CHAPTER 9

The United States–South Africa Diplomatic Meltdown: Crisis or Catalyst for Economic Sovereignty?

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Introduction

Since resuming the United States (US) presidency on 20 January 2025, Donald Trump has pursued an aggressive and unilateral foreign policy, marked by executive orders and abrupt diplomatic shifts. His revived 'America First' agenda, characterised by transactionalism, nationalist rhetoric and a rejection of multilateralism, has strained long-standing alliances and destabilised the global diplomatic landscape (Lowell et al., 2025). Trump's decisions to renegotiate international agreements, impose sweeping tariffs, openly criticise allied leaders and side with Russia in its invasion of Ukraine have introduced widespread uncertainty (Yourish et al., 2025), forcing nations to rethink their strategic alignments in an increasingly volatile world.

While Africa has largely remained peripheral to Trump's foreign policy, South Africa has stood out as a notable exception. In public statements and social media posts, Trump accused the South African government of land seizures, racial discrimination and 'anti-Americanism', claims widely discredited, but amplified by conservative US media (Usman and Carroll, 2025). In response, his administration issued an executive order offering asylum to white South Africans, particularly Afrikaners, and terminated key streams of financial assistance (The White House, 2025a), including funding from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), a cornerstone of South Africa's HIV/AIDS response (Usman and Carroll, 2025).

The most consequential threat, however, as noted by Fabricius (2025), concerned the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a vital US trade initiative that provides duty-free access for select African exports. As one of AGOA's main beneficiaries, South Africa relies heavily on this framework for exports such as vehicles, citrus and textiles. Alarmed by the economic implications, South African officials mounted urgent diplomatic efforts to preserve these trade benefits. However, on 2 April 2025, Trump announced sweeping tariffs on all US imports. Though temporarily delayed by 90 days, the tariffs, applied indiscriminately, effectively nullified AGOA's advantages. South Africa was hit with a 30 per cent tariff on all exports, sparking fears of factory closures, job losses and reduced foreign earnings (Fabricius, 2025).

Against this backdrop, this paper adopts a postcolonial lens to reflect on US–South Africa relations since 1994 and argues that a diplomatic rupture was not solely the result of Trump's volatile leadership, but rather the culmination of deeper tensions rooted in asymmetrical power dynamics and conflicting priorities. Trump's nationalist and transactional approach to foreign policy, prioritising short-term US gains over long-term alliances, intensified these strains, undermining multilateralism and reducing space for policy autonomy among smaller states like South Africa. Paradoxically, however, Trump's punitive and isolationist stance highlighted the dangers of dependency, compelling South Africa to reassess its development model. This moment of rupture, while disruptive, also creates strategic opportunities for South Africa and its African peers to assert greater autonomy through regional integration, economic self-reliance, and diversified global partnerships. Pragmatic engagement with the US remains vital, but on more balanced and sovereign terms.

This chapter is structured as follows: The opening section outlines the methodology, detailing the sources of data and the postcolonial theoretical lens guiding the study. The second section traces the historical trajectory of US–South Africa relations since the end of apartheid in 1994, highlighting both cooperation and recurring tensions that have shaped the bilateral dynamic over three decades. The third section focuses on Trump's first presidential term (2016–2020), examining key points of diplomatic friction and how these tensions laid the groundwork for

more pronounced confrontations in his second term. The fourth section analyses Trump's return to power in 2025, with a focus on the broader global diplomatic disruptions he triggered and the reemergence of South Africa as a foreign policy target. The fifth section critically examines how Trump's punitive measures may unintentionally open space for South Africa and its African peers to strengthen intra-continental cooperation and pursue economic self-reliance. The final section explores strategic responses and concludes with reflections on the broader implications for African sovereignty in an increasingly fractured global order.

Methodology

Data sources

This chapter primarily draws on publicly available sources, including journal and news articles, research publications, government and organisational documents, and other relevant materials. Its primary objective is to provide a grounded and contextually rich analysis of the US–South Africa diplomatic fallout. It seeks to capture both the factual developments and the broader discursive and geopolitical dynamics that shaped the crisis. This approach enables a multi-perspective examination of the rupture, ensuring that the analysis is not only evidence-based, but also reflective of competing narratives, policy shifts and the underlying power asymmetries between the two states.

