


The Inability of South Africa to Comprehend the Foreign Policy Apparatus and the Political Climate in the United States of America Correctly

Riaan Eksteen* 
University of the Free State

Abstract

This article reports on South African foreign policy in the context of the changing dynamics of Pres. Donald Trump's second term of office. It contends that South Africa has faced difficulties in adjusting to these developments and new foreign policy imperatives. The foreign policy of a country is profoundly influenced by its domestic realities. The Trump administration has implemented substantial changes in the foreign policy of the United States of America, marked by assertive negotiating strategies and an emphasis on economic, national interest and security priorities, which have compromised international partnerships. Trump's "America First" strategy has led to a withdrawal from enduring global obligations, affecting ties with other countries, particularly South Africa. Relations between the two countries were further exacerbated by limited understanding by South Africa of the political context of the United States. The disparity between the South African foreign policy initiatives and the realities of United States internal politics has caused misinterpretations of United States intentions. In March 2025, the South African ambassador was declared *persona non grata* by the United States, and the imposition of tariffs on South Africa further strained relations between the two countries. Sanctions being legislated by Congress remain a distinct possibility and would carry inordinate consequences for South Africa. Although the relationship between South Africa and the United States is anticipated to develop, the present circumstances remain ambiguous. The current research highlights the crucial importance of informed participation and a thorough understanding of the prevailing political processes.

Keywords: Executive Orders, *Persona Non Grata*, Ramaphosa, Sanctions, South Africa, Tariffs, Trump, United States of America

Introduction

Over the years, the South African (SA) government has failed several times to understand and interpret policy decisions and events in the United States in their proper context and level of importance. It has also failed to grasp how the foreign policy imperatives of the Trump administration are fundamentally altering geopolitical balances.

President Donald Trump signed the Executive Order (EO) "Addressing Egregious Actions of the Republic of South Africa" on 7 February 2025.¹ Other orders and actions followed, which affect South Africa. The interrelations between international and national environments are crucial in shaping foreign policy decisions. The reciprocal relationship between foreign affairs and domestic imperatives is a reality. A foreign policy would be

almost non-existent without domestic influences. Comprehending Trump's foreign policy requires an understanding of the domestic political landscape in the United States and the influences that shape it. The indiscretions of the SA ambassador resulted in the United States declaring him *persona non grata*. President Ramaphosa's appointment of Mcebisi Jonas as Special Envoy to the United States, his meeting with Pres. Trump in Washington in May 2025, and the imposition of tariffs on South Africa have a direct bearing on the precarious relationship of South Africa with the United States, which shows no sign of improvement. As this is an ongoing development, only events up to 8 August 2025 are discussed here.

The primary objective of the current study was to elucidate the characteristics and challenges of the current United States (US) policy towards South Africa, and the SA responses to it. The research underscored the profound misunderstanding by South Africa of trends in the United States, and the unpreparedness of South Africa to confront the realities of the contemporary US political scene. The expulsion of the SA ambassador, the ill-fated appointment by Ramaphosa of a special envoy to the United States, and the meeting between Trump and Ramaphosa required special attention. The study contextualised all these events and developments concerning Trump's conduct of applying tariffs on South Africa, and possibly legislative responses by way of sanctions, offering critical tools for comprehending the intricacies of US-SA relations.

Key causes contributing to the strained relationship between the two nations were identified and are stated, enabling a comprehensive evaluation of their consequences. The analysis revealed that both the SA government and the African National Congress (ANC) were often unaware of critical events that affected SA diplomatic relations with the United States, resulting in economic consequences and sanctions against South Africa. The dynamic nature of this relationship necessitated a flexible strategy to adapt to changes in the stances and responses of both nations.

Methodology

The current research employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the inability of South Africa to comprehend the foreign policy apparatus and the political climate in the United States correctly, while also misunderstanding the foreign policy dynamics and political landscape of the United States. The qualitative technique was selected for its efficacy in analysing intricate political relationships and the viewpoints of prominent political personalities, including heads of state. Data were collected through an extensive examination of government records, newspaper articles, and political journals that chronicled the declining ties between South Africa and the United States since the start of Trump's second term of office in January 2025.

The research encompassed documentary analysis and archival investigation to reveal elements of the US political system that may be misinterpreted or neglected by the SA government and the ANC. This involved analysing legislative procedures, the enforcement of sanctions, and the impact of Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) platform on global relations. The study examined the effect of and the way in which SA foreign policy positions, specifically SA relationships with Russia, Iran, and Hamas, along with the critical SA view of Israel, are at odds with US national interests and security.

A thorough literature analysis constituted the foundation of the study, including recent research findings and media reporting from both countries. This review was essential for creating a rigorous process that was theoretically sound and capable of producing genuine findings. It emphasised the significance of comprehensive literature reviews in finding well-examined effects and structuring data for coherent analysis.

Primary sources were utilised to convey the perspectives of leadership from both countries, with official material providing historical context and contemporary pronouncements. This method enabled a concentrated examination of pertinent problems while recognising the necessity for continuous monitoring of political events. The study emphasised the need for political analysts to perform comprehensive and unbiased assessments of these intricate subjects.

The organised, multifaceted methodology employed enabled a thorough identification and analysis of the ramifications of US–SA ties. The literature identified significant authorities involved in this developing political discourse, suggesting that the subject will remain relevant for forthcoming discussions. The research acknowledged the ambiguities surrounding the future of US–SA relations, and their potential influence on the lives of individuals and companies in South Africa, as well as on SA foreign relations. Speculation about future changes is avoided, as it may not yield any beneficial insights at present. The results, however, emphasised the necessity of ongoing surveillance and study of the ever-changing political situation to enhance comprehension of the outcome for both countries.

President Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Shake-Up

The EOs signed by Trump during the first month of his second term of office mark a turning point in US foreign policy, signalling a retreat from longstanding international commitments and alliances. This shake-up warrants particular attention, with European leaders scrambling to adjust to the changing geopolitical landscape while South Africa is notably unprepared. These developments cover four themes worthy of consideration:

US Foreign Policy Realignment

The above-mentioned EOs mandate a sweeping review of US involvement in multilateral organisations and treaties, reinforcing Trump’s transactional “America First” approach.² On 20 January 2025, Trump issued an EO suspending foreign aid for a 90-day evaluation process to ensure conformity with US interests and values.³ This extensive freeze affected several aid programmes for health initiatives and treatment in several African nations, including South Africa. On foreign aid, the United States is convinced that it has been duped by the global assistance programme for an extended period. The cancellation of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programmes was not only an example of the Trump administration targeting progressive expenditures or attempting to alter the financial outcomes of the federal government. It was also of paramount importance to a broader transformation in foreign policy direction. The whole framework through which the United States has historically used soft power is being dismantled, reoriented, and altered. This implies alterations in the approach of the United States to assistance and development initiatives, US promotion of global democracy, and its interactions with other governments.

Western aid cuts are reshaping the geopolitical landscape.⁴ Former stalwarts of overseas development, such as the United Kingdom, have decided that aid at previous levels is no longer politically or economically tenable.⁵ As Western countries reduce their aid budgets, China, Turkey and the Gulf States are increasing their competition for soft power and commercial advantage, also in Africa. The cancellation of almost all US aid, together with cuts in assistance by other advanced Western economies, will have immediate socioeconomic effects, and may also drive radical political change in several developing economies as governments struggle to replace these funds and expertise.

