

South Africa-Russia Trade Relations in the Mbeki-Putin Years, 1999-2008: Ideological Minimalism and Growing Commercial Flows

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Abstract

With both leaders focused on integration (or re-integration) of their states with their respective regions, for South Africa and Russia, under the coinciding presidencies of Thabo Mbeki and Vladimir Putin (1999 to 2008), distal ties would appear to have been a peripheral consideration, albeit one pursued with relative consistency. These years were un-ideological, having followed the collapse of the USSR but preceding the emergence of the intermittently ideological BRICS project. I use trade data from multiple sources to assess the two countries' economic relationship under these leaders. Upon noting the continued but slow growth in political interaction under the two leaders, the article documents the effects of political interaction on trade, which was encouraged by both leaders as they sought deeper south-south cooperation (SSC) and lessened dependency on the West (with which both countries were nevertheless growingly intertwined). Trade responded favourably on both sides after the 2006 mutual visits by the two presidents (as seen by 2007 trade volumes). Overall, under the Mbeki-Putin years, we observe Russian products forming a higher share of South African imports than the other way around, whilst growth in access to each other's markets saw mostly new access for South Africa (giving it a favourable surplus of over US\$25-million, which grew to over US\$2-billion under the Zuma years), thereby complicating our understanding of the relationship and the nature of the asymmetry which defines it.

Keywords: Russia in Africa; South Africa-Russia relations; South-south cooperation; Trade; Thabo Mbeki; Vladimir Putin

1. Introduction

The 1994 transition to democracy in South Africa signified a victory not only for the liberation movements which had fought against Apartheid, but also for their international allies. Thus, South Africa's (re-)entry into global affairs ought to have coincided not only with a re-kindling of relations with the international community broadly but also the formation of relations with states with whom relations had never existed with Pretoria. These include the majority of the states on the African continent (who had stood in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalised black population in the country), India (who had led the charge in calling for a boycott of the minority regime in South Africa by the United Nations in the 1940s), and China (who had given support to the Pan-African Congress) and Russia, formerly the citadel of the Soviet Union. The last of these in particular is particularly interesting; by the admission of the South African ruling party's own leaders, it offered the most support to the African National Congress (ANC) whilst it was in exile. But by 1994, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, having collapsed in 1991, and had been replaced by the political entity of the Russian Federation (which also succeeded it to its seat at the UN Security Council [UNSC]) following its dissolution. The ANC's own communist inclinations had dampened under the weight of the post-Cold War order. What character would relations between the two countries take? This was one of the questions that loomed largest as the new administration settled in. South African saw the first official visit by a head of state – five years after coming into power – when President Nelson Mandela visited Moscow in April 1999. He was on his way out, having opted to have one term in office. It would be another seven years until the next visit when a sitting president of South Africa, already in his second term in office, paid a visit to Russia, in July 2006, which was reciprocated two months later, marking the first time a Russian president had ever visited South Africa.

By many Cold War logics, which indeed informed policy in the West and thereby led to a soft stance on the Apartheid government (seen as a bulwark against communist influence in southern Africa), Russia ought to have been the principal partner of an ANC-ran South Africa. Yet by the admission of former president Thabo Mbeki, the relationship with Moscow failed to live up to many of its stated goals, and was rather characterised by minimal political

contact. This was a typical post-Cold War nexus; with ideology absent as a common denominator and cooperative agreements confined to scientific and economic cooperation. Ultimately, the relationship saw the unfulfilled creation of a geostrategic platform that had been meant to be an “OPEC for platinum” led by the two countries, joined by Zimbabwe. Though trade flows continued to grow, both sides nonetheless continued to be substantially more integrated with the West than with each other, with immediate regional priorities preoccupying both leaders’ foreign policies.

By comparison, President Jacob Zuma’s tenure in office (2009-2018) was characterised by much closer cooperation and courted controversy for doing so. Some notable milestones in this regard include South Africa’s entry into the BRICS association (both an economic and ideological fount for the administration whose rhetoric was laden with a turn away from the West), as well as the ultimately failed nuclear deal. Nevertheless, what may appear from afar to be a minimalist relationship may closer examination prove to be an active interaction. The present study, the first full-length peer-reviewed article to do so, sought to examine the relationship with those aims through the prism of the two presidents who led the countries in their immediate post-transitional phases (Mbeki after Mandela and Putin following Boris Yeltsin). Moreover, it does so with a view to test the contours of South Africa-Russian asymmetry, and problematises assumptions of South African juniority/dependency on Russia upon the former’s liberation and governance under the ANC, owing to its struggle-era reliance on the latter.

