

# CHAPTER 4

## Trump-era United States Foreign Policy: Impact on African Economies and Policymaking (2017–2021, 2025)

**Luvuyo Jalisa**

Department of Anthropology and Development Studies,  
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

**Ayabulela Dlakavu**

Witwatersrand School of Governance,  
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

### Introduction and problem statement

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The international order established after the Cold War, predominantly driven by US-led liberal institutionalism, is now experiencing significant fragmentation. This decline is driven by the revival of isolationist and nationalist ideologies, championed by Donald Trump's 'America First' policy. This approach has transformed US foreign relations by emphasising transactional diplomacy, expressing scepticism towards multilateral efforts, and reassessing global alliances. Trump's presidencies (2017–2021; 2025–present) signify a substantial break from the US-led liberal internationalist agenda, challenging the foundational principles of collective security, free trade, and collaborative institutions that have supported global governance since 1945 (Ikenberry, 2018). This chapter examines the consequences of this shift for Africa, a continent often marginalised in geopolitical power-brokering mechanisms, yet especially vulnerable to shifts in the global distribution of political and economic power. By placing Trump's policies within frameworks of classic economic liberalism, liberal institutionalism and economic nationalism, the chapter highlights how Africa is affected by a dynamic

world increasingly characterised by competing national interests, fluid alliances and diminishing multilateral coordination and cooperation.

The 'America First' doctrine prioritises specific US national interests over global collective governance and cooperation, influencing Washington's international relations across three primary areas: security, economy and diplomacy. Trump's mixed feelings towards NATO, demonstrated by threats to cut funding and challenge Article 5 commitments, undermine transatlantic unity (Webber, 2021). His withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organisation (WHO) points to a wider retreat from collaborative environmental and health governance (Betsill, 2017). On the economic front, measures such as punitive tariffs, reductions in aid (barring strategic allies like Israel and Egypt), and the dismantling of trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership have reshaped global supply chains, heightening vulnerabilities for African economies dependent on exports and development aid support (Prabhakar, 2024). These nationalist policies indicate a shift away from the embedded liberalism that once balanced market access with social welfare, favouring a mercantilist zero-sum transactional mindset instead.

For Africa, the consequences are complex. Trump's transactional style enforced through threats to cut UN peacekeeping funding crucial for conflict-affected countries like Mali and South Sudan, erratic aid cuts and provoking diplomatic tensions (e.g., warnings to South Africa regarding land reform and trade, and subsequently imposing 30 per cent tariffs), has strained established partnerships and heightened existential challenges, from climate resilience to security (Adebajo, 2023). Nevertheless, this fragmentation has also ignited a sense of agency among African nations. Regional organisations like the African Union (AU) are increasing their commitment to implement the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), while countries are diversifying their alliances through frameworks such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the EU–Africa Summit (Yang, 2024). These strategies align with Acharya's concept of 'multiplex world', where regions develop polycentric approaches to reduce reliance on unstable great powers. (van Lennep and Acharya, 2019: 12).

The research problem and gap addressed by this study are the realities whereby much scholarly work has focused on Trump's impact on traditional allies and major powers (Cooley and Nexon, 2025; Walt, 2018). A critical analytical gap remains regarding the impact of these Trump policies on African economies and policy responses. Studies that do address Africa tend to focus on specific bilateral relationships or individual policy areas rather than a comprehensive assessment of the 'America First' doctrine's multifaceted continental effects (Adebajo, 2023; Schneidman, 2025). This knowledge gap is problematic, since it obscures how peripheral regions, such as Africa, exercise agency in responding to volatility and national security threats created by a great power. Moreover, such a research gap limits understanding of emerging multipolar dynamics and the opportunities multipolarity presents to the developing world. Thus, this study is significant for several reasons. First, African states represent a substantial portion of the global periphery that relies heavily on stable trading relationships and multilateral frameworks for economic development and security. It is, therefore, important to understand the impact of the articulated 'America First' policy on African economies and economic policy. Second, Africa's rapid demographic growth and increasing economic integration through initiatives like the AfCFTA make it a crucial testing ground for understanding how peripheral regions are affected by, and adapt to, the retreat of hegemony. Third, the continent's strategic importance in global supply chains for critical minerals and its role in climate governance make African responses to US policy shifts consequential for global economic stability. All these are critical to the discussions put forward in this study.

