long-term strategy of economic and geopolitical influence (Corkin, 2019; Mohan & Power, 2020a; Shelton, 2020b). Scholars highlight varying motivations behind this engagement: market access (Alden, 2019), resource security (Taylor, 2019), and sectoral diversification (Brautigam, 2019).

Despite rapid trade growth, from US$10 billion in 2000 to US$254 billion in 2022 (IMF, 2024), Africa's exports to China remain dominated by raw materials, while imports are largely manufactured goods, creating a persistent trade imbalance (Sun, 2021; UN COMTRADE, 2024). This asymmetry underscores the need for African economies to shift toward value-added exports and industrial diversification. Therefore, while political ties remain significant, it is the economic dimension anchored in trade, infrastructure, and investment that now most clearly defines Africa–China relations in the 21st century.

Figure 3. Composition of Trade with China, 2000–22 (IMF Working Papers 2024, UN Comtrade database).



Despite economic gains, concerns persist over debt dependency, resource extraction, and limited technology transfer in Africa-China relations (Taylor, 2009). While some critics liken China's engagement to neo-colonialism (Lin, 2015; Brautigam, 2009), others see it as a developmental opportunity. Abidde & Ayoola (2021) and Ampia (2014) argue that China's engagement in Africa cannot be simplistically labelled as exploitative. Instead, it reflects a nuanced interplay of strategic interests, economic pragmatism, and political diplomacy. It required the African agency, which is becoming increasingly evident, with South Africa

leveraging FOCAC and BRICS to shape cooperation (Alden & Large, 2019). However, sustainable partnerships depend on Africa's ability to negotiate equitable agreements that align with its development priorities and mitigate economic asymmetries.

South Africa and other African nations actively influence China's engagement, balancing concerns over economic dominance with strategic cooperation. While challenges like debt sustainability and environmental risks remain, mechanisms such as FOCAC provide diplomatic avenues to address them. Africa can shape relations that foster long-term growth and stability by prioritising infrastructure, cultural exchange, and people-to-people diplomacy. Africa retains some ownership in these engagements, albeit power imbalances and greater transparency have to be addressed. Li *et al*. (2012) note that shifting global dynamics in the 1990s led to FOCAC's establishment as a platform for dialogue and coordination. Strengthening regional agency and ensuring fairer negotiations will be key to sustaining mutually beneficial cooperation with China.

While Africa-China relations present opportunities and challenges, African nations, particularly South Africa - must continue to integrate Africa into BRICS, ensuring the bloc serves as a platform for advancing the continent's development agenda. Through initiatives like the BRICS-Africa Dialogue and the New Development Bank (NDB), South Africa has facilitated African access to infrastructure financing and economic partnerships (Signé, 2018). Moreover, it has leveraged BRICS to advocate for African interests in global governance, including UN Security Council reform and economic multipolarity (Qobo & Soko, 2020). Without South Africa's mediation, BRICS engagement with Africa would likely remain fragmented and dominated by bilateral ties, particularly with China and India, rather than fostering a coordinated sub-regional approach (Besharati, 2013). Africa can transform its engagement from a passive recipient of investment to an active shaper of global economic and political norms by strategically positioning itself within BRICS. This could involve expanding access to development finance, enhancing trade and investment partnerships, and strengthening Africa's voice in global governance, particularly in the reform of the UNSC. It also includes advancing continental integration through AfCFTA and Agenda 2063 and promoting technological and knowledge exchanges.

3.2.2 *FOCAC and Its Formation*

Established in 2000, FOCAC formalised Africa-China relations, providing a structured platform for dialogue and economic cooperation. The first FOCAC Summit in 2006 marked a pivotal moment in Sino-African engagement, coinciding with China's *Going Global* strategy, encouraging outward investment and deeper economic ties with developing regions, including Africa. FOCAC institutionalised a partnership based on mutual benefit, non-interference, and equality, positioning China as an alternative development partner to traditional Western donors (Mohan & Power, 2020b; Alden & Large, 2019).

The Forum emerged from strategic interests on both sides. Li & Wu (2020) affirm that for China, Africa's growing economic significance was crucial to sustaining its rapid growth, building political alliances, and expanding its soft power. Moreover, FOCAC allowed China to counterbalance Western influence by presenting an alternative development model. While Corkin (2019) asserts that for African nations, the platform provided an opportunity to diversify partnerships beyond traditional donors, collectively negotiate trade and investment agreements, and secure financing for large-scale infrastructure projects without the policy conditions often imposed by Western institutions. Additionally, FOCAC has strengthened South-South cooperation, enhancing African agency in shaping relations with China (Anning, 2021; Six, 2020; Brautigam & Hwang, 2020).

FOCAC's agenda has evolved to reflect shifting priorities such as infrastructure, debt, trade imbalances, and sustainability. The 2021 Dakar Summit focused on sustainable development, poverty reduction, and digital transformation. In contrast, the 2024 Beijing Summit highlighted Africa's strategic role amid changing global geopolitics. China pledged $50 billion over three years—a decline from previous commitments—while reaffirming its focus on industrialisation, infrastructure, and poverty alleviation aligned with Agenda 2063 (China Daily, 2024a). Despite reduced funding and unmet past promises, the summit showcased China's growing use of soft power through ceremony and high-level diplomacy (Alexander, 2024). Media reports raised concerns about infrastructure deals, local labour issues, and Africa's lack of preparedness. Yet, the event reinforced China's image as a respectful and equal partner. President Ramaphosa called for more balanced trade and deeper investment, highlighting competition among over 50 African countries for Chinese engagement.

A core advantage of FOCAC is its collective negotiation mechanism, which enables African

states to engage China as a bloc rather than through fragmented bilateral deals. This structure enhances Africa's bargaining power in addressing trade imbalances, industrialisation, and debt sustainability. However, Wang & Zhu (2020) argue that FOCAC was initially driven by China's national interests rather than a purely mutual development vision. Abidde & Ayoola (2021) suggest that the partnership remains asymmetrical, as China consistently introduces major initiatives that shape the relationship. Shinn (2019) further notes that Africa-China relations have undergone multiple phases, often influenced more by China's evolving global strategies than Africa's autonomous decision-making. However, arguments by Akinola (2020), Shelton (2020a), Taylor (2020), Alden (2019), and Corkin (2019) highlight that African leaders play a role in shaping FOCAC, seeking a structured framework to leverage China's economic strength for their development. This institutional arrangement reflects a complex interplay of interests, where Africa's role, while growing, remains constrained by economic and political asymmetries.

In the broader geopolitical landscape, FOCAC's success has inspired other global actors to strengthen engagement with Africa. Amare & OBE (2024) observe that external powers—including the EU, US, India, Turkey, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the UAE—have expanded their summits with Africa, increasing Africa's triangulation options. This growing competition allows African ls to leverage partnerships strategically, ensuring more favourable terms in engagements with China and other global powers. While FOCAC has enhanced Africa-China cooperation, African nations must take a deliberate and unified approach to maximise benefits while mitigating dependency risks. Ensuring transparency, aligning FOCAC goals with Agenda 2063, and strengthening African agency will transform FOCAC from a primarily China-driven initiative into a genuinely equitable partnership.

3.2.3 *FOCAC Institutional and Coordination Mechanism: Challenges and Dynamics Considerations*

FOCAC operates through a multi-tiered coordination mechanism that facilitates structured engagement between China and African states. However, while China's centralised, state-led model, anchored by institutions like MOFCOM, MOFA, and the Ministry of Finance, ensures coherence and strategic direction (Brautigam, 2012; Taylor, 2019), Africa's fragmented institutional landscape undermines its collective bargaining capacity (Li *et al*., 2012; Moore & Osei-Tutu, 2020). Coordination spans Heads of State, foreign ministries, the African Union

(AU), and national follow-up committees, resulting in inconsistent policy responses and weakened African agency in agenda-setting.

Since 2015, FOCAC has increasingly aligned with China's BRI, prioritising industrialisation and infrastructure development (Wu, 2017). This strategic shift presents a critical opportunity for South Africa, through its leadership in SADC and engagement with the AU, to advance a development-oriented agenda. Yet, the effectiveness of regional bodies like SADC in leveraging FOCAC remains hindered by limited institutional coherence and weak policy harmonisation across member states (Yu-Shan, 2018). Therefore, South Africa can employ soft power, drawing on its diplomatic capital, developmental model, and institutional maturity to strengthen SADC's collective voice within FOCAC. This entails aligning REC priorities with AU frameworks and coordinating regionally endorsed positions in FOCAC negotiations., South Africa and SADC can reposition FOCAC as a platform not merely for bilateral transactions but for advancing regionally driven development goals within a more equitable partnership framework by enhancing internal coordination.

3.2.4 Key Institutional Actors in Africa's FOCAC Engagement underlying FOCAC-SADC Nexus with South Africa at a Strategic Crossroads

This section interrogates the institutional relationship between FOCAC's continental framework and the SADC regional bloc, highlighting South Africa's pivotal, yet under-leveraged position as a potential intermediary between the two. Africa's engagement within FOCAC is mediated through a multi-level institutional framework comprising continental, regional, and national actors (Li *et al.*, 2012; Monson, 2019). As illustrated in Figure 4, key participants include:

FOCAC AFRICAN PARTICIPANTS				
The African Diplomatic Corps serves as a conduit between the follow-up committee and African governments in preparing for the summit and implementing outcomes (Li *et al*., 2012).	Foreign Ministers and Senior Officials of African Countries formulate inputs and advise on deepening Africa-China cooperation at various levels (Taylor, 2019; Brautigam, 2012)	African Union coordinates African participants. NEPAD provides technical proposals and translates political will into concrete actionable agendas (Yu-Shan, 2018; Wu, 2017).	National Follow-up Committees in relevant departments in African countries with African Ambassadors in China play a crucial role in implementing outcomes (Monson, 2019; Du Plessis, 2014).	**Sub-Regional Organisations (RECs)**– Literature on this is covered within the broader scope of Africa-China relations with gaps in cooperation at the SADC level. (Liu, 2020; Yan, 2020).

Even with the breadth of this institutional arrangement, fragmented coordination limits Africa's capacity to negotiate collectively and maximise FOCAC benefits. Strengthening AU and REC-focused mechanisms is therefore vital for more strategic and unified engagement.

The FOCAC–SADC Disconnect: An Institutional Gap

Despite the twenty-five-year history of FOCAC as a platform for Africa–China cooperation, no formal FOCAC–SADC institutional architecture currently exists. There are no memoranda of understanding, structured summits, or dedicated sub-regional working groups convened under FOCAC auspices. Instead, SADC's engagement with FOCAC has occurred primarily through individual member states or AU-led processes, lacking a regionally coordinated mechanism (Yan, 2020; Liu, 2020). For instance, while then-SADC Chair Hage Geingob advocated for regional industrial cooperation with China at the 2018 FOCAC Summit, this initiative remained rhetorical, lacking any institutional mandate or follow-up mechanisms. Moreover, no evidence exists of explicitly convened FOCAC–SADC meetings, underscoring the ad hoc nature of current regional engagement (Monson, 2019). This institutional vacuum undermines the development of coherent regional strategies and limits SADC's collective bargaining power in its engagement with China.

South Africa at the Strategic Crossroads: Role and Limitations

South Africa, a former FOCAC co-chair and a key SADC member occupies a strategically central but underutilised position in bridging regional and continental Africa–China frameworks, aligning SADC priorities more effectively with broader Africa–China agendas. Strengthening this FOCAC–SADC nexus could enhance regional agency and cohesion in Africa's engagement with China. The 2015 Johannesburg FOCAC Summit, hosted by South Africa, marked a turning point in the regionalisation of Africa–China dialogue (Taylor, 2019). Furthermore, President Ramaphosa's 2024 state visit to Beijing reaffirmed South Africa's strategic value in China's African diplomacy. However, South Africa has not institutionalised this influence within a SADC framework. Its engagement with FOCAC remains largely bilateral or channelled through AU platforms, without establishing a structured sub-regional mechanism to align SADC priorities with FOCAC agendas (Le Pere, 2017). This gap is significant for three key reasons:

(i) SADC states negotiate independently with China, undermining their regional bargaining strength – lack of collective leverage.