Uncertainty for Europe

The US foreign policy shift has rattled European leaders, particularly in Germany, as they face a reduced US security presence and a push for more self-reliance.⁶ European leaders are rapidly grasping the extent to which their world has undergone significant changes. On 4 February 2025, Trump signed a sweeping EO with the potential to upend decades of US global engagement. The directive mandates a comprehensive review within 180 days of all current multilateral organisations of which the United States is a member, and all international treaties to which it is a party.⁷

Soon afterwards, Europeans became rudely aware of even more shocking news:

Trump's overtures to Putin and his administration's sharp rebukes of Europe have sent shockwaves through the continent. Can the transatlantic alliance be salvaged – and can Europeans take charge of their security as the United States pulls back?⁸

After winning the German election on 23 February 2025, the conservative leader, Frederick Merz, became chancellor in May 2025. He concluded that Europe must become independent from the United States and –

[M]ust navigate a new era without Washington as a close ally. But just as Merz is on the cusp of taking power in Germany, his cherished America has turned from indispensable friend to frenemy. [...] German leaders, including Merz, have been especially slow to accept the new reality.⁹

Politicians in Europe quickly grasped the profound influence of the new US approach to foreign relations and their interaction with the world. The future of European security hinges on the efficacy of its responses to these new challenges. It has become imperative for Europeans to evaluate the latest situation more strategically. Leaders, such as Emmanuel Macron of France and Sir Keir Starmer of the United Kingdom have made special efforts to manage their relations with Trump. They realised that the economic might of the United States is too substantial to evade, isolate or disregard. The concessions granted to Trump by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries over military budget objectives, akin to trade concessions by the European Union, demonstrate an acknowledge this fact.¹⁰ These were significant lessons for SA leadership.

The African Position

Since the beginning of his second term of office, Trump has exhibited a growing penchant for global disengagement. One observer believes it ‘might be too ambitious to hope for a full-fledged US strategy toward Africa’.¹¹ The impact of Trump’s actions reverberated throughout Africa, leaving many leaders astonished, and prompting a period of introspection. Within this context, Shimbali highlights African external dependence.

The aid cut exposes a tentative failure of African leadership. With excellent visibility, it lays bare the fact that Africans are dependent on America and the external community. There are lessons to learn, and highlighting these should be a priority for all Africans in envisioning opportunities for change. [...] It is undisputable that Africa is dependent on the international community. The act of constantly waiting for another country to provide medications and funds for free and for you to employ people with constantly donated funds, signals enormous evidence of dependence. This shows another level of Africa being akin to a street beggar.¹²

Vulnerability of South Africa

The United States is re-evaluating its relationship with South Africa from two perspectives. First, there are concerns over SA foreign policy alignments with China, Russia, and Iran, and its unrelenting negative attitude and actions towards Israel and the Republic of China (Taiwan). The United States is concerned by SA growing alliances with certain states, which are perceived as potentially compromising US national security objectives. Second, and equally important, is Trump’s indication – in no uncertain terms on several occasions – that he disapproves intensely of certain aspects of SA domestic policies and particular incidents in South Africa.

It is essential to realise that Trump is inherently a businessman and, hence, a transactional individual who comparably approaches foreign policy matters. That is why the United States has entered a transformational period in its foreign policy. This trajectory of change is already evident in the new US relationship with the Gulf States, which Trump visited in May 2025. In an interview with *Mauldin Economics*, George Friedman, author and strategist of *Geopolitical Futures*, explains, ‘We can make peace with those willing to work with us.’¹³

Trump drives a hard bargain, applying the same principles and agenda to his foreign policy to effect radical changes. He thrives on keeping his adversaries off-balance and, while hitting hard, he does not give them any chances to adjust or recover, which allows him to maintain dominance in the relationship.¹⁴ From alienating allies to praising adversaries, Trump intends to abandon decades of US foreign policy.¹⁵ The interests of other countries are secondary to that policy. Relationships are based on benefits to the United States and not on a continuation of the status quo. United States foreign policy and engagements therefore relate to the strategic security and economic interests of America. Trump’s protectionist, insular outlook poses a challenge to many countries. He has demonstrated this unequivocally to every country in the world through his policy on tariffs.

Policy on Tariffs

The tariffs Trump announced on 2 April 2025 signify a substantial shift in US trade policy under his administration, and raised concerns over a potential global trade war with unpredictable economic consequences. The announcement represents the completion of Trump's "America First Trade Policy", an EO he signed on his inaugural day in office.

Tariffs are a crucial component of Trump's worldwide strategy to bolster the United States domestically. The Federal Reserve cautioned that Trump's tariffs might exert enduring influences on inflation. Trump was not at all pleased to hear this remark. He is persistently implementing his tariff policy despite several alterations and recurrent delays. His reiterated threats to initiate measures against both significant and minor trading partners show his steadfast will to penalise nations generally for various trade practices and policies he perceives as unjust and harmful to the United States. At the same time, trading partners of the United States have predominantly not resisted Trump's massive tariffs.

With Trump's threats to redouble tariffs on states that defy him, it meant that for most countries, the decision to "chicken out" was not cowardice, but economic common sense.¹⁶

For the European Union, there was a genuine concern that a more confrontational stance towards Washington could spill over into other areas. European dependency on the US security guarantee was a further argument against trade confrontation. In the end, Europe found it lacked the power to pull the United States into a trade pact on its terms and so signed up to a deal it can just about tolerate – albeit one that is skewed in the US favour. But, as one EU ambassador remarked:

Trump worked out exactly where our pain threshold is. Let's look at the past months as a wake-up call. Europe must now prepare itself strategically for the future.¹⁷

In the same article, Bounds, Foy and Hall highlight another lesson for South Africa with reference to urgency and persistence.

Maroš Šefčovič, the EU's avuncular trade commissioner, was dispatched to Washington seven times to propose areas of agreement, deliver homilies on the importance of the transatlantic relationship. In total, Šefčovič held more than 100 hours of frustrating talks with his US counterparts.¹⁸

In recent months, a Japanese negotiator visited Washington almost every other week for meetings with top US officials. But it was only after he had secured a 70-minute meeting with Trump in the Oval Office that the critical US ally was able to strike a deal.¹⁹

It remains a question whether South Africa would be able to learn from others. While other governments have sent ministers and officials to spend days and weeks finalising mutually acceptable tariff structures, South Africa has opted to proceed mainly through long-distance communication, awaiting a template on US requirements, which has resulted in missing important deadlines.²⁰ South African officials were unable to engage adequately with their counterparts and other officials in Washington. 'That is symptomatic of the political *froideur* between the two countries.'²¹

In the end, the way South Africa handled its engagement with the United States on tariffs caused friction between political parties in the SA Government of National Unity (GNU). The political backlash widened when the Democratic Alliance blamed leaders from the ANC for botching the tariff negotiations.²² Again, Ramaphosa played the blame game, to which he has reverted so often in the past. With it, he only impresses those who want to be impressed. Lately, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Ronald Lamola, has also started to blame others for the precarious situation in which South Africa is finding itself in its relations with the United States.²³ When Trump's EO of 31 July 2025 is read, it is clear that South Africa falls in one or more of the groups of countries he referred to very forcefully.

