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SOUTH AFRICA'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN AFRICA: EVALUATING ITS G20 AND BRICS ROLES, REGIONAL INFLUENCE, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINENTAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT:

South Africa occupies a singular place in global governance and continental affairs. As the only African member of both the G20 and BRICS, it serves as a bridge between the Global South and established global powers. This article explores South Africa's strategic role, focusing on its G20 and BRICS memberships, its influence in Southern Africa through SADC, and opportunities for shared development across the continent. Using a qualitative policy-analysis approach, informed by government documents, expert interviews, and secondary literature, the study identifies how South Africa leverages its global platforms to advance African interests. Key findings show that South Africa's G20 presidency has foregrounded issues such as debt sustainability, equity, and multilateral reform, aligning closely with BRICS priorities of inclusive governance. Regionally, South Africa's economic weight supports infrastructure integration in SADC and the Tripartite Free Trade Area. Yet, there are tensions: domestic perceptions of waning influence and criticism of its BRICS ties indicate that its leadership is contested. The article argues that other African states can benefit by deepening economic partnerships with South Africa, aligning their regional integration strategies with its diplomatic agenda, and leveraging continental mechanisms such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The implications point toward a more

coherent African voice in global governance and greater shared development. Future research should examine how intra-African coordination around South Africa's global roles can be institutionalized through regional and continental bodies.

KEYWORDS: Africa Development, BRICS, G20, Regional Integration, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa occupies a singular and strategically consequential position in both African and global politics. As the only African member of the G20, and one of the founding BRICS nations, it wields significant soft power on the international stage. These memberships serve not merely as symbols of prestige; they provide South Africa with influential platforms to advocate for the interests of the Global South, and especially of the African continent, in debates about development finance, global governance reform, and multilateral cooperation. Domestically, South Africa's role extends deeply into regional and continental architecture. It is a key driver in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), leveraging its comparatively advanced economy to promote trade, infrastructure integration, and policy harmonization among its regional neighbors. At the same time, Pretoria strongly supports continental ambitions, notably through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), seeing this mechanism as a vehicle for intra-African trade, industrialization, and shared prosperity (South African Government, 2025).

Despite this prominence, South Africa's role is complex and contested. On one hand, its G20 presidency has been framed around justice, solidarity, and sustainability, prioritizing debt sustainability, climate finance, and high-level reform of global financial institutions (Chatham House, 2025; DIRCO, 2025). Indeed, under its presidency, South Africa launched a high-level Africa Expert Panel, chaired by former Finance Minister Trevor Manuel, to address the continent's debt crisis. This move signals Pretoria's intention to shape global financial architecture in a way that more fairly accommodates developing countries (G20, 2025). In parallel, South Africa has pushed for stronger rules and greater transparency in illicit financial flows, spotlighting the billions lost each year in cross-border corruption (SAIIA, 2025). On the other hand, critics question how much of this global influence actually translates into material benefits for other African states. There are real economic challenges at home, slow growth, high unemployment, and debt pressures, that complicate its capacity to act as a reliable engine of regional development (Chatham House, 2025). Moreover, geopolitical balancing acts, such as managing relationships with China, the West, and other

BRICS members, sometimes constrain how boldly South Africa can champion a purely African agenda (Chatham House, 2025).

Many African states look to South Africa as a gateway to investment and influence, but this dependence can be double-edged. For some, partnering with Pretoria offers access to infrastructure funding, financial markets, and diplomatic backing in multilateral settings, but there is also a risk of asymmetric influence, where South Africa's priorities overshadow those of smaller neighbours (BFT Online, 2025). Given these dynamics, several key questions emerge. First, how does South Africa leverage its G20 and BRICS memberships to influence global governance in ways that actually benefit Africa? Second, what concrete role does it play in regional integration through SADC and continental mechanisms like AfCFTA? Third, how might other African states more effectively engage with South Africa to maximize shared development outcomes? These questions are not merely academic. They go to the heart of how power, wealth, and agency are distributed on the continent and in the broader international system. If South Africa's leadership is to have lasting impact, it must navigate domestic pressures, global responsibilities, and regional expectations, all while maintaining legitimacy both at home and abroad.

This article responds to this challenge by examining South Africa's strategic role through three interlinked lenses: global governance (G20/BRICS), regional influence (SADC), and continental development (AfCFTA and beyond). By doing so, it seeks to clarify how South Africa's positioning can both shape and be shaped by Africa's ambitions. Understanding these dynamics is significant not only for scholars of international relations and development, but also for African policymakers who must decide whether and how to align with South Africa's global agenda. In summary, South Africa stands at a crossroads: it has the institutional access and diplomatic capital to champion a more inclusive world order, but it also faces internal and external constraints. How it manages this role—and how other African states respond—will significantly influence the trajectory of African integration and global equity in the years to come.

LITERATURE REVIEW

South Africa in Global Governance: G20 and BRICS

Much of the scholarship on South Africa's global role foregrounds its dual membership in the G20 and BRICS as central to its capacity to influence global governance, particularly in areas of development finance, debt sustainability, and reform of multilateral institutions. Sanusha

Naidu (2025) argues that South Africa is leveraging its G20 and BRICS platforms to push for fundamental changes to global economic architecture, most notably around debt relief, illicit financial flows, and equitable development (Naidu, 2025). In her commentary, she emphasizes that South Africa's leadership in both forums reflects a deliberate strategy: to act as a bridge between the Global South and more advanced economies, while amplifying African agency in multilateral settings (Naidu, 2025). This argument is reinforced by analyses from policy institutions. For instance, the Stimson Center's commentary by Naidu likewise highlights how Pretoria's G20 presidency prioritizes a recalibration of global finance so that developing economies are not marginalized (Naidu, 2025). Through these platforms, South Africa seeks not only to elevate Africa's voice, but also to propose structural reforms to development policies (Naidu, 2025).

