

THE CHANGES IN AFRICA'S TRADE FRAMEWORK AFTER DONALD TRUMP'S RECIPROCAL TARIFFS

TRAN THI LAN HUONG*
Discipline: International Economics

Received: 8/8/2025; Reviewed: 12/10/2025; Accepted: 13/11/2025

Abstracts

The article analyzes the changes in Africa's trade framework following U.S. President Donald Trump's implementation of reciprocal tariffs in 2025. The analysis draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks—dependency theory, adaptive institutionalism, and a strategic interdependence lens to interpret how African states adjust to these shifts in great-power tariff policy. Drawing on recent trade practices between China and the United States in several key African countries, the author assesses the impacts of Trump's reciprocal tariffs on selected African nations. Countries with deep economic ties to China, such as South Africa and Algeria, continue to face high tariffs, while those aligned with U.S. strategic interests or benefiting from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) enjoy significant tariff reductions. This dynamic has encouraged African nations to diversify their trade partners, strengthen intra-African trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and expand South–South cooperation with emerging economies. The article also examines U.S.–China competition in Africa, highlighting an emerging trend of strategic restructuring in which the United States seeks to strengthen its role in certain key sectors across the continent.

Keywords: Reciprocal tariffs, U.S.–Africa trade, China–Africa relations, South–South cooperation, geopolitical competition.

1. Introduction

The introduction of Donald Trump's reciprocal tariffs marked a turning point in U.S.–Africa trade relations. Intended to reduce trade deficits and protect American industries, the policy redefined the long-standing asymmetry between the United States

* Assoc. Prof., PhD, Hanoi University of Industry, Vietnam. Email: huong.tran03@hau.edu.vn

and African economies. Historically, Africa's trade engagement with advanced economies has been shaped by dependency structures and limited bargaining power, making it particularly vulnerable to unilateral policy shifts from major partners. Trump's tariff reforms therefore represented not only an economic shock but also a moment of institutional rupture that forced African nations to reconsider their external alignments and internal capacities.

Amid the immediate contraction in exports and investment flows, the policy also sparked strategic reflection across the continent. African governments and regional organizations, notably through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), began developing new frameworks for economic diversification and self-reliance. This study situates U.S. reciprocal tariffs within the broader discourse of dependency and adaptive institutionalism, exploring how external shocks can stimulate endogenous transformation. By analyzing both the structural disruptions and Africa's policy responses, the paper argues that Trump's tariff regime inadvertently accelerated Africa's search for strategic autonomy and a redefined role in global trade governance.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical approaches – dependency theory and adaptive response theory – to interpret how African economies have adjusted to the trade disruptions generated by Donald Trump's reciprocal tariff policy in 2025. The framework links structural economic dependency with the emerging patterns of strategic adaptation across African states and identifies both the constraints and the agency shaping Africa's evolving trade landscape.

Firstly, dependency theory (Frank, 1967; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979) provides a structural foundation for understanding Africa's longstanding asymmetric relations with global powers. Africa's trade framework has historically been shaped by external demand, commodity specialization, and capital flows dictated by industrialized economies (Amin, 1976). In this sense, Trump's reciprocal tariffs can be seen as a *new manifestation of core-periphery relations*, where the United States seeks to reassert its influence within an already unequal system. Recent research suggests, however, that dependency today is no longer a fixed state but a fluid condition of interdependence (Ahiakpor, 2022). African economies are increasingly able to repurpose external shocks such as tariff changes into incentives for reform and diversification. The "reciprocal" nature of U.S. tariffs paradoxically reveals both the persistence of dependency and the potential for agency: by facing renewed external constraints, African nations have begun to mobilize internal integration mechanisms such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and to pursue more balanced partnerships across the Global South.

Secondly, drawing on insights from *adaptive institutionalism* (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) and the concept of *policy learning* (Evans, 2012), the paper

conceptualizes Africa's responses as *incremental adaptation* rather than abrupt transformation. In line with this view, African institutions often evolve through gradual modification – what Mahoney and Thelen call *institutional layering* – where new regional norms and frameworks are grafted onto existing structures. The AfCFTA exemplifies such adaptation: rather than rejecting the global order, it seeks to embed Africa more cohesively within it, reducing vulnerability to external shocks. The empirical evidence on tariff readjustments and trade diversification observed in 2025 confirms that African states are not merely passive recipients of great-power policy but active agents engaging in selective realignment.

