



South Africans endorse open trade, greater African voice in international affairs

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1072 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

The African Union (AU) was admitted as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023 (Masamba, 2024). South Africa's presidency in 2025 is the first time an African country has taken on the mantle of agenda-setter of this multilateral forum. The country's leadership is widely seen as an opportunity to give more prominence to African priorities such as climate change, debt relief, fair trade, and infrastructure investment (Time Africa, 2025).

Since 1994, when South Africa joined the AU, it has contributed significantly to continental affairs. It has championed economic integration through intra-African trade, sought to elevate Africa's voice on the global stage, and promoted peace through conflict mediation and peacekeeping missions in conflict zones across Africa (History Rise, 2025). When South Africa chaired the AU at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it pushed for fairer development finance, access to vaccines and funding, and support for economic recovery in the Global South (African Union, 2021; Brand South Africa, 2025).

South Africa's biggest bilateral trading partners are China, the United States, and Germany (Ishmael, 2023). In August of this year, South African exports to the United States were slapped with a 30% tariff, causing especially grievous harm to the country's agricultural, manufacturing, and mining sectors (Tarrant, 2025). In response, the government is looking to leverage the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to facilitate greater economic integration and cooperation across the African continent (Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition, 2025). Meanwhile, trade within the BRICS group is growing; it represented 21% of the country's total trade volume in 2024, led by China and India. And new markets such as Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates are also gaining momentum (BRICS Connect, 2025).

Ahead of the G20 summit in Johannesburg (22-23 November), this dispatch explores how South Africans view their economic and political relations with the rest of the world.

The most recent Afrobarometer survey reveals that citizens are supportive of international trade and political cooperation.

Two-thirds of South Africans see China's economic and political influence on the country as positive – five times the share of negative assessments. Perceptions that China's influence is substantial and positive recovered in 2025, having fallen between 2015 and 2022.

Citizens are also more positive than negative in their assessments of the influence of the AU, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the European Union (EU), the United States, India, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

About six in 10 express satisfaction with the way South Africa's needs and interests are recognised in AU and SADC decision making. But fully three-quarters say African countries need a stronger voice on global platforms such as the United Nations.

Three-fifths of South Africans endorse open trade, but only about one in eight have heard of the AfCFTA.

Among the two-thirds of respondents who have heard of the Ukraine-Russia war, most want their country to remain neutral.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult citizens between 28 June and 19 July 2025. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2022.

Key findings

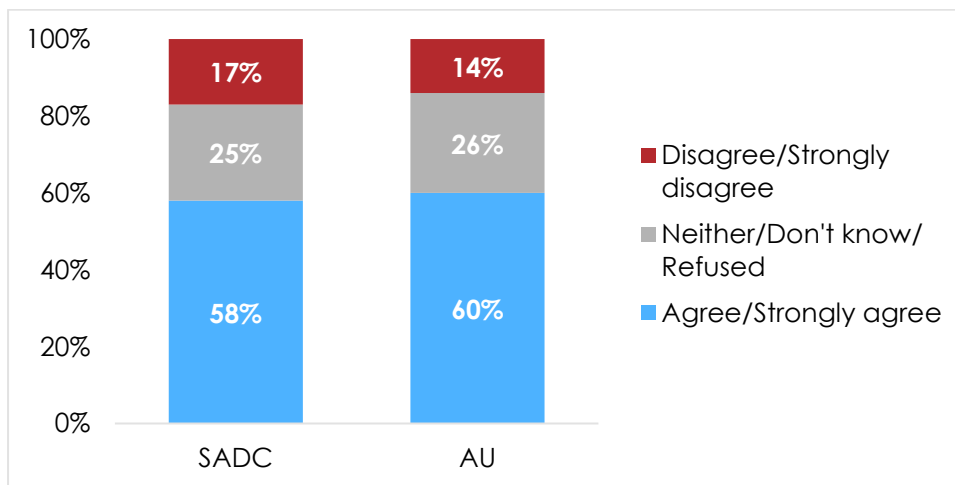
- Roughly six in 10 South Africans are satisfied with the way that SADC (58%) and the AU (60%) recognise South Africa's needs and interests in their decision making.
 - A large majority (75%) say African countries should have a greater say in international decision-making bodies such as the United Nations.
- About six in 10 citizens (61%) prefer free trade over limiting international trade to protect domestic producers.
 - A similar majority (57%) favour open trade with countries around the world, while nearly four in 10 would privilege trade with African countries (25%) or Southern African countries (13%).
- Only 12% of respondents say they have heard of the AfCFTA.
- Positive assessments outweigh negative ones when it comes to the economic and political influence of China (68% vs. 14%), the AU (59% vs. 13%), SADC (57% vs. 16%), the EU (50% vs. 14%), the United States (46% vs. 33%), India (41% vs. 19%), Russia (40% vs. 26%), and the United Kingdom (37% vs. 25%).
- Asked who helped South Africa most during the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens are most likely to cite the United States (22%), followed by the AU or Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (20%) and China (15%).
- Majorities of citizens see China's influence on South Africa as substantial (65%) and positive (68%), up since 2022 (56% and 37%, respectively).
- Among the 65% of South Africans who are aware of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, most (74%) favour taking a neutral stance on the war.