(ii) South Africa's leadership in BRICS and SADC is not systematically leveraged to integrate regional interests within FOCAC - underutilised soft power.

(iii) The absence of a FOCAC–SADC interface highlights the need for further research on how South Africa might catalyse regional cooperation and promote triangular development in areas like infrastructure and energy.

The institutional void between FOCAC and SADC, while limiting current coordination, offers fertile ground for future academic inquiry, including comparative studies (e.g. ECOWAS–FOCAC), scenario-building for a SADC–FOCAC mechanism, and modelling of South Africa's potential role in regional integration under China–Africa frameworks.

Enhancing African Agency in FOCAC: Policy Priorities

While FOCAC offers a structured and long-standing mechanism for Africa–China engagement, its effectiveness is contingent on Africa's ability to assert agency, strategically coordinate interests, and navigate complex geopolitical dynamics. As Abidde and Ayoola (2021) argue, despite FOCAC's institutionalisation of Africa–China relations, decision-making asymmetries persist, with China often dictating the agenda. Moreover, the decentralised nature of Africa's internal coordination weakens its bargaining position, necessitating stronger AU and REC involvement. To improve Africa's strategic engagement with China, particularly within sub-regions like SADC, the following priorities should be addressed:

(i) Strengthen institutional mechanisms within the AU and RECs to foster a more unified African approach to FOCAC.

(ii) Enhance technical capacity to negotiate favourable terms in key sectors such as trade, finance, and infrastructure.

(iii) Align FOCAC priorities more explicitly with the AU's Agenda 2063 to ensure developmental sustainability.

(iv) Leverage competition among emerging global partners (India, Turkey, Russia, South Korea, UAE) to secure more advantageous terms with China.

Despite the absence of a formal FOCAC–SADC institutional interface, this institutional vacuum presents fertile ground for future academic and policy inquiry. South Africa, given its geostrategic position, historical engagement in FOCAC, and leadership role within SADC and BRICS, is well-placed to catalyse a structured sub-regional mechanism that integrates SADC perspectives into the broader Africa–China cooperation agenda. Ultimately, while FOCAC provides a valuable diplomatic and developmental platform, its future success rests on Africa's capacity to strategically institutionalise its collective voice with South Africa playing a central, yet currently unrealised, role in this process.

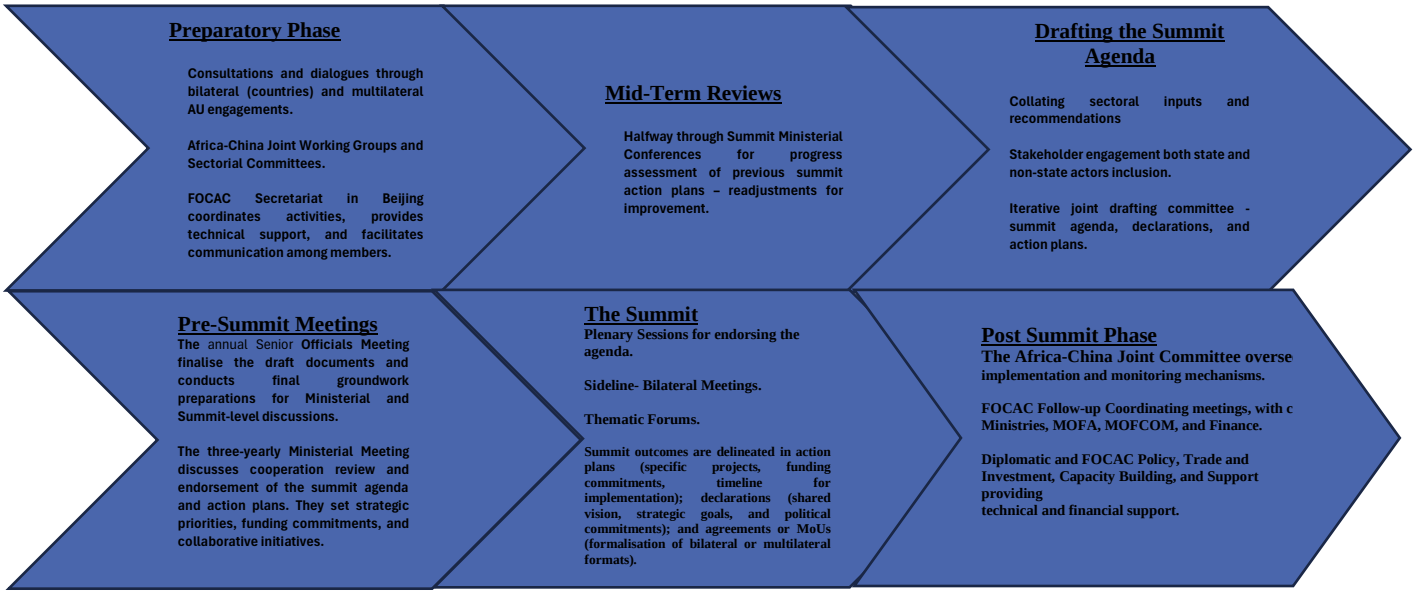
3.2.5 *FOCAC Decision-Making Processes*

The decision-making processes within FOCAC are shaped by a combination of high-level diplomatic engagements, ministerial meetings, and technical consultations reflecting a consensus-

driven approach that balances China's strategic interests with African developmental priorities. Shelton (2020b) and Taylor (2019) argue that FOCAC's institutional framework, grounded in South-South cooperation principles of voluntarism and consensus, provides a flexible mechanism for managing Africa-China relations. Its hybrid multilateral-bilateral approach fosters dynamic engagement, though Alden (2022) claims that the non-binding agreements and consensus-driven decision-making pose challenges to policy implementation and accountability.

Power asymmetries shape FOCAC's decision-making process. Cheru (2021) and Corkin (2019) argue that while African agency exists, China's dominant role in agenda-setting influences declarations and implementation. The Economist (2020) reports that the lack of a cohesive African policy toward China weakens Africa's bargaining position, allowing China to dictate priorities. Although some African states with more substantial institutional capacity have leveraged FOCAC more effectively, fragmented regional coordination continues to hinder Africa's collective bargaining power. Additionally, Taylor (2023) maintains that China's limited oversight of non-state actors complicates engagement, reflecting broader governance challenges in Sino-African relations. Figure 5 (below) summarises the various stages involved in the FOCAC decision-making process toward targeted outcomes, followed by a brief description of each of the steps:

Figure 5 – The FOCAC decision-making process toward targeted outcomes



Step 1:Bilateral consultations - China establishes direct ties with individual African states, reinforcing economic dependency and asymmetric power dynamics (Alden, 2017:45; Taylor, 2017:12). Realist (Mearsheimer, 2001:29) highlights China's pursuit of strategic interests through bilateral engagements, Constructivist (Acharya, 2014) sheds light on how shared narratives and identities influence African leaders' perceptions, reinforcing the established power asymmetry.

Step 2: Regional consultations strengthen regional agency and integration, enabling SADC to negotiate as a bloc to enhance bargaining power for collective interests in FOCAC. These consultations align with regionalism and constructivism, suggesting that they help shape norms of cooperation and solidarity among African states (Liu, 2019; Lee, 2017).

Step 3: Expert meetings facilitate technical cooperation, policy recommendations, and best practice exchanges between China and Africa. This highlights the role of experts in determining policy outcomes through technical advice, suggesting that cooperation in specific technical areas fosters broader regional integration in the long term. (Li, 2018; Lin, 2017).

Step 4: Sectoral consultations focus on key development sectors, ensuring targeted and sustainable cooperation for tailored negotiations. These consultations create patterns of interaction, strengthening institutional collaboration. (Brautigam, 2019; Kinga, 2017).

Step 5:AU consultations align FOCAC initiatives with AU frameworks, promoting continental priorities and African-led development strategies. Pan-Africanism supports a collective African voice in global engagements, while institutional liberalism highlights the role of formalised structures in ensuring that Africa's collective interests are represented. (Kuwe, 2018; Murithi, 2017).

Step 6: The FOCAC Secretariat Consultation coordinates policy implementation, facilitates communication, and ensures coherence between China and African member states. Competing institutional interests within Africa and China influence decision-making. The Secretariat mechanism may help sustain long-term cooperation. (Zhang, 2020; Wang, 2019).

Step 7: Drafting joint documents outlines cooperation strategies, policy agreements, and development roadmaps that reflect shared norms and expectations. This process involved bargaining, where African states seek to maximise gains from FOCAC, while the outcome documents influence shared norms and expectations from a constructivist perspective (Liu, 2019; Li, 2018).

Step 8: Realists argue that Senior Officials meet to finalise agreements, reinforcing China's dominant role in aligning the commitments with its interests while providing African states an avenue for diplomatic engagement (Alden, 2017; Taylor, 2017).

Step 9:The Ministerial Meeting endorses joint documents while balancing domestic political constraints and international commitments, ensuring that FOCAC commitments are aligned with national interests and linked to multilateral diplomacy and two-level games. (Brautigam, 2019; Lee, 2017).

Step 10: The FOCAC Summit promotes symbolic and substantive opportunities for high-level engagement and determines strategic direction, ensuring African leaders' participation in defining priorities linked to summit diplomacy and agenda setting (Kuwe, 2018; Lin, 2017).

Alden (2017) and Taylor (2017) claim that China plays a pivotal role in FOCAC, providing financial and technical support while offering a platform for Africa's development agenda. However, for FOCAC to be truly effective, it must evolve into an African-driven framework with strong Chinese support, fostering equitable partnerships and sustainable regional integration. SADC actively shapes FOCAC through regional and AU consultations, joint document drafting, and high-level negotiations (Karns & Mingst, 2017; Pease, 2017). It. It believes greater institutional coherence and collective bargaining are essential to maximise its impact. Archer (2017) and Pease (2017) argue that triangular cooperation with emerging partners can further enhance Africa's agency, reducing dependency and ensuring development aligns with regional priorities. South Africa can mediate these partnerships to reinforce African leadership within FOCAC. While China retains significant influence, FOCAC's structured engagement should provide a revived opportunity for Africa to transition from a passive recipient to an agenda-setter, ensuring African agency and ownership drive regional development.

3.2.6 *FOCAC Funding Methods and Sectoral Cooperation Areas*

FOCAC funding methods primarily encompass concessional loans, grants, interest-free loans, and special funds to foster sectoral cooperation in infrastructure developments, industrialisation, agriculture, health, education, and digital innovation (Alden & Wu, 2021). FOCAC, as an extensive framework for Africa-China cooperation, operates through a well-defined structure of policy coordination, financial mechanisms, and institutional collaboration (State Council Information Office, 2006). At the core of its operational model are strategic

documents such as the Joint Declaration and Action Plan, which provide the overarching vision and direction for the partnership. Alden (2012, 2018, 2019) and Li *et al*. (2012) maintain that these documents guide the alignment of specific initiatives across various sectors critical to Africa's developmental needs.

The financial instruments driving FOCAC projects come primarily from Chinese government institutions, including the China-Africa Development Fund (CADFund), the China Development Bank, and the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM). These institutions offer a mix of concessional loans, grants, preferential loans, and export credits, which support infrastructure, manufacturing, agriculture, and trade projects. According to (FOCAC Website, 2018; MOFA, 2018; Li *et al*., 2012), the focus on infrastructure development, in particular, aligns with broader Chinese initiatives like the BRI, which seeks to integrate African countries into global value chains by improving connectivity through roads, railways, ports, and telecommunications. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are significant mechanisms for mobilising private-sector investment. Kapoor (2017) argues that this strategy is critical in scaling up FOCAC's impact, as it brings additional resources and expertise to complement public funding. Hence, Acker (2024) emphasises the importance of African regional organisations in co-funding these projects and ensuring that African ownership is maintained and that projects align with regional development goals.

3.2.7 *Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanism*

A robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism ensures that FOCAC initiatives align with SADC's development goals and deliver sustainable impact. FOCAC provides a structured platform for Africa-China cooperation, yet its effectiveness depends on transparent decision-making, inclusive participation, and strong institutional coordination. Ministerial conferences and senior officials' meetings facilitate dialogue, with the six-month pre-meeting consultation being critical for shaping policy priorities. However, Hairong (2020) and Yu (2020) maintain that the forum's reliance on a bilateral approach limits transparency and regional integration efforts, as monitoring and evaluation remain fragmented and predominantly China-driven.