Theoretical approach

This study is grounded in a postcolonial theoretical framework, an interdisciplinary and critical approach that interrogates how the enduring legacies of colonialism and imperialism continue to shape contemporary international relations, particularly between the Global North and South. Postcolonial theory challenges the presumed neutrality of mainstream International Relations (IR) paradigms, exposing their Eurocentrism, historical amnesia and failure to account for the structural and discursive continuities of colonial domination in global politics.

Foundational thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Mohammed Ayoob have shown how international systems, often perceived as neutral or universal, are deeply embedded in histories of conquest, racial hierarchy and cultural erasure (Manchanda, 2018). As Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2021) argue, postcolonialism reveals how IR as a discipline has often been complicit in reinforcing asymmetrical power structures, privileging Western perspectives, while marginalising those of the colonised world.

Drawing on this tradition, this study operates on three central assumptions: First, contemporary international relations reflect colonial-era hierarchies in which Western states continue to exert dominance over former colonies through economic, political and epistemic means. Africa is routinely positioned as peripheral, its efforts to address historical injustices often delegitimised through racialised discourses that portray such initiatives (for example, land reform and affirmative action laws) as threats to 'universal' norms, rather than legitimate exercises of sovereignty (Grovogui, 2013; Said, 1979).

Second, Western powers continue to employ aid, trade access, and diplomatic legitimacy as instruments of neo-imperial discipline. Conditionalities such as threats to remove AGOA benefits or suspend development assistance function as modern iterations of colonial authority, reinforcing dependency, while denying the South genuine autonomy. These practices, as Grovogui (2013) highlighted, reflect the enduring assumption that the Global North retains the moral and political authority to define what constitutes 'acceptable' governance.

Third, formerly colonised nations frequently respond to such pressures by promoting multilateralism, regional solidarity and non-alignment as strategies to reclaim agency and resist hegemonic power. South Africa's engagement with BRICS, its leadership within the African Union (AU), and its appeal to international legal bodies like the International Court of Justice exemplify this quest for alternative sites of legitimacy and collective action beyond the Western-centric order.

This theoretical approach will guide the analysis by framing the US–South Africa diplomatic fallout during the Trump presidency as more than a bilateral disagreement. Instead, it will be examined as a symptom

of deeper postcolonial tensions, wherein a Global South state's assertion of sovereignty and alternative political identity is met with coercive pushback by a Global North power. The analysis will unpack how Trump's nationalist and transactional policies reflect neocolonial logics, how South Africa's responses challenge the norms of Western dominance, and how this episode illuminates broader struggles over representation, legitimacy and agency in the international system. Through this lens, the study will assess both the structural constraints and the emancipatory potential embedded in South Africa's diplomatic strategies.

US-South Africa relations since 1994: Cooperation, tensions and double standards

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a pivotal moment in US–South Africa relations, ushering in a new era of diplomatic engagement after decades of estrangement. During apartheid, the US maintained a cautious and often contradictory stance, reluctant to impose sanctions and slow to fully support the anti-apartheid movement (Goldstone, 2005). With South Africa's transition to democracy under Nelson Mandela, Washington, under the Clinton administration, embraced the 'new' South Africa as a potential regional anchor of stability, liberal democracy and market-oriented reform (Cook, 2013). The early post-apartheid period was marked by political goodwill, increased aid flows and efforts to integrate South Africa into global governance structures. Washington also encouraged Pretoria to assume a continental leadership role, positioning it as an African champion of liberal values.

Yet, despite this optimism, structural and historical tensions, rooted in colonial and racial hierarchies, soon emerged, complicating the relationship. While the US projected a vision of a unipolar, liberal international order centred on Western norms, South Africa advanced a foreign policy grounded in multilateralism, non-alignment and solidarity with the Global South. This divergence revealed a deeper postcolonial fault line, where the foreign policy autonomy of a newly democratic African state clashed with the expectations of a Global North power still invested in its global hegemony.

South Africa's relationships with countries such as Cuba and Libya, nations that had supported the anti-apartheid struggle, but were deemed pariahs by the US, became early sites of contestation (Cook, 2013; Drogin, 1997). A flashpoint came in 1997, when Pretoria's plan to sell advanced fire-control systems to Syria—then designated by the US as a state sponsor of terrorism—provoked a strong reaction from Washington, including threats to cut off foreign aid (Daley, 1997). The episode illustrated how US diplomacy continued to operate through postcolonial conditionality: economic partnership was contingent on conformity with US strategic preferences, often at the expense of African agency. While Nelson Mandela's government initially resisted, it ultimately suspended the sale (Drogin, 1997), highlighting how material dependence constrained sovereign decision-making.

