



South Africa-Nordic Relations: Exploring the Prospects for a Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

Since the democratisation of South Africa in the mid-90s, South Africa and the Nordic countries have cooperated multilaterally as well as in bilateral settings in areas such as education and research, business and trade, and peace and security. By exploring the research question 'What are the prospects for a strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordic region?', this article provides insights into the nature of South Africa-Nordic contemporary relations and advances our theoretical understanding of what factors influence the formation of strategic partnerships. The analysis is informed by Thomas Wilkins' strategic partnership model, which sets forth that the formation of strategic partnerships hinges on three core factors: environmental uncertainty, strategic fit, and a

system principle. It is argued herein that a fourth factor, international and domestic political context, also plays a role in the formation phase of a strategic partnership; an argument which is supported empirically by the South Africa-Nordic case. Data for the analysis is mainly collected from South African and Nordic government documents, while occasionally also drawing upon party documents, academic publications, and news articles. The paper concludes that the plurality of common national interests and shared values make fertile ground for a comprehensive and mutually beneficial strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordics. Nevertheless, current political contextual factors diminish the likelihood that such a strategic partnership will emerge in the immediate future.

Introduction

During the 1960s to 1990s, the relations between South Africa and the Nordic countries were overshadowed by the South African anti-apartheid struggle (Akamo et al., 2022: 16).¹ In post-apartheid times, relations between South Africa and the Nordics have continued to evolve; South Africa and individual Nordic states have cooperated bilaterally, as well as in multilateral settings in areas such as education and research, peace and security, and business and trade.² While relatively uncommon, there are also examples of some or all of the Nordic countries entering jointly into agreements with South Africa (DIRCO, 2008; DIRCO, 2001).

Both South Africa and the Nordics have expressed a desire to mobilise new partnerships in the international arena for the advancement of national interests (DIRCO, 2022a: 14; Denmark Government, 2022: 31; Denmark MFA, 2021: 39; Iceland MFA, 2018a: 6,12; The Finnish Government, 2020: 32; Norway MFA, 2018: 79; Sweden Government, 2017: 4).³ Elevating state relations to the strategic partnership level has several advantages. Firstly, it provides a framework for regular high-level dialogues that may facilitate an exchange of perspectives on matters of common interest. Additionally, it signifies mutual trust and commitment, which can foster deeper relations and cooperation in various domains. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for joint initiatives and projects that leverage the strengths and resources of both parties (Wilkins, 2008: 364). Denmark, which has made strategic partnerships central to its foreign policy, maintains that strategic partnerships contribute to building political and commercial relations with partner countries on several levels and thereby to creating opportunities to promote Denmark's foreign policy interests and priorities, including spreading Danish solutions and expertise (Denmark MFA, 2022). This article assumes that elevating the current South Africa-Nordic relations to the strategic partnership level could yield benefits including those mentioned above, and it is therefore considered pertinent to explore the prospects for such a partnership to emerge. It is worth noting that the article does not attempt to provide policy recommendations nor advocate for or against the establishment of a strategic partnership; its sole purpose is to evaluate the potential for a South Africa-Nordic strategic partnership to develop.⁴

By conducting a qualitative content analysis of South African and Nordic government documents, as well as drawing on insights from party documents, academic publications, and news articles, this paper explores the prospects for a strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordic region. It does so by turning to Thomas Wilkins' strategic partnership model, which sets forth that the formation of strategic partnerships hinges on three core factors: *environmental uncertainty*, *strategic fit*, and a *system principle*. It will be argued that a fourth factor also plays a role in the formation phase, namely *international and domestic political context*, defined as the broader societal and historical circumstances in which political events and phenomena occur. The research is novel in multiple senses. Firstly, it employs the formation variable of the strategic partnership model to analyse the prospects for the emergence of a strategic partnership that does not yet exist. Secondly, it considers a strategic partnership in the case of South Africa and the Nordics. Thirdly, it aids in the development of the framework outlining strategic partnership formations by adding a fourth factor, *international and domestic context*, to the formation phase of the strategic partnership model. Notably, this article assumes that interests and values set down in government documents from individual Nordic countries can represent interests and values in the Nordic region as a whole, as the below paragraph will explain in further detail.