## **Literature review and frameworks**

### ***Existing literature on Trump's foreign economic policy***

Trump's foreign economic policy has generated substantial scholarly attention, though with notable geographic and thematic gaps. Helleiner (2019, 2023) provides a comprehensive analysis of the shift from embedded liberalism toward economic nationalism, arguing that Trump's

policies represent a fundamental departure from post-war international economic norms. Fajgelbaum et al. (2020) provide a quantitative assessment of tariff impacts, demonstrating that protectionist measures reduced US real income by US\$7.2 billion annually, while failing to achieve stated objectives of reducing trade deficits.

Studies of Trump's multilateral disengagement emphasise institutional impacts. Patrick (2021) and Nye (2020) examine withdrawals from international organisations and climate agreements, arguing that these actions undermine global governance capacity. However, this literature predominantly focuses on the effects within the developed world and the multilateral architecture of the Liberal International Order, with limited attention on how institutional fragmentation and US foreign policy under Trump affects developing regions.

Research on African responses to changing US policy remains fragmented. Ndzendze (2021) provides valuable data on US–South Africa trade relations, while Kohnert (2025) offers a preliminary assessment of the implications of Trump 2.0. However, these contributions lack systematic theoretical grounding and comprehensive regional analysis and continental responses; thus, this chapter builds on this and addresses the knowledge gaps identified.

### *Theoretical framework*

This section of the chapter explains key theories in international relations and political economy to analyse how US President Donald Trump's 'America First' policies changed global dynamics, especially for Africa. We will look at two generally contrasting theories in international political economy: economic liberalism (i.e., classic economic liberalism and liberal institutionalism), economic nationalism (i.e., mercantilism) and the concept of post-hegemonic multilateralism. Each helps one understand how US actions under Trump affected and continue to affect Africa and how African countries are responding.

## ***Economic liberalism***

Economic liberalism is a theory explaining the rationale for eliminating barriers to international trade. Classical economic liberalism is a socio-economic philosophy founded by Adam Smith, premised on the principles of individual freedom from state overreach and secure private property rights, with market forces of supply and demand being the drivers of free market economies and economic development. The underlying idea is that free market economies encourage individuals to deploy or invest their capital in competitive industries (economic sectors) of their choosing, which naturally breeds economic competition, economic activity, economic growth and therefore, national economic development. Classical liberalism is sometimes referred to as *laissez-faire* economics, where the economy is self-regulating through supply and demand forces *vis-à-vis* the production and selling of goods, services and labour (Sally, 1998). For its part, neoliberalism (which is the recent advancements in economic liberal thinking) promotes principles such as free trade and unrestricted movement of capital, knowledge and people. It is these economic liberalism principles that are the primary drivers of globalisation, the latter term referring to a highly interconnected and interdependent global economy and international system (Kundnani, 2017). It is this globalised and interdependent free trade international system that is the subject of protectionist Trump's economic policy, particularly in this post-2025 era.

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## ***Liberal institutionalism***

Institutional liberalism, also known as liberal institutionalism, is another sub-school of liberalism. An international institution is defined as an international organisation or any rule(s) which governs the foreign policies and actions of states (Jackson and Sorensen, 2013). Liberal institutionalism promotes the idea that international institutions and regimes reduce anarchy by facilitating cooperation, lowering transaction costs and enhancing mutual trust among countries. Organisations like the

UN, World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the AU serve as guardians of a rules-based international order, promoting reciprocity and collective efforts. The 'America First' approach, however, marked a shift away from institutionalist norms, highlighted by the US's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO, threats to NATO funding and hindrances to WTO dispute resolution (Nye, 2020; Patrick, 2021). This shift toward bilateralism indicated a profound distrust of institutional limits on national sovereignty. While African states have embraced multilateral frameworks like AfCFTA, power asymmetries often undermine their effectiveness. The COVID 19 pandemic revealed these inequities, as African nations faced significant vaccine shortages despite mechanisms like COVAX.

