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## South Africa in BRICS: A Review of Asymmetric Power Relations in an Intercontinental Group

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### Abstract

The need for an even geographical spread and location were the underlying factors that informed the inclusion of South Africa in the BRIC states to become BRICS in 2011. With Brazil (Latin America, Russia (Eastern Europe and Asia), India and China (Asia), the inclusion of South Africa (Africa) completed the intercontinental status of the bloc of emerging economies as a formidable player in the global system. Rather than its economic and military strengths, South Africa's admission into BRICS is to fill the gap role as a continental representation in a group of states characterised by asymmetric

power relations. This paper argues that while South Africa's membership in BRICS is a continuation of Pretoria's foreign policy objectives, its role as a fill-the-gap actor seems to reinforce the position of Africa as a weak continental actor in global politics. Central to relationships among nations in the international system is power, defined in military, economic, and socio-cultural capabilities to advance national interests in a larger community. In the absence of a central authority to regulate the behaviours of actors, each member of the global community strives to establish functional linkages of mutual interests and benefits. South Africa in BRICS does not accord it sufficient power to pull the strings among the group and in the continental politics.

**Keywords:** *Power; National interest; Xenophobic; Economy; Soft power*

## **Introduction**

BRICS, described as an “unlikely coalition of nations” (Suljovic, 2018), has emerged as a formidable player in the contemporary global system. Initially conceived in 2001 as a potential intercontinental economic powerhouse among four countries, Brazil, Russia, China, and India, by economist Jim O’Neill, BRICS emerged to alter global economic growth dominated by the Western nations and allies. As a result, the BRICS countries have experienced phenomena rise in the global system (Suljovic, 2018). It accounts for 25% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and 18% of world trade with US\$ 4 trillion in global forex (Iqbal 2022).

With China as its economic giant, the second-largest economy globally, followed by India, the intercontinental body has risen to serve as an economic and political buffer in the post-Cold War global environment (Nuruzzaman 2020). Given the membership of Russia and China, two members of the five veto powers of the United Nations Organisation’s Security Council, BRICS, as noted by scholars, is a formidable global actor that tends to challenge the Western domination of global affairs (Smith 2015; Liu 2016; Layne 2018; Nuruzzaman 2020). Thus, the emergence of BRICS reflects the grievances of its members against the leadership of the United States of America (USA) in global order (Nuruzzaman 2020). With uneven growth in economic resources and power, BRICS members have a common belief about the need for the activities of the global multilateral institutions to “reflect the increasing economic and political influence of large emerging nations” (Suljovic, 2018).

The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) by BRICS

to operate like the other global economic institutions like the IMF and World Bank is proof of this resolve. Rather than going to the IMF and World Bank for loans, BRICS members have the NDB as their lending centre for their respective economic development. Nevertheless, none of the BRICS member countries has a sustainable environment for entrepreneurial growth, as measured by the Ease of Doing Business (EDB) indicator of the World Bank, especially in tax and registration of business. For example, South Africa's tax regime and business registration are stringent, while Brazil makes life hardest for entrepreneurs (Suljovic, 2018). Interaction among nations is not a new phenomenon. However, the hallmark of global politics is the ability of states, irrespective of size, and economic and political systems, to mingle together at diverse levels. The bedrock of this relationship is the pursuit of the core values of the state's national interest.

In developing countries, membership in regional organisations has attracted scholarly works, comparing their dynamism with those of advanced democracies (Asante, 1997; Ayoob, 2002;

Payne 2009). Developing countries, commonly referred to as the Third World, are known for their highly unequal status compared to the developed countries, and "they also incorporate weak states and/or fragile democracies, if not authoritarian regimes and/or struggling economies" (Fawcett and Gandois 2010, p. 618). Thus, most regional bodies in these countries often lack the political strengths necessary to pull the power strings in global politics. In addition, they could not influence the decision in the global system to draw maximum benefits without dependent support from a principal actor or group of actors. They exert limited independent exercise of power with a weak assertive position when confronted by the interests of the developed economies. For example, regional bodies in Africa lack the assertive autonomy independent of developed economies or regional allies. Hence, their weakness could not guarantee a unified position to pursue and promote the collective interest of their members. Indeed, actors' interests define the nature of relationships among countries in the global system.

