

Wrobel, Ralph

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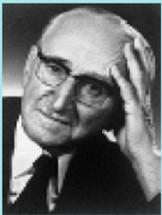
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Ordnungspolitische Diskurse

Discourses in Social Market Economy



Ralph M. Wrobel

**A New Geopolitical Positioning of South Africa:
Strategies for a modern “Swing State”**

Diskurs 2026 - 1

A New Geopolitical Positioning of South Africa: Strategies for a modern “Swing State”

Ralph Wrobel

University of Applied Sciences Zwickau, Germany

Abstract:

The evolving geopolitical landscape has placed South Africa at a crossroads, torn between its historical ties to the West and its growing relationships with BRICS+ nations, particularly China and Russia. The country's recent political shift, marked by the African National Congress (ANC) losing its parliamentary majority, has intensified debates over its international alignment. As a "Global Swing State," South Africa must navigate a complex global order by balancing cooperation with both power blocs—mainly Europe and China—while maintaining independence. A pragmatic foreign policy—one that prioritises economic development, democratic stability, and institutional reform—will be crucial in positioning South Africa as a bridge between the Global South and the West.

Key Words:

Geopolitics, Swing States, South Africa, Europe, Russia, China

JEL-Classification:

F50, O55, P45

Author:

Prof. Dr. Dr. Ralph M. Wrobel
Professor of Economics, especially Economic Policy
Faculty of Business and Economics
University of Applied Sciences Zwickau
Kornmarkt 1, 08056 Zwickau
Mail: ralph.wrobel@fh-zwickau.de

1. Introduction

The current geopolitical landscape is undergoing a profound transformation. The once relatively peaceful and cooperative international order of the early 21st century has evolved into one marked by bloc formation, rising geopolitical tensions, and ongoing military conflicts. Two “meta-blocs” can be identified: BRICs+ (China, Russia and their allies) and the “West”, mainly North America and Europe. (Deloitte 2025, 14) Encouraged by the emergence of a new bipolar world order, South Africa’s political elite finds itself increasingly torn between its longstanding ties to Western allies—whose values align with the nation’s liberal democratic aspirations enshrined in its Constitution—and its growing relationships with emerging powers like China and Russia. (Patel, 2023). In 2024, three decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa underwent a "second transition." After years of political disillusionment and economic decline, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its parliamentary majority, requiring it to establish a coalition government for the first time. President Ramaphosa formed a "Government of National Unity." (Hammelehle 2025, 111) A key priority for this new government is redefining South Africa's role on the international stage, its new geopolitical positioning.

Altogether, geopolitics studies the effects of human and physical geography on international politics and especially on international relations. In this, it focuses on political power investigating diplomatic history in relation to geographic space, especially over water ways, trade routes, access to natural resources, etc. (Wrobel 2019, 149). The framework of this analysis will be neoclassical geopolitics, which can be defined as ways of “*thinking about the effects of geography on international relations that explicitly locate themselves within the Mackinder – [...] – Spykman tradition, but which creatively rework it with reference to changed social, economic, political and cultural factors*” (Megoran 2010, 187). Within this framework, current South Africa can be described as a “*Global Swing State*” – together with Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Following the German Marshal Funds (2023, 3) these countries are states seeking “*to find their place in this world, as new coalitions emerge*”. They seek alternatives to the current order, yet no clear economic or political framework has emerged to replace it. In a globalised economy, Sino-American interdependence adds complexity to their rivalry, affecting a diverse range of global actors in distinct ways.

But what does that mean for modern South Africa in concrete terms? Should the country deepen its alliances with China and Russia? Or would forging new alliances with Western nations strengthen South Africa's democracy and improve its economic outlook? Should that lead to “changing camps,” substituting cooperation with other BRICS countries in the Global South with cooperation with the US and EU? Or is a policy of balancing the political, economic, and military power of the “East” and “West” a better solution for South Africa? To answer this question, first, the historical geopolitical position of South Africa will be briefly analysed, followed by an examination of its diplomatic, economic, and military relations and dependencies with both global power blocs—West and East. Then, three possible strategies will be discussed: (1) deepening cooperation with BRICS+, (2) changing camps to the “West,” and (3) balancing power between both blocs.

2. South Africa’s Historical Geopolitical Positioning

2.1 South Africa during the Apartheid-Period (1948 – 1993)

Already in the 19th and 20th centuries, South Africa's strategic location at the southern tip of the African continent, along with its vast natural resources, made it geopolitically significant. For instance, in the 1980s Butts / Thomas (1986, 4) mentioned: *“At the global level the West is dependent upon South Africa because of its strategic position upon the major oil transport route from the Middle East and the strategic minerals that are produced in or shipped through South Africa. The West, by virtue of its dependence upon Africa's minerals, is vulnerable to decisions made by South Africa.”*

During the Cold War era, maintaining control over South Africa was a geostrategic priority for the Western superpowers due to its 1,900-mile coastline and key harbours in Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, and Walvis Bay (in what was then South West Africa, now Namibia). (Ndlovu 2021, 219) The Western powers, primarily the US and the UK, sought to establish dominance over the Indian Ocean region, viewing South Africa as a strategic ‘second Gibraltar’ or ‘gatekeeper’ to this area. For instance, during the closure of the Suez Canal, an estimated seventy ships passed the Cape of Good Hope daily, amounting to no less than 25,450 ships annually. (Ndlovu 2021, 220) Following Portugal's withdrawal from Mozambique and Angola in 1975 and the rise of pro-Soviet Marxist regimes in these countries, the strategic significance of

South Africa's coastline had become increasingly evident to the West. This coastline was crucial for two key reasons: it acted as a major choke point on the Cape of Good Hope trade route and offered ports that enabled the West to maintain a naval presence in the region. (Butts / Thomas 1986, 9) For instance, the Simon's Town Agreement, a military pact between the UK and South Africa signed in 1955 and renewed in 1961, granted Britain access to the Simon's Town naval base. (Ndlovu 2021, 221)

At the same time, the Western powers identified southern Africa as a key support region within Cold War. Their rationale was based on the fact that many of the region's most critical mineral resources were found outside South Africa itself, particularly in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and in Southern and Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia). These colonies provided essential raw materials such as uranium, platinum, copper, cobalt, gold, chrome, vanadium, and manganese. Southern Africa, and especially South Africa, was often referred to as the 'Persian Gulf of minerals.' Minerals were the foundation of US foreign policy toward Africa, as the West relied heavily on these reserves for strategically important supplies. (Ndlovu 2021, 221) For instance, South Africa served as an export route for more than half of these minerals produced in Zaire's and Zambia's copper and cobalt belt. (Butts / Thomas 1986, 8)

Besides economic interests, the systemic competition between Western democracies and Eastern communist dictatorships was also a significant factor. Central geopolitical goal of the Western powers was to protecting the free world from the communist threat during the Cold War era. In the 1970s and 1980s, South Africa's ports and transport infrastructure played a crucial role in countering the East Bloc's presence in Southern Africa. In contrast, between 1956 and 1988, South Africa and the USSR had no official diplomatic relations due to ideological differences. Moscow severed ties with the apartheid regime as early as 1955, and from 1961 onward, the Soviet Union provided crucial support to African National Congress (ANC) members who were forced into exile or went into hiding following the party's ban. (Belousova 2024, 8) In Angola, the Soviet Union had a socialist client state. And the rise to power of Marxist leaders Samora Machel in Mozambique and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe was widely seen as paving the way for Moscow to establish a corridor of leftist states across the region, enhancing its influence. (Butts / Thomas 1986, 10) In this manner, the Apartheid-system in South

Africa became a bulwark against Communism in Africa for the Western powers. Additionally, as the Cold War escalated, large amounts of South African uranium were used in the production of nuclear weapons by the US and the UK, highlighting apartheid South Africa's steadfast alliance with the Western superpowers. (Ndlovu 2021, 223)

Actually, from the 1940s on, the ANC recognised the strategic importance of the UN in advancing the liberation struggle and established a committee of prominent Africans to interpret the UN Charter in the context of Africa. However, during the Cold War, the ANC's relationship with the Soviet Union changed significantly, particularly after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, in which peaceful demonstrators were shot. This shift necessitated the transformation of both the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in exile. (Egan 2013, 72) In July 1960, SACP leaders travelled to Moscow to strengthen fraternal ties. From then on, the Soviet Union provided arms to the ANC's military wing, "*uMkhonto we Sizwe*" (Spear of the Nation), trained its fighters, and coordinated international campaigns against apartheid. (Belousova 2024, 8-9) In 1976, the ANC also urgently requested the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee to send 400 trainees to Angola. Two years later, in 1978, the ANC leadership submitted another appeal for supplies and equipment to support camps in Angola accommodating 10,000 people. The crucial role of Soviet and other socialist countries' assistance was also clearly demonstrated during the February 1976 conference in support of Angola. (Ndlovu 2021, 237) This cooperation must be seen as the beginning of the long-time lasting friendship between black South African ANC leaders and the Soviet Union, respective nowadays Russia.