Africa's voice in global affairs

Nearly six in 10 South Africans (58%) say their country's needs and interests are adequately recognised in SADC decisions, while only 17% think they are not (Figure 1). One-quarter (25%) report uncertainty, say they "neither agree nor disagree," or decline to offer a response.

Views on the AU are almost identical: 60% express satisfaction with the way the continental body takes South Africa's needs and interests into account, while 14% disagree.

Figure 1: Recognition of South Africa's interests in regional and continental affairs
 | South Africa | 2025

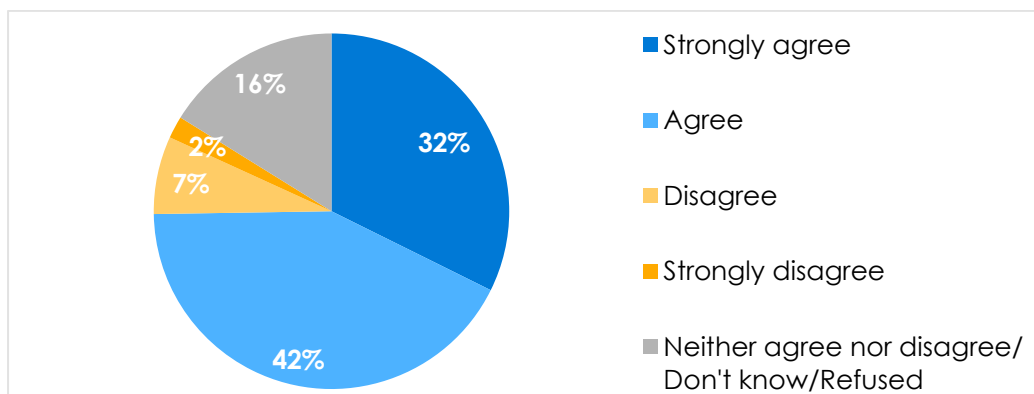


Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say:

- The needs and interests of South Africa are adequately recognised in the decisions of SADC?
- The needs and interests of South Africa are adequately recognised by the African Union when it is making decisions for the African continent?

When it comes to international bodies such as the United Nations, fully three-quarters (75%) of South Africans "agree" or "strongly agree" that African countries should be given greater influence in decision making (Figure 2). Only 9% disagree with the proposition.

