SECTION VII:
AFRICAN STRATEGIC OPTIONS

CHAPTER 16

Reshaping Africa's International Relations in an America First World

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Wearing a new face

The face of international relations (IR) is changing. Consequently, the study of IR, which has always been influenced by history, will evolve to adapt to changing global dynamics. The liberal order which has defined IR for a century is rapidly unmaking itself. Those who benefited from and propagated liberal instruments such as globalisation now believe they are being taken advantage of. In addition, the pressures of integrated global markets and the long-term effects of the COVID pandemic have shrunk national budgets and economies and have encouraged many nations to embrace a more nativist view of the world. The worsening climate crisis, political instability and poor governance in parts of the world have also caused mass migration, often via illegal channels. All these factors have led to a sharp and increased distaste for the liberal order. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the United States of America, long been considered the bastion of the liberal world.

The re-election of Donald Trump as President has re-ignited the fervour to withdraw from and dismantle the liberal order after four years of the Biden administration trying to re-establish it. President Trump's approach to the world is no longer new and has come to be expected; much of what his administration hopes to achieve echoes the plans of his first administration. However, the speed and gusto with which he has addressed these matters, and the wholesale decoupling of foreign policy initiatives, are new.

If America were alone in this, it would be possible to dismiss it as an isolated phenomenon and to expect a more conventional approach from the

next US administration. However, across the world, there are signs of liberal fatigue. The far-right is making serious inroads in mainland Europe; Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland are governed by far-right parties. France continues to flirt with nationalist parties; other national parties are increasing their numbers in parliament across Europe. Further afield, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has returned the age of conquest. In Asia, South Korea, normally a stable democracy, narrowly escaped chaos when its former President declared martial law in the face of mounting public disapproval. In Africa, multiple coups in West Africa have reversed democratisation on the continent. Furthermore, the reignition of conflict in Sudan and mass protests against poor government services across several cities in Africa contribute to a feeling of liberal foreboding. This foreboding is causing many countries to rethink the liberal order and the cost of maintaining it. In the meantime, America, having borne some of the costs of liberalism, is instead promoting national primacy without the pretence of benevolence.

So, we return to how history changes the face of IR. If this is a permanent shift in the world order, be it ever so slight, what happens when IR wears a new face? This chapter is especially interested in how Africa reacts when unbridled self-promotion instead of co-operation and transactionalism instead of multilateralism are the philosophies of relations between nations. This chapter illuminates the opportunities and challenges for Africa's IR from this approach by drawing on primary and secondary sources, along with field research relevant to this discussion. The chapter proceeds as follows: the next section reviews Trump 2.0, analysing how its policies have affected African countries so far and what effect they might still have. Then, in response to Trump 2.0, this study outlines a new approach to Africa's IR and how it can navigate the evolving global order. Finally, the conclusion highlights key observations and draws conclusions on African agency in IR.

When America comes first, what happens next?

America's interest in a post-independent Africa has traditionally been defined by trade, security and liberal orthodoxy propagation. During his first term, Trump did not break away from this too much. While there is still a lot of speculation over what Trump 2.0 will mean for the world historically, in the end, the US-

Africa relationship will still be defined mainly through trade, security and cultural diplomacy. One defining characteristic of the Trump Presidency is his general indifference to and sometimes open disdain for the continent (Ahluwalia 2025: 250). During his first term, Trump did not visit any African nations, and there is no record of him visiting the continent in his private life. Trump has also been on the record using derogatory language to describe African nations (Watkins and Phillips 2018).

His indifference is particularly curious given the mass appeal he enjoys on the continent, with his popularity already established during his days as a reality television star. Many Africans also share his social conservative and religious views; his colourful personality and posturing remind many of a brand of politics and posturing they are more familiar with (Igunza, Bartlett and Bright 2024). Some commentators believe Trump's approach to the world is based on spheres of influence, which include controlling and influencing parts of the world that are beneficial and leaving the rest (Goddard 2025). His indifference may be fuelling the administration's withdrawal from Africa and the relinquishing of its influence on the continent. The State Department has closed multiple embassy locations (Schwikowski 2025), while Russian paramilitary units have established a foothold across the Sahel (Smith 2024).

