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SOUTHERN AFRICA IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD: EXTERNAL POWER COMPETITION AND REGIONAL AGENCY

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Abstract

Southern Africa has become an increasingly important arena in global politics as the world shifts toward a multipolar order. Multipolarity expands Southern Africa's diplomatic options but not its structural economic agency, producing a form of conditional agency constrained by enduring global economic hierarchies. Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how countries in this region navigate the growing influence of external powers—China, the United States, the European Union (EU), Russia, and BRICS. This article examines how Southern African states balance external pressures with their own regional and national priorities, drawing on qualitative case studies from selected SADC member states. The analysis shows that while engagement with multiple global actors offers Southern African states opportunities to expand their diplomatic and economic options, structural constraints such as dependence on foreign aid, weak regional coordination, and uneven power relations often limit their ability to act independently. This article argues that Southern Africa's ability to exercise meaningful agency in a multipolar world relies on stronger regional institutions and better coordination among member states. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of African agency and regionalism, highlighting both the challenges and possibilities for Southern African states in shaping their own regional environment.

Keywords: *Southern Africa, Multipolarity, Regional Agency, South-South Cooperation, Multi-alignment, Great Power Competition.*

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Introduction

Southern Africa's engagement with a multipolar international order demonstrates that while the diffusion of global power expands states' diplomatic maneuverability, it does not translate into structural economic agency, as enduring hierarchies in global finance, trade, and production continue to constrain transformative development outcomes. The rise of multiple centers of power and the gradual erosion of the US-dominated post-Cold War unipolar order, and the shift toward multipolarity, have significant implications for Africa, and particularly for Southern Africa, a region historically shaped by colonial legacies, Cold War interventions, and long-standing dependence on foreign aid.[1] While scholars have extensively examined Africa's engagement with individual external powers such as China or the US, comparatively less attention has been paid to how Southern African states navigate simultaneous pressures from multiple actors and exercise agency within these dynamics.[2]

Southern Africa occupies a strategic position in global politics because it is rich in natural resources, hosts key maritime routes, and has long been a site of political contestation.[3] Over the past two decades, the region has witnessed intensified engagement from traditional Western actors, emerging powers such as China and Russia, and multilateral groupings like BRICS, all competing for influence through diplomacy, investment, and security cooperation.[4] These interactions provide Southern African states with new opportunities to diversify partnerships and leverage relations with multiple external actors for economic and strategic gain. However, they also present challenges, including dependence, uneven bargaining power, and the risk of fragmented regional coordination.[5]

The concept of African agency has emerged as a critical lens that helps explain the continent's responses to global pressures. Rather than being passive recipients of external influence, African states actively navigate complex international dynamics, using both national policy tools and regional institutions to pursue stra-

[1] G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal World Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–10.
[2] Chris Alden and Daniel Large, "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Multipolarity in Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 317–35.
[3] Alois S. Mlambo, "BRICS and Africa: Reassessing the South–South Cooperation Framework," *African Affairs* 119, no. 477 (2020): 1–23.
[4] Lucy Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency: Angola and China's Resource-for-Infrastructure Deals," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013): 191–210.
[5] Paul D. Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations: Concepts and Evidence," *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 2 (2016): 163–87.

tegic interests.[6] In Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) serves as a key platform for regional coordination by providing mechanisms for collective bargaining, conflict management, and policy harmonization.[7] Yet the effectiveness of SADC is constrained by institutional weaknesses, divergent national priorities, and varying levels of economic and political capacity among its member states. From an International Political Economy perspective, multipolarity represents a reconfiguration of external partnerships rather than a transformation of underlying economic structures; consequently, Southern African states gain tactical bargaining power without achieving structural autonomy, as commodity dependence, external finance, and asymmetric interdependence persist.

This study examines how Southern African states navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by a multipolar world. Specifically, it examines the strategies employed by states to balance external pressures with regional and national priorities. It focuses on the following questions: How do Southern African states exercise agency in the face of competing global powers? To what extent do regional institutions, particularly the SADC, enhance or constrain the ability of member states to act strategically? By addressing these questions, this article contributes to the broader literature on African agency, regionalism, and the implications of multipolarity for the Global South, while also offering insights into how Southern Africa can transform external pressures into strategic opportunities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Multipolarity Theory: This framework offers a critical lens for understanding the evolving global order and its implications for regions such as Southern Africa. Traditionally, international relations have been understood through the lenses of bipolarity, typified by the Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union, and unipolarity, reflected in the post–Cold War predominance of the US.[8] In contrast, a multipolar system is characterized by multiple major powers, each capable of influencing global outcomes and thereby creating a more complex and competitive international environment.[9] This diffusion of power fundamentally reshapes

[6] Tim Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations: Lessons for Africa and the World," *African Security Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 1–15.
[7] Gilbert M. Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," in Peacebuilding and Regional Dynamics, ed. Michael Lund and Roger Mac Ginty (London: Routledge, 2013), 87–106.
[8] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).
[9] Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the strategic options available to regional actors, including states in Southern Africa, by providing alternative sources of economic, political, and security support.

The relevance of multipolarity for Southern Africa is particularly evident in the growing presence of actors such as China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS. Within this evolving multipolar context, Southern African states are no longer forced to engage primarily with a single hegemon. Instead, they can diversify their diplomatic and economic partnerships, negotiating agreements and aid arrangements with multiple external powers simultaneously.[10] This diversification enhances the agency of Southern African states, allowing them to pursue national and regional interests while mitigating overreliance on any single external actor.

At the same time, multipolarity introduces a range of challenges that complicate the exercise of agency. Competing pressures from multiple powers can generate conflicting expectations, produce new forms of dependence, and intensify internal and regional coordination challenges.[11] For instance, while engagement with China may bring infrastructure investment and trade opportunities, it may also increase vulnerability to debt dependence and reduce states' leverage in their relations with other partners, such as the US or the EU.[12] In this context, multipolarity presents Southern African states with both opportunities and constraints, highlighting the importance of strategic diplomacy, coherent national policies, and effective regional institutions such as the SADC.

Conditional Agency in a Multipolar Order: This article argues that multipolarity expands diplomatic maneuverability for Southern African states but does not fundamentally transform their structural economic position in the global economy. Between 2008 and 2024, the diffusion of global power has enabled greater diversification of external partnerships and strategic balancing; however, the persistence of extractive trade models and commodity dependence constrains the translation of diplomatic flexibility into structural economic agency. In short, multipolarity widens tactical room for maneuver while leaving structural hierarchies largely intact.

From an International Political Economy perspective, agency must be disaggregated into two distinct dimensions: diplomatic agency and structural economic agency. Diplomatic agency refers to the ability of states to diversify partnerships, negotiate among competing powers, and leverage multilateral institutions to enhance bargaining power. Structural economic agency, by contrast, refers to the ca-

[10] Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism," 317–35.
[11] Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.
[12] Deborah Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

pacity to alter a state's position within global value chains, diversify production, and escape patterns of primary commodity dependence.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the rise of China, India, Brazil, and a resurgent Russia has significantly expanded diplomatic options for Southern African states. The presence of multiple external partners has reduced exclusive reliance on Western donors and enabled governments to engage in forum-shopping and strategic balancing. At the continental level, the African Union (AU) has functioned as an institutional amplifier of bargaining leverage, coordinating summit diplomacy through platforms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and EU–AU dialogues and embedding negotiations within Agenda 2063's developmental vision.[13] These mechanisms enhance diplomatic agency by allowing African states to aggregate their preferences and negotiate collectively rather than bilaterally.

Similarly, South–South Cooperation (SSC) and triangular cooperation arrangements have broadened partnership portfolios. Chinese infrastructure financing, Indian pharmaceutical exports and technical training, and Brazilian agricultural cooperation initiatives have diversified development pathways beyond traditional North–South aid hierarchies.[14] Triangular cooperation frameworks, often involving the United Nations or Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donors and emerging powers, have further institutionalized knowledge exchange and capacity building.[15] These developments support the claim that multipolarity increases diplomatic room for maneuver.

However, the expansion of diplomatic choice has not translated into structural transformation. Trade patterns between Southern Africa and emerging powers continue to reflect classical core–periphery dynamics: primary commodities and raw materials are exported, while manufactured goods and higher-value products are imported.[16] China's trade with Southern Africa, for example, remains heavily concentrated in minerals, energy resources, and agricultural commodities, whereas manufactured imports into the region continue to come predominantly from China.[17] Although infrastructure investments may facilitate long-term development,

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[13] African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (Addis Ababa: African Union, 2015).

[14] Emma Mawdsley, *From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism," 213–27.

[15] United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), *South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Action* (New York: United Nations, 2019).