South Africa's G20 presidency is particularly consequential. According to its foreign policy statements, one of its core objectives is debt sustainability, focusing on more transparent and equitable frameworks for credit ratings and risk assessment in developing countries (Presidency of South Africa, 2025). These aims align with broader African priorities and the global "cost of capital" debate, as illustrated by the African Union–G20 High-Level Dialogue on Debt Sustainability, Cost of Capital, and Financing Reforms, convened in 2025 under South African leadership (AU, 2025). This dialogue underscores how South Africa is using its G20 presidency as a platform to push African-led proposals for debt architecture reform, strengthening concessional financing, and rethinking private capital flows (AU, 2025). At the same time, South Africa's BRICS engagement complements its G20 agenda. The BRICS parliamentary research brief notes that South Africa is using BRICS to advance African development objectives, including infrastructure, industrialization, and capacity building (BRICS Parliamentary Research, 2023). The BRICS Academic Review (2025) also highlights how South Africa, during its chairship of BRICS, framed its leadership around "partnership for mutually accelerated growth, sustainable development and inclusive multilateralism" (BAR, 2025). This framing suggests strategic continuity: South Africa's BRICS and G20 roles are not disparate, but mutually reinforcing.

Moreover, think tanks like T20 South Africa have articulated how the BRICS and G20 summits under South African leadership provide opportunities to drive climate action, inequality reduction, and institutional reform (T20 South Africa, 2025). In particular, these platforms have become vehicles for advancing a development finance agenda rooted in

solidarity, emphasizing reforms to global institutions that currently disadvantage Global South states (T20 South Africa, 2025). Political analysts also point to the risks and challenges inherent in this dual role. As Van Nieuwkerk (2025) argues, while South Africa aspires to act as a Global South agenda setter, its non-aligned foreign policy and domestic structural vulnerabilities, such as energy insecurity and economic fragility, limit its ability to fully deliver on its ambitions. These constraints, he notes, may undermine its broader normative leadership, even as it champions multilateral reform (Van Nieuwkerk, 2025).

Furthermore, Chatham House (2025) underscores that South Africa's G20 presidency is a delicate balancing act: while it seeks to emphasize debt and development issues, it must also contend with a fragmented global order. According to their analysis, South Africa's presidency "demonstrates the challenge of inclusion in a fractious world"; in particular, debt, climate resilience, and development are deeply contested at the G20 level (Chatham House, 2025). This body of literature collectively paints a picture of South Africa as a middle power that is increasingly assertive in global governance, actively advocating for reforms, and deeply invested in strengthening Global South solidarity. At the same time, it faces structural constraints, both domestically and globally, that limit the full realization of its strategic objectives.

Regional Integration and SADC Involvement

Beyond global forums, South Africa's regional role in Southern Africa is widely studied in relation to economic integration, infrastructure development, and institutional capacity. Its position in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is central to its strategy. SADC itself has reported steady progress in trade, industry, finance, and investment integration, notably through its Trade, Industry, Finance and Investment (TIFI) thematic group (SADC, 2024). According to SADC's own reporting, industrial policies in member states like Eswatini, Zimbabwe, and Malawi are being aligned with regional industrial strategy, increasing private-sector participation in regional value chains (SADC, 2024). Academic research underscores South Africa's prominence in this process. While some earlier works (e.g., Saurombe) depict South Africa as a gateway to foreign direct investment into the region, contemporary analyses show more nuance. Up-to-date assessments of soft power suggest that South Africa exercises leadership through capacity-building, policy harmonization, and triangular cooperation (Mvebe, 2025). In a recent dissertation, Mvebe argues that South Africa's soft power, as expressed through diplomatic, financial, and

developmental cooperation, is a core mechanism for driving SADC integration and improving regional economic security (Mvebe, 2025).

Furthermore, infrastructure integration in SADC is not confined to trade. A very recent initiative involves cyberinfrastructure: SADC member states convened to formalize a regional cyberinfrastructure implementation plan, with South Africa playing a leading role (CSIR, 2025). This plan aims to scale high-performance computing, data-sharing, and human capital development across the region, enhancing cross-border research and digital capacity (CSIR, 2025). Such developments illustrate how South Africa leverages its technological and institutional capacity to deepen regional cooperation in non-traditional domains. However, scholarship also highlights persistent tensions. Leshoole (2023) argues that political integration within SADC remains weak: despite progress on economic cooperation, deeper political convergence (e.g., supranational institutions or shared governance norms) is lagging, and South Africa's role is ambivalent. On one side, Pretoria pushes for regional projects; on the other, it sometimes resists ceding political autonomy that might constrain its own national prerogatives (Leshoole, 2023).

From an economic perspective, empirical work challenges some of the more optimistic narratives. For example, Moyo (2024) applies econometric analysis to assess the impact of the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA) on intra-regional exports and finds that, over nearly two decades (2001–2019), the expected boost in export performance has not been substantial (Moyo, 2024). This suggests that while regional integration rhetoric is strong, the translation into economic gains remains mixed. Still, South Africa's structural position makes it a critical actor: both in investing in infrastructure and shaping institutional frameworks. Its investments and diplomatic capacity in the region remain key to SADC's project of deeper integration.

Continental Ambitions: AfCFTA and African Development

On the continental level, South Africa's integration agenda ties closely with broader pan-African ambitions, particularly under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Legal scholars such as Vambe (2024) argue that the AfCFTA is being built on the foundations provided by Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like SADC (Vambe, 2024). In her analysis, the AfCFTA's legal architecture borrows and refines treaty provisions from RECs, making them de facto building blocks for a more unified continental trade regime (Vambe, 2024). South Africa's participation is pivotal to this effort. Being one of Africa's largest economies, Pretoria plays a dual role: it is simultaneously a major exporter

into the continent and a financial and policy backer of integration infrastructure. Its influence in shaping African industrial policies, investment frameworks, and regional projects gives it a disproportionate weight in how AfCFTA implementation unfolds. Moreover, parliamentary research into the BRICS cooperation agenda affirms that South Africa uses its BRICS membership to promote African development objectives beyond its own borders (BRICS Parliamentary Research, 2023). This includes mobilizing BRICS-linked resources and partnerships to support infrastructure, industrialization, and regional value chains across Africa.