Justifying the grouping of the Nordic countries

The Nordic region is comprised of the sovereign states of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland as well as the autonomous territories of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.⁵ The region is united by a proximate geographical location, intertwined historical relations, and several social, political, and economic similarities (Akamo et al., 2022: 14). More specifically, the region adheres to the *Nordic Model*, which consists of social-democratic systems characterised by capitalism, welfare, and social inclusion (Hammerstad, 2012: 3). Institutions for Nordic cooperation include the Nordic Development Fund (NDF), the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO), the Nordic Women Mediators, and the Nordic Council, the latter being the region's official body for inter-governmental cooperation (NDF, 2022; NORDEFECO, 2022; PRIO, 2015; Nordic Council, 2022; Norden, 2022). Tellingly, the Nordic Council envisions

that by 2023, the Nordic region will become the most integrated region in the world (Nordic Council, 2020). The Nordic countries also cooperate within the European Union (EU)/European Economic Area (EEA) institutions.⁶ Furthermore, as Sweden and Finland applied to become members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2022, and the latter officially becoming a NATO member in April 2023, all the Nordic countries are likely to soon be part of the Alliance (Akamo et al., 2022: 6–7; NATO, 2023). Furthermore, the Nordics have a similar approach to foreign policy, entailing ‘an activist but consensus-seeking multilateralism; a strong ethical dimension reflecting the urge to spread the ideals of the ‘Nordic model’ of equality, redistribution, and peaceful resolution of conflicts to the rest of the world; support for the United Nations (UN) and its agencies; and generous aid and assistance to the developing world’ (Hammerstad, 2012: 3).

As the Nordic states share fundamental values, interests, and worldviews, interests and values expressed in government documents from individual Nordic states will in this article be considered to represent the entire region. While the Nordics do not have a joint Africa strategy, several agenda-setting arenas exist. This includes the Nordic-Africa Institute, the Nordic-African Business Summit, and the annual African–Nordic Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (NAI, n.d; NABA, 2022; Akamo et al., 2022: 9). According to Akamo et al. (2022: 6), the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting

has broadened ‘African–Nordic relations beyond development cooperation and towards a more politically-oriented and interest-based strategic partnership.’ The authors recognise that the Nordic countries have not previously jointly entered into a strategic partnership with another state. However, due to the high degree of interconnectedness, shared foreign policy agenda, and similar interests amongst the Nordic countries, it is pertinent to consider the entire Nordic region, rather than individual Nordic countries, when exploring the prospects for a strategic partnership with South Africa.

Strategic partnerships in the International Relations literature

There is currently no consensus in the literature on a definition of the term *strategic partnership* (Tyushka and Czechowska, 2019: 8–10). Since the world became increasingly interconnected and new forms of partnerships were needed to achieve policy goals during the ‘90s, the term has been frequently used by both academics and governments, albeit often without defining its meaning, to describe relationships between states and other actors in the international arena. Sean Kay (2000: 15) documented the US’s use of the term during the 90s and set out to conceptualise it, stating that ‘a strategic partnership enhances or justifies a close relationship between two states that seek mutual gains but whose interests may be competitive rather than shared.’ A year later, commenting on Russia’s strategic partnerships, Andrew C. Kuchins (2001: 260) argued that ‘the Russian leadership has elevated some bilateral relationships to the level of “strategic partnership” because of perceived long-term and important shared interests; they are not necessarily directed against a third party.’ In 2003, in a book chapter on Chinese relations, Avery Goldstein (2003: 75) holds that core elements of strategic partnerships include ‘a commitment to promoting stable relationships and extensive economic intercourse, muting disagreements about domestic politics in the interest of working together on matters of shared concern in international diplomacy, and routinising the frequent exchange of official visits, especially those by representatives of each country’s military and regular summit meetings between top government leaders.’ In yet another effort to delineate the concept, Surjit Mansingh writes

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in his 2005 paper on the US-India partnership that a strategic partnership occurs when:

...two governments agree to raise the level of their regular interactions to embrace levels from the lowest to the highest, to deal with the great variety of issues that concern each of them in a cordial and holistic manner seeking cooperation or understanding, and to make long-term commitments for mutual benefit and furthering their respective goals but do not enter into an alliance. (Mansingh, 2005: 2221).

Drawing on previous definitions, Thomas Wilkins (2008: 363) defines a strategic partnership as a 'collaboration between states (or other actors) to take joint advantage of economic opportunities or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation.' He argues that strategic partnerships are: 1) organised around a common goal that reflects the general purpose of the partnership (a system principle); 2) are primarily goal-driven rather than threat-driven; 3) tend to be informal and entail low commitment costs; and 4) that economic exchange is one of the key drivers of the partnership, alongside security concerns (Wilkins, 2008: 360–361). Drawing on literature from Business and Organisation Studies, Wilkins proposes the *strategic partnership model*, an analytical framework for analysing strategic partnerships from an International Relations perspective. The model considers three phases of strategic partnerships: formation, implementation, and evaluation. The framework has so far been applied to analyse the strategic partnerships between Russia and China (Wilkins, 2008), Japan and Australia (Wilkins, 2011), EU and South Africa (Adelle and Kotsopoulos, 2017),⁷ South Africa and Russia (Geldenhuys, 2020), and China and the United Arab Emirates (Bin Huwaidin, 2022). Differing from previous analyses, this article employs solely the *formation phase* of the strategic partnership model to explore the *prospects* for the emergence of a currently non-existing strategic partnership.