Alden (2014) and Bräutigam (2011) highlight inconsistencies in FOCAC's evaluation metrics, prioritising economic returns over broader social and environmental impacts. The absence of standardised, data-driven indicators, such as trade volumes, investment flows, and project completion rates—hinders comparative assessment across African nations. Furthermore, Wu

(2020) and Naidu (2013) claim that African stakeholders often have limited influence over evaluation processes, reinforcing the need for locally driven accountability mechanisms that align with regional priorities.

3.3 SADC'S REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Against the above background of the FOCAC institutional framework, this section discusses the SADC regional development framework within the context of SADC-China cooperation.

3.3.1 *SADC-China Cooperation*

SADC- China cooperation spans trade, infrastructure, industrialisation, agriculture, and security, with China as SADC's largest trading partner, surpassing $100 billion in trade volume by 2020 (SADC Trade Report, 2020). Chinese investments in SADC, valued at $14.5 billion, focus on infrastructure, mining, and manufacturing (China Global Investment Tracker, 2020)[14], aligning with the BRI and complementing SADC's regional integration agenda. This includes investments in transportation, telecommunications, and energy, including projects by Chinese companies to enhance connectivity (ITWeb Africa, 2020). Agriculture also benefits from Chinese investment in irrigation, mechanisation, and technology transfer (China Agricultural University, 2020).

Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding unsustainable debt burdens (IMF, 2020), environmental degradation linked to extractive industries (Environmental Defence Fund, 2020), and labour rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2020). While these investments foster economic diversification and South- South cooperation, Moyo (2020) contends that the asymmetry in trade relations, lack of transparency in agreements, and SADC's trade deficit with China raise critical questions about long-term dependence.

Lehman & Tan (2020b) highlight that China's growing influence in the SADC brings both opportunities and challenges in the changing landscape. Infrastructure investments improve regional connectivity, but Alden (2012) claims that Chinese firms' power and financing risks create dependency. Limited negotiation capacity exacerbates vulnerabilities, requiring stronger governance and oversight. The decline in Chinese commodity imports highlights the need for economic diversification (Mwega, 2019; Taylor, 2018). As FOCAC and China's engagement evolve, aligning investments with SADC's priorities, enforcing standards, and promoting

[14] Specific China-SADC trade and investment figures are less frequently published, therefore what is contained in the section is the most recent information available. China does not officially trade or invest with SADC as a group but with individual countries.

transparency are crucial. South Africa can leverage its middlepowership to advocate for a more balanced and mutually beneficial partnership for SADC with China.

3.3.2 *SADC: Dynamics, Challenges and Opportunities*

As alluded to by Moyo (2020), SADC was established in 1980[15] to counter apartheid and regional instability, has evolved into a key REC in Africa, shifting from nationalist to regionalist approaches influenced by Pan-Africanism and regional solidarity (Gatsheni, 2013). Its objectives include economic integration, reduced external dependency, and enhanced peace and security.

However, Khumalo (2015) opines that while SADC has launched regional integration initiatives such as the SADC Free Trade Area and Customs Union (Habib, 2013; Bond, 2004), it underlines a market-driven approach prioritising economic growth over social welfare, equality, and security. According to Nathan (2013) and Francis (2006), persistent challenges hinder deeper integration, including intra-regional trade barriers, infrastructure deficits, and political instability. Regardless of these tests, Akokpari (2008) and Adedeji (2002) maintain that the SADC remains a crucial player in African regionalism, aligning with the African Union's Agenda 2063 to drive industrialisation and economic cooperation.

SADC's engagement in regional peace and security, global governance, and economic cooperation underscores its strategic importance, yet structural weaknesses impede progress. Implementation gaps in regional frameworks such as the SADC Vision 2050 and RISDP (SADC, 2020) highlight the need for institutional reforms, enhanced funding, and stronger political will (Adebayo, 2016). While regional economic diversification remains limited, Kaplinsky (2019) claims that opportunities exist through initiatives like the AfCFTA and partnerships with China under FOCAC, which align with SADC's industrialisation and development goals. Still, Moyo (2020) argues that concerns over dependency, investment disparities, and governance deficits necessitate recalibrating external engagements to strengthen Africa's agency in global economic partnerships. Considering South Africa's middlepowership and influence within FOCAC, the country has a pivotal role in advancing

[15] The Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) was established in 1980 to reduce economic dependence on apartheid South Africa and promote regional cooperation. Following the end of apartheid, SADCC was transformed into SADC in 1992 with the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration and Treaty, expanding its mandate to include deeper regional integration and economic development (SADC, 1992; Saunders, 2000).

SADC's bargaining power and ensuring regional priorities are effectively represented in China-Africa cooperation frameworks.

3.3.3 *SADC RISDP and Priorities*

SADC's regional agenda, notably SADC Vision 2050 and the RISDP, outlines key priorities in economic integration, infrastructure development, industrialisation, human development, and security (SADC, 2020). SADC frameworks align with broader continental initiatives, such as Agenda 2063, and global partnerships like FOCAC's Vision 2035. The SADC Industrialisation Strategy and Roadmap (2015-2063) further emphasises economic diversification, regional value chains, and intra-African trade linked to the AfCFTA (AfDB, 2016). However, Moyo (2020) and Kaplinsky (2019) argue that while these frameworks offer a foundation for regional growth, persistent challenges undermine their effectiveness, including low intra-regional trade, investment disparities, and infrastructural deficits. Francis (2019) also claims security concerns, funding constraints, and limited implementation capacity.

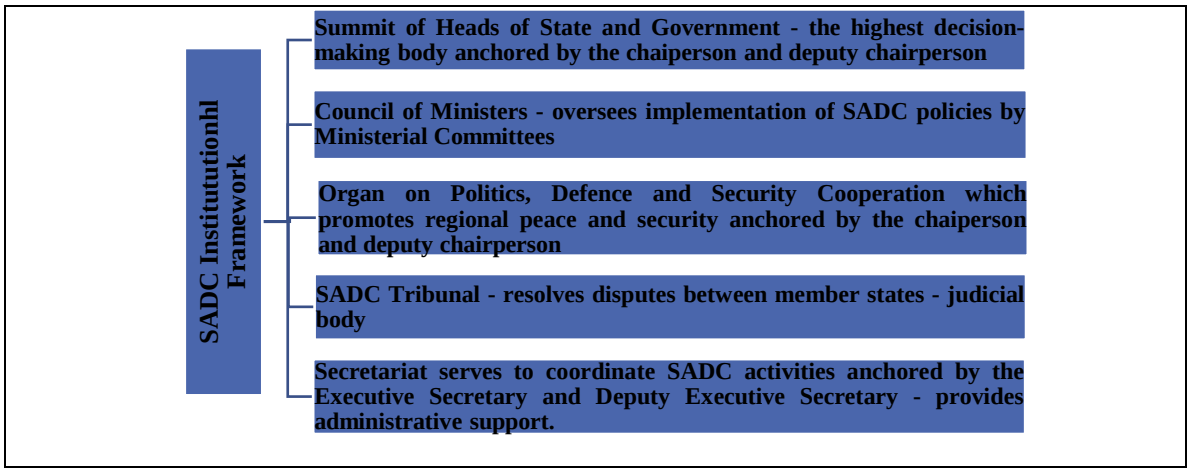
SADC has pursued strategic economic partnerships, including the SADC-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and participation in the AfCFTA (AU, 2021; European Commission, 2020). Infrastructure projects like the Mozambique-Zambia-Tanzania power transmission line aim to improve regional connectivity (World Bank, 2021). However, the region faces difficulties mobilising resources, ensuring policy coherence, and leveraging digital transformation (UNCTAD, 2020). The slow pace of industrialisation and economic integration reflects SADC's struggle with internal coordination and investment absorption (FOCAC, 2022). Without addressing governance inefficiencies and institutional weaknesses, SADC risks perpetuating a dependency model instead of fostering sustainable development (UNDP, 2021).

3.3.4 *SADC Institutional Framework*

SADC's institutional framework, grounded in the SADC Treaty, provides political and economic cooperation mechanisms. It includes decision-making bodies such as the Summit of Heads of State, the Council of Ministers, and Sectoral and Cluster Ministerial Committees, as outlined in Figure 6 below (SADC, 2023). Specialised agencies, including the SADC Development Finance Resource Centre (DFRC), support policy implementation and regional financing by offering technical and advisory services to enhance resource mobilisation (SADC-DFRC, 2023). However, scholars highlight inefficiencies in decision-making, bureaucratic inertia, and weak enforcement mechanisms as key challenges (Saurombe, 2022). The dominance of larger economies, particularly South Africa, over smaller member states raises

concerns about regional governance equity (Nathan, 2020). This power imbalance often results in uneven commitment to regional initiatives, where smaller states may lack the incentives or capacity to engage fully in collective decision-making (Chigora & Dewa, 2021).

Figure 6: SADC Institutional Framework



SADC's institutional framework, including national committees, research institutions, and the SADC Trade Commission, is vital for regional cooperation, policy formulation, and dispute resolution. However, its effectiveness is hindered by limited capacity, funding constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and weak coordination among member states and institutions (Habib, 2013; Akokpari, 2008). These issues and dependency on external donors raise concerns about the region's autonomy and the alignment of projects with SADC's priorities. The overlap of regional memberships (SADC, Southern African Customs Union, AU) further complicates coordination (Habib, 2013; Akokpari, 2008).

Scholars like Taylor (2017) and Hartzenberg (2011) argue that improving institutional accountability and decision-making could enhance regional governance, trade facilitation, and policy harmonisation. China-SADC cooperation, mainly through FOCAC, presents growth opportunities, but concerns over debt sustainability and policy alignment persist. South Africa's economic power is crucial in shaping these partnerships to ensure they align with SADC's development goals, especially industrialisation and trade (Bilal, 2017; Hartzenberg, 2011). Effective decision-making, better coordination, and strengthened institutions will be essential for sustainable and inclusive regional development.

FOCAC's growing role in Africa's development is evident, but its engagement remains predominantly bilateral, with limited involvement of regional organisations, private sector actors, and civil society, constraining Africa's collective agency (Alden & Large, 2019; Taylor,

2020). In contrast, initiatives like TICAD, BRICS, the EU, and ASEAN have incorporated poly-lateral diplomacy by integrating RECs, think tanks and business councils to enhance policy coordination and sustainable partnerships (Lisk, 2021). This gap in FOCAC highlights the need for the AU and RECs to assert regional agency and advocate for a more structured, multi-stakeholder approach, similar to TICAD's inclusion of the AU, private sector, and multilateral institutions (Ikenberry & Mo, 2022). Strengthening poly-lateral diplomacy within FOCAC would enhance regional integration, ownership of projects, and long-term developmental impact, reducing over-reliance on state-to-state negotiations that often bypass regional priorities.

Mlambo & Carter (2023) intimate that SADC can leverage South Africa's middlepowership to foster greater collective engagement in FOCAC, ensuring regional interests are represented and institutionalised. Africa can drive this shift by advocating regional coordination, strengthening public-private partnerships, engaging non-state actors, and leveraging its influence in the AU, BRICS, and TICAD to align FOCAC with SADC's development goals. Historically, China's state-centric model in FOCAC has limited poly-lateral diplomacy (Alden & Large, 2019; Taylor, 2020). However, the AU's full membership in FOCAC since 2011 and pledges in the 2024 summit to align projects with the AU's Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA mark a shift toward greater regional integration (Lisk, 2021). Nevertheless, challenges remain in fully incorporating RECs and non-state actors (ISS Africa, 2024). In this context, for poly-lateral diplomacy to succeed, it must align with China's interests in stability, integration, and investment while maintaining strong bilateral ties (Ikenberry & Mo, 2022). If China is genuinely committed to Africa, China's interests through FOCAC should be shaped by Africa's developmental priorities and regional conditions, ensuring a more balanced and mutually beneficial partnership.