Thirdly, the study applies a *strategic interdependence lens* (Keohane & Nye, 1977) to capture how the U.S.–China rivalry redefines the space of choice for African economies. Trump's tariff policy exemplifies what Baldwin and Freeman (2021) describe as *economic statecraft* – using trade as an instrument of geopolitical influence. Within this contested environment, African nations are compelled to negotiate positions between competing economic centers. Their responses – ranging from diversification under AfCFTA to participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative – demonstrate that dependency does not necessarily eliminate autonomy; instead, autonomy becomes negotiated and relational.

In sum, this theoretical framework situates Africa's experience under the Trump tariff regime as a case of reactive adaptation within structural dependency. It illuminates how trade asymmetries persist but are being recalibrated through pragmatic policy learning, internal coordination, and strategic negotiation. Such an integrated approach allows for the interpretation of Africa's changing trade patterns not merely as economic adjustments but as part of a broader process of institutional evolution and geopolitical repositioning in a multipolar world.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Changes in U.S. reciprocal tariffs towards Africa in 2025

In 2025, the United States under President Donald Trump implemented sweeping changes to its reciprocal tariff policy, significantly affecting trade relations with African nations. The process began with Executive Order 14257, signed on April 2, 2025, which introduced a flat 10% tariff on imports from 190 countries and territories, effective from April 5. In addition, country-specific reciprocal tariffs ranging from 11% to 50% were scheduled to take effect on April 9, 2025, targeting 57 trading partners, including twenty African countries. The methodology used for calculating the tariff rate involved dividing the U.S. trade deficit with a given country by that country's total exports to the U.S. in 2024, then halving the result. Several African nations were included among the twenty African countries listed for higher tariffs. Lesotho was assigned the highest rate among African countries at 50%, followed by Madagascar (47%), Mauritius (40%), Botswana

(37%), Angola (32%), Libya (31%), and Algeria and South Africa (30% each). In contrast, twenty nine African countries are subject only to the 10% baseline reciprocal tariff, including Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kenya. At a subregional level, East African countries were largely exempted from elevated, country-specific tariffs, while Southern Africa was disproportionately affected, facing the most significant increases. Notably, Burkina Faso, Seychelles, and Somalia were excluded entirely from the new tariff lists, likely due to their existing trade deficits with the United States, which reduce the perceived threat to U.S. trade interests (White House, 2025).

From August 2025, only a few African countries remain subject to high U.S. tariff rates, including South Africa, Algeria, and Libya, each facing a 30% levy. In contrast, several countries experienced significant tariff reductions compared to the initial schedule in April. Notably, Lesotho saw its tariff lowered from 50% to 15%, Ethiopia from 45% to 20%, and Rwanda from 42% to 18%. A majority of the listed African countries (21 countries in total) face a low tariff rate of 15% or less, reflecting a considerable shift in the U.S. approach toward differentiated tariff enforcement across the continent (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The changes made between April and August 2025 can be explained by the following factors:

Firstly, the United States sought to protect its domestic supply chains and consumer markets. Labor-intensive industries like apparel, textiles, light manufacturing play a vital role in many African countries. Countries such as Lesotho, Ethiopia, Rwanda, which were initially subjected to high tariffs in April (up to 50%), saw dramatic reductions in August (down to 15–20%) to avoid disruptions in low-cost imports that support U.S. retailers and manufacturers (Kholofelo, K and Tani, W., 2025). Lesotho's textile industry, the nation's largest private employer, was particularly vulnerable as a 50% tariff announced in April. The measure threatened the survival of garment factories supplying major U.S. retailers such as Levi's, Walmart, and Costco. Within weeks, the tariff was reduced to 15%, yet widespread factory closures and layoffs had already occurred due to order cancellations and investor uncertainty (Nellie Peyton, 2025). The supply chain fragility extended beyond Lesotho. Apparel buyers and manufacturers in the U.S. rely on consistent input from these partners for cost-effective sourcing. A sudden tariff spike risked disrupting production and increasing consumer prices, imposing real economic damage domestically. Senior industry representatives warned that the initial 50% tariff could devastate supply flows, compelling the administration to relent quickly to mitigate harm. Moreover, these countries are key AGOA beneficiaries. Preserving access under this regime is essential not only for the African producers but also for U.S. importers who depend on these duty-free inputs. The August adjustments suggest that the Trump administration recognized these interdependencies and opted to

a more calibrated approach, protecting domestic producers without damaging fragile but vital external supply relationships.

