

# CHAPTER 16

## Global South's Reaction to Trump 2.0's Return: South Africa's Case Study

**Buhle Mnyanda**

Department of Politics and International Relations,  
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

### Introduction

Trump's first term in office (2017–2021) has placed certain United States (US)–Africa matters at unambiguous relief. It exposed the deep racial divisions that underlie Trump's home success and have impacted US relations with Africa, even other parts of the Middle East region (Usman and Carroll, 2025). Trump's administration continued from the previous administration to support African countries with developmental aid, trade benefits, health funding and security aid (Tupy, 2018). Even though Trump's relations with African countries were cordial during his first term, there have been some altercations with some African countries, for instance, South Africa's Land Expropriation Act. In 2018, President Trump warned the South African government that if its constitution were to be amended in such a way that it allows the Expropriation Act without compensation to be passed, it would have no choice but to suspend South Africa from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) (Ahluwalia, 2017).

Again, in his second term as the 47th president, Trump still stands on the same stance about South Africa's Land Act. However, the US must consider that its heydays as the economically dominant, influential and powerful state are coming to an end. Other important actors are starting to emerge. As a result, Africa has options to choose from. For instance, China is one of the emerging states that has provided Africa with several

opportunities from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Many argue that the US is losing soft power to China in Africa (Bond, 2019; Gopaldas, 2024; Motala, 2017; Ndabula et.al, 2025; Ryan, 2025; Tupy, 2018).

This chapter seeks to examine South Africa's reaction to the Trump 2.0 administration. The chapter will first examine the applicable methods of this study, followed by the theories of international relations, namely Neoliberal Economic theory and Populist Conservatism theory. These two theories will help provide a framework for understanding one's study. Secondly, it analyses the US's first altercation with South Africa during its first term, drawing from the US–South Africa trade relations. It will then explore Trump's return to office as the US president and how his relationship with SA has been affected. The paper will explore whether South Africa has a solid plan to repair its relations with the US and its temporary strategy/plan on the health programmes affected by the USAID. It will then conclude by stating some of the solutions that US–South Africa could work on to repair their foreign relations.

## Methods

This chapter uses exploratory qualitative analysis; it provides a contextual insight into the Global South's reaction to the return of Trump's administration. South Africa is used as a case study to explore the shift in diplomatic relations between the US and South Africa during the Trump 2.0 administration. It is important to use a case study, simply because it is an experiential review that helps investigate a modern-day phenomenon within a real-life context (Varela, Lopes and Rodrigues, 2021). A case study helps answer the question of one's research by providing past events and phenomena using several data sources. It also contributes to a better understanding of the individual's phenomena and the political procedures of the society.

The study uses document analysis and discourse analysis, which includes primary and secondary sources such as journal articles, books, media articles, government statements and speeches. The purpose of using this study method is that it creates better understanding of complex

processes and it provides opportunity to identify and explain complex relationships, it has the capacity to develop detailed understanding and profuse description of the phenomenon of interest, which in this case, is Global South's reaction to the return of the president of the US, Donald Trump (Barr, 2004). The limitation of this study is that not much has been published about the new Trump administration. However, even though the study has some limitations, they can be overcome by carefully planning the study, meaning one needs to carefully consider their research design, ensuring that the qualitative research is integrated in a significant way.

### Neoliberal economics and populist conservatism

Neoliberalism is a political and economic theory which stresses the value of free market capitalism, which seeks to transfer control of economic factors from government to the private sector (Longley, 2021). The theory stresses the welfare-maximising consequences of market exchange, which critically favours lowering government spending, globalisation, free trade, deregulation, minimal state intervention, and privatisation (Evans and Sewell, 2013).

Populist conservatism, on the other hand, is a political ideology which links conservative principles with populist ideas and strategies. It stresses social order, cultural identity and national sovereignty. It emphasises 'the people' and is against the elites. The theory criticises multiculturalism, political institutions, and globalisation (Mudde, 2007). The theory highlights politics as a struggle between the minority and the elites. For instance, leaders like President Trump often frame globalisation as a zero-sum game, prioritises national interests by putting America first, and challenge liberal economic beliefs (Mudde, 2007). Trump has threatened to withdraw the AGOA from some of the Global South countries, putting American workers and industries first over free trade principles. These theories will explore in depth this act, also looking at Trump's discourse on South Africa's land expropriation act, aid and trade relations, reflecting on neoliberal economic values and populist conservative values.