Drawing from the concept of new regionalism defined in Chapter Two, this framework emphasises how state and non-state actors shape cooperation strategies in Africa's evolving geopolitical landscape. New regionalism goes beyond traditional state-centric models by highlighting the roles of regional organisations, civil society, the private sector, and global powers like China in driving regional integration. This approach promotes multidimensional cooperation across economic, political, security, and social spheres, ensuring sustainable development through inclusive governance and active participation from non-state actors (Naidu, 2015). While it offers economic integration and collective bargaining opportunities,

challenges such as unequal power dynamics and external geopolitical pressures remain (Flockhart, 2006; Hirsch, 2016). Ultimately, new regionalism advocates for flexible and adaptive cooperation strategies to address Africa's diverse and complex challenges (SADC, 2015). Thus, South Africa's middlepowership and soft power are essential tools in shaping the trajectory of FOCAC and ensuring that African regional integration and development are prioritised within this framework.

3.4 SOUTH AFRICA'S SOFT POWER PROFILE AND MIDDLEPOWERSHIP RATIONALE

3.4.1 *Soft Power and its Relevance to South Africa*

As conceptualised by Nye (2004) and outlined in Chapter Two, soft power refers to a nation's ability to achieve its objectives through attraction, persuasion, and influence rather than coercion or military force. In the African context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) highlights its significance for states like South Africa, which seek to balance regional leadership, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. Its relevance to South Africa includes the country's quest to promote African unity and regional economic cooperation and drive infrastructure development and regional integration while enhancing its global reputation and influence. According to Lee (2011), this approach has also helped attract foreign investment and tourism, support national interests through diplomacy, and foster cultural exchange and people-to-people relations. As stated by Van der Westhuizen (2014), Baker & Le Pere (2010), and Taylor (2009), South Africa occupies a unique position in global and regional politics as a prominent African power and an emerging middle power. Its influence extends beyond material capabilities, relying heavily on soft power (Nye, 2004). South Africa's soft power, through diplomatic engagement, cultural exchange, and promoting regional cooperation, strengthens its role as a bridge-builder in forging coalitions and reconciling differences within Africa and in its global interactions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Van der Westhuizen, 2014; Lee, 2011; Nye, 2004).

3.4.2 *Sources of South Africa's Soft Power*

Political and Diplomatic Influence

South Africa's democratic transition, symbolised by Nelson Mandela's leadership, significantly enhanced its global reputation. Habib (2009) claims the country emerged as a champion of human rights, multilateralism, and peaceful conflict resolution, with its 1994 transition from apartheid to democracy positioning it as a model for governance and reconciliation in Africa.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) became a globally recognised model for transitional justice; as mentioned by Fioramonti (2019), it reinforced South Africa's commitment to peacebuilding. As such, South Africa continues to play an active role in mediating conflicts on the continent, including contributing peacekeeping troops through the AU and the UN (Alden & Schoeman, 2015). Additionally, it advocates for UNSC reform and active participation in international partnership platforms, and the AU has positioned it as a key voice for Africa in international affairs (Zondi, 2019).

Landsberg (2021) and Van der Westhuizen (2014) contend that South Africa is crucial in diplomacy, mediation, and coalition-building, bridging developing and developed nations based on its democratic credentials and regional leadership in various institutions to enhance its soft power. Landsberg (2021), Adebajo (2017a), and Nathan (2005) maintain that, notwithstanding South Africa's diplomatic activism, inconsistencies in its foreign policy and domestic challenges sometimes undermine its credibility. Van Heerden (2022) echoes this critique by highlighting the tensions in Mbeki-era foreign policy between high-level strategic vision and the realities of implementation. While South Africa aimed to lead through values-based diplomacy and pan-African solidarity, its foreign policy was at times marked by ambiguity and elite-driven decision-making. This created perceptions of incoherence, which undermined the consistency needed to sustain soft power over time. These contradictions continue to shape South Africa's diplomatic image, especially when national interests appear misaligned with regional consensus or when policy lacks transparency (Van Heerden, 2022). However, Adebajo (2017a) highlights its legitimacy and effectiveness in governance, while Fioramonti (2019) and Schoeman (2018) emphasise its advocacy for African interests and the need for greater transparency in global governance.

Economic Leadership in Africa

South Africa remains one of the most industrialised economies in Africa, contributing significantly to intra-African trade, extensive investment, and corporate expansion. Cornelissen (2020) and Schoeman (2018) argue that South African companies have a strong footprint across Africa, reinforcing the country's economic soft power. It is a key player in the SADC and AfCFTA, advocating for economic integration and regional infrastructure development (Soko & Qobo, 2017). As a significant trading partner with China under FOCAC, Taylor (2020) asserts that South Africa has positioned itself as a bridge between Beijing and Africa, leveraging its strategic importance and partnership. Although there are demonstrable

advantages, Landsberg (2021) argues that the country faces significant economic challenges, including low growth rates, high unemployment, energy crises, and policy uncertainty, which diminish its ability to project sustainable economic soft power.

Cultural and Ideational Influence[16]

According to Van der Westhuizen (2016a), South Africa's cultural industries and values contribute significantly to its soft power. The successful hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup showcased the country's capability on the world stage, reinforcing its soft power appeal through sports diplomacy. South African arts, music, and literature strengthen its cultural diplomacy. The country's vibrant music scene and genres, alongside renowned artists, amplify its influence further. Additionally, world-class universities enhance research diplomacy through international collaborations (Cornelissen, 2020; Fioramonti, 2019). However, Zondi (2019) highlights that xenophobic attacks against African migrants have negatively impacted South Africa's pan-African leadership aspirations, creating a contradiction in its soft power projection.

3.4.3 *South Africa as a Middle Power: Strategic Rationale and Challenges*

Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) noted that middle powers play a crucial role in global governance through multilateralism, coalition-building, and conflict mediation. More recent scholars (see, e.g., Garcé & Milani, 2022; Köllner, 2020; Jordaan, 2003) further emphasise the evolving nature of middle-power diplomacy, highlighting their strategic adaptability in a multipolar world and their role in norm diffusion, niche diplomacy, and agenda-setting within international institutions. South Africa seeks to advance regional integration and multilateral cooperation as a middle power by leveraging its diplomatic influence and normative leadership. However, its role is often challenged by domestic constraints, regional asymmetries, and shifting global power dynamics (Soko & Qobo, 2021). As a bridge between the Global North and South, South Africa plays a pivotal role in trade, climate change, and security debates while

[16] Ideational influence shapes preferences and behaviours through norm diffusion, knowledge production, and soft power, without coercion. Ideational power institutionalises ideas, affecting decision-making through instrumental (strategic use), structural (institutional embedding), and discursive (shaping public discourse) mechanisms – (Carstensen & Schmidt (2016). As the distinction between the two terms lies in the degree of control over how ideas shape policies, institutions, and behaviours, for this study ideational power is more relevant to advance regional integration.

Whereas, normative power and ideational power are closely linked, particularly when discussing how South Africa uses its soft power and middlepowership in FOCAC. Normative power shapes global norms and values, while ideational power is the means through which those norms are institutionalised and influence decision-making. South Africa's normative power in FOCAC promotes regional priorities, and its ideational power strategically embeds and shapes these norms through diplomacy, discourse, and institutional structures, (Acharya, 2014; Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Manners, 2002).

championing South-South cooperation and African agency in multilateral platforms (Sidiropoulos, 2019; Jordaan, 2003). Alden and Schoeman (2015) highlight South Africa's engagement in global governance through international partnership platforms, emphasising its advocacy for human rights and sustainable development.

Additionally, its participation in BRICS and IBSA enhances its diplomatic influence. However, Landsberg (2021) and Taylor (2020) claim that its domestic economic instability, intra-African rivalries, and non-aligned stance on global issues raise concerns about its reliability as a middle power. South Africa's influence depends on its ability to align domestic and foreign policy, strengthen SADC cohesion in partnerships like FOCAC, and enhance cultural diplomacy. Addressing these challenges will reinforce its soft power and solidify its leadership in Africa and beyond.

According to Power (2011) and Nkrumah (2009), South Africa influences others through persuasion by employing various soft power tools, including diplomacy, cultural and educational exchanges, international development cooperation, human rights advocacy, and sports diplomacy, to enhance its global and regional influence. However, domestic challenges such as economic disparity, corruption, governance issues, regional competition, perceptions of dominance, and balancing global rivalries limit its effectiveness (Fioramonti, 2019). Despite these constraints, South Africa's middle-power status is reinforced by its mediation role, advocacy for governance reforms, and strategic positioning between developed and developing nations. To sustain and expand its soft power, it must address internal weaknesses, strengthen regional partnerships, and maintain credibility in foreign policy. South Africa can solidify its influence as a key player in African development and global diplomacy by effectively leveraging its ideational power assets.

3.5 CONCLUSION

The institutional frameworks of FOCAC and SADC, combined with South Africa's strategic use of soft power, provide a dynamic approach to advancing regional growth and development in Africa. FOCAC fosters economic cooperation and infrastructure development and strengthens global diplomatic ties. At the same time, SADC addresses the collective challenges of Southern Africa, with China playing a pivotal role in the region's growth. South Africa bridges global and regional divides by leveraging its historical legacy, diplomatic influence,

and economic power, creating synergies between FOCAC and SADC to contribute to regional stability and growth.

The next chapter will explore how South Africa capitalises on its soft power to align FOCAC's objectives with the SADC framework, unlocking new growth prospects for the region. It will examine how this synergy addresses infrastructure deficits, economic integration, and sustainable development challenges, positioning South Africa as a key leader in Africa's developmental agenda. South Africa strengthens Africa's collective bargaining power by fostering cooperation between these two institutions, ultimately promoting sustainable and inclusive growth. This study emphasises the need for a Pan-African policy approach to maximise FOCAC's potential in critical areas like industrialisation, agriculture, and human capacity building.

4 CHAPTER 4: TOWARDS A SADC-FOCAC SYNERGY IN PURSUIT OF REGIONAL GROWTH PROSPECTS: THE ROLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

The Africa-China relations built over decades of cooperation face a critical test as both partners navigate post-pandemic recovery, economic uncertainty, and the need to recalibrate their relationship toward long-term, inclusive development on equal terms (China Daily, 2024b).

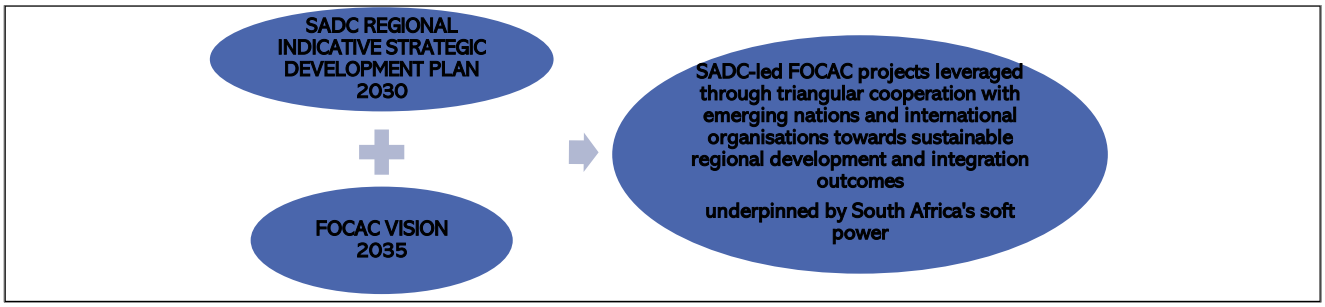
4.1 INTRODUCTION

Strategic partnerships reshape international cooperation as global power shifts from traditional Western dominance towards emerging powers. Regionalisation offers opportunities and challenges for sustainable development while fostering economic interdependence; it also demands cohesive strategies to navigate geopolitical complexities and competing interests. The FOCAC and SADC institutional frameworks discussed in the previous chapter provide the foundation for regional collaboration, yet fragmentation and external pressures often limit their effectiveness. South Africa can bridge these gaps with its diplomatic influence and soft power capabilities, aligning SADC's aspirations with FOCAC's broader development agenda.