Secondly, geopolitical alignment shaped a significant role. Countries continuing to receive higher tariffs, such as South Africa and Algeria, were viewed as less aligned with U.S. strategic interests. South Africa and Algeria occupy strategically critical positions in the Southern Africa and Northern Africa regions. Both have become major strategic partners of China, deeply embedded in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and broader Sino-African cooperation, which amplifies Beijing's influence across Southern and Northern Africa (South Africa joined the BRI in 2014, Algeria signed MOU in 2018). South Africa has been China's largest trading partner in Africa for years. Their relationship is elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in August 2010, encompassing key sectors such as infrastructure development, renewable energy, and digital technology capabilities. South Africa officially joined BRICS in December 2010, becoming the first African member of the grouping, and has since reinforced its strategic alliance with China through BRICS mechanisms, particularly in areas such as infrastructure, trade diversification, and technological cooperation. For instance, China and South Africa agreed to boost two-way trade, expand investments, and co-host an energy investment conference, all signaling deep economic integration (Liz Lee, 2024). In Algeria's case, it serves as a linchpin for China's influence in North Africa. Major Chinese investments include the development of the nation's deep water port El Hamdania and the East–West Highway, among the continent's largest infrastructure projects. Moreover, China and Algeria cooperated on security and defense and elevated their status to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in February 2014. China's deep engagement with these two nations reinforces its foothold in their respective regions and amplifies its strategic posture across Africa. In contrast, from the U.S. perspective, both countries are seen as in conflict with American strategic interests, particularly as Sino-African ties strengthen. To send a geopolitical message and counterbalance China's influence, the U.S. chose to maintain high tariffs on imports from South Africa and Algeria. By doing so, the U.S. signals disapproval of their outward strategic orientations and discourages further divergence from its own economic and political sphere.

Thirdly, the tariff adjustments were driven by the strategic necessity to preserve the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a key framework of U.S.–Africa trade relations since its enactment in 2000. The U.S. administration selectively exempted or reduced tariffs for countries maintaining AGOA eligibility and showing strategic alignment with U.S. interests. Notably, the majority of African countries whose tariff rates were reduced to 15% after August 2025 remain AGOA beneficiaries. This adjustment was designed to preserve diplomatic goodwill and long-standing trade preferences, while still signaling a clear preference for reciprocity and alignment with U.S. geopolitical priorities.

Fourthly, Africa's increasing trade with China reduced U.S. influence. China posted a trade surplus of USD 61.93 billion with Africa in 2024 (Ecofin Agency, 2025), supported by expanding exports in infrastructure, machinery, and green technology, a dynamic reinforced through FOCAC cooperation mechanisms. At the same time, the U.S. recorded a goods trade deficit of about 7.21 billion with Africa in 2024 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2025), despite AGOA preferences highlighting declining American competitiveness in African markets. This shift prompted the U.S. to impose tariffs, aiming to restore strategic balance, protect domestic sectors, and counter China's deepening footprint.

3.2. The impacts of Donald Trump's tariffs in some African countries

Firstly, this policy contributes to the disruption of Africa's traditional trade partnerships. Trade figures in Table 3.1 show clear differences between the United States–Africa and China–Africa trade relationships. While the U.S. recorded a trade deficit of USD 7.21 billion with Africa, exporting USD 32.37 billion and importing USD 39.58 billion, China posted a trade surplus of USD 61.93 billion, exporting USD 178.76 billion and importing USD 116.79 billion from the continent. Over recent decades, China has emerged as the dominant trade partner for many African countries, with approximately 20% of Sub-Saharan Africa's exports directed to China and about 16% of imports coming from China. This indicates that Africa imports far more from China than from the U.S., and simultaneously exports more to China. The data highlight China's dominant position as Africa's top trade partner, both in terms of volume and balance. The surplus further demonstrates China's ability to maintain a strong export-driven strategy, while the U.S. lags behind, unable to establish a similarly balanced trade relationship. These dynamics underscore the strategic challenge for U.S. trade policy, especially in the context of tariff adjustments under the Trump administration, which aimed to rebalance global trade but may have weakened America's competitiveness in Africa.