Figure 2: Should African countries have more say in international bodies such as the United Nations?
 | South Africa | 2025



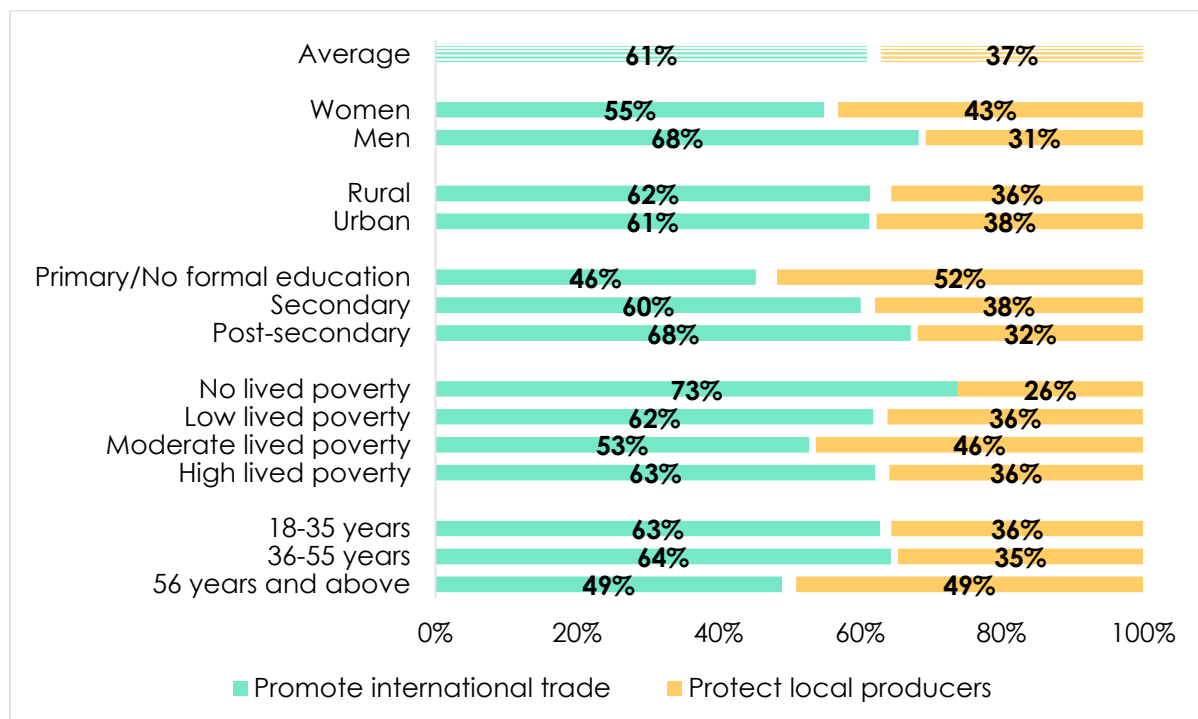
Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement, or haven't you heard enough to say: African countries should be given greater influence in the decision making of international bodies like the United Nations?

Trade with other countries

South Africans generally support free trade with the rest of the world: About six in 10 citizens (61%) say it is better for their economy if the government creates economic opportunities by making it easier to trade with other countries (Figure 3). By contrast, fewer than four in 10 (37%) would prefer to limit international trade to protect South African businesses.

Support for free trade increases with respondents' level of education, ranging from 46% among those with primary or no formal education to 68% among degree-holders. It is also more common among men than women (68% vs. 55%), young and middle-aged citizens compared to the elderly (63%-64% vs. 49%), and the wealthiest respondents compared to their less well-off counterparts¹ (73% vs. 53%-63%).

Figure 3: Open trade or limit trade? | by demographic group | South Africa | 2025