With the thawing period of the Cold War in the mid-1980s, the position of some Western countries regarding the apartheid regime in South Africa changed. In many countries, there was now support for the majority of South Africa's population in their struggle against apartheid. The European Community (EC), for example, adopted a coordinated stance on South Africa in 1985 as part of European political cooperation and developed a special program in support of victims of apartheid policies. On September 16, 1986, the EC foreign ministers decided on joint sanctions, which included a ban on investments in South Africa as well as the import of South African steel, iron, and gold coins (Krugerrand). (Corsi 1987) Also some US politicians claim to be part of the democratisation in South Africa. (see e.g. Lyman 2002) However, that can be seen as the beginning of the end of the apartheid in South Africa.

2.2 South Africa as “Rainbow Nation” (1994 – today)

The ANC's rise to power in 1994 marked a fundamental shift in South Africa's foreign policy, driven by changing domestic values and the entry of new political elites. This was not merely a change in leadership but a transformation of the entire political system. Under apartheid, the government's foreign policy was shaped by the National Party's Eurocentric, white, and anti-communist perspective, positioning South Africa as a developed nation and a Western ally. In contrast, the ANC viewed the country as African, developing, and aligned with the Non-Aligned Movement. This identity continues to shape the government's interpretation of national interest and is reflected in its approach to international relations. (Bradlow et al. 2020, 8) Therefore, post-apartheid, South Africa has struggled to define its role in regional and global politics, torn between neoliberal economic integration and a leadership position in Africa. (Ryall 1997, 397-398)

From the dawn of democracy in 1994 until the early 2000s, South Africa held a strong and respected position in global affairs. Due to its regional political and economic influence, along with the soft power gained from its history of democratic transition and reconciliation, South Africa has long been regarded as Africa's “natural leader” and a global moral authority. (Hammelehle 2025, 111-112) While the country still holds influence today, its international standing has diminished. This decline stems from both domestic and international factors. Internally, political corruption has weakened South Africa's global credibility. Externally, its reputation has suffered due to mismanagement of key events, including its 2011 UN Security Council vote on Libya, the 2015 visit of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, and the 2012 weakening of the South African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal. (Bradlow et al. 2020, 2-3) As a result, in recent decades, South Africa's status has eroded. Both material and soft power have diminished, an inconsistent stance on human rights and international law has weakened its moral credibility, and rising anti-Western sentiment has undermined its ability to serve as a bridge between the Global South and Global North. That can be traced back to the ANC's history as a liberation movement and the resulting deep-seated distrust of the West, particularly the US. (Hammelehle 2025, 111-112) The country's diminishing hard and soft power, along with its contested role in Africa, domestic democratic unrest, and economic challenges, have further weakened its international standing.

The reasons are obvious: Growing frustration with Western policies and the increasingly anti-Western stance of Nelson Mandela's successors have driven South Africa to pivot from engagement within global institutions to alliances with alternative bodies and non-Western partners. (Hamill 2018, 40) The West, particularly the US and Europe, traditionally engaged with Africa through a lens of security, energy supply, and strategic alliances. However, this dynamic has undergone a significant shift over the past two decades. The global economic centre of gravity has steadily shifted eastward, fuelled by China's rapid ascent and the broader economic resurgence of Asia. (Belhaj 2024, 3) Again and again, Pretoria has criticised Western commitments to global governance reforms as "empty," condemned the COVID-19 vaccine distribution as "vaccine apartheid," and accused the application of international law—such as in Gaza—of being selective. (see e.g. Ramaphosa 2021) As a result, South Africa is turning to Non-Western powers, especially the BRICS partners, including Russia and China. Although South Africa insists that it views BRICS as a "development platform" rather than an "anti-West" alliance, this stance is becoming harder to maintain as Beijing and Moscow increasingly leverage the group for revisionist objectives. For some observers, South Africa's emphasis on BRICS suggests that its choice of partners prioritises opposition to the West over commitments to democracy, international law, and human rights. (Hammelehle 2025, 112-113) Therefore, despite asserting geopolitical independence, South Africa today should be viewed as aligned with the autocratic Eastern Bloc.

3. South Africa's Current Geopolitical Position

3.1 South Africa as Geopolitical "Swing State"

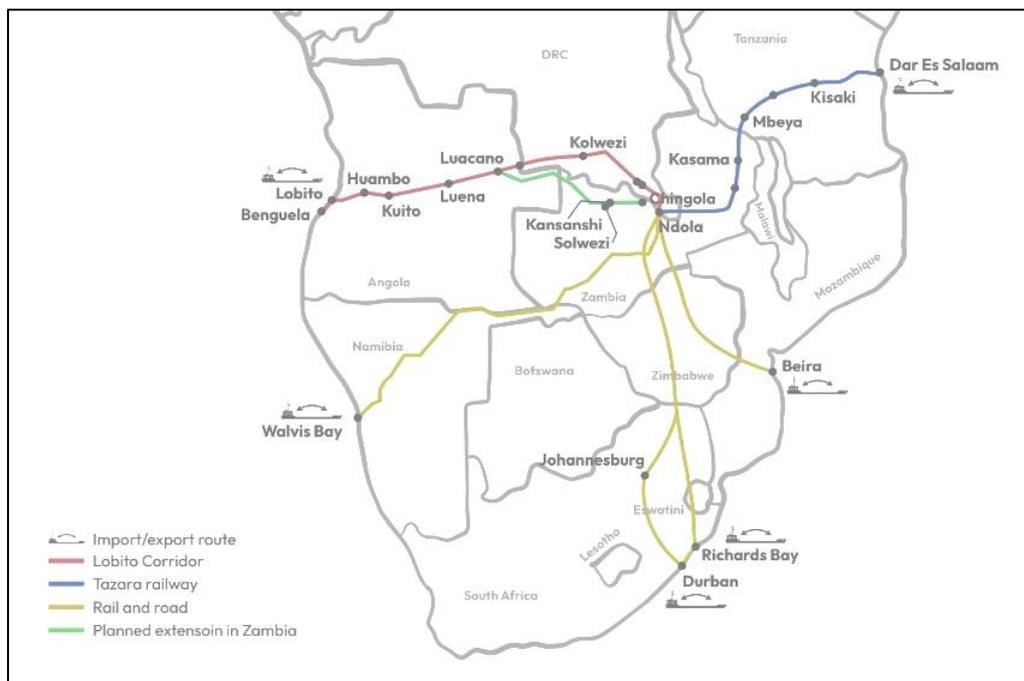
South Africa's Geopolitical Importance

Even nowadays, South Africa remains geopolitical relevant for the major powers in the West and the East of the world. First, the country continues to be a key player for major global powers, serving as the largest trading partner in Africa for China, the EU, India, and the US. (Maroleng 2023, 2) The country possesses considerable economic strengths, including abundant reserves of critical minerals essential for clean energy and digital technologies. Notably, it produces approximately 70 percent of the world's platinum and around 40 percent of global manganese and chromium. (Hammelehle

2025, 114) Additionally, South Africa is a key supplier of ruthenium, iridium, and rhodium, with the EU being especially reliant on these resources. (The African Climate Foundation n.d., 4)

Additionally, also nowadays South Africa is still the ‘Persian Gulf of minerals’ from Zambia and the Democratic Republic Congo because Durban is the major harbour for the export of copper, a metal which is pivotal to the world’s clean energy transition, and other minerals from the landlocked countries in Southern Africa. But it must be mentioned that alternatives are in consideration. The US is supporting the Lobito Corridor railway, linking the DRC to Angola’s Lobito port, with an 830 km extension to Zambia’s Copperbelt. The Biden administration backed the Angolan section with a \$553 million loan, but Trump's support is uncertain. The US enterprise KoBold Metals plans to export 300,000 tons of copper annually via the railway. Meanwhile, China is upgrading the Tazara railway, connecting Zambia to Tanzania, with potential plans to link both rail networks for enhanced African trade. (Kapekele 2025) As a result, South Africa is caught between Western and Chinese infrastructure projects in Southern Africa, reducing the geopolitical importance of the country. (see fig. 1)

Fig. 1: Trade Routes in Southern Africa 2025.