This article reviews the pattern taken by the trade between South Africa and Russia in the 1999-2008 period under presidents Thabo Mbeki and Vladimir Putin. The research is based on economic data and several interviews with South African and Russian policymakers who had involvement or have expert-level familiarity with the relations under these two presidents. The article relies on these as its primary sources. Upon noting the continued but slow growth in political relations under the two leaders, the article documents trade findings, with a view to demonstrate the co-evolution in political and economic relations. These show growth in trade, which was encouraged by both leaders as they sought deeper ‘South-South cooperation’ and less dependency on the West (with which their countries were nevertheless both intertwined).

Interestingly, in light of the differences in economic and population size,

the trade appears to have mostly been in favour of South Africa and growth in each other's access to mutual markets saw mostly new access for South Africa in Russia (with its trade surplus moving up from US\$25.5-million to US\$2.153-billion). This should go a long way in complicating our understanding of the relationship in its global South mould; the data generated shows that, under Mbeki, Russia accounted for a higher share of South African imports than South African products did for Russian imports. Thus, in this regard, South Africa was (quantitatively) *more* dependent on Russia. However, South Africa exported more to Russia in dollar terms (thus garnering the US\$25.5-million surplus). Notably, the years under Zuma saw South Africa not only growing its balance of trade surplus vis-à-vis Russia, but also accounting for a higher share of Russia's import market than Russia did for South Africa's. The product profile was not substantially transformed, however. The study also notes growths in trade in 2007, the year after the mutual visits, with Russian imports to South Africa more than doubling, and with them the share of Russia's South African imports. This spike declined in the following year. One of the potential obstacles to heightened trade under Mbeki and Putin may have been barriers to entry, which were only diminished by Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2012. Overall, however, the countries still constitute less than 1% of each other's import markets. The years under Mbeki and Putin did not substantially revise commercial reliance on third party trade partners, who are mostly in the West, albeit with an already growing Chinese share in both their markets. This thus necessitates a renewed understanding of dependency on commercial activity among countries of the global South among themselves, and particularly these two. This is delved into in the Conclusion of this article.

Section 2 of this article reviews the South Africa-Russia relationship. Section 3 gives a literature review. Section 4 briefly comments on the potential conceptual and theoretical relevance of the findings to be made. Section 5 provides a breakdown of the methodology. Section 6 presents the findings made. Section 7 concludes the article, reflecting on the significance of the findings and avenues for further research.

2. South Africa and Russia: The Foreign Policies and Bilateral Relations of Two Societies in Transition

South African president Jacob Zuma (2009-2018) paid more visits to Russia than to any other country. Furthermore, the two countries' cooperation found expression in the BRICS association of emerging countries. South Africa's chronic electricity shortages were apparently looking to be satiated through Russian cooperation, with the South African government seemingly granting a contract to Russian company Rosatom to bolster its nuclear power. This so-called 'Russia nuclear deal' worth US\$10-billion later gained controversy, however. As Russian officials see it, this was due to untoward Western influence, including over local media which painted the deal as corrupt. Local opponents of the deal, meanwhile, touted the expensiveness of the procedure, as well as a lack of transparency on how the Russian company had been selected.

The substantially deepened relations between Zuma-led South Africa and Medvedev- and later Putin(II)-led Russia were the product of foundations cemented in the period when the South Africa and Russia were under the leaderships of Thabo Mbeki and Vladimir Putin (first as Prime Minister and then President) from 1999 to 2008. Significantly, this relatively under-examined period offers some a priori analogies which make for insightful comparisons. Both presidents were leading their countries in period which could be described as 'post-transitional societies' (Hughes and John 2001: 673; Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010: 1). South Africa was five years into its emergence from the throes of Apartheid, which had been substantially assisted by the Soviet Union/Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which had itself collapsed in the early 1990s.

Both were therefore only the second leaders of their countries, with elderly predecessors (Nelson Mandela and Boris Yeltsin), though Mbeki arguably had had a greater role in foreign policy-making as early as 1994, when he became Deputy President of the country (Van Heerden 2017: 3). Putin on the other hand, had been involved in Moscow's intelligence apparatus, and had later served as Secretary of the Security Council prior to becoming Prime Minister in August of 1999, and president less than a year later in December of 1999 in an acting capacity and then formally from May of 2000. Both leaders also sought to position themselves as regionally-mindedness in their foreign policies, with Mbeki propounding the policy he termed the African Renaissance, buttressed by the reformation of the

Organisation of African Unity into the African Union in the Durban Summit in 2002, along with institutions such as the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD, later renamed the AU Development Agency in 2019). On the other hand, Putin-led Russia prioritised what is termed the 'near abroad' (Spechler 2010: 36) of the former Soviet sphere, which were increasingly pursued by (and in turn pursuing) the European Union for membership. These were buttressed by the formation and consolidation, respectively, of the Commonwealth of Independent States (consisting of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, with Georgia initially joining and exiting in 2008; Ukraine and Turkmenistan were parties of the founding process but never became official members) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance (signed in 1992 and formalised in 2002), which is widely seen as a successor to the Warsaw Pact (Sussex 2012: 203). On the other hand, the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) looked westward, and joined the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004.