[16] Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

[17] Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift.*

they do not automatically alter the region's position within global value chains. The structural composition of trade thus continues to reproduce patterns of dependence even within a multipolar framework.

African Agency Theory: This framework offers an important perspective for understanding the capacity of African states to act strategically in the international system, challenging narratives that portray the continent as passive or solely subject to external influence.[18] While traditional International Relations frameworks often focus on the actions of great powers, African Agency Theory emphasizes that African states and regional institutions actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to external pressures. This approach recognizes that agency is not only exercised at the national level but also collectively through regional mechanisms such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which facilitates coordinated diplomacy, conflict resolution, and policy harmonization among member states.[19]

In the context of a multipolar world, African Agency Theory is particularly relevant. The rise of multiple global actors has expanded the range of options available to Southern African states, enabling them to leverage external competition to their advantage.[20] For instance, states can simultaneously negotiate development projects, security partnerships, or trade agreements with external powers, thereby enhancing their strategic autonomy. However, agency is not unconstrained; structural factors such as economic dependence, weak regional coordination, and domestic political limitations continue to shape the scope of strategic choice.[21]

African Agency Theory complements Multipolarity Theory by highlighting how Southern African states navigate global power shifts. Whereas Multipolarity Theory explains the structure of the international system and the distribution of power among major actors,[22] African Agency Theory focuses on the capacity of regional and national actors to act within these constraints, either by exploiting opportunities presented by competing powers or by mitigating the risks associated with external influence.[23] For example, the SADC's collective diplomatic initiatives can help smaller member states balance pressures from larger external actors, demonstrating that agency is both a national and regional endeavor.

By applying African Agency Theory, this study recognizes Southern African states as active participants in shaping their regional and global environment, rather

[18] Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," 1–15.
[19] Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," 87–106.
[20] Ian Taylor, *Africa in International Politics: External Powers and the New Scramble* (London: Routledge, 2018).
[21] Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency," 191–210.
[22] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.
[23] Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.

than passive recipients of foreign influence. It underscores the importance of strategic decision-making, policy innovation, and regional coordination in navigating multipolar competition. Combined with Multipolarity Theory, this framework provides a comprehensive lens to examine how Southern African states exercise agency amid the competing demands of multiple global powers.

International Political Economy and the Structural Boundaries of Southern African Agency in a Multipolar World

The emergence of a multipolar international order has generated renewed optimism regarding African agency, particularly in Southern Africa, where states have increasingly diversified partnerships among Western powers, China, Russia, India, and other emerging actors. Governments across the region frame multipolarity as an opportunity to expand diplomatic autonomy, reduce dependence on traditional Western donors, and leverage competition among major powers for development gains. However, while political rhetoric emphasizes sovereignty, non-alignment, and strategic diversification, the material capacity to implement these aspirations remains constrained. International Political Economy (IPE) provides the most analytically robust framework for explaining this contradiction. By integrating political and economic analysis, IPE reveals how structural hierarchies in the global economy shape and constrain the scope of state agency in the global system.

At its core, IPE rejects the artificial separation of politics and economics in international relations. Robert Gilpin argues that the international political economy is shaped by the reciprocal interaction of state power and market forces, with dominant states constructing and sustaining the rules governing trade, finance, and production.[24] In this view, power is embedded not only in military capability but also in the ability to shape global economic structures. Southern African states formally possess sovereignty, yet they operate within an economic system largely structured by advanced industrial economies and global financial institutions. Their integration into global markets is mediated through export dependence, foreign investment inflows, sovereign credit ratings, and access to external finance. These structural features significantly narrow the range of viable domestic policy options.

Strange's concept of structural power further clarifies this dynamic. Strange contends that power in the global system is exercised through control over the structures of finance, production, security, and knowledge.[25] Southern African states do not control these structures; rather, they adapt to them. For example, fi-

[24] Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[25] Susan Strange, *States and Markets*, 2nd ed. (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994).

nancial markets determine borrowing costs, international institutions influence macroeconomic policy frameworks, and multinational corporations shape production chains. Even in a multipolar context, where new partners such as China provide alternative financing, the fundamental structure of dependence on external capital remains intact. Thus, while multipolarity diversifies external relationships, it does not automatically transform the structural distribution of economic power.

Dependency theory deepens this structural analysis by situating Southern Africa's contemporary position within a historical trajectory of unequal integration. Andre Gunder Frank's notion of "the development of underdevelopment" explains how peripheral economies are incorporated into global capitalism in subordinate ways that reproduce patterns of dependence.[26] Similarly, Walter Rodney demonstrates how colonial extraction shaped African economies toward primary commodity exportation and external orientation.[27] Southern Africa's contemporary economic profile reflects this continuity. Zambia's copper exports, Mozambique's reliance on extractive industries, and South Africa's dependence on volatile portfolio capital illustrate the persistence of externally oriented growth models. Commodity price fluctuations, global demand shocks, and shifts in international capital flows directly affect fiscal stability and social spending. Consequently, political ambitions such as industrial transformation, welfare expansion, or regional integration must contend with structural vulnerabilities embedded in the global economy.

Liberal IPE perspectives also illuminate the constraints facing Southern Africa, though through a different lens. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence emphasizes that states are mutually connected through trade, finance, and institutions.[28] While such interdependence reduces the likelihood of military conflict, it generates asymmetric vulnerability. Southern African economies are more sensitive to disruptions in global commodity markets, credit tightening by major central banks, and changes in development financing conditions than are the advanced economies to which they are linked. This asymmetry limits bargaining power even within cooperative frameworks such as BRICS or South–South partnerships. Interdependence, therefore, does not eliminate hierarchy; rather, it reconfigures it in ways that continue to privilege structurally dominant actors.

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[26] Andre Gunder Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment," *Monthly Review* 18, no. 4 (1966): 17–31.

[27] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

[28] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012).

Multipolarity represents a political reconfiguration unfolding within a largely unchanged global economic structure. While the diffusion of power beyond Western dominance has expanded the diplomatic options of Southern African states, allowing them to engage multiple external partners, diversification does not produce structural autonomy. Chinese, Western, and private financing remain embedded in global financial systems shaped by credit ratings, repayment pressures, and macroeconomic conditionalities, leaving development trajectories tied to external markets and capital flows.

Regional cooperation represents another strategy through which Southern African states seek to enhance collective agency. Institutions such as the SADC and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aim to expand intra-regional trade, harmonize policies, and reduce dependence on extra-regional actors. From an IPE perspective, regionalism can increase bargaining power by enlarging market size and fostering coordinated industrial policy. Yet internal fragmentation, infrastructural deficits, and uneven economic capacities among member states limit the transformative potential of regional integration. Without structural diversification of production and a reduction in dependence on external capital, regionalism can mitigate but not fully overcome global asymmetries.

This theoretical framework thus conceptualizes Southern African agency as conditional rather than absolute. Agency takes the form of diplomatic maneuverability, selective alignment, and negotiated partnerships. However, it operates within structural constraints shaped by historical patterns of unequal exchange, global financial governance, and asymmetric interdependence. Multipolarity expands the arena of competition among external powers, creating opportunities for strategic engagement. Nevertheless, structural hierarchies embedded within the global political economy continue to constrain Southern African autonomy. While multipolarity expands diplomatic space, it has not transformed underlying economic power relations. Persistent global asymmetries temper aspirations for sovereignty, development, and regional autonomy, as these ambitions remain constrained by enduring structural dependencies in the international economic system.

Regionalism and New Regionalism Theory: Regionalism in International Relations refers to the process through which geographically proximate states form cooperative structures to address shared political, economic, and security challenges. Traditional regionalism emphasized formal integration, economic interdependence, and institutionalized cooperation.[29] In contrast, New Regionalism Theory

[29] Björn Hettne, "Globalization and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation?" in *Theories of New Regionalism*, ed. Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy Shaw (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 19–41.

(NRT), which emerged in the 1990s, emphasizes that regional cooperation is not solely a response to economic needs but is also shaped by globalization, transnational networks, and the changing international order.[30] NRT highlights that regions are embedded in the broader international system and that regional institutions mediate between local and global dynamics.

In Southern Africa, the SADC exemplifies the principles of New Regionalism Theory. The SADC provides a platform for member states to coordinate economic, political, and security policies, allowing smaller states to exercise collective agency in their interactions with powerful external actors.[31] By pooling resources, harmonizing policies, and mediating conflicts, the SADC enhances the region's bargaining power and ability to manage the complexities of a multipolar world.