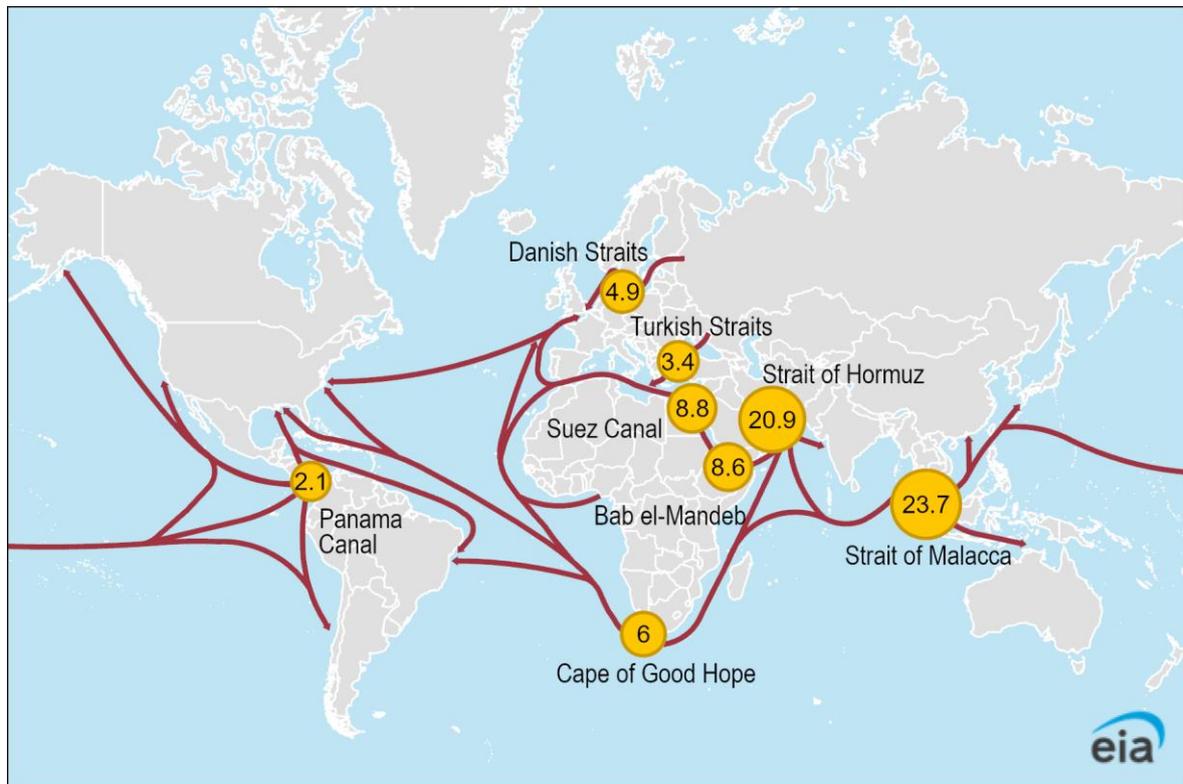


Source: Kapekele (2025).

At the same time, South Africa is the economic, trade, and political anchor of SADC, contributing significantly to the region's GDP, industrialization, and infrastructure. As the most industrialised economy, it facilitates regional trade, investment, and employment, with its Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) and major banks strengthening financial systems across SADC. As described, its well-developed transport networks and ports connect landlocked nations to global markets, while Eskom supplies electricity to neighbouring countries through the Southern African Power Pool (SAPP). For instance, in 2022 South Africa was the continent's largest net exporter of electricity with 3,925 GWh, followed by Mozambique and Zambia. (African Energy Commission 2024, 29) South Africa also plays a key role in peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and policy-making within SADC, further solidifying its leadership. (see e.g. Mutsaka 2024) Additionally, many SADC citizens migrate to South Africa for employment, boosting remittances to their home countries. With its influence in finance, trade, energy, and diplomacy, South Africa remains indispensable for SADC's economic integration and stability.

Secondly, the Cape of Good Hope, while not a chokepoint, is the fifth important global trade route, facilitating around 8% of seaborne-traded oil in 2023. (see fig. 2) Approximately 5.0 million barrels per day (b/d) of crude oil passed through the cape, primarily heading east to Asia, with China receiving over 40% of these imports. The main sources of crude were the US (32%), West Africa (31%), and South America (27%). Between 2020 and 2022, oil flows around Africa declined by 1.6 million b/d due to reduced Asian demand, lower West African output, and Russia's increased oil exports to India. But, the cape serves additionally as an alternative route for vessels bypassing the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb Strait, though it adds significant cost and transit time. In 2023, drought at the Panama Canal and disruptions in the Red Sea led to increased use of this route, a trend expected to continue in 2024 if disruptions persist. (eia 2024) Therefore, South Africa is still of geopolitical interest for the West as well as for China.

Fig. 2: Daily transit volumes of petroleum and other liquids through world maritime oil chokepoints (million barrels per day, 2023)



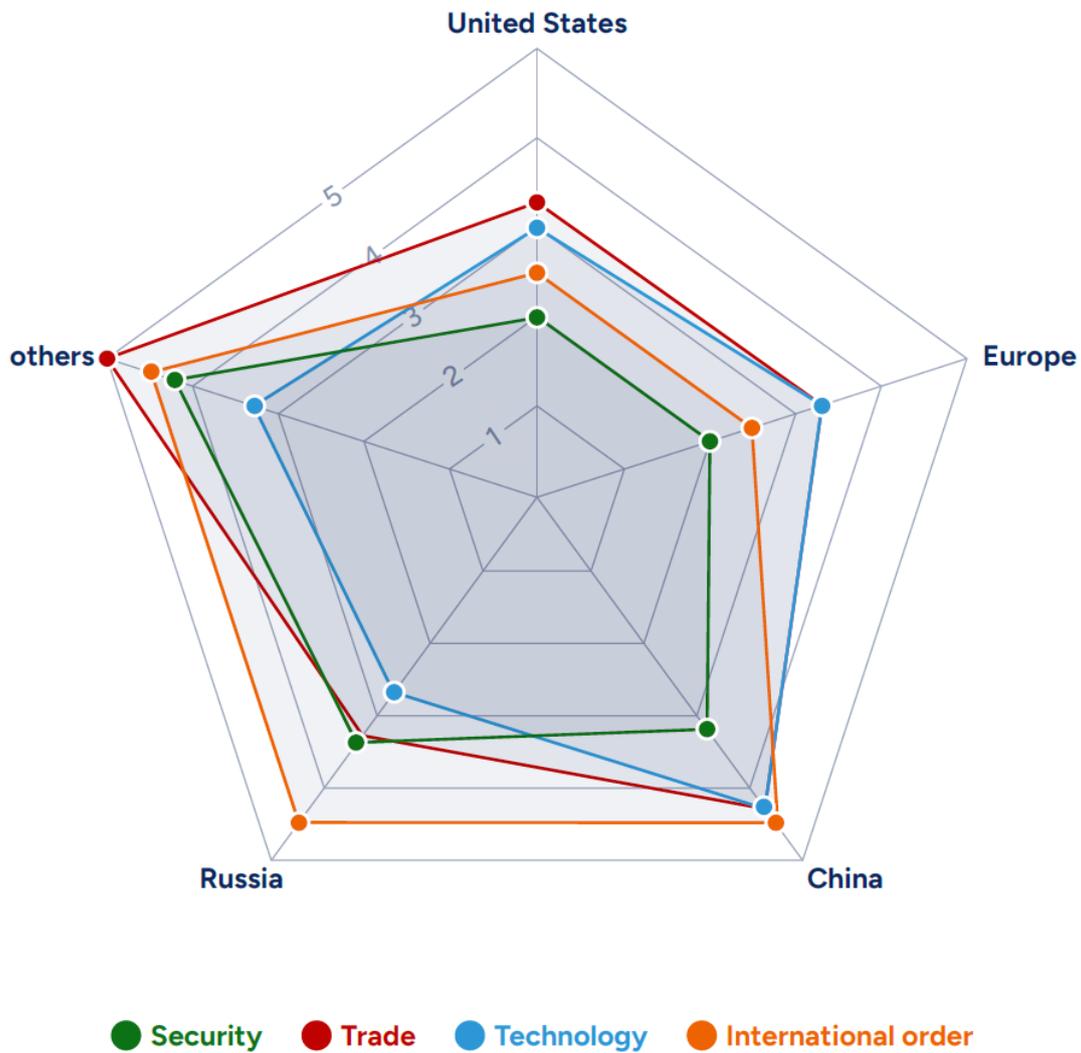
Source: eia (2024).

South Africa as “Swing State”

Nowadays, South Africa’s geopolitical position has been described in various ways, including as a regional power, an emerging or rising power, a pivotal state, and a middle power. As middle power South Africa is defined by its active engagement on the global stage rather than solely within its region. It plays a significant role in international organizations, advocating for global peace and security without attempting to impose a rigid ideological vision of an ideal world. (Bradlow et al. 2020, 15) But, in modern geopolitics the country can also be described as “*Global Swing State*”. (GMF 2023, 3) Global Swing States are nations whose strategic decisions play a crucial role in shaping the international order, driven by their geopolitical influence, economic strength, and diplomatic reach. These countries – besides South Africa also India, Brazil, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – are key actors in global governance, power balancing, and the development of international norms and policies. (Crellin 2023) As middle

powers they are characterised by relevant geopolitical influence, economic power, diplomatic capability, and soft power. (GMF 2023)

Fig. 3: South Africa’s Preferences for Cooperation



Source: GMF 2023, 43.

Figure 3—prepared by the German Marshall Funds in 2023—visualises the influence of different global actors—United States, Europe, China, Russia, and others for South Africa—across four key domains: security (green), trade (red), technology (blue), and international order (orange). The US appears quite dominant in security and technology, while China has a strong presence in trade and international order. Europe maintains a balanced influence across all areas but does not lead in any. Russia shows

relatively low influence except in security. The "others" category—mainly the African neighbour countries—suggests moderate influence across multiple domains. At all, the figure highlights the multipolar nature of global governance in South Africa, where no single actor dominates all aspects, and influence varies depending on the domain.

