

CHAPTER 15

'America First' and African Agency in the New World Order

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Introduction

The relationship between the United States (US) and Africa has been defined by substantial power differences that stem from colonialism as well as Cold War politics and racial inequalities. Historical factors, especially the persistent effects of the transatlantic slave trade and racialised discourse, have created a major gap between African publics and US policymakers, which Ngcoya (2007: 713) calls the 'great continental divide'. US foreign policy has alternated between periods of active partnership and passive neglect and security-driven interests when engaging with African leaders who occasionally welcome US collaboration (da Cruz and Stephens, 2010; Owusu et al., 2019; Welch, 1996).

During his presidency, Trump implemented protectionist trade measures and cut foreign aid while using derogatory language, which worsened African distrust. The Trump administration's isolationist policies during a period of increasing multipolarity and worldwide instability led several Global South nations to view the power vacuum created by a declining US as an opportunity to expand their influence (Igbatayo, n.d). African countries now function as strategic partners that Western nations, as well as emerging powers such as China, Russia, and India, actively pursue.

The emerging international situation creates vital issues regarding whether Trump's second administration will perpetuate Africa's current marginalisation or enable new strategic possibilities for African self-determination. The research aims to investigate this question by changing its focus from US policy goals to analysing Africa's status and possibilities within the current global order transformation. The existing body of literature about US–Africa relations from past to present and Trump's first term effects on trade and aid governance remains mainly focused on US actions.

African states receive minimal recognition as independent entities with the ability to make deliberate choices in foreign affairs. The analysis of African agency exists mainly as reactive behaviour, which scholars note, however, rarely study comprehensively and rarely make into the core of their analysis.

The research bases its analysis on African agency theory as its primary theoretical framework. The research borrows the agency definition attributed to Brown (2012), which views agency as 'the faculty of acting or exerting power' (Brown, 2012, as cited in Coffie and Tiky, 2021). Moreover, agency describes the ability of governments and regional institutions and bodies to affect external forces operating from positions of structural inequality (Coffie and Tiky, 2021). Trump's 'America First' doctrine represents both a structural disruption to current global arrangements because of its transactional and normative withdrawal approach. The structural disruption caused by Trump may simultaneously provide new chances for African states to build alternative alliances or strengthen regional unity. This includes increasing strategic engagement with Eastern powers, such as China, Russia and India, as a deliberate exercise of agency that challenges Western-dominated models of development and partnership.

This chapter does not attempt to quantify how each nation would respond to Trump 2.0, since data about such reactions remains incomplete. The paper conducts a theory-informed and typology-based analysis of the potential transformations in African agencies' strategic environment resulting from the disruptive conditions of Trump's second term, as well as from certain structural factors of different countries. Through the

examination of US–Africa relations development, the paper explores how African countries might be affected by the 'America First' policies. The primary inquiry concerns whether Trump's second term will reinforce Africa's position at the periphery or offer new opportunities for African entities to enhance their international influence. Central to this inquiry is the concept of African agency, understood not as passive reaction, but as the ability of states to assert strategic priorities, resist marginalisation and redefine international alignments.

Literature review

Extensive research exists about Africa's relations with the US from multiple academic viewpoints. The study of foreign policy toward Africa is one aspect that allows for the analysis of US–Africa relations by understanding the shifts in US foreign policy throughout different administrations. The book by Schraeder (1994, as reviewed by Welch, 1996) analysed the dynamics between Africa and the US prior to 1990. The main argument defended by Schraeder is the historic neglect of the US towards Africa (Welch, 1996). This neglect was demonstrated during many international events, such as the pre-World War II era, where the US demonstrated little interest over the African continent (Owusu et al., 2019). The North African region gained temporary increased importance during World War II, because Allied forces, including the US, conducted military operations in the region (da Cruz & Stephens, 2010). After World War II, American engagement with Africa took the form of country-to-country engagement, depending on the US agenda and interests, primarily in relation to countering Soviet efforts to control the region (Owusu et al., 2019). Although the interest given to Africa was significant, it was less significant than the engagement of the US with other regions such as the Middle East and Asia, especially because of a lack of strategic alliances with the newly independent African countries (Nyang, 2005). However, Africa was a geopolitically important to the US because of its efforts to encourage the spread to democracy and counter the Soviets (da Cruz & Stephens, 2010). Moreover, individual countries held a strategic position within the US strategy during the Cold War;

