


Leveraging BRICS: South Africa's Pursuit of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy Frameworks in a Multipolar World

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Abstract

In the realm of soft power, South Africa, a mixed economy and post-apartheid democratic country, has emerged as a significant influencer in post-colonial Africa, particularly in the post-apartheid era. This elevated status presents a dual opportunity. On one hand, South Africa can use its position as a gateway to the African continent, capitalising on its reputation as a one-stop shop for investment and diplomacy. On the other hand, this very same status often leads to South Africa being perceived as a conduit to Africa's vast, untapped resources, a perception that warrants careful consideration in the context of sustainable development and equitable partnerships. As the dynamics of global politics continue to evolve, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexities inherent in South Africa's position and the implications thereof for the African continent and BRICS. The notion surrounding BRICS remains a contentious issue, sparking intense debate. It is noteworthy that numerous countries from the Global North and Global South leverage South Africa's infrastructure to tap into the vast potential of African states. South Africa's unique position, boasting a comprehensive array of embassies, cements its status as a continental hub - a distinction that Ethiopia, the only African nation never to have been colonised, cannot claim despite its rich history. Accordingly, this study examines South Africa's strategic use of soft power and cultural diplomacy within the BRICS alliance, analysing its unique role as the bloc's sole African representative. Grounded in Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, the research employs a qualitative methodology using secondary data, document analysis, and case studies to assess how South Africa leverages its post-apartheid identity, cultural assets, and diplomatic networks to enhance its global influence. The findings reveal a significant soft power paradox: while South Africa possesses substantial assets, including its democratic transition, Ubuntu philosophy, and gateway position in Africa, its influence is critically undermined by domestic challenges such as xenophobia and economic inequality, which create a credibility gap. The study concludes that for South Africa to convert its symbolic representation into substantive leadership within BRICS, it must institutionalise its cultural diplomacy, proactively forge a cohesive African caucus within the enlarged bloc, and decisively address its internal contradictions.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, BRICS, South Africa, Multipolarity, Ubuntu, Global Governance

1. Introduction

The dawn of the twenty-first century witnessed a significant reconfiguration of global power, marked by the “*rise of the rest*” (Amsden, 2001) as emerging economies began to challenge the post-Cold War unipolar moment. In 2006, Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) allied to counterbalance the political and economic dominance of North America and Western Europe (BBC, 2024). This coalition was fundamentally redefined in 2010 with the inclusion of South Africa, transforming it into BRICS and signalling a deliberate move to unite the most influential developing nations. Unlike traditional alliances reliant on military or economic coercion, BRICS has strategically employed soft power - the ability to shape others’ preferences through attraction and persuasion rather than force (Nye, 2017) to contest established powers and advocate for a more multipolar world order (Vasudeo, 2019). South Africa’s accession to BRICS was a pivotal foreign policy decision, coinciding with its landmark hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, an event that projected its cultural diversity and capabilities to a global audience. This move positioned South Africa not merely as a member state but as the sole African representative within this influential bloc. Its membership is thus dual-pronged: to advance national interests and to serve as a strategic advocate for the African continent on issues ranging from global economic governance reform to sustainable development (Sidiropoulos et al., 2018). This role is guided by its National Development Plan and a foreign policy architecture that prioritises cultural diplomacy and soft power as central tools to enhance its global influence, a commitment recently reiterated in President Cyril Ramaphosa’s 2025 State of the Nation Address.

Empirically, the benefits of this engagement are evident. Trade with BRICS partners has grown consistently as the New Development Bank has funded twelve major infrastructure projects in South Africa valued at over ZAR 100 billion (Mazenda & Masiya, 2021; Adélé, 2023). The recent expansion of BRICS to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE further underscores the bloc’s evolving strategy and growing influence, presenting new opportunities and challenges for South Africa’s role within the alliance (Tella, 2022). Nevertheless, South Africa’s soft power strategy is fraught with contradictions and challenges. Its distinct value proposition, rooted in its post-apartheid democratic identity, its extensive diplomatic network across Africa, and the philosophical concept of Ubuntu, is persistently undermined by domestic issues, including xenophobic violence, racial tensions, and economic inequality. Moreover, its relatively smaller economy constrains its ability to set the BRICS agenda, raising questions about the symmetry of benefits and the authenticity of its role as an African champion (Kundu, 2014; Umezurike & Ogunnubi, 2016). The entry of new BRICS members also risks diluting South Africa’s unique position and tests its capacity to consolidate a coherent African agenda within the bloc. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the central research problem: *How effectively does South Africa leverage soft power and cultural diplomacy within the BRICS framework to enhance its global influence, and what internal and external factors constrain its success?* This paper argues that while BRICS provides a crucial platform for South Africa to project influence, the full potential of its soft power remains unrealised due to a credibility gap between its international aspirations and its domestic realities, as well as the shifting power dynamics within an expanding BRICS alliance.

The study is structured as follows: it first establishes a theoretical foundation using Joseph Nye’s soft power theory, complemented by frameworks of cultural and network diplomacy. It then outlines a qualitative methodology based on secondary data and case studies. Subsequent sections present empirical findings, offer a critical discussion of South Africa’s opportunities and constraints, and conclude with strategic and actionable recommendations for policymakers to refine South Africa’s BRICS engagement in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

2. Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

In this study, Joseph Nye's theory of soft power is employed as the primary theoretical framework. Nye's theory, which emphasises the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, provides a foundational lens for understanding how South Africa can leverage its cultural assets within BRICS to enhance its global standing (Nye, 2004). The theoretical framework allows the researcher to systematically explore the mechanisms through which South Africa projects its soft power, such as through cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and strategic alliances within the BRICS framework. By applying this theoretical lens, the study identifies key variables such as cultural policies, diplomatic initiatives, and international cooperation that contribute to South Africa's influence within BRICS (Huntington, 1996; Snow and Taylor, 2009). The theoretical framework also facilitates the formulation of research questions and hypotheses that are aligned with established knowledge in the field of international relations, ensuring that the study contributes meaningfully to the existing body of literature. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning this study offer critical insights into how South Africa can effectively leverage its position within the BRICS alliance to enhance its global influence. These frameworks are grounded in well-established theories of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and network diplomacy, each of which provides a lens through which to examine South Africa's strategic interactions within BRICS. The denotative and connotative meanings of concepts are also evaluated.