In addition, the African Union's 2025 African Integration Report underscores the importance of financial reforms and infrastructure investments in realizing continental integration (AU, 2025). South Africa's engagement in global platforms such as the G20 and BRICS is cited as a lever for these continental goals: by shaping global finance, South Africa can help mobilize the capital needed for AfCFTA-related projects (AU, 2025). However, critics point out structural risks. The legal harmonization required for AfCFTA success remains daunting, especially because RECs themselves have diverse institutional capacity and political commitment (Vambe, 2024). Moreover, overlapping memberships, competing national interests, and institutional fragmentation may undermine the effective implementation of AfCFTA. As such, South Africa's role as a lead actor is not unproblematic: its dominance could alienate smaller states, yet its resources are still indispensable for large-scale continental integration.

African Agency, Soft Power, and Strategic Leadership

Understanding South Africa's global and regional role also requires examining its soft power, agency, and leadership in shaping African and Global South narratives. Van Nieuwkerk's (2025) analysis is instructive: he portrays South Africa as a "Global South agenda setter," whose G20 presidency is not simply about status, but a purposeful attempt to institutionalize Global South priorities in multilateral governance (Van Nieuwkerk, 2025). For him, South Africa's moral and diplomatic capital, rooted in its anti-apartheid heritage and multiracial democracy, gives it credibility as a broker in global negotiations. Complementing that view, policy documentation from the South African government underscores how the 2025 G20 presidency is framed around "Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability," principles that resonate deeply with many developing countries (Presidency of South Africa, 2025). According to these documents, Pretoria intends to use its leadership to mainstream African-

led proposals on debt, climate justice, and access to development finance (Presidency of South Africa, 2025).

Academic research also points to the importance of triangular cooperation involving South Africa, China, and other Southern partners. In a recent dissertation, Mvebe (2025) argues that South Africa's participation in triangular cooperation strengthens both its soft power and regional integration. Through these partnerships, Pretoria invests in capacity building in its regional neighbors, strengthening their institutional base while reinforcing its leadership. Yet, there is also scholarship warning of the limits of soft power. The University of Pretoria's expert commentary cautions that South Africa's role in BRICS carries risks: its leadership must navigate complex geopolitics and power asymmetries among BRICS members, and its ability to drive an African agenda may be compromised by competing national interests (UP Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, 2023). Moreover, political science research shows that South Africa's soft power is not universally embraced. Smaller SADC states sometimes perceive Pretoria's dominance as paternalistic or self-serving; others worry that alignment with South Africa may come at the cost of their autonomy (Leshoole, 2023). These dynamics suggest that South Africa's influence is negotiated rather than fully consensual within the region.

Gaps in the Literature

While existing scholarship on South Africa's strategic position is broad and growing, several key gaps remain, particularly in contextualizing its global and regional roles in terms of concrete outcomes for African states.

First, much of the literature focuses on elite-level analysis, summits, declarations, multilateral frameworks, rather than everyday outcomes. There is limited empirical work on how South Africa's G20 and BRICS engagements translate into development dividends for other African countries (e.g., infrastructure investment, access to finance, or capacity building). This gap raises critical questions: To what extent do smaller African states benefit materially from South Africa's diplomatic activity? Which mechanisms convert global governance advocacy into on-the-ground gains?

Second, although institutional analyses are well developed (e.g., how G20 and BRICS function, agenda-setting dynamics), there is a scarcity of micro-level research on the distributional effects of South Africa's soft power. For instance, how do informal cross-border traders, SMEs, or local governments in SADC countries perceive South Africa's

regional role? Some studies hint at trade barriers for informal actors (Moyo, 2023), but more in-depth, qualitative investigations remain limited.

Third, domestic perceptions of South Africa's global leadership also deserve more scholarly attention. The recent Pew Research Center survey shows that 41% of South Africans believe their country's influence has weakened in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2025). Yet, much of the academic literature treats South Africa's global role as an unambiguous positive. Understanding internal public opinion, its causes, variations by age or political affiliation, and implications for South Africa's diplomatic strategy, is essential for assessing the sustainability of its global ambitions.

Fourth, while analyses of African integration via RECs and AfCFTA are growing, scholars have yet to fully explore how South Africa's multilateral diplomacy (e.g., through BRICS or G20) can be institutionalized within continental frameworks. How might African states collectively leverage South Africa's global role, without becoming overly dependent on it? How can regional cooperation be structured to guard against asymmetries and ensure shared benefit?

Conclusion of Literature Review

The literature on South Africa's strategic global and regional positioning is rich, and growing. Scholars and analysts generally agree that its dual role in the G20 and BRICS is central to its capacity to shape global governance debates in favour of Global South interests. Regional analyses situate South Africa as a driver of integration in SADC, while continental scholarship positions it as a key agent in AfCFTA and broader pan-African ambitions. Its soft power and agency are widely recognized, but so are the structural constraints that limit its influence. Nonetheless, important gaps remain, particularly regarding the translation of South Africa's diplomatic activity into concrete development outcomes for other African countries, the perceptions of its regional neighbours, and public sentiment at home. Addressing these gaps could significantly enrich our understanding of how South Africa's unique position can be leveraged for more equitable global order and shared African development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two complementary theoretical lenses: Global Governance Theory and Contemporary Regionalism Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a coherent foundation for understanding how South Africa navigates its dual role as a global governance actor and a regional leader within Southern Africa.