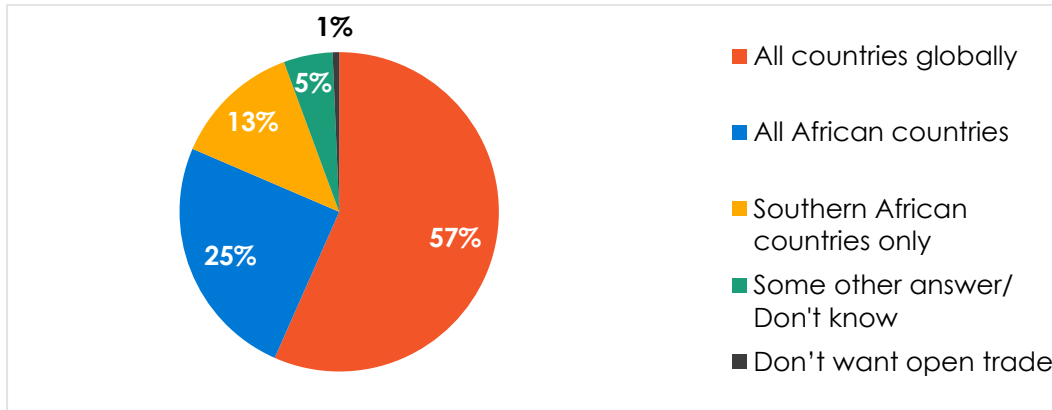


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is better for our economy if the government makes it easier for South Africa to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities.
 Statement 2: Our country should limit trade with other countries in order to protect South African producers.

If the government were to facilitate greater trade with other countries, a majority (57%) of citizens would favour trade with all countries worldwide, rather than limiting it to certain countries (Figure 4). One-quarter (25%) would privilege the entire African continent, while half as many (13%) would prefer to concentrate on countries in Southern Africa.

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

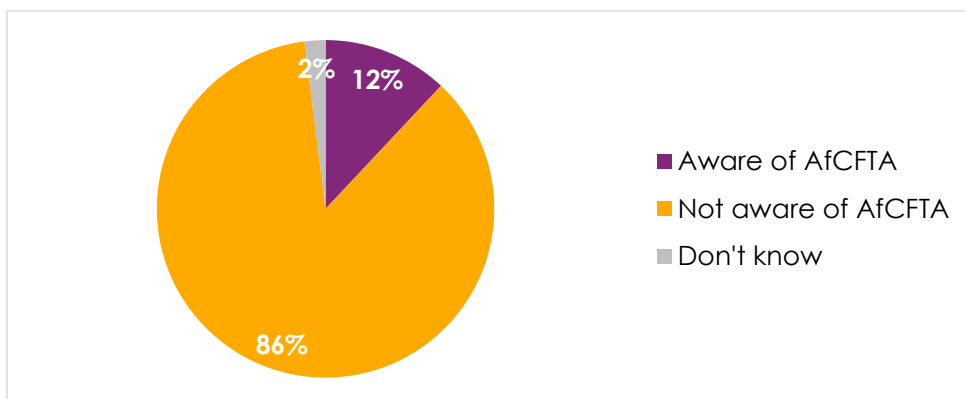
Figure 4: Which countries should leaders make it easier to trade with? | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *If South Africa's leaders are going to make it easier to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities, which countries should they make it easier to trade with?*

While South Africans favour open trade, most are not aware of the initiative aimed at creating a single market for goods and services across the African continent: Only 12% of respondents say they have heard of the AfCFTA (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Awareness of AfCFTA | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: *Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?*

