

Time to Cut U.S. Foreign Aid to South Africa

Max Primorac

KEY TAKEAWAYS

South Africa has long taken political positions that are grievously antithetical to the national security interests of the United States and its allies.

Pretoria supported Gaddafi, Castro, and Mugabe; sold weapons to al-Assad and Putin; is now forming alliances with China, Iran, and Russia; and supports Hamas.

South Africa does not qualify for further U.S. foreign assistance, and the U.S. should end its aid to South Africa until the country aligns with American values.

South Africa's request to The Hague's International Court of Justice (ICJ) last December to accuse Israel of breaching the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in Gaza as it defends itself against Hamas's effort to wipe Israel off the map is another in a long string of radical policies pursued by a country with strong ties to communist China, Russia, and Iran. These ties subvert U.S. and allied national security interests. Simultaneously, South Africa is among the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, totaling \$6 billion over the past 10 years, despite its close cooperation with U.S. adversaries. This gross disconnect must end: It is time to turn off the aid spigot to South Africa.

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South Africa as Proud Adversary

For years, South Africa has taken political positions that are grievously antithetical to the national security interests of the United States and its allies. South Africa serves as a reliable cheerleader promoting communist China's strategic aims to dominate the world, supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine, backing Iran and its terrorist proxies, and misusing international bodies to promote the agendas of these malign actors while posturing itself as a moral voice.

Aligning with Communist China. In 2010, South Africa joined Brazil, Russia, India, and China in founding BRICS, a geopolitical bloc established “to restructure the global political, economic, and financial architecture;”¹ in effect, to challenge the U.S.-led global system. China, subsequently, launched its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to lock developing countries into its political orbit through infrastructure loans.² BRICS has become an important global strategic lever for Beijing to erode U.S. influence. It represents 40 percent of the world's population and one-quarter of the global gross domestic product. The bloc acts as a crucible for multilateral platforms promoting de-dollarization of the global economy.

South Africa was the first African country to join the BRI and, as of 2023, has seen Chinese investments and construction projects reach \$14 billion, concentrated in strategic sectors of mining, energy, transport, and finance.³ Last summer, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa hosted the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, which he co-chaired with Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping who made a rare international visit (his other trip was to Moscow). Russian dictator Vladimir Putin serves as BRICS president *pro tempore* for 2024. The forum provided both China and Russia a global platform to air their grievances against the United States and portray themselves as partners with the developing world.⁴

Supporting Russia. In May 2023, in highly unusual and frank public remarks, U.S. Ambassador to South Africa Reuben Brigety accused the country of illegally supplying weapons and ammunition to Russia in its war on Ukraine: “The arming of the Russians is extremely serious, and we do not consider this issue to be resolved, and we would like SA [South Africa] to start practicing its nonalignment policy,” he said.⁵ The previous year, the U.S. embassy had alerted Pretoria that the Russian vessel that would eventually transport the weapons was under U.S. sanctions.⁶ Last year, President Ramaphosa was one of only 17 African heads of state of 49 delegations that traveled to St. Petersburg to participate in President Putin's Russia–Africa Summit.⁷ South Africa has yet to condemn Russia for its brutal and continuing war on Ukraine.

Most egregiously, in February 2023, South Africa hosted a 10-day joint military exercise with Russia and China off the strategic Cape of Good Hope through which much global trade passes. The event coincided with the one-year anniversary of Moscow's second invasion of Ukraine and signaled to the rest of Africa the Chinese People's Liberation Army's readiness to provide the African continent with military training.⁸ It also helps China to project its growing naval power throughout the Indo-Pacific region and into the Atlantic Ocean.

Carrying Iran's Toxic Water. During last summer's BRICS meeting in Johannesburg, for the first time in its 15-year history the five-country bloc formally invited six new members to join, including Iran. South African President Ramaphosa characterized it as a partnership of countries with "a shared vision for a better world." A senior Iranian official described it as "a strategic victory for Iran's foreign policy,"⁹ two months before Iran's axis of Middle Eastern proxies—Gaza's Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthi rebels, and Iraq's militias—would launch a coordinated mass attack against Israel, U.S. facilities in the region, and international shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

South Africa has had a long and supportive relationship with Iran. It abstained from 11 of 12 United Nations resolutions against Iran's human rights abuses, while opposing the remaining one.¹⁰ South Africa opposed a United Nations' report on the death of Mahsa Amini following her arrest for "wearing an improper hijab." Her brutal killing sparked months of massive protests throughout Iran under the banner of "Woman, Life, Freedom." The protests were brutally suppressed by the Iranian regime and "led to the deaths of at least 476 persons, including at least 64 children and 34 women."¹¹ South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor made a state visit to Teheran two weeks after Hamas's attack on Israel and as Iran-backed Hezbollah forces in Lebanon began firing hundreds of rockets into northern Israel.¹²