Its role as a modern "swing state" is also evident in its membership in both Western and Eastern organisations. Nowadays, South Africa is member in BRICS and G20 as well as in SADC, what shows a hybrid international orientation as well as the country's dominance in Southern Africa. Although the BRICS nations experienced a slowdown in economic growth, they surpassed the G7's share of global GDP in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2020. By 2023, BRICS accounted for 32% of global GDP, compared to 30% for the G7. In 2023, a decision was made to expand BRICS by inviting Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join. (Saalbach 2024, 3) Latest, since then BRICS+ can be seen as club of emerging countries in the "Global South" and counterpart of G7. The expansion of BRICS+ highlights the bloc's increasing significance, not only as a challenge to Western dominance but as a cooperative platform for addressing global issues. A Russian observer, Lukyanov (2023), suggests that BRICS+ is evolving toward an alternative to the West rather than an outright opposition. But, at the same time, India, Brazil and South Africa are members of G20, the enlargement of G7. South Africa even holds the G20 presidency in 2025. Additionally, South Africa is the leading economy in the SADC consisting of 16 states in the South of Africa. (Saalbach 2024, 8-10) That highlights South Africa's role as a "Swing State".

Relations with Western Powers

Relations with the great powers of today must also be assessed in a highly nuanced manner. Nowadays, US–South African political relations are still not very close. The two nations engaged in a bilateral strategic dialogue, with the US offering significant assistance to South Africa, mainly in the fight against HIV/AIDS. (Congressional Research Service 2020, 1) From 2025 onward, the USAID programme will suffer a significant budget cut imposed by President Trump, which will pose challenges to South Africa's HIV/AIDS prevention programmes, but at the same time, reduce the country's dependency on the US. However, even earlier, the relationship between South Africa

and the United States has encountered numerous challenges, resulting in a notable decline in recent years. These tensions stem from fundamental differences in foreign policy. South Africa's commitment to non-alignment contrasts with the United States' assertive global approach, which reflects its influence on the world stage. Current examples are the wars in Ukraine as well as in Gaza. Adding to the complexity is South Africa's increasing alignment with China, especially through its membership in BRICS. On the other hand, the US serves as a key market for South Africa. The AGOA agreement ("African Growth and Opportunity Act", 2000) has strengthened South African exports, particularly in the automotive and agricultural sectors, while both nations have expressed interest in cooperating in technology, research, and development. (Maroleng 2023, 2-3) In 2025, US president Trump strained the bilateral relationship once again. The United States announced to open its borders to certain white refugees from South Africa. The State Department and the Department of Homeland Security should take measures to "*prioritize humanitarian assistance for Afrikaners in South Africa who are victims of unjust racial discrimination*". (Bröll 2025) Therefore, if US American-South African relations will improve during the next four years of the Trump administration is questionable.

Relations with European countries are traditionally deeper for South Africa as has already been described above. Now, a new European programme shall intensify them. In 2021, through the "Global Gateway initiative", the EU has stepped into the global infrastructure financing competition with China, seeking to expand its own sphere of influence. By leveraging trade and investment as key geostrategic foreign policy tools, the EU aims to strengthen economic relationships worldwide. When the European Union member states introduced the Global Gateway initiative, they created a strategic investment plan designed to mobilise up to €300 billion in public and private funding by 2027. This financing will be drawn from existing development programs, loan guarantees, and private sector investments to support global infrastructure projects. With a strong focus on Africa, the Global Gateway Africa-Europe Investment Package allocates €203 million from the EU budget for the period 2021–2024. Like multilateral development financing, the EU ties its global infrastructure investments to specific conditions, such as democratic values, good governance, transparency, equitable partnerships, and sustainability. Key investment priorities include climate and energy, dig-

ital technology, transportation, health, research, and education. (Heldt 2023, 223) Following a concrete offer in 2023, the EU and its Member States will invest over €280 million in grants in South Africa, including €87.75 million from the EU budget, to support green recovery policies, stimulate green investments, and promote a knowledge-driven transition. This funding is part of the Just and Green Recovery Team Europe Initiative for South Africa, launched under the Global Gateway framework. (European Commission 2023) This is the first time that the EU is acting as a geopolitical power by practicing power politics using economic means!

But African representatives often criticise the EU for its paternalistic approach. Many recipient countries are frustrated by the EU's emphasis on values, which they see as burdensome bureaucracy rather than genuine support for good governance. Additionally, they often lack the institutional capacity to navigate the complex administrative processes required to initiate investments. Additionally, for many African countries, the EU's environmental standards are "a double-edged sword." Finally, an Afrobarometer survey (2019–2021) across several African countries found that 55% of Africans believe their governments should have more control over development funding, while 51% support their autonomy in decisions on democracy and human rights. (Heldt 2023, 230) There are also concrete conflicts of interest: South Africa and the EU differ in their approach to green recovery. While the EU prioritises decarbonization and renewable energy, South Africa must balance its energy transition with pressing socio-economic development needs. (SAIIA 2023, 17) At all, many mid-sized powers no longer feel compelled to align with the United States or Europe. Swing States like Brazil, India, and South Africa are actively pursuing strategic diversification, strengthening ties with Russia and China. What was once non-alignment during the Cold War has evolved into multi-alignment, as the increasing multipolarity of the world creates more opportunities for transactional relationships. (GMF 2023, 4-11)

Relations with China

Obviously, there is often an instinctive scepticism toward policies shaped by Northern powers, especially former colonial rulers, in South Africa. Even in countries with strong bilateral ties to Europe and North America, such as South Africa, favourable views of

NATO are not guaranteed, as Cold War memories remain influential. China has skillfully leveraged this sentiment, fostering a sense of shared identity with the Global South while maintaining admiration for its development model. (GMF 2023, 18) Many African nations perceive China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) financing model, which relies on loans, as a more appealing option, as it provides clear and predictable financial terms, for instance. (Heldt 2023, 230) South Africa established diplomatic relations with China in the late 1990s after the end of apartheid. These ties have steadily strengthened over the years, leading to South Africa's designation as a "Comprehensive Strategic Partner" of China in 2010. Due to the South African – Chinese relations it must also be seen that a key pillar of the ANC government's power is its alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), creating a close alliance between the Chinese Communist Party and the ANC. (Nolle / Parker 2021, 2) An additional key turning point has been China's use of its development initiatives as tools for geopolitical influence in the Global South, particularly since the 2017 Communist Party Congress. The BRI, launched in 2013, has redefined how infrastructure projects can transform nations. Unlike traditional aid efforts, BRI extends beyond developing countries, involving 180 nations and institutions. In recent years, China has introduced additional initiatives, including the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in 2021, which is widely appreciated by developing nations. The Global Security Initiative (GSI), endorsed by BRICS countries, and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), published in March 2023, further highlight the expanding scope and interconnected nature of these efforts. (Klingebiel 2023, 3)

Additionally, cooperation with China may help South Africa also in its energy transition. The inaugural China–South Africa New Energy Investment and Cooperation Conference took place in Sandton, South Africa, on June 13, 2023. This initiative aims to strengthen collaboration, trade, and investment in new energy technologies, supporting South Africa in addressing its energy crisis and revitalizing economic growth. As a gesture of assistance, the Chinese government donated solar panels and generators for installation in public institutions to help mitigate power disruptions. (SAIIA 2023, 33)

But these Chinese projects are not for free. Observers also highlight an uneven development pattern in countries participating in the BRI. Firstly, the local population sees little benefit, as projects primarily employ Chinese workers. Secondly, local economies gain minimal direct advantages since contracts are predominantly awarded to Chinese

companies. Ultimately, the so-called "*debt trap*," involving both public and hidden liabilities, risks undermining the sovereignty of recipient nations. (see e.g. Wrobel 2025) Indeed, Chinese loans remain attractive to some less developed countries because, unlike Western financial aid, they come without conditions requiring political or economic reforms, such as strengthening human rights, good governance, or economic liberalization. But as a result, high levels of corruption, weak oversight of the executive branch, and a lack of transparency are often tolerated by Chinese lenders. (Nabiyeva 2019, 5) However, China's loan agreements have sparked intense debate. Some analysts argue that Beijing engages in "*debt trap diplomacy*", imposing strict terms that enable it to seize strategic assets when debtor nations face financial difficulties. Others, however, highlight the benefits of Chinese lending (Gelpern et al. 2021, 4).