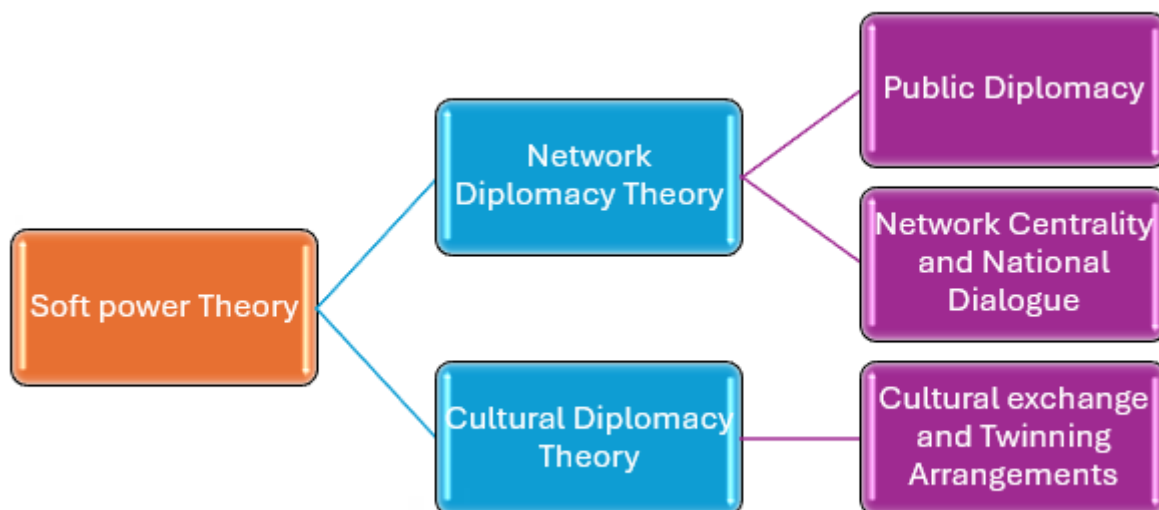


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework, Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power: BRICS as a Platform for South Africa

2.1 Soft Power Theory

Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, first articulated in his seminal work *Bound to Lead* (1990), serves as a critical foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of influence in international relations, especially for emerging economies like South Africa (De Martino, 2020). Soft power is defined by Nye as the ability to shape the preferences and actions of others through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or force (Nye, 2004). This concept relies on intangible assets such as culture, values, and policies, which collectively enhance a nation's dialogue and influence on the global stage. Nye emphasises that while the term "soft power" is relatively new, the behaviours it encapsulates have deep historical roots in South Africa from the Ubuntu paradigms. For example, Alan Hunter (2009) notes that the concept of soft power has been integral to Chinese military

thinking for over two millennia. In the Chinese context, soft power is characterised by two key components: stratagems, often associated with Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (2007), and moral leadership rooted in Confucianism. This dual focus on strategy and ethics underscores the broad applicability of soft power across different cultural and historical contexts, highlighting the importance of non-coercive methods of influence (Hunter, 2009).

A significant aspect of the soft power debate centres on its relationship with hard power. Nye conceptualises power as a spectrum that includes both hard and soft elements. Hard power encompasses the economic and military capabilities that enable a state to coerce or compel others, while soft power is derived from cultural appeal, values, and policies that attract others to align with a state's goals. Unlike hard power, which relies on "carrots and sticks," soft power works through the attraction of others to one's agenda in world politics. As Nye (2002) famously stated, soft power is about "getting others to want what you want" (Nye, 2002, p. 109). However, this distinction between soft and hard power is not universally accepted. Critics like Niall Ferguson argue that soft power is merely a disguised form of hard power, asserting that what ultimately matters in international relations is the ability to exert tangible force or economic pressure (Mcveigh, 2010). Similarly, Eric Li contends that soft power is simply an extension of hard power, derived from the same sources of strength but manifesting in different forms (Li, 2018). These critiques highlight the ongoing debate over whether soft power can truly stand alone as a distinct form of influence or whether it is inextricably linked to more traditional forms of power.

In the context of South Africa, soft power theory is particularly relevant as the country seeks to solidify its role within the BRICS framework. South Africa's rich cultural heritage, commitment to democratic values, and the legacy of post-apartheid reconciliation offer significant opportunities to project soft power on the international stage (Gallarotti, 2011). By effectively leveraging these attributes, South Africa can shape global perceptions, forge strategic alliances, and enhance its influence within the Global South, particularly within BRICS. Thus, the ability to harness soft power is crucial for South Africa's ambition to position itself as a leader in promoting African interests globally. Through cultural diplomacy, South Africa can highlight its unique cultural narratives, share its experiences of overcoming apartheid, and promote its democratic values, thereby fostering deeper connections with other BRICS nations and beyond. This soft power strategy not only strengthens South Africa's standing within BRICS but also contributes to its broader foreign policy objectives of advancing African development and representing the continent's interests on the global stage (Nye, 2004).

As the global geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, South Africa's reliance on soft power becomes increasingly vital. In a world where military and economic power are often insufficient to achieve lasting influence, soft power offers South Africa a means to assert its presence and advocate for its priorities without resorting to coercion. By engaging in cultural exchanges, promoting its values, and participating actively in international institutions, South Africa can enhance its soft power, thereby playing a more influential role in shaping global governance and contributing to a more equitable world order. In linking this theoretical framework to the overall study, Nye's concept of soft power serves as a guiding lens through which South Africa's strategies within BRICS can be analysed. It helps to explain how South Africa can utilise cultural diplomacy as a means to influence other BRICS members and shape international norms in favour of its own national interests. The framework also provides the basis for understanding the interplay between soft and hard power in the global context, particularly in the strategies employed by emerging economies like South Africa as they navigate the complexities of global governance. This integration of soft power theory into the study's conceptual framework ensures that the analysis is both theoretically grounded and relevant to the practical realities of South Africa's international relations strategy within BRICS.

2.2 Soft Power: The Subtle Art of Influence

Soft power, as conceptualised by Joseph Nye, is the ability of a country to influence others to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). Unlike hard power, which relies on military might or economic leverage, soft power draws on a nation's cultural appeal, its values, and its policies. In contemporary international relations, where the balance of power increasingly hinges on persuasion and attraction, soft power is a crucial tool. The efficacy of soft power lies in its capacity to shape the preferences and behaviours of other nations by making a country's culture, values, and policies attractive and desirable. (Petroni, 2019)

A nation's soft power is fundamentally rooted in three primary resources: culture, values, and policies. Table 1 below elaborates on these 3 resources.

