CHAPTER 10

Hegemonic discord? Unpacking the diplomatic dispute between South Africa and the United States

Anton M. Pillay
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Introduction

The diplomatic dispute instigated by Trump 2.0 against South Africa was a long-awaited showdown between two once-stalwart allies. Since about 2010 and more especially during the Biden administration, Pretoria's foreign policy (FP) has frustrated and angered the United States (US). This annoyance is a result of Pretoria's non-alignment with US foreign policy, which is often described as conflict-laden and unilateral (Griffiths 2004; Maynes 1999, Holloway 2000). Several incidents over the past few years, such as the *Lady R* saga, South Africa's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and South Africa's genocide case against a staunch US ally, Israel, have set the two nations on a collision course. President Trump's setting his sights on South Africa during his first week in office underlines the country's significant role in international affairs and underscores the 'heavyweight status' of the challenging relations.

The ensuing diplomatic dispute revealed several dynamics, international actors and global interplays at work, which stress the idea that this is not a normal conflict, but rather hegemonic discord. Hegemonic conflict occurs when there is a shift in the distribution of power between states (Gilpin 1981; Mearsheimer 2001). It is a conflict that threatens to transform the structure of the international system and is a combination of ideological and geopolitical war games.

To dissect this hegemonic discord, this chapter is split into three sections. The first section provides a background for President Trump's attack, where a brief history of the US-South African relationship is given, leading up to what the author describes as three seismic shifts that derailed the otherwise cordial relationship. This is followed by a comparative political analysis of the US-South

African relationship, which evaluates how similar both hegemons are. Lastly, the dispute is then unpacked from the perspective of hegemonic conflict.

The chapter takes on a realist approach to international relations, which revolves around the idea that states are the main actors in international affairs and that they act according to their own national interests and power. Realism describes the world as violent and aggressive and assumes that unco-operative human nature and an anarchical international system encourage leaders to act in a manner framed around suspicion and force (Mathebula and Sibizo 2024). In a way, realism allows for the personification of states, an important tool especially in the comparative analysis of states and their leaders.

Overall, this chapter aims to reveal that the conflict is essentially a hegemonic conflict over ideas, the prominent idea being race, or more specifically, who controls the global narrative on it.

Background to the diplomatic dispute: Three structural causes and three triggers

South Africa and the US share a long history of friendship, co-operation and mutual respect. It is a relationship so intertwined it might be considered an alliance. To McCoy (2011), the relationship is 'a long and intimate one'. If one statement summarises this US-South African relationship, it would be that the US helped to sustain apartheid but was also key in defeating it.

Prior to majority rule, the US viewed South Africa as a strategic ally thanks to its rich mineral resources, geo-strategic location and willingness to bow to US hegemony. In the early 1950s, the US began to arm South Africa as well as supply technologies like the IBM system, which helped to denationalise and register populations into racial categories. Like a true best friend, South Africa's enemies were America's enemies. For example, the FBI was involved in surveilling Mandela, as became clear after the 2018 declassification of thousands of surveillance documents on him. Furthermore, the CIA supplied the intelligence that led to the capture of a young Nelson Mandela at a farm in Rivonia. The US-South African relationship developed so well that by 1979, when South Africa tested a nuclear bomb in the Indian Ocean, the US made a nuclear agreement with the nation. Like true best friends, not only were enemies shared, but friends as well: South Africa consequently developed close ties with Taiwan and Israel.

South Africa's subservience to the US was reciprocated by the US in the form of its UN veto power, which it used to block numerous resolutions condemning apartheid (Thomson 2008). The US also resisted repeated calls for sanctions against South Africa and continued to supply the country with weapons even after the violent suppression of the 1976 student uprising. Where the friendship blossomed the most, though, was in Cold War dynamics, where Pretoria acted as a proxy in America's global fight against communism. Because South Africa acted as a linchpin in anti-communist action in Africa, a special bond formed between the two countries, most especially under President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). Certainly, Pretoria's right-wing values aligned well with Reagan's own conservative Republican worldview. Reagan staunchly opposed economic sanctions and also made it clear that friendly relations between the US and South Africa did not depend on the National Party seeking talks with the African National Congress (ANC) (CFA 1984).