### *Economic nationalism as Trump's alternative to globalisation and the liberal economic order*

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According to Bhaduri (2000), economic nationalism is an economic philosophy and practice whereby a nation-state endeavours to exert greater control over the domestic economy, while also seeking self-reliance and protection of domestic economic players (businesses) from the global economy. Economic nationalism is, therefore, the opposite of economic posture and philosophy to free market economic thinking and policy as espoused by economic liberalism. Examples of economic nationalist (i.e., mercantilist) policies include the protection of domestic infant industries from international competitors through policy instruments such as tariffs and non-tariff barriers on foreign goods and services. This practice is contrary to the economic liberalist goal of removing barriers to international trade, such as tariffs and non-tariff barriers (i.e., free trade). It is worth noting that economic nationalism is an established economic policy position of newly industrialising nation-states, such as when the newly industrialising US under Abraham Lincoln in the nineteenth century adopted an average import tariff of approximately 30 per cent on all foreign goods entering the US market (Bhaduri, 2000).

Economic nationalism is central to the 'America First' agenda, which includes tariffs, import restrictions and trade renegotiations, such as the US–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) and pressures on

African nations to pursue bilateral agreements (Noland, 2020). Africa's engagement with Economic Nationalism has roots in post-independence development strategies. Contemporary manifestations include resource sovereignty initiatives and local content requirements. The global resurgence of protectionist policies has created both challenges and opportunities for African economies, disrupting established export sectors while intensifying debates about self-sufficiency. Many African states have adopted what Rodrik (2023) argues to be pragmatic economic nationalism, combining selective protection of strategic industries with continued participation in global markets, as seen in East Asian Developmental States, Rwanda's technology sector and Morocco's automotive industry.

Having provided a review of the essence of two contrasting yet enduring economic schools of thought (economic liberalism and economic nationalism), the next sections examine the stated foreign economic policies of the two Trump administrations against actual trade statistics between the US under Trump and African nations. The aim is to track whether Trump's public economic nationalist policy postures have affected trade volumes between the US and African nations from 2017 to 2021 and 2025.

## **Methodology**

This chapter adopts a concurrent mixed-methods approach to examine the effects of Trump's 'America First' policy on Africa. It integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the diverse impacts of US policy changes on the continent's political economy, security and diplomatic relations. The adoption of the concurrent mixed methods allows for triangulation of findings that combine comparative case studies and critical discourse analysis, informed by contrasting theories of economic liberalism and economic nationalism. This approach links large-scale structural changes with localised regional responses, while engaging in discussions around global order and peripheral agency (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2017; George and Bennett, 2005). The focus reflects Ragin's (2009: 9) idea of 'causal complexity' in the context of transnational issues,

where outcomes arise from the interaction of structural limitations and responsive agency. The qualitative data utilised in this chapter includes content analysis of US and African foreign policies, including critical discourse analysis of official policy statements, speeches, opinion pieces and diplomatic communiqués from both US and African governments.

The quantitative data consulted and analysed in this chapter include trade statistics (from 2016 to 2025 from the Office of the US Trade Representative, World Bank and African Development Bank), along with direct observations during the two Trump administrations (2017–2021; 2025–present) and presented using descriptive statistics. Content analysis encompasses a detailed and systematic review of materials (in this case, trade statistics and stated foreign policies) aimed at revealing patterns, themes or biases (Mohajan, 2018). This mixed-methods approach helps answer the main research question regarding the real effects of the ‘America First’ policy on African economies and policymaking.

88 This study has some limitations. First, the ongoing nature of Donald Trump’s second term makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about long-term impacts on African economies and policymaking. This limitation, however, is mitigated by the study’s focus on the first completed Trump administration (2017–2021), which provides a four-year data period on US foreign policy, particularly on trade with Africa. Another limitation is that the second Trump administration is still at a relative infancy stage as much of the data for 2025 is based on preliminary sources, however, the foreign policy choices taken thus far in 2025 have been sufficiently far-reaching on the global economy, warranting an inquiry that can provide key insights to make inferences about the current and future trajectory of the global political economy. It is for these reasons that a mixed-methods approach was used to use qualitative and quantitative data to provide informed analysis that has depth and breadth *vis-à-vis* US–Africa economic relations, particularly on the trade terrain, which is vital for Africa in the context of AfCFTA and other emerging global trade relations.