## US-South Africa trade relations during Trump 1.0

The US has been a longstanding and important ally of South Africa, from being an important trading partner to aiding development. The US has absorbed large volumes of South Africa's minerals and agricultural exports, whilst it is also a major source of direct foreign investment and official development assistance (Van Rensburg, 2012). South Africa, on the other hand, imports substantial quantities of machinery equipment and other value-added products from the US. These products support South Africa's economic growth and other development efforts (Schraeder, 2018). For instance, the largest US market in Africa is in South Africa, where they have about 600 companies operating (Bond, 2019). Traditionally, the two countries, South Africa and the US, have enjoyed cordial relationships over the years, with each observing the other as a strategically important entry into a possibly vast and important market on the other side of the world (Lubbe and Du Plessis, 2021). However, in modern years, the relationship between South Africa and the US has become somewhat fractious (Tupy, 2018).

South Africa has been grumbling over what it perceives to be the US, which is being overbearing in its attempts to secure greater access into the South African market. A particular disagreement for South Africa has been the alleged dumping of US chicken products on the local market, with inflated penalties for South African chicken farmers (Van Rensburg, 2012). The US, in turn, has become increasingly outspoken about the need for South Africa which currently enjoys duty and quota free access for a large percentage of its US-bound exports within the generalised system of preferences and AGOA scheme combined to commit to a more mutual trade partnership (Soer, 2025). Indeed, several US representatives under the Trump administration have, over the years, stated that South Africa is 'too developed' to still be benefiting from AGOA which is proposed as a temporary measure to inspire beneficiary countries to improve their export competitiveness across numerous industrial sectors (Hart, 2020; Ngcobo, 2025; Stremlau, 2022; Vega Zamudio, 2021). With the new Trump administration, South Africa stands at a bit of a crossroads when it comes to its trade relations with the US, especially with AGOA,

which is scheduled to expire in 2025. The question is, will the US renew this act with South Africa? Or should South Africa consider exploring other options with the US, such as a free trade agreement? A free trade agreement between the two countries could bring a greater balance in their trade relations.

## **US-South Africa relations during Trump 2.0**

South Africa's relationship with the Trump 2.0 administration has been marked by trade strains and diplomatic rifts. The Trump administration's protectionist trade policies and uncertainty towards multilateralism have affected South Africa, a vital US trading partner in Africa (Joselit and Lee, 2025). Trump criticised South Africa's land reform policies together with his administration threatened to review South Africa's trade benefits under AGOA, creating uncertainty. In 2018, Trump tweeted distortions about South Africa's land reform efforts, claiming that white farmers were being targeted and killed (Kachur and Foley, 2024).

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Recently, Trump accused the South African government of what he called 'unjust and immoral practices' against the white Afrikaner community (Kohnert, 2025:11). This sparked tension after the Land Expropriation Act was passed by President Ramaphosa in January 2025. President Cyril Ramaphosa signed into law the Expropriation Act 13 of 2024, replacing the Expropriation Act 63 of 1975. This new act provides the framework for the expropriation of property to serve public interests (Miah and Sheppard, 2025). This act has created diplomatic tensions and shown how Trump's bombast could worsen existing racial and political rifts in a country. Trump threatened to cut future funding to South Africa with no solid explanation; all Trump says is that there are 'terrible things' the South African government is doing in the country. Trump accuses the South African government of stealing land as well as worse acts than that (Narsiah, 2025). He continued to accuse the SA government of unbearable contempt for the rights of its citizens and of adopting aggressive positions against the US and its friend Israel in its case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Trump's moves have brought shock and fear to experts; many fear

that Trump may utilise this opportunity to end preferential access to the US market through the US–Africa trade market AGOA (Tsanni, 2025). Trump’s accusations have resulted in him signing an executive order to freeze aid in South Africa. He then offered to assist Afrikaner refugees, specifically the white descendants of early Dutch and French settlers, to settle in the US (Ngcobo, 2025). Trump cut the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) funding to South Africa; this funding has been the biggest contributor to South Africa’s HIV and AIDS programme with approximately 5.5 million people receiving anti-retroviral drugs from this aid. As a result, this calls for the South African government to explore other alternative options. The Minister of Health, Aaron Motsoaledi, began negotiations with local and international foundations to assist in raising around US\$440 million that has been lost due to the US cutting aid in SA (Ndabula et al., 2025). The aim is to secure funding that will continue supplying antiretroviral medication to the people.

### **Elon Musk on US–South Africa relations**

After Trump’s return to office, Elon Musk, a South African-born billionaire, emerged as President Trump’s informal advisor; this is after he contributed over US\$270 million to Trump’s presidential campaign (Narsiah, 2025). Musk has been informally involved in Trump’s administration through a mission called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). DOGE is an executive order established in January 2025. Its aim is to reduce federal spending and remove wasteful programmes. Musk has also shared some of the views Trump has about the South African government land act, and he supported the view that white people are being discriminated against by the South African government. Musk even went on X to say why President Ramaphosa has ‘openly racist property laws’ (Kohnert, 2025: 12). It is believed that Musk is set to play a very influential role in Trump’s new administration, and his relationship with the South African president could take on enormous importance. Some Scholars say the complexity of South Africa’s relationship with the US is because of the growing ties South Africa has with Russia and China (Tsanni, 2025).