This chapter critically examines the future trajectory of SADC-FOCAC cooperation by exploring the strategic convergence between SADC's RISDP 2030 and FOCAC's Vision 2035. Drawing on insights from Chapter Two on regionalisation and regional organisations, it evaluates opportunities and constraints in harmonising these frameworks through lessons from other regional blocs with concrete examples. The discussion further presents scenarios of how South Africa, through ideational power projection, has advanced the African agenda across various global platforms. These examples highlight the potential for strengthening regional agency, driving sustainable development, and enhancing SADC's collective bargaining position within FOCAC.

Through strategic analysis, this chapter demonstrates how South Africa can shape SADC-FOCAC cooperation into a model for effective South-South collaboration, setting the stage for the policy recommendations outlined in Chapter Five. Therefore, revisiting the purpose of this study (summarised in Figure 7 below) underscores the argument that Southern Africa's regional development through FOCAC-backed, SADC-led triangular cooperation initiatives can be significantly strengthened by leveraging South Africa's soft power and strategic middle-power diplomacy.

Figure 7: Reaffirming the Research Main Argument



4.2 ENVISIONING THE FUTURE: CONVERGENCE OF SADC'S REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA AND FOCAC'S PRIORITIES

The SADC-FOCAC nexus underscores the need for transformative partnerships to tackle SADC's infrastructural and developmental challenges. Regional integration efforts are weakened by institutional incapacity, limited connectivity, and persisting economic disparities. This section explores the alignment between SADC's RISDP 2030 and FOCAC's Vision 2035, identifying opportunities to enhance infrastructure, trade, industrialisation, and human capital. Building on the insights from Chapters Two and Three, it assesses policy alignment and implementation gaps, setting the stage for Chapter Five's policy recommendations on strengthening SADC's strategic leverage through triangular partnerships.

4.2.1 *A brief overview of the SADC Development Plan (RISDP 2030) and FOCAC Vision 2035 Framework*

The SADC RISDP 2030 framework aims to advance economic integration, sustainable development and political stability across Southern Africa. Its core pillars include economic integration, infrastructure, social and human development, peace and security, and environmental resilience, with all of these aims aligned with the AU's Agenda 2063, thereby promoting regional markets and cross-border cooperation (SADC, 2020:31). Scholars such as (see, e.g., Nathan, 2012:42; Hartzenberg, 2011:16; Chingono & Nakana, 2009:402; Mangu, 2006:) emphasise RISDP's strengths in addressing trade, infrastructure, and social services while acknowledging challenges like economic disparities, weak institutional capacity, governance issues, societal inequality, funding shortages, uneven implementation, and conflicting national priorities —representing SADC's pledge to a united and prosperous region. The success of RISDP depends on collective political commitment, coherence among member states, and effective use of external partnerships. Notwithstanding its comprehensive vision for

integration, barriers to long-term growth require a hybrid approach that balances internal ownership with external collaboration for mutual benefit (www.sadc.int).

FOCAC Vision 2035 outlines China's strategic objectives to deepen cooperation with Africa from 2021 to 2035, focusing on infrastructure, industrialisation, trade, investment, peace and security, and people-to-people exchanges (www.focac.org). It is a comprehensive framework to strengthen political, economic, and social ties through regular ministerial meetings and summits. Scholars (see, e.g., Zondi, 2017:147; Tandon, 2015:147; Taylor, 2010:15; Brautigam, 2009:12) acknowledge FOCAC's role in driving investment and capacity-building but raise concerns about debt dependency, lack of transparency, and unequal power dynamics that favour China's strategic interests over African agency. These scholars argue that these risks hinder equitable development outcomes and limit African influence over agenda-setting. However, FOCAC Vision 2035 offers significant industrialisation and technology transfer opportunities aligned with Africa's regional priorities. Its success depends on addressing power imbalances, enhancing transparency, and fostering greater African ownership to ensure alignment with regional development goals. FOCAC remains pivotal for advancing Sino-African relations through targeted programs and strategic partnerships.

FOCAC Vision 2035 and SADC RISDP 2030 present complementary frameworks that, if strategically aligned, could unlock transformative development opportunities for Southern Africa (The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2014; SADC, 2020; FOCAC, 2021). While FOCAC provides critical resources and technical expertise to support regional development (Taylor, 2016), RISDP offers a structured blueprint for integration and sustainable growth (SADC, 2020). Ensuring that this alignment strengthens African agency and enhances transparency requires key stakeholders' active involvement, alongside accountability mechanisms to guarantee that FOCAC initiatives align with regional priorities (Alden & Large, 2019). This convergence can potentially accelerate Southern Africa's development trajectory by fostering deeper regional integration, with institutions like the AU and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) playing a crucial role in embedding these frameworks within Africa's broader developmental agenda (UNECA, 2022; AU, 2021).

4.2.2 *Lessons from Regionalisation and Regional Organisations*

Regionalisation, the integration and cooperation process among neighbouring states to achieve shared objectives, is a critical driver of economic development and resilience. As discussed in

Chapter Two, Archer's (2001) framework on regional organisations, which conceptualises them as arenas, instruments, and actors, underscores their role in facilitating such cooperation. For SADC, regionalisation fosters collective development goals, policy harmonisation, and strengthened bargaining power, particularly in negotiations like FOCAC. Comparative examples from the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the AU illustrate how effective regionalisation enhances economic growth and global influence.

(i) EU – A Comprehensive Example of Regionalisation

The EU serves as a forum for member states to negotiate policies across various domains, fulfilling the roles of an arena, instrument, and actor as defined by Archer (2001). Goyal (2016) and Bickerton (2015) highlight the Eurozone as a case of deep economic integration facilitated by the EU. As an instrument for collective action, the EU enables initiatives such as the Schengen Agreement, which allows free movement, and the Common Agricultural Policy, which supports food security (Lenz, 2021; Hughes & Sasse, 2012). As an actor, Müller (2020) contends that the EU represents its members in trade negotiations and climate agreements, leveraging its collective economic and political influence.

(ii) ASEAN – Functional Regionalisation

ASEAN's mediation of the South China Sea disputes reflects its role in managing security issues among members and with external actors. As an arena, ASEAN fosters dialogue among its ten member states on economic, political, and security issues. It drives regional trade integration through initiatives like the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. As an actor, ASEAN engages external partners to enhance regional stability and economic growth through ASEAN Plus frameworks (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; Collins, 2019; Acharya, 2014).

(iii) AU – African Regionalisation

Maphosa (2020) argues that the AfCFTA exemplifies AU-led regionalisation, aiming to enhance intra-African trade through a single market for goods and services. As an arena, Tordoff (2018) claims the AU provides a platform for African nations to address shared challenges, including conflict resolution and socioeconomic development. It facilitates cooperation through initiatives like Agenda 2063, which Adebajo (2020) describes as an instrument for continental integration and development. As an actor, the AU Peace and Security Council plays a direct role in conflict mediation, as seen in its intervention in the Ethiopian-Tigray conflict (Bortolotti, 2020).

SADC-FOCAC must prioritise strengthening institutional capacity and fostering economic integration while being vigilant of bureaucratic inefficiency and nationalism drawing from the EU. It must promote policy coherence, regional integration aligning with AU goals, and flexibility with vigorous enforcement and non-interference mechanisms that ensure equitable development inspired by ASEAN. Furthermore, aligning regional frameworks with the broader African development agenda, as the AU and UNECA championed, will ensure that SADC-FOCAC contributes meaningfully to sustainable development in Southern Africa.

4.2.3 *A SADC and Regionalisation Scenario: A Critical Analysis through Regional Organisations*

Applying Archer's framework to SADC's regional strategies (SADC, 2021) highlights the importance of a unified approach in advancing economic development and elevating the region's international standing. SADC is pivotal in advancing regionalisation within Southern Africa, seeking political and economic integration across the region. Although Carmody (2020), Ngoma (2020), and Southall (2013) focus on the challenges SADC faces in fostering deeper integration, they are multi-faceted, encompassing institutional limitations, political fragmentation, and divergent economic interests among member states. This case study will demonstrate SADC's role in regionalisation through the lens of the theoretical frameworks developed in Chapter Two, exploring the dynamics of regionalism and economic integration. It expands on regional integration strategies through regioness and regionhood, incorporating Archer's framework of actor, instrument, and arena.

4.2.4 *Regionalisation and the Role of SADC*

Regionalisation in Southern Africa has been promoted through key initiatives, most notably the SADC Free Trade Area, infrastructure development programs, and industrialisation strategies. SADC (2015) and Morrissey (2011) report that these initiatives aim to reduce trade barriers, improve infrastructure, and harmonise policies across member states. Yet, SADC's progress in these areas has often been slow due to the challenges associated with aligning the national priorities of its diverse members (Tjønneland, 2016). Adejumobi (2015) observes that prioritising national sovereignty over regional cooperation remains a fundamental obstacle to deeper regional integration.

The theoretical framework of regionalism, as discussed in Chapter Two, identifies the primary goals of regional cooperation as economic growth, political cohesion, and stability. While

SADC has made strides in creating the FTA, (Rampa *et al*., 2017) contend that the full implementation of its policies has been inconsistent, often hindered by the region's weak institutional capacity and fragmented political landscape. The concepts of *regioness* and *regionhood* are crucial for fostering integration within SADC, as (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000) claim that they emphasise historical and cultural cohesion that binds regions and a sense of collective identity through political and economic ties. However, their potential remains constrained by internal divisions, economic asymmetries, and nationalistic interests that undermine regional consensus on integration (Nathan, 2016).

4.2.5 *Institutional Challenges and Slow Integration*

Regionalisation initiatives like the SADC FTA have been successful. However, significant institutional challenges hinder deeper regional integration. Havenga (2019) underlines that the reliance on consensus-based decision-making, while inclusive, often leads to delayed implementation and policy stagnation, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as a customs union. Nhlapo (2019) and Roux (2017) underscore the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms and weak institutional structures further complicate the region's capacity to implement its developmental agenda. Theoretical insights into input, conversion, and output processes in political systems outlined in Chapter Two provide a helpful lens for understanding these challenges. The input refers to the policies and initiatives introduced by SADC, such as the FTA and industrialisation plans (SADC, 2015), which are commendable. Conversion relates to translating these policies into actionable goals, which are often constrained by weak institutional leadership, political fragmentation, and inconsistent implementation (Khadiagala, 2018; Nathan, 2016). Finally, the output represents the region's success in achieving integration goals, which is limited in SADC's case (World Bank, 2022; UNECA, 2020) if measured against economic, political, and social indicators, due to weak institutional frameworks and conflicting national priorities.

Applying the Rational Design framework to the SADC and the FOCAC reveals how institutional structures influence the effectiveness of regional and international cooperation. SADC's design addresses regional integration goals but faces challenges stemming from overlapping memberships and divergent national interests, which hinder consistent policy implementation. In contrast, FOCAC reflects China's strategic priorities and adopts a flexible, bilateral-oriented structure that facilitates engagement, though disparities in capacity and priorities among African states affect cooperation outcomes. A comparative analysis using this

framework underscores the significance of context-sensitive, strategically aligned institutional designs in enhancing cooperation, addressing implementation gaps, and advancing sustainable regional development.

4.2.6 *The Interplay Between SADC and the African Union (AU)*

While complementary to SADC's goals, the AU introduces an additional layer of complexity in the regional integration process. Both institutions aim to foster economic integration across Africa, but their priorities often conflict. As per Shalita (2015), the AU's Agenda 2063 emphasises continental goals, such as infrastructure development and economic integration, while SADC's regional focus on trade and industrialisation can sometimes counter these broader objectives. The tension between the AU and SADC reflects the challenges inherent in regional cooperation, and Bello & Chachage (2019) contend that, on the one hand, there is a need for RECs to cooperate and align their strategies, while on the other hand, national sovereignty and regional autonomy can hinder collaboration. Archer's arena framework helps elucidate this tension, as the arena refers to the geopolitical and institutional space where actors, such as the AU and SADC, negotiate and compete. In this context, the AU serves as a continental arena, whereas SADC represents a regional arena, each with different priorities and resources, thereby complicating efforts for coordinated regional integration.