Other trading partners, despite having engaged in negotiations, have offered terms that, in my judgment, do not sufficiently address imbalances in our trading relationship or have failed to align sufficiently with the United States on economic and national-security matters. There are also some trading partners that have failed to engage in negotiations with the United States or to take adequate steps to align sufficiently with the United States on economic and national security matters.²⁴

Understandably, the United States has been in no hurry to address the absence of South Africa when it had to deal face to face with consequential countries, such as Japan, Indonesia, and South Korea, which resulted in essential concessions and applicable tariffs.

As Ravi Pillay has correctly pointed out, the tariffs are just the tip of the spear; what follows is a contest for relevance, resilience and strategic foresight. Pillay continues:

President Ramaphosa says talks with the US are ongoing and he remains optimistic. But optimism is not a strategy. We must be brutally honest: this is more than a trade dispute. The proposed US sanctions bill not only threatens Agoa, it calls for a sweeping review of the entire US–South Africa relationship and scrutiny of ANC leaders. This is the sharp end of what happens when foreign policy is not aligned with economic interests. [...] At present, there is too little integration between our political alignments and economic objectives. [...] But this one demands more than moral appeals or bureaucratic reshuffling. It demands clarity, urgency and unity of purpose. It demands that we treat trade diplomacy as a frontline of national survival.²⁵

These tariffs are bound to intensify the already fragile SA financial and fiscal concerns. Pretoria must be prepared for the long-term economic damage as the United States weaponises trade for political pressure. Negotiations have been complicated by political demands from Trump, which – although not formally part of trade talks – are driving the hard-line stance taken by Washington. The Trump administration listed a series of conditions as part of the bilateral trade agreement negotiations.²⁶

In applying tariffs, Trump is also having an influence on foreign policy on a broader scale. It will serve South Africa well to note the three cases discussed below, involve two of its BRICS²⁷ partners as well. Within a month of taking office, Trump issued a series of strong warnings to both the BRICS bloc collectively, and to its individual member states individually. These warnings focused primarily on the efforts by the BRICS group to reduce reliance on the US dollar and the growing discussion around creating a new BRICS-backed currency.²⁸ That action may still come, but what Trump has imposed on India and Brazil relates to other issues he has with those countries. Until recently, Washington had seen Delhi as a pivotal strategic partner. The US annoyance with India largely centres on the latter buying Russian oil – the most significant supply source of oil to India. As Trump pursues his goals on Russia and trade, the relationship of the United States with India, an increasingly important partner in Asia, is at stake. On 6 August 2025, Trump announced that he would double tariffs on India to 50 per cent as punishment for India continuing to purchase Russian oil.²⁹ Trump coupled the new, punishing tariff level with a threat to impose similar penalties on other countries that buy Russian energy as he sought to use trade policies to pressure the Kremlin into resolving the war in Ukraine.³⁰ Trump also imposed a series of harsh measures against Brazil, including the implementation of a 50 per cent tariff on Brazilian exports to the United States. This is one of the highest tariffs the United States has levied globally in recent years. The stated motivation was not economic, but political.³¹ Trump explicitly linked the tariffs to Brazil prosecuting former Pres. Jair Bolsonaro, a close ally of his who was standing trial. In addition to the tariffs, the United States enacted sanctions against Brazilian Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who presided over the trial. The sanctions imposed on Moraes allow the United States to block property and freeze assets of foreign individuals implicated in corruption or human rights abuses. Moraes's US-based assets were frozen, and visa restrictions were imposed.

The president of Switzerland, Karin Maria Keller-Sutter, visited Washington on 5 August 2025, to persuade the United States to reduce the 39 per cent tariff imposed on her country. Following several encounters, including one with Marco Rubio, Trump's Secretary of State, she returned home without any results.³²

Trump has consistently sought to reform global trade, which he perceives as having deprived America of employment and wealth. With his implementation of the tariff policy, he executes that strategy. His imposition of double-digit tariffs on roughly 100 nations signifies a significant shift from the commercial framework that the United States has contributed to establishing internationally since World War II. Trump's modifications will elevate US tariff rates to levels unprecedented in a century. With these actions, he fulfilled a campaign commitment to use stringent tariffs to recalibrate global trade, to benefit the United States and thereby help to "Make America Great Again".

Over the past several months, Mr. Trump has, except China, been proven right that the U.S. economy is a powerful weapon to wield with its largest trading partners. Europe and Japan ultimately accepted less favorable terms to preserve access to the United States and avoid a painful trade war.³³

Now Trump is spearheading a dramatic reconfiguration of the international trade landscape.

Executive Order of 7 February 2025

The essence of the EO issued by Trump on 7 February 2025 is multifaceted.³⁴ It suspends aid to South Africa, promotes Afrikaner refugee resettlement in the United States, and responds to aspects of SA foreign policy and humanitarian considerations. This EO reflects the US stance against perceived discriminatory practices in South Africa and its broader foreign policy objectives of national interest and security. A specific effect of this EO is the withdrawal of the United States from the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), to which it had initially pledged more than \$1,5 billion in grant and commercial funding.³⁵ In a post on his X account (formerly known as Twitter) on 7 March 2025, Trump reiterated that the United States was ‘stopping all Federal Funding to SA’.³⁶ Ramaphosa’s response to this news highlighted Ramaphosa’s continued disconnection from the underlying motivations behind Trump’s actions. Further, it revealed Ramaphosa’s misconceptions about the factors driving Trump’s foreign policy adjustments. ‘South Africa remained committed to building a mutually beneficial trade, political, and diplomatic relationship with the Trump administration.’³⁷

To many South Africans, it appears however that the government is not treating its conflict with Washington with the urgency it demands. This fear became real when Trump imposed a tariff of 30 per cent on South Africa on 1 August 2025, effective a week later.

Ramaphosa is prone to procrastination.³⁸ He shows no inclination to prevent his presidency from unravelling even more.³⁹ The heart of the SA problem and dilemma is encapsulated in these remarks by William Gumede:

ANC leaders have insisted that foreign policy is the sole prerogative of the ANC. However, ANC officials are not able to read the Trump administration, and have used inappropriate negotiation strategies that have inflamed Trump and Republican leaders. [...] The ANC needs to take responsibility for its overwhelming role in the destruction of South Africa’s relations with the US. [...] unwisely-led country from being devastated by US sanctions, which stem mainly from years of ANC ideological and partisan anti-US policies. They also stem from the party’s continuing insistence on blame-shifting, rather than taking responsibility and becoming more pragmatic.⁴⁰

The outcome of the telephone discussion between Ramaphosa and Trump on 7 August 2025 remains uncertain. They committed to moving forward with more contacts, acknowledging the different trade negotiations in which the United States is now engaged, and recognising that the relevant trade negotiating teams will advance extensive conversations. Minister Ntshavheni, who serves in Ramaphosa’s office, made this unambiguous statement at a news conference on the same day the two leaders had their telephone conversation, ‘We need to be very clear that the transformation agenda of the country [i.e. South Africa] is non-negotiable.’⁴¹

A few days earlier, after a meeting of the ANC National Executive Committee, which is the highest decision-making body of the party between party conferences, the ANC Secretary-General, Fikile Mbalula, declared defiantly that South Africa will not be coerced into reversing its progressive economic transformation agenda or compromising its

sovereignty under the guise of opportunistic foreign trade.⁴² Lamola is on record saying that South Africa will not modify its policy to accommodate Washington, as this is a sovereign matter on which South Africa needs to continue to be firm, and to which the country should adhere. Mbalula also added a brazen comment about sanctions, implying that they do not scare South Africa.⁴³

South African Miscalculations

South Africa is not exempt from any policy review or new policy applications that the United States wants to implement in the interests of the United States. South Africa must realise that it is a minor, even insignificant, player in Trump's game plan. In evaluating the options available to the United States to act against South Africa, the influential Hudson Institute, which has close ties with the White House, has advanced these arguments.