New Regionalism Theory is particularly relevant when analyzing how Southern African states manage external pressures while pursuing regional cohesion. Unlike traditional regionalism, which often assumed top-down institutional compliance, NRT recognizes that member states retain significant national autonomy, and regional cooperation is shaped by both domestic political considerations and global structural pressures.[32] This theoretical lens explains why disparities in political commitment, economic capacity, and strategic priorities limit the SADC's regional effectiveness, especially under external power competition.

When combined with Multipolarity Theory and African Agency Theory, New Regionalism Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding Southern Africa's international position. Multipolarity explains the structure of global power and the competitive environment; African Agency Theory highlights the capacity of individual states to act strategically; and New Regionalism Theory situates these actions within a regional institutional context, demonstrating how collective frameworks can enhance or constrain national agency. Together, these theories provide a deeper understanding of how Southern African states leverage regional cooperation to maximize strategic options while navigating the opportunities and risks created by multiple external powers.

External Power Engagement: China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS

Southern Africa occupies a strategically significant position in the global system, attracting sustained interest from multiple external powers. This engagement is driven by a combination of economic, political, and security interests, reflecting the

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[30] Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[31] Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," 87–106.
[32] Fawcett and Hurrell, *Regionalism in World Politics*.

dynamics of a multipolar international order. Understanding how these actors operate in the region is essential to analyzing the opportunities and constraints faced by Southern African states in exercising agency and shaping their development trajectories.

China has emerged as a major actor in Southern Africa through trade, investment, and infrastructure development, often within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and bilateral resource-for-infrastructure agreements.[33] Chinese investment in transport networks, mining, and energy sectors provides Southern African states with critical development resources. However, scholars have highlighted the risks of debt dependence, limited technology transfer, and asymmetric bargaining power in these arrangements.[34] Despite these challenges, Southern African states often leverage China's engagement to diversify economic partnerships and negotiate favorable terms from other external actors.

The US and the EU have long influenced Southern Africa through aid, trade, and governance programs. Their engagement typically emphasizes democratic governance, human rights, and institutional development, often tying aid and investment to political and economic conditionalities.[35] While these mechanisms can promote policy reforms, they can also constrain national autonomy and create tension between domestic priorities and external expectations. Southern African states address these constraints by balancing commitments to Western partners with alternative opportunities offered by emerging powers, particularly China and Russia.

Russia's engagement in Southern Africa, although more limited than China or the West, focuses primarily on security cooperation, arms sales, and resource exploration. In countries such as Zimbabwe and Angola, Russia has leveraged historical Cold War-era ties to establish influence, often positioning itself as an alternative partner that respects state sovereignty and avoids open conditionalities.[36] While Russia's footprint is comparatively smaller, it provides Southern African states with additional leverage in negotiating aid, investment, and security arrangements with other global actors.

BRICS provides a platform for South–South cooperation that challenges traditional North–South dynamics. For Southern African states, BRICS represents opportunities for regional integration, development financing, and diversified partnerships.[37] South Africa, as both a BRICS member and a regional leader, plays a cen-

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33 Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift*.
34 Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency," 191–210.
35 Taylor, *Africa in International Politics*.
36 Mlambo, "BRICS and Africa," 1–23.
37 Leslie E. Armijo, "The BRICS Countries and the Future of Global Governance," *Global Governance* 13, no. 4 (2007): 456–76.

tral role in facilitating cooperation between Southern Africa and emerging powers, enabling member states to exercise collective agency while engaging in global multipolar competition.

Therefore, the presence of multiple external powers creates both opportunities and challenges for Southern African states. On the one hand, competing interests among China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS allow states to diversify partnerships, negotiate better terms, and exercise greater agency. On the other hand, these engagements can reinforce dependence, exacerbate regional inequalities, and strain the SADC's ability to coordinate collective responses. Understanding the strategies employed by Southern African states to respond to these pressures is essential for assessing the region's capacity to act autonomously in a multipolar world.[38]

The Role of the African Union

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, widely regarded as a turning point in the redistribution of economic influence toward emerging powers, Southern Africa has operated within an increasingly consolidated multipolar international order. The crisis weakened Western financial dominance and accelerated the global expansion of actors such as China, India, Brazil, and a resurgent Russia, each deepening diplomatic and economic engagement across Africa. In this shifting systemic context (2008–2024), Southern African states have not remained passive arenas of rivalry but have actively navigated great-power competition through layered institutional strategies. While much of the literature emphasizes the role of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), greater analytical attention must be paid to the continental dimension provided by the African Union (AU) as an additional platform of collective leverage.

The AU acts as a continental amplifier of regional agency by pooling the diplomatic leverage of its fifty-five member states. Structured summit diplomacy, including the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, EU–AU summits, and Russia–Africa forums, provides African governments with a coordinated platform for negotiating trade, infrastructure finance, security cooperation, and development assistance.[39] Agenda 2063, adopted in 2015, further institutionalizes a long-term continental development blueprint that shapes African engagement with external actors by articulating priorities such as industrialization, infrastructure connectivity, and economic diversification.[40] In this respect, the AU does not merely serve as a sym-

[38] Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.
[39] Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism," 317–35; Adekeye Adebajo, *The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[40] African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063*.

bolic body; it provides normative coherence and strategic direction that Southern African states can invoke in negotiations with global powers. By embedding national interests within continental frameworks, states enhance their bargaining position and reduce the fragmentation that external actors have historically exploited.

However, while the AU strengthens collective agency, its capacity remains structurally constrained. Financial dependence on external donors, particularly the EU and other Western partners, continues to affect budgetary autonomy in peace and security operations.[41] Internal political divergences among member states also limit cohesive continental positioning, particularly when external powers cultivate bilateral relationships that bypass multilateral structures. Accordingly, the AU serves both as a source of strategic leverage and as a contested institutional space. Its ability to operate effectively depends on internal unity and on the political commitment of member states, including those in Southern Africa, to favor collective bargaining over unilateral engagement.

Parallel to continental institutional leverage, Southern Africa's engagement with the Global South has expanded significantly since 2008 through mechanisms of South–South Cooperation (SSC). Unlike traditional North–South aid relationships grounded in conditionality and hierarchical donor-recipient dynamics, SSC is often framed rhetorically as a horizontal partnership premised on mutual benefit and shared development experience. China's infrastructure financing and industrial investment across Southern Africa, India's technical training and pharmaceutical partnerships, and Brazil's agricultural technology transfers, particularly in tropical agriculture, illustrate this diversification of development partnerships.[42] Such cooperation has contributed to capacity building, technology transfer, and skills development in sectors critical to regional transformation.

Nonetheless, the idea of horizontality in SSC warrants critical examination. Although emerging powers present themselves as development partners rather than traditional donors, significant asymmetries in capital, technology, and market access remain. Chinese lending practices, for example, have generated debate over debt sustainability and long-term dependence risks, even as they provide much-needed infrastructure financing.[43] Similarly, capacity-building initiatives may foster knowledge exchange but often remain embedded within broader strategic economic interests of partner states. Thus, SSC does not eliminate structural inequali-

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[41] Garth le Pere and Nhamo Samasuwo, "The African Union and the Politics of Continental Integration," *African Security Review* 21, no. 2 (2012): 3–15.

[42] Mawdsley, *From Recipients to Donors*; Paulo Esteves and Manaíra Assunção, "South–South Cooperation and the Global Development Architecture," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 10 (2014): 1775–90.

[43] Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift*.

ty; rather, it reconfigures it within a multipolar framework where multiple centers of influence coexist.

Triangular cooperation further complicates this landscape. In triangular arrangements, traditional donors collaborate with emerging powers and African states in joint development initiatives, combining financial resources, technical expertise, and local implementation capacity.[44] Triangular initiatives have been particularly visible in agricultural modernization, public administration reform, and vocational training. By enabling policy transfer and shared learning across Southern African, Latin American, and Asian partners, they strengthen institutional capacity and reduce dependence on any single external actor while reflecting the adaptation of global development frameworks to multipolar conditions.

From an International Political Economy perspective, these layered forms of engagement, including continental multilateralism, South–South partnerships, and triangular cooperation, represent strategies of diversification. Southern African states expand their diplomatic and economic options, thereby increasing room for maneuver within a competitive global environment. Diversification mitigates vulnerability to coercive dependence and enables selective alignment based on sectoral priorities. However, diversification does not equate to full autonomy. Structural constraints rooted in global capital flows, commodity dependence, and asymmetric trade relations continue to shape outcomes. Agency, therefore, must be understood as relational and constrained rather than absolute.

Since 2008, Southern Africa has incrementally adjusted its position within a multipolar order by pursuing pragmatic balancing rather than exclusive alignment. Engagement through AU diplomacy, South–South partnerships, and triangular cooperation has expanded strategic options while reinforcing a form of agency exercised within enduring structural limits. Multipolarity has therefore widened diplomatic space without fundamentally removing external constraints.