Table 1: Soft power, primary resources

Culture
<p>South Africa's rich cultural heritage is a vital aspect of its soft power, shaped by its complex history and diverse population. The country's commitment to reconciliation, as seen in the Government of National Unity One (GNU I- 1995-2000) and GNU II (2024-2029), has contributed to its attractiveness as a global partner. This commitment was further delivered by the State President of the Republic South Africa during the State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 06 February 2025 supported by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) countries, with an emphasis on exchange and twinning institutional arrangements aligned with the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, the One Belt and One Road signed between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa in 2015 as extended to various Asian Tigers, BRICS Countries, and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)</p> <p>Aligned to Nye (2017) ideology of soft power in Africa as a cradle of humankind and root of humanity or ubuntu paradigm and related socio-economic engineering soft power interventions (RDP White Paper 1994: 7-9), it is argued that the South Africa's cultural exports, including films, music, and literature, serve as powerful tools for promoting its values and way of life. The country's vibrant arts scene, diverse cuisine, and traditional music have captivated global audiences, fostering greater understanding and cooperation. Furthermore, South Africa's participation in international agreements and forums, such as the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the African Energy Declaration, and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), demonstrates its commitment to promoting its culture and values globally. In addition to its cultural exports, South Africa has also leveraged international events to promote its culture and values. The country's hosting of the Rugby World Cup in 1995 and the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup in 2010 showcased its ability to promote cultural exchange, resilience, and socio-economic cohesion. As a new member of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping, South Africa has also used these events to advance the notion that football is more than a game, promoting cultural exchange and people-to-people diplomacy. Accordingly, South Africa's cultural diversity is reflected in its 12 official languages, including KhoeSān or KhoiSān (Inkhwe and San, English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Sepedi/Northern Sotho, Xhosa, Venda, Tswana, Southern Sotho, Zulu, Swazi or SiSwati, and Tsonga. The country's diverse population comprises various ethnic groups, including the Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, English, Indian, and KhoeSān or KhoiSān communities, each with its unique cultural practices, traditions, and customs.</p>
Values
<p>South African values, deeply rooted in Africa's rich history and heritage, are founded on the principles of democracy, human rights, and social justice. As part of the African continent, South Africa is considered the cradle of humankind, home to a diverse array of cultures, languages, and traditions. The continent's values, shaped by its complex history and the confluence of ancient civilisations, have been influenced by its strategic position at the crossroads of the world.</p> <p>The African values of Ubuntu, or humanism, emphasise the importance of community, mutual respect, and cooperation. These values are increasingly being recognised and championed by African nations, as well as by international partners, including BRICS countries, the Middle East, and Asian Tigers. The influence of African values on globalisation, competition, and international relations is growing, as the continent seeks to reengineer its values and reclaim its position on the world stage.</p>

The discovery of new heritage sites, mineral resources, and ancient engineering marvels has sparked a renewed interest in Africa's rich cultural heritage. The continent's ancient civilisations, such as Egypt, Nubia, and Axum, have left an indelible mark on human history. The pyramids of Giza, the temples of Abu Simbel, and the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are testaments to Africa's ingenuity, creativity, and innovative spirit.

Through its membership in BRICS, South Africa plays a dual role in positioning its national and African interests to reclaim its global competitiveness, leveraging its rich mineral resources. South Africa's values are increasingly being recognised and respected by international partners, including the G7 and G20, since 2010. The African Union's Agenda 2063, which aims to promote economic integration, peace, and stability across the continent, is a testament to Africa's commitment to its values and principles.

As noted in the Government Gazette (2 February 1996, No. 16943: 18), "the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is aimed at promoting economic growth and development, reducing poverty and inequality, and improving the quality of life for all South Africans." Furthermore, Dr Ruel Khoza (2005: 157) emphasises the importance of African values in shaping the continent's future, stating that "African leaders must reclaim their cultural heritage and use it as a foundation for building a new Africa that is proud of its past, confident in its present, and hopeful for its future."

Using Nye's theoretical framework, supported by South African policies and Dr Ruel Khoza's work, it is evident that South African values, rooted in Africa's rich history and heritage, are founded on the principles of democracy, human rights, and social justice. As Africa seeks to reclaim its position on the world stage, its values are increasingly being recognised and respected by international partners. The continent's growing influence on globalisation, competition, and international relations reflects its rich cultural heritage and the values that underpin it. Accordingly, A nation that champions and exemplifies universally respected values in BRICS and other global forums of G7 and G20 can build a positive international reputation, making it a model for others to emulate, concluded Anholt (2007).

Policies

The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was a pivotal moment in South Africa's transition to democracy, shaping the country's policies, strategies, and plans from 1991 to 1992. The negotiations were guided by the Declaration of Intent, which committed parties to establishing a democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist society. This commitment to human rights, democracy, and equality has been recognised globally, enhancing South Africa's soft power. The Freedom Charter of 1955, adopted by the African National Congress (ANC), was a significant influence on CODESA. The charter's emphasis on equality, justice, and human rights aligned with the conscious philosophy of China, which prioritises people-centred development and social harmony. This alignment reflects the growing recognition of the importance of human rights and social justice in international relations. The concept of Ubuntu, or African humanism, is central to South Africa's soft power. Ubuntu emphasises the importance of community, mutual respect, and cooperation. As Khoza (2005: 140) explains, Ubuntu provides a framework for a new approach to leadership, based on African principles. This approach prioritises people-centred development, social harmony, and cooperation. The African Renaissance, a concept popularised by former President Thabo Mbeki, is closely tied to the idea of Ubuntu. The African Renaissance aims to promote cultural revival, peace, security, democracy, and wealth creation in Africa. This movement seeks to reclaim Africa's rich cultural heritage and promote African solutions to African problems. South Africa's leadership in international forums, such as BRICS and FOCAC, demonstrates its commitment to global well-being and cooperation. The country's role in international climate change initiatives and humanitarian assistance has strengthened its reputation as a responsible global citizen. As Keohane and Nye (1998) note, policies that promote environmental protection, humanitarian aid, and conflict resolution can significantly contribute to a nation's soft power.

Public Diplomacy: The Vanguard of Soft Power

With the understanding of the Ubuntu paradigm, the soft power relies on public diplomacy. Public diplomacy plays a pivotal role in the exercise of soft power. It involves engaging with foreign publics to inform and influence them, thereby building a positive image and fostering mutual understanding. Historically, public diplomacy has been instrumental in shaping global perceptions, as seen during the Cold War when the appeal of Western culture and values significantly undermined the Soviet bloc (Cull, 2009). In today's global landscape, public diplomacy is more relevant than ever, especially

in the context of transnational challenges such as terrorism. The struggle against transnational terrorism is not merely a military battle but also a fight to win hearts and minds. Overreliance on hard power, such as military interventions and economic sanctions, often fails to address the root causes of terrorism and can exacerbate the problem. Public diplomacy, when used smartly, becomes a critical tool in addressing these challenges.

For public diplomacy to be effective in generating soft power, it must be “smart.” This entails several key elements:

Soft power is an essential component of a country’s influence in the modern world. By leveraging culture, values, and policies, nations can attract and persuade others, achieving their goals through voluntary alignment rather than coercion. A smart power strategy that integrates both hard and soft power, supported by robust public diplomacy, is crucial for navigating today’s complex global landscape. Public diplomacy, when executed with credibility, self-criticism, and active civil society engagement, becomes a powerful tool in a nation’s arsenal, capable of shaping global perceptions and fostering international cooperation.

2.3 Cultural Diplomacy Theory

Diplomacy as a practice and theoretical concept has long been an integral part of international relations, predating the formal development of diplomatic theory within the academic discipline of International Relations (IR). In modern academic theorising is seen as the systematic organisation of ideas and principles that aim to explain specific phenomena (Constantinou & Sharp, 2016). The study of diplomacy has increasingly embraced perspectives from disciplines beyond IR, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, theology, philosophy, and cultural studies, leading to a more pluralistic and comprehensive understanding of diplomacy. Among these perspectives, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a critical subset of diplomacy, particularly relevant for states seeking to assert their identity and influence on the global stage.