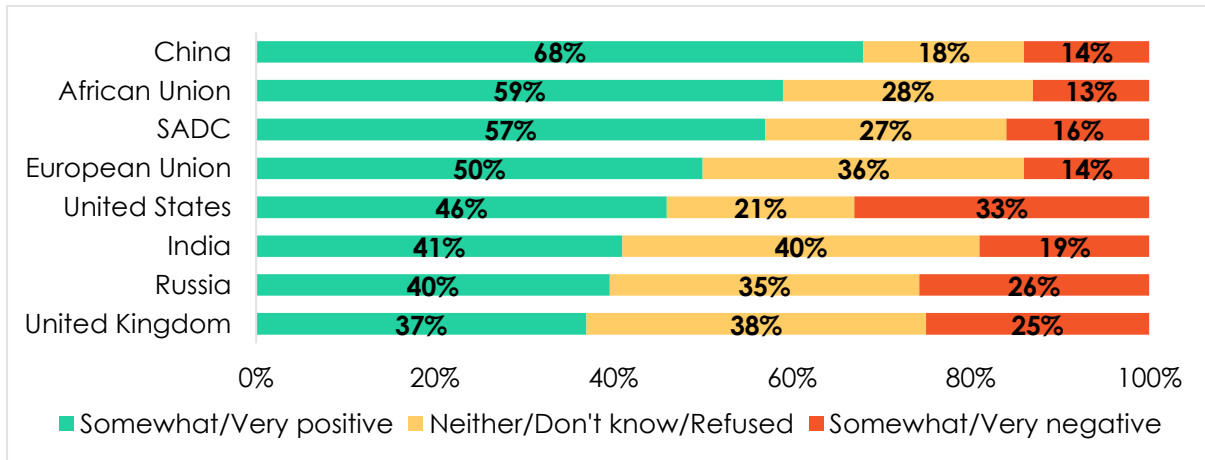
Influence of external actors

South Africans are more likely than not to welcome the economic and political influence of certain foreign nations and organisations on their country. But large proportions of respondents decline to offer an opinion or remain ambivalent (Figure 6).

About two-thirds (68%) of respondents say China's influence is "somewhat positive" or "very positive," the most favourable assessment among the eight powers the survey asked about. At least half of South Africans also hold positive views of three key multilateral organisations: the AU (59%), SADC (57%), and the EU (50%). Smaller shares recognise the value of the roles played by the United States (46%), India (41%), Russia (40%), and the United Kingdom (37%).

Minorities of South Africans (ranging from 13% to 33%) see the influence of these powers as detrimental. But between 18% and 40% say they "don't know," refuse to answer, or think their contributions are neither positive nor negative.

Figure 6: Influence of foreign powers | South Africa | 2025

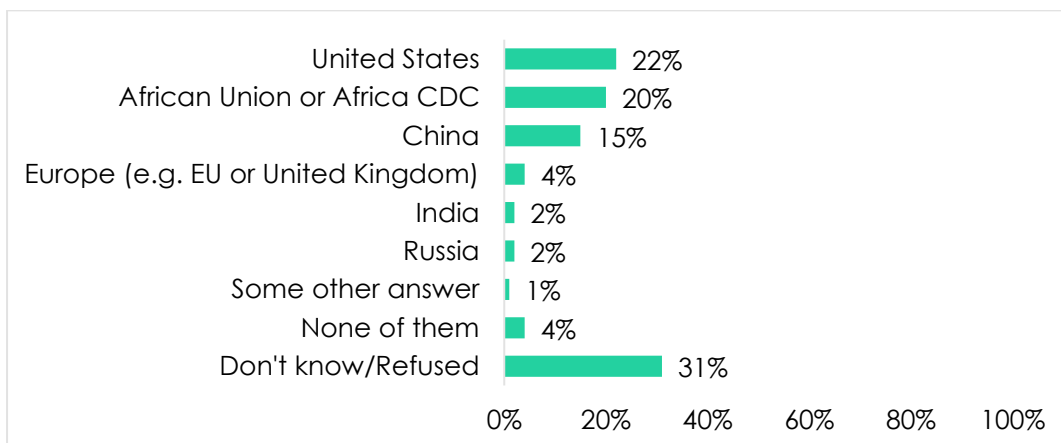


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on South Africa is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Asked which countries or organisations were the most helpful to South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, about one-fifth (22%) of respondents cite the United States, while a similar share point to the AU or Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (20%) (Figure 7). China comes third (15%).

Very few South Africans point to assistance from Europe (4%), India (2%), or Russia (2%), but three in 10 (31%) say that they "don't know."