Regional and National Responses to Multipolarity in Southern Africa

Southern African states confront external pressures from competing global powers while pursuing national development and regional integration. To address this challenge, they employ regional coordination, national diplomacy, and balancing strategies to safeguard autonomy, maximize opportunities, and minimize dependence. These strategies are shaped by the dynamics of multipolarity, the principles of African agency, and the structures provided by regional institutions such as the SADC.

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[44] United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), *South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Action*.

The SADC serves as the primary institutional framework through which Southern African states coordinate political, economic, and security policies. Established in 1992, the SADC aims to promote regional stability, economic integration, and collective bargaining with external powers.[45] Through mechanisms such as the SADC Secretariat, regional protocols, and peer review processes, member states attempt to harmonize positions on trade agreements, infrastructure development, and foreign investment. The SADC also plays a critical role in mediating disputes and promoting peace and security in the region, thereby strengthening collective agency and reducing regional vulnerability to external influence.

However, the SADC's effectiveness is affected by institutional weaknesses, differing national priorities, and resource disparities among member states. Murithi argues that, while South Africa often takes a leadership role in regional diplomacy, smaller states such as Lesotho, Eswatini, and Malawi may struggle to align with broader regional positions, limiting the SADC's ability to present a unified front in negotiations with external powers.[46]

At the national level, Southern African states employ a variety of diplomatic strategies to maximize benefits from external engagement. These strategies include diversification of partnerships**,** selective alignment, and strategic negotiation**.** For example, Zimbabwe has historically balanced relations between external powers, leveraging competition among multiple actors to secure development aid, trade agreements, and diplomatic support.[47] Likewise, Mozambique has cultivated partnerships with both Western and emerging powers to finance infrastructure projects while maintaining sovereignty over national decision-making.

National diplomacy is closely tied to domestic political priorities, including economic development, security, and social stability. Southern African leaders must balance the strategic benefits of engaging multiple external powers against the risks of dependence, domestic political backlash, and reputational costs.[48] This requires careful calibration of foreign policy and often demands a flexible approach that can adapt to shifting global dynamics.

Balancing Strategies in a Multipolar Context

In an increasingly multipolar international system, Southern African states have adopted a range of balancing strategies to manage competition among external powers while safeguarding national and regional interests. Rather than aligning

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[45] Khadiagala, "Regional Organizations and Peacebuilding in Africa," 87–106.
[46] Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," 1–15.
[47] Corkin, "Uncovering African Agency," 191–210.
[48] Taylor, *Africa in International Politics*.

exclusively with a single hegemon, states in the region pursue multi-alignment and hedging strategies**,** engaging simultaneously with multiple geopolitical actors and emerging partners from the Global South. This approach enables Southern African states to maximize economic and diplomatic benefits while limiting overdependence on any one external partner.[49]

A key balancing strategy involves the diversification of economic partnerships**.** Southern African governments actively seek investment, trade, and development finance from multiple sources, including China-led infrastructure financing, Western development assistance, and South–South cooperation frameworks such as BRICS. By diversifying external economic ties, states enhance their bargaining power and retain greater autonomy in development planning.[50]

At the diplomatic level, Southern Africa employs institutional and regional balancing through multilateral engagement. Regional bodies such as the SADC, alongside continental and global platforms including the AU, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the United Nations, provide collective diplomatic leverage when dealing with major powers. Acting through multilateral forums allows states to reduce external pressure and articulate shared regional positions.[51]

Southern African states also engage in normative balancing**,** selectively endorsing global norms such as sovereignty, non-interference, and development-first approaches while resisting externally imposed governance or security agendas perceived as infringing on domestic autonomy. This strategy is particularly evident in relations with Western donors and international financial institutions, where states seek to reconcile aid acceptance with policy independence.[52]

Balancing remains central to Southern African states' responses to multipolarity. By exploiting competition among external powers, states can enhance bargaining leverage and diversify sources of support. For example, South Africa's engagement with BRICS provides an avenue to strengthen economic partnerships while maintaining traditional relationships with the EU and the US.[53] Smaller states often adopt a form of soft balancing**,** engaging with multiple external actors with-

[49] Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants: The Search for Leadership in a Transforming Global Order," *International Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2013): 111–29.
[50] Sören Scholvin and Peter Draper, "The Gateway to Africa? Geography, Strategy and South Africa's Regional Economic Relations," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2012): 381–400.
[51] Siphamandla Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56, no. 2 (2021): 313–29.
[52] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2013).
[53] Mlambo, "BRICS and Africa," 1–23.

out formally aligning with any single power, thereby maintaining flexibility and autonomy.[54]

Balancing strategies are not limited to economic or diplomatic considerations; they also extend to security and governance. Southern African states increasingly participate in joint peacekeeping initiatives, regional conflict mediation, and multilateral policy forums to collectively navigate external pressures while promoting regional stability.[55] These strategies exemplify how national and regional forms of agency interact to create a more resilient and strategic Southern Africa in a multipolar world.

However, the effectiveness of these balancing strategies remains constrained by structural inequalities, limited state capacity, and regional fragmentation. While multipolarity expands strategic choice, the ability of Southern African states to balance external powers successfully depends on stronger domestic governance, economic transformation, and deeper regional coordination.

Structural Constraints on Southern African Regional Agency

Despite the emergence of a multipolar international order, the agency of Southern African states remains constrained by enduring structural, economic, and political limitations. One major constraint is economic dependence, rooted in colonial legacies and reinforced by continued reliance on external finance, foreign direct investment, and development assistance. Many Southern African economies remain heavily dependent on primary commodity exports, limiting their bargaining power in global markets and exposing them to external price shocks.[56]

A second limitation arises from asymmetric power relations between Southern Africa and external actors. Although multipolarity offers greater choice among partners, relations with major powers such as China, the EU, and the US often remain unequal. External actors continue to shape development priorities through conditional financing, trade regimes, and strategic investments, constraining domestic policy autonomy.[57]

In addition, institutional weakness and governance challenges further restrict African agency. Limited state capacity, corruption, and fragmented policy coordination undermine the ability of governments to negotiate, implement, and monitor

[54] Williams, "African Agency in Peace Operations," 163–87.
[55] Murithi, "The African Union's Evolving Role in Peace Operations," 1–15.
[56] Patrick Bond, *Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation* (London: Zed Books, 2006).
[57] Ian Taylor, *Africa Rising? BRICS–Africa Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2016).

external engagements effectively. In some cases, elite capture of external resources distorts development outcomes and weakens accountability to local populations.[58]

Regional fragmentation also limits agency. While the Southern African Development Community is intended to enhance collective bargaining and regional coherence, overlapping memberships, divergent national interests, and uneven implementation of regional commitments reduce its effectiveness as a unified actor in global affairs.[59]

Furthermore, external political and security pressures constrain Southern African autonomy. Sanctions regimes, geopolitical rivalries, and donor-driven governance norms can restrict diplomatic flexibility and narrow policy choices, particularly for states facing economic or political isolation.[60]

Although Southern Africa exercises limited agency through diversification of partnerships and regional diplomacy, this agency remains structurally bounded. Without significant improvements in economic transformation, institutional capacity, and regional coordination, the ability of Southern African states to shape external engagements on their own terms will continue to be constrained.

The SADC has repeatedly demonstrated institutional limitations that constrain its capacity to act decisively in regional crises. The SADC's structural weaknesses stem not only from a modest secretariat with limited autonomous authority, but also from a decision-making architecture that relies heavily on consensus rather than empowered institutional leadership. Scholars have noted that the SADC Secretariat lacks the robust mandate enjoyed by comparable bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States Commission**,** rendering it dependent on the political will and resource commitments of individual member governments for both operational direction and financial sustenance.[61] Without a permanent mediation unit, the Secretariat remains incapable of initiating preventive diplomacy or enforcing decisions, undermining the organization's ability to respond swiftly to emerging crises.[62]

These structural limitations have had tangible impacts on the SADC's peace operations. The SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), authorized in July 2021

58 David Booth et al., *Developmental Regimes in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
59 Southern African Development Community (SADC), *SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030* (Gaborone: SADC, 2020).
60 Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," 313–29.
61 "Why Is SADC Slow to Intervene in Political Crises?" *PSC Report* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2018), https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/why-is-sadc-slow-to-intervene-in-political-crises.
62 Thomas Mandrup, *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2025).

in response to the violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado, suffered from chronic resource constraints and operational gaps that impeded effective action. Although SAMIM helped reduce insurgent capacity and restore some state presence, it "never achieved key tasks such as sustained territorial stabilization, air and maritime support, or long-term capacity building of Mozambican forces," owing in part to mismatched resources and limited host-nation cooperation.[63] Severe logistical constraints limited the mission's effectiveness, including inadequate troop levels, weak intelligence capacity, and the absence of integrated command-and-control structures.[64] Parallel bilateral deployments further complicated regional coordination. Rwanda's deployment of troops in 2021 preceded the full operational deployment of SAMIM, indicating that bilateral security arrangements were often more agile and responsive than the regional mission itself.[65]

Moreover, the SADC's role in mediating economic crises among member states has been largely rhetorical rather than operational. In debt negotiations involving countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, the SADC has supported restructuring through political communiqués but lacks binding mechanisms to coordinate creditor negotiations or enforce fiscal frameworks. Member states, therefore, remain reliant on institutions such as the IMF or bilateral creditor arrangements to resolve sovereign debt distress. As a result, the SADC functions more as a diplomatic forum than as a driver of collective agency, with structural and resource constraints limiting its ability to translate regional consensus into action.

