SA/US Quo Vadis II 29 September 2026

The recently announced US visa arrangements, followed by the US ambassador's belligerent remarks, have put SA/US relations back in the spotlight again.

In March I published a first note on the topic and pointed to the starkly contrasting ways the US and China treat SA; that US policy towards SA has been captured by the "Afrikaner genocide" narrative; that the SA government cannot agree to the five demands the US has put to SA; and that the relationship is therefore in a deadlock. The recent developments have reinforced those conclusions. Relations are now more frigid than they were in March.

Are there any prospects of turning this around, particularly given the appointment of Roelf Meyer as ambassador to the US and the great willingness the Americans have shown in receiving him? I see three scenarios.

Remain as is

The first is a scenario of continuing deadlock and deterioration. In fact, foreign minister Ronald Lamola has said as much in New York where he is attending the UN and warned South Africans to prepare for a "worst case scenario". The driving logics are clear: Trump's disdain for SA, as re-confirmed in his vindictive and petty exclusion of SA from G20 proceedings; the US's totally unrealistic five demands which the SA government cannot possibly agree to; and the threats of the US ambassador of more punitive measures. So, relations keep on deteriorating from here.

Critical minerals

A possible joker in the pack which may spawn a different scenario, is critical minerals. Access to minerals is a high priority for the US and SA has several of them. In fact, about 60% of SA exports to the US are exempt from Trump's tariffs, mostly minerals and mineral products. Clearly the US wants those.

In May already the *Financial Times* reported on a meeting in Johannesburg attended by twenty-five officials from both countries and businesspeople on rare earths. Rare earth projects are now being developed in South Africa.

Being as transactional as they are, could the US drop their insistence on the five demands in exchange for access to rare earths and critical minerals? If so, we can look at an end to the deadlock and an improvement in ties. Let us call this the "joker in the pack" scenario.

The one obstacle to this scenario is the fact that SA has already signed a critical minerals agreement with the EU, a long-time reliable and trustworthy partner. How SA divvy up the rare earths cake between the US and the EU will be challenging.

Beyond politics

A third scenario is, to quote Roelf Meyer and investment envoy Alister Ruiters, "partnership beyond politics".

On the political level there is arrogance, belligerence and threats; on another level expanding business and tourism relationships.

In the six months since my note in March, five more US companies have announced investment and expansion decisions in SA totalling about R13 billion. In addition, several more billions have been invested by US companies buying SA companies to expand US operations here. The most prominent was the purchase by Alcoa of the Hillside and Bayside aluminium smelters in South Africa, which were part of Alcoa's deal to buy South32's global aluminium assets.

Two things stand out: the list of about 500+ US companies currently operating in SA is expanding, not shrinking; and BEE requirements and "Afrikaner genocide" narratives are not keeping new entrants out.

Many US companies operating here enjoy level 1 and 2 BEE status. Multinationals have the benefit of "buying" their BEE status with "equity equivalent investments" or EEIPs. Amazon, for example, has made a multi-year commitment to buy 1,95 million tonnes of carbon removal credits from a spekboom project in the Eastern Cape. The project has already created 1 600 jobs and aims to restore thousands of hectares of spekboom vegetation. It also creates an extra income stream for famers and game reserves on whose land spekboom is planted.

Talking about game reserves, Meyer and Ruiters point out that in May and June this year more than 40 000 US tourists came to SA each month. That is comfortably more than 1 000 arrivals per day! Although not the largest number of tourists, US tourist spending in SA is the highest of all countries' visitors. As would say Trump: politics ugly, investment and tourism beautiful!

In the meantime …

Data has now become available for SA agriculture exports for 2025. Exports to the US plunged by 3% in the first half of the year, by 11% in the 3rd quarter and a whopping 39% in the 4th quarter. (Trump tariffs took full effect from August). Yet overall agricultural exports from South Africa are up 10% with new consignments to Africa, the EU and the BRICS+ countries. On 8 September agricultural minister Willie Aucamp signed an access protocol for SA fresh cherries to China. The farmers are showing the way.

In August at a South Africa-China Electricity and Energy Investment Conference a MoU was signed on radioactive waste disposal; six Chinese companies made commitments to manufacture transformers, wires, pylons and batteries in SA; and work started on a SA-China energy investment partnership.

So What?

- The likely scenario for SA/US relations is a continuation of the deadlock and thus deterioration at the political level; whilst investment and tourism continue.
- Access to critical minerals may make for a more constructive relationship, but that is still up in the air.
- Agriculture shows how exports can be diversified successfully.
- The contrast between how China and the US treat SA has become even more stark than it was in March.