such was the case for Ethiopia that served as an important vessel to US military strategies during this period (Nyang, 2005). The post-Cold War involvement of the US in Africa was mainly determined by the 'politico-military' that attracted the interests of the US (Welch, 1996), making the continent a *selectively* important actor.

From the 1990s onward, however, US engagement in Africa appeared to shift toward a more sustained and structured approach, beginning with the Clinton administration (Owusu et al., 2019). The Clinton administration initiated a more sustained and organised African engagement by the US when it came to Africa during the 1990s, according to Owusu et al. (2019). The combination of bipartisan support during the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama presidencies led to the establishment of notable programmes such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Through these initiatives, the US advanced economic liberalisation as well as democracy and governance reforms throughout the entire continent (Owusu et al., 2019). These efforts marked a departure from Cold War-era disengagement, yet retained strategic and geostrategic considerations that preferred specific governance structures and market frameworks. The literature focuses extensively on how US foreign policy in Africa has become increasingly militarised through the creation and operation of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). Research scholars have studied AFRICOM security reasons to demonstrate how these motivations serve US domestic interests at the expense of African sovereignty (Campbell, 2017; da Cruz and Stephens, 2010; Ngcoya, 2007).

Under the Trump administration, the US strengthened counterterrorism efforts, which led to an increase in military presence throughout the continent through 6 000 troops and multiple bases, according to Kohnert (2025). The growing security presence of China in Africa became more evident when the country established a military base near the US base in Djibouti, which demonstrated Africa's position in global geopolitical rivalries (Devermont, 2020). According to critics, these developments create a limited security-focused perspective of Africa, which uses military power to evaluate partnerships while ignoring

development and democratic objectives (Conteh-Morgan, 2018; Ngcoya, 2007). The US has shown inconsistent dedication to human rights and governance across Africa, while letting politics influence its commitment levels. During its tenure, the Trump administration pursued a governance agenda which concentrated on efficiency anti-corruption, and US taxpayer value, while simultaneously downplaying human rights concerns and multilateral participation (Devermont, 2019). Under the administration, support for authoritarian leaders combined with their withdrawal from the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, revealed an overall departure from normative leadership (Owusu et al., 2019). The changes in US policies resulted in reduced African democratic achievements, which harmed US soft power effectiveness.

The literature on US–Africa relations continues to portray Africa as a passive entity, while research primarily focuses on US presidential administration strategies. The international relations literature frequently depicts African states as entities which receive foreign aid and military intervention, while remaining outside the process of shaping their relationships (Devermont, 2020; Owusu et al., 2019). Current research sought to debunk the passive narrative of African agency by increasingly recognising the role of Africa and its institutions in international relations (Coffie and Tiky, 2021).

The literature continues to engage in an ongoing discussion about the nature and extent of African agency in international relations. Gwatiwa (2022) argues that most of the African agency observed in relation to dominant powers, including the US, is exaggerated. Such actions do not meet the criteria for full autonomous agency when evaluated against this standard. Gwatiwa (2022) proposes that African responses should be viewed as agency slack, which manifests through two mechanisms: limited engagement (shirking) and subtle policy shifts that diverge from external expectations (slippage). According to Gwatiwa (2022), these mechanisms operate primarily as survival mechanisms, instead of demonstrating strong influence. The research by Coffie and Tiky (2021) demonstrates that African agency takes a more forceful approach. The authors demonstrate how Tanzania opposes external norms, while regional institutions, such as the West African Health Organisation

(WAHO) and the African Union Commission (AUC) use strategic bargaining to achieve their goals. The examples demonstrate intentional influence and strategic bargaining, according to the authors, rather than simple reactive positioning. According to Gwatiwa (2022), African agency operates through constraint and adaptation, however, Coffie and Tiky (2021) present African agency as a purposeful force which challenges dominant narratives and transforms international engagements to meet African needs.

