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Op-Ed

SOUTH AFRICA MUST CHOOSE STRATEGIC PATIENCE OVER IMPORTED PANIC

By Daryl Swanepoel

The latest round of criticism from sections of South Africa's right wing follows a familiar script. This time, it has been triggered by President Cyril Ramaphosa's participation in a progressive gathering in Barcelona, held up as yet further evidence that South Africa is drifting into ideological hostility toward the United States.

The charge is serious: that South Africa is mismanaging its foreign policy and unnecessarily antagonising Washington.

It is also wrong.

What we are witnessing is not simply a disagreement over diplomacy. It is the local expression of a much broader ideological contest, one that is unfolding inside the United States itself, and now increasingly being transplanted into South African political discourse.

Over the past weeks, the temperature has again been raised by renewed claims from President Donald Trump that South Africa is engaged in a "genocide" against Afrikaners. These claims are not only untrue; they have been repeatedly disproven, by crime data, by credible media and by voices within the American diplomatic establishment itself. Yet they persist, sustained not only by their repetition in U.S. political circles, but also by the way in which organisations such as AfriForum, Solidariteit, Lex Libertas and others frame developments in South Africa in terms that, while not explicitly advancing such claims, create the space in which they are more easily believed and politically mobilised.

This is not diplomacy. It is narrative warfare. And crucially, it is not originating in Pretoria.

It is tempting for critics to reduce this to a narrow dispute about South Africa's domestic policies, affirmative action, land reform or race-based redress. But that misses the deeper dynamic at play. What we are seeing is the externalisation of American domestic politics.

The same ideological forces that are currently dismantling Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks within the United States are now projecting that struggle outward. South Africa, by virtue of its history and its constitutional commitment to redress, has become a convenient theatre in which to fight that battle.

In other words, this is not about South Africa alone. It is about America's internal contest, exported.

Having recently returned from a series of engagements in Washington, one observation stands out with uncomfortable clarity: in certain quarters, we are no longer dealing with open-minded

interlocutors. We are dealing with positions that are already settled, reinforced by domestic political narratives and resistant to empirical correction.

That matters. Because it fundamentally alters the nature of the diplomatic challenge.

You cannot resolve a dispute when one side is not engaging with facts, but with a constructed reality. You cannot negotiate effectively when the premise itself is ideological, rather than evidential. And so the question arises: what should South Africa do?

There are those who argue, implicitly or explicitly, that we should adjust ourselves to this moment. That we should soften our positions, recalibrate our voice and avoid offending the sensibilities of the current ideological current in Washington. In less polite terms: that we should bend. But bend toward what, exactly?

Toward a narrative that denies our lived reality? Toward an ideological project that is itself contested within the United States? Toward a political moment that is, by its very nature, temporary? That would not be diplomacy. It would be strategic surrender.

None of this is to suggest that South Africa should abandon its commitment to a strong and constructive relationship with the United States. On the contrary, that relationship remains vital. But it must be built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to truth, not on the appeasement of misinformation or the importation of foreign ideological battles.

It is also worth placing South Africa's experience in a broader context. The current tensions are not unique. Across Europe, North America and of Asia, relationships with the United States have become more strained, more transactional and more ideologically charged. South Africa is not an outlier, it is part of a wider pattern.

The claim that Pretoria alone is responsible for this deterioration does not withstand scrutiny.

There is, of course, a counter-argument often advanced, that tensions between South Africa and the United States did not begin with the current administration and that Washington has long been uneasy with Pretoria's relationships within BRICS, and with countries such as Russia and Iran.

There is some truth in this. But it is a partial truth, and therefore a misleading one.

South Africa's engagement with BRICS and the broader Global South is not new. It has been a consistent feature of our foreign policy for over a decade, rooted in economic diversification, multilateralism and a deliberate strategy to avoid overdependence on any single global power. During that period, while disagreements with Washington certainly arose, they were managed through the normal channels of diplomacy. They did not define the relationship.

What has changed is not the existence of difference, but the way in which difference is interpreted and acted upon.

In recent months, routine expressions of strategic autonomy have increasingly been recast in Washington not as policy choices, but as acts of hostility. South Africa's recourse to the International Court of Justice in relation to Israel provides a further illustration of this shift. What Pretoria has framed as a legal action grounded in its constitutional and international obligations has, in parts of the U.S. political discourse, been recast as evidence of ideological hostility.

This reframing is telling. It collapses legal principle into political alignment.

In doing so, it draws South Africa into the orbit of another deeply polarised debate within American domestic politics, one in which positions on Israel have become entangled with broader ideological identity. The result is that South Africa is no longer engaged as an independent legal actor, but interpreted through the lens of external political loyalties.

Once again, the issue is not simply disagreement. It is reinterpretation and it marks a shift from manageable diplomatic tension to something more ideological in character.

What, then, is the appropriate response? It is not escalation. It is not capitulation. It is strategic patience.

Strategic patience means continuing to engage, but without illusion. It means defending our constitutional principles without apology. It means resisting the pressure to contort our policies to fit an external ideological agenda. And it means recognising that political moments, especially those driven by heightened ideological fervour, do not last forever.

The United States is not static. Its politics evolve. Its institutions recalibrate. The current trajectory, however dominant it may appear, is not immutable.

Those in South Africa who are rushing to align themselves uncritically with this moment would do well to reflect on that. They are not aligning with a permanent reality; they are aligning with a passing phase.

And when that phase passes, as all such phases do, the question will be asked: who remained anchored, and who drifted?

South Africa must ensure that it is counted among the former. Because in the end, the real test of foreign policy is not whether one avoids discomfort in the short term. It is whether one preserves national integrity in the long term.

We should seek partnership with the United States. But not at the cost of becoming a proxy battleground for its internal ideological wars. And not at the cost of becoming something we are not.

Strategic patience, not imported panic, is the wiser course.

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