Another distinction of the Trump administration is the redefinition of the rules of the US-Africa relationship. One of the specific levers of America's policy in Africa has been aid. The Trump administration has reversed this position globally by becoming more strategic with its investments and expecting a return on its participation. Trump removes the sheen and the pretence of benevolence and demands more equity in international relations. Trump sees the world through the lens of relative gains and not absolute gains. Relative gains in IR relate to what and how much one state gains compared to another, rather than calculating the absolute value of the gains (Jackson and Sørensen [1999] 2013: 121). It speaks to the competitive nature of IR, and demonstrates how Trump views the world: how much America loses relative to others, and not how much it benefits from the system it designed. While his view of the world in these terms is widespread, he has been surprisingly lenient with some countries. Tellingly, these countries are not in the developing world. African countries were not spared his tariffs, which his administration argues restore balance to international trade and force trading partners to reconsider their own tariff policies (Princewill 2025).

While America's trade policy is a fast-moving target and America has a trade deficit on goods with Africa, the principle of reciprocity belies the sheer disparity in economic and geopolitical power between the two trading partners. Because Trump does not have a sympathetic view of African countries, he does not feel a sense of responsibility to them.

Much of Trump 2.0 is still unfolding, and unfolding quite rapidly. Only with time and distance will it be possible to scrutinise all the effects of the Trump 2.0 administration. However, enough data is currently available along with data from the first administration to explore how Trump 2.0 will shape relations with Africa. Three broad categories will inform this exploration: trade, security and norms.

Building walls and closing markets

Tariffs are the *topic du jour* (the 'main T' of the moment). Terrorism and its eradication were once central to American foreign policy; now it is tariffs and trade. This approach has nothing particularly new; most countries have had some form of protectionism, especially for strategic industries. Nor is this new to Trump; one of the hallmarks of his first administration was how quickly he reneged on long-standing trade agreements. However, like with all things associated with Trump 2.0, the swift actions and the sweeping effects are new.

The Trump administration has enacted dramatic retaliatory tariffs on all countries, friend and foe alike. African countries have not been spared. The tariff policy is being created in a dynamic environment and has changed several times; however, countries like Algeria, Libya, South Africa and Tunisia are facing some of the steepest tariff hikes (Princewill 2025). At one point, the small country of Lesotho was subject to a 50% tariff, although this was later reconsidered. Eighteen other African countries are now subject to modified tariffs of fifteen per cent or more (The White House 2025a). During this period, Washington received and responded to several calls and requests for tariff renegotiations or a deal to avoid these tariffs, yet Africa was not given special consideration, clearly signalling Trump's position (Princewill 2025).

Indeed, Trump has reserved special ire for South Africa, one of Africa's economic powerhouses, because of his interpretation of domestic land laws as an affront to the white minority's civil liberties. Besides publicly denouncing

the South African government and imposing steep trade tariffs, Trump signed an executive order restricting aid to South Africa. This was purely symbolic, as all foreign aid had been stopped by this stage (Gavin 2025). Trump's muscular approach to South Africa reveals the political dimension of America's trade policy, which is unsurprising. However, this makes US trade relations unpredictable as they do not necessarily adhere to the administration's stated objectives.

Trump's second administration has not yet pronounced an African policy through which to interpret its actions. Nevertheless, reviewing the African policy of his first administration may provide insight into which principles remain and which have shifted. Guided by knowledgeable and trusted persons like the former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, the policy was anchored on prosperity, security and stability (Schneidman and Signé 2018). Prosperity was focused on advancing trade and commercial interests, security on countering terrorism in the Sahel and conflict on stabilising the continent by deploying aid strategically.