## Empirical analysis of the Trump administration's international trade policies

This section provides a review of the international trade positions of the two Trump administrations and their impact on trade volumes (movement of goods and services) between America and African nations from 2017 to 2021 and 2025 (the second Trump term).

### *First Trump term (2017–2021): Trade policy, trade wars and impact on US-Africa trade*

Trump's first administration (2017–2021) protectionist agenda, rooted in economic nationalism (Helleiner, 2019), targeted perceived unfair trade practices, particularly by China. The administration imposed tariffs on approximately US\$370 billion of Chinese goods under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, as well as on steel, aluminium, solar panels and washing machines from various countries. These measures were justified through expanded interpretations of Section 232 (national security) and Section 301 (unfair trade practices) of US trade law (Irwin, 2017).

The Phase One trade deal with China (2020) secured limited Chinese commitments to purchase US goods but failed to address structural issues, such as intellectual property theft (Autor et al., 2020). This bilateral trade deal with China, following a period of economic trade warfare since 2017, is evidence of a move from Washington's shift from the multilateral free trade regime coordinated by the WTO, towards economic nationalist ideals pursuing American interests through bilateral arrangements. This is contrary to the post-1945 US-founded Liberal International Order, where successive US government had traditionally sought to promote a multilateral-led international free trade system under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, 1947–1995) and its successor, the WTO (1995–). The waging of economic warfare by the first Trump administration against China in 2018 was itself, an economic nationalist foreign policy position, designed to protect the US economy from perceived Chinese unfair trade practices such as intellectual property theft. Such a trade war, therefore, lends credence to claims that the Trump

administration has a tendency to advance an economic nationalist posture in both theory and practice.

Similarly, the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into the USMCA preserved trilateral free trade between the three North American countries but introduced labour and environmental provisions with limited enforcement (Villarreal and Fergusson, 2019). These actions reflected a shift from multilateralism to bilateral deal-making, prioritising short-term gains over institutionalised cooperation through liberal international institutions as prescribed by liberal institutionalism.

Economists remain divided on the efficacy of these policies. Fajgelbaum et al. (2020) estimated that tariffs reduced US real income by US\$7.2 billion annually, with the burden falling disproportionately on American consumers and import-dependent industries. Critics highlighted that while tariffs protected select US industries, they raised input costs for downstream sectors (e.g., automotive) and triggered retaliatory measures from trading partners. However, some studies suggested modest employment gains in protected sectors (Flaen and Pierce, 2019).

### *Trump's first-term political and economic impact on Africa*

Ndzendze (2021) provides the following US–South Africa trade relations in the years 2017–2020: South African exported goods and services to the US grew by 14.1 per cent in Trump's first-year in office (2017), grew by 9.44 per cent in Trump's second year (2018), declined by 7.86 per cent in the third year (2019) and grew by 31.79 per cent in the fourth and final year in office (i.e., 2020, impressive numbers given the global disruption in commerce by the COVID 19 pandemic in that year). Likewise, US imported goods into the South African market grew by an annual average of 11.86 per cent during Trump's first term as US president (2017–2021). Thus, despite the common association of Trump as an anti-free trade and protectionist president, the trade statistics between South Africa and the US show a relatively free movement of South African goods in the US market, and reciprocally, a relatively free movement of US imports in

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the South African market. In fact, the value of South African exports to the US increased from US\$6.7 billion in 2013 under the Barack Obama administration to US\$10 billion in 2020 under Trump. This further indicates the deepening of trade relations between the US and South Africa during the first Trump administration, to the extent that the US had a trade deficit worth US\$11.7 billion in 2021, benefitting South Africa's positive balance of trade with the world's largest economy.

A further indication of the strategic nature of US–Africa economic relations during the first Trump term is that the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Washington's economic policy of granting tariff-free access to the US market to free market and democratic African nations, continued from 2017 to 2021. There was, therefore, no need for African nations to make any major trade policy changes, *vis-à-vis* the US and other major trading partners in the global society of nations.

