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The Securitization of South Africa by the United States: Washington's Pressure and the Role of Lobbies

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During Donald Trump’s second presidential term, the United States’ foreign policy toward South Africa has entered a new phase—one in which Washington seeks to reshape South Africa’s foreign policy, and even elements of its domestic politics, by deploying instruments of securitization, economic pressure, and media-driven narrative construction in pursuit of its own objectives. This trend, which has intensified over the past year, indicates that South Africa has come to occupy a central place in the attention of the U.S. foreign-policy apparatus—not only as an independent actor on the global stage, but also as a country willing to file a case against Israel before the International Court of Justice. In this context, the securitization of South Africa has become a tool for controlling the country’s behavior—one that is driven both by the Trump administration and by powerful lobbying groups in Washington.

In this context, one of the most significant drivers of the securitization of South Africa has been the country’s formal case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, accusing it of committing genocide in Gaza. This move—viewed by many countries as a turning point in the defense of international law—was met with a markedly different reaction in Washington and Tel Aviv. The Israeli regime, which enjoys extensive influence within the structure of U.S. foreign policy—particularly during Trump’s second presidential term—has sought to increase pressure on South Africa by leveraging its lobbying networks within the White House, the State Department, and Congress. These pressures have manifested not only in the form of political statements but also through concrete measures, including the escalation of tariffs affecting bilateral economic relations, the restriction of security cooperation, and the promotion of narratives that portray South Africa as a “threat.” Alongside the Israeli lobby, the lobby of white South Africans in the United States has also played an important role in the securitization of the country. In recent years—having gained greater influence with support from figures such as Elon Musk—this lobby has sought to project an image of South Africa in which “systematic discrimination against white people” is taking place. This narrative—amplified by certain American conservative media outlets—has enabled the

Trump administration to justify its actions against South Africa under the pretext of “defending human rights.” In the past year, the United States admitted a number of white South Africans without adherence to due legal process and granted them citizenship—an act that the South African government deemed a direct interference in the country’s internal affairs. This action also demonstrated how the narrative surrounding “white victimhood” can be transformed into a tool for political pressure. At the economic level, the Trump administration has sought to compel South Africa to alter its behavior by imposing heavy tariffs on imports from the country. These tariffs—which have particularly targeted South Africa’s metals, automotive, and agricultural sectors—form part of a broader U.S. strategy aimed at exerting economic pressure on states unwilling to align their foreign policy with Washington. The Trump administration has justified these measures under the banner of “supporting American domestic industries.” In practice, however, these tariffs form part of a broader process of securitization, aimed at undermining South Africa’s economic autonomy. Alongside mounting economic pressure, diplomatic coercion has likewise intensified.

In 2024, the U.S. government expelled the South African ambassador for criticizing Trump’s policies—an unprecedented move in relations between the two countries that demonstrated Washington’s willingness to employ coercive diplomatic measures to control South Africa’s behavior. The expulsion sent a clear message: any public opposition to U.S. policies—even from a democratic country with long-standing ties to the West—would carry significant costs. At the discursive level, the Trump administration has sought to portray South Africa as an “unstable” and “unreliable” country, one allegedly grappling with “reverse racial discrimination.” This narrative, which is also being amplified by certain U.S. media outlets, constitutes part of an effort to legitimize hardline policies against South Africa. Trump has repeatedly accused the South African government of discriminating against white citizens, even asserting during a tense meeting last year with President Cyril Ramaphosa that “white-owned lands are being seized by force.” These allegations, which have been rejected by the South African government,

illustrate how narrative construction can be transformed into an instrument of securitization. Alongside these narratives, the Israeli lobby has also sought to portray South Africa as a country “aligned with America’s adversaries.” South Africa’s lawsuit against Israel at the International Court of Justice has been perceived by Tel Aviv as a hostile act, with Israel seeking to leverage its influence in Washington to escalate the costs of this move for South Africa. These pressures have manifested in the form of support for congressional initiatives aimed at restricting economic assistance to South Africa, intensifying scrutiny of the country’s relations with China, Iran, and Russia, and even considering the possibility of imposing targeted sanctions on certain South African officials. South Africa now finds itself at a juncture where it must, while managing external pressures and preserving domestic legitimacy, adopt a multifaceted strategy to counter Washington’s securitization of the issue and its targeted pressures.

At the outset, it must be recognized that the nature of the pressures extends well beyond a simple diplomatic dispute. The combined use of economic instruments, diplomatic leverage, media influence, and lobbying efforts indicates that the objective is not merely to alter a specific policy decision, but to recalibrate South Africa’s strategic conduct and reorient the broader trajectory of its foreign policy. Within this framework, three sets of immediate and medium-term measures appear essential for the South African government and its policy-making institutions: (1) strengthening economic resilience and diversifying partnerships; (2) rebuilding and activating multilateral and legal diplomacy; and (3) managing the discursive and media landscape at both the domestic and international levels.