Under this vision, America still sought primacy, even though it was more circumspect with its resources; it was still committed to defending its interests against China and used aid as a focal point for soft power and engagement. However, while the Trump 2.0 administration has not issued a clear statement on its engagement with Africa, the gutting of USAID is a clear statement of intent and an indication of a new direction. Forty per cent of USAID's budget was spent in Sub-Saharan Africa (The Economist 2025). For some countries, like Liberia, the aid represented an large part of their GDP. Consequently, they lost 1.6% of their Gross National Income, the largest cut relative to GDP globally (Signé 2025a). These cuts were enacted despite the historical bonds between Liberia and the United States. *Prosper Africa*, a new initiative from the first Trump administration, was meant to refocus US foreign aid as a strategic and mutually beneficial investment, but it has been shuttered with the cuts to aid in his new administration (Launch Base Africa 2025). A holdover from the previous Africa policy is the focus on mutual prosperity and limited engagement, meaning where there is clear benefit and reward. The signals from the White House suggest that America will only engage where interest and influence are aligned; the age of soft power politics is shifting. Trade and not arms is now America's biggest weapon, but even so, America has been lagging behind China for some time now. In 2024, total trade between Africa and China was US$295.56 billion, showing a growth of four per cent compared to 2023 and keeping China Africa's primary

trading partner for the sixteenth year (ECOFIN Agency 2025). In contrast, total trade between Africa and the US was US$104.9 billion, up 8.3% from 2023, but still significantly below that of China (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2025).

Apart from trade, China has firmly established itself as a reliable partner on the continent. Through its famed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has woven an intricate web of economic, social and political interests. The BRI is China's answer to the American Marshall Plan and is a long-term strategy to centre China at the heart of development for a new world order. (Brautigam 2020: 5). The appeal of China's policy for African countries is the generous combination of infrastructure loans, grants and other economic incentives at a time when the rest of the world has lost its appetite for infrastructure finance. During the opening ceremony of the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC), which is always well attended, China announced a US$60 billion package for African states, consisting of US$10 billion in investment financing, US$15 billion of concessional grants and loans and US$20 billion in credit (Sow 2018). In response to the tariffs and new wave of protectionism from the US, China seized the opportunity and granted market access by removing all tariffs for African products (York 2025). China's relationship with Africa is neither benevolent nor balanced: some of the loans are predatory and have allowed for the forfeiture of national assets, but it is without the usual affectation and pretence of liberalism, and African nations know this.

Traditionally, in both Sino-African and US-Africa relations, the 54 African nations have been grouped into one bloc even though these countries are separate entities as far as diplomatic and trading relationships are concerned.[1] Nevertheless, Africa does often negotiate as a bloc, and the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA), the predominant trading agreement, views Africa as a bloc. On the other hand, the Trump administration prefers the transactional bilateral style, and if allowed, it will leverage it to weaken Africa's collective power. There are therefore signs that Trump's engagement with Africa may be openly controversial. Not all prosperity, even if mutually beneficial, is good prosperity.

The Trump administration announced agreements with Eswatini and South Sudan to accept deportees for processing, amid reports of increasing pressure on African countries to agree to these terms (Stone 2025). For example, the Nigerian Foreign Minister detailed how Nigeria had refused a similar deal for Venezuelan

prisoners (Channels Television @channelstv 2025). While controversial, such arrangements are not new; Rwanda and the United Kingdom had a similar arrangement before a new government scrapped it. However, Trump's success with African countries in this regard indicates the appetite for transactionalism on the continent and for currying favour with the US, even if it means breaking from the mould. The African Union (AU) has not pronounced itself on these deals yet, yet it would be curious to see how a continent that knows the horror of forced migration first-hand deals with processing human cargo.

AGOA was extended until December 2026, but many argue that the new tariff regime blunts the benefits of the initiative (Hudson 2025). A general protectionist trend governs Trump 2.0 trade policies, and that is unlikely to change, especially for African countries. Countries that want preferential treatment will need to make bilateral deals that align American interests with theirs.

American strategic indifference

In no other area are America's limited objectives and interests more apparent than in security. America's security interests in Africa have always been driven by geostrategic value, which has waxed and waned over time. America does not feel the same burden of history for Africa as for Europe. In post-independent Africa, especially during the Cold War, Africa's geostrategic and geopolitical value was high as both America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) looked to extend their influence. When the USSR disintegrated, and the Balkans fell into conflict, that strategic value fell, clearly apparent from the West's halting reaction to the Rwandan genocide (Arthur 2017: 15).