Cultural diplomacy refers to the set of activities undertaken by, or in collaboration with, the diplomatic authorities of a state, aimed at promoting the state’s foreign policy interests through cultural exchange (Pajtinka, 2014). This form of diplomacy allows states to craft, communicate, and share their national identities globally, making it an essential tool for emerging nations. Despite its significance, cultural diplomacy was not formally recognised as a distinct concept until the mid-20th century, when the term gained prominence during the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a global struggle for influence. The U.S. Department of State first defined cultural diplomacy in 1959 as “the direct and enduring contact between people of different nations [...] to help create a better climate of international trust and understanding in which official relations can operate” (U.S. Department of State, 1959, iv) (Grincheva, 2023). This definition underscores the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering mutual understanding and creating a foundation for more effective diplomatic relations. In practice, cultural diplomacy encompasses a range of activities, including promoting national culture and identity, facilitating the dissemination of a nation’s language abroad, and negotiating international treaties on cultural cooperation. These activities are tailored to reflect a state’s foreign policy priorities and ambitions, and they vary in structure and intensity depending on the state’s objectives and resources.

Cultural diplomacy theory provides a framework for understanding how South Africa can leverage its rich cultural resources to enhance its influence within the BRICS alliance. This theory posits that the exchange of cultural artefacts, ideas, and practices plays a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding and strengthening international relations (Mark, 2009). For South Africa, cultural diplomacy offers a strategic avenue to project its national identity, values, and cultural heritage

on the global stage, thereby enhancing its soft power. Within the BRICS framework, cultural diplomacy allows South Africa to showcase its diverse cultural heritage, which includes its history of struggle and reconciliation, its vibrant arts scene, and its linguistic diversity. By engaging in cultural exchanges with other BRICS nations, South Africa can build bridges that facilitate greater cooperation and understanding among these emerging powers. These cultural exchanges serve not only to bolster South Africa's soft power but also to advance its broader foreign policy objectives within BRICS. Through cultural diplomacy, South Africa can position itself as a leader in promoting African interests, fostering deeper ties with other emerging economies, and contributing to a more equitable global order.

Cultural diplomacy aligns with South Africa's ambition to assert its identity as a key player in international affairs, particularly within the Global South. By promoting its cultural assets and values through the BRICS platform, South Africa can strengthen its influence and build lasting partnerships that reflect shared interests and mutual respect. This strategic use of cultural diplomacy is crucial for South Africa as it seeks to navigate the complexities of global governance and advocate for the interests of Africa and other developing regions. Cultural diplomacy theory offers valuable insights into how South Africa can utilise its cultural resources to enhance its global influence within the BRICS alliance. By engaging in cultural diplomacy, South Africa can effectively project its national identity, build strategic alliances, and support its foreign policy objectives. This approach not only strengthens South Africa's position within BRICS but also contributes to its broader goal of promoting African interests on the international stage. Through cultural diplomacy, South Africa can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of global governance and fostering a more inclusive and cooperative world order.

2.4 Cultural and diplomatic relations within BRICS: A collaborative and strategic partnership

Cultural diplomacy, although a relatively recent term, has deep historical roots, tracing back to the activities of early explorers, traders, teachers, and artists who served as ambassadors of their cultures and ideas across the world (Grincheva, 2023; Ang et al., 2015). In today's global context, especially amidst economic challenges, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a crucial tool for fostering international cooperation, economic development, and cultural exchange. By promoting cultural exchange programs, cultural diplomacy facilitates skills development, bolsters creative industries, and drives both national and regional economic growth (Agbai et al., 2014). This approach not only enhances a nation's soft power but also contributes to global stability by promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among states (Saaida, 2013).

Cultural diplomacy operates on multiple levels, influencing global public opinion and shaping the ideologies of individuals, communities, and nations (Ang et al., 2015). In a world marked by competing interests and ideologies, the prioritisation and acceleration of cultural diplomacy are essential for South Africa. By actively projecting its image, values, and cultures both domestically and internationally, South Africa can strengthen its global standing and foster deeper ties with other nations. As Nye (2004) suggests, cultural diplomacy represents a long-term investment in nurturing a shared sense of culture, art, and heritage, with the potential to reshape the world into a more interconnected and understanding global community.

The significance of cultural diplomacy becomes particularly evident during observances such as Human Rights Month, where its role in safeguarding and advancing the right to artistic and cultural expression is highlighted. Cultural clashes often arise when one society attempts to impose its culture on another, leading to conflict (Ogharanduku & Tinuoye, 2020). In this context, cultural diplomacy serves as a vital component of diplomatic practice, promoting national culture abroad and mitigating cultural conflicts. For South Africa, enhancing its diplomatic toolkit with a stronger

emphasis on cultural diplomacy could significantly advance its international interests, foster mutual understanding, and enhance global cooperation through cultural exchange and dialogue (Slaughter, 2009).

Within the BRICS alliance, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, cultural and diplomatic relations play a pivotal role in promoting economic growth and development through multifaceted cooperation initiatives. Joint investment projects, trade agreements, and infrastructure development among BRICS countries facilitate the pooling of resources and expertise, enabling large-scale projects that individual nations might struggle to undertake independently (Prinsloo, 2022). This collaborative approach stimulates economic activities, spurs job creation, and fosters technological advancement across member states. Research underscores the potential of economic cooperation within BRICS to elevate living standards by fostering sustainable development and reducing inequalities among participating nations (Hooijmaaijers, 2021; Duggan et al., 2022). Beyond economics, BRICS and similar alliances play a crucial role in fostering cultural and people-to-people exchanges. These interactions are instrumental in deepening mutual understanding, building trust, and enhancing diplomatic relations among member countries. By promoting cultural exchanges, alliances like BRICS contribute to global harmony and stability by mitigating potential conflicts through increased dialogue and cooperation on shared values and interests. This aspect of cultural diplomacy is essential for promoting peaceful coexistence and collective prosperity, particularly in regions characterised by historical tensions or differing perspectives (Hameiri & Lee, 2012).

South Africa's diverse cultural heritage gains international prominence through initiatives such as the BRICS Film Festival and other cultural exchange programs (Cocks, et al., 2017). These initiatives not only enrich South Africa's cultural landscape but also enhance its soft power by showcasing its cultural diversity on a global platform. South Africa's participation in BRICS, therefore, represents an investment in a future marked by global interdependence and collaboration. The benefits of economic growth, diplomatic influence, development opportunities, technological exchange, and cultural enrichment all underscore the transformative impact of this alliance. As South Africa engages with its BRICS partners, it not only secures its national interests but also contributes to the emergence of a more equitable and multipolar world order (Tella, 2022).

In addition to that, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a significant initiative aimed at enhancing economic cooperation and integration across the African continent (Kuhlmann, et al., 2020). Like BRICS, AfCFTA seeks to boost intra-African trade, foster industrial development, and create a unified market for goods and services. Studies suggest that AfCFTA could unlock substantial economic growth opportunities for African countries by reducing trade barriers and promoting regional economic integration (Chapon et al., 2020; Briggs, 2021). Furthermore, AfCFTA's focus on economic integration is complemented by cultural exchange initiatives that strengthen social ties and promote a sense of African unity amidst diversity.