### **Interests defined by power**

The primacy of power in the Second World War (WWII) brought to the fore the perspective that power defines the position of actors in global politics. Hans Morgenthau and other leading realist theorists opine that politics in the international system is nothing other than interests defined

by power (Morgenthau, 1985; Drolet and Williams, 2021). Thus, the interplay of power and interests explains the behaviours and decisions of actors in their interactions. Unlike the moral persuasion of idealism, realists believe that in exercising power in the international system, actors are more concerned about their interests rather than the morality of the means (Morgenthau 1985; Zhang 2017). The contention is that certain virtues should guide the actions and behavioural disposition of political leadership. According to Zhang (2017, 513), “wisdom, foresight, judgment, prudence, willingness, determination, courage, restraint, skill, leadership, governance, and persuasion” are the indispensable qualities of resourceful leaders as leading actors in global politics.

Events in global politics post-1945 dictated the directions and nature of friendships in global politics. With a bipolar global system, states seek to align with peers because of comparative advantages. Thus, power is still a determining factor in defining the location of the interests of states in anarchical global politics. With competing interests, alignments in global politics, through global and regional organisations and bodies, is a function of power instruments, soft or hard, calculated by the advantages thereof (Zhang, 2017; Ilodigwe, 2019; Drolet and Williams, 2021). Therefore, every regional organisation membership is a function of the benefits derivable to promote national interests. Stronger actors with a measure of hard and soft powers would be looking forward to organisations they could control for their comparative advantages. Similarly, weaker states would want an umbrella body that can protect their interests.

Different perspectives evolved from the initial assumptions of applying realism in understanding the nature of actors in global politics. Kenneth Waltz explains this in the behaviour of sovereign states, as an actor and the structure of the international system (Waltz 1979). The interaction between these actors and the global environment presents a complex system that mutually affects each other. Impliedly, the behaviour of the state influences the global system, and the reactions thereof affect the behaviour of the state. This reality of a flux of interaction characterised all forms of interactions among states at any level. The interaction medium among states without an overarching central authority is through bilateral or multilateral agreements or organisations.

At the United Nations Organisation (UNO), the structure of a veto-powered Security Council is a measure to protect the interests of the powerful actors, in extreme cases, against a rapacious display of

powers (Barnett and Duvall, 2018; Remler, 2020; Kupchan, 2020). While this is a design to prevent the emergence of an absolute hegemon in the global system, developing states are often beholden to their allies at regional levels for support and protection. Even though the post-WWII Cold War ended with the collapse of the former USSR-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, nevertheless, polarity in the global system is formidable with differing interests of the Superpowers, the United States of America, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China. The European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) are regional bodies playing formidable political and security roles in defining the world order, hence, the importance of regional bodies and organisations in defining and configuring states' interests and power in the international system.

### **The emergence of BRICS as an intercontinental group**

In June 2006, four emerging economies, Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which were in a stage of newly advanced economic development, formed a group called BRIC to advance their similar potential for economic development (Nayyar, 2016; Tella, 2017). In 2010, the leaders of BRIC invited South Africa to join the group, and it formally became a member in 2011. South Africa's acceptance of the invitation made it the only African country in the group, and the name changed to BRICS. South Africa's membership in BRICS was a manifestation of its foreign policy focus to advance its bilateral and multilateral interactions (Durokifa, Moshood and Ijeoma, 2018) and its national interests, promote regional integration and establish a partnership with key players of the South in global governance (Schoeman, 2015; Tella, 2017).

BRICS as an economic alliance in the international system is at the forefront of political and economic diplomacy. To this end, South Africa's membership has expanded the frontiers of global diplomacy in the African continent, thereby promoting the values of its foreign policy and multilateral policy in the international system (Schoeman 2015; Nayyar 2016). Beyond this, South Africa's membership in BRICS has integrated its economy into the global economic system, thereby providing the necessary comparative advantage in global trade. This has also strengthened its foreign policy focus in bilateral relations with the other four group members. South Africa has signed a series of trade and economic agreements, which, one way or the other, would promote the core values of its foreign and domestic policies.

Before the formation of BRICS, South Africa had established multilateral relations with two other democratic countries, India and Brazil, to form IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa). The policy objective of IBSA is to ensure domestic governance in poverty, hunger, and job opportunities (Nayyar 2016). Despite this, the argument is that South Africa's membership would make it more dependent on the other four countries. This argument is premised on the reality that South Africa has the least population among the members. Aside from this, its economic growth and development level were far lower than the rest. However, South Africa's membership is in the pursuit of the goals of its foreign policy and its commitment to the principles of multilateral relations in the international system.