Wilkins' strategic partnership model: The formation phase

According to Wilkins' strategic partnership model, the formation of a strategic partnership is shaped by three

main factors: environmental uncertainty, strategic fit, and a system principle (Wilkins, 2008: 363–364). *Environmental uncertainty* refers to uncertainties in the external (international) environment. By joining forces in strategic partnerships, actors seek to mitigate competitive elements and threats in the international security order by increasing their flexibility and capabilities to respond to these uncertainties. Potential collaborators are assessed based on an overall *strategic fit* elicited from mutual interests and shared ideologies and values. Potential partners must also bring some worthwhile capability or benefit, and preferably complementary resources. Once a suitable partner has been identified, the partnership's purpose becomes solidified into a core framework based on mutual agreements and understandings. The overarching purpose or goal of the strategic partnership is known as the *system principle*, which is grounded in mutual interests and values that make up a joint worldview. Importantly, strategic partnership-building is a top-down process that requires support and involvement from top leaders in the respective countries or institutions.

South Africa and the Nordics: Environmental uncertainty

Environmental uncertainty is defined as uncertainties in the external (international) environment (Wilkins, 2008: 364). Shared environmental uncertainties that have been identified in the South African and Nordic governments' foreign-policy documents include climate change and environmental degradation; conflict and instability on the African continent; and threats to the rules-based international order (DIRCOa, 2022; Denmark Government, 2022; Norway MFA, 2008; Sweden Government, 2022b; Ulkoministeriö, 2021; The Finnish Government, 2020; Norway Government, 2021; Norway MFA, 2021; Iceland Government, 2019).^{8,9} The subsequent section will elaborate on these points.

Climate change and environmental degradation

According to a report titled *Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and Its Advancement in a Global Environment* (hereafter: South Africa's National Interest Document) produced by the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), 'climate change, natural disasters, environmental challenges, and infectious

diseases' is considered to be one among the 15 identified risks that can prevent the achievement of South Africa's national interests (DIRCO, 2022a: 30). Climate change and environmental degradation is also identified as a global and national threat in South Africa's National Development Plan 2030, the South African Climate Change Bill, and a white paper on South Africa's foreign policy (National Planning Commission, 2017: 33, 75; South Africa Government, 2022: 2; South Africa Government, 2011: 15). The Nordic region is just as clear in its concerns regarding climate change and environmental degradation and its potential impacts on national interests and security (Norway MFA, 2008: 11; Denmark Government, 2022: 31, 32; Sweden Government, 2022b: 3; Iceland Government, 2019: 26; Ulkoministeriö, 2021: 2). For example, in a parliamentary statement on government policy, the former Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde stated that the 'climate is of critical importance to our security' (Sweden Government, 2022b: 3). Moreover, the Nordic Council recognises climate change as 'one of humanity's biggest challenges' (Nordic Council, 2020: 7).

Conflict and instability in Africa

In the South African National Interest Document, DIRCO (2022a: 14, 30) considers 'regional instability, terrorism, and extremism' to be another of the 15 risks to the achievement of national interests, recognising that security and stability in Africa is 'an indispensable requirement for the security and stability of South Africa.' Similarly, the Nordic countries connect security in Africa to their national security, linking African instability to increased irregular migration and the spread of terrorism in Europe (Ulkoministeriö, 2021: 7; Denmark Government, 2022: 24; Norway MFA, 2008: 12). For instance, a government report on Finnish foreign and security policy states that 'the recent years have shown increasingly clearly that instability in Africa and the Middle East is having more direct impacts on the security of Europe and Finland than before. The Finnish participation in crisis management, therefore, also enhances the security of Finnish people' (The Finnish Government, 2020: 48). In a similar vein, a government report on Norway's strategy in the Sahel states that 'Norway has a clear interest in promoting improvement in the security situation in the Sahel and stabilisation of the region as a whole. Poverty, climate change, health crises, international terror,

organised crime, human trafficking, and irregular migration have direct consequences for Norway and all of Europe' (Norway MFA, 2021: 3).