Relations with Russia

A sense of nostalgic sympathy for Russia persists in parts of the Global South, particularly in regions of Africa and Latin America, where Moscow has actively cultivated support through regional media and high-level diplomatic outreach. (GMF 2023, 18) As was described above, during the apartheid era in South Africa, the ANC maintained a close relationship with the Soviet Union, rooted in shared ideological principles and strategic alliances. This connection later extended to Russia and continues to shape its foreign policy and broader stance toward the West. (Maroleng 2023, 3) A new phase of South Africa–Russia relations began with President Putin's historic visit in September 2006, the first by a Russian head of state to sub-Saharan Africa. This visit strengthened bilateral ties, leading to the Agreement on Friendship and Partnership, which outlined cooperation in metals production, nuclear energy, space exploration, agriculture, and chemicals. Article 2 of the agreement emphasised a commitment to a just, multipolar world based on equal partnerships and shared global development benefits. During president Zuma's administration (2009 – 2018), Russia emerged as a key focus of South Africa's foreign policy amid rising anti-Western sentiment. President Zuma emphasised the shared commitment of both nations to promoting a more balanced distribution of power and influence in global political and economic systems. (Belousova 2024, 9) But the Russian – South African ties are still close, nowadays. During a Russia-Africa Summit in 2019 South African president Cyril Ramaphosa mentioned

that “*his country’s engagement with Russia is based on mutual respect, and both countries will engage as equals in dealing with their challenges and developmental issues.*” (South African Government 2019) Impressively, South Africa’s stance on Russia’s war against Ukraine since 2022 illustrates its skew toward “*anti-Westernism*”. (Hammelehle 2025, 112-113) South Africa's policy became contradictory as it increasingly adopted Russian positions on the Ukraine conflict. In March 2022, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said for instance that “*the military conflict could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region*” (Belousova 2024, 22). However, he overlooked the colonialist attitude of Russia’s war of aggression, which should be apparent to all South Africans as people of the Global South. At all since February 2022, South Africa has clearly demonstrated that claims of non-alignment or neutrality can be used as a misleading pretext to justify an inconsistent and unpredictable foreign policy. This approach, lacking clear rationale or coherence, ultimately serves to support Russia’s imperial actions. (Klingbiel 2023, 4)

3.2 South Africa’s Economic Relations and Dependencies

Regardless of South Africa's strategic foreign policy and specific geopolitical orientation, the first question to ask is who the country's relevant partners are. Where do common interests exist – and, above all, where are there economic dependencies? As McGowan and Smith (1978) highlighted in their foundational work on the dependency theory of underdevelopment, “*economic power dependency*” can be assessed using several key variables: (1) the percentage of exports directed to the main trading partner, (2) the percentage of FDI originating from the leading investor country, etc. While dependency theorists originally framed their analysis as a critique of neo-colonial exploitation by developed nations, their criteria remain relevant for examining geoeconomic dependency today. (see e.g. Wrobel 2019) Therefore, in this chapter South Africa’s trade and investment relations, technology and military cooperation as well as official development assistance and loans will be analysed.

International Trade

Beyond the ANC's political stance, economic considerations have played a key role in South Africa's pivot toward emerging powers, particularly BRICS and China. Nevertheless, beside the African neighbour countries Europe remains the country's leading trading partner, while the US has recently become its fastest-growing export market. (Hammelehle 2025, 113) For instance, between January and November 2024 Europe accounted for 26.54% of South Africa's exports and imports – excluding trade with the direct neighbours. At all, table 1 shows a regionally balanced trade pattern for South Africa.

**Tab. 1: South African Exports & Imports by Region (excluding BLNS*)
(Jan. – Nov. 2024)**

World Zones	Exports (in ZAR)	in %	Imports (in ZAR)	in %
Africa	R 340.107.222.107	20,13	R 118.172.606.205	7,22
Europe	R 448.464.489.663	26,54	R 455.780.438.710	27,85
America	R 174.436.464.304	10,32	R 169.823.320.048	10,38
Asia	R 555.167.115.625	32,86	R 864.913.486.371	52,85
Oceania	R 21.024.279.754	1,24	R 21.353.026.327	1,30
Other	R 136.904.405.110	8,10	R 6.351.802.454	0,39
Total	R 1.689.522.958.251	100,00	R 1.636.394.680.115	100,00

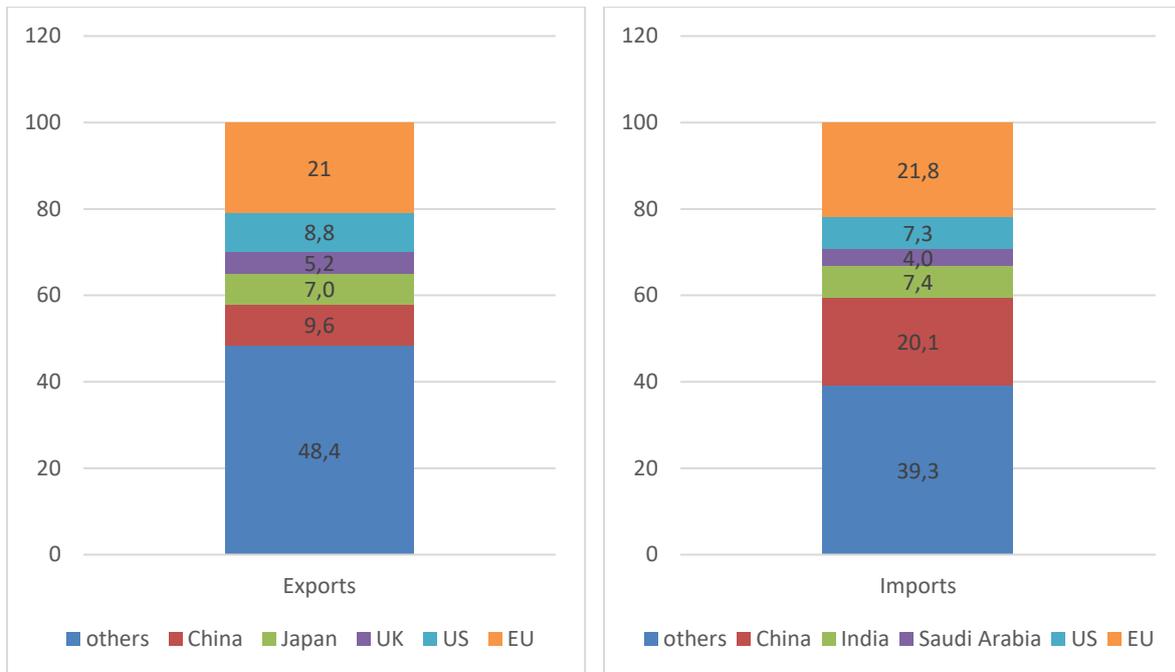
* BLNS = Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Eswatini.

Source: SARS (2025) Trade Statistics.

Also, a more detailed analysis of 2022 data shows no significant economic dependencies. (fig. 4) In that year, the EU was South Africa's largest export destination, accounting for 21% of total exports, followed by China (9.6%), the US (8.8%), Japan (7%), and the UK (5.2%). The remaining 48.4% was distributed across other global markets. On one hand, this reflects a relatively diversified export market, reducing overreliance on a single trading partner. On the other hand, Western democracies collectively account for at least 42.0% of South African exports, while China's share stands at just 9.6%. Notably, Russia does not rank among the top five export partners. When it comes to imports, the EU (21.8%) and China (20.1%) are South Africa's two largest suppliers, followed by India (7.4%), the US (7.3%), and Saudi Arabia (4%). This suggests only

that South Africa is reliant on both the EU and China for essential imports, particularly manufactured goods.

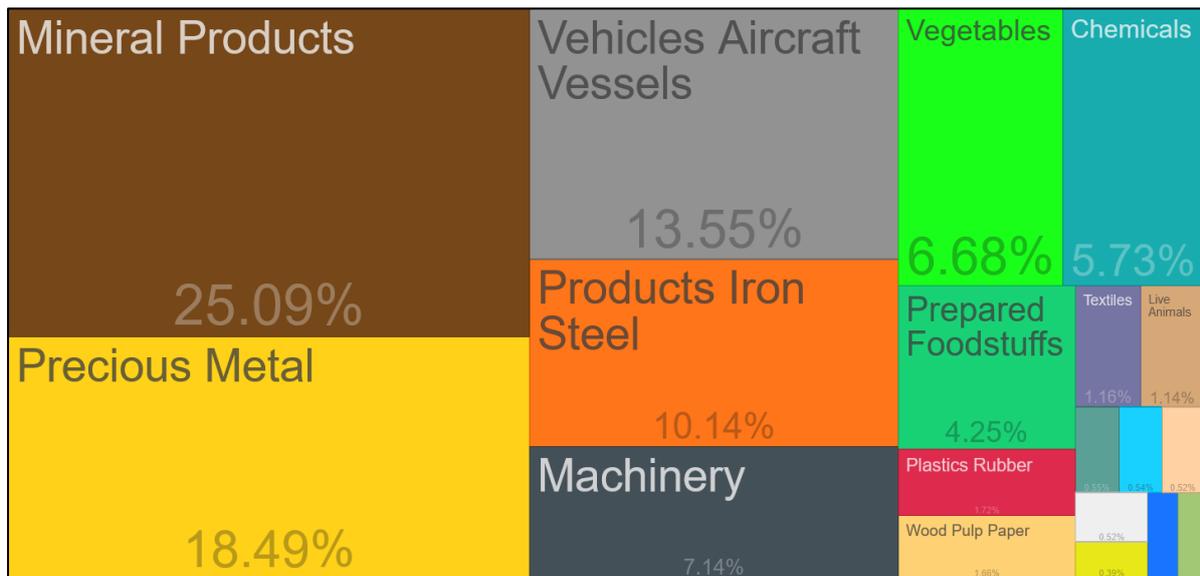
Fig. 4: South African total Exports and Imports by main destinations respective origin 2022.