Targeting Israel. The ICJ rejected South Africa's bid to misuse the genocide convention to impose a ceasefire on Israel that would have allowed Hamas a respite to regroup, rearm, and attack again. The irony is that the convention was established in the aftermath of Nazi Germany's systematic campaign to exterminate the Jewish people, a goal shared by Hamas.¹³ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken remarked that "whether or not we [the U.S. and South Africa] have a disagreement, one particular matter [South African support for Hamas] doesn't take away from the important work that we're doing together in so many other areas."¹⁴

But relations between South Africa and Hamas are more than "one particular matter." South Africa equates Israel's existence with a "75-year-long

apartheid, its 56-year-long belligerent occupation of Palestinian territory and its 16-year-long blockage of Gaza.”¹⁵ In an October 30, 2023, statement South Africa’s foreign ministry declared Israel “accountable for war crimes, crimes against humanity...and crime of genocide [that] must also be investigated,” without reference to Hamas’s brutal terrorist attack a few weeks before. The statement berated the “unethical way” in which the deputy head of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies criticized the government’s pro-Hamas stance, citing his “discredited information related to the beheading of children in Israel,” although Hamas’s atrocities have been verified,¹⁶ and then threatened the Jewish leader with the “potential libelous nature of his utterances.”¹⁷ In fact, South Africa worked closely with known Palestinian terror fronts in “documenting” their genocide claim and joined their delegation in presenting the claim to the ICJ. One reference in the court petition is titled, “Israel Apartheid: Tool of Zionist Settler Colonialism.”¹⁸

Foreign Minister Pandor spoke to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh just 10 days after the slaughter, prompting the Jewish Board to complain that “Minister Pandor has taken a side and dragged South Africa into a very, very dangerous situation as she supports Hamas militants.”¹⁹ This past December, a senior Hamas delegation visited South Africa to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s death by laying wreaths with Mandela’s grandson, a member of the ruling African National Congress, who called the Palestinian cause the “great moral issue of our time.”²⁰ More recently the foreign minister called “on all states to cease funding and facilitating Israel’s military action” and asked the ICJ to “issue an arrest warrant...for the prime minister of Israel.”²¹

Maintaining Long-Standing Radical Links. South Africa’s close ties to Hamas are not a new phenomenon, and the country has a long history of siding with dictatorships. For decades, Pretoria supported Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, Cuba’s Fidel Castro, and neighboring Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. It sold weapons to Syria’s Hafez al-Assad²² (and, more recently, to Putin’s Russia).²³

South Africa has been selective in its moral outrage. According to the Hudson Institute, while voting to condemn Israel in all 99 U.N. resolutions, on non-Israel related condemnatory resolutions, “South Africa abstained on 75 of the 111 motions, voted against 17 motions, and voted in favor for [only] 19 motions.” Yet, it sponsored 41 anti-Israel resolutions.²⁴

Pretoria voted against all 22 resolutions condemning the Syrian regime, which has caused the deaths of more than 200,000 civilians, tortured thousands, and displaced 14 million people. It has acted similarly in its refusal

to condemn China for massive human rights crimes in Tibet and Xinjiang. South Africa abstained from U.N. resolutions condemning North Korea for torture, public executions, forced labor camps, and “the trafficking of women for prostitution or forced marriage.”²⁵ It joined China and Russia in opposing a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Myanmar’s military regime to “allow full freedom of expression, association and movement for...all political prisoners, lifting all constraints on all political leaders and civilians.”²⁶

President Ramaphosa recently hosted Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the renegade general who has plunged Sudan into a brutal civil war and humanitarian crisis,²⁷ despite the Hague-based International Criminal Court investigating him for war crimes based on “a very significant body of material, information and evidence that is relevant to those particular crimes.”²⁸ Twenty years ago, Dagalo was a leader of Arab Muslim militias committing genocide against the non-Muslim peoples in southern Sudan, killing 300,000 civilians and displacing 3 million people. The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for the crime of genocide.²⁹ Despite the arrest warrant and requirement that states arrest him if given the opportunity, South Africa instead hosted al-Bashir and threatened to withdraw from the U.N. court after it faced heavy criticism.³⁰

This record stands in sharp contrast to Minister Pandor’s reason for accusing Israel of breaching the genocide convention. She said, “South Africa has a moral responsibility to always stand with the oppressed because we come from a history of struggle, a history of believing that everybody deserves human dignity, justice and freedom.”³¹

South Africa Receives Billions in U.S. Foreign Aid

South Africa is the ninth-largest U.S. aid recipient in the world,³² and from 2012 to 2021, received more than \$6 billion in direct U.S. government foreign assistance. The U.S. provides the country billions of dollars more through its partnership funding agreements with international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, the latter of which, for example, has committed more than \$2.6 billion in lending to the country.