In addition to this contradiction, the literature also fails to examine how Trump-era policies may affect African countries in differentiated ways. Africa is frequently treated as a uniform geopolitical space, despite its deep variation in regime types, economic dependencies and diplomatic alignments. As a result, the possibility that Trump's foreign policy may simultaneously entrench vulnerability in some contexts while enabling manoeuvring or resistance in others remains unexplored. This paper addresses both gaps by placing African agency at the centre of analysis and by examining the structural, regional and geopolitical conditions that shape Africa's strategic positioning under Trump 2.0.

From Trump 1.0 to Trump 2.0

Between Donald Trump's first term (Trump 1.0) and his second term (Trump 2.0), there is a continuation and intensification of a more aggressive and transactional US stance, which has significant implications for Africa, particularly in trade, foreign aid, security cooperation, and diplomatic relations. During his first presidency, Donald Trump demonstrated a limited interest in Africa. The continent was marginal in US foreign policy priorities, and his administration maintained a relatively muted engagement with African states. Trump's focus was largely domestic, and foreign policy was marked by a disdain for multilateralism and scepticism toward foreign aid. Africa received minimal attention in his rhetoric and strategic planning, aside from isolated actions tied to counterterrorism or immigration (Nyantakyi Oti, 2025). Moreover, Trump's previous term was characterised by an erratic approach to governance, where Trump failed to fully entrench his power within the US political and bureaucratic

system. As Scheppele (2025) notes, Trump 'floundered' in his first term, lacking both legal instruments and institutional control. While he had many ideas, they remained largely unstructured and poorly executed, leaving core institutions intact.

Trump's return to office in 2025 marks a decisive shift. Unlike in 2017, Trump now commands full control over the Republican Party and has surrounded himself with a loyal, ideologically aligned bureaucracy. The Heritage Foundation has played a central role in staffing the administration, with tens of thousands of vetted individuals ready to execute a conservative agenda modelled after Reagan's presidency (Zogby, 2025). This institutional consolidation has allowed Trump to act more decisively. As Scheppele (2025) argues, Trump now 'has lawyers' and is pursuing policy through legal mechanisms to reshape the US state fundamentally. This includes executive orders aimed at reshaping the civil service, displacing or marginalising those unwilling to implement the administration's directives.

In the foreign policy domain, this newfound legal and institutional preparedness has translated into a more disruptive global posture. According to Patrick (2025), Trump is not merely reshaping US foreign policy, he is dismantling it. The second Trump administration is marked by an overt rejection of the institutional framework of post-1945 global cooperation, signalling what Patrick (2025) calls the 'destruction' phase as opposed to a moment of creation akin to the Truman Doctrine or the Marshall Plan. Trump's 'America First' policy has evolved into a systemic effort to withdraw the US from its own legacy of multilateralism. This includes exit from international organisations like the World Health Organisation (WHO), a move that has already sent shockwaves through African health sectors dependent on WHO-backed initiatives (Nyantakyi Oti, 2025). The broader disavowal of global development frameworks is also evident in the administration's decimation of USAID and its incorporation into the State Department, which threatens critical programmes in public health, food security, and climate resilience across the Global South (Patrick, 2025). The US has also adopted an openly antagonistic stance toward the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), portraying them as a threat to US sovereignty and opposing

their inclusion in international documents and resolutions. There is even concern that Trump may initiate US withdrawal from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other multilateral development banks (Patrick, 2025).