The defeat of the Soviet Union and the release of Nelson Mandela from Robben Island saw the US jump ship and switch loyalties to the ANC government-in-waiting. In the post-1994 arena, President Mandela and President Bill Clinton enjoyed a special relationship defined by their charismatic leadership styles. Though the US did not approve of South Africa's friendship with its adversaries like Cuba, Libya and Iran, the two countries remained on cordial terms. Indeed, the US viewed South Africa as the poster child of African democracy, a model for imitation and a beacon of hope in comparison to fragile continental governance. The US-South African relationship was so close that South Africa was periodically accused of being a lackey of the West or even 'un-African' (Adebajo, Adedeji and Landsberg 2007; Tjemolane 2011).

In conflict, there are structural (root) and proximate (triggers) causes, the former referring to underlying problems and the latter to the triggering factors (Moller 2003). Fully-fledged conflicts do not burst into the open without a combination of these two factors. In the current US-South African conflict, there are three root causes and three triggers.

The aftermath of the September 11 attacks was the first root cause of the strained US-South African relations. Following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a small but significant rift began to grow between the two countries. To Pretoria, the 'war on terrorism' encouraged American unilateralism at a time when South Africa was at the peak of its multilateral agenda-

setting, having just played an instrumental role in transforming the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) (Landsberg 2010). The complete disregard of international law by the US, and the use of political trickery to falsify a 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' charade further exasperated the South African government, whose FP stressed conflict resolution, peacekeeping and multilateral efforts in diplomacy (Sidiripoulous 2014). South Africa's contempt for these actions was highlighted when President George W. Bush visited the country in 2003, and the retired President Mandela refused a meeting.

The period between December 2010 and April 2011 created the second root cause in the US-South African relationship decline. In December 2010, South Africa joined the anti-US Dollar group BRICS, which officially identified South Africa as moving away from the US sphere of influence. In aligning itself with US opponents like Russia and China, it marked a new era in South Africa's international affairs. The NATO-instigated removals of two key South African allies, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire in March and April 2011 were adjudged by South Africa as neo-imperialism (Pillay 2017). To make matters worse, the invasions were a great embarrassment to South Africa, whose Presidents, namely Zuma and Mbeki, had been tasked with mediation in both conflicts. This outright dismissal of South Africa's peacekeeping efforts and the removal of African leaders not in tune with the West posed a significant setback to South Africa's multilateral agenda. Furthermore, the use of Western forces to remove Gbagbo and Gaddafi was a disparagement of South Africa's stature in global affairs.

Despite seeking new friends in the international arena and making seemingly futile attempts at countering US imperialism in Africa, South Africa and the US remained on good terms thanks to *Obama-mania,* which had co-opted Africa with superficial slogans like 'Hope', 'Yes we can' and 'Trade not Aid'. The Obama administration emphasised the importance of international institutions, summarised in Obama's declaration that 'Africa does not need strong men, but strong institutions.' This international worldview corresponded well with South Africa's own institutional approach towards FP. South Africa's election to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for 2007/08 and 2011/12 is evidence of this narrative (Mbete 2018).

The arrival of President Trump in 2016 neither hampered nor strengthened the US-South African alliance. Trump's MAGA policy and severe polarising

presence in the US resulted in Africa taking a metaphorical backseat in terms of US FP priorities. Trump's first term was also heavily overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw most states focus on their domestic agenda. During the pandemic, South Africa largely followed America's lead on the virus in terms of scientific outlook, research and vaccination, with the country buying 99% of its vaccines from American companies (*Nature* 2022; Cowling 2023).

The disputed 2020 US elections that brought Biden to power instead of giving Trump a second term is the third structural cause in the deterioration of US-South African relations (See Figure 10.1 below). Trump and his supporters made repeated claims that the election was rigged and stolen (Bordeleau 2026). Refusing to concede the election, he insisted that fraud, mail-in ballots and systemic irregularities had cost him victory (Reilly 2026). His legal team would file over 60 lawsuits to no effect. Feeling cheated of victory and watching President Joe Biden's tenure from the sidelines, there was no limit to Trump's exasperation. Trump's moniker for Biden, 'Sleepy Joe,' helps to frame the argument that Trump became extremely frustrated with what he perceived to be a weak US government and ineffective hegemon. South Africa's FP actions during Biden's tenure might possibly have exacerbated Trump's anger.