Washington should confront any government that opposes US interests so aggressively. [...] A successful campaign would need to target South African officials responsible for the anti-American measures the government has implemented. [...] The US has a suite of relevant tools, including visa bans and sanctions, and South Africa is a target-rich environment. The ANC is one of Africa's most corrupt organisations. [...] The terrorist financing that flows from and through South Africa could also serve as the basis for sanctions. [...] But if the US does not meaningfully confront the ANC, the party will continue its decadeslong campaign against the West on behalf of the so-called progressive international revolutionary movement. [...] to target key anti-American officials in South Africa to marginalize them and warn others of what will come if they do not change course.⁴⁴

Trump's approach to foreign affairs makes sense when one considers how he has transformed the domestic scene and politics in the United States. For this reason alone, he regards South Africa as having no real consequence. To expect any favours from him or to believe that he will come to the rescue of the country in any way is to dwell in a fool's paradise. What makes the SA case worse is that its government seems to struggle even more to understand or adjust to the seismic changes brought about by Trump's "America First" foreign policy in his second term of office. Trump's distorted view of the Expropriation without Compensation (EWC) Act (No. 13 of 2024) is not the primary reason for his recent harsh words and criticism of South Africa.⁴⁵ His views on South Africa relate to how he perceives SA foreign policy and the way some aspects conflict with and undermine US national interest and security, how SA policies are hostile to decades-long close friends and security allies, and how ties with Iran are strengthened. The relationship between South Africa and Iran has garnered attention due to accusations of military technology transfer, possible nuclear collaboration, and Iran allegedly funding the ANC for driving the case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Biden administration had overlooked the escalating relationship between Iran and the purported transfer of military technology from South Africa to the Islamic Republic; however, the Trump administration has now seized this issue, and the repercussions for South Africa may be significant.⁴⁶ The relationship between South Africa and Iran may transform regional dynamics in Africa, affect global diplomatic relations, and alter economic and military strategies. Nonetheless, these consequences include the dangers of heightened tensions and possible US penalties.

Several authoritative articles have been published in South Africa and the United States lately, exploring the fundamental differences in these countries in depth.⁴⁷ At its core, this boils down to strategic assessments and geopolitical realities. Friedman remarks on these current realities:

Politicians become presidents because they understand reality. [...] They know the American people at this moment in time. [...] So we have a long history of how very efficient foreign policy leaders, which Roosevelt was, also handled domestic politics in the same way: unprincipled and self-righteous. [...] Trump is trying to prove something in the Western hemisphere. The old rules don't work and won't be followed, so he is a rule breaker. He breaks the norm. He's creating realities.⁴⁸

The imperatives of understanding the inner workings of the US political system and the way foreign policy matters are addressed by Pres. Trump and the two Chambers of Congress have proved to be severely lacking in the SA government in recent times. South African actions reflect the strategic vacuum in which the country conceives and executes its foreign policy. As Trump increasingly voices his displeasure with SA actions and policies, Ramaphosa's continued response declares that South Africa remains committed to building a mutually beneficial trade and political and diplomatic relationship with the Trump administration, assuming business as usual.

The reasons for this inept and ineffective handling of SA foreign relations are manifold, and do not need any discussion in this article. Instead of trying to understand what drives US foreign policy currently, South Africa persistently misreads developments and policies that aim to protect and enhance US interests. Francois Baird drives this point forcefully home in his article:

South Africa is reading the American picture completely wrong. South Africa has no communication problem with the American government; it is a relationship problem in a new order. There is a new order in America and the world. America is in the midst of a revolution during a geopolitical realignment. [...] The appetite to become more like Europe is fading. [...] The geopolitical outlook has also changed. [...] The focus of American policy on, among other things, tariffs, the budget, and diplomacy is being shifted to the new security agenda. [...] Diplomacy is now in support of friends such as Argentina and against foes, of whom the members of the BRICS grouping, for example, can all be seen as enablers of Chinese domination at close range. [...] The Ramaphosa government has clearly, and finally, convinced the Trump administration that South Africa has fallen into the Chinese-Russian-Iranian grip. [...] The core principle of all crisis management is to visualise the worst outcome, plan how to avoid it, and work hard to achieve the best result.⁴⁹

As Baird concludes, dark days are ahead if South Africa does not strategically review its policy and adopt a less confrontational stance toward the United States, addressing the issues that concern the United States and considered harmful and threatening to US national interests and security. Developments since the EO was issued on 7 February 2025 have not advanced SA relations with the United States; on the contrary, they instead

ensured that South Africa stays on the radar of the United States for whatever reason. Suffice it to concentrate on the main disastrous issues.

Indiscretions of Ebrahim Rasool

Rasool did not become a controversial figure overnight; he had already established himself as one before assuming his ambassadorial duties. The open display of his association with Palestine, Gaza, Hamas and Iran was known in Washington, DC, before his arrival. Addressing his mosque in Athlone, a suburb of Cape Town, Rasool explained, 'I believe that I will go to Washington as a representative of a moral superpower in a world that has lost its moral anchors.'⁵⁰

Rasool described the Hamas founder as 'one of the greatest inspirations' and has shown a consistent willingness to embrace terrorists and radicals for decades.⁵¹ Richard Johnson and Sam Westrop list many other associations with which Rasool is linked, and which raised eyebrows.⁵²

In March 2025, Rasool used his diplomatic status to denounce the United States and lambast Trump. No ambassador has a licence to speak in the way he did. He, like all other diplomatic officers, is not above the diplomatic legal principles enshrined in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, adopted on 18 April 1961, which have been codified in international law. Foremost, the clear injunction embodied in article 41, paragraph 1 of the Convention, contains this cardinal rule of diplomacy in unequivocal terms:

Without prejudice to their privileges and immunities, it is the duty of all persons enjoying such privileges and immunities to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving state. They also have a duty not to interfere in the internal affairs of that state.⁵³

This paragraph is explicit and free from ambiguity or interpretive difficulty. Although diplomats possess privileges and immunities, they are concurrently obligated by these privileges and immunities to fulfil their duties in accordance with the Convention. Any intervention in the domestic affairs of the host nation is prohibited. Arguably, a diplomat should also, under all circumstances, maintain cordial relations with the host nation to fulfil the mandate of the diplomatic assignment. In instances where diplomats exceed these limits, the host nation has the authority to designate them *persona non grata*, necessitating the sending nation (in this case, South Africa) to withdraw the individual. This procedure ensures that diplomatic immunity is not abused and that the sovereignty of the host nation (in this case, the United States) is maintained.