## South Africa's plan to repair relations with the US

South Africa's plan to repair its relations with the US is through strengthening diplomatic efforts to address misinformation by Trump and Elon Musk, and it is trying to provide accurate information about its policies. Former International Relations Minister, Dr Naledi Pandor, highlighted the prominence of fixing false narratives and engaging with the US administration and allies to shed light on South Africa's positions on land reform and foreign policy matters (Usman and Carroll, 2025). President Ramaphosa went on and appointed a new ambassador to the US after Ebrahim Rasool was expelled by President Trump. This response of replacing Ebrahim Rasool with another ambassador shows that South Africa is indeed willing to repair and restore diplomatic and economic relations with the US (Ryan, 2025). The new ambassador of South Africa to the US is Mcebisi Jonas, who is a former minister of finance.

President Ramaphosa has voiced a request to reach an agreement with President Trump to resolve disagreements over South Africa's land reform policies and its legal action against Israel at the ICJ. Ramaphosa aims to address these issues through discussion and negotiation to avoid further weakening of their relations with the US (Narsiah, 2025). The Deputy President of South Africa, Paul Mashatile, also took it upon himself to engage in the reparations of the US–South Africa relations. He emphasised the importance of strong connections between the US and South Africa, stressing the role of AGOA which supports South Africa's agricultural and manufacturing sector. Paul Mashatile also highlighted the efforts South Africa should take to diversify export markets and lower reliance on external assistance, especially in the health sector (Primorac, 2024). These initiatives by the South African government reflect their commitment to trying to repair their relations with the US under Trump's administration.

## South Africa's temporary strategies/plan on health programmes

The South African government implemented several plans after aid being cut by the US president. One of the strategies South Africa implemented was to increase domestic health funding, aiming to address the HIV/AIDS population. A budget of about ZAR28.9 billion was added to the health department (Soer, 2025). The government's plan for this health funding was through the increase of value-added tax, which was initially said to increase by 0,5 per cent in 2025 and another 0,5 per cent in 2026 (Usman and Carroll, 2025). However, this plan may have failed due to the reversal of the tax. Nonetheless, the health department is also exploring other strategies, such as negotiating with local and international foundations to raise funds for the PEPFAR programmes, especially the HIV/AIDS programme.

The Western Cape government has also put some temporary measures in place for its people, ensuring that they receive their treatment during this difficult period. These measures include a six-month antiretroviral treatment dispensation and a 28-day late collection allowance for clients refilling their treatment (Dyer, 2025). It has also implemented an automatic chronic dispensing unit script renewal to reduce the need for facility visitation. This is to reduce pressure on both clients and clinics during the funding gap (Miah and Sheppard, 2025). These are some of the strategies that the South African government has implemented towards the PEPFAR beneficiaries. Not all the programmes under PEPFAR have been given attention; the HIV/AIDS programme is, thus far, the only one that has been receiving funding.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Elon Musk and Donald Trump's evaluations of South Africa's land reform strategies are embedded in neoliberal economic doctrines and populist conservatism. They highlight the protection of private property rights, market-driven policies and uncertainty toward state-led redistribution efforts. Elon Musk's liberal leanings and Trump's populist rhetoric congregate in their description of South Africa's policies are economically

negative and racially discriminatory. It is imperative that the South African government educate Musk, together with Trump, about their Land Expropriation Act, as it is the driving factor behind the cutting of aid in South Africa. South Africa's Land Expropriation Act aligns with the South African constitution of 1996. Section 25 of the Constitution, known as the property clause, states under which conditions land can be expropriated. It does state that no one should be deprived of property, and property should only be expropriated for a public purpose or interest. Compensation may be granted if agreed upon by those affected or approved by the court. However, compensation must reflect an equitable balance between the public interest and the interests of those affected. Public interests may include the nation's commitment to land reform, bringing about equitable access to all South African resources.

To avoid US–South Africa tension, South Africa should urgently take initiatives and negotiate with Trump's administration on their Land Act, before it escalates to cutting South Africa from the AGOA Act. The AGOA Act is scheduled to expire in 2025 for South Africa; thus, urgent negotiations with the US are imperative. South Africa should also explore other alternatives and stop relying on the US. It should start negotiating with other allies such as Russia, China and the BRICS plus countries and should ensure it strengthens its diplomatic ties with other international actors, exploring other trade and aid funding opportunities.

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