Source: WTO (2023).

Only, some kind of South African geoeconomic dependence becomes evident when examining specific commodities in detail. As fig. 5 shows, South Africa's economy is heavily reliant on natural resources, particularly minerals and precious metals, making it vulnerable to price volatility in global commodity markets. The automotive, steel, and machinery sectors provide some diversification but remain secondary. Agricultural and chemical exports contribute to economic diversity but are relatively small in comparison to mining and industrial exports. South Africa's economy depends heavily on commodity exports, while efforts to expand processed goods exports remain limited, leading to a decline in the country's export competitiveness. Additionally, this imbalance suggests that South Africa depends heavily on foreign countries for higher-value industrial products, which could hinder local industrialization efforts. (NPC 2023, 21)

Fig. 5: South Africa's Export Composition (2023)



Source: SARS (2025).

Since the EU is divided into various independent states, it is primarily trade with China that is concerning. South Africa primarily exports low-value commodities, which fall short of balancing the higher-value goods imported from China. This has led to a significant trade deficit and an increasing dependence on Chinese imports. In 2020 for instance, South Africa's top exports to China consisted mainly of ores, iron and steel, and copper, while its leading imports from China were electronic equipment, machinery, and textiles. This imbalance in trade—where South Africa exports raw materials but relies on China for higher-value manufactured goods—has hindered the country's industrial development and deepened its dependence on Chinese imports. Additionally, too strong trade relations also create political dependencies. For instance, South Africa has repeatedly refused visas for the Dalai Lama to avoid straining its diplomatic relations with China—a concession that many Western countries have resisted. (Nolle / Parker 2021, 3) But it must be mentioned, that the partnership between South Africa and the EU also is inherently asymmetrical. While the EU serves as a key trade and development partner, disparities in power and differing priorities can influence the partnership's effectiveness. (SAIIA 2023, 17)

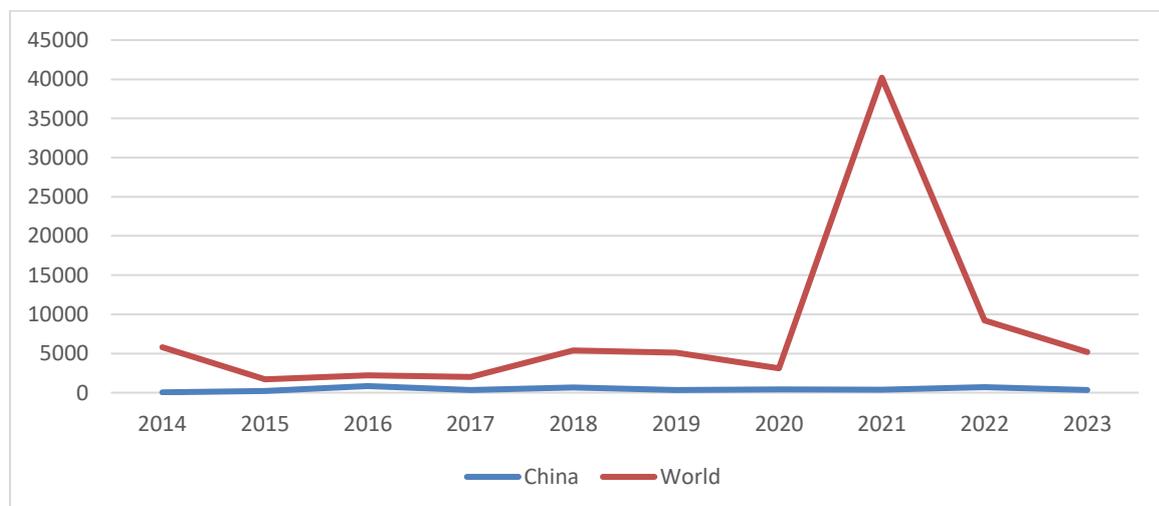
In contrast, economic relations between South Africa and Russia remain minimal. Currently, the Russian Federation ranks 32nd among South Africa's trading partners. In

comparison, South Africa's trade with China in 2021 reached \$13.6 billion in exports and \$19.2 billion in imports, whereas trade with Russia was significantly lower, totalling only \$410.8 million in exports and \$623.0 million in imports, only. Key areas of cooperation between South Africa and Russia include aluminium and steel production, renewable energy, gas-to-liquids refining, nuclear power, and more. (Belousova 2024, 24) Therefore, Russia is actually not a relevant trade partner for South Africa.

Foreign Direct Investment

Due to Foreign Direct Investments the picture is a little bit different. In 2023, South Africa contributed approximately 13 percent of Africa's GDP and attracted 10 percent of the continent's foreign direct investment (FDI). Within Southern Africa, Pretoria remains the economic powerhouse, accounting for about 60 percent of GDP and FDI inflows. (Hammelehle 2025, 114) As average from 1994 to 2023 South Africa received FDI as of 1.6% of its GDP. This is a bit more than India, for instance, which received 1.4 % of the country's Nominal GDP in the same period. (World Bank Group 2025a) A visible significant increase of FDI in 2021 was mainly driven by a major corporate restructuring in South Africa, involving a share exchange between South African Naspers and Dutch Prosus in the third quarter of the year. (Prosus 2025) (see fig. 6)

Fig. 6: Annual FDI flows from China resp. the whole World to South Africa 2014-2023 (in million U.S. dollars)



Data Source: Statista (2025) & Focus Economics (2025).

When looking at the distribution of FDI sources, a clear dominance of Europe becomes evident. For instance, China accounts only for a small percentage of the South African FDI inflows. (see fig. 5). Instead, as table 2 shows The Netherlands (36.7%) and the United Kingdom (24.5%) account for the majority of FDI stocks, suggesting that these countries are key hubs for foreign investment in South Africa. In contrast, China – as the only “non-Western” country – holds rank 6, only, with 3.4% of the FDI stocks. Actually, that shows a clear dependency from Western countries, mainly from Europe. But nearly three decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa has become the leading destination for Chinese investment in Africa and China’s largest trading partner on the continent. Therefore, some also view it as China’s closest economically in the region.

Tab. 2: FDI Stocks by Country 2022 (in %)

Rank	Country	%
1	The Netherlands	36.7
2	United Kingdom	24.5
3	Belgium	6.8
4	United States	5.5
5	Germany	4.1
6	China	3.4
7	Luxembourg	2.3
8	Australia	2.0
9	Japan	1.7

Source: *Global Trade Portal (2025)*.

Technology and Military Cooperation

Also, in technology cooperation China has become a key partner for South Africa, especially in information and communications technology, with cybersecurity cooperation playing a central role. This collaboration is guided by China’s International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace (ISCC) and takes place both bilaterally and through the African Union. Leading the charge is Chinese tech giant Huawei, which drives numerous initiatives and investments under Beijing’s Digital Silk Road framework. On the

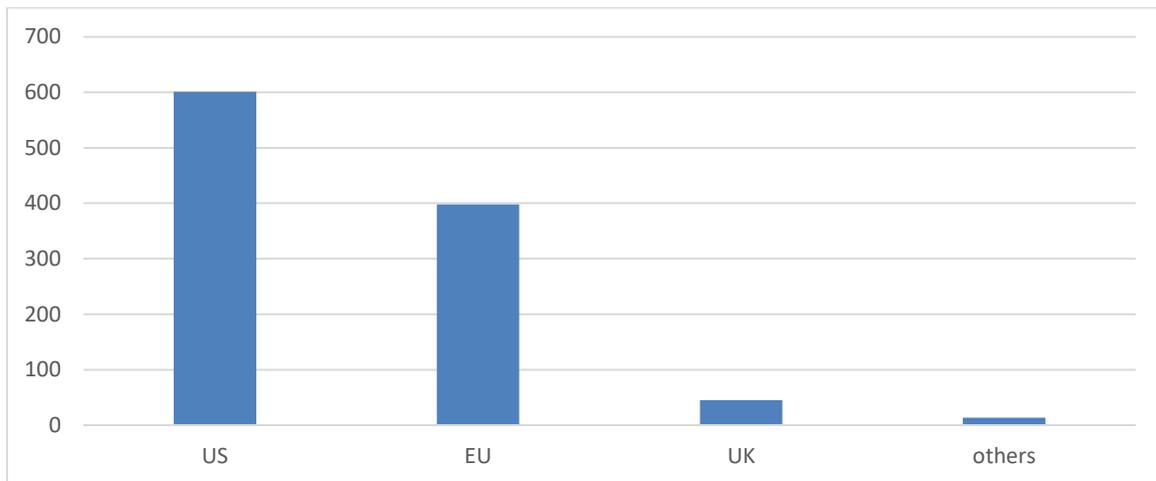
other hand, South Africa's National Space Agency (SANSA) maintains a strong partnership with NASA, working closely on various space programs, too. (GMF 2023, 41)