Mandela's open criticism of US foreign policy further underscored South Africa's attempt to assert an independent global voice. His denouncements of American complicity in Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus and the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bombing of Yugoslavia reflected a rejection of Western exceptionalism. In 2003, Mandela famously condemned the US invasion of Iraq as a tragedy and an act of imperialism, highlighting how Pretoria saw international law and multilateral institutions as crucial to a just global order (Lulat, 2008; Sontag, 1999; Swarns, 2003). These tensions reflect South Africa's effort to resist hegemonic discourse and demand equal footing in global affairs, a position that often provokes backlash from the US foreign policy establishment, accustomed to compliance from Global South states.

Economically, US engagement with South Africa was shaped by liberal market ideology. The AGOA, introduced in 2000, was emblematic of the US effort to integrate African economies into a global trade regime premised on deregulation and open markets. South Africa emerged as one of AGOA's top beneficiaries, exporting cars, citrus and textiles to the US market. However, friction arose when Pretoria implemented anti-dumping duties on US poultry imports in an attempt to protect local South African producers (Naumann, 2015). South Africa's redistributive and developmental policies—such as Black Economic Empowerment

(BEE) and local content requirements—also diverged from Washington's neoliberal template. American investors often perceived these measures as protectionist (Naumann, 2015), revealing the tension between national development priorities and external economic expectations shaped by post-Washington consensus orthodoxy.

Under the presidencies of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, these divergences deepened. Mbeki's commitment to 'African solutions for African problems', especially his 'quiet diplomacy' to Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, reflected a rejection of Western interventionism and a preference for continental diplomacy (Cook, 2013; Lulat, 2008). Mbeki's strong opposition to the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, which resulted in Muammar Qaddafi's death, further hardened Pretoria's scepticism about Western-led regime change (Weissman, 2018). These positions, while consistent with South Africa's postcolonial commitment to sovereignty and non-interference, were frequently interpreted in Washington as enabling authoritarianism (Cook, 2013), reflecting a persistent North–South moral asymmetry where the West retains the authority to judge the legitimacy of other nations' foreign policy choices.

Simultaneously, Pretoria's calls for the reform of global institutions, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO), put it at odds with US strategic interests (Cook, 2013). Despite its formal rhetoric on inclusivity, the US has resisted substantive changes to these institutions, thereby preserving the architecture of global governance inherited from the colonial era. South Africa's challenge to these structures represents a broader effort by Global South states to reshape the global order, not merely as subjects of international law, but as co-authors of its rules.

Despite these political frictions, cooperation did flourish in some areas, especially in public health. The US's PEPFAR provided billions in funding and technical support for South Africa's HIV/AIDS response, helping build critical public health capacity (Cook, 2013). This engagement, however, was not free from tension. Mbeki's AIDS denialism—his questioning of the link between HIV and AIDS—clashed with US policy and global scientific consensus, leading to diplomatic fallout. The situation

stabilised under Zuma, who adopted a more pragmatic and health-driven approach (Weissman, 2018). Yet even in this area, the dynamics of donor-recipient relations reflected hierarchies of expertise and legitimacy, with the US positioned as the benevolent technocratic power and South Africa as the errant pupil.

President Barack Obama's administration sought to reframe the relationship as a partnership rather than patronage, emphasising education, health and trade during his 2013 visit (Cook, 2013; Pillay, 2014). However, tensions remained. South Africa's increasing engagement with BRICS and its criticism of Western double standards in forums such as the United Nations (UN) generated unease in Washington. From a postcolonial perspective, Pretoria's alignment with BRICS represents not just economic diversification, but an ideological challenge to Western-centric narratives of global leadership. This assertiveness was, however, tempered by contradictions in South Africa's own foreign policy. One such contradiction emerged in 2015, when South Africa refused to arrest Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir—wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity—during an AU summit in Johannesburg (Gqiza and Ogunnubi, 2019). The decision provoked criticism from both domestic and international actors, including the US, and cast doubt on Pretoria's commitment to international justice. This episode reveals the tensions inherent in postcolonial diplomacy, where solidarity with fellow Global South states can conflict with human rights obligations and multilateral legal frameworks.