Table 3.1. Comparison of U.S.–Africa and China–Africa Trade Relations in 2024

Trade relationship	Year	Exports (USD)	Imports (USD)
United States–Africa	2024	32,37 billion	39,58 billion
China–Africa	2024	178,76 billion	116,79 billion

Source: Ecofin Agency. (2025); Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2025).

The introduction of U.S. reciprocal tariffs in 2025 (ranging from 10% to 50%) on select African exports introduced significant pressure on African economies. These tariffs disrupted established trade dynamics and encouraged policymakers across the

continent to re-evaluate their heavy reliance on China. The timing was especially challenging given that many African countries had already accumulated substantial debt to Chinese creditors. Facing these competing pressures, several African governments recognized the growing risks of one-sided dependence on China, in both economic and political terms. Consequently, they were prompted to explore greater diversification in their trade partnerships and economic alliances in order to mitigate long-term risks.

From a structural-economic standpoint, the reciprocal tariffs function as an external shock that tests the resilience of African economies integrated into a Sino-centric trade system. According to UNCTAD (2023), the continent's external trade concentration ratio – measuring dependence on the top three trading partners – exceeds 70 percent in many low-income economies. Such exposure magnifies vulnerability when a major partner alters tariff regimes. The Trump administration's measures therefore acted not only as bilateral instruments of pressure but also as catalysts compelling African states to seek strategic diversification (Baldwin & Freeman, 2021).

Moreover, the tariffs reflect a reassertion of U.S. economic statecraft – the use of trade instruments to achieve geopolitical goals (Blanchard & Ripsman, 2013). In practice, this statecraft sought to realign global supply chains by penalizing countries perceived as excessively aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Yet, as Carmody (2020) argues, the coercive aspect of U.S. trade diplomacy often yields ambiguous outcomes in Africa, where states balance short-term material incentives with long-term sovereignty concerns.

Secondly, the United States' tariffs have significantly shifted the preferred trade orientation of several key African nations. Algeria, Libya, and South Africa – all notable partners in China's BRI – put an estimated 30,000 jobs in South Africa at risk just days before a 30% U.S. tariff on most South African imports took effect. Other countries such as Nigeria and Ethiopia, which have received massive infrastructure loans from China and are deeply embedded in BRI corridors, are increasingly caught in a strategic dilemma. Nigeria, for example, saw U.S. tariffs imposed on its refined oil products and agricultural exports, affecting over USD 2 billion in trade volume in 2024. Ethiopia, despite being landlocked, has come under indirect pressure due to its close economic alignment with Chinese port and rail investments in Djibouti. Conversely, Kenya and Ghana have benefited from relatively lower tariffs (10% or exemptions) and continued support under AGOA, enabling them to maintain or expand textile and agricultural exports to the U.S. This tiered reciprocal-tariff approach by Donald Trump aims to favor African countries that are members of AGOA while creating difficulties for those with deep trade and investment ties to China. The U.S. government hopes that this tariff strategy will prompt many African governments to shift their trade partnerships and increase cooperation with the United States instead of China.

This differentiated approach embodies what Evenett and Fritz (2022) describe as the “weaponization of interdependence,” where trade policies are selectively targeted to reward political alignment. While economically rationalized as reciprocity, the strategy carries a clear geopolitical subtext to fragment China’s dominance in African markets. Recent data from the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2024) show that U.S. imports from AGOA countries increased by 6.2% in 2024, whereas imports from non-AGO states declined by 11.4%. This pattern confirms that the tariffs operate less as neutral economic correctives and more as instruments of strategic realignment.

Thirdly, the U.S. aims to restrict China’s influence in Africa. Before the United States implemented reciprocal tariffs, China was considered a reliable trade and investment partner in many African countries. Although the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was established in 2000, the share of U.S.–Africa trade remained much lower than that of China–Africa trade. In the context of increasingly fierce global economic competition, Africa has become a crucial geopolitical arena where the U.S. and China seek to exert influence. Therefore, the imposition of reciprocal tariffs by Donald Trump – at varying levels for different African countries – demonstrates Washington’s attempt to reshape Africa’s trade structure toward a more multipolar framework.