Figure 10.1: The 45th, '46th' and 47th President. Source: Megan Varner/ Getty Images 2024.

Three events or 'triggers' during Biden's tenure formed the first three metaphorical 'dominoes' that set the 2025 diplomatic dispute in motion. The first was the *Lady R* scandal of 2022, in which a Russian cargo tanker was loaded in a South African harbour. Then American Ambassador to South Africa Ruben Bridgety claimed South Africa was arming the Russian war in Ukraine, an allegation he would later retract (Fihlani and Moloney 2023). In the uproar that followed, the Rand plunged to a record low against the Dollar, wiping billions off South Africa's bonds. Though the type of cargo stowed on the *Lady R* was never determined, the incident was a bold move by the South African government, as not many countries were willing to dock or load a Russian cargo ship.

The second trigger, related to the first, was South Africa's neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. At the UN, South Africa abstained from two resolutions to condemn Russia, a stance that frustrated the Americans, who expected South Africa to lead an African consensus on the matter. South Africa also refused to say that it would abide by the ICC arrest warrant for President Putin, who was expected to attend the 2023 BRICS summit in South Africa. In a way, by trying to rationalise its stance on refuting an international arrest warrant, South Africa was encroaching on the US's self-declared role of sole international policeman.

The third trigger was South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The audacity of the South African government to initiate proceedings against US ally Israel was seen as a direct interference in the de facto United States policy of arranging the Middle East to its own benefit. By taking Israel to court, South Africa gained global ideational leverage over the US in its defence of Palestine.

These three events led to Trump, within days of assuming office, issuing an executive order (EO) that designated South African FP as a national security threat to the US and its allies. Titled 'Addressing Egregious Actions of the Republic of South Africa', the EO noted the aggressive positions South Africa had taken towards the US and its allies, including accusing Israel of genocide in the ICJ. The EO also accused South Africa of reinvigorating its relations with Iran to develop commercial, military and nuclear alliances. The EO further voiced its disapproval of South Africa's Expropriation Act, which allows the state to acquire private property without compensation. Expropriation in South Africa is a highly politicised subject most often construed over racial lines. The

greater narrative on land expropriation without compensation is that the black population continues to be oppressed without land, and that white privilege and wealth are connected with land ownership.

The EO had severe repercussions. US aid to South Africa was cut off within weeks, and the threat of possible further sanctions in the form of ending South Africa's participation in the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) gained momentum. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio declined to attend the G20 Foreign Ministers summit in Johannesburg in February 2025 as a response to the EO. In an escalation of tensions, the US expelled its South African ambassador in March 2025 and later retracted military support for the South African army.

The Trump-instigated dispute caused the US-South African friendship to plummet to its lowest point ever, turning strong allies into adversaries,

From brothers in arms to sibling rivalry

This setback in otherwise cordial relations obscures the fact that the US and South Africa are in fact remarkably alike. The extraordinary similarities between the two states set the scene for a comparative analysis.

To begin, they have similar state identities, which could be due to their shared settler-colonial origins. The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, and Jan Van Riebeeck landed in Cape Town in 1652; both brought the old world and its culture, values and ethos into new worlds. Both the Puritan Settlers and Dutch Calvinists were fleeing persecution in Europe and sought to create a new world with their respective selves as rulers. From the very moment of disembarking, both had similar if not equal ideologies in the form of a 'manifest destiny' or the 'right of conquest', assumptions based on the entitlement of settlers to be overlords over all others (Magubane 1996: 32; Hallett 1974: 677). Both groups are classic examples of what Mamdani (2020) calls 'settler intellectuals'—groups that can empathise with the native but never believe them to be capable of self-consciousness.

In *othering* the natives as savages, inferiors and backward, settlerism rapidly developed into colonialism. From colonialism sprang the economic system of capitalism, which, when intensified, resulted in imperialism, a chain of events that applied to both the US and South Africa. Democracy emerged in tandem

with the growth of capitalism, and both states are now often seen as ideal modern democracies. Thus, capitalism and democracy are the shared foundations on which both states were built.