### **BRICS: The giants versus the Lilliputians**

In the theoretical literature of small states in the international system, the assumption is that actors with weak standing in global affairs would seek an alliance with bigger players in the international environment. This is one of the relics of the Cold War international system, where alliances and alignments dictated the survival of small states (Morgenthau, 1985; Waltz, 1979). The determination of the position of an actor in the Cold War global politics was the preponderance of hard power in a bipolar global system (Miller and Verhoeven 2020). The alignment of weak states with the major players was for protection and to fend off potential stronger states' aggression (Miller and Verhoeven, 2020). Other small states caught in the realities of the power dynamics became the battlegrounds for the ideological rivalry embedded in promoting the core national interests of the world powers.

Developing countries were and are still vulnerable to the dynamics of power in the international system. Hence, the emergence of various multi-national regional bodies serves as political havens for weak states, akin to the Cold War era. The relationships in these regional bodies feature the Giants and the Lilliputians. The asymmetric power relations among members make the small actors operate on narrow margins characterised by flawed policies with inopportune acts in mistimed moves (Waltz, 1979).

BRICS has members in Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. Russia is a transcontinental country with its Western part in Eastern Europe and its eastern part in northern Asia. China and India are the Asian members, while Brazil is from South America and South Africa

is from Africa. Thus, BRICS is a transcontinental body. In power configuration, Russia is a leading power in Eastern Europe and a significant player in global politics as one of the five UNSC veto powers. (Nayyar, 2016). Likewise, China, the second-largest economy globally and the most populous country with 1.4 billion people, is a global power in the Asian region and another UNSC veto power (Nayyar 2016). India also has a proportionate power in Asia as the second-most populous country, with 1.3 billion people, and a strong player in global politics. Brazil has the largest population in South and Latin America, with 211 million population, the fifth largest country in areas and the sixth most populous country.

South Africa is a regional hegemon in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and formidable power in the African continent. Though it competes with Nigeria in terms of economic power, South Africa is the most developed Sub-Sahara Africa country with a strong economy but with domestic challenges that have shaped its continental foreign policy. In the BRICS, South Africa is the weakest economic and military influence link.

Historically, China and India have been formidable players in the global economic system. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the two countries accounted for 44 per cent of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Roy, 2014). However, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this position began to fluctuate “from 16.4 per cent of global GDP in 1913 to 8.7 per cent in 1950, rising to 12.59 per cent on average between 1985 and 1995 and 16.88 per cent between 1995 and 2003” (Roy, 2014, p. 6). Since 2006, the two economies have witnessed steady growth as formidable players in the global economic system.

Each of the five members of BRICS has the potential which advances complementary cooperation. China is promoting multilateral trade, and Russia is noted for its heavy industry, and oil and gas resources. Brazil’s strength lies in its agriculture and mining (Xinhua, 14/11/2019). India’s vital service industries and South Africa’s lead in non-ferrous metals all present a complementary advantage in servicing the interest of the member states (Xinhua,14/11/2019). China remains the largest trading partner of the other members of BRICS (Xinhua, 14/11/2019). In 2018, the economic growth of BRICS member countries accounted for 23.52% and 16.28% of global economy and trade, respectively.

## South Africa in BRICS and asymmetric power relations

One of the avenues for multilateralism in international relations is the membership of regional and global organisations. Through these avenues, countries establish bilateral and multilateral relations and interact to expect mutual benefits within their national interests (Fawcett and Gandois, 2010; Nayyar, 2016). When countries participate in forming regional bodies, there are expectations of ensuring that the aims and objectives of such organisations flow with the objectives of the country's foreign policy. This defines the perspectives and the nature of the interaction of countries with others in the global system. South Africa is not an exception. Aside from its membership in some regional and continental bodies, the country played a significant role in forming the five-nation multinational bodies, BRICS, which comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

The cornerstone of the South African foreign policy revolves around the concept of *Ubuntu*, reinforced by the recognition of the humanity found in everyone in a multifaceted, multicultural, and multiracial world. This reflects its symbolic appellation of a rainbow nation, characterised by the consequences of its immediate apartheid past.

