

The Political Economy of Sino-South African Trade in the Context of Asia-Pacific Regional Competition

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In *The Political Economy of Sino-South African Trade in the Context of Asia-Pacific Regional Competition*, the author intends to comparatively examine the China-South Africa trade relationship over the twenty-year 1998-2018 period through the prism of four other relationships South Africa has with countries China's contentious neighbours in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific (or Indo-Pacific). The different case studies presented in the book (Taiwan, Japan, India, and the United States) highlighted a 'differentiated engagement' between Pretoria and Beijing. Importantly, it reports the countries' relations with China, ranging from ambivalent at best to adversarial at worst. At the same time, these countries also aimed to increase trade relations with post-Apartheid South Africa, sometimes at China's marginal expense, since 1998 (when Pretoria formed diplomatic ties with Beijing to Taiwan's exclusion).

Bhaso Ndzendze's writing style is extensive and delves in-depth into the debates of Asia being regarded as the new economic centre of gravity for the new century in international relations, ranking China above all other countries in terms of trade relations with South Africa. The book further highlights the debates on whether there is any validity to the notion that as Chinese imports to South Africa grew, they displaced the market access of those countries that initially had more significant exports than China's. China has been able to assert itself as an essential economic power in the world and today. Its focus on investing in Africa cannot be overlooked. It seems to be invested in sharing its development model with developing states on the continent and has become an essential partner to many African states. As a result, the relations between China and other African countries remain the subject of interest to scholars and policymakers.

China's current relationship with Africa had intensified in the 1980s and looks to garner more strength today. In the years following Africa's independence from colonialism, African states economies experienced a steady decline due to the various conflicts that plagued the continent during and after the official end of the Cold War. Different economic recovery strategies were introduced, such as the structural adjustment policies, which further plunged African states into austerity. China provided viable alternatives for social, political and economic development formulas to the unipolar world of the 1990s. African governments are already frustrated by complex donor policies and the high overhead costs of multilateral development projects. African governments have been open to the alternatives China have provided over the years. Bhaso's analysis emphasises this competition of Asian states in the continent; even so, most of these states fall short of winning a trade competition against China. This is due to China having had more years of continuous growth, has formulated its niche product portfolio with which the other countries could not compete, and higher exports to South Africa compared with Taiwan, Japan, India, and the US. The book helps the reader to appreciate

the complexities behind South Africa's external relations and China's African presence by explicitly considering the *regional* motivators of China's South Africa policy with data-based quantitative analysis. Methodologically the book benefits from an extensive literature review in which the author complements with survey data and content analysis on the China-South Africa trade relationship.

From the introductory chapter to the conclusion, the book sets the theme on the various formations and ambivalent rivalries observed in the relationships between the countries and China in South Africa. Next, Ndzendze formulated the theoretical framework for policy and theory, reflecting on the collective implications of the findings in the preceding chapters. The theoretical framework is an intellectual challenge demonstrating that while there may be a competition for market access, mutual growth is still possible and the dominant trend for South Africa and its peer economies.

The weakest part of the book is that it falls short on its limitation to South Africa, starting with the introduction. The author could begin analysing the preceding statement made by former President Jacob Zuma in support or opposing the same message. "The emergence of China as a power among others gives or offers an opportunity to African countries to be able to free themselves from the shackles that are colonially designed." Details on the following would be beneficial and may enrich the introduction.

Is there an Africa-specific cost-benefit analysis? When it comes to exploitation, what's the difference between Chinese and European? As a resource guzzler and destroyer of Africa's natural riches, which country gets points for environmental stewardship? In other ways, the author is reminiscent of European colonisation a century earlier. Africa provides a low-cost supply of raw resources, a lucrative export market for Chinese manufactured goods, and a way for China to release its excess cash.

Aligning with comments exemplified by the preceding statements, 'scholars and politicians are keenly aware of China-Africa ties, but international institutions and western governments see malign intentions from Beijing and naiveté from African officials and hence the people'. In my opinion, the honeymoon between China and Africa is because the Chinese fund is unaccountable and suitable for African leaders enjoying impunity.

In terms of the China-South Africa relations, it aims to examine the connection between China and South Africa in terms of competitiveness with other Asian countries. The evaluation should focus on trade volume, the trade balance between imports and exports, and technology transfer. The focus should be on who exports the most and the importance of commerce. Is South Africa a beneficiary country or a contributor to the trade balance? I believe that South Africa is no more special than any other African country in terms of capacity compared to China and other Asian countries. On the contrary, the South is superior to several African countries when compared inside the African continent.

Regarding the theoretical implications, one could argue that economic interconnectedness as a deterrent to conflict is a good idea. Asian countries have to compete peacefully due to their economic dependency on China. The US, Japan, and China are either winning or losing (Taiwan). The results are likely to support Ricardian comparative advantage. The author may have used the competing relationship between the BRICS and other countries such as Asian countries, the United States, Japan, and European competitors to Africa through South Africa and a solo move to illustrate his points. In addition, in terms of the policy implications, one could argue that Africa's needs have unique requirements that not all of these partners are now satisfying. To begin, there is no consensus on how Africa should trade with China, which is a debatable premise. Furthermore, Agenda 2063 is not

a manifesto of policy. As its moniker implies, it is a collective wishful thinking exercise devoid of any meaningful execution mechanism.

In conclusion, despite the insights stated above, the book is one of the few unique contributions highlighting detailed the role of competition, often referred to as the 'new scramble for Africa' in Asian states' presence on the continent. The book is a fascinating work that presents important lessons for a genuine South-South relationship. Therefore, promoting effective communication and understanding around common interests is an intellectual challenge in relationships in the coming decades. The book further relates a vital message to the readers and African states on the need to clearly articulate the long-term interests of the relationship with China and cautiously evaluate the alternative provided by China so that it can make an informed choice for the benefit of its people. In short, the author should be commendable since the book contributes to the scholarship on the limited literature on the role that this perceived competition has had in pushing China's entry towards South Africa's market. Highlighting how the country opens its market to South African exporters and whether this continues to persist in the post-Great Recession period.

References

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