Opportunities in a Multipolar Order

The emergence of a multipolar international order presents significant strategic opportunities for Southern Africa. As global power becomes more diffused among geopolitical actors, Southern African states gain greater room for diplomatic maneuvering, economic diversification, and policy autonomy.[66]

One major opportunity lies in the strategic diversification of partnerships. Multipolarity enables Southern African states to reduce overdependence on traditional Western donors by engaging a wider range of external partners simultaneously. China's infrastructure financing, India's development cooperation, and South–South frameworks such as BRICS provide alternative sources of investment,

[63] Mandrup, *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)*.
[64] "Why Is SADC Slow to Intervene in Political Crises?"
[65] Mandrup, *The Effectiveness of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM)*.
[66] Scholvin and Draper, "The Gateway to Africa?" 381–400.

trade, and development finance.[67] This diversification strengthens bargaining power and enhances state agency in negotiating development outcomes.

A second opportunity relates to regional integration and collective bargaining**.** Institutions such as the SADC can leverage multipolar competition to secure more favorable trade terms, infrastructure support, and development assistance. Acting collectively enables Southern Africa to negotiate more effectively with external powers and reduces asymmetric dependencies at the national level.[68]

Multipolarity also creates space for normative and diplomatic agency**.** Southern African states increasingly engage in multilateral forums to advance shared positions on development, sovereignty, and global governance reform. This engagement allows the region to shape global norms rather than merely adapt to them.[69]

Finally, the multipolar order creates opportunities for economic transformation and industrial development. Competing external actors seek access to Southern Africa's natural resources, markets, and strategic corridors, which, if managed effectively, can support industrial policy, infrastructure development, and technology transfer.[70] When aligned with coherent domestic strategies, external engagement can contribute to long-term development rather than extractive dependence.

While multipolarity does not eliminate structural inequalities, it expands the range of strategic choices available to Southern African states. The extent to which these opportunities translate into meaningful development outcomes depends on regional coordination, domestic governance capacity, and the ability to negotiate external engagements on mutually beneficial terms.

Zimbabwe: Sanctions, China, and Strategic Balancing

Zimbabwe represents one of the most illustrative cases of how African agency is both enabled and constrained within a multipolar international system. Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe's relations with Western powers, particularly the US and the EU, have been severely strained by land reform policies, governance disputes, and human rights concerns. The imposition of targeted sanctions and the withdrawal of Western development assistance significantly narrowed Zimbabwe's external

[67] Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.
[68] Margaret C. Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 1–18.
[69] Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," 313–29.
[70] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Transformative Industrial Policy for Africa* (Addis Ababa: UNECA, 2016).

engagement options, compelling the state to pursue alternative partnerships beyond the West.[71]

In response, Zimbabwe adopted the "Look East Policy," marking a strategic pivot toward China, Russia, and other non-Western actors. China has since become Zimbabwe's most significant external partner, investing heavily in mining, energy, telecommunications, agriculture, and infrastructure. Key projects include investments in platinum and lithium extraction, power generation facilities, and transport infrastructure, positioning China as a central actor in Zimbabwe's economic recovery strategy.[72] This realignment illustrates how multipolarity can expand diplomatic and economic alternatives for states facing Western exclusion.

However, Zimbabwe's engagement with China and other emerging powers has not translated into full policy autonomy. Chinese financing has often been structured around loan-backed infrastructure projects and resource-for-infrastructure arrangements, reinforcing asymmetric power relations. Limited transparency in loan agreements and weak domestic institutional oversight have raised concerns about debt sustainability and long-term economic sovereignty.[73] As such, Zimbabwe's agency remains restricted by its dependence on external capital and commodity exports.

Beyond China, Zimbabwe has sought to diversify its partnerships by engaging with Russia, particularly in the mining and energy sectors, and through renewed diplomatic outreach to BRICS members and regional allies. Nevertheless, these relationships remain largely transactional and have not significantly altered Zimbabwe's structural economic vulnerabilities. Multipolar engagement has thus provided strategic flexibility**,** but not structural transformation.[74]

At the regional level, Zimbabwe's agency is further constrained by the limited effectiveness of collective bargaining mechanisms. While the SADC has offered diplomatic support, particularly in resisting regime-change narratives and sanctions, the organization has struggled to translate political solidarity into meaningful economic leverage or coordinated development strategies.[75] Regional fragmentation and divergent national interests limit the SADC's ability to function as a unified actor capable of enhancing Zimbabwe's negotiating power.

Domestic political dynamics also significantly shape Zimbabwe's agency. The politicization of external engagement, elite capture of foreign investment, and governance challenges have undermined the developmental impact of international

[71] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.
[72] Taylor, *Africa Rising?*
[73] Pádraig Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).
[74] Taylor, *Africa Rising?*
[75] Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," 1–18.

partnerships. External actors often engage with state elites rather than broader societal institutions, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and limiting accountability.[76] Domestic institutional constraints limit Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from multipolar competition. Sanctions continue to shape investor perceptions, restrict access to international finance, and reinforce reliance on non-Western partners. Consequently, Zimbabwe's bargaining power remains limited, challenging the assumption that multipolarity inherently strengthens Global South agency.

Zimbabwe's experience reflects a paradox of agency in a multipolar system. While the diffusion of global power has allowed Zimbabwe to avoid complete isolation and maintain economic and diplomatic links, its ability to shape these engagements on its own terms remains limited. Structural economic weakness, governance constraints, regional fragmentation, and asymmetric external partnerships continue to bind Zimbabwe's agency.

Zimbabwe's case underscores the gap between diplomatic flexibility under multipolarity and limited structural economic agency. By the end of 2024, public and publicly guaranteed debt stood at approximately US$23.3 billion (72.9 percent of GDP), including US$16.7 billion in external debt (52.5 percent of GDP).[77] Arrears to external creditors, estimated at US$7.4 billion or about **2**3.2 percent of GDP, have blocked access to concessional financing from institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank**,** underscoring constraints on access to global capital markets.[78]

Zimbabwe's creditor composition reveals distinct multipolar dynamics. China is the largest non-Paris Club creditor, holding roughly US$2.0 billion (95 percent of non-Paris Club debt), primarily linked to infrastructure projects such as power station expansions.[79] Paris Club creditors, including Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the US, account for substantial bilateral external obligations (approximately US$3.9 billion), while multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and AfDB account for smaller tranches but significant arrears.[80] This complex

[76] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.
[77] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zimbabwe: 2024 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Zimbabwe* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2024), https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/ZWE.
[78] IMF, *Zimbabwe: 2024 Article IV Consultation*.
[79] Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, *Annual Public Debt Report to Parliament* (Harare: Government of Zimbabwe, 2023), https://zimtreasury.co.zw/public-debt-management/.
[80] Government of Zimbabwe, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, *Annual Public Debt Report to Parliament* (Harare: Government of Zimbabwe, 2025), https://zimtreasury.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Public-Debt-Report-to-Parliament-ZWE.pdf.

creditor mix illustrates a multipolar landscape where African states are engaged simultaneously with Western, Chinese, and multilateral lenders, yet remain constrained by arrears, limited access to new financing, and weak creditworthiness.