The goal of the *persona non grata* concept is to ensure justice for both the sending state (the state whose diplomat is being removed) and the receiving state (the state attempting to remove the ambassador). This ensures that both concepts uphold the equality and dignity of sovereign nations.⁵⁴

Rasool had to leave his post on 17 March 2025. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, James Risch, remarked, 'I applaud @securbio for calling out the South African ambassador's disgraceful, anti-American hate speech. Suffice it to say that he is not cut out for diplomacy.'⁵⁵

In South Africa, supporters of the ANC considered Rasool's expulsion undiplomatic and humiliating, because it was aimed at making an example of South Africa. It wanted to send a message to the rest of the developing world that there are consequences for challenging US interests and international and political agenda. From the ranks of the ANC, the response was audacious.

For this, the US has declared him persona non grata, proving once again their double standards on free speech and democracy. But we will not be bullied. [...] South Africa will stand by its diplomats. We will defend our sovereignty. And we will not be silenced by an empire that preaches democracy but punishes truth-telling. South Africa is not a vassal state. We do not take orders from Washington. We will not be intimidated into silence. Ambassador Rasool's expulsion is proof that our stance on global justice is practical – when you are punished for speaking the truth, it means your words carry power.⁵⁶

Addressing the crowd, welcoming him back to South Africa, Rasool, in his arrogant self-assurance, insolently spoke of wearing US action as a 'badge of dignity' and stated that he had 'no regrets'.⁵⁷ This meant he stood by his remarks for which he had been expelled.

While not mentioning any country or organisation by name, Ramaphosa's coded wording left nobody in March 2025 in any doubt about what he had in mind and wanted to convey beyond the borders of South Africa.

As South Africa we stand in solidarity with all those whose right to lead lives of dignity are being undermined by conflict and war. [...] As a country we will continue to repeat our call for a renewed global human rights movement so that the rights and dignity of all people should be upheld.⁵⁸

His remarks followed those of Rasool, who, upon his return to South Africa, again spoke brashly, 'We cannot negotiate away our case against genocide at the ICJ'.⁵⁹

The departure of Rasool was not the last SA official who was ordered to leave the United States. The SA Military Attaché in Washington and its Consul-General in Los Angeles were also ordered to leave the United States. In July 2025, the United States cancelled the "Exercise Shared Accord" with the SA military. The cancellation marks a significant shift in US-SA military cooperation.⁶⁰ At the beginning of August 2025, the Russian naval training ship, Smolnyy, docked in Cape Town harbour for several days after the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) had granted permission for the visit.⁶¹ The third iteration of the tri-nation naval exercise Mosi, between Russia, China and South Africa, was set down for Western Cape waters in November 2025.⁶² These developments reflect the current political climate and the perceived tilt by SA foreign policy away from the United States, possibly jeopardising all future defence collaboration.

For some time already, international obsequiousness (submissiveness) has been wearing thin – even Pres. Joe Biden's administration became impatient with the SA anti-Western posturing – but it took Trump to draw the curtain finally. Trump's freezing of aid to South Africa, with the possibility of sanctions, has a simple moral: actions have consequences. The nostalgic foreign policy of the ANC, rooted in several alliances with Iran, Venezuela

and Cuba, has significantly strained SA relations with the United States. This ideological alignment has led to tangible repercussions.⁶³

The legacy of Nelson Mandela is finally depleted. The 'Madiba magic' that opened international doors and wallets and silenced criticism is no more. The halo of righteousness under which the ANC swaggered on the world stage since 1994 lies shattered.⁶⁴

The only constant permanency in SA foreign policy is the unrelenting support to Cuba, Western Sahara (Polisario), Palestine (Hamas) and Iran. At the Liberation Movement Summit, which was held in Johannesburg on 27 July 2025, Ramaphosa warned that the African continent was once again under threat. This time, he criticised transactional diplomacy, whereupon he reiterated unwavering SA support for the struggles of Palestine, Western Sahara and Cuba.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, there has been little indication of alterations in foreign policy, amendments to problematic laws, or a departure from the pervasive race-based criteria in South Africa. The newly formed GNU is hamstrung in foreign affairs in that the ANC grip on DIRCO prevents any foreign policy reform, and the ANC stubbornly controls all SA foreign policy. The party ensures that mostly party cadres with little business acumen are appointed as ambassadors. In contrast, SA competitors appoint commercially adroit and highly experienced individuals with proper skills to prioritise investment for their companies in their countries above political ideology.⁶⁶

Appointment of Mcebisi Jonas

Ramaphosa's response to the vacancy of the ambassadorial post in Washington was to appoint Jonas as Special Envoy to the United States.⁶⁷ A day after his appointment, Jonas suffered the ignominy of being discredited on several fronts from which he has not recovered to this day. First to surface were his harsh criticisms of Trump, which he had made in a public speech several years ago.⁶⁸ It was not his criticism of Trump that scuttled him. Many others have criticised Trump in equal or even harsher and more derogatory language.⁶⁹ It is his chairmanship of MTN, an emerging market mobile operator headquartered in South Africa, which has clouded his effectiveness. Jonas could not distance himself from that role. Incisive and penetrating questions about the role of MTN in Iran and the relationship with that government remain. The facts about MTN and Iran are public knowledge.⁷⁰ A recent court case in New York has highlighted that relationship.⁷¹ The United States regards Iran as a danger and a threat to its national interests and security. It remains an open question whether the SA government identified and quantified these facts in its due diligence before appointing Jonas. The upshot of this blunder and foreign policy miscalculation has been that Jonas did not accompany Ramaphosa on his visit to Washington. Furthermore, Ramaphosa has subsequently confirmed, on several occasions, that Jonas was actively involved in discussions and finalising positions relating to SA relations with the United States, including tariffs. The presidency was most indignant in its reaction to reports that the United States had not issued a visa to Jonas that would have allowed him to meet officials in Washington. The status of Jonas's assignment remains an unanswered question. In reply to a parliamentary question, Lamola provided

the following answer, ‘The special envoy has yet to travel to the US on official business. However, it must be noted that the sensitive and confidential work of special envoys is never published.’⁷²

This confirmation from Lamola underlines the strained and questionable approach by South Africa to and dealing with the United States. From Lamola’s remarks it was clear that at least one of Jonas’s tasks as special envoy for engaging with the United States would not be happening.⁷³

Ramaphosa’s Visit to the White House

Even before Ramaphosa’s visit to the White House in May 2025, Julius Malema, the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), exacerbated the SA position in Washington by performing his contentious signature song and dance, ‘Kill the Boer, Kill the Farmer’, on the tenth anniversary of his party on 21 March 2025. Both Trump and Rubio took note of it. The latter, who further deemed Rasool undesirable in the United States, remarked that it is ‘a chant that incites violence’.⁷⁴ Ramaphosa must have been aware that the conduct of one of his political adversaries was already known to a sceptical audience in the United States. When Trump therefore played a video showing Malema’s audacious performance of the song on several occasions, Ramaphosa’s body language revealed how uncomfortable he appeared. He had no coherent answer to Trump’s question of why action had not already been taken against Malema. Ramaphosa could not have been surprised to learn subsequently that the United States was demanding action against Malema as one of the preconditions for improving relations. Space does not allow for a further evaluation of the meeting, which Ramaphosa continued to describe as “successful”, only to be contradicted by several sources who were aware of the US assessment of that visit. Gerrit Olivier made these remarks about the visit.