Though capitalism has its benefits, by critiquing it, it is impossible to avoid terms like exploitation, unsustainability and inequality, terms often used when describing the history of both states. Both states confiscated land from native populations and imposed racial restrictions across their societies. Jim Crow segregation and Apartheid (separateness) are the same ideologies in that they both sought to create an inferior second-class citizen whose sole purpose was to serve the economic machine of the state. Both ideologies have entrenched coloniality by perpetuating long-standing patterns of power. Though segregation and apartheid were defeated politically, their legacy continues in that both states have ideologically valorised Eurocentrism as superior, progressive and universal, though it really represents white supremacy, capitalist profitability, destruction of the planet and Euro-American self- universalisation (Kwet 2018).

Though both states have dark histories, they have been able to reinvent themselves in similar ways. The concept of freedom is heavily entrenched in the state machinery of both America, being 'the land of the free', and South Africa, being a 'cry freedom' country, both creating constitutional democracies with freedom being a founding principle. Freedom and human rights are often interchangeable concepts, and both states have incorporated (valorised) this into their normative frameworks. America has justified the invasion of other states for having poor human rights records. Operation Just Cause (Panama in 1989), Operation Restore Hope (Somalia in 1993), Operation Uphold Democracy (Haiti in 1994) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq in 2003) are a few examples where the US has cited human rights abuses as an excuse to intervene and remove governments that did not comply with these norms. Likewise, South Africa, thanks to its history, experience and efforts in state-manufactured reconciliation, has largely written the book on state-led human rights enforcement (Dugard 1997; Alden, le Pere and Lawrence 2003). In the Ukraine-Russia conflict, for example, both sides recognised the potential of South Africa to serve as a conflict negotiator/mediator.

Socio-economically, the similarities are striking. Both countries have diverse and multicultural populations with diverse ethnic, racial and linguistic groups. Furthermore, the English language and Christian religion dominate

both countries. Both states rank illegal immigration as a source of tension and a major domestic agenda item. In fact, in his first tenure, President Trump pushed for the building of 'the wall,', which supported America's anti-brown and black philosophy. In South Africa, xenophobia and Afro-phobia are rife, with the worldview of a large number of South Africans being that foreigners represent everything that is wrong with the country. The importance of this issue can be seen in the number of deportations per year, with the US ranking at number one and South Africa at number eight.

Both states see themselves as exceptional. American exceptionalism is the belief that Americans are generally better off, more advanced, more cultured and living better lives than other nations and states (Pillay and Madzimure 2021). Likewise, South African exceptionalism views itself as better than other African states and other nations, given its high degree of development, infrastructure and ability to hold free and fair elections timeously (Pillay 2016). Indeed, exceptionalism is intertwined with their respective hegemonies.

In addition, both states are hegemons, even though American hegemony operates globally, while South African hegemony primarily operates in Africa. Both countries impose their hegemony through hard power (military, economy and finance) and soft power (culture and ideas) (Sidiropoulos 2014). Interestingly, South African hegemony excels the most in its ability to act as a faucet for American hegemony. That is, South Africa successfully imports the US worldview and cosmopolitanism to Africa because of its ability to imitate the American hegemon so well.

Two examples speak to this 'faucet' metaphor. Firstly, both states are superpowers in their use of the media when we consider the scale of their propaganda and cultural exports. The media can be considered a 'quiet domination' in that it stimulates audiences to the worldview of the disseminator. Here, fact and fiction blur to create propaganda, to control culture, to shape what people see as normal, and to influence and direct behaviour. South Africa has Africa's biggest media platform, Multichoice, which operates in 50 African countries. The majority of its channels are simply American entertainment. In 2025, Mnet, a premier channel of Multichoice, announced a 'Straight from the US' option, which allows viewers to view American content within 24 hours of its release in America. The purpose of this initiative is to make South Africans, and Africans as a whole, more in tune with American culture.