Threats to the rules-based international order

A third shared environmental uncertainty central to South African and Nordic national interests is threats to the rules-based international order. As can be read in South Africa's National Interest Document: 'a rules-based international system favours smaller to middle-power states for the simple reason that it attempts to curtail the excesses of realpolitik underpinning major powers' foreign policies...' (DIRCOa, 2022: 20). The document stipulates that South Africa should defend multilateralism and the rules-based international system, while also opposing the unfairness in the current system by promoting reform of global political and economic governance to become fairer (DIRCO, 2022a: 14). The Nordics too highlight the importance of a rules-based international order to seek solutions to common challenges and that deterioration of this system would be a threat to their security (Norway Government, 2019: para. 1; The Finnish Government, 2020: 11; Sweden Government, 2022c). In a report on Nordic foreign and security policy requested by the Nordic Foreign Ministers, it is stated that the Nordics are heavily reliant on a functioning rules-based international system and that a disruption of this system would undermine core principles of the Nordic countries such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Bjarnason, 2020: 20).

South Africa and the Nordics: Strategic fit

This chapter will discuss South Africa and the Nordics' mutual interests as identified in: increased trade and business relations, including the promotion of the green and blue economy; cooperation and exchange of expertise on mediation and peacebuilding; and the promotion of democracy, human rights, a rules-based international system, and reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Trade and business relations

Currently, the trade between the Nordics and South Africa is not very extensive. The top commodities that South Africa exports to the Nordic countries include fruit and vegetables, wine, vehicles, and minerals

(Trading Economics, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e) at a total sum of approximately 470 million US dollars in 2021 (UN COMTRADE, n.d.). Top commodities exported from the Nordics to South Africa vary between the different Nordic countries and include machinery, electronics and technology, paper and paperboard, and different types of chemicals (Trading Economics, 2021f; 2021g; 2021h; 2021i; 2021j), at a total sum of approximately 1,75 billion US dollars in 2021 (UN COMTRADE, n.d.).¹⁰ South Africa has highlighted the importance of positioning itself to become an integral player in the global economy and strives to attract sustainable investments to grow its economy (DIRCO, 2022a: 20). Simultaneously, the Nordic countries are expressing interest in further developing and strengthening trade around Africa (Finland MFA, 2021: 3, Sweden Government, 2022: 4, Norway MFA, 2008: 4, Denmark MFA, 2020: 1). For example, Finland states that 'from the perspective of Finland's interests, it is important for Finland to contribute to positive development in Africa and to build new political and economic cooperation with its African partners that benefits both parties' (Finland MFA, 2021: 3). Moreover, the annual Nordic-Africa Business Summit can be understood as a manifestation of Nordic and African interest in stronger trade and business cooperation.

Many promising trading sectors between the Nordics and South Africa could be explored. The *blue economy*, referring to economic activity in and around lakes, rivers, oceans, and bodies of water, has been called the 'new frontier of African renaissance' by the African Union (AU, 2022). As well as being important for business, sustainable fishing, which is a part of the blue economy, could help prevent food security threats that the world is facing (Akinmade, 2019: para. 4). The necessity to accelerate growth in both the blue and green economies has been highlighted in South Africa's National Interest Document (DIRCO, 2022a: 13). Given the centrality of oceans in the Nordic economies, particularly Norway and Iceland, there is potential to explore these markets further (Akinmade, 2019: para. 5). Moreover, the Nordics have over several decades accumulated expertise on over-exploitation, water resource management challenges, and pollution risks that could benefit South Africa (ibid.). Both Iceland and Norway state that they are seeking to offer expertise in areas such as sustainable fishing (Iceland MFA, 2018b: 10; Norway MFA, 2008: 22). Furthermore, another underexplored

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arena for collaboration is technology start-ups, a sector in which both South Africa and the Nordics encompass different types of expertise and knowledge that can be exchanged (Akinmade, 2019: para 11). The start-up ecosystem in South Africa is increasingly gaining global attention and South Africa is the only African country represented in the start-up Blink top 50 rankings, identified as a country with accelerating entrepreneurial innovation. The Nordic countries are also represented in the top 50 rankings, with Sweden ranking the highest (StartupBlink, 2022: 31). In 2022, Sweden hosted a business delegation from Sweden to South Africa for companies to explore opportunities for building relationships with new stakeholders and to get first-hand insight into the local tech-start-up scene in South Africa (Business Sweden, 2022). Exploring the potential of the blue and green economy, technology start-ups, and other promising trading sectors between the Nordics and South Africa could not only benefit both economies but also contribute to the green shift and sustainable solutions.