The two leaders were also in complicated relationships with the West, operating as they were in a period of US triumphalism at the behest of the post-Cold War period, followed by US militarism in the post-9/11 years, with Russia having pursued its own anti-terror strategy in Chechnya but which was reluctant to grant the US permission to invade Iraq through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2003. On the other hand, many African leaders, including South African President Thabo Mbeki were quite opposed to the manner in which the war on terror took shape. Indeed, his predecessor Nelson Mandela had even planned a trip to Iraq, along with British mogul Richard Branson, to try and convince Saddam Hussein to step down. The bombing began before he could make the trip, however. Nevertheless, both countries were, and indeed remain, commercially linked to the EU, which is the principal trade partner for both countries, whilst the US was the leading source of FDI to Russia in 2019 at US\$39.2-billion (Bershidsky 2019), and the EU to South Africa, at 75% of all foreign direct investments in 2018 (Tralac 2018). These two leaders therefore had a rare near-perfect coincidence of holding high office in their countries and directing their foreign policies. How much did the two leaders cooperate?

President Mbeki only made a single state visit to Russia, in July of 2006, however this was not only to meet with his Russian counterpart but for a

multilateral summit; President Mbeki, accompanied by First Lady Zanele Mbeki, had led a South African delegation including then Minister of Foreign Affairs Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Minister of Trade and Industry Mandisi Mphahlele and his special advisor Adv. Mojanku Gumbi, went to St. Petersburg mainly to the G8 Summit. The South African President was part of a delegation of the Strategic Outreach Partners made up of the leaders of other countries, including India, Brazil, China and Mexico. The purpose of his participation in the summit was “for strategic discussions with G8 leaders to discuss among others energy, security, education, infectious diseases, international trade and a presentation on Africa” (DIRCO 2006). The president also used the summit to make numerous bilateral discussions, including with the leaders of Brazil, China, France, President Hu Jintao and President Jacques Chirac, and the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

On the other hand, President Putin made a bilateral visit to South Africa, which he made later that year. The meeting was mainly economic in nature, accompanied by discussions on developments in the southern African region, as well as then ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Cote d’Ivoire, indicating already at this point a Russian focus on conflict and security on the continent, which has shaped its policy in recent years towards the Central African Republic, the Horn and Libya (*Fin24*, 4 September 2006).

At the time, the two concluded several agreements, including on medical cooperation, peaceful use of outer space, intellectual property protection, and aviation and water resources and forestry (*Fin24* 2006). At the time, the majority of South African exports are made up of vehicle engines (18.8% of exports); machines and mechanical appliances (14%); fresh grapes (13.8%); flat-rolled products or iron (10%); pears (6.8%) peaches (3.4%), amounting to almost 70% of all exports to Russia, whilst South Africa mainly imported nickel group minerals from Russia (*Fin24* 2006). Putin’s visit was also arranged to ensure a meeting with South African diamond mining mogul and Chairman of the De Beers Group Nicky Oppenheimer, who was thanked by the Russian president for establishing the South Africa-Russia Business Council (Kremlin 2006) – “two months later De Beers and Russia’s state-owned Alrosa diamond mining firm signed a joint prospecting deal” (*Forbes* 5 March 2008).

“We want to see the visit not as a once-off event but as a very significant building block in our relations,” noted Dlamini-Zuma, though this would be the

last visit until Putin's visit in 2018 for the BRICS summit. In that period, Russia took the opportunity to hold bilateral discussions with other countries, most notably Turkey, leading to wide speculation that Ankara would soon join the association (Ndzendze 2018). In his bilateral meeting with new South African president Cyril Ramaphosa, during which he reportedly inquired on whether the nuclear deal could be resuscitated (Winning 2018), as he did once again in the 2019 October Sochi Russia-Africa Summit. In turn, Ramaphosa summarised his response thus, claiming that "we are not about to embark on a nuclear power project we cannot afford" (Fabricius 2019). In a 2016 interview with the Russian *Kazan Journal of International Law and International Relations*, Mbeki admitted that some failures, including a planned OPEC-like cartel for platinum with Russia and Zimbabwe: however, "these discussions did not go anywhere" (Mbeki and Mezyaev 2016: 13).