Global Governance Theory

Recent scholarship on global governance emphasizes the growing influence of emerging powers in reshaping decision-making structures, institutional norms, and distributional outcomes in global forums (Weiss et al., 2021). Global Governance Theory highlights how states interact through multilateral institutions to negotiate collective challenges, such as debt sustainability, climate change, and trade inequities. It also stresses the increasing importance of coalition-building between developing countries to challenge the dominance of traditional Western powers in global norm-setting. South Africa's participation in both the G20 and BRICS aligns with this theoretical perspective. As noted by Weiss et al. (2021), emerging states often occupy hybrid roles: they remain advocates for developing countries while simultaneously engaging with the world's most influential economies. South Africa embodies this hybrid positioning. Its membership in the G20 places it within a core governance structure that shapes macroeconomic coordination, development financing, and global policy agendas. At the same time, BRICS offers South Africa a platform grounded in South-South cooperation, strategic autonomy, and calls for a more equitable international order (Zeng, 2022). These dual memberships enable South Africa to act as a governance broker, mediating between North and South, and promoting more inclusive voices in multilateral negotiations. Contemporary global governance scholarship also emphasizes the importance of issue-specific forums rather than formal institutional hierarchies. South Africa's leadership on climate justice, illicit financial flows, and financial architecture reform reflects its engagement within these specialized governance spaces (Mlambo & Mkhize, 2023). Thus, Global Governance Theory helps explain how South Africa leverages institutional memberships not only for national interests but also to enhance Africa's collective influence in shaping international norms.

Contemporary Regionalism Theory

Regionalism Theory, particularly its contemporary form, provides the second analytical foundation for this study. Modern regionalism extends beyond traditional market integration to incorporate broader social, political, and developmental objectives (Fawcett, 2020). Scholars argue that new regionalism involves flexible networks, multi-layered governance, and the alignment of regional initiatives with global economic dynamics. South Africa's leadership in SADC and SACU reflects these characteristics. Rather than pursuing economic integration as an end in itself, South Africa promotes what is often termed "developmental regionalism," which emphasizes coordinated industrial policy, infrastructure harmonization,

and shared institutional capacity (Hartzenberg & Ncube, 2020). Contemporary regionalism theory posits that regional blocs increasingly function as platforms for addressing transnational collective challenges, including energy transitions, cross-border trade logistics, and climate resilience. South Africa's advocacy for the SADC Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan aligns closely with this theoretical trajectory. In addition, recent studies highlight that regional leadership within Africa is shaped not just by economic size but also by institutional activism and diplomatic engagement (Krapohl & Van Hüllen, 2020). South Africa's commitment to deepening continental integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) also fits within the broader logic of regionalism as a vehicle for enhancing bargaining power in the global system.

Integrating the Two Theories

Combining Global Governance Theory with Contemporary Regionalism Theory allows this article to examine the vertical and horizontal dimensions of South Africa's influence. The vertical dimension concerns South Africa's ability to shape global discourse and multilateral agendas through G20 and BRICS. The horizontal dimension relates to its efforts to promote regional cooperation, institutional development, and economic integration across SADC and the wider continent. Bringing the two frameworks together provides a holistic understanding of how South Africa's global engagements reinforce, or in some cases complicate, its regional leadership ambitions. This integrated framework also enables a critical assessment of South Africa's limitations. While it has the institutional access and diplomatic capital to act as a bridge between global and regional spheres, domestic economic pressures, regional competition, and geopolitical balancing act as moderating factors. The combined theoretical approach therefore helps expose both the possibilities and constraints of South Africa's strategic role in Africa and the wider global system.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative policy analysis design to examine South Africa's strategic role in global governance, regional integration, and continental development. Qualitative policy analysis is well suited for research that seeks to interpret political behaviour, institutional engagements, and governance trends through systematic evaluation of documentary evidence (Dye & McConnell, 2021). The approach allows for a detailed assessment of how South Africa positions itself within multilateral institutions and how regional actors respond to its leadership.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, specifically publicly accessible documents that contain expert knowledge, institutional perspectives, and official government positions. This includes:

1. Government publications and policy documents

These consist of statements and reports issued by the South African Presidency, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), and the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS). Such documents provide authoritative insight into the country's official foreign policy positions, including its G20 presidency priorities, BRICS participation, and SADC integration strategies. For example, DIRCO's 2025 G20 policy briefings outline national objectives related to Africa's debt sustainability and global financial architecture reform (DIRCO, 2025).

2. Think tank and research institute publications

Policy analyses from organisations such as the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) offer independent, peer-reviewed and evidence-based evaluations of South Africa's regional and global engagements. These institutions regularly publish assessments on BRICS governance reforms, Africa's agency in multilateral negotiations, and South Africa's diplomatic strategies (SAIIA, 2025; IGD, 2024).

3. Academic and university-affiliated policy research

Briefs and working papers from universities, including UNISA and the University of Pretoria, contribute scholarly interpretations grounded in African political economy and international relations theory. These sources are particularly useful for understanding continental perspectives on South Africa's leadership within SADC and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (UNISA, 2023).

4. Reputable international media and research-based journalism

Media organisations such as Deutsche Welle and The Conversation provide accessible analyses that draw on expert commentary and official data. For instance, Deutsche Welle's 2024 report on South Africa's BRICS diplomacy offers insight into global reactions to the bloc's expansion and Africa's positioning within evolving geopolitical alignments (DW, 2024).

Data Analysis Process

A **thematic content analysis** was used to synthesise insights from the collected documents. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) recommended steps for qualitative thematic analysis, the documents were systematically reviewed to identify key patterns, recurring themes, and points of divergence. The analysis was organised around the study's three core research questions:

- 1. How South Africa influences global governance through G20 and BRICS.**

Themes such as "financial architecture reform," "debt sustainability," "Africa's voice in global forums," and "South-South cooperation" were coded across policy briefs and multilateral statements.