The 'Trump Card': Heightened frictions in US-South Africa relations

The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016 ushered in a distinctly turbulent period in US–South Africa relations. Although bilateral ties had weathered ideological and diplomatic disagreements in the past, the Trump era represented a deeper rupture, defined not only by policy divergence, but by a broader erosion of multilateral norms and the reassertion of hierarchical global power relations. Central to this shift was the Trump administration's 'America First' agenda, which embraced economic nationalism, unilateralism and a

form of transactional diplomacy that sidelined historical alliances and downplayed developmental commitments. This moment exposed the fragility of South Africa's position within the US-led international order and revealed the persistence of postcolonial asymmetries in the global diplomatic landscape.

One of the earliest and most consequential flashpoints, as Serino (2025) noted, was the Trump administration's overt disengagement from Africa and its dismissive, even derogatory, rhetoric toward the continent. Africa's marginalisation in US strategic planning became evident as Trump offered little diplomatic or developmental attention to African partners. A low point came in January 2018, when Trump reportedly referred to African nations using vulgar and racially charged language during an immigration policy discussion (Serino, 2025). Although partially denied by the White House, the remarks sparked continental outrage. South Africa formally summoned the US chargé d'affaires to protest, underscoring the gravity of the diplomatic breach (Mabuza, 2018). This revealed more than a cultural insensitivity; it exposed the durability of colonial racial imaginaries in contemporary diplomacy, where African nations continue to be devalued in Western political discourse.

While the Trump administration launched the 'Prosper Africa' initiative in late 2018, it was widely perceived as a geopolitical countermeasure against China and Russia, rather than a genuine commitment to mutual development (Signé and Olander, 2019). The initiative lacked strategic coherence, senior-level engagement and actionable implementation frameworks (Schneidman, 2020). Trump's frequent proposals to slash foreign aid, including PEPFAR funding and the closure of USAID offices, amplified anxieties among South African policymakers. Although the US Congress intervened to preserve key programmes (Signé and Olander, 2019), the administration's approach signalled a retreat from cooperative, development-oriented engagement. From a postcolonial perspective, such shifts reveal the volatility of aid-dependent relationships and highlight how the Global South remains structurally vulnerable to the policy whims of Global North powers.

A particularly inflammatory episode occurred in August 2018 when Trump tweeted that he had instructed the US State Department to

investigate land expropriation and violence against white farmers in South Africa. Echoing far-right conspiracy theories, Trump claimed the South African government was seizing land from white farmers and permitting large-scale killing, despite no credible evidence supporting such claims (Serino, 2025; Wilson, 2018). Pretoria swiftly condemned the statement, framing it as misinformation and neocolonial interference in its domestic affairs (Wilson, 2018). The controversy illuminated the racialised lens through which Trump engaged with African issues, centring white grievance while ignoring the historical realities of apartheid-era land dispossession. The incident starkly illustrates the postcolonial critique of Western foreign policy as being animated by selective moralism (Manchanda, 2018; Spivak, 1988), often privileging settler-descendant narratives over indigenous struggles for justice.

Economically, Trump's protectionist posture created additional tensions. His administration's threats to revoke AGOA benefits unless South Africa opened its markets further reflected a broader transactionalism that instrumentalised trade preferences as disciplinary tools (Kohnert, 2018). While South Africa maintained its AGOA eligibility during Trump's first term, friction remained over poultry imports, local content requirements and intellectual property rights. These tensions underscore how economic relations between the Global North and South are often embedded in asymmetrical structures of dependency, with market access used to enforce compliance with US commercial and strategic interests, echoing the extractive and hierarchical logics of empire.

At the multilateral level, the ideological rift widened. Trump's open hostility toward global institutions, evident in his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organisation (WHO), ran counter to South Africa's historical commitment to multilateralism, international law and global governance reform (RSA, 2017). South Africa's foreign policy has long been anchored in a postcolonial commitment to inclusive international institutions that reflect the voices of formerly colonised nations. Trump's unilateralism undermined these principles and cast doubt on the US's reliability as a global partner. This divergence is not merely ideological; it reflects a deeper struggle over

whose voices count in shaping international norms, a central concern of postcolonial IR theory (Spivak, 1988).