In that period, Africa's security environment was defined by civil wars and conflicts spurred on by ethnicity, nationalist movements and a desire for control of state resources or a combination of all these factors (Wai 2018: 21). There were also wars of secession and independence between Eritrea and Ethiopia, as well as between Sudan and South Sudan (Dersso 2014: 1). In response to these conflicts, the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) became more active security actors. It was during this period that the principle of African Solutions to African Problems became a mainstay of multilateral engagements on the continent (Adekeye and Landsberg 2000: 15). It also meant that African countries began viewing security collectively; indeed, the Economic Community

of West African States (ECOWAS) was instrumental in ending conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone during this time. Vestiges of some of these conflicts remain or have been transformed into different conflicts.

However, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, Africa once again became important to the US as it prosecuted its Global War on Terror (GWOT). The US increased its attacks on terrorist cells and, over time, shifted to drone attacks that did not require the same workforce and resources as in previous military engagements. Incidentally, America's waging of its campaign against terrorism has, in turn, fuelled terrorism in Africa. For example, the collapse of the Libyan government and breakdown into warring factions flooded the continent with weapons and fighters, which have been manifested in Mali's insurgency conflicts (Bala and Tar 2021: 191).

Dislodging terrorists in the Middle East has also led to an influx of unwanted elements into Africa and the spread of radicalism on the continent, where porous borders, large ungoverned areas and poor governance have encouraged the growth of terrorist groups. Local groups have merged, allied and morphed into terrorist groups that have transnational and international links with bigger groups (Bala and Tar 2021: 191). The Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) in Burkina and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which functions across West Africa and the Sahel, are among the deadliest terrorist groups in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024: 2). Additionally, Sub-Saharan Africa is the region most affected by terrorism in the world, recording 59% of terrorism-related deaths in 2023 (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024). Terrorism, which was once localised to East Africa and the Horn of Africa, is now Africa's primary security threat. It has spread across the Sahel, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has had to deploy forces in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, to combat terrorism and extremism (SADC 2021). Sub-Saharan Africa has become the epicentre of terrorist activity in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024: 3).

America's security interests are curbing the spread of terrorism, safeguarding marine trading routes and securing access to strategic resources. While these have always guided security engagements across different administrations, the objectives have become narrower over time. America has never been keen to engage on the continent directly, especially after the debacle of *Operation Black Hawk Down* in Somalia (Williams 2008: 310). It also does not help that African

governments have been unified in rejecting proposals to establish AFRICOM, the African Command of the US, operating on African soil, the command centre of which is in Stuttgart, Germany (van Wyck 2016: 110). America has also been an unreliable partner in security matters for African countries. When Nigeria tried to purchase weapons from America as the Boko Haram threat grew, they were denied under the Leahy Act, which prevents America from trading with countries that have questionable human rights records (Ogbonnaya 2016: 193). America's enforcement of this act is not universal or indiscriminate, as it would disqualify some of its security relationships with non-African governments. However, there are signs of a commitment to a security relationship with Africa.

Increasingly, drone warfare has characterised engagement with Africa. This has been consistent across the Obama, Biden and Trump administrations. Obama dramatically increased the scale of these attacks, with a reported 540 authorised strikes, many of which were executed in Somalia (Zenko 2017). Biden dialled back strikes against Somali targets with 51 targets reported, and Trump, in the first six months of his second administration, authorised 43 strikes in Somalia (Hudson 2025). Trump's increasing use of drone warfare in Somalia is noteworthy because he vowed to end American military engagements and has shown very little other interest in Africa. However, American security policy has always been defined by its interests, and Trump's actions are consistent with policy even if the objectives are narrower. The Somali strikes are likely connected to the safeguarding of maritime routes and not the elimination of terrorist cells, as a similar approach was not taken against cells in the Sahel.

Strategic indifference and transactionalism may define the Trump 2.0 security approach in Africa. In the first six months of Trump 2.0, the administration's only engagement was brokering the Rwanda-Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) peace deal, which stipulated access to critical minerals in DRC (Signé 2025b). The deal is similar in principle to one rejected by Ukraine for being too taxing and not providing security guarantees (Méheut et al. 2025).

However, other conflicts on the continent are unlikely to garner the same attention from the administration. The Sudan Civil War, which is in its second year, has been largely ignored even though Biden played a significant role in mediation and negotiations. A senior AU political officer with experience of the conflict and knowledge of the peace negotiations detailed how America's interference and interests may in fact have complicated the process:

> "The United Nations was being tele-guided behind the scenes by the United States, whose objective was much more long-term. They were not opposed to the military being in power. If the African Union position had been followed, we would have appointed a new Prime Minister, and there would be no crisis"[2].