In fiscal year (FY) 2022, South Africa received \$660 million in total U.S. direct assistance across all programs³³ while it is slated to receive more than \$900 million in HIV/AIDS support for FYs 2024 and 2025, adding to the more than \$8 billion the country has already received since 2003 as the single largest recipient of U.S.-funded HIV/AIDS support.³⁴ Most U.S. foreign aid supports the country’s health sector for HIV/AIDS care, prevention,

and treatment and, more recently, for improving the government's COVID-19 response capability. Other programs support agricultural development, food security, basic education, entrepreneurship, the national economy, and youth employment.

The Biden Administration's climate agenda provides South Africa even more foreign aid opportunities. It is among the world's top 20 global greenhouse gas emitters and relies on burning coal to generate 80 percent of its electricity needs, more than any other industrialized country. As a result, it has been under immense pressure from Western governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations to transition to renewable energy and reach net zero carbon emissions. Pretoria agreed to a transition plan in exchange for a U.S. government commitment to provide it more than \$1 billion as part of a larger \$8.5 billion donor-financed international aid package.³⁵

Power Africa, a federal interagency coordinating mechanism designed to bolster Africa's energy sector, has to date supported 3,180 megawatts of electricity generation projects in South Africa, closing on 38 deals and catalyzing billions of dollars in private-sector investments. Though the \$8.5 billion aid package falls well short of the estimated \$100 billion South Africa estimates it will need the next five years to accelerate the transition, U.S. taxpayers and allied taxpayers—and their children—are on the hook for paying for it.

Furthermore, the U.S. government disbursed \$83 million to expand South Africa's information and communication technology infrastructure. The program will ultimately expend \$300 million to support a network of interconnected data centers across the African continent, handing South Africa a privileged global technology leadership role.³⁶ The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) joined the World Bank, France's development finance agency Proparco, and Germany's state investment arm DEG in a \$660 million long-term financing package for local pharmaceuticals producer Aspen Pharmacare Holdings Limited, helping to make South Africa a continental leader in COVID-19 vaccine production.³⁷ Germany-based BioNTech followed suit by opening "one of the most advanced manufacturing facilities in the world," with its own vaccine-producing plant.³⁸ The DFC has invested in several South African-based investment funds.

South Africa is also the largest U.S. trading partner in Africa. It is a member of the Africa Growth Opportunity Act (AGO),³⁹ which offers sub-Saharan countries duty-free trade access to U.S. markets. South Africa has seen more than \$25 billion in two-way annual trade with the United

States, including more than \$16 billion in exports, larger than the amount of Chinese investment in the country. It is a regional home to 600 American companies that see the country as stable and relatively developed. Many international donor agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, have their regional headquarters there. In sum, South Africa has benefitted substantially, both financially and politically, from its privileged position as a major partner to the U.S. and other Western countries.

Holding South Africa Accountable

The U.S. Congress has finally taken note of South Africa's radical foreign policy positions that undermine global stability and provide aid and comfort to America's adversaries. Last June, the Republican and Democratic Party leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee signed a joint letter asking the Biden Administration to move the 2023 U.S.–Africa trade summit from South Africa to another location because of Pretoria's "deepening military relationship with Russia." The letter stated that South Africa's "joint military exercises with Russia and China" violate AGOA's "statutory requirement that beneficiary countries 'not engage in activities that undermine United States national security or foreign policy interests.'"⁴⁰

The Biden Administration ignored the congressional letter and thus the trade summit was not relocated, but it prompted Senator Jim Risch (R-ID) to further castigate "the Biden administration's decision to hold the African Growth and Opportunity Act Forum in South Africa despite the country's concerning relationship with Russia, Iran, and Hamas."⁴¹ Risch sought to remove South Africa's eligibility for AGOA's duty-free trade access to American markets, describing the country's actions as "subverting U.S. national security and foreign policy interests" and promising "that Congress must take course-correcting action."⁴²

This year, a bipartisan group of 210 legislators wrote to the Biden Administration to denounce South Africa for "grossly unfounded and defamatory charges against Israel on the world stage, abusing the judicial process in order to delegitimize the democratic State of Israel."⁴³ House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Michael McCaul (R-TX) said that he was "deeply concerned that South Africa's claims are politically motivated, highlighting its close ties to Hamas, and demonstrating its efforts to align with Iran, Russia, and the Chinese Communist Party's interests."⁴⁴

The House of Representatives' State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee appropriations bill for FY 2024 "prioritizes...

programs that strengthen our national security, counter the People's Republic of China (PRC)...provide support to our allies, and promote American values at home and abroad, while cutting the spending for low priority activities and programs."⁴⁵ According to this criteria, South Africa does not qualify for further U.S. foreign assistance.