A second example of the 'faucet' metaphor is culinary tastes. American fast-food companies are very popular in South Africa, with KFC, McDonald's, Burger King, Krispy Kreme and Pizza Hut representing the export of the American cultural palette. KFC has continuously ranked as South Africa's number one fast food chain, while McDonald's is very popular throughout the country. Similarly, South African fast-food companies like Debonairs, Steers, Hungry Lion and Fish Aways can be found across Southern Africa, West Africa and East Africa, operating in the same manner in Africa as the desire for the American palette operates in South Africa.

Overall, the similarities between the hegemons are most likely due to the great extent of cultural transferability shared between both states. That is, their cultures are sought after globally and often imitated. A great example of this cultural transferability is seen in the Hollywood production of Invictus. It is surreal how an American director can direct a movie about rugby and capture South Africa so poignantly. However, the problem arises when two similar hegemons try to exist in the same arena. Conflict is inevitable when one hegemon is in decline, and another seeks to usurp its unravelling powers.

US-South African diplomatic dispute as a hegemonic conflict

Powerful states cannot always directly engage in battle as the costs are too high. Therefore, the majority of their attacks and counter-attacks happen at the ideational level (Wang 2000; Koskenniemi 2011). In hegemonic conflict, ideas represent 'ammunition' as hegemons battle over leadership in the global arena and the right to enforce rules at international institutions (Pillay 2024). Orford (2010) refers to this institutional leadership battle as part of the 'managerialism of global governance'.

Pre-eminent hegemon scholars like Nye (2008) and Prys (2008) argue that economic and military muscle is only one part of hegemony. Hegemons must provide the norms and standards for operating in the world, or in other words, 'the rules of the game'. In setting the agenda, it must persuade and convince states to reach a favourable consensus. Often referred to as 'soft power', it is the influence that enables a state to achieve desirable outcomes not through coercion or rewards but through attractiveness. Nye (2008) argues that a hegemon's soft power in some cases could outweigh their military or economic weight. This

understanding of hegemony means that countries like South Africa, for example, which might not have as strong an economy or military as India, Brazil or Germany, can use soft power to make up for whatever hard power it lacks. This explains how a 'middle power' like South Africa can go toe-to-toe with a global heavyweight like the US.

In the soft power battle between the US and South Africa, the central idea being fought over is ownership of race relations. Race relations are extremely important as the social, historical and political implications of race remain deeply embedded in the structure of global affairs. Global challenges—such as the legacy of colonialism, global inequality and economic exploitation, migration and refugees, human rights, security and terrorism, international aid and development finance—are all key issues on the global stage, often viewed through the prism of race. According to Mbete (2018), International Relations as a discipline has racial origins, hierarchies and views that continue to propagate the idea of a Western world vs the rest. Therefore, whoever controls the global narrative on race will exercise a great amount of power. That country would be able to determine who is the oppressor and who the oppressed, an extremely influential paradigm in geo-political relations.

Since 2008, race has played a prominent role in US elections. Though Obama's eight years in office were seen as a sign of progress in racial equality, there was significant backlash to his double election. Obama's presidency triggered a reactionary response by many Americans uncomfortable with a black president. Previously silent segments of the population became emboldened, with several key narratives being that Obama's presidency symbolised everything wrong with America. A popular critic during the Obama years was Donald Trump, who gained political popularity by criticising Obama's championing of progressive policies, a campaign that was gladly accepted amongst conservative white voters. Trump's vision to 'Make America Great Again' was a direct challenge that America had declined under its first Black president.

It was not only Trump who prioritised race in his electoral campaign. To beat Trump in 2019, Joe Biden based his entire campaign on a Black Lives Matter ticket, a movement that had castigated Trump during his entire first-term presidency (2016—2019). Biden's election website was headed by a BLM poster, a clear statement on where the Democratic Party stood. Biden's affiliation with the movement was so great that a *Washington Post* article described the

BLM movement as a 'coalition that vaulted him to the Presidency' (Olorunnipa, Clement and Guskin 2023). In return, he called the BLM riots a 'historic movement for justice'. In the run-up to the 2024 election, Biden would call white supremacy the greatest terrorist threat to the US, which again reveals the prominence of race in that US election.