America's interest in the Sudan conflict has waned over time, and the Trump administration is unlikely to re-enter the fray unless such a move is aligned with its commercial interests. Alignment is, however, unlikely given the many other interests involved in Sudan.

America is also noticeably absent in the Sahel, where terrorist groups are expanding their reach and operations. The Russian African Corps succeeded the Wagner Group, establishing a foothold across the Sahel. In countries like Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali and Niger, Russia has formalised its security co-operation and helped guarantee regime survival (Smith 2024).

Admittedly, the Trump administration has inherited many of its security priorities. Both the Ukraine-Russian war and the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict preceded Trump 2.0, as did the Iranian escalation.

Abnormal relations

Trump 2.0 is unfolding in real time, but one thing that is already clear and consistent with Trump's first term is his rethinking and reordering of international normative frameworks. During his first term, he aggressively pulled out of climate change agreements and the US-Iran nuclear deal. Furthermore, he withdrew and withheld funding from the World Health Organisation (WHO) at the height of the pandemic. Trump often threatened the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which was once considered sacrosanct for Western Security. He also reversed years of long-standing trade agreements.

In his second term, Trump has swiftly reversed long-standing agreements, consistent with his first term. In addition, many of his policies revert to those of his first term, as they were undone during the Biden administration. However, others are new and drastic. The shuttering of aid, which has been part of US foreign policy for decades, while not unheralded, was swift and encompassing. The effects of this will be felt most in Africa, where many countries will struggle

to fill the gap in the social services they provide (The Economist 2025). Even large economies like Nigeria will feel the effects of the withdrawal of aid, with a financing gap of US$160 million (Adebayo 2025). Trump has also aggressively challenged the thinking on trade. During his first term, he set his sights on his North American neighbours and China, but now the dragnet is global and drastic. Trade policies for Trump 2.0 are decidedly protectionist and nationalist, challenging liberal orthodoxy for the last hundred years.

For African countries, it is a curious time: these are the very polices that many were encouraged to reject during the Structural Adjustment of the 1990s championed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). To watch as America rejects trade liberalisation and raises trade barriers to protect its industries must feel like the world is reversing on its axis. Nevertheless, the question at the heart of these actions is the same as that at the heart of IR: Does power have a moral obligation? As Hans Morgenthau asked, should we consider morality in politics? Therefore, does Trump have an obligation to develop the continent without seeking a return? Should the US grant African countries a preferred trading status, such as AGOA, because it has a responsibility to help developing nations? These may be nuanced, philosophical questions for some, but the answer is clear for Trump 2.0 so far. Marco Rubio, the US Secretary of State, while justifying the end of USAID, mentioned that African states have received the most funding, yet have only voted with the US at the UN 29% of the time (US State Department 2025). There is a clear expectation that relationships come at a cost, and benevolence and goodwill are not currency.

There are other implicit ways that Trump 2.0 may also change normative frameworks for African states. America no longer has as stringent a view on social and political freedoms as previous administrations have had. China has made inroads into Africa because it does not require democratic alignment, whereas America has always done so in the past. However, Trump's transactional approach frees America from this condition. The Trump administration suspended the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which prevented trade and engagement with many African administrations (The White House 2025b). On a continent that has seen a reversal in democratisation and democratic liberties, Trump's political style, which is often irreverent and does away with customs and niceties, is familiar to many African leaders. Many African leaders have remained in power through a patchwork of favour-seeking and favour-granting relationships that co-exist with

more formal political networks; this is often referred to as neopatrimonialism (Henderson 2009: 33). Some African leaders may look to Trump's political style as justification to undermine democratic institutions and disregard checks and balances. America's indifference towards Africa will also not force military governments to consider a democratic transition a necessity.

