



# South African–U.S. Relations 2025: Policy Frictions and Strategic Outlook SpecialREPORT OCT 2025

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# 1.Key Findings

- Waning diplomatic relations between South Africa and the United States epitomize broader changes from a unipolar to a multipolar world order.
- The Trump administration's Afrikaner refugee resettlement program, including Trump's communication strategy through social media platforms such as Truth Social and X, has created further racial divisions in South Africa and has stirred racial debates across the U.S.
- South Africa's unemployment rate increased by 0.3 percentage points from 32.9% in the first quarter to 33.2% in the second quarter, with approximately 100,000 jobs at risk. Showing the devastating effects of tariffs on the country.
- Despite a looming 30% tariff, South African agricultural exports to the U.S. have witnessed a significant 26% growth in the second quarter of 2025, signalling possible avenues for cooperation between Pretoria and Washington.
- Measures such as the national dialogue held in August and the indictment of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party's President, Julius Malema, in August for hate speech, represent Pretoria's resolve in addressing racism and hate crime in the country.

## 2. Summary

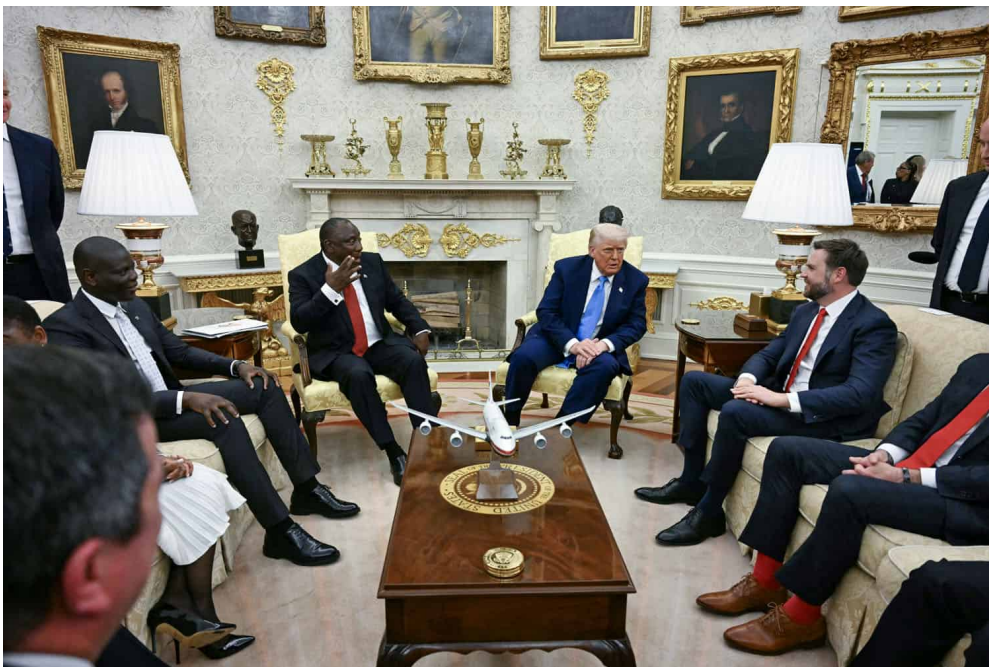
In recent months, bilateral relations between South Africa and the United States [have steadily deteriorated](#), moving beyond the economic sphere to encompass political and diplomatic tensions. While South Africa has long been a key partner for Washington in Africa, the 2025 context is marked by disputes whose roots are primarily political. President Cyril Ramaphosa's government has been accused by the Trump administration of pursuing discriminatory domestic policies, particularly concerning the recent land redistribution law, which it considers discriminatory to the [Afrikaners minority](#). At the same time, sharp divergences have emerged on the international stage: South Africa has openly criticized U.S. positions on the Palestinian issue and filed legal action against Israel at the [International Court of Justice](#) (ICJ), further straining bilateral ties.

Within this broader climate, the imposition by Washington of 30% tariffs on a wide range of South African exports, combined with uncertainty over the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), poses serious risks to key sectors such as agriculture and the automotive industry. These measures threaten to erode the competitive advantages enjoyed by South African exporters over the past two decades, with possible repercussions on employment, production chains and social stability in a country already burdened by inequality and high unemployment. The current phase thus raises complex questions about the future of bilateral relations and South Africa's capacity to adapt its global strategic positioning.

### 3. Current Events/Major Issue

On September 8, US President Donald Trump announced that he would not be attending the [G20 Summit in South Africa](#), scheduled for November 2025, but would be represented by the Vice President, JD Vance. By opting out of the G20 Summit, Trump signaled the deterioration in U.S.–South Africa relations that has characterized recent months of his second term. In a post on his [Truth Social platform](#), Donald Trump attacked South Africa's Land Expropriation Reform. He announced the freezing of financial aid to the country through an Executive Order on February 7, 2025. The same Executive Order stated that the U.S. is launching the resettlement of the, in terms of the US administration, marginalized Afrikaner white minority under a special refugee programme. The Trump administration has accused and held firm that the government of South Africa is [committing genocide](#) against the Afrikaners, claims which the South African government has repeatedly refuted. In May 2025, a South African delegation led by President Cyril Ramaphosa was at the White House for a bilateral meeting with the U.S. administration. The meeting, however, did not achieve any meaningful progress in improving bilateral relations between the two countries. A [30% tariff](#) on all South African exports to the U.S. was maintained, which is the highest for any Sub-Saharan African country. Furthermore, the 2025 U.S. State Department Country Report claimed that human rights in South Africa have worsened, further [creating tensions](#) between the two countries.