Trump 2.0, therefore, represents not only a revival of isolationist tendencies, but also a more ideologically coherent and institutionally enabled disengagement from Africa. While in his first term, Africa was neglected, in the second term, it is being sidelined with strategic intent. His administration's reconfiguration of US foreign policy has deprioritised development aid, and programmes like PEPFAR, critical to HIV/AIDS response in Africa, may suffer drastic funding cuts (Amena Africa, 2025). Simultaneously, Trump's nationalist discourse and history of derogatory remarks about Africa have shaped the perception that US–Africa relations, under his leadership, are defined more by disdain than by partnership (Nyantakyi Oti, 2025). Nyantakyi refers to analysts like Etsey Sikanku, who argue that African leaders must prepare for engagement with a 'transactional Donald Trump' who will prioritise nationalist goals over any long-term strategic or moral commitments (Nyantakyi Oti, 2025). Trump's policies are not shaped by grand strategy, but by instinctive transactionalism and personal grievance; they are 'pecuniary, petulant, and patrimonial' rather than coherent geopolitical visions (Patrick, 2025).

The economic dimension of this shift is especially consequential. Patrick (2025) contends that Trump's foreign economic policy is dismantling the postwar trade regime. The multilateral system built around non-discrimination and reciprocity, embodied in institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), is being rejected in favour of bilateralism and transactionalism. The principle of 'Most Favored (sic) Nation, which has been a cornerstone of global trade liberalisation, is being replaced with explicit tit-for-tat deals. For African economies integrated into global supply chains and reliant on fair trading rules, the erosion of the WTO's relevance has significant implications. One leading expert captured the gravity of this shift by asserting that under Trump, 'the WTO is toast' (Patrick, 2025).

In terms of security, Trump 1.0 maintained a significant US counterterrorism presence in Africa, especially in the Sahel and the

Horn of Africa. However, Trump 2.0 may recalibrate that presence. While his 'America First' strategy could push for reductions in overseas military bases, there is also the possibility of deepening support for regional counterterrorism actors, especially in countries like Nigeria and Kenya, without establishing a direct US footprint (Amena Africa, 2025). Thus, the trend may be toward proxy security partnerships, rather than traditional basing arrangements, reflecting a shift from physical presence to influence via alignment and selective cooperation.

At the same time, Trump's second administration appears poised to intensify efforts to counter China's influence in Africa. This may include investments or partnerships designed to rival Chinese initiatives, particularly under the framework of the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) (Amena Africa, 2025). Yet, it remains unclear whether Trump will be committed to sustaining this multilateral initiative, given his scepticism toward alliances and global partnerships. As such, US efforts to compete with China in Africa may be undermined by the administration's broader ideological retreat from cooperative frameworks. Nevertheless, Africa remains caught in the crossfire of great power rivalry, with China continuing to offer large-scale infrastructure and trade deals through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while the US pivots away from long-term aid and multilateral engagement.

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The potential consequences for Africa are profound. On one hand, Trump's aggressive disengagement from multilateral institutions and aid frameworks presents a challenge to development efforts and state capacity across the continent. On the other hand, this vacuum may catalyse introspection among African leaders, prompting efforts to reduce dependency and explore alternative models of growth and cooperation. This geopolitical rupture could offer African nations an opportunity to re-evaluate their reliance on US aid and craft more autonomous development strategies (Amena Africa, 2025). Yet, such an agency must be understood within the constraints imposed by a rapidly shifting international order in which Trump's America seeks to abandon the very architecture it once built.

In short, Trump 2.0 is not simply a repetition of his first term, but an escalation. The key difference lies not just in the aggressiveness of rhetoric

or policy, but in Trump's increased institutional capacity to implement sweeping changes. His administration is no longer a floundering experiment, but a well-resourced ideological project. For Africa, the implications are sobering. Development aid is under threat, multilateral partnerships are crumbling and diplomatic engagement has given way to instrumental transactionalism. The continent, once marginal in Trump's worldview, is now actively deprioritised—a casualty of a broader project to dismantle America's global commitments. In response to this retreat, African states have not remained passive; instead, many have taken deliberate steps to renegotiate their positions within a fractured global order, reflecting varied forms of agency.