The deepening cooperation among BRICS countries has also led to significant institutional developments, such as the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) (Adams, 2023). The NDB offers new resources and perspectives from emerging powers to the developing world, providing an alternative to traditional Western-led financial institutions. Assessing the impact of these initiatives on existing international financial institutions will be crucial in understanding the evolving dynamics of global governance (Takahashi, 2021). However, the soft power efforts within BRICS have been uneven, with countries like China and Russia being more proactive than others, such as South Africa. To fully realise their potential, BRICS countries need to more effectively recognise and utilise their cultural resources and public diplomacy. This recognition is essential for enhancing the alliance's collective influence on the global stage.

Alliances like BRICS and initiatives such as AfCFTA not only promote economic growth and development through collaborative projects but also contribute to global stability by enhancing cultural understanding and fostering diplomatic relations. The literature highlights the transformative potential of these alliances in advancing collective prosperity and sustainable development on both regional and global scales. A cooperative approach, guided by a collaborative mindset, may best serve BRICS countries in their efforts to peacefully and constructively transform the current world order.

2.5 Intersection of Network Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy

Network diplomacy is an evolving concept that addresses the complexities of modern international relations by emphasising the role of networks in diplomatic interactions. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of public diplomacy and network centralisation, as it integrates the idea that modern diplomacy operates within a networked environment where both state and non-state actors interact. The theory suggests that diplomacy is no longer the exclusive domain of states but involves a complex web of relationships among various actors (Morozov, 2023).

Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy, unlike traditional state-centric diplomacy, focuses on engaging with foreign publics to influence their perceptions and attitudes towards a country. This approach leverages soft power to achieve foreign policy objectives through means such as cultural exchanges, international broadcasting, and social media campaigns (Saskia, 2022). Public diplomacy emphasises building relationships with non-state actors, including the general public, NGOs, and the media, recognising the power these actors hold in shaping international opinions and policies.

Network Centralization

Network centralisation refers to the degree to which a network's structure is dominated by a central node or a few central nodes. In highly centralised networks, a few key actors hold significant influence over the flow of information and resources. While centralisation can lead to efficient decision-making and coordination, it also poses risks if these central nodes are compromised, potentially undermining the entire network (Morozov, 2023).

Intersection of Public Diplomacy and Network Centralisation

The intersection of public diplomacy and network centralisation offers several strategic insights into how diplomatic efforts can be optimised in a networked global environment:

Enhanced Communication

Centralised networks can enhance the effectiveness of public diplomacy by streamlining communication channels. Influential media outlets or prominent NGOs, as central nodes, can efficiently disseminate messages to a broader audience, thereby amplifying the reach and impact of public diplomacy initiatives (Theoretical Analysis and Implications of Network Diplomacy Concept, 2024).

Strategic Alliances

Public diplomacy efforts benefit significantly from strategic alliances with central nodes in the network. These alliances can magnify the influence of diplomatic initiatives, making it easier to shape public opinion and achieve foreign policy goals (NETWORK DIPLOMACY: THEORY - SSRN, 2024).

Resilience and Adaptability

While centralisation offers communication efficiency, it also demands resilience and adaptability. Public diplomacy strategies must be flexible enough to respond to changes within the network, such as shifts in public sentiment or the emergence of new influential actors (Network Approach in Public Diplomacy: A Critical Analysis, 2024).

Challenges of Centralisation

Over-reliance on central nodes can be risky. If these nodes lose credibility or are compromised, the effectiveness of the entire network can be undermined. Therefore, a balanced approach that incorporates both centralised and decentralised elements can enhance the robustness and resilience of public diplomacy efforts (The Role of Networks in Public Diplomacy, 2024). Network diplomacy theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between public diplomacy and network centralisation. By leveraging the strengths of both concepts, diplomatic actors can navigate the complexities of modern international relations more effectively. This intersection highlights the importance of both centralising communication for efficiency and maintaining flexibility to adapt to the dynamic nature of global networks. Such an approach enables states and non-state actors to enhance their influence, achieve diplomatic objectives, and contribute to global governance in a more nuanced and effective manner. By integrating network diplomacy into the broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks of soft power and cultural diplomacy, the study underscores the strategic importance of networks in shaping international relations. This multifaceted approach ensures that diplomatic initiatives are not only effective in the short term but are also sustainable and adaptable in the face of evolving global challenges.

3. Conceptual Framework

In this study, the conceptual framework is built around three central concepts: Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, and BRICS as a Platform. These concepts are crucial for understanding how South Africa navigates its role within the BRICS alliance by leveraging its cultural assets and soft power strategies. Below, each concept is defined both connotatively (the implied or associated meaning) and denotatively (the literal or explicit meaning), providing a comprehensive understanding of their significance in the context of this research.

3.1 Cultural Diplomacy

Denotative Meaning

Cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of cultural elements—such as ideas, values, traditions, and artistic expressions—between nations to foster mutual understanding, strengthen relationships, and promote national interests (Ang, et al., 2015). It is an official state policy that involves the deliberate projection of a nation's cultural heritage and values to influence foreign publics and governments (Georghiou, 2015).

Connotative Meaning

Beyond its formal definition, cultural diplomacy carries connotations of building bridges across cultural divides, nurturing long-term international relationships, and creating a positive global image. It embodies the idea that culture can be a powerful tool in softening political tensions and enhancing a country's influence on the global stage (Grincheva, 2023). For South Africa, cultural diplomacy is not only about showcasing its rich and diverse cultural heritage but also about positioning itself as a

leader in the Global South, advocating for African interests, and contributing to global cultural and diplomatic discourses.

3.2 Soft Power

Denotative Meaning

Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences and behaviours of others through appeal and attraction, rather than coercion or payment (Tella, 2022). It is derived from the cultural, ideological, and policy-based influence that a country can exert internationally, making other nations want to emulate or align with its values and goals.

Connotative Meaning

Soft power suggests a subtle, yet profound, form of influence that operates through admiration and voluntary alignment rather than fear or financial incentives. It is often associated with the power of persuasion, the allure of cultural products, and the appeal of political ideals (Nye, 2017). For South Africa, leveraging soft power within the BRICS framework involves using its history, democratic values, and cultural assets to inspire cooperation, foster deeper connections, and advocate for reforms in global governance that reflect the interests of the Global South.

3.3 BRICS as a Platform

Denotative Meaning

BRICS is an acronym for a coalition of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Umezurike & Ogunnubi, 2016). This alliance was formed to foster economic, political, and cultural cooperation among its members, providing a collective platform to influence global economic governance and challenge traditional Western dominance in international affairs.

Connotative Meaning

The influence of non-Western powers in shaping the global order. As a platform, it represents an opportunity for South Africa to engage with other powerful emerging economies on equal footing, enhancing its strategic influence and advancing its national interests (Buser, 2021). The BRICS alliance also connotes a collective effort to redefine global norms, promote multipolarity, and ensure that the voices of the Global South are heard and respected in international forums. For South Africa, BRICS is a crucial stage for exercising cultural diplomacy and soft power, helping it to build alliances, foster solidarity, and contribute to the creation of a more equitable global system.

3.4 Interaction between Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy serves as a key mechanism through which soft power is exercised. By engaging in cultural exchanges and promoting its values, South Africa can enhance its soft power, making its culture and political ideals more attractive to other nations within the BRICS alliance. This interaction underscores the importance of cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool for amplifying South Africa's influence on the global stage.