In some regards, however, the two leaders set in motion the lead up to formation of the BRICS as it is in the present, though South African entry is substantially due to Chinese invitation. Many scholars have observed that the organisation is trying to engineer redress in global order (Mthembu 2017). Composed of the developing states of Brazil, Russia, India, China and (belatedly added) South Africa, the BRICS association was formed in 2009 upon being benchmarked in 2001 by the Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neal to be set, *caeteris paribus*, to match the level of industrialisation and economic standing of the developed nations. It was therefore, at the very least, an attempt to bring about some level of multilateralism and a shift away from the historically globally dominant US and the EU countries and 'their' international financial institutions, primarily Bretton Woods, as well as ratings agencies such as Moody's, Fitch and Standard and Poor's. In the successive summits since 2009 that take place in the BRICS countries on a rotating basis, the BRICS countries have discussed and enacted various mutual positions and common policies and have sought to build institutions indicating a shift away from the West-dominated order, including a development bank and a 'BRICS ratings agency' to offset the perceived disproportional influence of the western ratings agencies. Within that organisation, as is the case in general global political economy which the organisation itself is trying to transform, some asymmetry persists. For example, between 2008 and 2018, China was the largest recipient of FDI, whereas Brazil overtook Russia in 2010 by receiving US\$82.39-billion to Russia's US\$43.168-billion; India overtook Russia in 2014, when it saw

a US\$34.577-billion worth of new FDI to Russia's US\$22.031-billion. As at the end of the dataset, the ranking of FDI influx ranged from China (US\$203.429-billion), Brazil (US\$88.324-billion), India (US\$42.117-billion), Russia (US\$8.785-billion), and South Africa (US\$5.46-billion).

It is worth examining therefore the degree to which the asymmetry plays out in the bilateral setting between South Africa and Russia. The two following sections below respectively (1) give a literature review on the study of South African and Russian foreign policies, and appraisals of the relationship, and the emergent themes in the scholarship and (2) provide the theoretical framework through which to analyse (and therefore potentially understand) the relations between the two countries, specifically under the coinciding presidencies of Mbeki and Putin.

3. Literature Review

Former president Mbeki summarises the history of the ANC and the USSR as follows:

“Before the 1960s these relationships were mostly between Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the South African Communist Party. But later, from the 1960s the relationships were broadened and included ANC. At the end, globally the Soviet Union became the principal supporter of the ANC in many respects. For instance when the British and American Governments and others claimed that ANC was a terrorist movement, USSR clearly said that ANC was a leading movement of the people of South Africa who were struggling for their liberation. The Soviet Union was our principal supporter in terms of the supply of weapons to conduct the armed struggle” (Mbeki and Mezyaev 2016: 11).

South Africa's foreign policy, much like (and indeed because of) the domestic order of the country took a divergence in 1994, with the coming into power of the country's first black government under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. Thus “South Africa's foreign policy has evolved through various presidents” (Qobo and Dube 2015: 145). Furthermore, and more to the point of this book, scholars of South African foreign policy observe that “since the dawn of democracy

there has also been a gradual shift from a foreign policy that exhibited strong normative expressions, inclined to the West, to a more pragmatic foreign policy that is aligned with the new rising powers” (Qobo and Dube 2015: 145; Van der Westhuizen and Smith 2015: 344). What has remained constant over this near three-decade period is South Africa’s self-understanding as a regional leader, and middle power. Within the continent has had ample opportunities to live up to middle power and regional leadership status, as “typical middle power activities include a consistent interest in the resolution of conflicts (more often in their immediate region, but also on occasion beyond), and strengthening international law and the multilateral system (because they do not have preponderant military power).” Nevertheless, the middle power ranking, though often caricatured as the diplomatic equivalent of a ‘global boy scout’, has not precluded pragmatism given that “the middle power role is also driven by considerable self interest” (Van der Westhuizen and Smith 2015: 344). It is because of this that some foreign policy watchers note that South Africa’s foreign policy “began its own drift with the demise of Mbeki in 2008; at the same time, opportunities for expanded international ties had begun to arise in the form of the interest in African resources on the part of emerging economies” (Qobo and Dube 2015: 151).