South Africa's foreign policy derives its importance from the ability of the state to harness its potential through a pragmatic diplomatic presence in global affairs to advance its domestic needs. To achieve this, South Africa's foreign policy focus extends to progressive relationships with our immediate African neighbourhood and continent; working with countries of the South to address shared underdevelopment challenges; promoting global equity and social justice; working with countries of the North to develop a true and effective partnership for a better world; and doing our part to strengthen the multilateral system, including its transformation, to reflect the diversity of our nations, and ensure its centrality in global governance (White Paper 2011).

Post-apartheid foreign policy goals and strategies focused on domestic needs, sub-regional influence, and continental and global relevance. Thus, the pursuit of the ambitious foreign policy goals aimed at "affecting the shape and direction of the country's domestic order and overcoming the legacies of the apartheid era, including poverty, inequality and social dislocation" (Landsberg, 2012, p. 2).

This approach is aimed at promoting the "domestic and developmental needs, particularly to create a better life for all South



Africans” given the “socio-economic realities that continue to prevail in the country” (White Paper, 2011). This implies that the inward and outward foreign policy focus of South Africa takes cognisance of the benefits derivable from the dynamics of multilateral relationships. In an unequal global environment, the assumption is that the economy of a developing country, faced with myriads of social and structural challenges, would draw strengths from the developed economies to address key areas of its development needs. Nevertheless, the concern of every state in the international system is to exert its power, hard or soft, to draw maximum benefits from other actors.

South Africa is the least among the BRICS group in hard power. In military strength, four out of the five members of BRICS, Russia, China, India, and Brazil are the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup>, respectively, in military powers in the global system, with appreciable defence budgets, South Africa is ranked 29<sup>th</sup>.

**Table I: Military Strengths of BRICS Member States**

Country	Global ranking	Defence Budget
Russia	2	\$48, 000, 000, 000
China	3	\$237, 000, 000, 000
India	4	\$61, 000,000,000
Brazil	10	\$27, 800,000,000
South Africa	29	\$4, 278,000,000

Source: 2020 Military Strength Ranking

<https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>

Brazil, China, India, and Russia have a more comprehensive range of non-military diplomatic forays within their regional and continental domains in displaying soft power. Brazil has remarkable gains from its cultural exports (Tella, 2017; Chatin, 2018). Samba music, dancing, entertainment, and soccer are two major notable socio-cultural heritages of the Latin American country that has endeared it into the global reckoning. Brazil has explored this soft side of its power to bolster its international image and economic resources. The Samba music carnival is a tourist attraction that has earned the country substantial revenue and boosted its economic growth. The tourist industry in Brazil is an essential source of employment. Beyond this, and more critical is Brasilia’s power of persuasion as an actor in the international system.

According to Chatin (2016, p. 374), Brazil sustains its role as an international actor in deploying its soft power “expressed in its powers of persuasion, mediation, and capacity for dialogue with several countries”. Brasilia advocates dialogue, negotiated solutions, and non-punitive measures to resolve international conflicts. This soft aspect of Brazil has made it a remarkable actor in the quest for global peace and security.

China’s deployment of its soft power and its political and economic diplomacy has attracted a wider audience in the international system, most especially in Africa, where it has established its Confucius Institutes to exhibit and propagate the principles of its cultural values embedded in its cultural values Confucianism (Bhatta, 2019). Its adoption of the Confucian principle in its foreign policy outlook has attracted its neighbouring Asian countries. China has not displayed its military power in terms of any interventionist adventures, even though it has strong military capabilities and a presence in some neighbouring countries. Rather, it has strengthened its economic relationships with state and non-state actors globally. Through the Confucius Institute and its economic assistance, China's cultural exchanges have bolstered its image on the global scene (Bhatta, 2019).

India’s cultural heritage manifests majorly in its religious values. Buddhism, associated with India, is a religious practice across the Asian region. Indian cultural diffusion to overseas audiences are private sector-driven rather than state-driven. Yoga, Bollywood and other cultural display have made India and household name (Jaishankar, 2018; Bhatta, 2019). Indian cultural values have a considerable influence in South Asian countries. In addition to this, the display of its ancient values in promoting democratic principles and human rights has remained a credit in its long years of political stability, despite several internal crises.

One potential soft power of South Africa is Pretoria’s commitment to promoting human rights and democratic principles (Petroni, 2019; Marten, 2019). South Africa’s Constitution has a comprehensive human rights component in its Bill of Rights (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996). Aside from this, South Africa has an endowed cultural heritage site, its entertainment industry, has an array of soap operas and musical displays, as well as several tourist centres in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, among others, which are potential tourist tractions (Tella, 2017; Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike, 2015). South Africa’s sporting events, such as Rugby and soccer, have announced

their presence on the global scene, especially its defeat of England in the recent Rugby world cup. South Africa’s policy on education exchange has attracted many African citizens to its universities, especially in research degrees. As a result, South African universities rank among the best in the global ranking, compared to other African states.