Zimbabwe's export structure further highlights structural limitations. Zimbabwe's trade engagement with China remains limited relative to other Southern African economies. Zimbabwe's exports to China, largely composed of commodities such as tobacco and minerals, have recently totaled about US$1.71 billion, compared with roughly US$1.41 billion in imports from China.[81] The predominance of commodity exports limits opportunities for structural transformation or movement up global value chains. Despite recent macroeconomic stabilization efforts and the launch of an IMF staff-monitored program focused on fiscal and monetary reforms, Zimbabwe's capacity to convert diplomatic engagement into deeper economic agency remains limited. A heavy debt burden and unresolved arrears to Western financial institutions continue to prevent full re-engagement with global financial markets until these obligations are cleared.[82]

South Africa: Regional Leadership and Middle-Power Diplomacy

South Africa occupies a distinctive position in Southern Africa and the broader Global South as a regional power and an emerging middle power in an increasingly multipolar international system. Post-apartheid South African foreign policy has consistently emphasized multilateralism, African solidarity, South–South cooperation, and reform of global governance structures. Guided by these principles, Pretoria has engaged competing external powers through a strategy of multi-alignment rather than exclusive partnership with any single major power.[83]

A fundamental pillar of South Africa's multipolar engagement is its membership in BRICS**,** which has elevated its global diplomatic profile and expanded its strategic options beyond traditional Western partners. Through BRICS, South Africa has sought to advance development financing alternatives, most notably through the New Development Bank (NDB), while also promoting Global South perspectives on international political and economic reform.[84] This engagement illustrates

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[81] Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), *External Trade Statistics* (Harare: ZIMSTAT, 2025), https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Macro/Trade/2025/-EXTERNAL_TRADE_04_2025.pdf.

[82] International Monetary Fund (IMF), "IMF Staff Completes 2024 Article IV Mission to Zimbabwe," Press Release No. 24/47, February 14, 2024, https://www.imf.org/en/-News/Articles/2024/02/13/pr2447-zimbabwe-imf-staff-completes-2024-article-iv-mission.

[83] Adam Habib, *South Africa's Suspended Revolution: Hopes and Prospects* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013).

[84] Taylor, *Africa Rising?*

South Africa's capacity to exercise agency by selectively leveraging emerging power coalitions to complement existing ties with the EU and the US.

Economically, South Africa maintains diversified external relations. The EU remains South Africa's largest trading bloc, while China has become its largest individual trading partner and an important investor in infrastructure, manufacturing, and energy. This diversification strengthens South Africa's bargaining position and reduces its vulnerability to unilateral external pressure.[85] However, economic relations are marked by persistent asymmetries, particularly in trade structures that continue to favor exports of primary and semi-processed goods, limiting industrial upgrading and long-term autonomy.

At the regional level, South Africa has sought to exercise leadership through the SADC and the African Union (AU)**.** It has played a prominent role in conflict mediation, peacekeeping, and regional diplomacy, including engagements in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These initiatives reflect South Africa's ambition to act as a stabilizing force and norm entrepreneur within Southern Africa.[86] Yet regional leadership remains contested, as neighboring states often perceive South Africa's dominance as self-interested or hegemonic, constraining its ability to act as the unified regional representative.[87]

Domestic political and economic constraints further complicate South Africa's agency in a multipolar context. Chronic economic stagnation, high unemployment, energy insecurity, and governance challenges have weakened state capacity and reduced foreign policy coherence. Domestic pressures increasingly divert attention inward, limiting resources and political capital available for regional leadership and global diplomacy.[88] These internal dynamics underscore the extent to which external agency is contingent upon domestic stability and economic performance.

Normatively, South Africa has adopted a cautious diplomatic posture that emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and dialogue**,** particularly in relation to global crises involving Russia, China, and Western powers. This stance reflects an effort to balance principled commitments to human rights with pragmatic considerations of national interest and strategic autonomy. While this approach enhances diplomatic flexibility, it has also attracted criticism from Western partners and civil society actors who view it as morally ambiguous.[89]

[85] Scholvin and Draper, "The Gateway to Africa?" 381–400.
[86] Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.
[87] Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," 1–18.
[88] Zondi, "Africa and the Changing Global Order," 313–29.
[89] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

Therefore, South Africa's experience highlights both the possibilities and limits of regional agency in a multipolar world**.** The country has successfully leveraged diversified partnerships, multilateral platforms, and middle-power diplomacy to expand its strategic options. However, domestic economic challenges, contested regional leadership, and enduring global power asymmetries constrain its ability to shape regional and global outcomes. South Africa's case demonstrates that while multipolarity offers expanded space for agency, effective leadership ultimately depends on internal capacity, regional legitimacy, and a coherent long-term strategy.

South Africa's economy illustrates that diplomatic latitude within a multipolar order does not equate to structural economic agency. By 2025, South Africa's gross government debt had reached approximately 77.4 percent of GDP, prompting the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to recommend clearer fiscal rules designed to reduce the ratio to around 70 percent over the medium term.[90] External debt, including obligations to foreign creditors and bondholders, reached an all-time high of about US$193 billion by late 2025, reflecting South Africa's deep integration into global financial markets.[91] Although much of South Africa's debt is domestic (reducing foreign exchange risk), a substantial portion of government bonds and external liabilities are held by foreign investors, reflecting deep exposure to global capital flows.[92]

Credit exposures to China remain relatively modest in aggregate terms but are politically significant. By 2020, South Africa's obligations to Chinese lenders amounted to roughly 4 percent of GDP, including high-profile loans to state-owned utilities such as Eskom, where Chinese financing of about R370 billion (approximately US$25 billion) supported government stimulus initiatives.[93] These loans have drawn criticism and allegations of governance issues, illustrating how Chinese financial engagement can be politically potent without dominating the overall

[90] National Treasury, *Budget Review 2026* (Pretoria: National Treasury, 2026), https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/National%20Budget/2026/review/FullBR.pdf; International Monetary Fund (IMF), *South Africa: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for South Africa* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2026), https://www.imf.org/en/news/articles/2026/02/10/pr-26039-south-africa-imf-executive-board-concludes-2025-article-iv-consultation.

[91] South African Reserve Bank (SARB), *Quarterly Bulletin – December 2025* (Pretoria: SARB, 2025), https://www.resbank.co.za/en/home/publications/publication-detail-pages/quarterly-bulletins/quarterly-bulletin-publications/2025/december.

[92] National Treasury, *Budget Review 2026*; IMF, *South Africa: 2025 Article IV Consultation*.

[93] Boston University Global Development Policy Center, *Chinese Loans to Africa Database* (Boston: Boston University, 2026), https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/.

debt portfolio. On the other hand, South Africa's linkages with Western creditors are more substantial overall: Western institutional investors, commercial bondholders, and private banks hold a large share of the sovereign bond market and external liabilities.[94]

Trade patterns similarly reflect structural constraints. China is South Africa's largest trading partner for both exports and imports, with exports dominated by commodities such as ores and precious metals and imports concentrated in manufactured goods, reinforcing structural constraints on higher value-added industrial development.[95] At the same time, Western markets (the EU and the US) remain major destinations for South African manufactured exports such as motor vehicles and machinery, reflecting entrenched trade patterns shaped more by global value chains than by the diplomatic options available to Pretoria. Thus, while multipolarity expands South Africa's external partnerships, it does not fundamentally alter the structural foundations of the economy. Debt and trade relations remain embedded in global financial and production networks that privilege established economic hierarchies.

Mozambique: Energy Resources and External Power Rivalry

Mozambique has emerged as one of the most strategically significant states in Southern Africa in a multipolar international system, largely due to the discovery of vast offshore natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin. These discoveries have positioned Mozambique at the center of global energy geopolitics, attracting intense interest from a diverse range of external actors, including Western multinational corporations, China, Russia, and emerging powers seeking to secure long-term energy supplies. As a result, Mozambique offers a critical case for examining how external power competition interacts with domestic capacity and regional security dynamics to shape African agency.[96]

The influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Mozambique's extractive sector initially raised expectations of rapid economic transformation, industrial development, and fiscal sustainability. Major liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects led by multinational corporations were widely expected to deliver substantial fiscal revenues and stimulate infrastructure development. However, Mozambique's capacity to leverage these investments for inclusive development has been con-

[94] SARB, *Quarterly Bulletin – December 2025*.
[95] National Treasury, *Budget Review 2026*; IMF, *South Africa: 2025 Article IV Consultation*.
[96] Marcus Power, "Gas, Geopolitics and Mozambique," *Review of African Political Economy* 45, no. 156 (2018): 1–18.

strained by weak institutional frameworks, limited local content integration, and heavy reliance on foreign capital and expertise. This has reinforced structural dependence rather than fostering autonomous development.[97]

Multipolar competition in Mozambique extends beyond economic engagement to encompass security dynamics**,** particularly following the outbreak of a violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado province. The escalation of conflict in this gas-rich region exposed the Mozambican state's limited capacity to provide security, prompting the involvement of external actors. Regional interventions by the SADC and bilateral military assistance from Rwanda underscore the extent to which Mozambique's sovereignty and agency have become intertwined with external security provision.[98]

External military assistance has stabilized key areas but has also revealed the paradox of agency under multipolarity: Mozambique retains formal sovereignty while relying on external security actors that constrain autonomous decision-making. In addition, prioritization of the protection of extractive investments over broader human security has fueled local grievances and undermined state legitimacy.[99]

Regionally, Mozambique's experience reflects the limits of collective African agency. Although the SADC's intervention demonstrates regional solidarity, the slow and fragmented response revealed weaknesses in regional coordination and capacity. External actors continue to play decisive roles in shaping security and economic outcomes, reinforcing asymmetric power relations even within ostensibly African-led frameworks.[100]

Mozambique's engagement with China and other emerging powers has focused primarily on infrastructure development and resource extraction. While these partnerships offer alternatives to Western-dominated financial institutions, they often reproduce extractive economic patterns and lack transparency, limiting opportunities for sustainable industrialization and domestic value addition.[101] As such, Mozambique's participation in multipolar competition has expanded its external partnerships without significantly enhancing its structural agency.

