

CHAPTER 11

TRADING TRUST FOR DEALS

The US turn in Africa and its transatlantic echoes

by

ROSELLA MARANGIO

Commerce, security and migration are the United States' top priorities in its relations with Africa⁽¹⁾. Rather than disengaging from the continent, Washington's new mantra focuses on striking deals, controlling migration, counterterrorism efforts and fostering ties with countries willing to align with US interests. At the Abidjan CEO Forum in May 2025, the US signed deals worth \$550 million with Côte d'Ivoire⁽²⁾. At the US-Africa business summit in Angola, US companies concluded deals totalling more than \$2.5 billion with the host government and other African countries⁽³⁾. The Trump administration does not shy away from expressing approval or disapproval of its partners' policies whenever it suits

US interests, whether regarding partnerships with China or domestic reforms such as the expropriation bill in South Africa⁽⁴⁾. While projecting power through tariffs and bans, the US continues to expand its network of economic and security agreements across the continent.

While most African countries continue to seek to diversify their partnerships, leaders have also pushed back against perceived unilateral policies. A balance of outreach and pushback is emerging in Africa-US relations, driven more by pragmatism than by trust. This chapter argues that this new dynamic is transforming US-Africa relations and has significant implications for the Africa-EU

(1) Pecquet J., 'Fitrell lays out Trump's priorities for Africa: "Commerce, migration, peace"', *The Africa Report*, 13 May 2025 (<https://www.theafricareport.com/383729/commerce-migration-peace-us-state-departments-fitrell-lays-out-trumps-priorities-for-africa/>).

(2) US Embassy in Côte d'Ivoire, 'Senior Bureau official Fitrell highlights US commitment to stronger commercial ties with Africa during visit to Côte d'Ivoire', Press Release, 16 May 2025 (<https://ci.usembassy.gov/senior-bureau-official-fitrell-highlights-u-s-commitment-to-stronger-commercial-ties-with-africa-during-visit-to-cote-divoire/>).

(3) US Department of State, 'Record-breaking U.S.-Africa business summit yields \$2.5 billion in deals and commitments', 30 June 2025 (<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/06/record-breaking-u-s-africa-business-summit-yields-2-5-billion-in-deals-and-commitments/>); US Department of State, 'Digital Press Briefing: Senior Bureau Official Troy Fitrell's commercial diplomacy trip to West Africa', 20 May 2025 (<https://www.state.gov/digital-press-briefing-senior-bureau-official-troy-fitrells-commercial-diplomacy-trip-to-west-africa/>).

(4) Pecquet J., 'Don't get too chummy with China: Five things Fitrell told US Congress on Africa', 5 June 2025 (<https://www.theafricareport.com/385509/dont-get-too-chummy-with-china-five-things-fitrell-told-us-congress-on-africa/>); Mark, M., 'Marco Rubio shuns G20 meeting in South Africa over "equality" drive', *Financial Times*, 6 February 2025 (<https://www.ft.com/content/fad1d92b-1ec5-4128-b129-91f4687bf548>).

partnership. Amid mounting US pressure and rising competition, the Africa-EU partnership gains momentum by emphasising that what counts is not only the substance of policies but also the reliability of the partnership – an approach aimed at resisting a world order shaped by coercion rather than rules.

A ROLLERCOASTER PARTNERSHIP

Commitment to multilateral institutions has long been a critical foundation of trust between the US and African countries. However, the Trump 2.0 administration has accelerated its retreat from this domain by withdrawing from UN agencies, suspending financial contributions to the UN system, exiting the Paris Agreement, and boycotting key global forums like the G20 ministerial meetings. These actions are widely perceived as dismissive of African calls for inclusive multilateralism and as undermining both African agency and multilateral institutions.

US development aid has historically been a cornerstone of its soft power in Africa. However, recent cuts to USAID and the withholding of funding from UN programmes have disrupted essential projects, particularly in the health and education sectors, with

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serious repercussions projected across the continent⁽⁵⁾. This shift away from development cooperation towards more transactional economic engagements has eroded trust and jeopardised decades of partnership-building.

While the US maintains a security presence in Africa, the nature of this engagement is evolving. The suspension of US financial contributions to the UN has had far-reaching consequences for Africa, disrupting both humanitarian programmes, and peacekeeping missions, most of which are based on the continent⁽⁶⁾. In addition, Washington's opposition to UN financing for African Union-led peace support operations such as the AU mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) has further strained trust, particularly as it was accompanied by vocal demands for a 'fairer share' of contributions from Africans and Europeans. Meanwhile, airstrikes against the Islamic State and Al-Shabaab in Somalia have increased dramatically, from 10 in 2024 to more than 45 between February and August 2025⁽⁷⁾. The latest AFRICOM African Lion exercise, hosted by Morocco, Ghana, Senegal and Tunisia, was the largest in its 20-year history, with over 10 000 participants from more than 20 countries⁽⁸⁾. However, these efforts are increasingly seen through a transactional lens, aimed at securing access to strategic resources, and stand in contrast to China's possible ambitions to expand its own military footprint on the continent.