African nations have often used international organisations and multilateralism to advance their interests. The multilateral approach is a norm of Africa's foreign policy. Multilateralism allows strength in numbers and for African states that has often meant voting as a bloc, pooling their numbers to advocate for things that are important to them. Where a clear power imbalance exists, smaller countries can thus counter stronger countries; the practice is defined as soft balancing (Whitaker 2010: 1110). In US-Africa relations, African states identified as vital partners to the US have often demonstrated an independent streak contrary to US interests. Notably, the dissent is concentrated on three issues: the International Criminal Court (ICC), the establishment of AFRICOM and the Global War on Terror (Whitaker 2010: 1110). This view is also corroborated by how African states have voted against US interests in the past. Trump's preferred style of bilateral engagement may reframe this; his view on international organisations being only useful when they further US interests may also reframe African multilateralism. Different African countries have already made strong statements on withdrawing from the ICC (Ssenyonjo 2017: 214). African states hold many common positions on a wide range of issues, including trade, the environment, extraction rights and maritime rights, to name a few. Trump 2.0 may cause African states to rethink this approach if continued US engagement in Africa is determined by interest alignment. An example of this is the BRICS group. South Africa was the first African member of BRICS, and many other African countries have joined the expanded grouping thereafter. BRICS philosophy and expansion have been a point of contention for the Trump administration (Chia and Jordan 2025)

Make Africa Great Again

Trump 2.0 is new, and the administration is rewriting the rules of American foreign policy, but new is not always unprecedented. Historically, Africa has always had to react to change economically, socio-culturally or socio-politically.

Africa is well adapted to its political or economic fortunes changing, but it also demonstrates agency, not waiting to be acted upon but acting on its own. Even at the height of great power competition between Russia and the US, African states made strategic and pragmatic choices that advanced their own interests. Those actions were often referred to as non-alignment, which still shapes the foreign policies of many African nations with their more powerful partners.

As a field of study, Africa's International Relations (AIR) is still relatively new. However, as a practice, it has been around for some time and reveals many traits that can help African nations navigate Trump 2.0. AIR is broadly categorised as the production of knowledge about IR in African academia, which yields a concrete and universal set of African ideas (Khadiagala 2010: 376). The diplomatic practices and foreign policies of African states between themselves and external actors, and the third refers to any approach which takes Africa as the primary unit of analysis in IR (Cornelissen et al. 2012: 1). AIR allows the analysis of the African states as the centre of study, as the actor and not the reactor.

A noted expert and voice in the field, Professor Thomas Tieku, was interviewed as part of this research, and he believes that AIR challenges the structure of the international system:

> "African IR if properly done, and my understanding of it is that it seeks to actually challenge the world as it exists now, one, it seeks to somewhat, seeks to challenge even the configuration of the state system. So, in other words, the African IR is an equity-oriented IR. American IR is a problem-solving IR. It is an IR that takes the world, accepts the world as the best that we can have, or at least the alternative is no better than what we have now"[3].

AIR qualities can shape Africa's IR in a Trump 2.0 world. These qualities are drawn from a wide analysis of African states' foreign policy across East and West Africa. While not conclusive, they are consistent enough to provide a guide on how African states can respond.

Africa's IR is personality-driven. This is not peculiar to Africa; charisma and demagoguery have always coloured the interpretation of the history of the international order. However, in Africa, with weaker institutions, the incidences of this are higher. The state often assumes the personality of the officeholder. Personality as a property of IR is not without its benefits. The strength of

conviction of personalities shaped the normative instruments that African IR currently rests on. The strength of conviction was responsible for retooling the AU when Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria and Thabo Mbeki of South Africa called for a renewed Africa. Trump's foreign policy is often personal and idiosyncratic; he has occasionally preferred to bypass convention and state policy and strike personal deals on the strength of his personality. He has attempted this with Vladimir Putin of Russia and Kim Jong Un of North Korea, often against the advice of his advisors. Likewise, African leaders have often come to agreements based on the personalities of their leaders. The ECOWAS intervention in Liberia was driven by Nigeria's President, who had a personal relationship with the troubled Liberian leader, Samuel Doe (Obi 2009: 121). African leaders who manage to be on friendly terms with the US President will likely benefit from the relationship.