Under President Zuma, foreign policy was aligned more and more towards China and Russia (Van der Westhuizen and Smith 2015: 344). Indeed it is a commonly held historiography that “In the period beginning around 2002, especially midway through President Thabo Mbeki’s first term of office, South Africa placed a strong emphasis on Africa’s renewal or renaissance,” whereas under Mandela there was a “moralising discourse on human rights that was characteristic of President Nelson Mandela’s era (1994–1999)” (Qobo and Dube 2015: 151; Van Heerden 2017), whereas the Zuma presidency in turn was characterised by the tilt towards the East. Furthermore, the ruling ANC “has cemented party-to-party relations with both Vladimir Putin’s United Russia, despite its right-leaning credentials, and the Communist Party of China” (Qobo and Dube 2015: 151). Such associations have been received differently, and accusations of corruption have flared up (Head 2019). Nonetheless, the decisive tilt in South Africa’s policy is noted by all. Nonetheless, this neat compartmentalisation is not without its flaws. Indeed, the eastward tilt had already begun in the 1990s, owing to the historical relationship between the ANC and the USSR, the re-kindling of the staunchly anti-Apartheid India (which also has the a sizeable diaspora in South

Africa, which is the largest anywhere in the world), as well as South Africa's recognition of the PRC, owing to the pending return of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997.

Nevertheless, the collapse of the USSR eliminated the ideological outlook of Moscow, who was also preoccupied with rebuilding Russia's economy and placed increasingly less emphasis on foreign relations on Africa (Neethling 2020: 15). As seen, the 2006 visit by Putin was the first of any Russian head of state. Succeeding Yeltsin, in his first term as president Putin is widely understood to have grown "increasingly wary" of the EU and the US's policies of expanding into Russia's "backyard" (Spechler 2010: 35). The relations between Russia and Africa appear to be less ideologically-inclined therefore, despite (or perhaps signified by) the party-to-party relations between the ANC and Russia United. Thus the Russia of 1999 was substantially removed from the Soviet Union Mbeki had went to study in in 1969 (Mbeki and Mezyaev 2016). The former president acknowledged that:

"There were very close relations between Soviet Union and the ANC. But we have not seen this replicated in the relations between the Russian Federation and democratic South Africa. This was the same story with Sweden which had helped the ANC and our struggle very much. When it came to state-to-state relations during the post-apartheid period these did not become as strong as they should have been. So I think that this reflects some weaknesses in the formation and implementation of our foreign policy" (Mbeki and Mezyaev 2016: 13).

Russia's re-emergence on the continent has been linked to an ostensible Putin plan to outmanoeuvre Europe: "Putin has a renewed interest in Africa because it can play an important role in his political ambition to build strategic control over energy networks and resources. He can use the deals he made with Algeria, Libya and Nigeria to put the EU under pressure with regard to its future energy provision" (Hoste and Koch 2015: 3). Thus reportedly, "Russia is further reducing the EU's supply options by coupling its effort in the east with its efforts in Africa, especially in the countries that could eventually serve as alternative suppliers (to Russian energy resources) when it comes to European energy needs" (Hoste and Koch 2015: 3). The recent spurt of studies on Russia's re-emergence on the continent has brought to the fore some insights. Nonetheless, in their future-

oriented goals, they do not shed light on the history of specific bilateral relations. Thus, this is a first study of the relations between South Africa and Russia during the Mbeki-Putin period, with a comparative quantitative outlook on trade relations that also analyses the direction and magnitude of the mutual imports and balance of trade within the period as well as under the Zuma-Medvedev and Zuma-Putin (II) years (2009-2017).

4. Conceptual Framework

Though the article is not set out to vindicate, generate or test any particular theory, we can nonetheless make some theoretically relevant insights. There are numerous theoretical frameworks which could be employed to frame our analysis of the South Africa-Russia relationship under Mbeki and Putin. However, as our interest is in the asymmetry between the two major partners, the article will therefore make findings implicative for relations among middle powers and recovering major powers. In this regard, the most readily apparent framework is dependency theory, given its core-periphery lens. “The relationship is one in which a metropolis or center exerts pressure upon its satellite or periphery,” and particularly “the South (Africa) has become an external sector of the North (Europe) - a source of materials, cheap labour and educated people (through brain drain)” (Matunhu 2011: 68).

Conceptually, the history of the relationship between the liberation movement governing South Africa and its historical proximity and dependency on Soviet assistance, this is given greater relevance. In research terms, given the historical client-like relationship that the ANC had observed with regards to the USSR (“the Soviet Union was our principal supporter” as Mbeki put had it [Mbeki and Mezyaev 2016: 11]), we would expect the trade balance to be tilted towards Russia, and it would have the trade surplus; moreover, the product set may be expected to look a certain way, with South Africa importing manufactured products and exporting mainly raw materials. This may especially be more so given Russia’s economic size by virtue of its GDP, which stood at US\$3.4-trillion in 2019 to South Africa’s US\$368-billion (a ratio of 1: 9), as well as its comparatively advanced stage of industrial development. Additionally, the lack of ideological convergence (as detailed in the literature review and as indicated in interviews with policymakers) as well as the lack of extensive public interaction

between the political principals, the economically concentrated analysis is given further rationale.