Figure 1: South African and U.S. delegations at the White House



Source: Jim Watson/AFP

## 4. Background

The Republic of South Africa is one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to consistently rank as a consolidated democracy, according to the Afrobarometer. Since 1994, South Africa has held regular multiparty elections under its parliamentary system. The country is one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where the rights of minority groups, notably LGBTQ, are protected. In terms of [gender representation](#), the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report ranked South Africa 14th in the World in 2021, while the Inter-Parliamentary Union in the same year ranked the country 11th in the world for female representation at the parliamentary level, and 2nd in Africa. Women representatives make up 43% of the current South African parliament. These statistics and the country's shared values with the West make South Africa a natural Western ally and an epitome of the Western liberal democratic model in Africa.

The history of South Africa is incomplete without mentioning apartheid, a 20th-century racial discrimination policy. Although apartheid officially ended in 1994 following Nelson Mandela's election as South African president, the hallmarks of the policy still animate South Africa's domestic and foreign policy. South Africa's [foreign policy](#) (FP) is driven by the respect for international human rights and freedom, and international solidarity and support for groups under "colonialism and oppression". Its unwavering support of Palestine and Cuba, for instance, reflects the country's own past. Internally, the African National Congress (ANC) party, which fought for the country's liberation from apartheid, has been in power since 1994. Yet, South Africa's political discourse has always been polarised around racial and ethnic divides. The Democratic Alliance party (DA) is largely perceived as a so-called "white party", while the Economic Freedom Fighters (EEF) has maintained and promoted anti-white rhetoric with its leader, Julius Malema, widely seen across Africa as a Pan Africanist due to his strong stance against the West. In 2024, the ANC and the DA entered into a coalition to form the current government of [national unity](#), the first post-apartheid. However, the formation of the national unity government has not completely eradicated racial polarization in the country, creating an avenue for confrontation with the current U.S. administration. For instance, the Trump administration has repeatedly attacked South Africa's land redistribution policy and affirmative action measures, insisting that the policy [discriminates](#) against the white minority Afrikaners in South Africa.

Geopolitical disagreements have further strained bilateral relations, particularly regarding the Middle East. South Africa has openly supported the Palestinian cause, consistently opposing U.S. policy in the region, and most recently filed legal proceedings against Israel before the [International Court of Justice](#) (ICJ). This stance directly challenges Washington's position and adds another layer of discord to the bilateral relationship.

At the same time, South Africa's role as a regional leader is complicated by its [internal fragility](#). While the country remains the most industrialized and influential economy in sub-Saharan Africa, persistent challenges, including rising levels of crime, socioeconomic inequality, and political tensions, undermine its claim to stability. These internal weaknesses amplify the impact of external pressures, making the current tensions with the United States not only a matter of foreign policy but also a test of Pretoria's domestic resilience and regional credibility.

## 5. Analysis and Future Outlook

Deteriorating bilateral relations between South Africa and the U.S. are rooted in South Africa's foreign policy, which has been proven to sometimes clash with the U.S. foreign policy, especially under Donald Trump's [America First policy](#) and [Make America Great Again \(MAGA\) ideology](#). South Africa is a founding BRICS member, a bloc which analysts have argued aims to strategically rival the Western geopolitical and economic hegemony led by the U.S. Since Trump's return to office, he has targeted BRICS by threatening [100% tariffs](#) on the bloc's members over claims of a possible de-dollarization, while tensions with BRICS founding members, Brazil, India, China, and South Africa, have heightened. Beyond BRICS, major global events such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have shaped South African-U.S. relations. In 2023, the then U.S. Ambassador to South Africa, Reuben Brigety, accused South Africa of providing [military equipment to support Russia's war](#) in Ukraine, a claim which the South African authorities refused as baseless. South Africa has hardly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and was one of several countries to abstain during an April 7, 2022, [UN General Assembly vote](#) to suspend the Russian Federation from the UN Human Rights Council. South Africa's 2023 decision to file a genocide case against Israel, a strategic U.S. ally in the Middle East, at the ICJ clashed with U.S. foreign policy, prompting [severe criticisms](#) from top officials in the then Biden administration.