SADC functions as a central actor, coordinating regional policies, while South Africa (Alden & Schoeman, 2015), as a middle power, plays a leadership role in facilitating integration. Nathan (2016) argues that instruments such as the SADC FTA, North-South Corridor, and Southern African Power Pool (SAPP) are crucial for economic connectivity and infrastructure development but suffer weak enforcement mechanisms. The arena includes intra-SADC negotiations and engagements with external partners like the AU, FOCAC, and emerging economies, which introduce complexities due to competing interests (Vanheukelom *et al*., 2016).

SADC's integration efforts face challenges due to economic disparities, political fragmentation, and institutional weaknesses, constraining deeper regional cooperation. However, Hettne & Söderbaum (2000) argue that South Africa's middlepowership offers strategic advantages. Balancing regional autonomy with broader continental and global objectives remains a persistent challenge. Triangular cooperation with intergovernmental institutions, UNECA, and FOCAC presents an opportunity to align external resources with SADC's priorities,

strengthening institutional frameworks and decision-making processes. For the SADC to achieve meaningful regional integration, it must enhance institutional leadership capabilities and coherence, address power asymmetries, and strategically engage external partners. Leveraging South Africa's leadership and triangular cooperation mechanisms can provide a more sustainable and inclusive path toward integration, ensuring that regional development aligns with African and global priorities.

4.3 OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR SYNERGY BETWEEN SADC'S RISDP AND FOCAC VISION 2035

This section explores how integrating SADC's development plan with FOCAC's framework can strengthen the regional economy and promote cohesion. As an example, SADC-FOCAC cooperation has significantly boosted trade, investment, and infrastructure development, with trade between China and SADC rising from $12 billion in 2000 to over $60 billion by 2022, primarily driven by raw material exports (SADC Trade and Investment Report, 2021). China has invested over $30 billion in SADC, focusing on energy, mining, and infrastructure, including key projects like industrial parks and transportation corridors (SADC Infrastructure Development Master Plan, 2012). This has improved regional connectivity and trade, with intra-SADC trade growing from 10% in the early 2000s to 20% by 2020 (SADC Trade and Investment Report, 2021).

However, the region's dependence on raw material exports and Chinese investments raises concerns about long-term economic sustainability and diversification (FOCAC Action Plan, 2018). Infrastructure and industrial projects have spurred growth but have not sufficiently promoted value-added industries, potentially limiting SADC's ability to move beyond resource dependence. FOCAC's success lies in the initiatives being focused on local capacity-building, industrial diversification, and ensuring alignment with SADC's broader development goals.

Opportunities for SADC-FOCAC Synergy

SADC's engagement with China under FOCAC presents opportunities for regional development but is hindered by structural challenges. Hence, in the section below, the synergy and opportunities for regional development in shared priority areas are unpacked, as well as challenges that hinder the collaboration impacting SADC's regional integration agenda with China's focus on economic cooperation in Africa for mutual benefit, demonstrated through the scenarios highlighted below: -

(i) Projects such as the Tanzania-Zambia Railway and Kazungula Bridge on infrastructure and economic connectivity align with SADC's Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan (RIDMP) and China's BRI (China MFA, 2018; SADC, 2012). Though Oyejide (2014a,b) and Moyo (2013) raise concerns that the dominance of Chinese funding and expertise limits local ownership, the bilateral nature of agreements—primarily between China and individual African states, including key SADC members, undermines regional cohesion.

(ii) FOCAC's industrial parks and manufacturing hubs, which are underpinned by industrialisation and economic diversification, support SADC's Industrialisation Strategy (2015–2063) (SADC, 2015; UNCTAD, 2020). However, Carmody, Taylor, and Zajontz (2021) and Brautigam & Hwang (2019) highlight challenges such as Chinese firms prioritising their workforce and providing minimal technology transfer, which restricts long-term industrial benefits for host countries.

(iii) While FOCAC supports agricultural modernisation, which aligns with agricultural development and food security priorities, UNECA (2017) reports that its focus on export-driven cash crops rather than food security benefits China more than SADC. Additionally, intensive farming practices raise ecological concerns regarding soil depletion and sustainability (FAO, 2019).

(iv) China provides scholarships, vocational training, and technology transfer, all contributing to human capital development (Moyo, 2013a). However, Oyeide (2014a) and Adebanji (2012) argue that there is little evidence of returnees contributing to SADC economies, given weak local job markets and misaligned educational priorities. Hence, Chikoko (2017) believes brain drain remains a persistent issue without structured return-to-work policies.

(v) Emerging partners such as India, Brazil, the Gulf States, Turkey, and intergovernmental institutions could enhance regional development efforts through triangular cooperation (UNECA, 2017; AU, 2015). However, Kawai & Iwasa (2018) argue that China's dominant role may marginalise local priorities, potentially fostering dependency (Tao & Wang, 2020; Lin, 2017). Ensuring sustainability requires effective governance and active local participation.

FOCAC's engagement with SADC presents a paradox of opportunity and dependency. While infrastructure, industrialisation, and human capital development align with regional priorities, the asymmetric nature of China's involvement limits local agency and long-term sustainability. South Africa must leverage its diplomatic influence to negotiate collective regional strategies within FOCAC as a regional middle power. Expanding triangular cooperation with emerging

partners and multilateral institutions can create a more balanced and sustainable regional development model. Ultimately, SADC's ability to assert agency, strengthen governance mechanisms, and ensure transparent, locally driven initiatives will determine the level of success of its engagement within FOCAC.

Challenges for SADC-FOCAC Synergy

While the above examples highlight opportunities in infrastructure, renewable energy, and industrialisation, SADC's engagement with FOCAC is constrained by structural challenges that hinder its full potential, such as:

(i) Uneven development and inconsistent political commitment among member states are due to fragmented regional integration and economic disparities (Lee, 2018a). Oyejide (2014c) attributes this to misaligned priorities, weak coordination, and a lack of transparency, further exacerbating these issues and limiting regional agencies in negotiations with external partners. The dominance of larger economies in decision-making risks marginalising smaller states and slowing collective progress. Schulz (2019) and Acharya (2014) indicate that these challenges mirror those of other regional blocs, such as the EU and ASEAN, which require strategic approaches to ensure inclusive representation and ownership. SADC is not the only organisation dealing with such problems, as ASEAN and EU face similar challenges.

(ii) FOCAC projects often rely on concessional loans that, while accelerating development (Brautigam and Hwang, 2019; Nantulya, 2019), raise concerns about debt sustainability, resulting in dependency on external financing and debt sustainability. Non-transparent repayment terms threaten SADC's financial sovereignty, diverting resources from domestic priorities and creating long-term fiscal vulnerabilities. Vanheukelom (2017) and Zondi (2017) argue that without apparent financial oversight, the risk of economic dependency persists, undermining regional agency in project negotiations.

(iii) A significant obstacle to SADC's effective engagement with FOCAC is the lack of a unified regional framework explicitly aimed at the region's interaction with China through FOCAC. Brown (2014) explains that member states negotiate independently, fostering competition for Chinese investments and undermining collective bargaining power, leading to bilateralism over regionalism predicament. This results in duplicated efforts, missed opportunities for regional integration, and an erosion of SADC's ability to coordinate development policies in alignment with regional goals (Alden & Wu, 2016).

(iv) The increasing geopolitical competition between China and external influences from other emerging powers affects SADC's development trajectory. Nantulya (2019) and Alden & Large (2011) claim that external actors often prioritise strategic interests over regional goals, reducing the effectiveness of triangular cooperation. SADC risks being caught in global power struggles, limiting its ability to assert agency in international partnerships.

(v) While FOCAC has the potential to boost employment, Carmody (2020) alleges that Chinese companies frequently import their workforce, limiting job opportunities and knowledge transfer for local communities and adding to the employment and skills transfer deficit. Weak governance structures and inconsistent regulatory frameworks across SADC further complicate project oversight, which Kanyangale (2020) asserts leads to delays and lack of transparency. The lack of strong institutional mechanisms limits local benefits.

(vi) FOCAC-backed infrastructure projects often face criticism for insufficient environmental safeguards, prioritising rapid implementation over environmental sustainability concerns (Brautigam & Hwang, 2019; Lee, 2018b). Deforestation and other ecological consequences conflict with SADC's sustainability goals, raising questions about the seriousness of both parties' commitments to long-term environmental responsibility.

FOCAC's emphasis on infrastructure, trade facilitation, and capacity building aligns with SADC's development goals, yet challenges like fragmented coordination, economic dependency, and governance deficits persist. A unified regional strategy, stronger governance mechanisms, diversified funding through triangular cooperation, and sustainability safeguards are essential for maximising benefits. South Africa's soft power is key to fostering regional cohesion, securing favorable FOCAC terms, and driving transformative development by leveraging Africa-led initiatives with support from emerging partners and multilateral institutions. Prioritising regionalisation and sustainability will ensure long-term, inclusive transformative growth for SADC in an evolving global landscape.

4.4 PROJECTING SOFT AND MIDDLEPOWERSHIP: SOUTH AFRICA'S DIPLOMATIC CAPITAL FOR A SADC-LED FOCAC AGENDA

South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy has consistently reflected a blend of soft power, grounded in legitimacy, persuasion, and normative appeal, and middlepowership expressed through agenda-setting, coalition-building, and strategic brokerage in African and global diplomacy. This dual diplomatic posture provides the foundations for a more assertive role in

reshaping FOCAC towards a SADC-driven, regionally responsive development model (Habib, 2009; Van der Westhuizen, 2016b).

As the most industrialised and diversified economy in Africa, South Africa's leadership in initiatives such as NEPAD, and Agenda 2063 underscores its ideational influence and commitment to Pan-African development (AUDA-NEPAD, 2023; Otavio, 2017). Its active participation in global coalitions such as BRICS, the G20, and the G77+China further enables it to broker strategic partnerships and promote South–South cooperation. Within SADC, South Africa can serve as a bridge in translating regional priorities into the FOCAC framework by anchoring collective goals in policy instruments like the RISDP, AfCFTA, and PIDA (, 2024). This would reinforce African agency and foster an equitable, regionally grounded China–Africa partnership.

South Africa's ability to influence regional development through FOCAC is underscored by five illustrative examples of its soft power and middlepowership:

(i) Through niche diplomacy, South Africa has championed the AfCFTA and used its leadership in the AU and BRICS to align regional industrialisation with Chinese development finance, particularly through FOCAC's infrastructure and SEZ initiatives (Tralac, 2024; African Union, 2023; FOCAC, 2023).
(ii) During its 2020 AU chairmanship, it spearheaded a coordinated continental COVID-19 response, advocating for global debt relief, equitable vaccine access, and multilateral solidarity through platforms such as COVAX and the African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (African Union, 2020; WHO, 2021).
(iii) By hosting COP17 in 2011 and advocating climate justice, South Africa reinforced its normative leadership on global environmental governance, pushing for green development alignment in FOCAC's 2025–2027 Action Plan (Scholtz, 2012; FOCAC, 2021; Death, 2011).
(iv) South Africa's mediation in regional conflicts such as in the DRC and South Sudan, and its active role in the AU Peace and Security Council, illustrate how it links peacebuilding with development, a critical foundation for sustainable SADC–FOCAC cooperation (Nathan, 2012; African Union, 2022; Alden & Le Pere, 2017).
(v) Through triangular cooperation mechanisms, South Africa has facilitated co-financing dialogues involving China, the Gulf States, and India, expanding FOCAC's development scope

beyond bilateral aid and fostering diversified, regionally aligned investments that reinforce SADC integration (Naidu & Lutchman, 2020; Zeng, 2020; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000)

South Africa's deployment of soft power and middle-power diplomacy through its normative leadership as alluded in the examples above, demonstrates a deliberate alignment with regional and global governance frameworks. These efforts have elevated Pretoria's standing within multilateral platforms such as the AU and the FOCAC. However, the translation of this normative influence into measurable developmental outcomes across SADC has been uneven. This shortfall is attributable to a confluence of structural and political factors, including limited institutional coherence within South Africa's foreign policy apparatus, the absence of a cohesive SADC voice in FOCAC processes, and the predominance of bilateralism in China–Africa engagement, which often sidelines regional agendas (Zhou, 2023; Taylor, 2021; Habib, 2020). Further complicating Pretoria's leadership aspirations are longstanding perceptions among smaller SADC member states of South Africa's exceptionalism, which have engendered what some scholars describe as "dominance fatigue" (Adebajo, 2020; Alden & Schoeman, 2013; Van Nieuwkerk, 2012). These perceptions, shaped by historical asymmetries and divergent national priorities, continue to dilute South Africa's soft power and constrain its capacity to broker unified regional positions.