The Biden administration (2021–2025) attempted to reverse course, restoring support for multilateralism and renewing US commitments to global development, climate cooperation, and democratic governance (Usman and Carroll, 2025). However, geopolitical tensions persisted beneath the surface. South Africa's diplomatic non-alignment, particularly its position on Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, drew criticism from Washington and Brussels. Pretoria's abstention in the UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia (UN News, 2022) and its repeated calls for negotiated solutions were framed by some Western observers as evidence of strategic ambiguity, or worse, complicity (Buccus, 2025).

From a postcolonial perspective, South Africa's actions can be read as a deliberate assertion of agency, resisting pressure to align reflexively with Western geopolitical priorities. Pretoria's posture reflects a Global South tradition of strategic non-alignment, dating back to the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, intended to insulate postcolonial states from the coercive polarities of global superpower competition. In this light, South Africa's efforts to maintain ties with Russia and China should not be understood as ideological allegiance, but as part of a broader recalibration of diplomatic sovereignty in an increasingly multipolar world.

Nevertheless, South Africa's claims to neutrality were severely tested by its hosting of the Exercise Mosi II naval drills with Russia and China in February 2023, held during the one-year anniversary of the Ukraine invasion (Ramsden, 2023). While South Africa framed the exercises as routine and apolitical, the symbolism and timing were impossible to ignore. From Washington's perspective, this marked a serious breach of diplomatic trust, exacerbated by reports that South Africa had covertly supplied weapons to Russia via the sanctioned vessel Lady R, which docked at a military base in December 2022. Although Pretoria denied the allegations, the incident triggered high-level rebukes from US officials and generated debate over whether punitive economic or diplomatic measures would follow (Ramsden, 2023).

Trump's return to power in 2025: Global diplomatic shifts and South Africa's re-emergence as a foreign policy target – A postcolonial reinterpretation

Trump's return to the US presidency on 20 January 2025 marked a seismic shift in global affairs. Emboldened by a nationalist mandate and driven by deepening disillusionment with liberal internationalism, Trump's second term ushered in an even more uncompromising brand of unilateralism and transactionalism. The new administration articulated a vision of global engagement premised on narrow national interest, coercive diplomacy and open disdain for multilateral institutions (Lowell et al., 2025). Within this volatile international environment, South Africa, once peripheral to US strategic interests, reemerged as a significant target of Trump's punitive foreign policy. This renewed focus was shaped not only by contemporary geopolitical shifts, but also by deep-seated racialised narratives and colonial hierarchies that continue to shape Western engagement with the Global South.

From the outset, Trump's rhetoric signalled a stark departure from the principles of collective diplomacy. In his inauguration speech, Trump warned that the US would no longer be 'shackled by foreign entanglements or unfair trade deals', heralding a 'new era of absolute sovereignty' (The White House, 2025b). Trump's administration quickly moved to withdraw from key pillars of global cooperation, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the WHO, and the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC). US funding to the World Bank and IMF was slashed, reflecting a worldview in which international institutions were framed as vehicles of 'global freeloading' (Yourish et al., 2025). This retreat from multilateralism opened space for rival powers like China and Russia to consolidate regional influence and challenged the very architecture of post-World War II international governance.

Trump's policies not only undermined long-standing alliances, but they also revived a postcolonial script of punishment and compliance. As part of this vision, nations that resisted US hegemony or pursued autonomous foreign policy paths were cast as adversarial or ungrateful (Lowell et al., 2025). South Africa's increasing alignment with the BRICS bloc, its vocal

advocacy for multilateralism and its critical stance on Western double standards placed it firmly within Trump's foreign policy crosshairs. The reemergence of South Africa as a target in 2025 thus reflects not a sudden geopolitical rupture, but the continuing struggle over who gets to define global legitimacy, morality and leadership.

'Mission South Africa': Discursive 'delegitimisation' and racialised diplomacy

The renewed antagonism toward South Africa was not entirely novel. Within US conservative discourse, post-apartheid South Africa has long been portrayed as a case study in failed transformation, marked by land redistribution, state inefficiency and racialised governance (Cabral, 2025; McGreal, 2025). Trump and his allies strategically drew upon this narrative, invoking inflammatory claims of 'white genocide', land seizures and Marxist economic planning (Cabral, 2025; Serino, 2025). These assertions, though debunked by human rights monitors, resonated with sections of Trump's political base and formed part of a racialised moral economy in which postcolonial attempts at redress were cast as threats to Western civilisation (Serino, 2025; Wilson, 2018).