Renewable energy

Cooperation and trade in renewable energy have been highlighted as lucrative opportunities for South African and Nordic companies (Akinmade, 2019: para. 8). The Nordics have over the past decades developed innovative and viable energy systems with a focus on sustainability, system integration, and grid stability

(Nordic Energy Research, 2021). During the Nordic Energy Days conference held in Pretoria in 2017, Norway's former State Secretary at the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, Ingvil Smines, said that there are many opportunities for Southern African countries to strengthen their partnerships with the Nordic countries regarding renewable energy (Odendaal, 2017). During the same conference, South Africa's former Presidential Special Energy Adviser, Silas Zimu, stated that it is time that South Africa learns from what the Nordics have done (ibid). South Africa and the Nordics already cooperate on projects related to sustainability and green energy. For example, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the South African Department of Environmental Affairs are cooperating on a project which focuses on waste management (Naturvårdsverket, n.d). Also, as part of an initiative targeting support for renewable energy in countries relying on coal power, Norway has provided funding to solar energy projects in South Africa (Akamo et al., 2022: 56). Moreover, cooperation on green energy between the Danish Energy Agency, the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, the Independent Power Producers, and Eskom¹¹ has been established to provide better opportunities for South Africa to achieve their climate objectives (Center for Global Cooperation, 2021).¹²

Peacebuilding and mediation

South Africa and the Nordics also have mutual interests related to peace mediation and peacebuilding, particularly on the African continent. South Africa is involved in continental peace-making, UN-mandated peacekeeping operations, and peacebuilding. Indeed, it has become somewhat expected of South Africa to play a large role on the continent in this respect (van Nieuwkerk, 2014: 6). The motives as to why South Africa is concerned with peace and security in Africa include that South Africa sees it as a responsibility to reciprocate the support it received from other African countries during the liberation struggle; the idea that the specific South African liberation experience of internal negotiation and agreement could serve as an example for other conflicts; and the recognition that own political and economic achievements will depend on the condition of the rest of the continent (Sidiropoulos, 2007: 2). South Africa's National Interest Document highlights that 'South Africa's African Agenda is based on the understanding that there

can be no development without peace and no peace without development' and that the security and stability of the continent is a requirement for South Africa's own security and stability (DIRCO, 2022a: 14). Like South Africa, the Nordic identity is connected to the promotion of peace. For instance, in 2017, the Nordic Council launched the idea that 'peace should be made the trademark of the Nordics' (Norden, 2017). Particularly concerning Norway, studies have described the country's 'peace brand' as a self-enforcing identity, but also as a means to achieve national interests in terms of gaining influence on the international arena (Leira, 2013; Stokke, 2012). In addition to promoting their peace identity, the Nordics are interested in peace advancement and stability of the African continent because this could reduce threats of migration and terrorism as well as improve conditions for trade and business, as discussed previously in the article.

Interestingly, civilian and humanitarian support to South Africa's anti-apartheid movement was among the Nordics' first peace engagements abroad and played a central role in shaping the peacebuilding element in Nordic foreign and development policy (Hagemann and Bramsen, 2019: 15). There are also several examples of modern South Africa-Nordic cooperation initiatives related to peace and security in Africa. Training for Peace (TfP) is an ongoing collaborative initiative established by Norway in 1995 to support the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which later expanded to the rest of Africa (Nantulya, 2017: para 9–10). The TfP Programme is funded by the Norwegian government and has two South African partner institutions (NUPI, 2022). Additionally, South Africa and the Nordics collaborate within the UN on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda to promote capacity building on the African continent. Peace-making and peacebuilding are areas that hold great potential for cooperation, expertise-sharing, and mutual inspiration. For example, the Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) network was inspired by a similar initiative in Southern Africa (PRIO, 2015). Joining forces in the area of peace and security promotion can help achieve mutual interests related to South Africa and the Nordics' peace identity as well as peace and stability on the African continent.

Democracy and human rights

Another area of mutual interest is the promotion of democracy and human rights. The Nordic countries are often seen as being at the forefront of promoting democracy and are all considered to be highly democratic and with low levels of corruption (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020: 4; Transparency International, 2021).¹³ The Nordic countries' Constitutions put a strong emphasis on democracy, human rights, and equality among all, and on the importance of spreading these values (Norway MoJ, 2022; Denmark Parliament, 2019; Iceland MoJ, 2018; the Swedish Parliament, 2021; Iceland Parliament, 2004). Their strong pro-democracy stand was once again proven when the Foreign Ministers of the Nordic countries gathered at a meeting in September 2022 to discuss the promotion and protection of democracy (Sagheer, 2022). Additionally, Sweden explicitly states that 'ensuring support for, defending and promoting democracy is a priority for the Swedish Government' (Sweden Government, 2021: para. 7). Like the Nordics, South Africa's Constitution puts prominence on democracy and human rights. The Constitution has been celebrated globally for its inclusiveness and does not only serve as a legal framework but importantly also as a statement of socio-economic transformational goals (South Africa Government; n.d.). In South Africa's National Interest Document, it is stated that South Africa's normative posture is mainly seen to be characterised by principles such as democracy and human rights outlined in the Constitution (DIRCO, 2022a: 15). However, it is worth noting that South Africa has been ranked as a 'flawed democracy' (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020: 48) and is currently faced with issues such as corruption and human rights abuses (Freedom House, 2022a; Amnesty International, 2021).

