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Examining the current US-South Africa bilateral relationship

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Chairman John James, Ranking Member Sara Jacobs, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Africa, let me start by expressing my gratitude for the invitation to express the views of my organisation, Good Governance Africa, on the crucially important subject of the bilateral relations between the United States and South Africa. I am indeed honoured to appear before you today.

South Africa stands at a crossroads of profound significance. Having overcome colonialism and apartheid, it now faces two critical new challenges: finding its place in a world entering a new era of great power competition and the post-apartheid state's susceptibility to opportunistic governance and the mismanagement of the country's economy.

While we take a moment to acknowledge South Africa's commendable strides, such as its robust democratic framework and unwavering judicial independence, it is incumbent upon us to address our evident shortcomings. Let us begin with a frank assessment of South Africa's domestic situation.

The diminishing efficacy of the state, the escalating spectre of crime, and the decline in health and educational standards are pressing concerns. The state has become a hub for political patronage and cronyism, leading to conflicts with business elites in the private sector.

The deterioration of South Africa's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), especially Eskom, threatens political stability and social harmony. The ruling elite's interests, marked by corruption, have resulted in mismanagement and financial instability. The ideological battles in the ANC over the state's role in the economy arise from resource conflicts, with the greatest challenge being the anti-democratic politics of the emergent kleptocracy.

Its second great challenge comes from renewed and emerging rivalries between major countries such as China, India, Russia, and the United States. These rivalries will define how the world navigates some of the great challenges of this century: conflict, technological disruption, climate change mitigation, and poverty alleviation.

South Africa remains important to the great powers. It is the largest individual trading partner that China, the EU, India, and the US each have on the African continent. It also ranks among the top five African countries in terms of aggregate trade with Russia. Great powers are therefore seeking South African support, especially over contentious issues.

The relationship between South Africa and the United States has faced a series of challenges, leading to a

significant deterioration in recent years. Understanding the complexity of this strained relationship requires us to delve into the factors contributing to these tensions and the far-reaching implications they hold.

At the heart of these tensions lie fundamental differences in foreign policy. South Africa's foreign policy, characterised by non-alignment, contrasts with the United States' assertive global posture, which is a reflection of its power on the global stage.

These differences have been notably evident in key areas.

The war in Ukraine has been a contentious issue. South Africa's reluctance to join in international condemnation over Russia's invasion of Ukraine stands in sharp contrast to the United States' stance against Russian aggression.

Another flashpoint has been the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The two nations have adopted divergent approaches and perspectives towards the Middle East, deepening the rift between them.

Further complicating matters is South Africa's growing alignment with China, particularly as a member of BRICS. China's increasing economic and strategic influence in South Africa has raised concerns in the United States, which views China as a strategic competitor.

A particularly contentious event was South Africa's decision to host naval exercises with Russia and China in February 2023. This move was met with sharp criticism from the United States, which perceived it as undermining diplomatic efforts to isolate Russia.

The deterioration in relations between Washington and Pretoria was thrown into sharp relief when Ambassador Reuben Brigety alleged that South Africa had supplied arms to Russia in December 2022, using the Russian carrier Lady R.

To date, Ambassador Brigety has yet to offer tangible evidence to validate these claims. The claim did appear to result in convincing Russian President Vladimir Putin to eschew in-person attendance at the recent BRICS summit in Johannesburg.

For many, these events have exposed a contradiction

in South Africa's foreign policy. Many see the strategy of non-alignment as incongruent with our constitutional aspirations for "human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedoms".

Historical factors have also contributed to a sense of distrust between the two nations. South Africa has criticised US foreign policy, often juxtaposing it with what it sees as US hypocrisy – supporting human rights in South Africa while aligning with authoritarian regimes elsewhere. These historical grievances have further strained relations.

The ANC had a strong connection based on shared ideological principles and strategic alliances with the Soviet Union during the apartheid era in South Africa, and this relationship was extended to Russia and continues to influence its foreign policy and attitudes towards the West as a whole.

The implications of this strained relationship between the US and South Africa are significant and extend beyond the diplomatic arena. Trade, investment, and cooperation in a number of sectors have characterised the economic relationship between South Africa and the United States. South Africa serves as a gateway for US businesses into the continent.

Conversely, the US represents a significant market and source of foreign direct investment for South Africa. AGOA has boosted South African exports, especially in the automotive and agricultural sectors, and both countries have shown interest in collaborating in areas like technology, research, and development.

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the United States has been a significant contributor of foreign assistance to South Africa, with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) administering the aid.

In 2022, the US allocated \$393 million in aid to South Africa, making it the third-largest beneficiary of US aid across Africa.

USAID's programmes have significantly reduced the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, increased access to life-saving antiretroviral treatment, and created over 100,000 jobs since 2017.

The agency's focus on democracy and governance has strengthened South Africa's political landscape, with support for critical institutions like the Electoral Commission of South Africa and the Independent Electoral Commission.

While any deterioration in the relationship could potentially harm South Africa's economy, both nations have a vested interest in ensuring stability, democracy, and human rights in Africa.

South Africa remains an enormous opportunity for the US. Chinese loans to Africa are at a two-decade low. We need more unconditional initiatives in South Africa that will lead to more enhanced cooperation, focusing more on people-to-people relationships.

A clearly articulated position of non-alignment is the most prudent way for South Africa to preserve its own sovereign integrity while projecting its human-centred values at home and abroad.

By proactively maintaining the synergy between non-alignment and human-centred values and clearly articulating this position, South Africa will give itself the best chance of reducing the risks posed by great power competition while reaping the benefits.

In following such a strategy, it can also be an example for other developing nations on how they too can navigate this era of uncertainty. At GGA, we believe the future of our relations lies in a partnership that recognises Africa's agency and aspirations.

The US and Africa as a whole can forge a relationship that is mutually beneficial and supports the development goals of both parties. May we be so bold as to suggest that our organisation is the perfect intermediary for such interventions, given the antipathy displayed by members of the governing party to certain messages?

The Brigety incident has demonstrated that there is a need for the US to maintain protocol, while South Africa must carefully manage its ties with China and Russia to ensure they do not come at the expense of relations with other major players like the United States.

The US has an opportunity to re-imagine its future with not just South Africa but the continent as a whole. South Africa and the United States have a great deal to offer one another. Both societies place a strong emphasis on human rights, individual liberties, and protecting the rights of our citizens.

As our relationship continues to evolve, our shared values and commitment to multilateralism should become the bedrock of our collaboration and partnership on various global issues, all to the mutual benefit of both our great countries.

Recommendations

1. The US should focus on direct civil society engagement with South Africa, empowering them in governance and state capacity building.
2. Strengthen private sector collaboration between the US and South Africa, fostering economic growth and innovation.
3. Transition from aid-centric relations to trade-driven engagements, leveraging opportunities from the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA).
4. Encourage youth participation in South Africa's democratic future, recognising its challenges as a "choiceless democracy"; and
5. Enhance people-to-people ties through cultural, educational, and professional exchange programs, fostering mutual understanding and trust.

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