From a postcolonial perspective, Trump's rhetoric functions as a form of symbolic violence, delegitimising South Africa's sovereignty, pathologising its internal democratic processes and reviving paternalistic tropes of civilisational decline. Such discourses reflect what Edward Said described as the Orientalism of Africa—a framing in which the continent's resistance to Western models of development or diplomacy is seen not as autonomy, but as deviance (Said, 1979). Trump's narrative positioned South Africa as an object of discipline, rather than a subject of equal engagement.

The Trump administration's framing of South Africa paved the way for concrete policy retaliation. In March 2025, Trump signed an executive order terminating significant US development assistance, including cuts to PEPFAR—a programme central to South Africa's HIV/AIDS response (Usman and Carroll, 2025). This decision marked a sharp departure from decades of health diplomacy and served as a stark reminder of the

instrumental nature of development aid in postcolonial geopolitics. In April, Trump imposed sweeping 30 per cent tariffs on all South African exports, citing national security and 'unfair competition' (Fabricius, 2025). Although a 90-day suspension was later introduced, the tariffs signalled the effective erosion of AGOA preferences and posed existential threats to South Africa's automotive, agricultural and textile industries. These measures exemplify neocolonial conditionalities in which economic tools are weaponised to enforce ideological conformity. As postcolonial theorists like Mohammed Ayoob argue, the Global South's political autonomy remains constrained by structural economic dependencies maintained through global trade and financial systems (Ayoob, 1995).

Trump also proposed to suspend South Africa from US-backed security training programmes and bilateral trade dialogues (Usman and Carroll, 2025), further revealing an intent to isolate rather than engage. Rather than responding to concrete violations of international norms, these punitive actions were driven by ideological divergence, underscoring a worldview in which loyalty, not legality, determines the legitimacy of state behaviour.

The diplomatic standoff reached new heights during South Africa's presidency of the G20 in 2025. US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio publicly boycotted the G20 foreign ministers' meeting in Cape Town, denouncing Pretoria's alleged alignment with authoritarian regimes and its 'anti-American' agenda (Gumede, 2025). This boycott, unprecedented in G20 history, was symptomatic of a broader fracture in the global governance system. South Africa, leveraging its G20 chairmanship, sought to prioritise issues of debt relief, climate justice and IMF governance reform, demands aligned with the AU and Global South priorities (Gumede, 2025). From a postcolonial perspective, Pretoria's agenda represented an attempt to redefine what constitutes global urgency and who has the authority to set the terms of global cooperation. In response, the US's retreat from the G20 and its efforts to delegitimise South African leadership reinforced the colonial logics of inclusion and exclusion in global diplomacy.

Tensions intensified further in March when Rubio declared South African Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool *persona non grata* (Usman and

Carroll, 2025). During a closed-door webinar, Rasool had criticised Trump's administration for mobilising a 'supremacist instinct' and weaponising 'white victimhood' to justify its foreign and domestic policies (Knickmeyer and Lee, 2025). Though made in a private setting, his remarks were quickly politicised, and his expulsion was framed as a defence of American dignity and diplomatic norms.

This episode reflects the fragility of the postcolonial voice in global politics. Rasool's critique, rooted in a history of anti-apartheid activism and solidarity politics was recast, not as a legitimate contribution to international discourse, but as an unacceptable challenge to US authority. As Spivak (1988) observed, this silencing of subaltern critique exposes the boundaries of who is allowed to speak and be heard in international relations. Pretoria, for its part, refrained from reciprocal measures, signalling its intent to preserve diplomatic channels. Yet the asymmetry of the exchange highlighted how postcolonial states must often choose between voice and access, critique and cooperation, a dynamic that remains central to their global engagement.