The differential effects of 'America First' policies

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To analyse the differential effects of Trump 2.0's 'America First' policies, this paper adopts a typological approach that selects a targeted set of African countries representing contrasting structural profiles. The typology is developed through three structural elements that determine each nation's susceptibility to US foreign policy during Trump's second term: political regime type, strategic importance and aid dependency. To clarify these dynamics, the typology introduced in this paper serves as a descriptive analytical tool, organising countries according to how the three structural features interact. Aid dependency is derived from *Financial Times* and USAID data for the year 2022, used as a baseline to assess vulnerability to funding withdrawals following Trump's return to office. Aid dependency was classified as either high or low, based on whether a country received more or less than US\$1 billion in US foreign assistance during the reference year. Countries receiving over US\$1 billion were categorised as high aid-dependent, while those receiving less were considered low aid-dependent. The regime type is drawn from the 2025 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report, which classifies countries as liberal democracies, electoral democracies, electoral autocracies, or closed autocracies (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Strategic value is assessed qualitatively through security relevance to US policies, control of key natural resources and geopolitical and regional influence, creating a

classification of countries that takes into account the interests and orientations of 'America First': securing direct economic benefits for the US, natural resource investments and exploitation, foreign aid for the direct benefit of America (America First Agenda, n.d).

These features serve as fundamental characteristics that shape how African countries stand during Trump's 2025 presidential return and their subsequent handling of US foreign policy characterised by selective engagement, conditionality and transactionalism (Bukhari et al., 2025; Gwatiwa, 2022). This comparative analysis enables an understanding of the differences in the international and regional standing of African countries under Trump 2.0, and links them to the orientation of Trump 2.0 policies. This analysis also has a predictive component that can guide the understanding of future broader impacts of 'America First' policies on African countries based on their characteristics.

The selection of the countries is not intended to be exhaustive, but strategic: each case represented in Table 15.1 reflects a relevant combination of regime type, aid dependency and strategic value that influences its exposure to, or leverage within, the evolving US foreign policy framework. For example, Ethiopia and Egypt were chosen as high-aid states with contrasting political regimes, highlighting that regime type is not the sole determinant of aid. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Angola represent resource-rich states with varied aid levels, offering insight into how resource wealth can be used as a bargaining tool. South Africa and Botswana exemplify politically stable democracies with varying levels of aid dependency. Eritrea serves as an extreme case of a self-isolated regime with no US aid links, illustrating the outer edge of disengagement. This comparative selection ensures variation across all three structural dimensions and allows for a nuanced understanding of how Trump-era policies impacted African states not uniformly, but as a function of their structural position and strategic posture.

The strategic importance of each of these countries was determined in three categories: low, moderate and high strategic interest. The low strategic value of Botswana and Eritrea can be justified by the independence of Eritrea towards US aid (Wallis and Adeove, 2025), making it an unattractive partner for Trump's transactional foreign policy.

The strategic position of Botswana can be attributed to modest trade values between the two countries. In 2024, US–Botswana goods trade totalled US\$509.5 million, with a trade deficit of US\$300.8 million (United States Trade Representative, n.d). Moreover, Botswana’s democratic governance and limited role in great power rivalries do not align with the transactional priorities of Trump’s ‘America First’ approach (Devermont, 2019; Kohnert, 2025; Owusu and Carmody, 2019). South Sudan, despite being historically important to US foreign policy due to its independence process and humanitarian crises, has had its strategic relevance under the ‘America First’ diminished significantly. There are significant aid cuts that accompany Trump 2.0, in addition to the accusations that South Sudan is taking advantage of the US (Ali, 2025; Čok, 2025).

Ethiopia and South Africa are classified as holding a moderate strategic value. Ethiopia is a powerful regional actor and holds significant importance on the continental and international level through the African Union (AU) and active engagement in the Horn of Africa (Klobucista, 2020). South Africa is also an important actor because of its regional and international influence (through its strong standing in the region and membership in BRICS and the G20). Moreover, trade relations between the US and South Africa are important as South Africa is the largest trading partner in Africa of the US (US Department of State, 2022).