Consequently, a more inclusive and consultative diplomatic approach, emphasising coalition-building, participatory regionalism, and the institutional integration of SADC perspectives into FOCAC frameworks, could recalibrate South Africa's regional posture. South Africa can enhance its legitimacy and reposition FOCAC as a mutually beneficial, African-owned platform rooted in regional priorities by operationalising its soft power through cultural diplomacy, triangular cooperation, and strategic humility (Costa, 2023). Thus, while the country retains the potential to leverage FOCAC for broader regional gains, its effectiveness will depend on its ability to foster regional trust, address perceptions of dominance, and institutionalise a coherent SADC strategy, challenges explored in greater detail in Chapter Five

4.5 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS– TRANSITION TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating synergy between SADC's RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035 through South Africa's middlepowership and soft power presents a unique opportunity for regional development. South Africa can enhance SADC's cohesion and influence within FOCAC by aligning SADC's development priorities. Addressing governance gaps, power asymmetries,

and geopolitical challenges through harmonised policies and strong institutional frameworks will be crucial. South Africa can leverage its diplomatic and cultural capital to shift SADC-FOCAC engagement towards a sustainable multilateral partnership, driving inclusive and transformative regional development.

In a global order echoing Cold War dynamics, African states must balance relations between competing powers like China, Russia, and the West. This fluid landscape highlights the need for a unified African approach to external partnerships. As ISS Africa (2025a) notes, Africa's fragmented engagement weakens its position in bilateral negotiations. To advance Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, African actors must take ownership of agenda-setting and adopt coordinated strategies that centre the continent's development and security priorities. These insights pave the way for the final chapter to highlight key deductions and recommendations to translate this analysis into actionable steps and, most importantly, derive a strategic framework for strengthening South Africa's role in fostering SADC-FOCAC cooperation through enhanced multilateralism, regional integration and sustainable development.

5 CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The concluding chapter integrates the study's core findings, emphasising South Africa's potentially pivotal role in leveraging its soft power through its middlepowership to align SADC and FOCAC frameworks for advancing regional integration and sustainable development. Addressing the central research question—how South Africa can utilise its soft power to maximise FOCAC opportunities for SADC's developmental agenda—the study underscored South Africa's potential to coordinate a unified SADC policy approach within FOCAC while fostering regionally-led triangular cooperation with emerging economies and international organisations. This aligns with the key sub-questions (1.3.2) by illustrating how South Africa's diplomatic influence can shape regional agency, integrate emerging nations into FOCAC, and ensure policy coherence between SADC's RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035.

The study further highlights the opportunities and challenges within FOCAC, assessing South Africa's ability to balance power dynamics and promote African agency beyond bilateral agreements. Ultimately, the findings suggest that a coordinated, partnership-driven approach can enhance SADC's development trajectory, ability to balance power dynamics and promote African agency beyond bilateral agreements, strengthen South-South cooperation, and provide a strategic roadmap for Africa-China relations that extends beyond SADC, offering insights for policymakers to refine regional strategies (see the recommendations and future research areas provided in section 5.3 and 5.4, respectively).

5.2 SUMMARY OF KEY INSIGHTS

South Africa's foreign policy, anchored in the African Agenda, underscores solidarity, sovereignty, and inclusive sustainable development. It recognises its stability as intertwined with regional welfare. This context justifies South Africa's strategic positioning as a regional leader and middle power committed to advancing Pan-Africanism and regional development through its African Agenda.

FOCAC's early phases were primarily bilateral, with minimal engagement from the AU and RECs. The AU's inclusion in 2011 signalled a shift toward broader continental engagement. However, RECs remain underutilised despite their crucial role in regional integration. Given China's substantial financial commitment of USD 50.7 billion at the 2024 FOCAC Summit for infrastructure, trade, and security (ISS Africa Report, 2025b), a more coordinated African

approach is crucial to fully leverage these investments. As highlighted in the *PSC Insights* report (2025), despite the alignment of China's FOCAC priorities with continental frameworks such as the PIDA and Agenda 2063, regional coordination remains fragmented. The RECs, though central to Africa's multilateral architecture, continue to be sidelined in formal FOCAC decision-making processes, limiting the continent's ability to advance a unified and strategic engagement with China. Aligning FOCAC initiatives with RECs strategies could unlock regional value chains, enhance cross-border trade, and accelerate development. By leveraging its leadership in SADC and the AU, South Africa is well-positioned to bridge this gap, ensuring projects contribute to Africa's long-term economic and developmental goals.

Leveraging ideational influence, South Africa has consistently amplified the voices of developing countries, challenged global power asymmetries, and promoted regional cohesion, sustainable development, and African agency in international partnerships. South Africa's contributions to regional initiatives and conflict resolution demonstrated its commitment to balancing domestic and regional goals with global South partnerships. South Africa can spearhead SADC-led, FOCAC-backed initiatives to tackle regional challenges, align strategic visions, and foster cohesive development within and beyond the SADC region by leveraging its leadership to form regional coalitions, shape policies, and promote continental socio-economic aspirations. The research has illustrated South Africa's potential as a catalyst for advancing SADC's developmental agenda within FOCAC. This section discusses a number of key insights from the study.

Chapter One set the tone for the study and provided the international relations context for the research theme by outlining the background of South Africa's foreign policy on regional integration and the strategic relationship with China, Africa-China ties, and SADC-China cooperation, shaping the study's scope and research question. It set out the rationale for exploring the rationale for investigating opportunities for SADC-FOCAC synergy toward regional development as outlined in the study's objectives. It set out the research methodology and theoretical framework that integrated key concepts central to the study that provided the foundation for answering the core research question and sub-questions on South Africa's role in fostering SADC regional policy for FOCAC. The study contributed to the literature by addressing intra-regional fragmentation, strengthening regional agency, proposing policy recommendations, and bridging gaps in regional monitoring frameworks to promote equitable partnerships and sustainable development.

Through an in-depth literature review, Chapter Two developed a theoretical foundation for understanding how South Africa's soft power and middlepowership can be strategically employed in a regional organisation such as SADC to enhance cooperation and influence regional development - directly addressing the central research question and relevant sub-questions. By discussing core concepts such as soft power and middelpowership, as well as paying attention to the role and functions of regional organisations and the process of regional integration (regionalisation), and the analysis underscored how middle-power strategies such as agenda-setting and consensus-building enable smaller states to mitigate intra-regional fragmentation and advocate for fairer initiatives aligned with the integration goals of developing regions.

Building on the insights from Chapter Two, Chapter Three outlined the evolution of FOCAC from a South-South Cooperation mechanism into a strategic partnership that offers both opportunities and challenges for SADC, particularly in advancing regional integration and sustainable development. The attention to institutional mechanisms, challenges, and coordination was essential for understanding the nuts and bolts of the FOCAC-SADC relationship. The chapter revealed that while FOCAC supports infrastructure, industrialisation, and technology transfer, its asymmetric structure and SADC's fragmented engagement weaken regional agency, necessitating a unified approach aligned with RISDP 2030. As a middle power, South Africa is well-positioned to bridge gaps between China and SADC by leveraging its diplomatic influence, economic clout, and leadership in multilateral diplomacy to promote transparency, sustainability, and regional cohesion. Chapter Three demonstrated that South Africa's soft power assets—rooted in its democratic institutions, economic prominence, and knowledge production—can facilitate a collective SADC response, ensuring engagements with China serve regional rather than fragmented national interests – answering how South Africa's diplomatic influence can be used for advancing regional development.

Addressing sub-questions on regional agency, soft power, and triangular cooperation, the study revealed that South Africa could enhance SADC's bargaining power by fostering policy coherence, integrating partners like India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Gulf States into FOCAC, and advocating for governance reforms to balance power asymmetries. Theoretical insights from neoliberalism, constructivism, and global South frameworks underscored the need for stronger African agency to navigate governance challenges, institutional fragmentation, and

economic dependencies. Ultimately, South Africa's ability to mediate and shape the SADC-FOCAC partnership will determine the extent to which regional integration, sustainable development, and African agency are advanced within global development frameworks.

Chapter Four envisioned the future of alignment between SADC's RISDP 2030 and FOCAC Vision 2035, highlighting a unique opportunity to advance regional integration through trade liberalisation, infrastructure development, and industrialisation. This alignment presents the potential for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and stronger regional cohesion through cultural exchanges and capacity-building. Examples of successful regionalisation efforts demonstrated the importance of harmonised policies, enhanced bargaining power, and sustainable practices in building meaningful partnerships, thus fostering growth. However, external and internal factors hinder it, including political fragmentation, economic disparities, and institutional inefficiencies requiring balanced interests, stronger regional agency, and adaptive governance models. A specific example of FOCAC's support for projects like the Tanzania-Zambia Railway demonstrates how its priorities can reflect SADC's RISDP 2030 goals, particularly in regional connectivity and trade. This shows that coordinated regional engagement is not only feasible but already emerging. However, without formal REC involvement in FOCAC processes, such initiatives risk remaining fragmented and bilateral, underscoring the need for a structured, region-led approach.

Chapter Four also briefly discussed some examples of how South Africa uses its soft power—rooted in diplomatic influence, economic leadership, and cultural appeal—to advocate for the African agenda. This role could be expanded, positioning South Africa as a key actor in pushing for policy coherence and regional ownership of FOCAC projects. The study also confirmed that South Africa's middlepowership strategies, such as niche diplomacy, diplomatic bridge-building, multilateral engagement, strategic coalition-building, norm-setting, and knowledge production, have proven effective. These strategies have allowed South Africa to leverage various multilateral platforms, and its 2025 G20 Presidency offers a further opportunity to enhance regional agency. However, fragmented bargaining by individual SADC states, as well as constraints and power imbalances, weaken and collect the entire agency, requiring a more unified approach.

The study demonstrated how South Africa, as a normative middle power, can leverage its soft power, regional leadership, and diplomatic influence to foster triangular cooperation within

FOCAC for regional development. It highlighted how regional organisations could influence FOCAC beyond bilateral cooperation, reinforcing the importance of multilateral frameworks and the collective agency of African states in the global development landscape.

5.3 THOUGHTS AND PROPOSALS FOR ACCELERATING SADC'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Final Thoughts

Based on the above insights, this section highlights final thoughts and proposals for accelerating SADC's sustainable development agenda. It is posited that South Africa could guide SADC's engagement with FOCAC to address regional socio-economic challenges in a more dedicated, structured, and sustainable manner. By leveraging diplomatic leadership and coalition-building, South Africa can enhance regional alignment, strengthen SADC's agency, and promote a Pan-African approach to infrastructure, industrialisation, agriculture, and human resource development in line with the RISDP. However, challenges such as debt dependency, trade imbalances, and governance gaps must be addressed through regional coordination, diversified partnerships, and a unified strategy prioritising sustainable development. SADC must push for increased market access, new regional investments, and beneficiation closer to the source of raw materials and local manufacturing to foster value-added exports and technology transfer. The lack of an Africa-China policy weakens Africa's position in FOCAC, underscoring the need for collective action through the AU and RECs. South Africa must lead in shaping a coherent regional strategy, ensuring FOCAC catalyses inclusive, sustainable, and regionally driven development while reducing dependency on external actors.

FOCAC's implementation is predominantly bilateral, lacking a unified regional mechanism to align with AU objectives and Agenda 2063. Despite its structured engagement, the Forum remains heavily arranged with limited African agency in shaping outcomes, as China primarily drafts final documents with minimal incorporation of African input. The absence of an African-led pre-FOCAC Summit planning and follow-up mechanism further weakens accountability and monitoring. Additionally, FOCAC's hybrid nature results in the double reporting of bilateral projects as multilateral, undermining transparency. Unlike other AU strategic partnerships, FOCAC is not coordinated through AU policy organs but through the Group of African Ambassadors in Beijing, creating potential misalignment with Common African Positions formulated in Addis Ababa. South Africa's engagement strategy seeks to address these gaps by advocating for stronger alignment between FOCAC and AU priorities, enhancing

regional coordination through SADC and AU structures, reviewing the bilateral-multilateral distinction within FOCAC, and leveraging bilateral engagements to support national and regional development objectives, particularly in industrialisation, skills development, and regional integration.