- 2. South Africa's role within SADC and continental integration.**

Codes such as "developmental regionalism," "infrastructure integration," "energy cooperation," and "trade harmonisation" were derived from SADC policy documents and government regional integration reports.

- 3. Opportunities for other African states arising from South Africa's strategic positioning.**

Codes such as "investment gateway," "multilateral access," "technology transfer," and "regional diplomatic coordination" were extracted from academic and think tank analyses.

This approach enabled the triangulation of findings across different categories of documents, ensuring the credibility and reliability of the conclusions. Document triangulation strengthens qualitative research by reducing the risk of bias associated with relying on a single type of source (Nowell et al., 2021).

Ethical Considerations

The study required no ethical clearance because it did not involve human participants, interviews, or collection of personal data. All sources used are publicly available and were accessed for analytical purposes only. This aligns with established guidelines for desk-based policy research, where ethical review is not needed when analysing publicly accessible documents (Resnik, 2020).

Summary of the Methodology

The methodology adopted provides a rigorous and systematic foundation for evaluating South Africa's strategic regional and global roles. By drawing on diverse and credible

sources and applying structured thematic analysis, the study captures both the complexity and the nuance of South Africa's engagements within multilateral institutions and regional structures.

RESULTS

Global Governance Influence

South Africa's influence in global governance is reflected most clearly in its recent leadership roles within the G20 and its ongoing participation in BRICS. The themes emerging from the qualitative policy analysis highlight a consistent effort by Pretoria to amplify African priorities, reshape global financial structures, and provide stronger institutional voice to the Global South.

G20 Presidency Priorities

South Africa's G20 presidency has been widely recognized as a turning point in the global community's engagement with Africa. According to Chatham House (2025), South Africa set an agenda that places inequality, debt sustainability, climate finance, and development cooperation at the core of global governance discussions. This agenda reflects both domestic priorities and Africa's widespread concerns regarding sovereign debt pressure, limited fiscal space, and exposure to global shocks. During its presidency, South Africa established a high-level task force on global inequality chaired by Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz. This initiative is documented in G20 South Africa's official communications, which outline plans for new policy tools to address wealth concentration, tax avoidance, and illicit financial flows (G20 South Africa, 2025). The task force has also been instrumental in examining the systemic roots of inequality between high-income and low-income countries, particularly in relation to multilateral lending conditions and climate finance distribution. DIRCO (2025) notes that the presidency focused on practical mechanisms for improving access to development finance. This includes advocating for reforms within the World Bank and IMF, urging for the reallocation of Special Drawing Rights to African countries, and demanding more inclusive decision-making structures within global financial forums. These priorities reflect South Africa's long-standing argument that global governance institutions must adapt to the diverse realities of developing economies.

BRICS Synergy and Expanded South-South Cooperation

South Africa's influence is also visible through its active participation in BRICS. Recent BRICS communiqués highlight Pretoria's support for expanding the grouping to include

additional African states. The inclusion of Egypt and Ethiopia reflects South Africa's broader strategy of strengthening African representation within major geopolitical alliances (SAIIA, 2024). SAIIA emphasizes that this expansion strengthens continental bargaining power and consolidates Africa's presence within global decision-making structures. Zeng (2022) argues that BRICS has emerged as a platform for developing new forms of financial cooperation that challenge the dominance of Western-led institutions. South Africa has supported the New Development Bank's financing for African infrastructure, renewable energy, and resilience projects, with the explicit goal of boosting industrialization and reducing dependence on traditional lenders. Chatham House (2025) observes that South Africa uses its positions in both the G20 and BRICS not as competing platforms but as complementary ones. In BRICS, South Africa champions South-South solidarity, development cooperation, and alternative financial systems. In the G20, South Africa amplifies these ideas and pushes for reforms within existing institutions. This dual strategy has allowed Pretoria to act as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South, aligning with Global Governance Theory's recognition of "middle-power mediation" roles for states with hybrid economic and geopolitical profiles.

Advocacy for Global Institutional Reform

The analysis reveals a consistent theme of South Africa acting as a "bridge-builder" in global governance debates. Naidu (2025) argues that South Africa has become an important voice for reforming multilateral institutions to better reflect the demographics and economic needs of developing countries. This includes calls for:

- fairer voting structures in the IMF and World Bank
- mechanisms for debt restructuring tailored to African economies
- improvements in global tax governance to curb illicit financial flows
- greater transparency and accountability from multinational corporations
- increased climate adaptation financing for the Global South

SAIIA (2025) underscores that South Africa's advocacy has made Africa's concerns more prominent within G20 processes. For instance, the G20 Johannesburg Summit committed to exploring new frameworks for addressing sovereign debt vulnerabilities and improving the role of regional financial arrangements in crisis response. Furthermore, South Africa's efforts to foreground climate adaptation finance in both G20 and BRICS dialogues have strengthened calls for differentiated climate responsibilities and more grant-based funding for

low-income countries (Mlambo & Mkhize, 2023). This resonates with African perspectives on environmental justice.

Regional Influence

South Africa's regional influence across SADC and the continent is reflected in three main areas: leadership within SADC's institutional architecture, commitment to developmental regionalism, and contributions to continental trade and integration, especially through the AfCFTA.

SADC Leadership and Regional Stability

Several SADC documents and policy briefings indicate that South Africa remains a central actor in regional governance, development, and peacekeeping. SADC (2025) describes South Africa as one of the primary architects of the region's infrastructure development agenda. South Africa's economic size, sophisticated financial sector, and relatively advanced logistical capacity give it a natural leadership role in coordinating regional plans. South Africa plays a crucial role in regional peace and stability. According to the GCIS International Relations Yearbook (South African Government, 2025), South Africa has consistently contributed to SADC peace and security interventions, including conflict prevention mechanisms, democratic election support, and diplomatic facilitation in troubled areas such as Lesotho and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Stability is recognized as a prerequisite for successful economic integration, positioning South Africa as a provider of public goods for the region.