5. Methods and Analysis

This article quantitatively assesses the direction and magnitude of mutual imports between South Africa and Russia over the 1999-2008 period. In so doing, we are interested in the following research questions. Firstly, did Russian imports of South African products experience growth or decline in the period? Moreover, were these matched or exceeded by South African imports of Russian products? Secondly, we are interested in finding whether the overall balance of trade was in South Africa's favour (surplus) or not (deficit). Thirdly, the growth of South African exports to Russia were higher or lower than growth of exports under the successive Zuma presidency (i.e., 2008 to 2017). Thus, the first two questions investigate the direction, and the third question investigates the magnitude of trade relations under Mbeki and Putin.

This section analyses the direction and magnitude of mutual imports between South Africa and Russia in the 1999-2008 period. In Figure 1 below, we summarise the total imports by either country of products sourced from the other in the years under study.

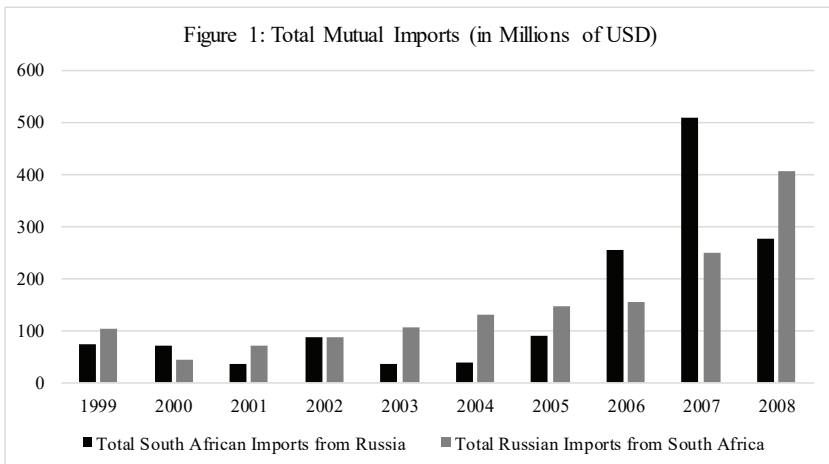
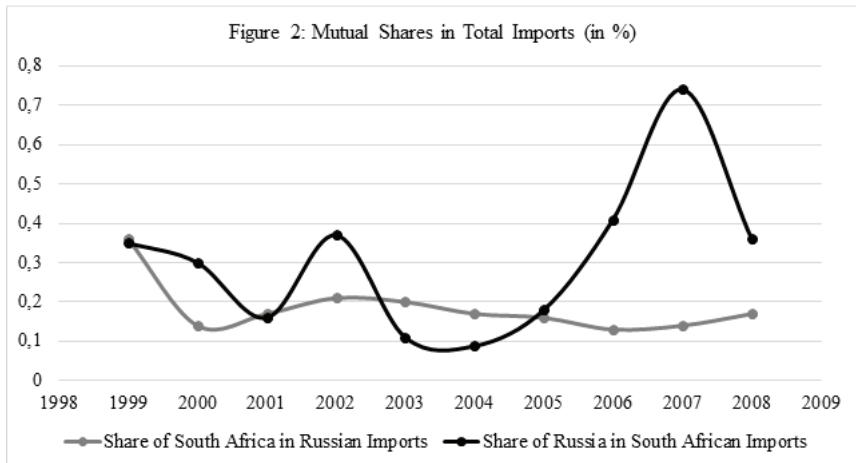
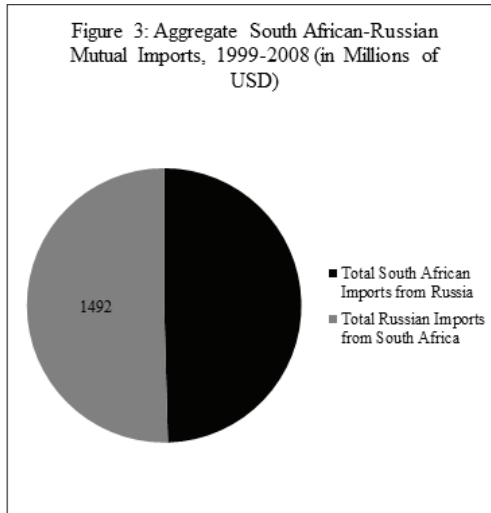


Figure 1 demonstrates that in 1999, and then between 2001 and 2005 and once again in 2008, Russian imports out-measured South African imports from Russia. Thus, South Africa had trade surpluses for 6 of the 10 years. Whilst Figure 1 captures the year-to-year trade totals (as well as the respective balances of trade), it nonetheless does not give insight on the significance of either country's imports into the other's market. Figure 2 shows the different market shares over the same period as derived from Figure 1, with the below figures indicating the share of each country's exports to their counterpart on their total imports.