Contrary to the “hallelujahs” from some local media, the recent White House meeting between the two presidents was a damp squib. It did not “reset” relations. Trump was unimpressed; diplomatic relations were not restored, and nothing was said about the punitive measures that had been imposed.⁷⁵

Olivier’s overall conclusion is that ‘not since the dark days of apartheid has the country been humiliated more than it is nowadays’.⁷⁶

South African Action against Israel

The United States deems SA actions against Israel and the close relationship South Africa has with Iran as contrary to US national interest and threatening US national security. After the institution of legal proceedings against Israel at the ICJ, South Africa also supported action by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against the leaders of Israel. Thereafter, South Africa played a central and founding role in the Hague Group.⁷⁷ This Group leads and coordinates multilateral efforts among these states, of which Cuba is a member, to enforce rulings of the two courts already mentioned. The Hague Group regards its involvement as a moral and legal necessity thereby cementing its international profile as a champion of multilateral legal action and accountability in the Israeli–Gaza conflict. Ramaphosa co-authored an ill-considered, ill-advised, and especially ill-timed

article with the leaders of Malaysia and Colombia, as well as the director of the Hague Group. In the article, the authors were highly critical of Israel and the United States. The Group's endorsement of Hamas, a US-designated terrorist group, came as no surprise.

On 29 September 2025, Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a 20-point peace plan for Gaza, signifying a notable turnaround in US and Israeli approaches. The proposal includes the prompt release of hostages, the disarmament of Hamas, and the formation of a technocratic government. It further seeks a gradual Israeli departure and possible statehood for Palestinians, supported by several Muslim nations, including Turkey.⁷⁸

Trump's plan offers the best pathway out of the tragedy that has unfolded in Gaza. [...] For dragging the negotiations back to reality, Mr Trump and his team deserve praise.⁷⁹

Despite criticism and potential challenges, including the reaction by Hamas and the political environment in Israel, the peace initiative signifies a substantial possibility to alleviate the persistent bloodshed in Gaza, necessitating continuous pressure from international stakeholders for its effectiveness. This development carries substantial strategic and reputational implications for both South Africa and the Hague Group. The ongoing litigation and legal processes at the ICJ and ICC are at risk of being sidelined as the peace plan advances. The endeavours of South Africa and the Hague Group may become insignificant if legal impetus starts to lag behind political realities.

The new peace approach concurrently poses distinct challenges for South Africa. Its anti-Israeli stance is now aligning with a prospective breakthrough initiative, necessitating a careful refinement of legal strategies, advocacy, and diplomatic objectives within a more dynamic international context. South African diplomacy may face a significant obstacle if the country does not adopt a more pragmatic approach to international relations and geopolitics. South Africa must decide whether to engage pragmatically in the evolving peace process to maintain its influence, or to persist mainly in legal and political resistance, thereby risking diplomatic isolation. If the peace process is successful, the SA government may need to modify its rhetoric and approach, particularly as the new effort receives increased backing from the Muslim and Arab populations.

South African Chairmanship of the G20

United States Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, did not attend a G20 meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors held in South Africa in July 2025, which is currently the G20 president. The annual G20 meeting of heads of government takes place in Johannesburg in November 2025. Earlier, Rubio declared that the United States would not attend the summit.⁸⁰ Subsequently, the White House National Security Council banned US agencies from all work on the G20 in South Africa. While it does appear most unlikely that Trump will attend, Ramaphosa continues to assert that Trump will come. On 29 July 2025, Trump said that he would not attend the meeting. He cited deep dissatisfaction with SA domestic and foreign policies, specifically referencing concerns over violence in the country. During conversations with reporters, Trump suggested he might send someone

else to represent the United States, saying, ‘I’ve had a lot of problems with South Africa. They have some very bad policies.’⁸¹

In some circles in the United States there are growing calls to have South Africa expelled from the G20, citing the size of the SA gross domestic product (GDP) and the links the country has to terrorism.⁸²

Action by Congress

Legislative action is anticipated from both chambers of Congress. In light of the array of issues, Congress will reassess the bilateral relationship with South Africa. A bipartisan measure, the US–SA Bilateral Relations Review Act, was already introduced on 6 February 2024 in the House of Representatives during the Biden administration.⁸³ South Africa was viewed as subverting US foreign policy objectives, leading to escalating tensions between South Africa and the United States on several geopolitical matters. The SA conduct was considered to compromise US national security and foreign policy objectives. The legislative action foreshadowed a thorough examination of the bilateral relationship, addressing apprehensions of SA affiliations with China, Russia, Cuba and Iran, in addition to the SA position on Israel and Hamas. Also flagged was the SA involvement in joint military exercises with China, SA purported arms provision to Russia, and SA allegations against Israel in the ICJ as proof of activities that jeopardise US interests. For many US lawmakers, South Africa had gone too far and attacked a close ally and was undermining US security interests. There had to be consequences.⁸⁴

These activities represented a notable intensification in US–SA relations, with possible ramifications for commerce, foreign aid through USAID (US Agency for International Development) and diplomatic connections. On 3 April 2025, Congressman Ronny Jackson introduced a Bill, co-sponsored by Congressman John James, to authorise a comprehensive review of the bilateral relations between the United States and South Africa, identifying government officials of South Africa and leaders of the ANC who could face the imposition of sanctions. The Bill, with the title the “US–South Africa Bilateral Relations Review Act of 2025”, is resolute in declaring that SA foreign policy actions ‘undermine United States national security and foreign policy interests’.⁸⁵ An extensive range of issues, both domestic and foreign, are listed that are causing the United States much concern, and are to be investigated and reported to Congress as part of the stated review.

Within 120 days of enactment of this Bill, the US president, in collaboration with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Treasury, had to present a classified report to the relevant congressional committees containing a list of senior government officials of South Africa and ANC leaders identified by the US president as having participated in corruption or human rights violations. The report will provide a comprehensive explanation of the conduct that justifies the individual’s inclusion on the list, along with the anticipated timing for punishment. This Bill delineates eight principal issues concerning the ANC and South Africa.

According to Jackson, South Africa has brazenly abandoned its relationship with the United States to align with China, Russia,⁸⁶ Iran, and terrorist organisations, and this

betrayal demands serious consequences. For him, the SA government and the ANC have continued to undermine US national security interests consistently. He added, ‘This legislation ensures we conduct a comprehensive review of this supposed “ally” while also holding accountable any corrupt officials. The era of governments undermining American interests without repercussions ends now.’⁸⁷

Jackson explained that his Bill builds on and supports Pres. Trump’s EO of 7 February 2025. On 23 July 2025, this Bill was approved by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs with the committee voting 34 in favour and 16 against. The next step for approval is a debate and vote in the House, and if approved, the same procedure will be followed in the Senate. After approval in that chamber, it will require the signature of the president. Voting in the Committee has already shown support from some Democrats. This may also be the case for the following stages. The reaction of the ANC was that it was clear that the action would not be supported by the Democrats in Congress, who have, over the years, stood by the ANC. For some reason, the ANC seems completely oblivious of the fact that some Democrats on the Committee had already voted in favour and that the Democrats do not have a majority in either the House or the Senate in any case. Ramaphosa’s reaction was equally puzzling, as he did not know what was driving the proposed legislation to take action against members of the ANC. He was convinced that the Bill would not harm relations between South Africa and the United States.⁸⁸