The broader implication is the re-politicization of trade. Rather than operating as an autonomous market process, trade once again becomes a vector of power projection (Hopewell, 2022). By differentiating tariffs among African states, Washington signals its willingness to condition access to its market on political alignment. This approach mirrors the shift toward strategic conditionality observed in the European Union’s post-Cotonou framework (European Commission, 2022) but with a sharper competitive edge vis-à-vis China.

The aim is to reduce the continent’s excessive dependence on China – a country that has expanded its footprint through the BRI, infrastructure financing packages, and a “debt-trap diplomacy” strategy (Brautigam, 2020). By strengthening relations with AGOA-eligible countries and exerting pressure on those leaning more toward China, Washington hopes to reclaim strategic economic positions. In doing so, the U.S. seeks to restructure a continent endowed with abundant resources, a rapidly growing population, and rising geopolitical significance – making Africa a focal point of global influence.

From a theoretical perspective, the U.S. tariff policy embodies what Keohane and Nye (1977) conceptualized as complex interdependence: power exercised not by direct control but through the manipulation of economic linkages. The Trump administration’s tariffs altered those linkages by making trade relations conditional, thereby converting interdependence into a source of leverage. For African states, this

transformation offers both constraint and opportunity – constraint because it narrows export channels, opportunity because it opens space for negotiating better terms of engagement with multiple partners (Cheru, 2021).

Furthermore, the contrast between U.S. and Chinese strategies underscores differing developmental philosophies. China's developmental pragmatism – anchored in infrastructure financing and state-led industrialization – has provided tangible assets, yet also generated concerns over debt sustainability (Brautigam, 2020; IMF, 2023). The U.S., in contrast, emphasizes normative reciprocity and market access conditioned on governance standards (USTR, 2025). These divergent logics place African governments at the intersection of competing models of globalization. As scholars such as Mkandawire (2022) note, Africa's challenge is to transform such external competition into an engine for endogenous institutional learning.

Ultimately, Trump's reciprocal tariffs mark a moment of recalibration in Africa's external economic relations. They exposed structural asymmetries but also stimulated a new round of policy reflection within African capitals. Early indicators such as Kenya's proactive pursuit of a bilateral free-trade agreement with the U.S. and the acceleration of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – suggest that the continent is moving toward a hybrid strategy that blends diversification with selective alignment (UNECA, 2024). Whether this transition yields sustainable autonomy or reproduces dependency in new forms remains an open empirical question – one that future research must continue to interrogate through the combined lenses of trade politics, institutional adaptation, and developmental realism.

3.3. The future of Africa's trade framework after Trump's reciprocal tariffs

Firstly, enhancing Intra-African Trade and South–South Cooperation. The United States' reciprocal tariff policy has acted as a driver for this trade reorientation, as it has exposed the risks of over-reliance on a few major markets. This has compelled African nations to strengthen internal integration and expand cooperation with other developing countries. These reciprocal tariff measures on African goods have reduced the competitiveness of African exports in the U.S. market. By raising the cost and uncertainty of access to the U.S. market, these tariff measures have weakened the price competitiveness of certain African export sectors (notably apparel, some agricultural products and refined fuels), prompting exporters and policymakers to seek alternative markets. The U.S. Trade Representative's termination of AGOA eligibility for Ethiopia, Mali and Guinea (effective 1 Jan 2022) and Uganda, Niger, Gabon and Central African Republic (effective 31 October 2023) are explicit policy examples of changed U.S. market access (AGOA, 2024). Recent trade-policy analyses document that the April and August 2025 reciprocal-tariff measures produced an immediate decline in competitiveness for some exporters and influenced private buyers' sourcing decisions.

These developments together have created a push away from depending solely on the U.S. market.

African governments and firms have responded by accelerating two kinds of strategic adjustments: deeper intra-African trade under AfCFTA and strengthened South – South links with other developing economies. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is explicitly designed to absorb shocks from volatile external markets and to raise intra-regional value-added trade. Removing tariffs and non-tariff barriers under AfCFTA can materially raise intra-African trade. UNCTAD and other international organizations document that South–South trade relationships (with partners such as China, India, Brazil and ASEAN economies) have already helped many African exporters to diversify outlets and partly offset losses when access to traditional Western markets tightened. The upshot is a structural movement toward a more diversified trade map: processed and labor-intensive exports (garments, horticulture, ...) are being steered where preferential access remains (or can be negotiated), while bulk commodity and infrastructure linkages continue to involve major Asian partners, thus producing a more multipolar trade architecture for the African continent. U.S.'s new tariffs will increase the salience of AfCFTA and South–South cooperation. Full implementation of AfCFTA, including tariff liberalization and the removal of non-tariff barriers, could significantly expand intra-African trade capacity and resilience. It is forecast that South–South trade linkages (China, India, Brazil, ASEAN, other developing countries) will lead to market diversification and reduce dependence on single markets, a dynamic likely to strengthen if reciprocal tariffs persist. U.S. reciprocal tariffs exposed vulnerabilities and stimulated actions that could diversify Africa's trade and reduce its dependence on China.

