

ECONOMY

OPINION: All eyes on Washington for US-SA bilateral negotiations

21 May 2025 - by Eugene Goddard



Facing off in Washington, US President Donald Trump and his South African counterpart, Cyril Ramaphosa. Source: IOL

12:45 CAT, Gauteng.

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the stage is set today, 21 May, for what will undoubtedly be one of the biggest days in the history of 'Brand South Africa'.

Deputy President Deputy Paul Mashatile is currently in Paris on an official working visit that started on Monday, where he is attending the South Africa-France Investment Conference to strengthen bilateral relations and mobilise investments between the two countries.

In his stead, and with President Cyril Ramaphosa in the US, the Minister of Mineral and Petroleum Resources, Gwede Mantashe is running the show at home – a dangerous situation some might say.

But 'Uncle Coal' was upbeat on radio this fine, blustery morning, saying that he was confident that the 2025 Budget Speech by Minister of Finance Enoch Godongwana would finally be accepted.

As Acting President of South Africa, Godongwana had the Government of National Unity's (GNU) full support, Mantashe said.

It will be third time lucky if the Budget is approved, and a blessing of sorts as Ramaphosa and his team enter talks over bilateral relations with the US Administration of President Donald Trump.

Imagine the Budget is rejected yet again, and Elon Musk, via his social media platform, X, whispers into Trump's good ear: "These guys can't even pass a national budget."

Given the burden of expectations weighing on Ramaphosa and his team of six delegates, one can almost imagine the President saying to Mantashe: "*Mfuwethu*, make sure it happens, okay?!" (*).

The all-eyes-on-Washington meeting gets under way at 17:00 local time, by which time Godonwana would hopefully have tabled his speech.

Nevertheless, when South Africa settles in for the evening later today, 21 May, it will hopefully be with a sigh of relief.

As a deft negotiator and a successful businessman, Ramaphosa has the goods and the nous and whatever else he needs to face down the American bully in the White House.

He will also have the support of Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen; Minister of International Relations, Ronald Lamola; Minister of Trade industry and Competition, Parks Tau; Minister in The Presidency, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni; Special Envoy to the US, Mcebisi Jonas; decorated golfers Ernie Els and Retief Goosen, as well as South Africa's wealthiest billionaire, Johann Rupert, who plays golf with Trump and helped to cement the talks.

Trump will be flanked by the likes of Musk and Christopher Landau, the US Deputy Secretary of State who played a key role in helping 49 Afrikaners from South Africa resettle in the United States as refugees.

He is there in place of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio who, at the time this post was being prepared, appearing before the Senate about the 'Afrikaner refugee issue'.

What's at issue? A whole lot!

Punishing tariffs of 30% on certain South African goods from mid-June if South Africa fails to make certain concessions.

Most notably of these, it includes the court case against Israel over the War on Gaza at the International Court of Justice in De Hague, and the treatment of minorities in South Africa.

It also includes disease-related restrictions on US pork and chicken entering South Africa, and market access for American blueberries, to name a few.

What's to gain?

Well, if Ramaphosa and his team succeed in repairing relations with the US, South Africa might just maintain certain trade benefits with our biggest investor and second-biggest trade partner after China.

China, though, doesn't have about 600 companies operating on local soil. The US does. That there are billions in potential revenue riding on today's meeting in Washington is an understatement of sorts.

One can only hope that Ramaphosa learned from Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy how not to deal with Trump.

Which is not to say that he is expected to kowtow to Trump.

The stage is set. It's a big deal, perhaps the biggest deal between South Africa and the US in recent times.

* At 15:45 on Wednesday afternoon, it was confirmed that the Budget had at long last been passed.

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