3.5 BRICS as an Enabler of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

BRICS provides the platform through which South Africa can deploy its cultural diplomacy initiatives and exercise its soft power. The alliance offers a collaborative space for cultural, economic, and political exchanges that are essential for building and sustaining influence. The BRICS platform enables South Africa to engage with other emerging powers, share its cultural narratives, and promote policies that reflect its national interests and those of the broader African continent.

3.6 Strategic Outcomes of the Conceptual Framework

By leveraging cultural diplomacy and soft power within the BRICS framework, South Africa aims to achieve several strategic outcomes: enhanced global influence, stronger bilateral and multilateral relationships, and a more prominent role in global governance (Agbai, et al., 2014). This approach not only benefits South Africa but also contributes to the collective goals of BRICS, particularly in advocating for a more balanced and inclusive international order. The conceptual framework outlined above provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the key concepts driving South Africa's strategy within the BRICS alliance. By defining and exploring the connotative and denotative meanings of Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, and BRICS as a Platform, this framework sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how these concepts interact to shape South Africa's role in international relations. The framework also underscores the importance of these concepts in achieving the research objectives, offering a clear pathway for analysing South Africa's influence within the global context.

3.7 Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Tools for Navigating Global Complexities

Soft power, as a concept, encompasses a range of strategies that nations use to influence global affairs without resorting to coercion. Unlike hard power, which relies on military force or economic pressure, soft power draws on cultural appeal, values, and policies to attract and persuade others (Ohnesorge, 2020). South Africa's post-apartheid journey of reconciliation and peacebuilding offers valuable lessons for global soft power initiatives. The emphasis on dialogue, understanding, and cultural exchange during this period demonstrates the potential of soft power to address deep-seated conflicts and promote international cooperation. A central element of South Africa's soft power strategy is the concept of Ubuntu, an African philosophy that emphasises interconnectedness and mutual respect. Ubuntu, which embodies the principle of "I am because you are," reflects a broader humanistic ideal that transcends borders and cultures, making it a powerful tool in South Africa's diplomatic efforts. By embracing Ubuntu, South Africa can foster greater understanding, cooperation, and lasting peace on a global scale, positioning itself as a moral leader in international affairs.

However, South Africa's soft power is not without contradictions and challenges. Recurring incidents of xenophobic violence have marred the country's image both regionally and globally, contradicting the values of tolerance and inclusivity central to its soft power narrative. These incidents have negatively impacted South Africa's ability to attract and co-opt other nations, weakening its soft power influence. In addition, inconsistencies in South Africa's leadership, particularly concerning its stance on African issues, have further undermined its soft power. Effective soft power relies on consistent and credible leadership that can champion and uphold the values being promoted. South Africa's foreign policy has sometimes exhibited contradictions, especially in balancing national interests with regional and continental aspirations. This ambivalence can dilute the effectiveness of its soft power, as it creates uncertainty about the country's true commitments and priorities.

3.8 Maximising South Africa's Soft Power Potential within BRICS

To fully harness its soft power potential and solidify its role as a significant player in global affairs, South Africa must address the internal contradictions that undermine its influence. By resolving these issues and projecting a more consistent and inclusive leadership, South Africa can better leverage its BRICS membership to enhance its global influence. This approach will require a more strategic alignment of South Africa's national interests with the broader goals of BRICS, ensuring that the country remains an active and influential participant in shaping the global agenda. South Africa's foreign policy realignment towards the Global South, particularly through BRICS, reflects a strategic shift in its international relations. However, the complexities and challenges associated with this shift necessitate a nuanced approach that leverages soft power, cultural diplomacy, and strategic partnerships. By addressing internal contradictions and enhancing its leadership consistency, South Africa maximises its soft power potential and plays a more influential role within BRICS. Moreover, aligning its cultural diplomacy efforts with SDG 17 provides a pathway for South Africa to contribute to global sustainable development while advancing its national and regional interests. Through these efforts, South Africa can reinforce its position as a key player in global governance, promoting a more equitable and multipolar world order.

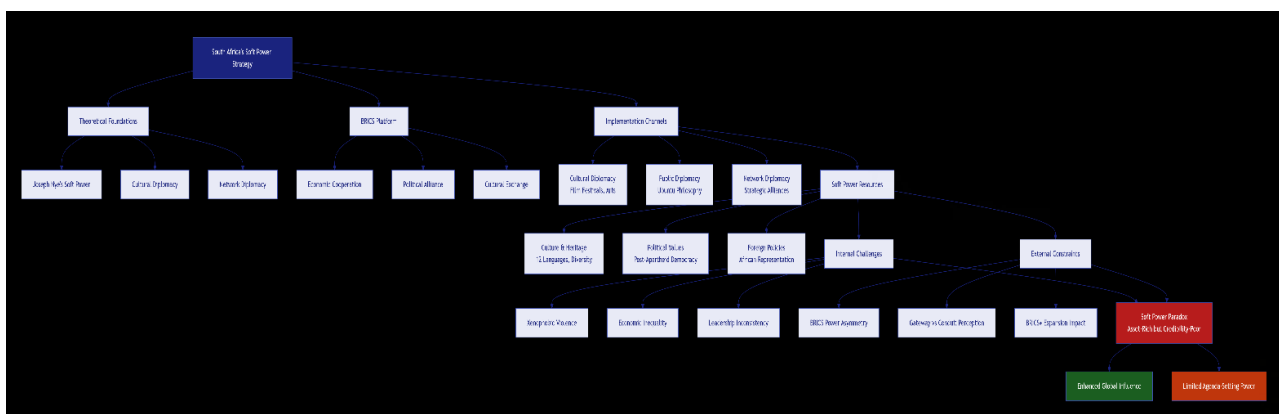


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of South Africa's Soft Power Strategy in BRICS.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary data sources, document analysis, and case studies to examine South Africa's use of soft power and cultural diplomacy within BRICS (Bowen, 2009). Data was sourced from trade statistics published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the South African Reserve Bank (SARB); BRICS Summit communiqués; reports from the New Development Bank (NDB); and Afrobarometer public opinion surveys capturing African and South African perceptions of BRICS (Sidiropoulos et al., 2018; Tella, 2022).

The selection of sources was guided by three criteria. First, **timeliness**, with emphasis on data produced after 2010, the year South Africa joined BRICS, and particularly on materials published after the 2023 BRICS expansion to ensure contemporary relevance (Prinsloo, 2022). Second, **relevance**, with preference for sources directly related to cultural diplomacy, soft power theory, and South Africa's international positioning (Nye, 2017; Georghiou, 2015). Third, **reliability**, privileging peer-reviewed academic articles, official government reports, and policy documents from reputable international organisations (Yin, 2018).