As global economic and geopolitical dynamics evolve, South Africa's role in shaping the SADC-FOCAC partnership will be critical in determining the trajectory of regional integration and economic transformation in Southern Africa. By proactively asserting its middle-power status and leveraging its soft power, South Africa has the potential to maximise the benefits of FOCAC for SADC and position itself as a key architect of a new paradigm in African agency within global development frameworks. This study provides a foundation for further research on the evolving dynamics of triangular cooperation within South-South frameworks, offering policy insights for South Africa's long-term strategic positioning in both regional and global contexts.

South Africa's role as a facilitator and middle power within SADC's engagement with FOCAC offers valuable insights for other RECs and the AU. Given that SADC operates as one of the continent's RECs, the recommendations advanced are not only applicable at the regional level. Still, they are also relevant to the AU, which plays a critical role in shaping the continental agenda within FOCAC deliberations and activities. This underscores the need for a coherent continental framework that aligns regional initiatives with broader African priorities in China-Africa cooperation.

Proposals from the Study

The recommendations arising from the overall analysis emphasise the importance of positioning the AU and RECs at the core of the FOCAC framework. This centrality is seen as key to accelerating Africa's regional development and integration agenda. These recommendations reflect recurring themes identified throughout the literature review, regional policy discourse, and the institutional frameworks examined in the study.

Strengthening AU and REC Integration in FOCAC

SADC must institutionalise a pre-FOCAC consultation mechanism, led by the SADC Secretariat and supported by the Chairs of RECs and member states, to unify regional priorities, enhance policy coordination, and strengthen its bargaining power within FOCAC. SADC leaders, RECs, and non-state actors could develop a SADC-FOCAC Position Paper targeted

for each summit, ensuring that projects align with Agenda 2063 and SADC's 2030 vision. This is important, especially as RECs are still not formal members of FOCAC.

A dedicated SADC-FOCAC task force can facilitate stakeholder engagement and align regional needs with FOCAC objectives for greater impact. Such an initiative would also reinforce AU regional integration efforts at a broader, continental level, aligning SADC's strategy with the AfCFTA and Africa's broader China engagement, positioning the continent as a more cohesive global actor. A coordinated approach to joint infrastructure projects, sustainable investments, and equitable economic benefits, along with a post-FOCAC evaluation mechanism aligned with AU and REC frameworks, ensures accountability. It is essential to advocate for a structured role for the AU and the RECs to maximise the effectiveness of Africa's engagement with FOCAC. This structured involvement would ensure that FOCAC initiatives are harmonised with the continent's long-term development priorities while fostering a unified approach. Additionally, enhancing regional policy coherence is critical to avoid duplication of efforts and streamline project implementation. Strengthening Africa's collective bargaining power in negotiations with China would enable the continent to secure more equitable and mutually beneficial outcomes, reflecting its developmental aspirations and long-term interests.

Aligning FOCAC with African-Led Regional and Continental Frameworks

The all-encompassing impact of FOCAC initiatives requires integration with frameworks like the AfCFTA, PIDA, and SADC RISDP to promote connectivity, industrialisation, and trade across the continent. Establishing mechanisms for regional policy harmonisation is crucial to aligning these initiatives with national and regional development priorities, ensuring coherence and effectiveness. Additionally, strengthening Africa's negotiation capacity is essential to safeguard its agency and prevent exploitative agreements, fostering equitable and sustainable partnerships.

Africa faces low energy access and high vulnerability to climate change, requiring a transition to sustainable development. China, as a leader in renewable energy and with its Green Belt and Road Initiative, is well-positioned to support this shift. However, Africa must ensure its partnership with China aligns with its own development goals, promoting a coordinated, regionally integrated approach to a just energy transition.

Enhancing SADC's Capacity for Regional Agency

Investing in capacity-building initiatives is essential to enhance Africa's ability to formulate policies, negotiate effectively, and implement projects aligned with its developmental goals. Establishing robust governance frameworks prioritising accountability, transparency, and local ownership of FOCAC-funded projects will ensure their sustainability and alignment with regional priorities. Additionally, strengthening oversight mechanisms to monitor project implementation and assess impact while fostering public-private partnerships will bolster efficiency and ensure inclusive benefits from FOCAC engagements. The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) should play a greater role in shaping the security dimensions of FOCAC, particularly where infrastructure and economic cooperation intersect with regional stability. South Africa, leveraging its soft power and leadership within both SADC and the AU, can advocate for integrating peacebuilding priorities into FOCAC planning to ensure sustainable, conflict-sensitive development outcomes.

Leveraging South Africa's Soft Power for Triangular Cooperation

South Africa should take a leading role in coordinating with SADC member states and the African Union to present a unified regional position during FOCAC engagements, strengthening Africa's collective voice. Institutionalising triangular cooperation between China, SADC, and emerging partners such as India and Brazil can foster innovation, co-financing models, and technology transfer, enhancing regional development. Furthermore, promoting African agency is crucial to ensure that FOCAC frameworks prioritise Africa's development goals over external interests, advancing sustainable and inclusive growth for the continent. SADC, with South Africa in a lead role, should champion the adoption of FOCAC's "small is beautiful" model—focusing on smaller, high-impact projects that align with RISDP 2030. This approach can reduce debt risks, support triangular cooperation, and ensure financing is better matched to regional priorities and capacities.

China's Role in Supporting Sustainable Development

China should align FOCAC projects with Africa's long-term development goals by focusing on job creation, technology transfer, and sustainable infrastructure development. Emphasising transparency, equity, and inclusive partnerships will build trust and foster more substantial and collaborative relationships, ensuring mutually beneficial outcomes in the long term. Therefore, it is concluded that South Africa, as SADC's most industrialised nation, has the potential for a catalytic role in aligning FOCAC with Africa's regional integration agenda. By leveraging its

ideational power, it can facilitate a more strategic, African-led approach to FOCAC, ensuring sustainable, inclusive development across the continent.

As 2025 commemorates the 25th anniversary of FOCAC, it is evident that the evolving global landscape demands stronger, more cohesive efforts between Africa and China. In this regard, FOCAC's projects should be increasingly regionalised to better align with the diverse developmental needs across the African continent. RECs, particularly SADC and the AU, must play a central and strategic role in shaping the implementation of FOCAC initiatives. This approach would ensure that regional perspectives and priorities are fully integrated, fostering sustainable development, peace, and stability within Africa and contributing to global modernisation efforts. The empowerment of RECs and the AU would not only enhance the relevance of FOCAC but also affirm the collective commitment to building a shared future for humanity grounded in meaningful and coordinated actions.

5.4 CONCLUSION: AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following four research areas are relevant to addressing the underexplored intersections of the SADC-FOCAC nexus, regionalisation and regional integration, and triangular cooperation with regional ownership. They could contribute to more nuanced analyses and knowledge-building in the sphere of continental and sub-regional community building for development.

Impact of Triangular Cooperation on Regionalisation

Most engagements limit the potential for regional integration and collective bargaining despite the increasing significance of FOCAC in Africa's development. Triangular cooperation involving emerging powers like India, Brazil, Turkey, and the Gulf States presents an opportunity to diversify partnerships, enhance knowledge-sharing, and reduce Africa's dependency on a single external actor. However, there is little research on how these actors can be systematically integrated into FOCAC projects to promote regional value chains, industrialisation, and infrastructure connectivity within frameworks like SADC and the AU. Additionally, the role of non-state actors (e.g., think tanks, private sector, and NGOs remains underexplored, even though these actors could potentially play a major role in driving sustainable development and ensuring transparency in FOCAC projects.

The study has argued for South Africa's role and the SADC-led approach, which should be subject to continuous research and evaluation to monitor progress, identify emerging challenges and opportunities and enable strategic adjustments. Ongoing follow-up mechanisms are

essential to ensure effective implementation and to formulate evidence-based recommendations for sustained improvement. This will provide policymakers with actionable insights to ensure that FOCAC moves beyond a donor-recipient model and becomes a platform for equitable, multilateral, and sustainable partnerships. This, coupled with a critical and continuous examination of poly-lateral diplomatic and triangular cooperation mechanisms within FOCAC, is essential to determine whether these genuinely empower regional institutions to drive agency.

Regional Collaboration in Sino-Subregional Partnerships

The study of Sino-SADC cooperation is pivotal in understanding how subregional frameworks operate within the broader Africa-China partnership. It offers critical insights into whether Africa's lack of a unified China policy hinders effective subregional collaboration and the achievement of development objectives. This research can evaluate the comparative impact of policy coordination and capacity-building initiatives, shedding light on the most effective approaches for tangible outcomes in Sino-African engagements. Furthermore, analysing the AU's summit strategies, including Kagame's "representational engagement" model, may provide a lens to explore Africa's evolving diplomatic strategies in global governance, particularly in interactions with powers like China. Such insights may improve policy coherence, refine diplomatic strategies, and ensure Africa's influential role in global decision-making.

A Sino-subregional approach in FOCAC, aligned with Africa's continental integration agenda, particularly the AfCFTA, can reshape Africa-China relations and offer a model for broader global partnerships. Incorporating case studies of successful subregional cooperation, both within Africa and globally, can strengthen the policy relevance of this argument. Policymakers could also explore institutional mechanisms to operationalise such shifts, including how RECs like SADC, ECOWAS, and EAC can better integrate into FOCAC processes and African financial institutions and development banks' roles in fostering regional projects. Finally, empowering African scholars and think tanks to lead this discourse through research associations, policy dialogues, and collaborations with Chinese institutions could enhance Africa's agency in shaping the future of subregional engagements within FOCAC and beyond. Addressing these aspects with actionable recommendations will ensure the study's relevance and impact on policy and practice.

SADC's Strategic Autonomy: From Passive Recipient to Active Agenda-Setter in FOCAC and other Global Partnerships

SADC's ability to move from a passive recipient to an active agenda-setter in FOCAC and other global partnerships requires a strategy and regional coordination shift. One key area of focus is how SADC can transition from being a reactive participant to a proactive regional bloc that shapes the terms of engagement. This includes examining whether a unified policy approach to FOCAC can enhance regional bargaining power and reduce dependence on bilateral state-to-China agreements. South Africa's role in this process is crucial, as it must balance its national interests with its position as a regional leader and middle power within SADC. Additionally, non-state actors such as think tanks, the private sector, and civil society are crucial in shaping regional engagement strategies with external partners. A well-defined framework for SADC-driven policy coherence that prioritises industrialisation, infrastructure development, and digital transformation within FOCAC dialogues would further strengthen the region's strategic autonomy. Is being an agenda-setter enough to accelerate regional integration?

Decolonising Regionalism: Rethinking Power Structures, Overcoming Intra-SADC Divisions, and Advancing a Pan-African Development Model

Another critical research area involves rethinking power structures, overcoming intra-SADC divisions, and advancing a Pan-African development model. This requires moving beyond traditional power asymmetries and shifting from externally influenced regionalism to a Pan-African-led integration approach. Decolonial thought offers an alternative lens for regional cooperation that moves away from Eurocentric and Sino-centric frameworks, allowing for a more independent and self-determined path. One of the main challenges to regional cohesion is intra-SADC political and economic fragmentation, often exacerbated by protectionist policies and conflicting national interests. Addressing these divisions is key to developing a coherent regional strategy within FOCAC. The AfCFTA presents an opportunity to strengthen SADC's negotiating power in South-South cooperation by fostering greater economic integration. Furthermore, exploring the role of African epistemologies and indigenous governance structures can provide new pathways for sustainable regional development, reducing dependency on external models and reinforcing self-reliance.

A focus on these research areas would offer valuable insights on how SADC can redefine its agency, assert regional priorities, and overcome historical dependencies in FOCAC and broader

global partnerships. By fostering a more unified and strategic approach, SADC and the AU, and RECs have the potential to play a greater role in shaping their development trajectory within the evolving global order.

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