

Will President Trump attend the G20 summit?

The South African government sorely desires meaningful **G20 summit participation by the United States (US)** for reasons of optics and respectability.

South Africa's international relations minister, Ronald Lamola, recently called on the US, as a G20 member, to participate and contribute, saying: "Their participation remains very critical and important." Alvin Botes, deputy minister of international relations, said that participation by the US, which will take over the G20 presidency from South Africa in 2026, was "imperative for the success of the G20".

Whether the US will attend, and especially whether **President Donald Trump** will attend, remains very much up in the air. South African anxiety about Mr Trump's possible non-attendance is a tool the US administration can use in ongoing foreign policy and trade disagreements between the two countries. Mr Trump will likely continue to dangle his attendance before South Africa, which wishes "consensus seeking" to be part of the legacy of its G20 presidency, and which would feel snubbed – correctly so – if Mr Trump chose not to attend.

How this plays out is contingent on Mr Trump's assessment of the relationship between the two countries. There is little to suggest that he places much value on the G20 or on other multilateral assemblies, preferring to conduct diplomacy on a bilateral and often personal basis. Knowing that the **G20 presidency gives South Africa enhanced global standing** and is important to its government, high-profile US attendance would essentially be a sign of goodwill.

However, with relations between the two countries at arguably their lowest point ever, **US attendance is unlikely at this point**. Mr Trump has taken a visibly **antagonistic stance towards South Africa**, an approach which the long-term orientation and actions of the South African government and the African National Congress have invited.

Both the government and supportive commentators seem to have assumed that the meeting between Messrs Trump and Ramaphosa had begun to reset the relationship. This is a misreading of the situation.

Mr Trump can be expected to keep up the pressure on South Africa because there is no reason for him to change it. He has made it clear that he **wants to see progress on specific issues**, including race-based laws, expropriation without compensation, the safety of South Africans and especially farmers, and a toning down of South Africa's aggression against Israel, including through the case it brought against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

With the South African government showing no movement in any of these areas, it is not giving Mr Trump a reason to attend the G20 summit. Absent an engaged US presence in the G20, **South Africa's ambitions for its presidency** will not be fully realised. Indeed, the objectives and theme chosen – solidarity, equality, sustainability – will not find favour with the US administration even if it chooses to participate.

President Trump's posture towards a range of other countries, many of them in the G20, and the uncertainty that his actions have occasioned, mean that a "G20-minus-the-US" is a plausible outcome for the summit.

The European Union and its members are standing by to fill the gap left by the United States. They continue to evince a commitment to multilateralism and a more accommodating view of South Africa's domestic policy choices. With environmental concerns enjoying continued prominence in Europe, the themes of solidarity, equality and sustainability chosen by South Africa are finding resonance. South African exporters will do well to **take note of this shift** and factor it into their planning, especially in the face of the high tariffs the US is threatening to impose on its imports from South Africa. – **Chris Hattingh**

The CRA will publish regular Client Notes on the upcoming G20 summit, which is taking place in Johannesburg on 22 and 23 November.

Clients are also invited to book us for a briefing on geopolitical developments and the implications for their business.

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