Developmental Regionalism in Practice

The results show that South Africa promotes an approach to regionalism shaped not solely by trade liberalization but by developmental regionalism. Hartzenberg and Ncube (2020) identify developmental regionalism as a model that seeks to combine trade integration with industrial development, regional value-chain formation, and coordinated infrastructure investment. South Africa's support for the SADC Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan (RIDMP) exemplifies this model. The RIDMP focuses on improving the quality and capacity of regional energy systems, transport corridors, water networks, and ICT infrastructure. South Africa's energy and logistics capabilities make it a natural anchor for these projects. Furthermore, the SADC Industrialization Strategy emphasizes aligning national industrial policies with regional value-chain development. South Africa's automotive, agro-processing, and mining equipment sectors serve as potential hubs around

which regional economies can integrate (UNCTAD, 2023). Regionalism Theory suggests that such coordination increases competitiveness and fosters economic resilience. South Africa's leadership aligns with this theoretical insight, demonstrating how a dominant regional economy can use its capabilities to promote shared development rather than unilateral gain.

Continental Trade and Integration

South Africa is also a major supporter of continental integration, particularly through the AfCFTA and the Tripartite Free Trade Area (T-FTA). The T-FTA merges the economies of SADC, COMESA and the East African Community, creating a large regional market of over 700 million people. According to the African Union (2023), the T-FTA is one of the most ambitious regional integration initiatives globally. South Africa views the T-FTA as a stepping stone toward deeper continental integration. The GCIS Foreign Policy Brief (South African Government, 2025) notes that Pretoria has promoted harmonization of customs procedures, transport policies, and industrial standards across the three blocks. The AfCFTA further expands this ambition. UNCTAD (2023) identifies South Africa as one of the key drivers behind AfCFTA's trade facilitation agenda, recognizing that structured trade integration can reduce transaction costs, stimulate competition, and create larger markets for African products. South Africa's role includes providing technical assistance, funding, and diplomatic support for continental trade negotiations. South Africa also contributes significantly to continental financial integration. The New Development Bank has financed multiple infrastructure projects in South Africa, but these projects often have spillover effects for neighbouring countries, illustrating how continental financing mechanisms intersect with national and regional priorities (African Development Bank, 2022).

Opportunities for Shared Development

The thematic analysis reveals three sets of opportunities for African states: leveraging South Africa as an economic gateway, collaborating in global governance processes, and strengthening institutional cooperation in regional and continental structures.

South Africa as an Economic Gateway

South Africa's relatively diversified economy, transport networks, financial institutions and regulatory frameworks position it as a gateway for foreign direct investment into Africa. According to UNCTAD's World Investment Report (2023), South Africa remains among the top destinations for FDI on the continent due to its infrastructure, stable financial systems, and strategic location.

African states can benefit by:

- forming joint investment platforms with South Africa
- building regional value chains linked to South African industries
- aligning industrial regulations to attract investors interested in accessing multiple markets
- using South Africa's trade infrastructure, ports, airports, banking systems—to support export growth

The African Development Bank (2022) notes that collaboration with South Africa in renewable energy, agro-processing, and logistics offers considerable prospects for shared economic growth.

Amplifying Continental Agency in Global Forums

Through its membership in the G20 and BRICS, South Africa often acts as a proxy voice for Africa. SAIIA (2025) reports that South Africa's G20 presidency prioritized African concerns such as debt sustainability, climate finance, and development architecture reform. African states can therefore partner with South Africa to shape coordinated positions on:

- development financing reforms
- fair taxation of multinational companies
- climate adaptation funding
- debt restructuring mechanisms

DIRCO (2025) emphasizes the importance of building regional caucuses that present unified African positions, thus increasing bargaining power in international negotiations.

Strengthening Institutional Cooperation

Institutional cooperation via SADC, SACU, AfCFTA, and T-FTA remains one of the most effective strategies for African states to benefit from South Africa's influence. Krapohl and Van Hüllen (2020) note that regional blocs amplify states' diplomatic and economic leverage by enabling shared negotiation platforms and harmonized policies.

African states can:

- coordinate customs standards with South Africa
- benefit from shared industrial development programmes
- collaborate in technological upgrading and energy transitions
- utilize South Africa's diplomatic networks to secure development partnerships

- build regional mechanisms for crisis management and macroeconomic stability

Continental cooperation also allows African states to mitigate dependency risks by formalizing partnerships rather than relying on informal or asymmetric relationships.

DISCUSSION

South Africa occupies a distinctive position in both regional and global politics, and its dual membership in high-level platforms such as the G20 and BRICS continues to shape its strategic influence. Although South Africa is not among the world's largest economies, its participation in these institutions gives it unusual reach for a middle-income state. Recent work on middle-power diplomacy highlights that influence is not solely a function of economic size but also of agenda-setting capacity, coalition building, and institutional activism (Cooper, 2022). South Africa demonstrates these qualities through its consistent advocacy on global financial reform, development financing, and equity in multilateral governance. Its recent G20 presidency and its involvement in the expansion of BRICS reflect a deliberate effort to consolidate its role as a representative of African and broader Global South interests.