Countries with high strategic importance for the US include Egypt, the DRC and Angola. The latter two countries have significant critical mineral and fossil fuel reserves. In the case of the DRC, American businesses are poised to invest in minerals to advance US economic interests and counter Chinese dominance in mineral exploitation (Wallis, Hook and Hodgson, 2025). The same logic would be applied to Angola, thanks to President Trump’s fossil fuel expansion goals. In the case of Egypt and beyond resources, the country holds high strategic value under Trump 2.0 as the president has expressed his interest in maintaining free and unhindered access to the Suez Canal, a vital artery for global trade and US naval movement (Pollet, 2025). Trump also pushed Cairo to accept displaced Palestinians into the country (Harb, 2025), making Egypt a crucial actor for American strategies in the region.

Table 15.1: Typology of African states under Trump 2.0

Country	Regime type	Aid dependency	Strategic importance	Typology
Botswana	Democracy (electoral)	Low	Low	Independent country
Ethiopia	Democracy (electoral)	High	Moderate	Strategic dependent
South Africa	Democracy (liberal)	High	Moderate	Strategic dependent
Egypt	Autocracy (electoral)	High	High	Strategic partner
DRC	Autocracy (electoral)	High	High	Strategic partner
Angola	Autocracy (electoral)	Low	High	Strategic bargainer
South Sudan	Autocracy (closed)	High	Low	Vulnerable country
Eritrea	Autocracy (closed)	Low	Low	Independent country

This typological classification reveals that the degree of vulnerability to US disengagement and the ability to navigate in a changing geopolitical environment depend on the intersection of regime type, aid dependency and strategic importance. Low-aid, low-strategic-importance states such as Botswana and Eritrea are classified as independent countries. Eritrea, having not received any US assistance in 2024 and opting for a self-reliant development path, remained unaffected by shifts in US foreign aid. This outcome reflects a long-standing national strategy aimed at avoiding structural dependency, which has made the country largely immune to the shifting priorities and conditionalities of external donors (Wallis and Adeoye, 2025). These countries’ aid independence strongly relates to agency. Eritrea’s internal resource-based approach enables the country to steer its development without external conditions and donor-imposed agendas. This remains a crucial requirement for agency building as determined by Gwatiwa (2022).

Ethiopia and South Africa are strategic partners that have a moderate to high strategic value, but a high level of aid dependence. Both democracies

received US aid, however, their domestic priorities do not align with the interests of the Trump policies. Aid-dependent democracies such as Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya faced sharp funding reductions, leading to devastating consequences like widespread layoffs of health workers and disruption of HIV and TB programmes (Wallis and Adeoye, 2025). For these two countries, especially South Africa, thanks to its international standing, its aid dependence can be reduced through diversification of partners. South Africa has leveraged the retreat of US influence to deepen its engagement with the BRICS and promote South–South cooperation, expressing dissatisfaction with US policies and asserting its position as a leading voice in a multipolar world (Igbatayo, n.d.; Kohnert, 2025). This reflects a proactive form of agency, where South Africa strategically leverages Trump’s disengagement to reinforce its realignment toward BRICS and assert a regional leadership role.

Egypt and the DRC are strategic partners that are authoritarian regimes, which have maintained or enhanced US ties due to their geostrategic utility. Egypt continued to receive military aid and political backing despite governance concerns because of its importance in regional security (e.g., Gaza border, Suez Canal access). The DRC, rich in critical minerals, actively exploited its resource wealth to offer mining concessions in exchange for US support, even amid ongoing conflict (Wallis et al., 2025). These cases illustrate how autocratic regimes can benefit from a transactional US approach when strategic alignment takes precedence over democratic conditionality. Moreover, the DRC’s offering of mining concessions in exchange for political support exemplifies strategic bargaining as a form of agency despite domestic constraints.