According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative (2022), the total value of trade between the US and Sub-Saharan African nations (imports and exports combined) was estimated to be US\$44.9 billion in 2021, compared to US\$34 billion in 2016 at the end of Obama's term as US President. This means that US–Africa trade under Trump's first term grew by US\$10.9 billion, an indication of stronger US–Africa exchange of goods, rather than US protectionism and tariffs on African goods. Table 4.1 shows volumes of trade between Sub-Saharan African nations and the US under the first Trump administration (2017–2021), where Africa retained an advantageous trade surplus with America throughout the four years of the first Trump term.

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**Table 4.1: US/Sub-Saharan Africa trade relations under the first Trump administration (2017–2021)**

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Value of African exports to the US (in US\$ billions)	24.9	25.1	21	19.2	28.3
Value US imports to Africa (in US\$ billions)	14.1	15.9	15.8	13.5	16.6

Source: Office of the United States Trade Representative (2022, Online)

The US–Africa trade statistics of Trump’s first presidential term, therefore, demonstrate Washington’s commitment to the ideals and policies of free international trade, which is a tenet of economic liberalism. Furthermore, the continuation of the AGOA legislation, which aims to encourage African governments to maintain democratic political systems and free market economic policies, is a further indication of support for economic liberalism during the first Presidential term (2017–2021). Free market economies are an age-old principle of economic liberalism theory in economics and political economy. The broader image that these trade statistics and free movement of goods between African nations and America demonstrate is that the first Trump administration may not have been necessarily an advocate of economic nationalism and a destroyer of multilateralism per se. Rather, what the trade statistics, free trade legislation for Africa, and tariffs on China demonstrate is that the US likely sought to correct a massive trade deficit with China, which is the second-largest economy and arguably approaching economic power parity with the US. Moreover, trade deficits contribute to the broader current account deficits that the US economy has come to be characterised by, which stood at -US\$466 billion in 2017 when Trump assumed the American presidency (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2018). That Balance of Payments deficit simply means that the US economy experiences more outflows of money than inflows, which is a sign of de-industrialisation, which is not good for industrial employment for Americans, a typically labour-intensive economic sector. As a result, one could conclude that the first Trump administration adopted both economic nationalist and economically liberal policies in equal measure with the intention of safeguarding American economic interests: chiefly, reducing the Balance of Trade and Balance of Payments deficits that have come to characterise a post-industrial American economy that has ceded industrialisation to emerging economies with relatively lower labour costs and better economies of scale.

***Second Trump administration (2025–2028): Trade policy, trade wars, and impact on US-Africa trade***

With effect from 1 February 2025, the Trump administration, a month into its tenure, levied an additional 25 per cent tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico, with whom the US is meant to be in a free trade agreement with—the USMCA (The White House, 2025b). The Trump administration asserted that these tariffs were imposed in retaliation to Mexico and Canada’s failure to cooperate with the US to address illegal immigration and drug trafficking from these neighbouring countries. This represents a change in Trump’s second term, where tariffs on trade are levied not as a reciprocal measure, but to address US grievances with its neighbouring countries on non-trade matters.

On 2 April 2025, Trump invoked his presidential authority in terms of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 (IEEPA) to address what he called large trade deficits negatively affecting the American economy. As of February 2025, the US had a trade deficit in goods and services of US\$122 billion (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025). This trade deficit means the US consumes more than it produces and sells, which Trump has partially explained as one of the primary reasons for escalating tariffs. The unilateral course correction procedure chosen by the Trump administration was to impose a base 10 per cent tariff on all imports from other countries, effective 5 April 2025 (The White House, 2025a). Additionally, Trump imposed higher individualised tariffs on countries with whom the US had the largest trade deficits as of 2024, such as China (-US\$380 billion), Mexico (-US\$130 billion), Vietnam (-US\$123 billion), Thailand (-US\$45.6 billion) and the EU at -US\$224 billion (Brookings Institution, 2024; EU, 2025; Guarascio 2025). Table 4.2 shows trade partners with higher trade tariffs as imposed effective 9 April 2025. Tariffs are intended to address America’s trade deficits with the respective countries, intending to equalise reciprocal trade barriers.