These soft power components are part of the expression of Pretoria’s foreign policy goals and objectives. However, compared to the composition of BRICS member states, it is yet to be seen how South Africa will reconcile its commitment to human rights and democratic principles in a group led by two prominent states with poor records of respect for the democratic rights of its citizens. Incessant attacks on African migrants have negatively affected Pretoria’s diplomatic forays in the continent. These weaknesses weaken its capability to compete evenly with the other members of the BRICS in a global system characterised by prudent management of diplomatic resources.

South Africa is the weakest link in economic and technological developments. South Africa has the least gross domestic product (GDP) of \$358.84 billion and ranked 37 globally, compared to China, India, Brazil, and Russia (Table II). This limits its economic power for an assertive and independent position in the group.

Table II: GDP Nominal ranking of BRICS States

Country	GDP (Nominal) (billions of \$)						Growth (%)	GDP per capita (Nominal) (\$)	
	2019	Rank	2020	Rank	Share	diff		2020	Rank
China	14,140.16	2	15,269.94	2	16.9%	7052	6.0	10873	69
India	2,935.57	5	3,202.18	5	3.54 %	780	5.80	2,338	144
Brazil	1,847.02	9	1,893.01	9	2.09 %	121	2.20	8956	80
Russia	1,637.89	11	1,657.54	11	1.83%	155	1.87	11305	68
South Africa	358.84	37	369.85	37	0.409%	11.7	0.80	6,193	96

*Source: Extracted by the authors from the International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook October 2019, February 20, 2020.*

In the GDP ranking of purchasing power parity (PPP), South Africa has the lowest position, which makes it spend more money on imports (Table III). With a weak currency in the global market, South Africa in BRICS is vulnerable to playing second fiddle. The implication of this is

a possibility of compromised foreign policy objectives.

**Table III: GDP Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) Ranking**

Country	GDP (PPP) (billions of \$)						Growth (%)	GDP per capita (PPP) (\$)	
	2019	Rank	2020	Rank	Share	diff		2020	Rank
China	27,308.86	1	29,471.47	1	19.7%	-	6.0	20,984	71
India	11,325.67	3	12,362.81	3	8.27%	9959	5.80	9,027	122
Brazil	3,456.36	8	3,596.84	8	2.41 %	408	2.20	17,016	87
Russia	4,349.42	6	4,518.72	6	3.02%	70.4	1.87	30,820	55
South Africa	809.03	31	834.00	32	0.558%	2.58	0.80	13965	102

*Source: Extracted by the authors from the International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook October 2019, February 20, 2020.*

The contradiction in Pretoria’s foreign policy goals and objectives in its interaction with Russia and China restricts the extent of its assertiveness in global affairs. It would be difficult for Pretoria to condemn Russia and China in cases of violation of human rights and democratic principles. In its 2010 Johannesburg Declaration, BRICS reaffirmed its members’ commitment to continually support the United Nations Charter on “respect for international law, promoting democracy and the rule of law”. It is unclear how China and Russia, with their poor records on human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles, would adhere to these principles. Nevertheless, one could argue that Pretoria might not have any difficulty dealing with this but concentrates on its potential gains rather than the democratic deficiencies of its superiors in the BRICS by observing the commitment to the principle of mutual respect contained in the Johannesburg Declaration. BRICS reinstated the dedication of its members to “the principles of mutual respect, sovereign equality, democracy, inclusiveness, and strengthened collaboration” (BRICS, 2018). However, despite this, Pretoria has a record of benefits derived from its membership in BRICS.

**South Africa’s gains from BRICS**

Pretoria’s membership in BRICS has boosted its image as a member of

the power bloc and strengthened its power and influence in the SADC region. Expectedly, emerging powers are potential regional powers with a measure of influence to stabilise the political environment and serve as a balancer (Schoeman, 2015). Additionally, Pretoria is more prominent in the global diplomatic scene than its African peers in relating with other emerging powers. Nevertheless, the acceptance of Pretoria's leadership in the African continent is limited to the SADC region, which also had its backlash with the attacks on migrants from the SADC regions, especially Zimbabweans and Malawians.