Africa's IR is also pragmatic, not paradigmatic. As African states seek opportunities for interest assertion, they have sometimes embraced worldviews that were suitable to the moment; at times there have been Socialist states like Tanzania and Ethiopia, and the everyman appeal of Marxism was well suited to the militant freedom fighters in Angola and other parts of Africa. During the Cold War, African countries pushed for a Non-Aligned Movement to give them freedom of choice in a bipolar world. In the 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, many African states embraced the neoliberal worldview and the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). African countries continue to choose the path or philosophy most beneficial to their objectives, which often informs their foreign relations. This characteristic will serve African leaders well with the transactionalism of Trump 2.0. When interests have a commercial value and not a normative one, it will allow African leaders to make clear-eyed decisions that align with their interests without the theatre of neoliberal guilt or shaming. IR is revealing its real face of *realpolitik*. Already, Francophone Africa, which was firmly tethered to France, is doing an about-face and creating new security relationships with Russia (Jonah 2025). This agile approach to policy options is not new to a continent that has historically been sacked and sought for its resources, but it may be more pronounced in a Trump 2.0 world, and deft political leaders may be able to take advantage. As the Nigerian Minister of Industry, Trade and Investment recently quipped in response to the US tariffs: 'The world is a big place, we do

have old friends, and we are certainly making new friends'[4].

Additionally, another trait of Africa's IR is that it is cyclical. Indeed, this is true of all IR; epochs define history. However, once again, a war in Europe holds the world's attention, as does the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet Africa risks being devalued geopolitically and becoming a battleground for proxy battles. The Sudanese conflict has not received the same attention as conflicts elsewhere, even though it has created another humanitarian disaster. Africa is still gripped by insecurity and instability, and African dictators are also reemerging. In all the countries that have experienced a coup in recent years, the military was in charge, or the military had transformed into politicians when the Cold War ended. It is political *déjà vu*. The cyclical nature of IR should make analysis and actions predictable, even with all the changes of a Trump 2.0 world. Trump, despite his unorthodox approach, is highly unlikely to recognise Taiwan as an independent nation and is unlikely to reverse US policy with Israel and withdraw support. Moreover, US policy returned to its more traditional roots after Trump's first term and may do so again. On average, African leaders outlast a US administration; in some cases, like Cameroon and Uganda, there has not been a change in regime since the 1980s. African leaders are more prepared than most to play the long game because, though the face of IR is changing, it may not change for too long, and sometimes it is more of the same.

Conclusion

The actions and policies of the second Trump administration point to a deliberate withdrawing of its influence from the continent, bolstering the theory that spheres of influence govern Trump's foreign policy. So far, Trump does not view Africa as being within his sphere of influence. Trump's indifference towards the continent provides an opportunity for African leaders to demonstrate agency and leadership. African voices have been among the loudest regarding equitable climate change policies, good governance in the extractive industries and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform. All these initiatives are antithetical to current US policy and provide an opportunity for African leaders to have a voice.

Trump 2.0 also presents challenges to Africa's IR. There are AIR traits that directly conflict with Trump's style; Africa's IR is normative and it is consensus-seeking. Trump's bilateral and transactional approach will challenge this. His

personal style will further weaken institutions like the AU and force countries to consider common positions in the interest of national objectives. Trump is unlikely to recognise Taiwan but might recognise Western Sahara if this move provides an advantage. How would Africa react? An African nation might agree to host AFRICOM in a security-for-critical-minerals deal. What does that do to Africa's collective position on security? Furthermore, what if more African countries agree to host third-party immigration detention centres? Does this become a standard of US-Africa relations, and what does it do to Africa's normative and ideational frameworks? Trump 2.0 is unfolding in real-time, and history will provide a clearer picture of, and answer to some of these questions. AIR provides a framework to consider them. Lastly, the changes being introduced by Trump's second administration will require nations to adapt quickly. For African leaders, many of whom have been in power for decades, adapting to the latest geopolitical changes has been key to their survival. It is nothing new.

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Endnotes

1 The African Union recognises Western Sahara as a sovereign state, although Morocco and Algeria still dispute this.

2 In May 2023, as part of field research, a senior political officer, AU, was interviewed virtually. The officer remained anonymous to speak candidly.

3 Prof. Thomas Tieku, an authority on Africa's IR was interviewed by the author on 2nd February 2023 as part fieldwork

4 Jumoke Oduwole, the Nigerian Minister for trade, was interviewed on CNN on the 7th August 2025. The full interview is available here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgYP100zplo