Time to Cut Aid to South Africa

Two fundamental principles must direct U.S. foreign aid. First, foreign aid is a tool of foreign policy intended to promote America's national interests at home and abroad. Foreign aid is not a global entitlement program, nor is it charity.⁴⁶

Second, responsibility for meeting citizen needs lies with the recipient governments, not the United States. These governments must carry out policies that generate jobs and wealth, provide basic social services, and build public-sector capacity to handle emergencies. Should gaps emerge, these governments can request support from the U.S. and other donors. However, in exchange for such assistance it is reasonable for donors to expect that aid recipients adhere to basic international norms of behavior and not threaten donor security.

In the case of South Africa, neither of these principles have been met. Across every major national security imperative—confronting Chinese and Russian aggression, Iranian terrorism, and other threats to the U.S. and its allies, South Africa stands proudly opposed. Few countries are less aligned with America's security interests than South Africa.

While Congress demands that South Africa desist in pursuing policies that damage the bilateral relationship, the Biden Administration has been mute, willing to blindly continue large-scale aid programs to South Africa irrespective of Pretoria's open and systematic support for malign actors that threaten the United States and its allies. The U.S. Department of State states that "the United States and South Africa have built a solid bilateral relationship" and that South Africa "is a strategic partner of the United States."⁴⁷ But this claim is clearly false. Failing to hold South Africa to account undercuts the credibility of the entire U.S. global foreign assistance as a critical tool of soft power.⁴⁸

Recommendations for the Administration and Congress

In order to stop U.S. taxpayer funding of South Africa's dangerous foreign policy, the Administration and Congress should:

- **Suspend South African membership in U.S. trade and investment agreements.** The Administration has the authority to suspend South Africa's membership in the AGOA, the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (via South Africa's membership in the Southern African Customs Union), and the Generalized System of Preferences. Preferential access to U.S. markets should be reserved for countries that respect U.S. national security, abide by international norms of behavior, and share basic values with the American people. Such preferences should not be extended to hostile countries, such as South Africa. Should the Administration not act, Congress should revoke South Africa's eligibility upon the program's renewal.
- **Freeze South Africa's participation in U.S.-funded development programs.** South Africa benefits from an array of U.S.-financed energy, technology, health, education, and agriculture programs. These include Power Africa, Prosper Africa, and those of the DFC, which enable substantial private investment in South Africa. Besides providing financial support, these programs give Pretoria global platforms to propagate its anti-democratic, anti-Western, and antisemitic propaganda. It also sends the political signal to other aid recipients that there are no consequences for promoting policies that harm the United States. Arguments that taking punitive action will push the country into China's arms neglect that it is already in China's (and Russia's and Iran's) arms. Should the Administration fail to take such action, Congress should exclude South Africa from these programs in its next foreign aid bill.
- **Veto further disbursements of multilateral assistance.** The United States should rally its allies on the boards of the World Bank and other multilateral funding institutions to freeze further financial disbursements to South Africa. World Bank and International Monetary Fund engagement encourage private capital flows into South Africa, making the country a stronger ally of America's adversaries, especially China.
- **Prune global health programs.** South Africa is the continent's largest recipient of U.S.-funded programs to prevent and treat HIV/AIDs, despite South Africa being among the wealthiest African countries. To avoid serious disruption to the country's highly aid-dependent health sector, the U.S. Congress should cut HIV/AIDS aid support to South Africa by 10 percent annually to give the country time to assume these functions.

Conclusion

The multi-billion-dollar foreign aid industry that will reflexively criticize any aid cuts should instead consider pressing Pretoria to end its support for malign actors. Arguing that lives are at stake in South Africa ignores the far greater number of lives lost to the murderous regimes in Beijing, Moscow, Teheran, Damascus, Havana, and elsewhere, regimes that South Africa materially supports. By extending billions of dollars of aid to these regimes' ally, South Africa, the U.S. becomes complicit in the crimes of those regimes.

The many South Africans who rely on U.S.-financed programs to meet their health needs should reconsider support for the ruling African National Congress that has abused uninterrupted government power since 1994 and is therefore responsible for damaging South Africa's international standing.

South Africa would restore a modicum of bilateral trust with the United States by scrapping its libelous accusation against Israel of breaching the genocide convention, but that would require a sea change in the country's foreign policy DNA that has taken decades to form and become deeply invested in supporting America's adversaries. It is unlikely to change soon. As such, the United States has no obligation to finance countries, such as South Africa, that work in opposition to U.S. and allied national security interests. It is time to turn off the aid spigot to South Africa.

Max Primorac is Senior Research Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation.

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