Pretoria has benefited from its economic ties with BRICS members, especially Russia and China. In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to boost the country's investments in South Africa by about \$14 billion and another loan facility of R33 billion to assist Eskom improvements in its energy generation capacity (Head, 2018). South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, had noted the country's infrastructural and agricultural needs, and that every component of the country's economy would benefit from the Chinese foreign investments. Another benefit is the prospect of improved medical care delivery through its nuclear medicine bilateral cooperation with Rusatom Healthcare, a corporation owned by Russia (Head, 2018). The agreement, majorly on the non-power use of nuclear energy, would lead to the construction of a commercial cyclotron, which would increase South Africa's nuclear medicine production capacity.

Diplomatically, one of the high points of the 10<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit in 2018 was the presence of other African delegations to ensure that the continent accesses the vast economic opportunities in the BRICS region. Analysts see this as one of Pretoria's diplomatic forays to assert its leadership in the continent. The 2019 Sochi Russian-American Summit was one of the fallouts of 2018 BRICS summits.

Despite these beneficial prospects accrued to Pretoria's membership in BRICS, South Africa's economy has not received the necessary boost to cater to its dwindling domestic fortunes. Although the most developed economy in Sub-Saharan Africa, its slow growth impacts its domestic environment. The World Bank reported the growth this way:

The South African economy grew by 1.3% in 2017 and 0.8% in 2018. The World Bank projects 2019 growth at 1.3%, accelerating further to 1.7% in 2020. Given population growth, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita growth has been close to nil since 2014, leaving little room to reduce poverty. Commodity prices remain essential

for South Africa, a major exporter of minerals and an importer of oil. Strengthening investment, including foreign direct investment, will be critical to propelling growth and creating jobs (The World Bank, 2019).

There is slowing progress in the strides toward improving the well-being of its citizens. Despite “real income growth, expansion of social safety nets, access to basic services including subsidised housing credit”, the poverty level increased from 16.8% in 2011 to 18.8% in 2015 and jumped to 24% in 2020, with 13.8 million people living in extreme poverty (The World Bank, 2019; World Poverty Clock, 2020). In its 2019 Household Affordability Index, the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD) stated that 56% of South Africans were living in poverty (less than R41 per day) while 13.8 million people were living on less than R19 a day (extreme poverty) (PMBEJD, 2019). The World Poverty Clock (2020) confirmed this figure.

The World Bank blamed this abysmal development on structural challenges and weak growth occasioned by the 2008 global economic recess. There is a shortfall in the necessary skills to drive the country’s labour market developments, thereby engendering a high rate of unemployment, which stood at 29.4% as of March 2020, with 55.2% of the youth unemployed (Trading Economics 2020). In addition, internal dynamics have compounded the worsening poverty and unemployment in the country. The PMBEJD (2019) discovered that the socio-economic environment created by apartheid still looms large on the economic progress of the people. The group noted, “the costs of transport to get to work and back home eats away at the value of the low wage, leaving very little money to secure food and other critical expenses” (PMBEJD (2019).

Prepaid electricity costs, water, and transport have increased since last year, putting more pressure on low wages. Electricity increased by 13.07%, and water increased by 9.6% in July 2019. Taxi fares, meanwhile, increased by 7.7% in August 2019. These all compete viciously for the money remaining in the household purse (PMBEJD 2019).

This is more profound among the majority Black population, weakening their purchasing power. In most Black South African households, the family members depend on the income of the only one or two people working. Family members expect such workers to support “to cover the costs of goods and services needed for dignity and household functionality off their wages” PMBEJD 2019).

In inequality, South Africa has one of the highest rates in the world (Statistics South Africa 2019). As one of the salient features of the South African society, occasioned by the segregated colonial and apartheid policy, inequality in the country persists. With a dual economy, the Gini coefficient has remained at 0.65 since 2015. Moreover, income inequality left over 70% of the country's wealth with 10% of the population, while about 60% of the people held 7% of the net wealth (The World Bank 2019).

### **Asymmetric power**

South Africa's membership in BRICS boosts Moscow's strong presence in Africa. Communist Russia failed to achieve this feat in the early 1970s to have a strong foothold in the continent when its assistance to the Nigerian government during the Civil War failed to influence Lagos to shift its loyalty from the West (Stent, 1973). Nigeria's inclusion in the African allies of the USSR would have boosted Moscow's influence on the continent. Thus, the admission of South Africa into the BRICS is one of the recent diplomatic moves to shift Africa's strong economies and hegemony away from the Euro-Western-dominated global system.