On 17 June 2025, when Greg Steube, a Republican from Florida, introduced legislation for the House to consider suspending aid to South Africa for its pro-Hamas bias, he pointed out that it was clear that South Africa was unfairly targeting Israel and was friendly towards Hamas and Iran, thereby inciting hostility towards the United States and its allies. He detailed the various instances in which South Africa sided with Hamas and aligned with Iranian economic and military interests. Steube’s bill proposed imposing targeted sanctions on political leaders responsible for the antagonism by their government towards the United States and its allies.⁸⁹

Understanding US Sanctions

Several aspects of US sanctions of which South Africa and the ANC may not be aware are worth noting. Trump does not require legislative authority to impose sanctions on countries, companies, or individuals. He can authorise them in a matter of minutes. As president, Trump typically does not require explicit new legislative approval from Congress to impose most types of economic sanctions on countries, companies, or individuals. This sweeping authority is primarily granted by the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). This Act became law in 1977. It gives the president sweeping powers

[T]o impose economic sanctions on persons and entities upon determining that there exists an unusual and extraordinary threat, which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States, to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States.⁹⁰

Additional innovations in sanctions policy may arise as the Trump administration investigates the extent and boundaries of penalties to advance its geostrategic or domestic policy goals.⁹¹ The US president possesses extensive authority to decide when sanctions are enacted, the particular targets, and the methods of their implementation or removal. Executive Orders are a conventional instrument. Furthermore, Pres. Trump has the executive authority to alter, suspend, or revoke penalties as he deems appropriate or advisable. He can also do this by EO.

Over many years, various Acts have acted as legal basis for many actions by Trump:

- Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act – allows sanctions against foreign individuals involved in gross human rights violations or corruption.⁹²
- Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) – authorises sanctions against entities doing business with Russia, Iran, or North Korea.⁹³
- International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) – grants the president sweeping powers to regulate commerce and freeze assets during a national emergency involving foreign threats.⁹⁴ If South Africa is designated as a hostile economic actor, this Act could freeze ANC-linked bank accounts and block financial transactions.
- Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act – directly bans foreign officials involved in significant corruption or human rights violations from entering the United States. No criminal conviction is necessary; justified suspicion is enough.⁹⁵
- USA Patriot Act, particularly section 311 – allows the Treasury to designate a foreign jurisdiction or institution as a ‘primary money laundering concern’.⁹⁶ This designation could devastate the global financial credibility of South Africa.
- Material support to foreign terrorist organisations statute⁹⁷ – criminalises any support – direct or indirect – to groups, such as Hamas. Public meetings between the ANC and Hamas officials fall under potential violation of this statute.
- Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)⁹⁸ – requires foreign entities acting in US political spheres to register as agents. If the ANC members or proxies engage in lobbying within US territory, they face criminal exposure under FARA.

From the above, it is clear that Trump already holds full legal authority to impose any of the following:

- Swift visa bans under 7031(c);⁹⁹
- Personal sanctions under the provisions of the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Institutional sanctions under CAATSA and IEEPA; and
- Economic warfare via the Patriot Act¹⁰⁰ and Treasury designations.¹⁰¹

During his first term of office, Trump imposed sanctions after issuing a specific EO, which dealt with the imposition of sanctions.¹⁰² Nothing prevents him from issuing such an Order again with even stiffer stipulations. Six months into his second term of office, the US sanctions policy has undergone notable shifts in both designation trends and enforcement activity. Since January 2025, the Trump administration has reinvigorated its sanctions agenda, with a renewed focus on Iran and China.¹⁰³ He already issued EOs that reinstated sanctions against Iran and some of its officials. On 3 February 2025, Trump's EO imposed wide-ranging sanctions on the ICC and specific court officials, primarily in retaliation for investigations and arrest warrants that could implicate US or Israeli officials in war crimes. The sanctions include asset freezes, travel bans, and prohibitions on US interaction with these officials.¹⁰⁴

When Trump imposed a 50 per cent tariff on Brazil on 30 July 2025, he also subjected a Justice of the Brazilian Supreme Court to sanctions for overseeing investigations into former Pres. Jair Bolsonaro. This is a highly unusual use of some of the gravest human rights sanctions the United States has at its disposal. In the EO Trump signed on 30 July 2025, he declares that recent policies, practices, and actions of the Government of Brazil constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. He declared 'a national emergency concerning that threat'.¹⁰⁵

What is often forgotten is that Congress can impose sanctions of its own. Congressional sanctions may necessitate the president's imposition of specific penalties on designated persons, businesses, or countries. These statutes may link sanctions to explicit triggers, establish supervision mandates, or delineate the conditions under which sanctions may be waived or rescinded. Congress is the sole authority capable of lifting these penalties via a potentially protracted legislative procedure. Presidential sanctions are authorised swiftly and can be revoked at the president's discretion. In contrast, congressional sanctions are legally binding and often more challenging to suspend, as they can either overrule or bolster presidential actions.¹⁰⁶

The duration for Congress to rescind or abolish sanctions enacted by law does not adhere to a predetermined schedule. Congress must enact new legislation to modify or rescind current sanctions laws. The outcome is contingent upon the legislative process, the pertinent legislation regulating the punishments, and the current political dynamics. Specific sanction legislation has inherent waiting periods or notice obligations. Sanctions accompanied by substantial legislative monitoring or significant political support tend to endure longer and are more challenging to rescind promptly than executive sanctions proclaimed by the President. Legal termination serves as a considerable limitation, complicating and prolonging the process of rescinding sanctions, even following diplomatic or policy changes. The congressional repeal of legislatively imposed sanctions may take weeks, contingent on favourable political conditions, extend to years, or perhaps remain indefinitely unachieved without consensus. Specific legislative stipulations influence the process, the prevailing domestic political environment, and the gravity with which Congress addresses pertinent national security or foreign policy goals.¹⁰⁷ Attia emphasises that lifting sanctions is often harder than imposing them.¹⁰⁸ Congress needed

about 30 years to rescind the classification of Nelson Mandela as a terrorist. During the Reagan administration in the 1980s, the United States initially classified Mandela and the ANC as terrorists. Notwithstanding his election as president of South Africa in 1994, Mandela remained on the US terrorist watch list for decades. The circumstances were so ingrained that Mandela required special permission to enter the United States even after his presidency. The legislation to remove Mandela and the ANC from the US terrorist list was approved by both Chambers of Congress and enacted by Pres. George W Bush in July 2008, shortly before Mandela's ninetieth birthday.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, from the early to mid-1980s until July 2008, around 30 years had to pass before Congress took action to rescind the terrorist classification against Mandela and his ANC associates, more years than the duration of his imprisonment.

The Impact of Domestic Policies on Foreign Policy

The influence of domestic matters on foreign policy is now more evident than in recent US history. Pres. Trump has proved this. Foreign policy mirrors domestic policy, and foreign policy cannot be separated from its domestic environment.¹¹⁰ The interconnection between internal and global events is undeniable, as domestic factors largely shape foreign policy. Domestic pressures can manifest in various forms, and the interaction between foreign policy decision-makers and domestic constituencies is a real phenomenon. Foreign policy is developed neither in a vacuum nor in seclusion. It is ingrained in national interests, which consistently influence its parameters. Henry Kissinger's famous words are extremely apt. 'Foreign policy begins where domestic policy ends'.¹¹¹

Realists, such as Kissinger, prioritise stability and power balance over ideological goals, including the promotion of democracy or human rights. For Kissinger, a country that demands moral perfection in its foreign policy will achieve neither perfection nor security. He advanced two critical principles. The test of a 'policy is how it ends, not how it begins' and foreign policy is 'the art of establishing priorities'.¹¹² This reflects Kissinger's pragmatic, realpolitik approach to diplomacy, emphasising that effective foreign policy requires setting and managing clear priorities amid complex global challenges. President John F Kennedy, who had to face various serious foreign policy challenges, made the profound statement that 'domestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us'.¹¹³ This remark highlights the importance of emphasising the critical and often existential stakes of foreign policy.