From an economic standpoint, responding to tariff pressures and the threat of losing preferential trade benefits requires a coordinated blend of domestic and foreign policy measures. In the short term, South Africa must develop targeted support programs for vulnerable industries, implemented both through temporary assistance packages and by facilitating access to alternative markets. These measures must be temporary, transparent, and conditioned on structural reforms, so as to mitigate economic harm while avoiding the reinforcement of narratives alleging domestic mismanagement.

In the medium term, the diversification of trade and foreign investment partners should become a strategic priority. Expanding engagement with Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American markets, along with strengthening South–South cooperation, could raise the economic cost of securitization for Washington while providing viable alternatives for South African exporters and investors. The active pursuit of BRICS mechanisms, the African Union, and bilateral agreements with emerging partners should be prioritized in order to reduce dependence on any single market. South Africa should leverage multilateral mechanisms and deepen its cooperation with other African states and international organizations—particularly the African Union—to advance its position in the diplomatic and legal arenas. Bringing a case before the International Court of Justice, although it has itself contributed to mounting pressures, remains an important legal instrument that can strengthen South Africa’s international legitimacy. It is therefore essential that this course be accompanied by a coordinated diplomatic strategy aimed at securing the support of regional states and international partners. Activating regional diplomacy within the African Union and other regional groupings to secure supportive communiqués and build legal and political coalitions could help mitigate the effects of diplomatic isolation. At the same time, South Africa should strengthen its legal capacities in order to formulate credible legal and reciprocal responses to potential retaliatory measures, such as targeted sanctions or financial restrictions. Discursive and media management constitutes a critical pillar in countering securitization, as the acceptance of a security-centered narrative by domestic and international audiences is a prerequisite for the success of this process. South Africa should proactively and professionally reproduce and disseminate its own narrative—one that emphasizes the country’s commitment to human rights, multilateralism, judicial independence, and its domestic efforts toward reform. This requires a coordinated international media campaign that draws on public diplomacy, strategic public relations in international media outlets, and the mobilization of diaspora networks. In response to narratives alleging “systematic discrimination against whites,” the appropriate course should be grounded in transparency and the presentation of accurate data—clarifying

land reform policies, redress measures, and the existing legal mechanisms designed to protect minority rights.

At the same time, any aggressive move or emotionally charged response risks reinforcing the opposing narrative; accordingly, both the tone and substance of South Africa's messaging must remain professional, evidence-based, and firmly grounded in verifiable data. These developments, coupled with the unilateral pressures Washington is exerting on South Africa, could create a significant strategic opening for Iran. From a diplomatic perspective, Iran can capitalize on its shared position with South Africa in defense of multilateralism and international law, and through coordination in international forums—such as the United Nations General Assembly, regional groupings, and BRICS—offer reciprocal support for each other's legal and political positions. Such cooperation could enhance the legitimacy of both sides in the face of unilateral pressure. A key dimension of the securitization of both Iran and South Africa lies in the fact that both countries have come under intensified scrutiny in Washington, influenced in part by pro-Israel lobbying efforts in the United States. The role of lobbying networks in Washington—particularly pro-Israel lobbying groups, as well as organizations supported by certain foreign activists and investors—adds further complexity to the issue. South Africa should engage in a deliberate strategy of counter-lobbying, cultivating ties with members of the U.S. Congress, American civil society organizations, and independent media outlets capable of amplifying alternative narratives. Mobilizing the South African diaspora in the United States and Europe to explain government policies and present credible evidence could help mitigate the influence of opposing lobbying networks. At the same time, it is essential to maintain relations with the U.S. government through formal diplomatic channels in order to keep avenues for dialogue and de-escalation open; a complete severance of diplomatic relations would benefit neither side. From a security and geopolitical standpoint, South Africa must strike a delicate balance between strengthening South–South cooperation and preserving room for engagement with the West. Deepening military and security cooperation with China and Russia may entail political and diplomatic costs in the short term.

These partnerships therefore need to be transparent, grounded in clearly articulated national interests, and accompanied by public explanations of their objectives and scope in order to preempt negative portrayals. At the same time, South Africa can draw on its capacities in mediation and peace diplomacy to demonstrate its constructive role in the international system, thereby helping to weaken perceptions of it as a “threat.”

At the domestic level, structural reforms and enhanced transparency in politically sensitive policy areas—such as land reform, which has historically been accompanied by tension in the country—are essential. Many anti-South African narratives are fueled by information vacuums and misperceptions; the provision of transparent reporting, reliable statistical data, and legal mechanisms to protect the rights of all citizens can help reduce the space for media exploitation and lobbying. Moreover, strengthening independent judicial and oversight institutions, and demonstrating a clear commitment to the rule of law, are among the measures that can enhance South Africa’s international legitimacy.

Ultimately, South Africa must be prepared to contend with more assertive scenarios: these may include heightened tariffs, the imposition of targeted sanctions against officials, or efforts to restrict access to international financial resources. To this end, establishing emergency financial support funds, strengthening foreign currency reserves, and developing alternative financial instruments in collaboration with international partners can enhance economic resilience. Furthermore, formulating legal and diplomatic strategies to respond to retaliatory measures, and utilizing international mechanisms for dispute resolution, are essential.