Secondly, China's trade position is being challenged. China remains Africa's largest trading partner for the 16th consecutive year in 2024, with bilateral trade hitting a record USD 295.6 billion, up 4.8% year on year, while cooperation in areas such as investment, industry and technology continues to deepen (Zhang Yiyi, 2025). Through South–South cooperation, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the BRICS framework, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), African countries' dependence on China has deepened significantly. This growing reliance poses challenges for the United States in its efforts to expand its influence in Africa. African countries have increasingly become indebted to China. Notable examples include Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia, South Africa... Dependency on Chinese finance has deepened, and in some cases exposed African economies to “debt trap” vulnerabilities.

After the United States imposed reciprocal tariffs, U.S.–China competition in Africa may enter a phase of strategic restructuring. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), continues to maintain its advantage in large-scale infrastructure and mining projects. However, the United States is leveraging tariff policy and trade

preference programs such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to expand its influence in high value-added sectors, including information technology, renewable energy, and financial services. In terms of trade, the U.S. promotes the import of deeply processed products, while China focuses on exporting consumer goods, machinery, and infrastructure investment. In terms of investment, the U.S. seeks to limit the “debt trap” and promote financial transparency, whereas China prioritizes rapid project implementation accompanied by credit packages. As a result, African nations will face more options but will also need to craft sophisticated foreign trade strategies to balance between the two powers, avoid overdependence on one side, and maximize opportunities from both.

Thirdly, strengthening U.S. influence in Africa. Imposing tariffs increases the cost of exporting to the United States, putting pressure on partner countries to open their markets or make concessions in bilateral negotiations (U.S. imports may rise if these countries offset the impact by opening their domestic markets). In the long term, the United States hopes to reduce trade deficits with key partners. By selectively granting tariff exemptions or reductions for important suppliers (such as those of strategic minerals and high-tech raw materials), the U.S. can secure critical inputs for its domestic industries while forcing less secure supply sources to restructure. Through its new tariff policy, Washington seeks to reinforce its interests under AGOA and to punish countries heavily dependent on trade with China. This aims to curb China’s influence in Africa and compel African states to “choose sides” in matters of strategic cooperation.

Accompanied by investment incentives and intellectual property protection measures, the retaliatory tariff policy may encourage U.S. companies to seek alternative sources of supply in more U.S.-aligned African states or to invest directly in order to secure raw materials for America’s global supply chains.

However, some countries, particularly larger, more influential ones such as South Africa and Algeria – may respond by strengthening their alliances with China, BRICS, and other emerging developing economies, thereby reducing cooperation with the United States. In other words, Africa’s trade order is expected to shift toward a structure that reduces dependence on China, diversifies partnerships, and generates positive impacts for the U.S. and Europe, but only if tariff measures are accompanied by comprehensive cooperation policies with African nations.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the U.S. reciprocal tariff policy under President Donald Trump in 2025 is more than a short-term trade measure, it represents a strategic lever aimed at reshaping Africa’s trade framework. By selectively imposing higher tariffs on African nations with strong economic alignment to China, while extending preferential access to AGOA (aligned countries), the U.S. is attempting to recalibrate

trade flows, reduce China's increasing dominance, and secure long-term U.S. economic and geopolitical interests. This policy has acted as both a shock and a catalyst, forcing affected African countries to reconsider one-sided dependencies, while accelerating structural shifts toward diversified trade partnerships, enhanced intra-African integration under AfCFTA, and deeper South–South cooperation. However, the long-term outcome will hinge on whether the U.S. complements its tariff strategy with sustained investment, technology transfer, and infrastructure support, without which China's advantages in financing speed, infrastructure delivery, and embedded economic networks may continue to outpace U.S. influence.