Angola is a strategic ‘bargainer’ and is classified as a resource-rich, low-aid autocracy that has used its oil and mineral wealth to maintain diplomatic flexibility. Angola is not dependent on US aid, has a valuable resource portfolio and thus, positions itself as a negotiator in a multipolar environment. This position puts Angola in a favourable position to leverage its resources and independence by taking control over its national matters and actively defending its interests. Angola’s use of its resource wealth to negotiate favourable partnerships illustrates resource-based agency within a multipolar order.

South Sudan, a vulnerable country, was one of the countries most affected by Trump’s disengagement. Its high aid dependence, coupled with its low strategic relevance under ‘America First’, meant reduced leverage and exposure to neglect. South Sudan’s reliance on humanitarian assistance offers no bargaining power in a climate of growing conditionality and indifference to the US’ governance or human rights.

While this typology offers a structured way to assess the differential impacts of Trump 2.0 on African states, it is not without limitations. Notably, it does not incorporate the colonial histories of the selected countries, despite their profound influence on institutional development, foreign alignments, and strategic perceptions. This exclusion is not a denial of colonialism’s significance, but a methodological choice aimed at maintaining analytical focus on contemporary structural features, namely regime type, aid dependency and strategic importance, which directly shaped countries’ vulnerability or leverage in relation to US foreign policy under Trump 2.0. Integrating colonial legacy as a fourth typological dimension would require a different analytical framework, including historical institutionalism and potentially different country groupings. Nonetheless, colonial histories are acknowledged where relevant in the narrative analysis and remain crucial to understanding long-term patterns of agency and alignment.

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Navigating the opportunities

African agency operates within an evolving international environment shaped by the ‘America First’ policy, which produces both structural barriers and emerging opportunities. The Trump administration’s foreign policy received negative reactions from many African leaders and publics who saw it as a combination of neglectful behaviour and transactional diplomacy with a primary focus on American–Chinese competition (Devermont, 2020; Kohnert, 2025). This selective and disengaged approach (Igbatayo, n.d.; Kohnert, 2025) and the weakening of multilateral commitments (Owusu et al., 2019; Kohnert, 2025) inadvertently created political space for African actors to assert their interests more proactively.

One notable dimension of this assertiveness is the strategic turn

toward Eastern powers, particularly China and India. In response to reduced US engagement and growing conditionality, several African countries have sought alternative partnerships that offer development financing, infrastructure investment and security cooperation. For example, Ethiopia have deepened economic ties with China through large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Addis-Djibouti Railway (Global Infrastructure Hub, 2020). Nigeria and China have also signed agreements focusing on economic cooperation and nuclear energy development, reinforcing their collaboration under the BRI framework (Onuah and Lee, 2024). Moreover, India is the third-largest trade partner of Africa, after the EU and China, according to 2024 data, reflecting the increasing importance of non-traditional partners and the growing ties to Eastern partners (Pilling, 2024). These engagements demonstrate that African states are not merely substituting one dependency for another but are exercising agency by diversifying their partnerships and leveraging great power rivalries to serve national and regional interests.

370 Aid dependence throughout Africa has started to decrease, especially after Trump issued his 2025 executive order to reassess US foreign assistance (Van Rooyen and Cilliers, 2025). The emerging global circumstances have enabled Africa to establish its strategic role through proactive initiatives rather than limited adaptive responses. Van Rooyen and Cilliers (2025) contend that Africa will determine its global position through three essential elements: leadership, regional integration and strategic partnerships with emerging powers. African actors face the difficult task of moulding worldwide developments, instead of receiving direction from them. The unanticipated nature of Trump 2.0 foreign policy could drive Africa toward stronger South–South relations and pan-African organisation (Igbatayo, n.d.). As US influence declines, several African countries have deepened engagement with China and other Eastern partners to fill gaps in infrastructure investment and strategic financing, illustrating the continent’s adaptive and pragmatic exercise of agency.

The ability of African states to influence international relations through goal-oriented external engagement while upholding domestic priorities, has emerged as a dynamic international force (Coffie and Tiky, 2021).

