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Can China's zero-tariff programme offset the loss of Agoa for South African agriculture?

China's zero-tariff programme, which started in May 2026, allows 53 African countries preferential trade access to the Chinese market until 30 April 2028. The programme is non-reciprocal. It is a unilateral, one-way policy designed to enhance economic cooperation, and African countries are not required to lower tariffs on Chinese imports.

By Gilberto Biacuana 9 Nov 2026

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Source: Adem Albayrak via Pexels

This is an important distinction, as the trade arrangement is unlikely to disrupt local production through import competition. However, negotiations are under way for a reciprocal trade arrangement after April 2028.

From a South African perspective, the China zero-tariff programme was seen as an export diversification strategy for South African agricultural exports in the face of uncertain United States trade policy, particularly the uncertainty surrounding the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa).



LOGISTICS & TRANSPORT

Agoa exclusion puts South African exporters under pressure

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With the confirmation by United States authorities of the termination of Agoa as of January 2027, this article evaluates the impact of China's zero-tariff policy on South African agricultural exports to China in the second quarter of 2026 on an annualised basis. The objective is to ascertain whether the Chinese market can be a long-term solution to potentially lower agricultural exports to the United States.

China offers an alternative export market

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Prior to China's zero-tariff programme, South Africa's agricultural exports to China were constrained by a most favoured nation (MFN) tariff rate of 10% and strict phytosanitary and regulatory hurdles. For example, agricultural exporters faced lengthy sanitary checks, complex protocols and product registration delays.

These factors constrained the full potential of South Africa's agricultural exports to China. China's zero-tariff programme completely wipes out the 10% MFN tariff and improves South Africa's export competitiveness in China. Nonetheless, the non-tariff barriers remain in place, and South Africa still must comply with phytosanitary requirements and other regulations imposed by China.

In 2025, China was the seventh most important destination for South Africa's agricultural exports, accounting for 4.6% of South Africa's total agricultural exports by value, behind countries such as the Netherlands (12.2%), Zimbabwe (7.7%), the United Kingdom (7.3%), Mozambique (5.7%), Namibia (5.6%) and Botswana (5.6%).

In 2025, South Africa's agricultural exports to China consisted of nuts (30.5%), wool (28.4%) and macadamias (11.4%). Other major export commodities included citrus fruit, deciduous fruit, raw animal hides, wine, beef, fresh grapes and other

fruits, amongst others. This export profile is similar to South Africa's exports to the United States and is likely to be affected by the termination of Agoa.

Recent export growth to China

Recent data from TradeMap shows that South Africa's agricultural exports to China reached R3.95bn in Q2 2026, an increase of 30.1% year on year. China was the fourth-largest destination for South Africa's agricultural exports in Q2 2026. This period coincides with the implementation of the zero-tariff policy by China, which came into effect in May 2026.

During the same period, exports to the United States reached R2.1bn, a decrease of 28% y/y, and the United States was the tenth-largest destination for South Africa's agricultural exports.

It is also worth noting that, in Q2 2026, there was notable growth in agricultural exports to countries in the Middle East and Asia. For example, exports to Vietnam reached R2.1bn (up by 152.6% year-on-year), while exports to Saudi Arabia reached R1.65bn (up by 90.1% year-on-year). This bodes well for the ongoing export diversification initiative by the South African authorities.

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TAXATION & REGULATION

SA's Agoa exclusion: Why the bigger risk may lie beyond lost exports

Sanisha Packirisamy 3 days

Turning back to the growth of agricultural exports to China, although two months of the implementation of China's zero-tariff policy in Q2 2026 is too short a period to draw a firm causal link, the increase in exports to China is encouraging. Furthermore, the net effect of the decline in exports to the United States and the combined increase in exports to China, the Middle East and Vietnam is positive.

The Chinese market holds great potential for South Africa's agricultural exports and can potentially absorb exports that would have gone to the United States through Agoa. Zero-tariff market access to China improves the competitiveness of South Africa's exports to China. Products such as wine and macadamias, which had previously faced tariff rates of 20% and 10%, respectively, will benefit from zero-tariff market access.

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