(5) Cilliers J., 'Data modelling reveals the heavy toll of USAID cuts on Africa', ISS Africa, 28 February 2025 (<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/data-modelling-reveals-the-heavy-toll-of-usaid-cuts-on-africa>).

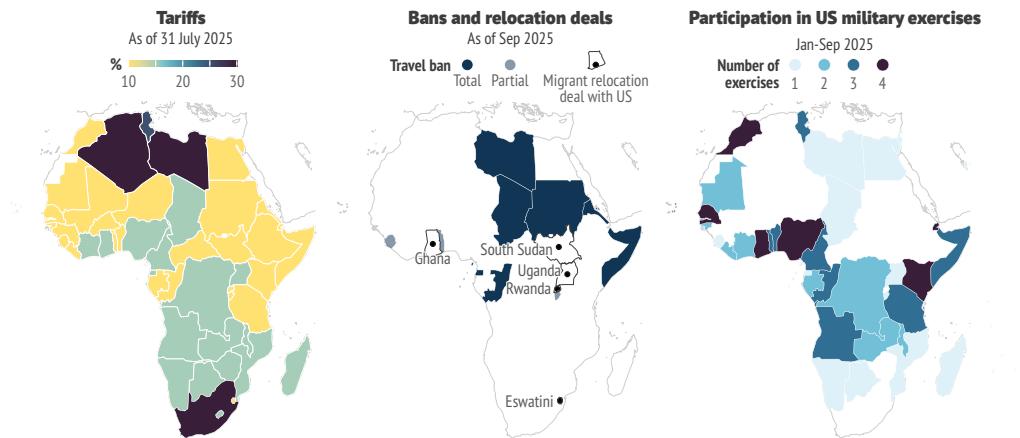
(6) See: Council on Foreign Relations, 'Funding the United Nations: How much does the U.S. pay?', 28 February 2025 (<https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs>).

(7) AFRICOM, 'Airstrikes 2024 and 2025' (<https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/airstrikes>).

(8) Africom, 'African Lion' (<https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/exercises/african-lion>).

Redrawing ties

Mapping US-Africa relations under Trump



Data: The White House, 2025; AFRICOM, 2025; USA Naval Forces, 2025; US Department of Defense, 2025; European Commission, GISCO, 2025.

NB: The depiction of borders is indicative and does not support any territorial claims.

The US's trade posture under Trump 2.0 is characterised by the imposition of new tariffs and exploiting uncertainty over the future of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to pressure partners into negotiating bilateral deals. Even though the AGOA expired on 30 September 2025, discussions are ongoing over a potential one-year extension⁽⁹⁾. These tariffs are widely perceived as hampering African development while selectively exempting mineral imports that benefit US interests. At the same time, migration policies, including travel bans targeting several African countries and proposals to relocate US-bound migrants to third-party African nations like Rwanda and Eswatini, have drawn criticism from the AU and civil society. These policies are seen as largely unilateral and instrumental in pressuring countries

to adopt policies more aligned with US preferences, as demonstrated by Somalia's decision to reinstate recognition of Taiwanese passports or the adoption of American border control technology⁽¹⁰⁾.

FRACTURED TRUST

Many African countries continue to adopt a cautious posture, navigating between public pushback and ongoing negotiations. Thus, in response to the US travel ban Chad suspended visas for American citizens, while the AU urged Washington to protect its border in a balanced, evidence-based manner⁽¹¹⁾. Ghana's Foreign Minister protested about alleged disrespectful remarks, recalling the

(9) 'Trump administration says it supports 1-year renewal of Africa trade initiative', Reuters, 29 September 2025 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/trump-administration-says-it-supports-1-year-renewal-africa-trade-initiative-2025-09-29/>).

(10) Garowe online, 'Somalia lifts ban on Taiwanese passports amid US pressure and geopolitical tensions with China', 12 June 2025 (<https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-lifts-ban-on-taiwanese-passports-amid-u-s-pressure-and-geopolitical-tensions-with-china>); Nor, M.S., 'Somalia deploys new border technology to get off Trump's US visa blacklist', *The Africa Report*, 4 July 2025 (<https://www.theafricareport.com/387347/somalia-deploys-new-border-technology-to-get-off-trumps-us-visa-blacklist/>).

(11) AU Commission, Statement of the African Union Commission on US Travel ban, 5 June 2025 (<https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20250605/statement-african-union-commission-us-travel-ban>).

depth of bilateral ties and Africa's contribution to the US, and declaring that 'Ghana will not be deterred by false narratives', a statement that echoes South Africa's President's assertion that 'we will not be bullied'⁽¹²⁾.