While there is no shortage of global critics who argue that President Trump represents far-right conservative values, he has been more open to associating with this demographic in his second tenure as President. Elon Musk's 'Roman salute' at Trump's inauguration made it clear how far along the spectrum the administration stands. When far-right-wing French Politician Marine Le Pen was handed a guilty verdict in March 2025, President Trump, Vice-President J.D. Vance, Elon Musk and Donald Trump Jr rushed to Le Pen's defence. The Le Pen dynasty is associated with anachronic racist discourses, islamophobia and ethnicism (Seitz 2024). Some argue that right-wing values run deep in the US government. For example, remarking on the Bush era, Roberts (2005) has the following to say:

> "The United States is starting to acquire the image of Nazi Germany. Knowledgeable people should have no trouble drawing up their own list of elements common to both the Bush and Hitler regimes: the use of extraordinary lies to justify military aggression; reliance on coercion and threats in place of diplomacy; total belief in the virtue and righteousness of one's cause; the equating of factual objections or reality based analysis to treason; the redirection of patriotism from country to leader; the belief that defeat resides in debate and a weakening of will."

In effect, America represents a right-wing government who is trying to control the narrative on race globally. The biggest obstacle to this pursuit is South Africa, which is run like a communist state. The ruling ANC, a socialist organisation, is in an alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The country has had two presidents, namely Mandela and Zuma, who were members of the SACP. An economy pillared on state-run corporations and industries, constant supply shortages, decades-old infrastructure and a militant workforce are just a few reminders of how Stalinist the country has become. Besides the ANC, the broader political

landscape also largely subscribes to socialist ideology. Opposition parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Mhkonto WeSizwe (MK), the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), Congress of the People (COPE), Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO) and the United Democratic Movement (UDM) all subscribe to different levels of socialism. In addition, the South African workforce is quite militant in that trade unions are very powerful. The biggest trade union, COSATU, affiliates itself with class-struggle politics. At the international level, South Africa's diplomatic affinity for states like Russia, China, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba speaks volumes about its socialist ideology.

Indeed, South Africa's greatest soft power is in controlling the global narrative on race. South Africa, given its history, has a great deal of leverage in saying who the oppressor is and who the oppressed. This is a powerful narrative for the one who controls it. South Africa's G20 theme of 'Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability' angered the US, who perceived it to be an attack on the America First Policy. Marco Rubio, the US Secretary of State, declared that the theme was a play on 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion', a policy banned within 48 hours of Trump's swearing in. Similarly, in Israel's war on Palestine (2023), South Africa and the US have two completely different interpretations of who the victim is and who the aggressor. South Africa's push to change Sandton Drive to Leila Khaled Drive speaks directly to this. The proposed change is a homage to a Palestinian freedom fighter. The US embassy, which resides on Sandton Drive, opposes the renaming, with possible Trump appointee Joel Pollack saying that if the renaming goes through, the US embassy will be permanently closed (Business Tech 2025).

The ANC for long deployed race to deflect unwanted attention from its own actions. When attacked, it can deploy race to flip the script and turn any issue into an anti-colonial or anti-imperial attack against it. Its use of this type of attack is so powerful that even opposition parties have at times found themselves rushing to defend the ruling party when matters of race, imperialism or colonialism have been stirred up.

Table 10.1 captures this debate, illustrating how the two states attempt to outmanoeuvre each other on race issues.

Table 10.1: Country comparison of states outmanoeuvring each other on race issues.

USA	What they are saying		RSA
Trump	• South Africa is racist. Farm attacks constitute white genocide	• Trump is racist.	ANC
AfriForum	• Farm attacks constitute white genocide.	• Treason, lies, fraudulent misconception • Crime stats related to farm murders disputed • Arrest AfriForum for treason. • AfriForum is white supremacy.	MK John Hlophe, Police Minister Senzo Mchunu, EFF Carl Niehaus, Kim Heller (author), ATM Vuyo Zungula
Marco Rubio	• Discrimination against the white minority	Ramaphosa Slams Rubio's remarks, warns against a new colonialism.	President Ramaphosa
Marco Rubio	• US opposes 'Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion' framework.	• G20 Theme 'Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability' • The erosion of multilateralism presents a threat to global growth and stability	ANC, President Ramaphosa
AfriForum	• Impose sanctions against leaders of the ANC.	• Foreign Aid has always been a tool for colonial control. • 'AfriForum is an anti-transformation programme driven by the hope that apartheid will return.'	EFF Julius Malema, Minister Gwede Mantashe