South Africa's National Interest Document states that the vision for the country is to establish a society based on fundamental human rights, social justice, and democratic values (DIRCO, 2022a: 11). It also states that the country supports and leads global trends that are in favour of human rights, peaceful settlements of disputes, as well as respect for international law and collective action through multilateralism (DIRCO, 2022a: 17). Additionally, South Africa aspires for a global world order that is rooted in equality, solidarity, and unity of purpose (DIRCO, 2022a: 27). An initiative for promoting democracy that South Africa could benefit from could, for instance, be related to

sharing Nordic expertise on coalition governments. Research suggests that coalition governments are the most likely alternative to foster an inclusive democracy, nation-building, and development for a politically, ideologically, and racially diverse South Africa (Gumede, 2016). Nordic expertise in coalition governments could therefore serve as an example of South Africa-Nordic cooperation to strengthen democracy. Considering that authoritarian regimes are gaining increasingly more power in the international system and that the world is experiencing a shrinking of democracy globally, coordinated action to promote democracy internationally is of importance to states who support the democratic model (Freedom House, 2022b: 2).

Increased African representation in the UNSC

Both the Nordics and South Africa are in favour of increased African representation in the UNSC. This has been an outspoken foreign policy point for South Africa for a long time (Venter, 2003: 29). A statement from Ambassador Mathu Joyini, Permanent Representative of South Africa to the UN, clarifies the country's position: 'Africa calls for not less than two permanent seats with all the prerogatives and privileges of permanent membership including the rights of veto' (DIRCO, 2021: 7). Furthermore, Ambassador Joyini stated that Africa demands five non-permanent seats (DIRCO, 2021). Likewise, a recent statement to the UN on behalf of all the Nordic countries reads: 'The Nordic countries support a balanced expansion of the Security Council from all regions to better reflect current global political and economic realities, and to ensure increased representation of developing countries... particularly both permanent and non-permanent seats for Africa in order to redress the historical injustice against Africa' (Denmark MFA, 2023: para. 3). Both Norway and Finland mention their support for Africa's demands for increased representation in the UNSC in their foreign policy documents, with Norway noting that a 'strengthened and reformed UN is in the interests of both Norway and African countries' (Norway MFA, 2008: 19; Ulkoministeriö, 2021: 6). Furthermore, at a seminar held on the sidelines of the 2022 African-Nordic Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Helsinki, Norway's Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt reaffirmed Norway's commitment to securing a permanent seat on the Security Council

and to expanding the number of elected seats for African countries (NAI, 2022).

South Africa and the Nordics: The system principle

The system principle is the *reason* that a strategic partnership exists and tends to be grounded in common interests and values that inspires what becomes the common goal of the partnership (Wilkins, 2008: 364). As a strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordics does not yet exist, such a system principle naturally has not been created. However, the common interests and values that were mentioned in the above paragraphs would make a good foundation for a system principle to be discussed and implemented if the two actors were to establish a strategic partnership. Referring to the analysis above, the overarching goal of a potential strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordics would likely be anchored in their mutual interests in sustainability efforts, promotion of democracy and human rights, peace and security initiatives in Africa, enhancement of both regions' economies, and protecting the rules-based international order.

South Africa and the Nordics: International and domestic political context

This article argues that Wilkins' strategic partnership framework would benefit from adding international and domestic political context, defined as broader societal and historical circumstances in which political events and phenomena occur, as a key factor within the formation phase. This includes factors such as the domestic political system, social and cultural norms, developments in the global economy, and international relations. Wilkins' framework does to some extent capture elements of this point by briefly mentioning that support from leaders is central to the formation of a strategic partnership (Wilkins, 2008: 364).¹⁴ The following section will illustrate how factors related to international and domestic political context reduce the likelihood of a South Africa-Nordic strategic partnership taking form in the immediate future, even though shared environmental uncertainties and a strategic fit have been identified.