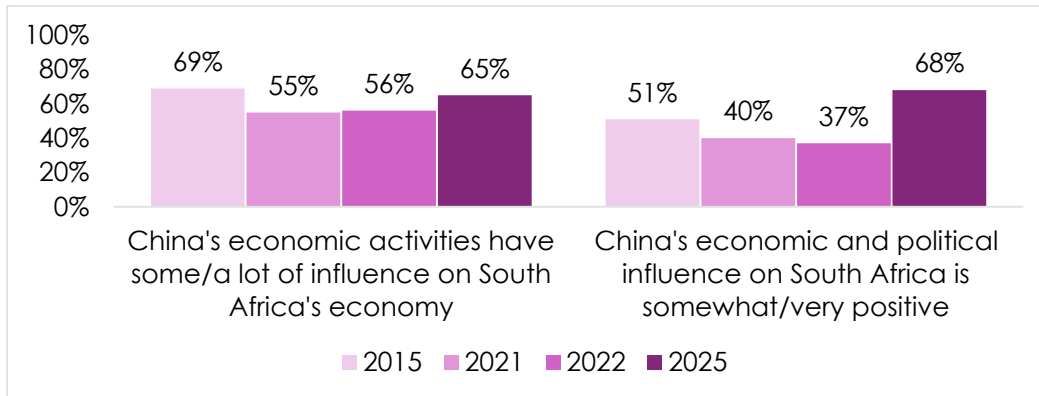
Figure 7: Most helpful countries or organisations in managing negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: Which of the following countries or organisations, if any, did the most to help South Africa manage the negative impacts of COVID-19, or haven't you heard enough to say?

The share of South Africans who say that China's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on the country's economy dropped from 69% in 2015 to 56% in 2022, before bouncing back up to 65% in 2025 (Figure 8). The proportion who see China's economic and political influence on South Africa as "somewhat positive" or "very positive" nearly doubled between 2022 and 2025, and is up by 17 percentage points since 2015 (68% vs. 51%).

Figure 8: Trends in perceptions of Chinese influence | South Africa | 2015-2025

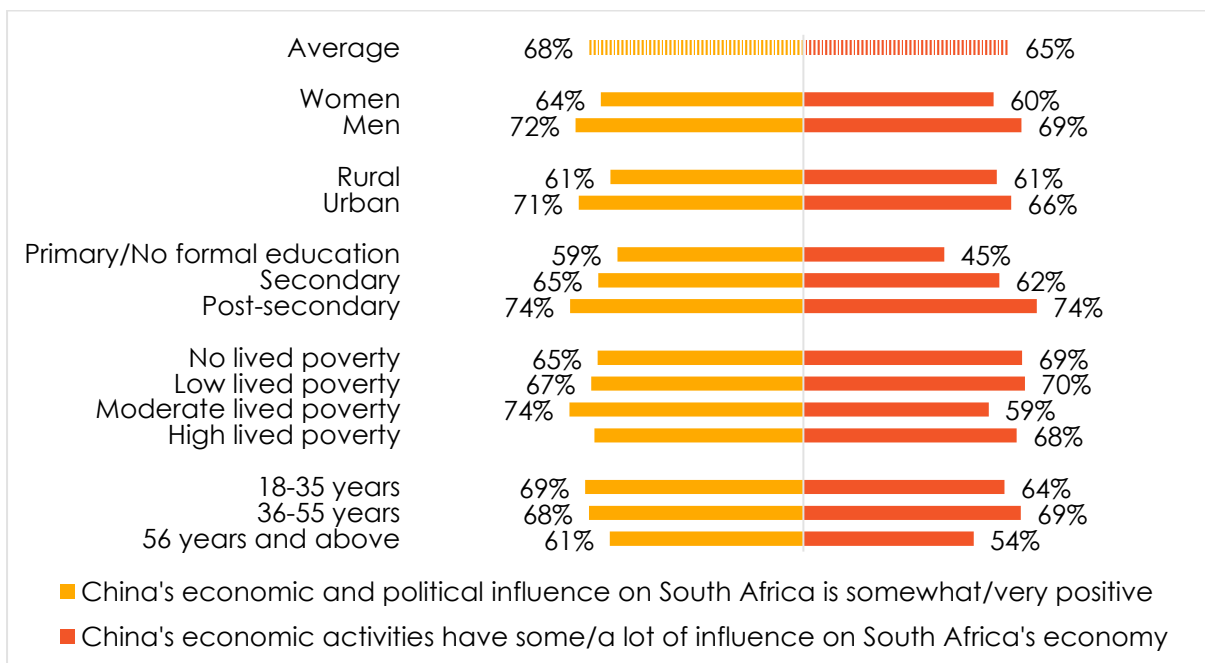


Respondents were asked:

*How much influence do you think China's economic activities in South Africa have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?
 Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on South Africa is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say: China?*

Perceptions that China's influence is substantial and positive are more common among men and urbanites than women and rural residents (Figure 9). Both assessments increase substantially with respondents' level of education.