Figure 2 demonstrates that South Africa has accounted for a higher share of Russian imports in 2 out of the 10 years, in 2003 and 2004, whilst Russia has accounted for a higher share of South African imports in 1999-2002 and 2005-2008. Noticeably, the two countries' mutual imports were still quite insignificant; with neither country accounting for more than 0.74% of each other's imports – the 0.74% high watermark (obtained in 2007) was Russia's (see Figure 2).



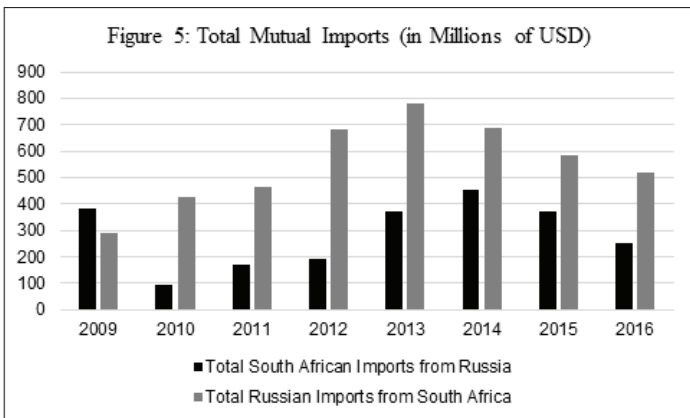
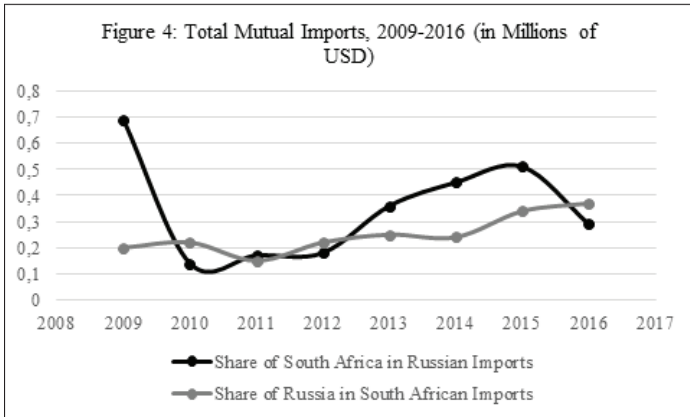
On the other hand, Figure 3 demonstrates that Russia imported slightly more from South Africa than did from Russia in the ten-year timeframe. As an aggregation of total annual imports by each country from the other, it demonstrates that South Africa made total imports from Russia that come up to a total of US\$1.466-billion, whereas Russia made total imports from South Africa that total US\$1.492-billion.



Taken altogether, the data complicate the would-be asymmetrical relationship implied by dependency theorists. Whereas Figure 2 shows Russia having a higher share of South Africa's import market for more years (8) than South Africa did in Russia's (2) under the Mbeki-Putin years, Figures 1 and 3 on the other hand show that in aggregate terms, South Africa made more exports to Russia in dollar terms. Additionally, there can be two readings of Figure 2. It could be an indicator of Russia's multiplicity of trade partners than the purely asymmetrical nature of commercial relations. Alternatively, the Figure could be underlined by unequal import capacities and in this strict interpretation South Africa could be seen as being *more* dependent on Russia. A third reading could nonetheless note that these years were only a maintenance of the trade levels, with Russia accounting for 0.36% of South African imports in 1999 and 0.36% by the last year of Mbeki in office, whilst South Africa had initially accounted for 0.35% of the Russian import market in 1999 and had declined to 0.17% by the year he left office. A fourth reading, stemming from the third, could therefore understand the pattern in a global dependency pattern; these countries constituted less than 1% of each other's markets, with the substantial portion of either being dominated by the countries of the global north.