South Africa's treatment under Trump's second term was not an isolated anomaly, but part of a broader strategy of global disciplining, in which states that challenge US dominance, particularly in the Global South, face economic, diplomatic and symbolic retaliation. Trump's foreign policy resurrected the imperial binaries of civilised versus uncivilised, cooperative versus rogue, liberal versus illiberal, placing South Africa on the latter side of each dichotomy. However, this crisis also revealed spaces for resistance. South Africa's continued commitment to multilateralism, its advocacy for global economic reform and its insistence on development-oriented diplomacy reflect a postcolonial aspiration to reshape the global order on more equitable terms.

Implications for South Africa and the Global South: Turning adversity into opportunity

Pretoria's continued diplomatic engagement with Washington amid escalating tensions reveals a pragmatic recognition: the US remains a vital economic partner. One restraining factor against full punitive escalation

was the strategic value of South African mineral exports, especially platinum group metals and manganese, which are indispensable to the US high-tech and manufacturing sectors. These commodities account for approximately 33 per cent of South Africa's exports to the US and were conspicuously excluded from Trump's 2025 tariff regime (Ngundu, 2025). Far from incidental, this exemption illustrates how trade is increasingly governed by national strategic imperatives. As Ngundu (2025) notes, the move was designed to protect US industrial competitiveness and secure critical supply chains. In this context, South Africa's mineral wealth offers a limited buffer against economic coercion and, more importantly, serves as a postcolonial site of leverage where Global South states can reclaim agency within exploitative trade relations historically rooted in extractive colonialism.

However, the reemergence of South Africa as a target of US foreign policy highlighted the precarity of its position within the global economic order. Trump's actions—tariffs, aid withdrawal and diplomatic hostility—exposed the fragility of postcolonial sovereignty when it is overly reliant on preferential access to Western markets. This economic backlash catalysed a critical moment of introspection. South African leaders, policy analysts and civil society actors began to interrogate not just short-term losses but the deeper structural dependencies that had persisted since the country's democratic transition (Vandome, 2025). The result was a surge of policy debate on trade diversification, accelerated intra-African economic integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the imperative of domestic industrialisation (RSA, 2025).

The immediate consequences of Trump's measures were predictably harsh. Export-driven sectors, such as agriculture, automobile manufacturing and textiles—long beneficiaries of AGOA's duty-free access—faced sudden barriers, threatening employment, investment and production chains. Development programmes were also curtailed, with PEPFAR cuts jeopardising gains in public health and HIV/AIDS prevention. This crisis, however, also triggered a strategic recalibration, compelling South Africa to revisit its global alliances and reassert its commitment to non-alignment and multilateral solidarity, long-standing themes in postcolonial African diplomacy.

South Africa's May 2025 economic response plan emphasised value-added exports, regional trade expansion and new partnerships, signalling an intention to mitigate future dependency risks (RSA, 2025). More broadly, Trump's coercive diplomacy served as an unintended catalyst for deeper intra-African cooperation and stronger South–South linkages. As Vandome (2025) observes, South Africa's increasing engagement with China, Russia, India, and Brazil was not merely opportunistic, but reflected a growing Global South consensus: that the postwar international order remains shaped by colonial legacies, exclusionary institutions and power asymmetries antithetical to Southern development.

This pivot was particularly evident during South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency. Pretoria utilised the platform to foreground issues that had long been marginalised in global governance—climate justice, debt relief and the reform of Bretton Woods institutions (Vandome, 2025). These positions, while clashing with US preferences, were embraced by many Global South states, reinforcing a collective effort to reshape the normative architecture of international cooperation. Postcolonial theory helps one see these moves not simply as policy disputes, but as acts of epistemic resistance—efforts to redefine what counts as global 'urgency', and who gets to articulate it.

AfCFTA and the struggle for continental autonomy

The AfCFTA presents one of the most promising pathways for transforming this moment of adversity into long-term autonomy. Launched in 2021, AfCFTA seeks to create a unified African market of over 1.4 billion people and a combined Gross Domestic Product of US$3.4 trillion (Hagos, 2023; Ryder, Lwere and Eguegu, 2025). It represents an attempt to reverse Africa's colonial economic legacy, which fragmented the continent into export-dependent enclaves tethered to distant metropoles (Hagos, 2023). Trump's aggressive trade nationalism reaffirmed the urgency of operationalising AfCFTA, not simply as a trade mechanism, but as a pan-African economic sovereignty project.