African actors have strategically adjusted their approach by redefining their relations with Western partners, while strengthening continental institutions and building new connections with emerging powers (Coffie and Tiky, 2021). African countries have actively transformed their foreign relations through increased integration under AfCFTA and AU institutional reforms and active participation in international climate and development meetings (Coffie and Tiky, 2021; Devermont, 2020). These transformations present varying chances for states to benefit from them.

The ability of South Africa and Nigeria, along with the DRC, to handle multipolar competition stands higher than that of smaller and aid-dependent states, which remain exposed to severe external threats. When nations diversify their alliances, it does not automatically bring autonomy, since new dependencies emerge through extractive sectors and digital governance frameworks. African countries' new partnerships raise questions about whether their realignment represents authentic interest-based agency or a movement within current global power structures.

African agency has not been stifled by Trump's return, but the circumstances of its exercise have undergone change. African states have made increased investments in regional self-help mechanisms as well as home-grown solutions and institutional development because of the declining US normative leadership (Coffie and Tiky, 2021). The 'America First' policy has both compromised US international reputation and decreased specific forms of US–African collaboration, however, it has simultaneously compelled African countries to become more forceful in defending their national and regional interests (Igbatayo, n.d.). African agency functions as an adaptive strategic practice which develops through regional institutional frameworks and bilateral partnerships within a growing multipolar world order (Coffie and Tiky, 2021; Igbatayo, n.d.; Kohnert, 2025).

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Conclusion

This study examines the effects of Donald Trump's return under the 'America First' agenda through a typology developed from three structural dimensions: political regime type, aid dependency and strategic value to

the US. The typology presents a detailed analysis of how different African states interacted with Trump's foreign policy, because it goes past general assumptions about US–Africa relations. The analytical framework serves two purposes: it explains the current era and provides tools for future strategic planning regarding similar international dynamics. The typology serves scholars and policymakers to understand African state vulnerabilities and opportunities because it focuses on structural realities within these countries, regardless of the political approach used by administrations, including those adopting isolationist, transactional or conditional engagement.

The evaluation shows that strategic utility, rather than normative democracy concerns, guided Trump's US foreign policy decisions. Democratic regimes were not systematically favoured, nor were the autocratic regimes. Strategic alignment through military positioning, mineral wealth and geopolitical leverage set the conditions for US engagement with other nations. The country cases show that autocratic governments, including Egypt, are considered to have an affinity with Trump's America, while democratic states like Ethiopia might face aid cuts and a disinterest in their internal political affairs from the US. Resource-rich states, including the DRC and Angola gain benefits from their ability to leverage the resources that are prioritised by the US, which allows them to negotiate new forms of international engagement through their strategic assets, regardless of their political regimes. These results reveal an opportunity for African countries to move beyond dependence and potential interference from the US and other powers.

The typology also provides essential guidance for African nations to enhance their resilience as their foreign policies evolve. This classification enables countries to evaluate their national dependencies in conjunction with their institutional capacity and bargaining power. African states should focus on building autonomy, because this will enable them to become stronger global negotiators, leading to a more proactive role within the international system and a more active agency. The acquisition of agency through regional integration, partnership diversification, and aid independence reduction functions as a defensive strategy, which leads to active global engagement.

While structural factors shaped exposure to US policy shifts, the paper also highlights how African states exercised different forms of agency, ranging from strategic disengagement to assertive bargaining and alliance diversification, to navigate a disrupted global order.

Although Trump’s second term remains limited to four years, his foreign policy structure, based on strategic choices with diminished international cooperation and conditional financial assistance, will produce enduring effects. This chapter will prove useful for analysis beyond Trump 2.0. The analysis provides an interpretive framework for studying external African relations, through which great power rivalries, climate change, and international alliance shifts will test African capabilities.

The lessons from African countries’ interactions with Trump during his presidency demonstrate how these nations can shape their future paths in an evolving global system through independent approaches and tailored plans that cater to each country’s specific needs and strengths. The diversity of these responses affirms that African agency is not only possible, but already underway, complex, strategic and adaptive.

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