The status of Russia and China in the UNSC serves as a buffer against the Euro-Western domination. The two countries have been able to block some UN Resolutions to deal with certain developments in Africa. While Beijing is less concerned about the domestic affairs of its African partners, Moscow has not hidden the continuation of its Cold War diplomacy of interference in the domestic affairs of its allies, as shown in its meddling with the political affairs of the Balkan states in Eastern Europe, and lately, Ukraine.

BRICS is an intercontinental economic body; nevertheless, based on the asymmetric power relations among the five members, especially with the weak position of South Africa, it is an avenue for the promotion of Beijing and Moscow in an emerging new World Order (Nuruzzaman, 2020). These two global powers have less interest in promoting democratic values and ethos, a posture that has set them against the Euro-Western powers. Since its membership in BRICS, the voting behaviour of Pretoria at the UN has shifted towards the Sino-Russian interests, joining other BRICS members at the UNSC to vote along with Moscow and Beijing on critical issues, especially those dealing with human rights and the promotion of democratic values in developing countries (Anthony, Tembe and Gulla, 2015).

In their study, Anthony et al (2015) have chronicled instances when South Africa's membership of the BRICS has influenced Pretoria's voting pattern on UNSC Resolutions, which were eventually defeated by the veto power of China and Russia. Since 2010, Pretoria has not hidden its preference for international issues that involve the interest of China and Russia. One could argue that this furthers its national interest in the global system. Nevertheless, it is not sure if Pretoria considered that most of its support for China and Russia contradicted the posture of its foreign policy contained in its White Paper on Foreign Policy.

China's invasion of the African market with low quality and cheap products has contributed immensely to the stifling of the growth of domestic industries, thereby compounding the already volatile economies (Roy, 2014; Anthony, Tembe and Gulla, 2015). Consequently, most African countries are consumers of Chinese finished products whereas, records of poor treatment of African workers in Chinese industries in Africa abound.

Post-independent Africa has benefited from Chinese construction projects, medical assistance, and scholarships for African students to study in Chinese universities. This largesse has afforded Beijing to benefit more from Africa's export of raw materials and import of Chinese goods. Africa is the largest market for Beijing manufacturing commodities (Mureithi 2022).

Since 2000, China's presence in South Africa reflected in its total imports with implications on employment and industrialisation (Edwards and Jenkins, 2015). Chinese commodities have dominated the increase in import penetration of the South African market. Thus, local producers suffer from the pressure of downward prices of imported commodities from other developing countries. As Edwards and Jenkins (2015, p. 449) have noted, "imports from China are around 63 per cent of the price (unit value) of imports from other developing countries and only a third of the price of imports from developed countries".

While this has a positive impact with reduced prices of imported commodities, the cumulative effects decreased the fortunes of local manufacturers and reduction in employment opportunities (Umezurike, Iwu, Obokoh, and Umezurike, 2017). China's presence in South Africa with new skills and technology engendered stiff competition with the local manufacturing sector lacking the latest production technology. Rather than strive to learn newer skills to improve labour capacity, the South African manufacturing sector mounted "the pressure on the government to provide the local companies with concessions that will



make them competitive in the local market” (Umezurike et al., 2017, p 128). Even though the imposition of a tariff quota on Chinese imports, especially on textiles products (Edwards & Rankin, 2012), mitigated the tendency for China to make South Africa a dumping ground for its commodities, the impact is still severe. The cheap prices of Chinese commodities in the markets led to a decrease in the patronage of locally manufactured products and lower production by forcing the local manufacturers to downsize the workforce. Chinese industries pay lesser wages with longer working hours. This exacerbated the tense domestic environment as the competition for jobs became fierce between the local and foreign African migrants, ready to accept employment with less pay. With poverty resulting from the loss of employment, internal socio-economic dynamics gave sporadic unrest generated by xenophobic expressions concerning job placement (Fagbadebo and Ruffin, 2018).

Moscow’s reinvented interest in Africa aimed at gaining access to the continent’s mineral resources such as oil and gas, using the political leaders’ networks of cronies at Russia’s state- owned enterprises in charge of natural resources “and the African leaders who serve as their local counterparts” (Marten 2019, p. 155). The Russian leadership galvanised this with adequate political and security support for mostly autocratic regimes and leaders in a bid to undermine any prospect of democratic consolidation, especially in states with dysfunctional and weak government institutions, such as the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.