South Africa has experienced a shift in its foreign policy orientation since it transitioned to a democracy in 1994. Whereas Mandela's ANC led the country into

a new democratic era with a focus on the multilateral and a promise that human rights would 'be the light that guides our foreign affairs' (Mandela, 1993: 88), a decade later Zuma's ANC increasingly turned towards Russia and China (Matthee, 2016: 14). Indeed, Zuma's foreign-policy strategy deliberately altered economic and diplomatic links away from the US and Europe, and voices within the ANC became increasingly critical to the West (Alden, Sidiropoulos, 2019: 30). Stronger cooperation between emerging economies, including though foras such as the BRICS,¹⁵ creates arenas for consolidating South Africa's ties to these countries, including authoritarian regimes. A recent ANC policy document emphasises the importance of forming closer relations with 'fraternal parties' and expanding the BRICS (ANC, 2023: 10–11). This view was underscored at the ANC's 55th national conference in January 2023, where the party stated that South Africa should use its 2023 BRICS chairmanship to push for the admission new members to the group (ANC, 2023: 11). Several states have expressed interest in joining the BRICS, including countries with poor human rights and democracy records such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Global State of Democracy Initiative, 2022; Devonshire-Ellis, 2022).

A core element of the ANC's foreign policy is solidarity with countries that supported the liberation struggle against apartheid (Sidiropoulos, 2022: para. 13). While the Nordic support was limited to peaceful aid only, the Soviet Union provided weapons and other military

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aid as well as military training to the ANC (Gottschalk, 2022: para. 7-9; Sidiropoulos, 2022: para. 13). These historical links, coupled with what parts of the South African political left considers to be Western double standards in multilateralism, the use of force, the rule of law and democracy, make the ANC and the South African political left inclined towards Russia (Sidiropoulos, 2022: para. 15). Quoting from the ANC document 'A Better Africa in a Better and Just World' (ANC, 2015), which set parameters for foreign-policy discussions at the ANC's National General Council in 2015, Mills and James (2016: 8) display these sentiments:

As a revolutionary national liberation movement which is an integral part of the international revolutionary movement to liberate humanity from the bondage of imperialism and neocolonialism, the document declares the ANC's staunch support for China and Russia and its opposition to the 'imperialist' and 'aggressive' US... From the ANC's vantage, 'The sudden collapse of socialism in the world altered completely the balance of forces in favour of imperialism. It ushered in a new world hegemonic era of global socio economic agenda of capitalism and free market imperatives'... According to the ANC, 'They have vowed in Washington that there will be Russia or China to challenge the US hegemony' since 'The US does not appreciate the resurgence of China and Russia as dominant factors in the arena of international power relations. It has instead declared a cold war against these two emerging world powers'.

Importantly, in a more recent ANC policy document, the party is not as explicit in its scepticism towards the Western and US hegemony (ANC, 2023). However, a significant part of the South African political left still sees Russia as a country that opposes US hegemony and respects national sovereignty and the rule of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs (Alden and Sidiropoulos, 2019: 31). As a political party stemming from South Africa's liberation movement, opposing imperialism is a central part of ANC's history and legacy. The party often criticises or opposes what it understands as the West's arrogance and imperialist behavior, whether it concerns Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya, or ignoring development countries' voices (Sidiropoulos, 2022: para. 14). As such, the Nordics'

close association with the US and the West might lessen South Africa's interest in entering into a strategic partnership.

In the case of the Nordic states, due to their geographic proximity to Russia, their current international and domestic political context is notably affected by Russia's efforts to expand its power. This became even more evident with the Russian war on Ukraine that started in February 2022. Commenting on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Swedish Ambassador and Sweden's Defence Attaché to South Africa condemned Russia for its actions and put a strong emphasis on the importance of supporting fellow democratic states (SABC News, 2022). While the Nordics strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Norway Government, 2022), South Africa abstained from the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions (DIRCO, 2022b). However, South Africa maintained that the Russian military intervention in Ukraine has violated international law and holds that they are pursuing a non-aligned path in their foreign policy (DIRCO, 2022c). Due to the current political context experienced by the Nordics; the closer South Africa gets to authoritarian regimes with poor human-rights records, the less eager the Nordics will be to enter into a comprehensive strategic partnership with South Africa.