To illustrate the application of soft power, the study employs three case studies: South Africa's hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup as a foundational soft power event (Ogunnubi, 2022); the BRICS Film Festival as an example of cultural diplomacy (Cocks et al., 2017); and NDB financed infrastructure

projects in South Africa as evidence of tangible economic benefits (Mazenda & Masiya, 2021). The methodological framing also considers South Africa's identity as the only post-apartheid state in Africa (Neethling, 2017). This dual identity, combining features of both the Global North and Global South, complicates its role within BRICS. On the one hand, South Africa operates as a gateway to Africa, with an extensive diplomatic network and relatively sophisticated institutions (Hendricks & Majosi, 2021). On the other hand, it remains a mixed economy democracy marked by persistent structural inequalities, domestic instability, and a credibility gap that undermines its international soft power narrative (Umezurike & Ogunnubi, 2016).

The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis, guided by Joseph Nye's theory of soft power and complementary frameworks of cultural and network diplomacy. Triangulating multiple data sources, economic statistics, public opinion surveys, and cultural case studies ensured a more robust and valid assessment of South Africa's strategies and outcomes within BRICS.

5. Empirical Evidence of South Africa's BRICS Engagement

Empirical data underscores the material benefits of South Africa's BRICS membership. Trade with BRICS partners has steadily expanded, growing from approximately USD 28.4 billion in 2010 to USD 45 billion in 2021, which now represents nearly 20 per cent of South Africa's total trade portfolio (IMF, 2023). China is South Africa's largest trading partner within BRICS, accounting for more than 10 per cent of both exports and imports (SARB, 2022).

In addition to trade, South Africa has benefited from BRICS-linked development finance. Since its establishment, the New Development Bank has approved twelve projects in South Africa, valued at over ZAR 100 billion (USD 5.2 billion) (NDB, 2023). These projects include renewable energy initiatives, transport infrastructure upgrades, and water management systems, highlighting the tangible developmental dividends of membership (Adélé, 2023).

South Africa's distinctive position as a continental diplomatic hub further enhances its value within BRICS. It possesses the most comprehensive diplomatic network in Africa, allowing it to function as a practical entry point for both Global North and Global South actors seeking engagement with the continent (Diko & Sempijja, 2020). While Ethiopia symbolically projects resilience as the only African nation never colonised, South Africa combines symbolic post-apartheid transformation with institutional capacity, making it a more effective continental interlocutor (Tella, 2022).

Yet this gateway role also presents contradictions. South Africa is celebrated as a post-apartheid democracy committed to reconciliation and Ubuntu, but it is simultaneously criticised as a conduit for external actors to access Africa's resources (Carmody, 2019). Its cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as the BRICS Film Festival (2016, 2019, 2023), have projected a positive image of its creative industries and reconciliatory ethos (Cocks et al., 2017). However, this narrative is persistently undermined by episodes of xenophobic violence, which erode the credibility of South Africa's claim to embody tolerance, inclusivity, and human solidarity (Afrobarometer, 2022; Ogunnubi, 2022).

At the same time, Afrobarometer surveys (2022) reveal mixed public perceptions. While many South Africans view BRICS membership as a positive force for African agency, concerns persist about the uneven distribution of benefits and China's outsized influence within the bloc. These perceptions underscore the fragility of South Africa's soft power credibility. The recent expansion of BRICS to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE further amplifies these challenges, as South Africa must now compete with other African and regional actors to retain its distinct voice within the alliance.

6. Findings and Discussion

This study's findings reveal a complex and often contradictory picture of South Africa's soft power engagement within BRICS. While the country has strategically leveraged the platform to project influence, its efforts are consistently undermined by a significant credibility gap and structural constraints. The discussion that follows interprets these findings through the theoretical lenses of soft power and network diplomacy.

6.1 The Strategic Deployment and Limits of Cultural Diplomacy

The findings confirm that South Africa has effectively utilised cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool. Initiatives like the BRICS Film Festival have successfully showcased the nation's creative industries and diverse cultural heritage, fostering people-to-people connections and positioning South Africa as a key cultural player within the alliance (Cocks et al., 2017). This aligns with Nye's (2004) assertion that culture is a primary resource for soft power, capable of creating attraction and fostering mutual understanding.

However, the discussion must contend with the stark contradiction between this projected image and domestic realities. The recurring episodes of xenophobic violence directly undermine the core tenets of the very *Ubuntu* philosophy that South Africa promotes internationally. As Nye (2017) argues, the effectiveness of soft power is contingent on credibility and consistency. The dissonance between South Africa's narrative of tolerance and its internal social fractures severely erodes its soft power, making its cultural diplomacy superficial to both regional and global audiences (Ogunnubi, 2022). Furthermore, a critical limitation lies in the lack of institutionalisation. Unlike India, which has leveraged Bollywood and its extensive cultural networks, or China through Confucius Institutes, South Africa has yet to institutionalise its cultural diplomacy. The absence of such enduring structures limits the sustainability and reach of its cultural influence, rendering it episodic rather than foundational.

6.2 Network Diplomacy: Amplified Voice Amidst Structural Asymmetries

The study finds that South Africa has actively engaged in network diplomacy, using BRICS meetings and working groups to amplify its voice on global issues like climate change and sustainable development (Sidiropoulos et al., 2018). Its extensive diplomatic footprint across Africa provides it with a unique "hub" status, enhancing its value as a continental interlocutor within the network (Hendricks & Majozi, 2021).

The discussion, however, highlights the inherent power imbalances within this network. Despite its diplomatic activity, South Africa's influence is constrained by its relatively smaller economic power compared to giants like China and India. This asymmetry illustrates a key challenge of network diplomacy: central nodes with greater economic and political weight disproportionately shape the agenda (Morozov, 2023). South Africa's advocacy for African interests, therefore, often occurs within parameters set by more powerful members, limiting its ability to effect substantive change in core economic and political arenas of the bloc.

6.3 The Dual-Edged Sword of the "Gateway" Role

Empirical evidence solidifies South Africa's role as a strategic gateway, evidenced by growing trade and significant NDB financing for infrastructure projects (NDB, 2023; IMF, 2023). This role provides tangible benefits and a platform for influence.

Yet, the discussion must critically interrogate the implications of this role. The “gateway” narrative is double-edged. While it offers economic advantages, it also fosters a perception of South Africa as a conduit for external resource extraction rather than a genuine partner in African-led development (Carmody, 2019). This perception damages its soft power within the continent and complicates its claim to be the authentic voice of African interests. This tension could be mitigated if South Africa more explicitly anchors its gateway role in African Union frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, ensuring that its mediation reflects collective continental priorities rather than merely facilitating external access to resources. Such a strategic alignment would transform its role from a passive gateway to an active and accountable steward of African development.

6.4 The Impact of BRICS+ Expansion: Opportunity or Marginalisation?

The recent expansion of BRICS to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE presents a pivotal new finding. While this enlarges the bloc’s economic reach, it also fundamentally challenges South Africa’s unique position as the sole African representative.

The discussion centres on the strategic implications of this shift. South Africa’s distinctive value proposition is now diluted. The expansion introduces new African dynamics: Ethiopia brings symbolic weight as Africa’s uncolonized state, while South Africa offers institutional depth as the continent’s diplomatic hub. Unless South Africa leverages this complementarity to build a unified front, it risks redundancy within BRICS+. To avoid marginalisation, it must proactively forge a cohesive African caucus with Egypt and Ethiopia to ensure continental interests are represented collectively. Failure to do so risks having African agendas fragmented and outmanoeuvred by the interests of larger, non-African members within the expanded BRICS+ framework.

