

Trump 2.0 and Its Implications for South Africa: Opportunities and Challenges
Part 2 of the RHI-series “Trump is back – what it means for the world”



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Introduction

The unexpected re-election of Donald Trump as the United States of America's 47th president has evoked concern and confusion about its potential ramifications for the South African economy and geo-political standing. The net prediction is this: Trump's second term does not bode too well for South Africa, with the potential amendment of AGOA, a probable trade war with China, and shifting global alignments setting the scene for Africa and South Africa being neglected in the bigger picture. If this is the case, why then are some South Africans not only proclaiming their support for Trump, but exhibiting something of a pseudo-patriotism for the US? Is it that they just relate to Trump's xenophobic, protectionist rhetoric or is it that the ever-growing prominence of American news, television, celebrities, and influencers is somehow creating a small, but notable, South African community that feel inherently protective of American ideals?

Potential effects on the South African economy

A prominent concern is that the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), an agreement that allows African nations to export tax-free to the US, will not be prioritised once Trump has entered the office. Even if AGOA is eventually renewed, given SA's ANC party's historical ties with Russia and Iran as well as the country's outspoken stance on Israel's war on Gaza, Republican legislators may enforce stricter conditions to keep South Africa in line or might even exclude the nation from the agreement entirely. Another worry is that Trump's promised tariff increases, especially with regards to Chinese exports, would negatively effect the Chinese economy and, by extension, South Africa's China-dependent economy. Of course, the fate of South Africa is not set in stone, but the cards are not stacked in our favour.

Potential effects on South Africa's geo-political relations

Given its nationalistic and isolationist sentiments, it is likely that the incoming Trump administration would be less concerned with maintaining diplomatic ties with African nations, inflaming the growing anti-West sentiments across the continent.

South Africa is a nation that often finds a way of sitting on the fence of global divides, with civil relations maintained across the board and the bulk of its exports going to China, the US, Germany, India and Japan. However, the Trump administration may brush aside diplomatic niceties and look less kindly upon SA's membership in the rapidly expanding BRICS group and its obvious ties with US adversaries, compelling it to define its position in a changing world order, at the risk of souring some of its many relations.

Do South Africans care?

The returning Trump administration will likely be bad for South Africa, but how much do South Africans care? Although the majority of South Africans seem either unaware of US politics or hold anti-Trump sentiments, there is a notable portion of those who are not only pro-Trump, but almost patriotically so. They post photos of Trump raising a fist to the air on X, wear MAGA hats and proclaim unconditional support for a leader of a nation that they have no real ties to. His strong anti-immigration stance may indeed resonate with many, and it is, of course, natural to hold opinions on other leaders, but I can't help but get the feeling that these sentiments are not rooted in "What can Trump do for South Africa?", but rather "If I were American, what would Trump do for me?". The world, not excluding South Africa, is so oversaturated with American media, shows, celebrities and culture that we can't help embodying a part of the American. Although this phenomenon is nuanced and multi-layered, it is worth taking note of, especially when the well-being of our nations is in question.

Conclusion

Donald Trump's second term as president does not necessarily spell complete economic collapse and political offscouring for South Africa, but it definitely means uncertainty and, for the time being, a weaker Rand. The status of AGOA, US economic protectionist policies, and diplomatic shifts are noteworthy developments to follow. In light of current predictions, it is necessary to be aware of how the world views American politics and what motivates these views. A good starting point might be to be wary of over-identifying with a nation so far removed from our own.