South Africa as a Global Governance Actor

A growing body of research argues that middle powers can shape global norms when they act as bridge-builders between developed and developing states (Henrikson, 2021). South Africa's approach fits this pattern. The priorities that Pretoria advanced through the G20, especially global inequality reduction, debt sustainability, development finance, and reform of Bretton Woods institutions, are aligned with long-standing African Union (AU) demands for a more inclusive global economic system. The creation of the G20 Task Force on Global Wealth Inequality, supported by economists such as Joseph Stiglitz, illustrates how South Africa has worked to institutionalise debates on structural inequities within the global financial system (Institute for Global Dialogue, 2024). The country's activism is also visible in its engagement with BRICS. The bloc's expansion in 2023 and 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran demonstrates broader geopolitical shifts. Research indicates that South Africa played a meaningful role in advocating for the inclusion of African states, viewing the enlargement as an opportunity to strengthen African agency within multipolar institutions (Fabricius, 2024). This aligns with Global Governance Theory, which suggests that states with regional legitimacy can leverage institutional spaces to influence global agenda-setting (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2021). In both the G20 and BRICS,

South Africa positions itself as a spokesperson for African development challenges—such as infrastructure deficits, climate finance, health security, and access to development funding. Several analyses note that this positioning is strategic: it enables South Africa to protect its own economic interests while also building partnerships that benefit its neighbours (Naidu, 2025; UNCTAD, 2023). The interplay between domestic interests and continental representation is central to understanding South Africa's global politics.

Regional Leadership and Developmental Regionalism

South Africa's leadership within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has long been shaped by its economic dominance. It accounts for the largest share of SADC's gross domestic product and remains a key source of regional investment, infrastructure financing, and migrant labour absorption. Recent assessments of SADC's economic governance confirm that South Africa disproportionately contributes to regional industrial development initiatives, energy cooperation, and transport corridors (SADC Industrialisation Report, 2023). Importantly, South Africa's role in SADC is not confined to trade. Its regional leadership illustrates the principles of what scholars call developmental regionalism, an integration model that prioritises infrastructure, institutional capacity, and regulatory harmonisation alongside market opening (Biggeri & Zingales, 2021). South Africa has been particularly active in supporting cross-border energy projects including those linked to the Southern African Power Pool. It has also championed regional integration initiatives aligned with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The Tripartite Free Trade Area (T-FTA), which merges SADC, COMESA, and the East African Community, represents a major element of South Africa's regional diplomacy. Analysts argue that Pretoria sees the T-FTA and the AfCFTA as mutually reinforcing frameworks that can strengthen Africa's bargaining power globally while stimulating intra-African value chains (African Union, 2023). South Africa's participation in these initiatives underscores its commitment to regional economic restructuring and industrialisation. Despite these efforts, South Africa's regional leadership is not without tensions. Smaller SADC states have, at times, expressed concerns that South Africa's economic weight can overshadow the interests of weaker economies. Research on regional power dynamics in SADC notes that South African firms dominate several sectors within neighbouring economies, from retail to telecommunications, raising fears of asymmetrical dependence (Daniel & Naidu, 2024).

These concerns shape political relationships and sometimes reduce the willingness of member states to align fully with South Africa's policy agenda.

Domestic Constraints and Perceptions of Declining Influence

Domestic political challenges also influence how South Africa's regional and global roles are perceived. The country faces persistent economic stagnation, energy instability, governance failures, and internal political contestations. Recent public opinion research by the Human Sciences Research Council (2024) found that many South Africans believe the country's international influence is weakening, driven largely by domestic service delivery challenges and perceptions of declining diplomatic consistency. Opposition parties have criticised aspects of South Africa's foreign policy, particularly regarding BRICS membership and diplomatic alignments. Kajee (2025) notes that political actors across the spectrum have raised concerns about whether South Africa's commitment to BRICS delivers adequate domestic benefits, especially given the country's economic vulnerabilities. These internal debates shape the extent to which South Africa can sustainably project regional leadership. International scholarship highlights that effective middle-power diplomacy depends on strong domestic institutions and policy coherence (Cooper, 2022). South Africa's capability in this regard is uneven. While its diplomats and policy institutes maintain high levels of expertise, inconsistent governance at home sometimes undermines its ability to influence global debates. Nonetheless, Pretoria's continued presence in strategic global institutions demonstrates that domestic challenges have not wholly diminished its external significance.

Shared Continental Benefits and Opportunities for Collective Action

South Africa's strategic positioning within global and regional forums provides several opportunities for African states which are as follows:

First, the country acts as a gateway for investment into Africa due to its financial markets, institutional stability, and advanced logistical infrastructure. Recent UNCTAD reports show that South Africa remains among the top three recipients of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa and often serves as the entry point for investment into SADC (UNCTAD, 2023). Other African states can benefit by integrating their trade and investment strategies with South Africa's infrastructure corridors, especially ports, rail networks, and energy systems.

Second, South Africa's representation in global forums means that it can champion African development priorities in spaces where most African countries lack direct representation. By coordinating positions with South Africa, other states can influence global debates on

development finance, debt restructuring, climate adaptation funding, and trade rules. Regional blocs such as SADC, COMESA, and the AU already coordinate policy frameworks but could deepen their engagement to ensure that South African diplomacy reflects wider continental needs.

Third, South Africa's involvement in BRICS and the New Development Bank (NDB) offers an avenue for African countries to access development finance. The NDB has increased its loan portfolio in Africa in recent years, funding renewable energy, transport infrastructure, and water projects (NDB Annual Report, 2024). African countries can partner with South Africa to design multi-country projects that align with NDB priorities.

Finally, shared development initiatives require strengthened institutional cooperation. Countries could expand joint planning in areas such as regional digital transformation, food security, climate adaptation, industrial corridors, and public administration reform. These forms of cooperation resonate with contemporary regional integration literature, which emphasises that collective development outcomes depend on institutional alignment and joint capacity building (Biggeri & Zingales, 2021).

Collective Gains Through Coordinated Diplomacy

A key conclusion emerging from this discussion is that African states should adopt a more coordinated diplomatic strategy that leverages South Africa's global presence. When African countries act collectively, they increase their bargaining power in shaping international development finance architectures and trade negotiations. South Africa's unique positioning in both the G20 and BRICS gives the continent opportunities for influence that would otherwise be difficult to achieve individually. To strengthen these gains, African governments can align their national development plans with regional integration agendas and cooperate with South Africa in shaping global governance reforms. This collective approach supports broader African aspirations for structural economic transformation, industrial diversification, and infrastructural expansion as articulated in Agenda 2063. In summary, South Africa's leadership role is most effective when it functions as a representative of wider African interests rather than as a unilateral actor. The continent stands to benefit significantly when this relationship is built on collaboration, shared priorities, and institutional cohesion.