**Table 4.2: Additional tariffs imposed on countries deemed as the ten ‘worst offenders’ by Washington, DC**

Country	Import tariff rate
Lesotho	49%
Cambodia	49%
Madagascar	47%
Vietnam	46%
Botswana	37%
Thailand	36%
China	34%
Taiwan	32%
South Africa	30%
India	26%

Sources: CNN (2025); Daily Maverick (2025); Mmegi, 2025; Wong and Epstein (2025)

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From Table 4.2, four of the 10 ‘worst offender’ countries receiving the biggest tariffs from the US were African nations, Lesotho, Madagascar, Botswana and South Africa were subjected to tariffs ranging from 30 to 49 per cent. However, the US administration suspended the implementation of these tariffs for 90 days (i.e., until July 2025), with all countries in the world being subjected to a common tariff of 10 per cent in the interim, effective as of 5 April 2025. These import tariffs are likely to reduce the appeal of African imports in the US market, thereby reducing or even eradicating Africa’s long-held trade surplus with the US. Such losses in foreign earnings for African agriculture and manufacturers could lead to a loss of economic activity, economic stagnation or regression and job losses. Countries like Lesotho, which lack a diversified economy, could be hardest hit, particularly the fragile textile industry.

Trump’s second term has, thus far, been a personification of economic nationalism with regard to international trade policy, against many countries with whom the US incurs large trade deficits, particularly against the second biggest economy that rivals America, namely China. Building on previous campaign proposals, the administration introduced

the Reshoring America Act (2025), offering tax credits to firms relocating supply chains from China and imposing stricter export controls on advanced technologies (The White House, 2025b). This approach mirrors the bipartisan CHIPS and Science Act (2022) that prioritises punitive measures over incentives, exacerbating global supply chain fragmentation. The administration has doubled down on tariffs, extending them to Chinese electric vehicles and renewable energy components under the guise of ‘national security’, while proposing ‘Tax Cuts 2.0’ to make permanent the individual provisions of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) set to expire in 2025 and introduce additional corporate incentives for domestic manufacturing (The White House, 2025b). Such policies are a continuation of Trump’s first-term measures designed to re-industrialise the American economy and possibly reposition the US as a global manufacturing pace-setter akin to Washington’s leadership of the Second and Third Industrial Revolutions.

***Further implications of Trump 2.0 economic nationalism (2025 and beyond) for the international order and Africa***

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The second Trump term has institutionalised tariffs, particularly against China. However, the administration’s rejection of multilateral coordination (e.g., refusing to join the Indo–Pacific Economic Framework) is one of the most important components of the Trump administration, signalling a loss of confidence and interest in the Liberal International Economic Order underpinned by the WTO’s international free trade regime. Such rejections of multilateral economic management institutions are not a random policy but appear to be based on the belief that such multilateral institutions provide gains for America’s economic competitors (i.e., China and the EU) and consequently, work against US economic interests.

Anti-multilateral US policies have important implications for African foreign policy: African governments must adapt and relate to Washington DC, at a bilateral level. This means that trade and investment agreements with the US must be negotiated directly with Washington, rather than through the WTO and multilateral financial forums (i.e., the Group of Twenty [G20] or the World Economic Forum). African nations’ foreign

policy apparatus and diplomatic corps must devise appropriate bilateral strategies in dealing with Trump's second administration. It is, therefore, likely that the AGOA may be scrapped rather than renewed by the Republican Party-led Congress later in 2025.

During Trump's second presidential term, which focuses on more globalised economic nationalism (to address trade and balance of payments deficits), the long-standing trend of US trade liberalisation is significantly undermined. US administrations have leveraged the AGOA to persuade African countries to establish and maintain liberal democracy and free market political and economic systems. At the same time, however, AGOA has been essential to US–Africa trade since 2000, providing a lucrative duty-free market to African goods and services. In 2025, AGOA eligibility was revoked for Ethiopia, Mali and Zimbabwe due to alleged labour and human rights abuses, a decision critics denounced as politically motivated amid Africa's growing ties with the EU and China (Schneidman, 2025). Nigeria and Kenya faced retaliatory tariffs of 40 per cent on poultry and textiles, while South Africa's steel and aluminium exports were targeted as a response to perceived land reform laws that violate individual property rights, a cornerstone of economic liberal philosophy and theory (Adebajo, 2023). These actions have destabilised export sectors, such as Kenya's floriculture and Lesotho's garment industry, worsening North–South disparities and threatening industrial growth in these African economies (Rodrik, 2018).