Mozambique illustrates how multipolarity can intensify external competition around strategic resources while simultaneously constraining local agency through

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[97] Joseph Hanlon, "Following the Donor-Designed Path: Mozambique and the Pitfalls of Foreign Aid," *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2018): 1–20.
[98] Cedric de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2020): 301–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251.
[99] Hanlon, "Following the Donor-Designed Path," 1–20.
[100] de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding," 301–17.
[101] Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa*.

economic dependence and security reliance. This case also underscores that the presence of multiple external actors does not automatically translate into increased bargaining power or development gains. Instead, effective agency in a multipolar world requires strong institutions, inclusive governance, and regional coordination, conditions that remain fragile in Mozambique's current political economy.

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado crisis provides a second illustration of conditional agency within a multipolar international order. Following the discovery of vast offshore natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin in the early 2010s, Mozambique became the site of some of Africa's largest LNG investments. In 2019, a US$20 billion LNG project led by TotalEnergies (now TotalEnergies SE) reached final investment decision, making it one of the largest foreign direct investments in African history.[102] Additional LNG projects included ExxonMobil's planned Rovuma LNG development and Eni's Coral South FLNG project, which began production in 2022.[103]

However, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, which escalated after 2017, directly threatened these investments. By 2021, TotalEnergies declared force majeure following attacks near Palma.[104] The security vacuum prompted both regional and bilateral responses. In July 2021, the SADC deployed the SAMIM.[105] That same month, Rwanda independently deployed approximately 1,000 troops to Cabo Delgado under a bilateral agreement with Maputo, preceding the full operationalization of SAMIM forces.[106]

The sequencing is analytically significant. Rwanda's rapid bilateral intervention secured key urban centers and LNG project zones, while the SADC's regional deployment faced logistical and coordination challenges. This episode underscores two dynamics: first, the multiplicity of security actors in a multipolar environment; and second, the limits of regional institutional capacity relative to agile bilateral arrangements. While Mozambique leveraged both regional and bilateral partner-

[102] TotalEnergies, "Mozambique LNG Project Overview," corporate report, 2019.
[103] Eni, "Coral South Introduces Hydrocarbons to FLNG Offshore Mozambique," press release, June 18, 2022, https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2022/06/coral-south-introduces-hydrocarbons-to-flng-offshore-mozambique.html.
[104] Alex Vines, "The Evolving International Response to the Cabo Delgado Crisis" (London: Chatham House, 2021).
[105] Southern African Development Community (SADC), "Communiqué of the Extraordinary Summit of SADC Heads of State and Government," June 23, 2021, https://www.sadc.int/latest-news/communique-extraordinary-summit-sadc-heads-state-and-government-23rd-june-2021.
[106] Government of Rwanda, "Rwanda Deploys Joint Force to Mozambique," press release, July 9, 2021, https://www.gov.rw/blog-detail/rwanda-deploys-joint-force-to-mozambique.

ships, the security response also revealed fragmentation in African collective action.

Despite the transformative potential of LNG development, Mozambique's fiscal crisis—exacerbated by the 2016 "hidden debt" scandal involving more than US$2 billion in undisclosed loans—significantly constrained the state's leverage over foreign investors.[107] As in Zambia, external capital inflows did not automatically translate into structural economic agency. LNG contracts remain dominated by multinational energy corporations, with Mozambique positioned primarily as a resource exporter rather than a value-chain integrator.

Zambia: Debt, Infrastructure, and Chinese Engagement

Zambia offers a revealing case of how Southern African states engage with a multipolar international system through infrastructure-led development while confronting severe constraints on economic and political agency. Since the early 2000s, this country has actively diversified its external partnerships beyond traditional Western donors, engaging China, multilateral financial institutions, and emerging economies to finance large-scale infrastructure projects. This strategy reflects an effort to leverage multipolar competition to accelerate development and reduce dependence on a single external patron.[108]

China has emerged as Zambia's most significant bilateral financier, funding major projects in transport, energy, telecommunications, and urban infrastructure. Chinese loans and investments have supported road construction, hydroelectric power stations, airports, and public buildings, positioning infrastructure development as a central pillar of Zambia's growth strategy.[109] These engagements demonstrate Zambia's attempt to utilize alternative development financing models outside Western conditionality frameworks.

However, the rapid rise in external debt, much of it contracted from Chinese lenders, laid bare the limits of Zambia's agency in a multipolar international environment. Zambia's 2020 sovereign default, the first by an African country during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in infrastructure-centered borrowing that was not matched by sufficient economic diversification or

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[107] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Republic of Mozambique: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Mozambique*, IMF Country Report No. 2026/045 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2026), https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2026/02/19/republic-of-mozambique-2025-article-iv-consultation-press-release-staff-report-and-574050.

[108] Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa*.

[109] Deborah Bräutigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy,'" *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

fiscal discipline.[110] Debt distress significantly reduced Zambia's bargaining power, forcing renewed engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other Western-dominated financial institutions.

Zambia's experience highlights the complexity of balancing external partners. While engagement with China provided rapid financing and visible infrastructure gains, it also created opaque debt structures and limited transparency in loan agreements. Weak domestic oversight and governance challenges further constrained Zambia's ability to manage these partnerships strategically.[111] As a result, multipolar engagement expanded Zambia's options but ultimately narrowed policy autonomy when debt obligations became unsustainable.

Beyond China, Zambia has sought to rebalance its external relations by strengthening ties with the EU, the US, and international financial institutions. The post-2021 government prioritized debt restructuring, fiscal consolidation, and renewed cooperation with Western partners as part of economic recovery efforts. This development highlights the conditional character of agency under multipolarity, as states may realign their partnerships in response to economic necessity rather than strategic preference.[112]

At the regional level, Zambia plays an active role within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), benefiting from relative political stability and a history of regional cooperation. However, regional institutions have provided limited insulation against global financial pressures, highlighting the constraints of regional agency in addressing debt and development challenges.[113]

Zambia's case demonstrates that multipolarity does not inherently empower African states. While diversified external partnerships can enhance short-term development capacity, weak domestic institutions, debt dependence, and global financial hierarchies continue to restrict long-term autonomy. Zambia's experience underscores the importance of aligning external engagement with sustainable development strategies and robust governance frameworks to translate multipolar opportunities into genuine agency.

The Zambian case illustrates the limits of structural economic agency in a multipolar system. By 2020, Zambia's external public debt had reached approximately 120 percent of GDP, culminating in sovereign default in November 2020,

[110] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zambia: Request for an Extended Credit Facility Arrangement—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Zambia*, IMF Country Report No. 21/204 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2021).
[111] Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa*.
[112] IMF, *Zambia: Request for an Extended Credit Facility Arrangement* (2021).
[113] Lee, "The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Southern Africa," 1–18.

the first African state to default during the COVID-19 pandemic.[114] Of Zambia's roughly US$17 billion in external public debt at the time of default, approximately US$6 billion was owed to Chinese creditors (primarily policy banks such as China Exim Bank), while around US$3 billion was held by Eurobond holders from Western financial markets.[115] This creditor composition complicated restructuring negotiations, as Chinese policy banks, private Western bondholders, and multilateral institutions operated under distinct frameworks.

The case demonstrates both expanded diplomatic options and structural constraints. On the one hand, Zambia diversified its financing sources during the 2010s, issuing three Eurobonds (2012, 2014, 2015) while simultaneously contracting significant Chinese infrastructure loans for roads, airports, and hydropower.[116] On the other hand, this diversification did not translate into structural transformation: copper continued to account for over 70 percent of export earnings, reinforcing commodity dependence.[117] Amid fluctuating copper prices and widening fiscal deficits, Zambia's exposure to external creditors, both Chinese and Western, became unsustainable.