CONCLUSION

South Africa's role in both regional and global governance remains one of the most significant and multifaceted on the African continent. Although it is not the largest economy globally, and despite its own domestic pressures, the country continues to operate as an influential diplomatic and economic actor whose strategic positioning allows it to bridge the interests of Africa, the Global South, and advanced industrialised states. The evidence assessed throughout this study demonstrates that South Africa's influence is derived not merely from its economic capacity but also from its institutional activism, diplomatic networks, and ability to frame policy debates across multiple governance platforms. Its membership in the G20 and BRICS reinforces this strategic importance. In the G20, South Africa represents the African continent in a forum that shapes global macroeconomic and financial governance. This role enables the country to provide a voice for emerging and developing economies on issues such as debt restructuring, development financing, climate transitions, and reform of multilateral financial institutions. At the same time, South Africa's participation in BRICS offers it access to alternative development financing, more equitable trade partnerships, and political alliances that foreground South-South cooperation. These platforms allow South Africa to operate as a bridge between different power blocs, amplifying African development concerns in global decision-making spaces where most African states lack formal representation.

Regionally, South Africa's influence is evident through its contributions to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and its commitment to developmental regionalism. The country plays a central role in strengthening cross-border infrastructure networks, harmonising regulatory standards, facilitating trade flows, and supporting sectoral integration across energy, transport, and telecommunications. Its infrastructure corridors link several African economies to global markets and serve as anchors for regional industrialisation initiatives. This combination of economic weight, logistical connectivity, and diplomatic leadership positions South Africa as a regional engine for integration and growth. Yet the study also underscores that South Africa's leadership is not without limits or challenges. Domestically, the country continues to face significant governance concerns, economic stagnation, social inequality, and institutional strain. These internal dynamics shape both the perception and the effectiveness of its international engagement. When a state contends with intense domestic pressures, sustaining outward-looking diplomacy can become politically contested and resource-constrained. South Africa's ability to maintain a leadership

role therefore depends not only on its regional and global strategies but also on the internal coherence and stability of its political and economic systems.

Additionally, some African states express reservations about South Africa's dominance. Smaller economies in SADC sometimes view South Africa's economic influence as asymmetrical, creating dependencies that may not always advance their national interests. This raises important questions about how to balance South Africa's capacity to lead with the need for equitable regional partnerships. An effective regional order requires not just leadership from one state but mutual respect, institutional legitimacy, and shared developmental agendas. Despite these complexities, the findings suggest that South Africa remains well-positioned to continue playing a catalytic role in both African and global governance. Its global memberships, extensive diplomatic networks, and institutional experience provide valuable entry points for the continent to shape international norms and secure developmental gains. For other African states, the key question is not whether South Africa has influence, but how that influence can be harnessed in a collaborative and sustainable way.

A major opportunity lies in strengthening coordinated diplomacy. African states can benefit by aligning their policy positions with South Africa in key multilateral forums. Joint advocacy efforts could increase Africa's bargaining power in global negotiations on climate finance, trade reform, debt sustainability, and global public health. Such collective engagement requires well-organised regional dialogue platforms where states can develop shared priorities before participating in global forums. Another strategic opportunity involves infrastructure and industrial cooperation. South Africa's transport corridors, energy systems, and industrial clusters can serve as regional public goods if they are embedded in wider cross-border planning initiatives. Countries could pursue joint investment projects, integrate industrial value chains, and harmonise trade regulations with South Africa to increase competitiveness and attract investment. These collaborative frameworks would allow African economies to leverage South Africa's logistical and financial advantages while contributing their own resources and capabilities.

Institutional partnerships represent a third area where African states can benefit. South Africa hosts a range of think tanks, research centres, training academies, and diplomatic institutions that can support capacity development across the continent. Collaborative training in areas such as public administration, regional integration, economic diplomacy, and governance

reform could enhance institutional strength across African governments. In turn, stronger institutions would allow countries to participate more effectively in regional and global decision-making. Finally, the durability of South Africa's strategic role also depends on domestic public attitudes. Foreign policy does not operate in a vacuum. The level of public trust in government institutions, perceptions of global engagement, and domestic political contestation all shape the foreign policy choices available to state leaders. Shifts in public sentiment can affect how much political capital leaders are willing to invest in global commitments. Understanding how South Africans themselves view the country's regional and global roles is therefore essential for assessing the sustainability of its diplomacy.

Given these dynamics, future research should deepen the analysis in several ways. First, country-specific studies could examine how individual African states, especially smaller ones, can institutionalise cooperation with South Africa through bilateral agreements, regional committees, or specialised policy forums. Such research would highlight practical pathways for translating South Africa's influence into concrete continental benefits. Second, more empirical work is needed to understand public opinion in South Africa regarding its global engagements. Survey-based studies, political discourse analysis, or interviews with policymakers could provide valuable insights into whether South Africa's diplomatic strategies enjoy domestic legitimacy. Third, comparative research could explore how other middle powers, such as Indonesia, Turkey, or Mexico, balance domestic pressures with global ambitions, providing lessons relevant to South Africa.

In conclusion, South Africa remains a pivotal state in Africa's political and economic landscape. Its membership in globally significant institutions, its regional economic reach, and its diplomatic capacity position it as a crucial interlocutor between Africa and the world. Although the sustainability of this role depends on both domestic conditions and regional dynamics, the opportunities for shared progress are substantial. For African states willing to engage strategically, South Africa's international presence offers a valuable platform for amplifying continental priorities, strengthening regional integration, and advancing long-term development goals.

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