With African nations being subject to the blanket interim 10 per cent US global tariff, which came into effect in April 2025, it is key for African nations to diversify their export markets through expansive trade and industrial policy, while also continuing to create comparative advantages for export-oriented domestic goods and services in existing markets. Another important consideration for African economic policymakers is to operationalise and implement AfCFTA signed in 2018 (Mahlangu, 2024), which effectively seeks to remove tariff and non-tariff barriers of 55 economies, accounting for 1.3 billion people. This is a large and relatively untapped intra-African free trade area that can stimulate the marginal rate of intra-African trade (which is a meagre 3 per cent of total world trade), intra-African investments and African industrialisation. This AfCFTA



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may also be a catalyst to intra-African investment in road, rail and ocean infrastructure to link all sub-regions of Africa with each other, paving the way for mass job creation, mobility of goods, services and people and perhaps serve as an eventual catalyst to the creation of the single African currency long touted by pan-Africanists.

By 2023, intra-African trade under the AfCFTA had increased to 15 per cent of Africa's total trade, largely due to customs reforms and digital trade initiatives (Africa Export–Import Bank, 2024: 13). The April 2025 AfCFTA Ministerial Conference in the Democratic Republic of the Congo aimed to evaluate the agreement's implementation. The conference recognised emerging geopolitical tensions and stressed that AfCFTA transcends mere policies and legal frameworks; it is about reshaping Africa's economic landscape by enhancing intra-African trade, fostering industrialisation, creating jobs and building resilient economies. This was evidenced by South Africa's strategic protectionism in its poultry sector, inspired by Rodrik's advocacy for industrial policy, showcasing how selective economic nationalism could strengthen local industries without inciting global backlash (Department of Trade, Industry and Competition, 2024). This situation exemplifies Acharya's concept of multiplex multilateralism, where regional institutions help counterbalance hegemonic retreat or protectionism.

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### ***Diplomatic diversification and multipolarity***

In response to US anti-globalisation, African nations are seeking to forge 'multi-alignment' strategies. The expansion of BRICS+ in 2025, welcoming Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt and Ethiopia, while the New Development Bank has been supporting infrastructure projects in Kenya and Ethiopia since before 2020 (Manyazewal, 2019). The EU–Africa Summit in 2025 adopted a commitment to strengthen trade relations, further diverging from US climate policy reticence.

### *American retreat and African agency*

US disengagement from multilateral fora has strained its ties with traditional ties. For Africa, this US disengagement signifies an opportunity for innovation and occupying space in a multipolar world order. The AfCFTA, BRICS+, the Africa–EU Summit and networked security partnerships reflect a continent striving for multipolarity to assert its sovereignty. While challenges like systemic risks, debt dependency, norm fragmentation and elite capture remain, Africa’s adaptive strategies illustrate Acharya’s (2016: 454) concept of a multiplex international system. The decline of US economic dominance paradoxically empowers Africa to redefine its global standing, balancing resilience with strategic realignment.

## Discussions

### *Theoretical implications*

The empirical findings presented in this study challenge the conventional theoretical expectations. Most significantly, the disconnect between Trump’s economic nationalist rhetoric and actual trade performance during 2017–2021 suggests that economic nationalism’s implementation is more complex and selective than theoretical frameworks typically acknowledge. The evidence from the trade statistics compared to trade policy pronouncements demonstrates that in both his two presidential terms, Trump has balanced economic nationalist policies (i.e., trade warfare with China and other countries with whom the US has trade deficits) with economic liberalism (continuation of free trade with African nations in the first term through AGOA and the USMCA). It does appear from early foreign policy pronouncements early in Trump’s second-term that the US may be willing to ramp up protectionist trade policy in a bid to reduce America’s large Balance of Trade and Balance of Payments deficits relative to its economic competitors (EU and China) and other countries who may be perceived as threats to American economic interests (i.e., countries like South Africa who align with

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American economic competitors: China and the EU).