USA	What they are saying		RSA
AfriForum	• South Africa has racist policies • Reverse apartheid.	• AfriForum is racist.	ANC
AfriForum	• Land expropriation without compensation (DRDLR 2017) •	• January 2025 Act to make it easier for the state to expropriate land in the public interest	ANC
Elon Musk	• South Africa of enforcing 'openly racist ownership laws'. • Starlink is not allowed to operate in South Africa because I'm not black.	• Elon Musk is racist. • 'If a leading business figure like Elon Musk harbours the kind of unprogressive, racist views that we've witnessed and the peddling of lies …' • Published 'Regulations in respect of the Limitations of Control and Equity Ownership by Historically Disadvantaged Groups and the Application of the ICT sector code' • This is not an issue of skin colour or race; Starlink is welcome to operate in South Africa. • BEE Policies necessary to uplift the black population	ANC, RSA Presidential Spokesman Vincent Magwenya, Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), South African Head of Public Diplomacy Clayson Monyela South African Government
Marco Rubio	• Land expropriation is racist.	• Redressing historical injustice	ANC

USA	What they are saying		RSA
Marco Rubio	• Ebrahim Rasool is a 'race-baiting politician who hates America and hates POTUS'.	• Trump is leading a white supremacist movement. • 'South Africa can be a moral superpower…. What our people died for on the 21st of March is what we stand for.'	RSA-US Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool
AfriForum CEO Kallie Kriel	• 'Ironic… It is he who refused to condemn slogans such as "Kill the Boer"'.	• AfriForum is sowing division in SA.	President Ramaphosa
Marco Rubio, Elon Musk	• "'Kill the Boer' is a chant that incites violence. South Africa's leaders and politicians must take action to protect Afrikaner and other disfavoured minorities." • The song is genocidal.	• Kill the Boer (Sang on March 21st) • The Song is not hate speech.	EFF leader Julius Malema, The Equality Court (Aug 2022)
The World Bank	• South Africa must relax its BEE drives as they are spurring corruption and inefficiency in public administration.	• BEE is a core constitutional mandate to fix past economic inequalities from apartheid	RSA Government

USA	What they are saying		RSA
		• President Trump's 7 Feb order halts critical financial aid under the pretence of protecting Afrikaners from 'government-sponsored race-based discrimination'.	Open letter from 100 parliamentarians from across the world

Conclusion

The diplomatic dispute between South Africa and the US under President Trump 2.0 is more than a clash of foreign policy preferences, but a deeper hegemonic conflict over ideological dominance. Control over the global narrative on race appears to be the core conflict issue, and to a lesser extent, control over the international order. South Africa has made bold attempts since 2020 to assert itself on the global stage, attempts which have struck at the very heart of America's hegemonic authority. Though a middle power, it leverages its soft power to contest 'toe-to-toe' with the American heavyweight.

Ideational politics remain a powerful tool in international relations. Trump's 'America First' doctrine has sought to reassert its dominance through coercive measures (sanctions, aid cuts, diplomatic isolation), while South Africa, emboldened by its BRICS alignment and historical legitimacy, has positioned itself as a counter-hegemonic force advocating for a multipolar world. The ideological battleground—centred on race, land reform and anti-imperialism—reveals how both states weaponise narratives to delegitimise the other. For the US, framing South Africa as 'racist' against white minorities (via AfriForum and Elon Musk's critiques) has been an attempt to undermine its moral standing. Conversely, South Africa's ANC government has dismissed these accusations as neocolonial interference, reinforcing its anti-Western posture, and positioning itself as judge, jury and executioner of what constitutes racism.

To conclude, the options for a resolution to the US-South Africa diplomatic dispute are either sustained confrontation or a recalibration of relations. Given their shared history and friendship, there is a possibility for the latter. However, as both states navigate and push their competing visions of a world order in the

face of geopolitical fragmentation, the battle for ideational supremacy is probably far from over.

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