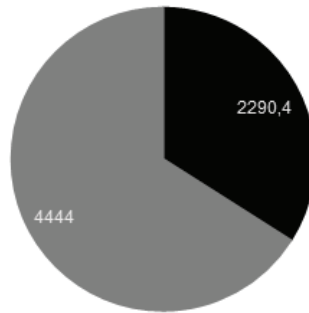
Using figures 4 to 6 the article tests the degree to which the pattern under the Mbeki-Putin years was reversed or sustained in the Zuma-Medvedev and Zuma-Putin (III) period. Figure 4 shows that Russia accounted for a higher share of

South African imports than South Africa constituted of Russian imports only in 2 years (2010 and 2016), with the trend mainly showing South Africa having a higher share of Russian imports for the majority of the years (in 2009, and then from 2011-2015). Thus, in this regard, Russia was *more* dependent on South Africa, in reversal to the trend in the 1999-2008 period (compared with Figure 2).



Furthermore, Russian imports from South Africa substantially out-measured South African imports from Russia (see Figure 5), with trade surpluses for the 2010-2016 period (compare with Figure 1). Noticeably, trade between South Africa and Russia still increased after 2014, the year of the sanctions posed on Russia by the West that also coincided with its expulsion from the G8.

Figure 6: Aggregate South Africa-Russia Mutual Imports, 2009-2016 (in Millions of USD)



■ Total South African Imports from Russia ■ Total Russian Imports from South Africa

Furthermore, Figure 6 shows that despite the shorter period of 8 years, the Zuma years also saw substantially higher exports to Russia at US\$4.444-billion (compared to US\$1.492-billion between 1999 and 2008; see Figure 3). Compared to the US\$2.290-billion worth of South African imports from Russia, this demonstrates a trade surplus of US\$2.1536-billion. One of the potential obstacles to heightened trade under Mbeki and Putin may have been barriers to entry, which were diminished by Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2013. This remains untested, however, and is an area for further analysis.

In terms of the product sets, the South African Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) observes that “the export of mineral products [includes oil and gas] (67.4%) and metals and precious products (12.9%) are Russia's major exports” (Van Rensburg and Nqaba 2013: 24). However, South Africa mainly imports wheat (30%), processed copper (16%) and fertilisers (14%) from Russia, and Russia mainly imports agriculture, from South Africa. This indicates that the product exchange between the two countries was not changed between Mbeki and Zuma's presidencies. Noticeably, South Africa's oil imports do not stem from Russia. Rather the following countries make up the entirety of its oil sources: Saudi Arabia (42.29%), Nigeria (33.81%), Angola (13.02%), United Arab Emirates (5.59%), Ghana (3.05%), Togo (1.71%), and Norway (0.53%) (MIT Observatory of Economic Complexity 2020). For the entirety of the Zuma presidency, this remained unchanged with Saudi Arabia (38.73%), Nigeria

(28.71%), Angola (15.97%), Iran (7.14%), the UAE (3.72%), Ghana (1.82%), Qatar (1.38%), Equatorial Guinea (0.93%), Iraq (0.87%) and Oman (0.65%) being the main sources of oil to South Africa, indicating Russia's focus on its EU market (Barden 2017; November; Bremmer 2020).

6. Conclusion

The relationship between South Africa and Russia is a complex one, as substantially proved by the article. This quantitative analysis has demonstrated an upward trajectory, both in direction and magnitude. The conceptual implications drawn here are that asymmetry can take more than a single form in a bilateral relationship, but that this can change over time when political alignment co-evolves with the economic deepening (as seen under the Zuma years). In essence, this article showcases two routes by which to understand dependency in a dyadic relationship; one premised on share of a trade partner's total imports, another on trade balance surplus alone. The task at hand, however, remains integrating this into the nature of the political interaction, wherein Russia is the larger of the two in terms of GDP, population and global influence, but South Africa has a larger trade surplus.

The verdict remains to be seen for the Ramaphosa-Putin period, which has started off to mixed signals; resistance to the nuclear deal on the one hand, and security cooperation on the other; as signified by the perfectly timed landing of the Tupolev Tu-160 'Blackjack' bombers at Air Force Base Waterkloof at the onset of the Sochi summit in October of 2019 (Martin 2019).

There thus persist some areas of further research, including on the role of the Russian diaspora, the effect of third parties on the bilateral interaction (including the West as well as fellow BRICS members China and India, who are also playing and seeking to play greater roles on the continent, and who both boast large diasporas in South Africa), as well as FDI, which could further the quantitatively informed framework for analysing the asymmetry between South Africa and Russia as it could integrate notions of investor confidence on both sides. Some early research into investment flows demonstrate greater interest in Russia by South African financiers than Russian interest in South Africa.

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