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White paper on imports and exports points to growth opportunities for SA

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South Africa stands at a pivotal point in its economic development, and a unique position of potential global economic power. In a world that is rapidly realigning economic and political blocs, South Africa could reposition itself and cement its position as an economic powerhouse.

A white paper published by cross-border payments service provider Verto South Africa has unpacked the key opportunities for South Africa to tap into, to fully make use of its trading potential.

"South Africa connects Africa, Europe, and Asia, and plays a pivotal role in global trade, making it key for companies in South Africa to understand the risks, impediments, and opportunities in the importing and exporting of goods and products," explains Cornelius Coetzee, South Africa country director for Verto.

A trade surplus of R21bn1 recorded in February 2025 was good news for domestic industries, although this exposed the country to global demand fluctuations. The strong export performance was a positive sign, but there is growing apprehension over the coming months and the impact of a global 'tariff war.'

"In the year ahead – how can South Africa better make use of the import and export opportunities that exist and enhance its economic prospects for the future? We tried to point to ways in which these doors could be opened," says Coetzee.

The whitepaper analyses the current landscape, unpacks key trends, analyses the challenges (regulatory and others) and opportunities, and suggests solutions and a roadmap to improve trade efficiency.

Expansion of trade with Africa

The African Continental Free Trade Area presents significant opportunities for South African exporters to expand into neighbouring markets, creating new revenue streams and strengthening regional trade integration. By focusing on value-added goods and services, South Africa can entrench its position as a leader in intra-African trade.

Diversification of markets

Exploring new trade partnerships beyond traditional markets (e.g., Southeast Asia, and Latin America) will reduce dependency on a few key regions and mitigate risks associated with economic downturns in major markets. Targeting emerging markets with growing middle-class populations can unlock new demand for South African products. It removes our reliance on a dollar-denominated export destination.

Digital trade solutions

Digital platforms such as Verto and other fintech innovations provide faster, more cost-effective cross-border payment solutions, helping businesses navigate currency volatility and optimize transaction costs. Additionally, blockchain technology can enhance transparency and efficiency in trade documentation, reducing fraud and delays.

Investing in infrastructure and logistics

Government and private sector investments in ports, railways, and alternative energy solutions will enhance trade efficiency, reduce costs, and make South Africa a more competitive global trade partner. Encouraging private sector investment in logistics and trade infrastructure to overcome inefficiencies is critical. Collaborative efforts between government and businesses can drive innovation and improve competitiveness.

Sustainable trade and ESG

With the global emphasis on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors, South African exporters can gain a competitive advantage by adopting sustainable trade practices and aligning with green energy initiatives. For instance, exporting renewable energy technologies and eco-friendly products can tap into the growing demand for sustainability.

Agricultural exports

Expanding markets for high-demand products like citrus fruits, wine, and macadamia nuts, especially in regions like Asia and Europe, remains a lucrative opportunity. South Africa's agricultural sector can also explore niche markets for organic and specialty products.

Promoting innovation and technology

Investing in research and development can boost South Africa's competitiveness in high-tech industries, such as renewable energy and advanced manufacturing. Exporting innovative products can open doors to premium markets.

Next steps?

"Our paper calls on policymakers, industry leaders, and other stakeholders to collaborate and adopt a forward-thinking approach that marries technology with regulatory compliance. Continuous innovation and dialogue will be crucial for transforming challenges into opportunities," says Coetzee.

South Africa's import and export industry presents a mix of challenges and opportunities. Businesses that can adapt to changing global trade patterns, change their export markets, and invest in digital trade solutions, will be the best ones to succeed.

"We empower South African businesses to navigate the complexities of international trade by providing innovative financial solutions that enhance efficiency, reduce costs, and unlock new market opportunities," says Coetzee.

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