Interestingly, these states, including Russia, are under international sanctions for violating human rights in their different domains (Marten 2019, p. 157).

As Moscow warms into the continent’s economic landscape, Pretoria's presence in BRICS provides a platform for its presence in the continent. The recent Russia-Africa Economic summit held in Sochi indicated Moscow’s readiness to penetrate the continent, in an anticipated Sino- Russia cooperation, for a greater foothold beyond its Cold War-era African relationships. However, the feasibility of such collaboration is not clear given China’s vast investments, which are superior to Moscow’s economic presence (Marten 2019). However, there is no doubt that Moscow is penetrating the continent as a big market for its nuclear technology, arms sales, security cooperation, natural resources importation, and construction.

**Table IV: Targeted Russian Initiatives in Africa**

Initiative	Key African Target Countries
Natural Resources	Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Mozambique, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Arms Sales	Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Security Cooperation	Angola, Central African Republic, Egypt, Madagascar, Mozambique, Somalia, Somaliland,
Counter-Terrorism	Chad, Nigeria, Somalia
Nuclear Power Technology	Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Zambia
Hydropower Construction	Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Namibia, Zambia
Railway Construction	Angola, Guinea, Nigeria

*Source: Peterson, N. 2019. Russian Strategic Intentions. A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper. Available at, [http:// nsiteam.com/ sma-publications/](http://nsiteam.com/sma-publications/)*

Russia and the governing African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa have had a long relationship dating back to its anti-apartheid struggle era. Thus, SA's membership in BRICS renewed the longstanding ties. A major setback in Russian-South African relations was the outcome of the failed nuclear power deal. Russian nuclear energy corporation, Rosatom, and the Jacob Zuma administration had concluded a deal for nuclear technology as alternative energy. However, public outcry over corruption allegations in the deal led to its rejection. The pressure associated with the acceptance of the deal informed the activism of the South African civil society to rise against the government in massive protestation against state capture, which led to the forced resignation of President Zuma (Marten 2019). This development has since subjected any Russian-South African dealings to public scrutiny.

Recently, South Africa's Nuclear Energy Corporation (NECSA) sought to further explore a relationship with Rusatom Healthcare's nuclear medicine (SAnews 27/07/2018). The agreement, which was on non-power nuclear technology, aimed at exploring the potential of deepening mutual relationships between the two countries' "innovation and technological development related to peaceful uses of nuclear

energy” (SAnews 27/07/2018). The partnership, for a start, would lead to the construction of two Solution Reactors in South Africa to produce cost-effective nuclear medicine products. This would boost healthcare delivery in South Africa. This is a positive envisaged contribution to the public sector management in South Africa. Nevertheless, the distrust in the governance policy of Russia in diplomatic relationships has remained a challenge.

Aside from the bungled nuclear deal, another sour part of Russian subtle meddling in the internal affairs of South Africa was its reaction to the proposed policy of land expropriation without compensation. This is a focal policy thrust of the governing party, ANC, a long-term ally of Moscow. Putin Russia had expressed the willingness of his administration to attract white South African farmers in case of any reprisal impact of the policy (Patel, 2018). This would translate to mean that South Africa’s loss in terms of skill in the agriculture sector of the economy would be Moscow’s gains.

## **Conclusion**

South Africa in BRICS is like an African representative in an intercontinental body promoting the interests of the non-Euro-Western hemisphere in the global system. For China, it is an avenue to control the continent through trade and other multilateral engagements, which had already manifested in China’s presence in the socio-economic activities of all African countries. For Russia, it would be an opportunity to reassert its hold on some of its former allies during the Cold War through direct support and intervention in their domestic affairs, a replication of the Cold War diplomacy of expansion of its ideological persuasion. As a military hegemon in Eastern Europe, the Sino-Russian relations cemented in BRICS might offer Africa a fertile ground to counteract Euro-Western influence in a developing country.

As a member of BRICS, South Africa must meander the diplomatic threshold to sustain its leading role as a formidable continental power. Found in the labyrinth of stronger economic powers, particularly China and Russia, Pretoria has the potential to attract more foreign investments to boost its trade and commerce. Aside from this, as a continental power, South Africa enjoys the diplomatic support of Russia and China in the UN Security Council, militarily and economically.

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