Figure 9: Perceptions of Chinese influence | by demographic group | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked:

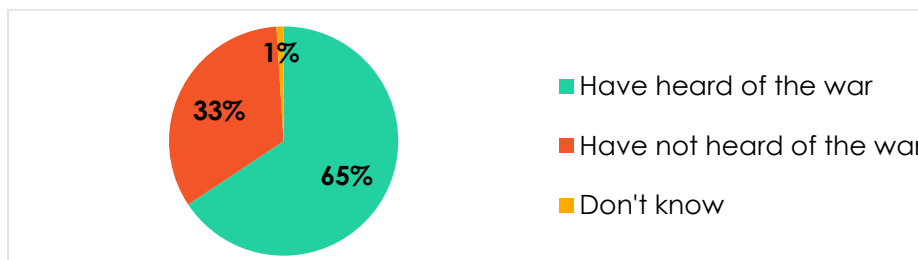
*How much influence do you think China's economic activities in South Africa have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?
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Russia-Ukraine war

Afrobarometer asked South Africans about their perceptions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. About two-thirds (65%) of respondents report having heard about the conflict (Figure 10).

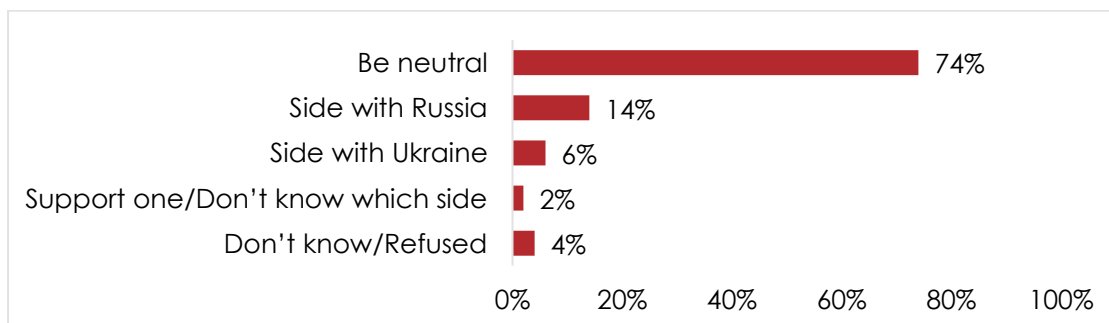
Among those who are aware of the war, three-quarters (74%) say South Africa should adopt a neutral stance (Figure 11). A larger share want the country to align with Russia (14%) than with Ukraine (6%).

Figure 10: Awareness of the war between Russia and Ukraine | South Africa | 2025



Respondents were asked: Have you heard about the war between Russia and Ukraine, or haven't you had a chance to hear about it yet?

Figure 11: Support Russia or Ukraine? | South Africa | 2025



Respondents who have heard of the war were asked: Should South Africa be neutral or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If "support one side":] Which side? (Respondents who have not heard of the war are excluded.)

Conclusion

South Africans are more likely to approve than disapprove of the economic and political influence exerted on the country by organisations such as the AU, SADC, and the EU, as well as by the United States, the United Kingdom, and BRICS partner countries China, India, and Russia. Notably, South Africans' perceptions of both the extent and the value of Chinese influence, which fell between 2015 and 2022, have rebounded in 2025.

About six in 10 citizens feel represented in SADC and AU decisions, but there is strong support for enhancing Africa's global voice on platforms such as the United Nations. When it comes to international conflicts, a strong majority of those who are aware of the Russia-Ukraine war advise caution, preferring that South Africa maintain a position of non-alignment.

While a clear majority of South Africans support international trade, very few know about the AfCFTA, suggesting a need for a public-awareness campaign if citizens are to support and take advantage of this initiative.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, nonpartisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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