South Africa is well-positioned to drive the implementation of the AfCFTA, given its relatively diversified economy, advanced infrastructure,

and financial systems. By reorienting investment and trade toward African partners, Pretoria can not only shield itself from great power volatility but also help reshape the continent's insertion into the global economy on terms more reflective of African priorities. The project's success, however, requires more than economic will. It demands political coordination, harmonised regulatory frameworks and a shared continental commitment to postcolonial emancipation from external domination (Hagos, 2023).

Beyond Africa, South Africa and its neighbours are seeking to diversify trade and diplomatic partnerships with emerging markets across Latin America, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This global diversification, while not without risks, offers strategic hedging against future Western volatility. However, as postcolonial theorists warn (Grovogui, 2013; Spivak, 1988), dependency is not only a geographic condition, but also a structural one. Avoiding 'new colonialism' from China or others will require African states to strengthen domestic industrial bases, set their own regulatory terms and centre the voices of their own peoples in development planning.

Despite the strategic momentum generated by recent diplomatic shocks, formidable structural obstacles continue to hamper Africa's path toward genuine transformation. Many African states remain burdened by deep infrastructural deficits, fragmented regulatory regimes, weak manufacturing bases and limited intra-continental connectivity. Compounding these constraints are governance challenges, including policy inconsistency, bureaucratic inefficiencies and elite networks that remain closely aligned with Western capital and donor priorities (Hagos, 2023). These entrenched dynamics undermine efforts to industrialise, reduce external dependency and assert policy sovereignty.

In the short term, the economic fallout from Trump-era punitive measures, ranging from inflation and rising food prices to cuts in social spending, risks fuelling domestic discontent, populist rhetoric and protectionist reflexes that could undermine long-term regional integration. Crucially, diversification may not necessarily lead to emancipation. Shifting economic alliances—whether toward BRICS, China, or the Gulf States—without simultaneously investing in domestic capacity-building, technological innovation, and labour-

intensive industries may simply reproduce dependency in new forms. True postcolonial sovereignty requires more than shifting geopolitical orientation. It demands a transformation of production systems, financial autonomy, and institutional coherence. Without structural reform that centres African priorities and capabilities, today's diversification efforts risk becoming tomorrow's subordination, merely replacing one master with another.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2025 profoundly disrupted US–South Africa relations, marking a new and volatile phase in an already asymmetrical partnership. The Trump administration's punitive approach, manifested through sweeping tariffs, aid cuts, and diplomatic marginalisation, was grounded in a foreign policy worldview shaped by nationalism, transactionalism, and a retributive logic that framed multilateralism and dissent as threats to American primacy. South Africa, portrayed as ideologically adversarial and aligned with global 'rivals' such as China and Russia, became an illustrative target within a broader effort to discipline the Global South.

Viewed through a postcolonial lens, these actions are not merely deviations from liberal norms; they are extensions of entrenched global hierarchies forged in the colonial era. The use of trade and aid as coercive tools reflects a persistent belief in the right of Western powers to define the terms of acceptable governance, diplomacy and development in the Global South. The racialised discourse around South Africa, particularly narratives of 'white victimhood', land expropriation and alleged economic mismanagement, echoes colonial tropes that cast African agency as inherently dangerous or incompetent.

Paradoxically, Trump's coercive diplomacy also served as a catalyst for critical introspection and strategic recalibration. The shock of economic retaliation and diplomatic isolation exposed South Africa's overreliance on preferential trade access and Western development assistance. In response, the country has begun to articulate a more assertive and diversified foreign policy posture, one that embraces regional integration

through the AfCFTA, deepens cooperation with BRICS and other Global South partners and foregrounds the need for reform in global governance institutions. This repositioning signals a broader desire to transcend neocolonial dependency and reclaim agency in international affairs. However, as this chapter has argued, the path forward is not without obstacles. Internal challenges, ranging from elite capture and infrastructural deficits to policy incoherence, risk undermining these ambitions. Moreover, replacing Western dependency with uncritical engagement with new powers like China or Russia, risks replicating old patterns of extraction and external control.

Ultimately, Trump's return to power has forced South Africa, and the continent more broadly, to confront a fundamental question: will Africa continue to operate on the periphery of a system it did not design, or will it forge a new path rooted in self-reliance, regional solidarity and postcolonial sovereignty? The answer will define not only Africa's future, but also the evolving shape of global order itself.

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