In short, Africa's trade framework is entering a period of strategic restructuring, where nations will balance between competing powers to maximize benefits, protect vulnerabilities, and enhance their influence in shaping the continent's role in the global economy.

References

- African Development Bank (AfDB). (2024). *African Economic Outlook 2024: Navigating global fragmentation*. Abidjan: AfDB.
- Ahiakpor, J. C. W. (2022). Rethinking dependency theory and development in Africa. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 56(2), 321–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2022.2038412>
- Amin, S. (1976). *Unequal development: An essay on the social formations of peripheral capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Al Jazeera. (2025). *Which countries are included in Trump's latest round of adjusted tariffs?* Retrieved August 1, 2025, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/1/whos-included-in-trumps-latest-round-of-adjusted-tariffs>
- AGOA.info. (2024). *AGOA country eligibility*. Retrieved October 5, 2025, from <https://agoa.info/about-agoa/country-eligibility.html>
- Baldwin, D. A., & Freeman, J. (2021). Power and interdependence revisited: Economic statecraft in a multipolar era. *International Affairs*, 97(5), 1333–1351. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab142>
- Blanchard, J. M. F., & Ripsman, N. M. (2013). *Economic statecraft and foreign policy: Sanctions, incentives, and trade*. London: Routledge.
- Brautigam, D. (2020). *The dragon's gift: The real story of China in Africa* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Cardoso, F. H., & Faletto, E. (1979). *Dependency and development in Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Carmody, P. (2020). *Development theory and practice in a changing world*. London: Routledge.
- Cheru, F. (2021). Africa and the new global order: Negotiating sovereignty in an era of interdependence. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(9), 2060–2078. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1924507>
- Ecofin Agency. (2025, January 20). China–Africa trade up 4.8% to \$295 bn in 2024. *Public Management*. Retrieved March 3, 2025, from <https://www.ecofinagency.com/public-management/2001-46339-china-africa-trade-up-4-8-to-295bn-in-2024>
- European Commission. (2022). *Post-Cotonou Agreement: A renewed partnership with African, Caribbean and Pacific States*. Brussels: European Union. Retrieved March 2, 2025, from <https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu>
- Evenett, S. J., & Fritz, J. (2022). *Subsidies and market distortions in the global trading system*. London: Centre for Economic Policy Research.
- Evans, P. (2012). *Embedded autonomy: States and industrial transformation*. Princeton University Press.
- Frank, A. G. (1967). *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Hopewell, K. (2022). *Clash of capitalisms: The real battle for global economic leadership*. Cambridge University Press.
- International Monetary Fund (IMF). (2023). *Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa*. Washington, DC: IMF. Retrieved March 3, 2025, from <https://www.imf.org>
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). *Power and interdependence: World politics in transition*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Kugler, K., & Washington, T. (2025). *How African countries are responding to the new US reciprocal tariffs*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/06/africa-us-tariff-economy-agoa>
- Liz Lee. (2024). *China, South Africa agree to seek balanced trade, more investment*. Reuters. Retrieved March 9, 2025, from <https://www.reuters.com/markets/china-south-africa-sign-cooperation-documents-trade-more-investments-2024-09-03>

- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2010). *Explaining institutional change: Ambiguity, agency, and power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mkandawire, T. (2022). Institutional transformation and developmental pragmatism in Africa. *Development and Change*, 53(4), 897–920. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12715>
- Nellie Peyton. (2025). *Lesotho textiles to struggle even with lower 15% Trump tariff*. Reuters. Retrieved August 1, 2025, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/lesotho-textiles-struggle-even-with-lower-15-trump-tariff-minister-says-2025-08-01>
- Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR). (2025, February 2). U.S.–Africa trade deficit report 2025. Retrieved March 3, 2025, from <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/africa>
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2023). *Economic Development in Africa Report 2023: Diversification and resilience*. Geneva: UNCTAD. Retrieved March 3, 2025, from <https://unctad.org>
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). (2024). *AfCFTA Implementation Report 2024*. Addis Ababa: UNECA. Retrieved March 3, 2025 from <https://uneca.org>.
- White House. (2025). *Annex I of Executive Order 14257*. Retrieved March 5, 2025 from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Annex-I.pdf>
- Zhang Yiyi. (2025). China remains Africa's top trade partner for 16th year. *Global Times*. Retrieved May 21, 2025 from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202505/1334585.shtml>