Conclusion

Although Wilkins' framework is traditionally used to evaluate whether a strategic partnership will endure or not, the ambition of this paper has been to apply the framework to a non-existing strategic partnership to comment on the prospects for such a partnership to emerge. The article has exemplified how Wilkins' strategic partnership model can be applied to analyse not only already existing strategic partnerships, but also which strategic partnerships *could* exist, *why* they could exist, as well as the benefits that would follow *if* they existed. The plurality of identified common environmental uncertainties (climate change and environmental degradation, conflict, and instability in Africa, and threats to the rules-based international order) and shared values and interests related to economy and security (increased trade and investment, promotion of the blue and green economy, peace mediation and peacebuilding, promotion of democracy and human rights, and

increased African representation in the UNSC) makes for a fertile ground for a strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordics. Elevating South Africa-Nordic relations to a strategic partnership would lead to increased interactions on all levels of government which could increase both regions' capacity and ability to find joint solutions to promote national interests and tackle environmental uncertainties. However, the current international and domestic political context experienced by South Africa and the Nordics, an element this article has added to the formation phase of the strategic partnership model, diminishes the likelihood of such a partnership emerging in the immediate future. This article represents an initial analysis of the prospects of a strategic partnership between South Africa and the Nordics, creating a foundation for further analysis. More research is needed on South Africa-Nordic relations, including the potential for cooperation in areas such as global health and cybersecurity. Additionally, academic investigation on how political context can affect the formation of new partnerships in various cases is needed, as implications of political context will play out differently from case to case. Moreover, further research on strategic partnerships between regional blocks and bodies, such as SADC and the Nordic Council, could yield interesting results.

Notes

1. The African National Congress (ANC) was a central actor in the liberation movement and received civilian and humanitarian support from some of the Nordic countries (Akamo et al., 2022: 16). When South Africa transitioned to a democracy in 1994, the ANC's Nelson Mandela became President and the ANC has remained the country's ruling party since then (ANC, n.d).
2. Indeed, the action plan for a so-called 'green' strategic partnership, focusing on green energy and green growth, between Denmark and South Africa is currently being developed (Denmark MFA, 2022).
3. Existing strategic partnerships of South Africa or the Nordic countries include South Africa-European Union (European Union, n.d), South Africa-Russia (Geldenhuys, 2020; Lessa, 2010), South Africa-China (Alden and

Wu, 2014), Denmark-China, Denmark-South Korea, Denmark-Japan, Denmark-Mexico, Denmark-India (Denmark MFA, 2022), Norway-Brazil (Norway Government, 2011), Norway-AU (Norway Government, 2018), Norway-Germany (Norway Government, 2023), Sweden-the Gulf countries (Sweden Government, 2022a), Sweden-Poland (Embassy of Sweden, 2022), Sweden-France (Sweden Government, 2019), Sweden-Brazil (Sweden Government, 2015). Strategic partnerships with the states of Finland or Iceland as members were not identified. A strategic partnership involving the Nordics as a common actor was also not identified. Please note that this list cannot be understood as a complete overview. Also note that these arrangements are identified as strategic partnerships by their members, while not necessarily fitting into Wilkins' definition of a strategic partnership.

4. A discussion arguing *in favour of* or *against* the establishment of a South Africa-Nordic strategic partnership would require a deeper analysis of geopolitical developments, which this article does not provide.
5. In this article, only the relationship between the Nordic sovereign states and South Africa is considered.
6. Although South Africa already has a strategic partnership with the EU, the authors consider that it is relevant to discuss the prospects for a separate South Africa-Nordic strategic partnership. A potential South Africa-Nordic strategic partnership would likely differ greatly from the South Africa-EU strategic partnership, as the former would be specifically shaped by the shared values and strategic fit between the Nordics and South Africa.
7. Adelle and Kotsopoulos (2017) concentrate particularly on the climate-change relations under the EU-South Africa Strategic Partnership.
8. In the Icelandic government documents, only the threat of climate change was identified.
9. In addition to the three mentioned environmental uncertainties, both South Africa and the Nordics also identify threats related to global health

and cybersecurity as important risks to national interests. However, these will not be discussed further in this article.

10. In recent years, there has been an overall decreasing trend in exports between South Africa and the Nordics, with a few exceptions of increased exports from South Africa to Denmark and Iceland, and from Finland to South Africa (Trading Economics, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e, 2021f; 2021g; 2021h; 2021i; 2021j).
11. Eskom is South Africa's primary electricity supplier.
12. The cooperation is based primarily on three areas focusing on capacity development in energy planning and wind resource mapping, development of a liberalised energy market with grid planning and higher rates of renewable energy sources, and integration of renewable energy sources and grid codes.
13. As of 2022, all Nordic countries ranked highly on various peace, democracy, and human development indexes (UNDP, 2022; World Population Review, 2022).
14. Wilkins also recognises that a range of factors, including external pressure and changes in partner status, can affect the prospects of a strategic partnership. However, this is only mentioned in the evaluation phase of the framework (Wilkins, 2008: 366–367).
15. The BRICS is a group bringing together major economies. Current members are China, Russia, Brazil, India and South Africa (BRICS, n.d: para. 3).

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