6.5 Synthesis: The Soft Power Paradox

In synthesis, the findings point to a central “Soft Power Paradox.” South Africa possesses considerable soft power assets: a powerful post-apartheid narrative, a vibrant culture, and a strategic diplomatic position. It has successfully utilised the BRICS platform to gain a voice and secure material benefits.

However, its ability to convert these assets into consistent and effective influence is hamstrung by two major factors:

1. **The Domestic Credibility Gap:** Internal issues like xenophobia and inequality create a direct contradiction that nullifies the attraction of its values-based foreign policy.
2. **Structural and Network Constraints:** Its smaller economy and the evolving dynamics of an expanded BRICS+ limit its agenda-setting power and threaten to dilute its unique role.

Therefore, the study concludes that while BRICS provides a crucial amplifier for South Africa’s soft power, the country’s ultimate influence within the alliance and the broader global arena will be determined not by the platform itself, but by its ability to resolve its internal contradictions and navigate the increasingly complex network politics of the bloc. To reconcile this paradox, South Africa must close its domestic credibility gap, institutionalise its soft power strategies, and spearhead an African caucus within BRICS+, thereby converting symbolic representation into substantive leadership.

7. Recommendations

Based on the critical findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed to help South Africa reconcile its soft power paradox and leverage its BRICS membership more effectively.

These are structured to address the key areas of weakness: institutionalisation, strategic alignment, domestic credibility, and leadership within the expanded BRICS+ framework.

7.1 Institutionalise a Coherent Soft Power Architecture

South Africa must move beyond ad-hoc cultural initiatives to build a durable soft power infrastructure.

- **Establish “Ubuntu Cultural Institutes”:** Modelled on successful platforms like the Alliance Française or Confucius Institutes, the Department of Arts and Culture, in partnership with DIRCO, should launch dedicated cultural centres in key BRICS+ nations. These institutes would offer language courses (in South African languages), arts exhibitions, film screenings, and academic seminars, permanently embedding South African culture and the philosophy of Ubuntu abroad.
- **Launch a “Creative Africa” Nexus:** Leverage the BRICS Film Festival momentum to create a permanent digital and physical platform—a «Creative Africa Nexus»—showcasing and facilitating trade in creative goods and services from South Africa and the broader continent. This positions South Africa not just as a participant, but as the institutional hub for African cultural exchange within BRICS.

7.2 Strategically Align the Gateway Role with African Priorities

To counter the perception of being a mere conduit, South Africa must actively frame its role as a steward of African development.

- **Champion an “AfCFTA-BRICS Partnership Framework”:** South Africa should use its diplomatic weight to formally table and advocate for a partnership framework between BRICS and the African Union that explicitly aligns BRICS investments and projects with the developmental objectives of AfCFTA and AU Agenda 2063. This ensures that economic cooperation benefits regional value chains and industrialisation, not just resource extraction.
- **Publish an Annual “BRICS-Africa Development Impact Report”:** To ensure transparency and accountability, South Africa should lead the production of an annual report, in collaboration with the AU, assessing the developmental impact of BRICS-funded projects on the continent. This would build trust and demonstrate that its gateway role delivers tangible, shared benefits for Africa.

7.3 Bridge the Domestic Credibility Gap with Concrete Action

A nation’s soft power is fundamentally rooted in its domestic reality. South Africa must urgently address the contradictions that undermine its international narrative.

- **Implement a National Social Cohesion and Inclusivity Strategy:** This strategy must go beyond rhetoric and include a publicly trackable action plan with clear targets for reducing xenophobic violence, promoting social integration, and tackling economic inequality. The Department of Home Affairs and the Justice Department should be mandated to report annually on their progress, making this a cornerstone of both domestic and foreign policy.
- **Integrate Soft Power into Domestic Policy Formulation:** A «Soft Power Impact Assessment» should be considered for major domestic policies. This would ensure that government departments are aware of how internal decisions—on social policy, human rights, and economic management—directly affect the country’s international reputation and influence.

7.4 Forge a Cohesive African Caucus within BRICS+

The expansion of BRICS makes it imperative for South Africa to lead, not just represent.

- **Initiate a Formal “BRICS Africa Tripartite” (BAT):** South Africa should immediately initiate a structured, formal caucus with Egypt and Ethiopia. This «BRICS Africa Tripartite» would be held before all major BRICS summits to develop unified positions on key agendas, ensuring that African voices are consolidated and cannot be divided or marginalised.
- **Leverage Complementary Strengths:** Within this Tripartite, South Africa should position itself as the institutional anchor, leveraging its diplomatic network and financial expertise. It should actively partner with Ethiopia’s historical symbolism and Egypt’s geopolitical weight to present a multifaceted but united African front, thereby increasing the collective bargaining power of the continent within the bloc.

By adopting these targeted recommendations, South Africa can transition from a symbolic member to a substantive leader within BRICS. The path forward requires closing the domestic credibility gap, building enduring institutional frameworks for its soft power, and strategically leveraging its position to ensure that its BRICS engagement delivers authentic, sustainable benefits for both the nation and the African continent.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that South Africa’s engagement with BRICS represents a strategic, albeit complex, pursuit of soft power and cultural diplomacy in a multipolar world. The analysis confirms that the country possesses a compelling value proposition: its post-apartheid democratic identity, its institutional sophistication as Africa’s diplomatic hub, and its rich cultural heritage rooted in the philosophy of Ubuntu provide a solid foundation for international influence. Empirically, this has translated into tangible benefits, including growing trade flows and significant infrastructure financing through the New Development Bank.

However, the research reveals a critical soft power paradox. South Africa’s considerable assets are consistently undermined by a persistent credibility gap stemming from domestic challenges—most notably xenophobic violence and socio-economic inequality—which contradict its projected values of tolerance and human rights. Furthermore, structural constraints, including its relatively smaller economy and the strategic implications of the BRICS+ expansion, limit its agenda-setting power and threaten to dilute its unique position as the African voice within the bloc. The findings indicate that South Africa has achieved more success in cultural and diplomatic initiatives than in translating its BRICS membership into decisive economic or political influence.

The path forward, echoing Dr Ruel Khoza’s call to “Let Africa Lead,” demands a deliberate and coherent strategy. To convert its symbolic representation into substantive leadership, South Africa must transcend episodic engagements and institutionalise its soft power. This entails closing the domestic credibility gap through concrete action, anchoring its gateway role firmly within AU Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, and proactively forging a cohesive African caucus within BRICS+. By doing so, South Africa can recalibrate its engagement from that of a participant to that of an architect—shaping the bloc’s priorities to reflect genuine African development imperatives. In conclusion, while BRICS provides an indispensable platform, the ultimate measure of South Africa’s soft power will not be determined by its membership alone, but by its ability to reconcile its internal contradictions and leverage its strategic position with greater consistency and purpose. By institutionalising its soft power, demonstrating accountable leadership, and championing a collective African agenda, South Africa can fully unlock its potential to advocate effectively for a more equitable and multipolar world order.

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