Foreign policy decision-makers must therefore understand domestic issues and policies thoroughly before devising and implementing an effective foreign strategy. It is imperative that domestic problems are incorporated into the analysis of foreign policy decision-making and that the influence of domestic affairs and their resultant effects on foreign policies be accurately evaluated. Trump's foreign policy is shaped by his "Make America Great Again" motto and the "America First" slogan. His foreign policy is significant only when it aligns with national interests and its advancement benefits the United States. He perceives his approach to foreign relations as the most pragmatic, prioritising the benefits for the United States. It is this interaction in the United States that the SA government appears to misunderstand; thus, ignoring and failing to take it seriously. To understand Trump's foreign policy, it is essential to understand the domestic political

scene in the United States, as well as the influences that affect it, including Congress and social media. The ANC has not yet grasped that domestic policies and practices have foreign policy implications. Negotiation starts at home; it is not only a foreign discourse. Diplomatic conversations encompass more than interacting with foreign peers; they are mainly coordinating internal resources. Diplomats have to manoeuvre through the intricate landscape of domestic politics, institutional interests, and public expectations. These home imperatives represent a crucial and often undervalued aspect of diplomacy. Proficiency in both international and domestic negotiating facets is therefore essential for a practical diplomatic approach.

Conclusion

South African relations with the United States are far more tenuous than most South Africans and the government, including the ANC, comprehend. It is no secret that there is a lack of tolerance for South Africa at the highest level of government in the United States, including Congress. The United States faces far more pressing challenges and issues than South Africa, which it has to address elsewhere in the world. South Africa appears to be out of sync with the strategic priorities of the United States. Geopolitical dynamics have changed, and new global challenges have emerged. States that have come to rely on US-backed alliances are undoubtedly recalibrating their approaches. Failure to understand and adjust to those foreign policy realities advanced by the United States could lead to numerous cascading diplomatic and economic consequences for South Africa. The repercussions of misreading US intentions can be disastrous. Currently, the SA government suffers from tunnel vision in its foreign policy, focusing excessively on Trump's pronouncements regarding SA domestic affairs. The application of 30 per cent tariffs may just be the beginning of more action against South Africa and could well be the fall of the first domino.

South Africa finds it challenging to formulate and apply a coherent foreign policy. It continues to operate in a fabricated reality brimming with self-importance and arrogance. Trump's presidency, which will last for more than three years to come, will still have profound ramifications in that period. Considering the negative sentiment that has already taken hold in Congress, it is evident that a catastrophe is imminent. Virtually no possibility of reversing this deteriorating trend seems possible. Attempts to engage with individuals on Capitol Hill will probably remain futile. Longstanding SA allies in Congress forged during and after the Nelson Mandela era appear to have dissipated to a large extent. One of the prime functions of the SA embassy is to work with Capitol Hill. That cardinal relationship with legislators in both Chambers and with both parties has been sadly neglected in recent years. Building these consequential relationships takes time and effort, even in the face of differing opinions and perspectives. South Africa can no longer afford to send retired comrades to steer its interests in these crucial corridors of power. More than six months have passed since Rasool's expulsion in March 2025. Ramaphosa has yet to appoint a replacement. The optics of this indecision are not only a sad reflection on his style of government, but undoubtedly seen in the corridors of power in the United States as a negative indication of how he considers relations with the United States. When the modus operandi of other countries is studied in terms of how they approached the United States, they are much more successful. It is clear that South Africa failed by default.

Characterising the mood against South Africa as hostile may be an understatement. As long as South Africa remains ignorant about the real reasons for the current US attitude toward South Africa, there will be friction and rejection. Developments in sanctions policy may arise as the Trump administration examines the extent and constraints of sanctions to further its geostrategic or domestic policy goals. Once a US president institutes sanctions, it does not prevent Congress from adopting legislation to enforce its sanctions. Under certain circumstances, a country, company or individual may face a dual set of sanctions. It is this duality that South Africa and the ANC – or only the ANC – may face if Trump and Congress, with the two Bills already introduced in the House, each decide to impose their own set of sanctions. South African policymakers will continue to decry this as unfair, unjust, and undeserved, fuelled by Ramaphosa's bravado that South Africa will not be bullied. Ramaphosa invariably believes he can sit back and let matters develop to his liking before attempting any action, and if not, he resorts to the blame game. South Africa has found it progressively challenging, if not impossible, to have it both ways. The United States is now making South Africa pay the price for its deliberately chosen irreconcilable positions.

In its bid to advance its foreign policy, South Africa has failed to conduct a risk analysis of the consequences of its actions. Had that been done, it would have been apparent to those driving SA foreign policy that enduring peace and long-term geopolitical stability can only be achieved through the calculated management of power rather than initial motivations or moral appeal. Tariffs are part and parcel of Trump's foreign policy. Through his tariff programme, he aims to transform global trade dynamics both economically and politically. These are not just employed to rectify trade imbalances to affect global alignment. Trade alignment is thereby intimately linked to geopolitical allegiance. Countries are now presented with a choice: engage and align, or confront the repercussions.

The current imbroglio with the United States will continue, and lessons learnt from the past will not be recalled. At the same time, South Africa continues to hold its one-sided conviction that it remains a significant force in the realm of international human rights. The SA government believes it can enforce its will to make a grandstand among its international supporters, while in reality, the new global order is taking shape without South Africa having any say in it. At most, the country will be reduced to a spectator. The ANC foreign policy, which South Africa advances, is a liability that threatens SA national prosperity.

South African foreign policy is in disarray. Yet, nothing exposes the anti-Western agenda of the ANC more starkly than its hostility towards Israel, with its pursuit of the case at the ICJ and support of the ICC. The ANC has brought its disastrous foreign policy posture on itself and the country. Nobody else is to be blamed for that snowballing fiasco. Tragically, Ramaphosa's infatuation with Cold War-style non-alignment is an anachronism that is costing him and South Africa the influence and respect he so desperately yearns for. Furthermore, he continues to be obsessed with promoting a failed ideology and the obsolete and meaningless slogans and rhetoric he constantly borrows from the liberation struggle of yesteryear. He did so again at the Liberation Movements Summit in Johannesburg on 27 July 2025. When South Africa and the ANC take note of Trump imposing a greater tariff

percentage on India and sanctions on Brazilian Supreme Court justice, the SA government must realise that their policies and behaviour have consequences.

Ramaphosa knows what to do to put SA relations with the United States on a sound footing. Incompetence is, however, ingrained in the body politic of South Africa. When the economy of a country shows signs of collapsing and becomes ungovernable, it is unrealistic to expect that its foreign policy will remain unaffected. South Africa lacks the diplomatic capital to support its self-assessed international importance. Diplomatic trust compounds with credibility. The significance of South Africa on the global scene has declined significantly over the past ten years, suffering an inevitable decline. This resulted in a stalemate situation with the United States. By continuing to misread US foreign policy, South Africa is putting itself at risk.

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