In military terms, South Africa is independent from foreign powers. The country has built a robust domestic defence industry, exporting \$179.3 million worth of weapons, ammunition, and military equipment in 2022 to over 70 countries, with the Gulf States and Egypt as its main buyers for instance. But a rising military cooperation with China and Russia is obvious. When recently questioned about arms sales to Russia, South African Defence Minister Thandi Modise stated that the country's arms procurement agency, Armscor, would seize "*commercial opportunities with countries subject to international treaties, including Russia,*" as they arise. Following an early African National Congress principle, South Africa has avoided formal military alliances. However, it actively participates in close interstate collaborations, such as the joint naval drills with China and Russia in the Indian Ocean in February 2023. (GMF 2023, 40-41) Unsurprisingly, this event sparked dissatisfaction among many Western nations. (Belousova 2024, 22)

Official development assistance and Loans

Overall, South Africa is not a major recipient of Official Development Assistance (ODA). In 2021, for example, the country received €601 million (56%) from the US, €398 million from the EU Global Gateway Programme, and an additional €71 million from Switzerland, Canada, and Japan combined (see Fig. 7). USAID programmes have played a crucial role in reducing HIV/AIDS prevalence, expanding access to life-saving antiretroviral treatment, and generating over 100,000 jobs since 2017. (Maroleng 2023, 3) This programme is likely to be discontinued starting in 2025.

Fig. 7: ODA to South Africa in 2021 (in Euro million)



Source: Team Europe (n.d.).

Instead of ODA China's economic influence in South Africa extends beyond trade into loans and investment. While official Chinese lending to Africa, including South Africa, has been declining—traditionally facilitated through the China Development Bank and China Exim Bank—funding is increasingly shifting to Chinese State-Owned Enterprises and private investors. Despite the decrease in loans, China has previously financed both the South African government and struggling state-owned enterprises like Eskom and Transnet. However, these loans are not unconditional, as seen when China withheld funding for Eskom over concerns about incomplete power plants. China's investment strategy in South Africa is both assertive and strategic, with an increasing role for private investors. Ultimately, China's economic engagement serves its own interests—securing resource access while strengthening diplomatic and economic ties. (Nolle / Parker 2021, 4)

One notable case is a \$2.5 billion loan from the China Development Bank to Eskom, the state-owned power utility, during Jacob Zuma's presidency. This loan raised concerns about its opaque terms. (Collocott 2019) But also under Cyril Ramaphosa's presidency, the China Development Bank extended an additional R 370 billion (\$25.8 billion) loan to support a 2018 economic stimulus package. Initially described by the government as a "gift," the loan's details were not publicly disclosed, leading to controversy. While officials defended it, arguing that the interest rate was reasonable, they refused to reveal the terms due to a confidentiality clause. (Mail&Guardian 2018) At

all, between 2000 and 2023, China provided a total of 24 loans to South Africa, amounting to \$6.9 billion, making the loans much more notable for South Africa than ODA. The loan distribution highlights a strong emphasis on energy and infrastructure. Notably, the surge in loans during 2010-2011 and 2015-2018 suggests periods of increased borrowing, likely driven by economic demands or major infrastructure developments. (Global Development Policy Center 2025) President Ramaphosa continues to defend China's lending practices to African nations, despite strong criticism from Western countries. While many in Africa hope that initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative will support the continent's Agenda 2063 and the recently implemented African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), weak industrial protections combined with China's lending model are likely to deepen the liquidity crisis in South Africa and across the continent. (Nolle / Parker 2021, 3) In contrast, the former opposition Democratic Alliance – now part of the "Government of National Unity" strongly criticised the deal, warning that it could push South Africa into a debt trap. (Mail&Guardian 2018)

But also loans from Western institutions must be mentioned. During the same period South Africa received 8 loans with the total amount of \$6.58 billion from the World Bank, 4 loans of \$2.67 billion during the COVID19 pandemic 2022-2023, only. (World Bank 2025b) Since COVID19 in 2020 China seems to be in economic crisis. The country's share of Sub-Saharan Africa's long-term external public debt declined annually from 18.9% in 2019 to 15.3% in 2023, driven by falling new disbursements and sustained high repayments. Despite reduced lending since 2020, China remains a dominant creditor, maintaining strong diplomatic and financial ties, particularly with resource-rich nations, and holding significantly more outstanding debt in the region than Western creditors. (BNP Paribas 2024) Therefore, the risk of a Chinese "debt trap" for South Africa remains but the country's change in finding "Western" creditors helps to balance the power of China.

South Africa's Economic Dependencies

To summarise, South Africa's economic dependencies are complex and multifaceted. While the country maintains strong trade and investment ties with both Western na-

tions and emerging powers like China, the nature of these relationships varies significantly. South Africa's export market is relatively diversified, with Europe remaining its largest trading partner, while China plays a significant but smaller role. However, the country continues to rely heavily on commodity exports, making it vulnerable to global market fluctuations. Western countries, particularly the Netherlands and the UK, dominate FDI in South Africa, underscoring an enduring financial dependency on Europe. Despite China's growing role, it remains a secondary investor. Chinese loans, often criticised for their opaque terms, have contributed to concerns about debt dependency but the South Africa took the last loans during COVID19 pandemic from the World Bank instead from China. In contrast, economic ties with Russia remain minimal. Military and technological collaborations with China are expanding, though Western partnerships, particularly with the US, remain influential in certain sectors. At all, no foreign power has too much economic influence in South Africa, while Europe and China may be seen as the most important players.

4. Strategies for South Africa's Future Positioning

4.1 Strengthening Pan-African Economic Integration

Rather than prioritizing alignment with global powers, South Africa could strengthen its economic and political ties within Africa, particularly through initiatives like the African Union (AU), and – first of all – the Southern African Development Community (SADC). South Africa is not only the political leader within this group of Southern African nations but also the most important electricity supplier. Additionally, South African harbours are essential for the export of raw materials from the neighbouring landlocked countries into the world. This approach would reduce dependency on external powers like Europe and China, promote regional stability, and drive economic growth. By positioning itself as a key leader in African affairs, South Africa could enhance its geopolitical influence and contribute to a more unified and self-sufficient continent.

However, there are challenges to this strategy. African markets are still developing and may not yet offer the same level of investment and trade opportunities as major global players like the EU or China. Additionally, many African economies depend on similar commodity-based exports, which could limit opportunities for economic diversification. While a stronger regional focus could boost long-term resilience, South Africa must

carefully balance its engagement with Africa and global economic partners to maximise growth and stability. Therefore, this strategy can only serve as one component of the country's broader geopolitical repositioning.

4.2 Deepening Cooperation with BRICS

A deeper engagement with BRICS, particularly China and Russia, presents both advantages and significant risks for South Africa's geopolitical and economic strategy. One of the most compelling arguments for strengthening ties with BRICS is the potential to expand trade and investment opportunities, especially through China's extensive economic engagement in Africa. The New Development Bank (NDB), established by BRICS nations, serves as an alternative to the IMF and World Bank, offering financial resources for infrastructure and development projects without the political conditions often attached to Western loans. (Belousova 2024, 12) China's approach to foreign investment—focused on industrialization and infrastructure rather than political or economic reforms—has been particularly appealing to African governments seeking greater autonomy in decision-making. Additionally, by engaging more deeply with BRICS, South Africa could strengthen its position as a key player in the Global South, reducing its dependence on Western financial institutions and enhancing its diplomatic influence in international affairs.

However, a stronger alignment with BRICS also comes with significant economic and political risks. One major concern is the risk of economic overdependence on China, particularly in manufactured goods and infrastructure investments. While China's investments can drive economic growth, the lack of financial transparency and the potential for debt dependency raise concerns, as seen in the cases of Sri Lanka and Zambia, where unsustainable Chinese loans led to financial crises. (Belhaj 2024, 7) Furthermore, Russia, despite its historical ties with the ANC, lacks strong trade or investment connections with South Africa and provides neither technological advancement nor development aid. (Belhaj 2024, 4) Additionally, Russia's global isolation due to its war in Ukraine has further reduced its economic appeal. South Africa's neutral stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine could also strain relations with Western economic partners, leading to potential consequences such as exclusion from the US African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) and a decline in European foreign direct

investment (FDI). Given that the EU remains a major trade and investment partner, distancing South Africa from the West could have significant economic repercussions.

Beyond economic concerns, BRICS itself lacks internal cohesion and does not provide strong security guarantees. While China and Russia have sought to expand BRICS influence, both nations face growing economic and geopolitical challenges. China's Belt and Road Initiative has struggled due to debt restructuring issues, and Russia's military focus on Ukraine has weakened its ability to expand its global influence, despite recent joint military exercises with South Africa. (GMF 2023, 16) Ultimately, while BRICS membership offers South Africa opportunities for economic diversification and geopolitical influence, fully aligning with China and Russia would expose the country to economic vulnerabilities and diplomatic risks.