Nonetheless, the main contestation between the South African authorities and the Trump administration is perhaps on the purported Afrikaner minority. Demographics show that whites make up 7.1% of South Africa's [63.1 million people](#). Yet, President Trump has repeatedly maintained his claim that the South African government is committing [genocide](#) against minority white South Africans. Trump's position is rooted in South Africa's [Expropriation Act 13 of 2024](#), a land-reform law that aims to correct racially imbalanced land ownership under apartheid. Under apartheid, whites controlled 87% of South African land while blacks owned 13%. International organizations, including the [UN](#), view South Africa's land reform law as "an important step in fostering a more equitable future". Following its promulgation by President Cyril Ramaphosa in January 2025, President Trump issued an [executive order](#) in February 2025, cutting vital aid to South Africa and announcing a special refugee programme to resettle Afrikaner white South Africans, with dozens already [relocating](#) to the U.S. under the policy. Along the same line, pro-Afrikaner groups such as Afriforum and Solidarity are facing heavy criticism, particularly from blacks, over their role in influencing Trump's rhetoric. Furthermore, in

March, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared South Africa's Ambassador to the U.S. Ebrahim Rasool a "*persona non grata*" over his comments that Trump's white genocide claims are part of a broader "[white supremacist](#)" movement in the U.S. under the MAGA ideology. Thus, suggesting that Trump's motives are more geostrategic than factual.

Beyond this, South Africa faces a 30% U.S. tariff. While Asia, Europe, and Africa are South Africa's biggest export destinations, exports to the U.S. still account for 8%. Pearls, metals, and vehicle components comprise over 89% of South Africa's total exports to the U.S. As such, the U.S. tariffs have profound consequences for South Africa's economy and [threaten](#) the viability of key industries such as agriculture, automotive manufacturing, and textiles. Unemployment rates in South Africa have sharply increased from [32.9% in the first quarter to 33.2%](#) in the second quarter. In addition, approximately [100,000 jobs are at risk](#), with cascading effects on domestic production chains, food security, and overall economic stability. Agricultural producers, in particular, depend heavily on external markets to sustain profitability and employment. With U.S. market access severely curtailed, many will struggle to remain operational, thereby weakening both export revenues and local food systems. At the same time, Pretoria has emphasized the importance of continuing AGOA, which exempts certain South African exports from tariffs. In fact, South Africa's agricultural exports to the U.S. witnessed a [significant growth of 26%](#) in the second quarter of 2025 despite the tariffs. However, [current bills](#) in the U.S. Senate and Congress are threatening to revoke South Africa's participation in AGOA.

## 5.1 Stability Factors

### - Degrading Factors

- The absence of U.S. Senator Marco Rubio from the G20 ministerial meeting in February, coupled with President Trump's decision to skip the upcoming G20 Summit in November, has strained diplomatic engagement with Pretoria.
- The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), led by Julius Malema, have further exacerbated racial tensions through chants such as "kill the Boer/White farmers."
- The relocation of white South Africans to the United States under Trump's special refugee program has heightened perceptions of racial polarization.
- The alleged influence of Elon Musk within the Trump administration, along with Trump's references to a so-called "white genocide" during the May 2025 White House meeting with President Ramaphosa, has contributed to a deterioration in bilateral discourse.

## - Stabilization Factors

- On August 15, 2025, the South African government launched a **national dialogue initiative** aimed at fostering political reconciliation and strengthening social cohesion.
- The indictment of Julius Malema for hate speech by South Africa's Equality Court in August 2025 marks a significant institutional response to racial incitement, signaling renewed efforts to curb hate speech and mitigate politically charged ethnic tensions.

## 6. Impact and Recommendations

Rising policy divergence between Washington and Pretoria is generating an increasingly uncertain operating environment. The continuation of high tariffs on South African exports and the temporary suspension of select U.S. aid programs have reduced market access and constrained ongoing initiatives. Concurrently, political narratives surrounding land reform and minority rights have intensified domestic polarization, elevating security and reputational risks for organizations engaged in governance or human rights programming. The lack of diplomatic progress and the resulting policy uncertainty add to regulatory and financial volatility, affecting NGOs, private-sector stakeholders, and field operations alike.

### Recommendations

- **Diversify Partnerships:** Expand engagement with EU, BRICS+, and multilateral donors to offset potential funding constraints linked to evolving U.S.–South Africa relations.
- **Scenario Planning:** Prepare contingency frameworks for possible tariff escalations, aid adjustments, or diplomatic downgrades, incorporating financial buffers into operational budgets.
- **Risk Mapping:** Conduct localized assessments to identify areas where political or racial tensions could generate operational or reputational exposure.
- **Engage Multilateral Forums:** Utilize platforms such as the G20, African Union, and United Nations to sustain dialogue and diversify advocacy and funding channels.
- **Reputational Safeguards:** Establish clear communication strategies to maintain neutrality and avoid association with politicized narratives related to land redistribution or minority rights.
- **Tariff Mitigation:** For export-oriented entities, explore supply-chain diversification, preferential trade mechanisms, and regional market expansion to mitigate tariff impacts.
- **Security Protocols:** Update staff safety and crisis-response training, prioritizing areas affected by polarization or land-reform disputes.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Strengthen relationships with South African civil society, local authorities, and community leaders to bolster legitimacy and operational resilience.

- **Legal Preparedness:** Monitor evolving legislation and potential litigation risks concerning expropriation, property rights, and refugee resettlement policies that may affect operations or partnerships.

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