However, while US-Africa relations are marked by growing distrust, trust has not evaporated entirely nor has it vanished across all countries. Morocco continues to enjoy US favour following its normalisation of relations with Israel and Washington's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. The agreement brokered between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda contributed to a more positive perception of US engagement, even if it was built on years of African-led mediation efforts, and its sustainability remains to be seen. Moreover, the US-Africa business summit and President Trump's meeting with the presidents of Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Liberia and Gabon in June and July 2025 underscore Washington's continued efforts to expand its outreach to the continent.

Overall, differences across the continent reflect strategic convenience rather than enduring trust. But while the US applies pressure through tariffs and suspension

of aid, other countries are stepping up their engagement. Canada has launched its first ever Africa strategy, China has announced its readiness to extend the zero-tariff treatment to all 53 African countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has significantly expanded its investments in Africa⁽¹³⁾.

Growing awareness of a shifting US posture has prompted African countries to seek more diversified partnerships. Growing awareness of a shifting US posture has prompted African countries to seek more diversified partnerships, including among themselves, albeit with varying intensity and through different approaches. At the AU-EU Ministerial meeting in May 2025, the EU High Representative clearly stated that the EU will continue to be a 'reliable, attentive, predictable and solid partner to Africa'⁽¹⁴⁾. Amid growing uncertainty, this reassurance could make all the difference. However, for this commitment to succeed, the EU will need to demonstrate its strategic autonomy while maintaining cooperation with the US whenever possible, proactively managing divergences, and being prepared to push back when necessary – just as African partners are doing. This would also include exploring further cooperation in Africa with third countries such as the Gulf states and Türkiye whenever possible.

(12) Ablakwa S.O., 'Dear US, Our talk is not cheap, Sincerely, Ghana Foreign Minister Ablakwa', *The Africa Report*, 10 July 2025 (<https://www.theafricareport.com/387783/dear-us-our-talk-is-not-cheap-sincerely-ghana-foreign-minister-ablakwa/>); Wendell, R. and Peyton, N., 'South Africa "will not be bullied" Ramaphosa says after Trump attack', Reuters, 6 February 2025 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-will-deepen-reforms-try-lift-growth-above-3-president-says-2025-02-06/>).

(13) Government of Canada, 'Canada's Africa Strategy: A Partnership for Shared Prosperity and Security', 2025 (<https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/transparency-transparence/canada-africa-strategy-strategie-africaine.aspx?lang=eng>); Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, 'China-Africa Changsha Declaration on Upholding Solidarity and Cooperation of the Global South', 11 June 2025 (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202506/t20250611_11645736.html); Savage, R., 'UAE becomes Africa's biggest investor amid rights concerns', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2024 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/24/uae-becomes-africa-biggest-investor-amid-rights-concerns>).

(14) European Commission, EU/African Union Ministerial Meeting, Brussels, Opening speech by Kaja Kallas, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, 21 May 2025 (<https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/1-272116>).

While relations with the US may feel like a rollercoaster to many, there is no shortage of partnerships in Africa. As competition increases, most visibly between the US and China, African countries will continue to hedge as much as possible. However, the key question for African countries remains how to transform foreign investments into sustainable local growth and development. The EU also emerges as a unique partner in this regard, combining investment capacity with attention to labour standards, environmental protection and climate change concerns.

STEERING THROUGH CHANGE

The erosion of trust challenges long-held assumptions about the EU-US transatlantic and US-Africa relationships. Shared values no longer provide a stable compass; instead, pragmatism and transactional bargaining have become the norm. African and European actors must navigate a fluid landscape in which the US may selectively align with their interests – or actively exploit divisions within regional blocs to strengthen its hand.

To respond, Africa and the EU should move beyond defensive postures and adopt forward-looking strategies:

> **Anchor US engagement to shared priorities within African and European agendas.** Rather than merely react, partners should set their own terms of engagement. They should build on areas of convergence whenever possible, for instance maritime security, the fight against organised crime and counterterrorism. At the same time, they should clearly articulate

US material interests, such as securing critical supply chains and disrupting drug trafficking routes. Reframing US bargaining positions as part of a shared, mutually beneficial agenda, rather than as sources of division, would shift the balance of agency.

- > **Repoliticise support for African integration.** The EU should defend regional integration as both a political and economic priority, a buffer against divide-and-rule tactics. The AU and its African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) initiative serve as key pillars of resilience against fragmentation.
- > **Broaden the agenda beyond security to include strategic areas of innovation.** This means expanding cooperation into areas that are strategic for both EU and African countries: digital governance (including AI regulation and data protection), climate adaptation finance, and critical raw materials. Supporting Euro-African value chains could benefit both continents by diversifying supply and creating value-added locally, especially in Africa.
- > **Bring Africa from the margins to the centre of EU strategic discourse.** Outreach must go beyond symbolism: Africa should be central to EU narratives about the global order, not relegated to a marginal chapter. This would grant Africa the recognition it increasingly demands as a co-shaper of global norms.

Ultimately, the EU and Africa can develop strength by investing in empowerment – of their partnership, their institutions, and a genuinely rules-based order.