4.3 Changing the “Camps” to the West

In contrast, a strategic realignment toward the West could bring significant economic and political advantages for South Africa. However, such a shift also entails major risks, particularly concerning relations with BRICS partners, the selective application of Western values, and the conditionality of Western economic engagement. A stronger alignment with democratic values and rule-of-law-based institutions could enhance South Africa's global reputation and foster long-term political stability. Partnering with Western allies would grant access to high-value markets, investment opportunities, and development aid, supporting economic growth. Initiatives like the Just Energy Transition Partnerships—as seen with South Africa and Indonesia—illustrate the types of agreements the West can offer, focusing on financial tools that support trade, security, energy, and technology. (GMF 2023, 16) Additionally, aligning more closely with the EU and US could lead to more favourable trade agreements, ensuring greater economic integration with some of the world's largest economies.

A stronger European focus appears to be the most viable Western strategy for South Africa. Given the country's limited economic ties with the United States and the uncertainty surrounding US foreign policy, South Africa would likely benefit more from deepening relations with the EU. Despite internal disagreements within the West, Europe remains a stable economic partner, offering investment in critical industries and infrastructure projects. Additionally, increased transparency in resource management and

the development of diversified, resilient supply chains would position South Africa as a key supplier of critical minerals for the global energy transition. (SAIIA 2023, 22) This could boost economic development, reduce inequality, and strengthen anti-corruption efforts.

However, shifting too strongly toward the West could alienate key BRICS partners, particularly China, which is South Africa's second-largest import partner. A realignment would risk damaging economic relations with Beijing, potentially leading to reduced investment and trade opportunities. Given China's position as a major infrastructure investor, cutting ties could slow down South Africa's economic development. Furthermore, China's non-interference policy makes it an attractive partner for nations that reject Western conditionality on governance and economic reforms. (Belhaj 2024, 6) Another major concern is the inconsistency of Western engagement in Africa. Historically, the West has applied a double standard in international law, selectively enforcing it when it aligns with its geopolitical interests while overlooking violations elsewhere—such as in the Gaza conflict. This perceived hypocrisy has fostered resentment in Africa, leading many to view Western institutions as unreliable and biased. Additionally, Western support for authoritarian regimes in Africa and controversial EU migration agreements have further eroded trust in Western leadership.

Moreover, Western investment often comes with political and economic conditions, which can create friction between donor countries and recipient states. Historically, reforms imposed by Western financial institutions have led to social unrest, deepening skepticism toward Western-led economic initiatives. If initiatives like Global Gateway mirror past Western strategies by imposing restrictive policies or fostering new dependencies, they will fail to attract long-term commitment from African nations. (Heldt 2023, 230) Therefore, this option also comes with significant drawbacks for South Africa.

4.4 Real “Multi-alignment” to Balance Europa and China

As global power dynamics shift, South Africa must pursue a multi-aligned foreign policy that balances relations between Europe and China. This approach is crucial for economic diversification, diplomatic flexibility, and geopolitical relevance. By carefully

managing its partnerships with these major players, South Africa can maintain strategic autonomy, avoid overdependence, and act as a bridge between geopolitical blocs. South Africa's economy is deeply interwoven with both the West and China, making a balanced strategy essential. China is South Africa's largest trading partner, providing investments in infrastructure, energy, and raw materials. Its "no-strings-attached" approach appeals to nations that seek economic growth without external political interference. However, concerns about debt dependency and China's increasing influence in Africa highlight the risks of an overreliance on Beijing.

At the same time, Europe remains a crucial economic partner, particularly as an investor, trade ally, and development partner. The EU's Global Gateway initiative offers South Africa opportunities to engage in sustainable development, technology partnerships, and trade diversification. Furthermore, aligning with Europe's emphasis on democracy, transparency, and good governance supports South Africa's domestic priorities, such as combating corruption and strengthening the rule of law. By maintaining strong relations with both China and Europe, South Africa ensures economic resilience and negotiating power, reducing its vulnerability to external pressures from any single global power.

While officially non-aligned, South Africa's foreign policy increasingly should reflect a nuanced multi-alignment strategy. As a key voice in the Global South, South Africa can leverage its relationships with multiple blocs to advance its own interests. The government's push for a "transformation of the Global Order from one based on power to one based on rules" may reflect concerns that the Western-led liberal order applies its principles inconsistently. South Africa, therefore, can advocate for reforming multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and Bretton Woods system to better represent emerging economies. (GMF 2023, 41)

However, South Africa's current stance on global conflicts raises questions about its non-alignment. Its refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while simultaneously criticizing Western foreign policy, has led some observers to label its approach as "misguided nostalgia" rather than realpolitik. (Seekings / Saunders 2022, 118-120) Or, as McKaiser and Polakow-Suransky (2022) emphasised: *"[Their] loyalties and perceived historical debts have blinded South Africa's leaders to the reality of what contemporary Russia has become. Pretoria has failed to recognise that Putin's Russia is not the anti-imperialist patron of liberation movements that it once adored; it is an*

overtly imperialist state trying to reconstitute its old empire and has become the leading global patron of far-right white nationalist parties.” This suggests that South Africa must refine its multi-alignment approach, ensuring it does not appear biased toward any single power.

A truly balanced foreign policy requires South Africa to engage with both China and Europe on equal terms. While China’s economic influence is undeniable, its indirect support for Russia’s war in Ukraine raises ethical concerns that South Africa cannot ignore. Similarly, South Africa must recognise that Europe, despite its inconsistencies, remains a reliable partner for trade, investment, and governance cooperation. Therefore, balancing Europe and China requires a sophisticated diplomatic strategy. Both sides may, in the long run, demand greater loyalty, forcing South Africa to navigate tensions carefully. The challenge lies in maintaining strong economic ties with China, while also ensuring that European partnerships remain robust. Additionally, balancing both relationships could limit deep commitments, reducing long-term strategic benefits in areas such as technology transfer and security cooperation. However, the benefits of multi-alignment outweigh these risks. By positioning itself as a mediator between geopolitical blocs, South Africa can strengthen its diplomatic influence, enhancing its economic flexibility, and reinforces its role as a key player in shaping the future global order. At all, South Africa cannot afford to fully align with either the West or China. Instead, it must embrace a balanced, pragmatic approach, strengthening its economic ties with both partners while maintaining diplomatic independence. By refining its multi-alignment strategy, South Africa can secure greater economic resilience, geopolitical relevance, and a stronger role in global governance.

5. Conclusion

While all four strategies have their advantages and drawbacks, a combination of balancing Europe and China while strengthening African integration could be the most sustainable option for future South Africa. This would ensure diversification, regional leadership, and reduced external dependence. However, much depends on South Africa’s domestic priorities and political will. To regain its position as the undisputed leader in Southern Africa, South Africa must first address its internal issues. These

include problems such as corruption, deficits in the democratic system, and social inequality. Only then will a foreign policy realignment on a global scale be possible.

Then South Africa—as a modern "swing state"—can maintain its independence by successfully balancing the superpowers relevant to the country. While South Africa is currently more economically connected to the EU but politically stronger aligned with the BRICS states, particularly China and Russia, a realignment should take place—one that strengthens South Africa's democracy, rule of law, economic development, and independence. In times when autocracy is rising not only in Russia and China but also in the US countries like South Africa—and other swing states—could cooperate more with Europe to support democratic systems in the world and re-building the previous Western-Style international order to a new multipolar international order. At the moment, the deep South African—Russian relations are problematic as they sideline South Africa from the perspective of Western states, mainly Europe.

To be successful, concerns about post-colonial attitudes from the West should not obstruct collaboration with these nations. But also, Western countries must change their behaviour to the modern Swing States. To support such a balanced geopolitical positioning of South Africa the US and Europe must refrain from using binary "us or them" language respective narratives. Framing contemporary geopolitics as a struggle between autocracy and democracy is counterproductive, as it overlooks the nuanced strategic interests of swing states and assumes the West has the legitimacy to define global divisions in normative terms. As is well known also in Europe, although swing states recognise the risks associated with Russian and Chinese ambitions, they do not view the US and Europe as credible global defenders of national sovereignty. Swing states like South Africa typically advocate for the reform of existing international institutions rather than a complete overhaul of the post-1945 order. They also oppose unilateralism, whether from the US or China. (GMF 2023, 50) A clear and consistent commitment to these principles could serve as the foundation for Western allies' engagement with these nations.

Economic pragmatism and a more centrist cabinet could pave the way for a more balanced and moderate South African foreign policy. In concrete, the ANC should reassess its longstanding foreign policy principles and prioritise reform over revisionism. Finally, South African politicians must understand that South Africa is not only part of

the Global South – BRICS, developing country etc. – but at the same time also a Western style democracy. That enables the country to be a moderator between East and West, autocracies and democracies, the Global South and the Global North.

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