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, the continuity of AGOA during the first Trump term demonstrates institutional resilience, particularly when arrangements serve mutual interests and involve limited domestic political costs. However, the second term's universal tariff implementation and AGOA weaponisation reveal the fragility of such arrangements when political priorities and national interests shift.

The African response pattern supports Acharya's (2018) multiplex multilateralism framework while adding a nuanced understanding of how peripheral regions exercise agency. Rather than passive adaptation to great power competition, African states have proactively constructed alternative institutional arrangements (AfCFTA, BRICS+), while maintaining selective engagement with the US, such as through AGOA. This pattern suggests that post-hegemonic multilateralism emerges through strategic diversification, rather than wholesale rejection of existing relationships.

### ***Policy contradictions and unexpected results***

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Several findings contradict conventional wisdom about Trump's 'America First' policy. First, the growth of US–Africa trade from 2017 to 2021 challenges narratives of a comprehensive US retreat from the continent. This growth occurred despite diplomatic tensions and rhetorical hostility, suggesting that economic relationships can maintain momentum despite political tensions.

Second, the selective nature of early Trump-era protectionism reveals the importance of domestic political considerations in shaping economic nationalist policies. African countries largely escaped initial tariff waves, not due to their strategic importance, but because they posed a limited threat to US domestic industries.

Third, Trump's unpredictable policies have inadvertently helped African countries work more closely together. When the US is unreliable, African nations must seek alternative options and become more self-sufficient. This has prompted them to establish stronger institutions and partnerships with one another more quickly than they might have if they could still rely on the steady hegemonic leadership of the US.

### *Broader implications for global order*

The relationship between the US and Africa under Trump illustrates how the world is changing as a whole. America has moved away from working with everyone to focusing mainly on its own interests. This creates both new chances and new problems for regions like Africa. Old ways of helping countries develop are breaking down (i.e., aid); however, this makes room for African countries to work more with other developing and developed nations and create their own institutions or economic relationships centred on mutual interests.

What is happening is that smaller regions are building contingency plans to protect themselves when big powers like the US act unpredictably. What can be seen unravelling is the 'defensive multipolarity' where countries are creating safety nets by working with multiple partners instead of relying on just one. This suggests that a world with many centres of power might not come from big countries planning it that way. Instead, it is happening because smaller countries are adapting and finding new partnerships to protect themselves from uncertainty.

### *Critical engagement with existing scholarly work*

These findings provide important insights into academic discussions about how global power shifts and institutional changes occur. Unlike theories that predict institutional breakdown when dominant powers decline (Mearsheimer, 2018a), the African case reveals more nuanced processes of adaptation and institutional creativity. The often-neglected regions appear to have more power to influence the post-hegemonic international order than conventional theories recognise.

Nevertheless, this analysis also exposes weaknesses in overly positive views of institutional durability. The rapid transformation of AGOA from a technical trade programme into a foreign policy tool shows how quickly institutional frameworks can become politicised when new leadership changes priorities.

## Conclusions

The Trump administration's 'America First' and bilateral approach to international relations, particularly in trade and investment, significantly disrupted the established post-World War II multilateral practices in international relations and the global political economy. By withdrawing from vital organisations such as WHO and the Paris Climate Accord, imposing unilateral tariffs, and weaponizing trade tools like AGOA, Trump's administration confronted liberal institutional principles and promoted a protectionist, nationalist agenda. These policies are largely driven by America's domestic economic interests. For Africa, this disengagement creates both vulnerabilities and opportunities, revealing structural dependence on particular export markets, while simultaneously spurring opportunities for intra-African collaboration and deeper integration, strategic diversification of diplomatic and economic partnerships and enhanced agency in global forums. As the international system continues to evolve, Africa's adaptive responses highlight the ongoing tension between institutional frameworks and nationalist impulses, the transition from US hegemonic stability in an uncertain yet dynamic multipolar world, and between dependency and an opportunity for genuine African self-determination. The continent's evolving strategies signal a redefinition of its global engagement, not as mere recipients of great power interests, but as proactive, resilient players contributing to the establishment of a more multipolar and inclusive international framework.

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