The subsequent restructuring under the G20 Common Framework further illustrates conditional agency. As China co-chaired Zambia's official creditor committee in 2023, negotiations were protracted due to coordination challenges between bilateral creditors and private bondholders.[118] Multipolarity provided Zambia with multiple financing partners, but it did not alter the underlying extractive export model. Thus, diplomatic diversification did not prevent structural vulnerability.

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[114] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zambia: Request for an Arrangement Under the Extended Credit Facility—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Zambia*, IMF Country Report No. 22/292 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2022), https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2022/09/06/Zambia-Request-for-an-Arrangement-Under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-Press-Release-Staff-523196.

[115] World Bank, *International Debt Statistics 2022* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36289.

[116] Matthew T. Page et al., "Zambia's Debt Crisis," Chatham House Research Paper, 2021.

[117] World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2022* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/.

[118] Official Creditor Committee (OCC), "Press Release: The Paris Club Welcomes Zambia's Debt Restructuring Agreement under the G20-Paris Club Common Framework," June 23, 2023, https://clubdeparis.org/files/live/sites/clubdeparis/files/contributed/02%20Actualit%C3%A9s-PJ%20et%20image(s)/2023/PR-Zambia-CommonFramework-20230623.pdf.

Synthesis and Implications: Southern Africa in a Multipolar Context

The comparative analysis of Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, and Zambia demonstrates that multipolarity expands strategic options for Southern African states but does not automatically translate into meaningful agency**.** Across cases, states adopt diversification and hedging strategies, engaging simultaneously with multiple external powers, including China, the EU, the US, Russia, and emerging partners to secure investment, aid, and security assistance.[119] Zimbabwe's "Look East Policy" emerged in response to Western sanctions and signaled a shift toward alternative external partnerships. Its engagement with Chinese infrastructure financing, as well as Mozambique's parallel security arrangements, demonstrates strategies of selective alignment aimed at securing immediate benefits.[120] Through its engagement in BRICS, South Africa pursues a multi-alignment strategy that reflects middle-power diplomacy, balancing ties with both Western and non-Western actors to strengthen its regional role.[121]

However, these strategies are structurally constrained**,** reflecting the enduring relevance of Dependency Theory**.** All four states remain heavily reliant on external finance, foreign direct investment, and primary commodity exports, which create asymmetric power relations and limit autonomy in policy decision-making.[122] Debt distress in Zambia, resource dependence in Mozambique, sanctions-induced isolation in Zimbabwe, and South Africa's domestic economic stagnation underscore that multipolarity does not dissolve structural inequalities.[123] In this sense, Southern African agency is bounded**,** consistent with the neorealist notion that states operate within constraints imposed by global power hierarchies and material capabilities.[124]

Regionalism shapes the scope of agency. Although SADC and AU engagement provide platforms for collective bargaining and normative coordination, fragmentation, divergent interests, and limited institutional capacity constrain their effectiveness. Mozambique's dual-track security strategy, involving both SADC and Rwandan forces, reflects selective regional engagement in response to institutional limitations and external pressures. South Africa's contested regional leader-

[119] Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.
[120] Vines, "The Evolving International Response to the Cabo Delgado Crisis."
[121] Habib, *South Africa's Suspended Revolution*.
[122] Samir Amin, "Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa—Origins and Contemporary Forms," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 10, no. 4 (1972): 503–24.
[123] Bräutigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy,'" 1–14.
[124] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

ship similarly shows that middle-power agency depends on domestic capacity and regional legitimacy.[125]

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest several imperatives. First, Southern African states must align external engagement with coherent national development strategies that prioritize economic diversification, industrialization, and institutional capacity-building. Second, enhancing transparency, monitoring, and accountability in managing foreign investment and aid is critical to prevent debt crises, elite capture, and ineffective outcomes. Third, strengthening regional institutions is essential to consolidate collective bargaining power, manage external competition, and coordinate responses to security and development challenges.

Thus, Southern Africa's experience in a multipolar world illustrates a tension between opportunity and structural constraint**.** Multipolarity offers flexibility and strategic options, but meaningful agency is contingent on domestic governance, institutional strength, and regional cohesion. Viewed through Dependency Theory, neorealist frameworks, and Regionalism, the analysis shows that external power competition both expands and constrains Southern African agency: states can maneuver strategically but cannot fully escape structural asymmetries in the global system.[126]

Conclusion

Southern Africa's experience in an increasingly multipolar international order reveals a region moving through a wider diplomatic field without escaping the economic hierarchies that continue to shape its choices. The spread of power across a broader range of actors has created more room for engagement, wider access to finance, and greater flexibility in foreign policy. China, the US, the EU, Russia, and BRICS-related platforms have all expanded the field in which Southern African states operate. Yet expanded access to partners has not carried the region into a fundamentally different position in the global political economy. The central pattern running through the article is one of wider diplomatic opportunity alongside persistent structural exposure.

The four case studies sharpen this point. Zimbabwe's turn toward non-Western partners opened channels of survival and adaptation under sanctions, preserving diplomatic space at a moment of severe isolation. That shift mattered politically, but it did little to resolve the deeper burdens of debt, institutional fragility, and weak productive transformation. Mozambique entered multipolarity through a

[125] Alden and Schoeman, "South Africa in the Company of Giants," 111–29.
[126] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

different route, shaped by natural gas, foreign capital, and escalating insecurity. External interest surrounding Cabo Delgado seemed to promise an economic breakthrough. What followed was a more complicated picture in which energy wealth drew in investors, security actors, and regional institutions, while the state remained heavily dependent on external capabilities.

Zambia's trajectory speaks directly to the promises and risks of diversified external finance. Chinese lending, Eurobond issuance, and large infrastructure projects appeared to offer a path toward accelerated development. The debt crisis that followed showed how quickly this strategy could narrow national room for action once fiscal strain deepened and commodity dependence remained intact. South Africa, with greater institutional capacity and diplomatic reach than its regional counterparts, has pursued multi-alignment with notable sophistication. Its role in BRICS, the AU, and SADC, together with ties to Western markets, has given Pretoria unusual strategic breadth. Even there, domestic stagnation, financial vulnerability, and contested regional authority place clear limits on influence.

Taken together, these cases bring into focus a particular kind of agency. Southern African states negotiate, hedge, recalibrate, and exploit openings created by rivalry among larger powers. They are active participants in the making of their external relationships. At the same time, their choices unfold within economies marked by commodity concentration, exposure to external finance, weak industrial depth, and uneven state capacity. Diplomatic flexibility has grown faster than the material foundations required to turn that flexibility into durable autonomy. That gap is one of the most important conclusions of the study.

The regional dimension adds another layer. SADC and the AU continue to matter as arenas of coordination, legitimacy, and collective voice. They offer platforms through which Southern African governments can frame common concerns, defend regional priorities, and reduce the isolating effects of purely bilateral bargaining. Their political value is real. Yet the record examined here suggests that diplomatic presence and institutional effectiveness remain far apart. Regional action still depends heavily on the will, resources, and calculations of member states. Divergent interests, uneven capacities, and limited enforcement weaken collective follow-through. The response to Cabo Delgado captured this tension with unusual clarity. Regional engagement existed, but operational coherence remained fragile, and bilateral action moved more quickly than the regional mechanism itself.

The wider theoretical implication lies in the distinction between diplomatic maneuverability and structural economic agency. Multipolarity has changed the setting in which Southern African states pursue their interests. It has multiplied interlocutors, widened access points, and reduced the older pattern of dependence on a narrow circle of Western actors. That change is significant. Even so, a broader diplomatic field does not by itself reorder production, trade, finance, or technological capacity. Southern Africa still confronts a world economy in which value is concentrated elsewhere, borrowing costs are shaped externally, and development ambitions remain vulnerable to commodity shocks and capital volatility. Once these conditions are taken seriously, the agency appears less as a fixed possession and more as a negotiated capacity whose scope rises and falls with domestic institutions, fiscal resilience, and regional coherence.

For that reason, the long-term significance of multipolarity for Southern Africa will depend on what states do with the room they have gained. The availability of multiple partners can create leverage, ease isolation, and open new channels of cooperation. Those opportunities matter. Their developmental value, however, will remain limited unless they are tied to stronger institutions, more disciplined management of debt and investment, broader productive diversification, and more effective regional coordination. Southern Africa has entered a wider diplomatic world, yet it still carries the weight of inherited asymmetries that no shift in global power can erase. The most persuasive reading of the evidence is sober. Multipolarity has expanded strategic space, though the quality and consequences of that space continue to depend on domestic strength, regional organization, and the difficult work of economic transformation.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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