

# Trump's Exit from the Paris Agreement: An Opportunity for the EU to Back South Africa's Climate Leadership

by Bongiwe Ngcobo-Mphahlele and Darlington Tshuma

In his address to the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in January 2025,<sup>1</sup> South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa – who currently chairs the G20, the first African leader to do so – outlined a bold and assertive agenda centred on global cooperation, inclusive growth and sustainable development. His address included a renewed call for transparency in the allocation of climate resources and the reform of the global financial architecture that has long been criticised as too rigid to support long-term sustainable development in the Global South.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, *Davos 2025: Special Address by Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/01/davos-2025-special-address-cyril-ramaphosa-president-south-africa>.

<sup>2</sup> Darlington Tshuma and Bongiwe Mphahlele, "South Africa's G20 Presidency: Tapping into Africa's Potential through Financial, Climate and Food System Reform", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|54 (September 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18854>.

## *The impact of the US's withdrawal and the potential role of the EU*

The Trump administration, however, now threatens the success of South Africa's G20 presidency. Following his inauguration in January 2025, Trump signed in quick succession a barrage of executive orders – key among them one to withdraw the US from the landmark Paris Agreement.<sup>3</sup> He also indicated the intention to dismantle US climate policy by prioritising fossil fuel production and re-opening coal mines decommissioned by his predecessor.

On 5 February, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio posted on X that he would not attend the G20 Summit preparatory meeting that took place

<sup>3</sup> White House, *Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements>.

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in Johannesburg a few weeks later, on 20-21 February.<sup>4</sup> Several high-profile ministers, including finance ministers from key countries such as Canada, India and Japan, withdrew from the meeting. Rubio further criticised South Africa's G20 approach anchored on "solidarity, equality, and sustainability" characterising it as an attempt to promote Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies that the Trump administration has shown contempt for.

The Secretary of State's outbursts and Trump's own climate denialism cast doubt on the US President's participation in the G20 Summit later in November. More generally, the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and Trump's campaign promise to prioritise fossil fuel production and re-open decommissioned coal mines will certainly undermine global climate action and multilateral cooperation.

Criticism of South Africa's G20 leadership by senior staffers in the Trump administration could undermine the country's efforts and cast doubt on the US's intention to build on them when Washington takes over the G20 presidency in November 2025. For example, earlier in March, the Trump administration withdrew from the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JETIP) with South Africa.<sup>5</sup> This initiative, which included

<sup>4</sup> Kate Bartlett, "Rubio Snubs South Africa's G20 Meeting amid Diplomatic Tensions", in *VOA News*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7979557.html>.

<sup>5</sup> South African Government News Agency, *US Withdraws from Just Energy Transition Partnership with SA*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/node/73750>.

the US, France, Germany, the EU and the UK, committed 8.5 billion US dollars to support South Africa's energy transition at COP-26. The US's portion of this pledge amounted to 56 million US dollars in grants.

Fragmentation and division within the G20 could jeopardise the group's ability to present a united front on crucial agendas, key among them the climate crisis and reform of global financial architecture. Trump's second departure from the Paris Agreement and his administration's commitment to initiate budget cuts on development assistance, especially on critical programmes like USAID, should not be emulated by other partners such as the EU as this would likely not only affect commitment from other G20 members to advance climate finance initiatives but create a void that could be filled by other actors with divergent interests and clashing priorities. The United Kingdom for example has signalled the intention to cut development spending to finance its defence and security budgets.<sup>6</sup> As the EU also scrambles to bolster its defence budgets in a constrained economic environment, maintaining the commitment to climate action and finance is particularly important in order to relaunch the engagement with Global South countries.

Indeed, Washington's abrupt withdrawal from the Paris Agreement

<sup>6</sup> Danielle Sheridan, "Former Army Chiefs Criticise Starmer's Aid Cut to Boost Defence", in *The Telegraph*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/03/07/former-defence-chiefs-criticise-starmer-aid-cuts>.

presents a strategic opportunity to reset EU-Global South relations to fill the vacuum created by the US's withdrawal and to bolster South Africa's leadership in strengthening global cooperation on climate action. A disjointed approach to the climate challenge not only threatens to jeopardise South Africa's ambitious agenda but may also render its whole G20 presidency challenging.

As one of the key blocs committed to climate action, the EU must use its collective power to back South Africa's ambitions. This will demonstrate the EU's commitment to multilateralism and distinguish it as a dependable and predictable partner, which is particularly important at a moment when geopolitical realignments and reconfigurations are exposing tensions in the international system, especially on international law, equality of states and the universality of norms and values.

### *The urgency of reforming the global financial architecture amidst the climate crisis*

Adverse climate impacts in Africa are already manifesting themselves in severe and extreme weather events like recurrent droughts, flooding, fluctuations in precipitation and rising temperatures. In regions impacted by prolonged and successive droughts, resource-based conflicts and tensions have escalated, posing threats to social cohesion and long-term stability. Collective action to tackle the climate crisis is therefore all the more urgent.

For South Africa, global climate action is imperative for the achievement

of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, a comprehensive reform of the multilateral financial architecture is necessary to respond to existing and emergent challenges. Despite contributing less than 4 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions,<sup>7</sup> African countries are among the most vulnerable to climate impacts, highlighting the urgent need for equitable climate financing to support the continent's developmental ambitions, as well as its adaptation and mitigation efforts. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, the cost of climate adaptation is estimated to be between 30 and 50 billion US dollars annually over the next decade – that is, between 2 and 5 per cent of the region's GDP.<sup>8</sup> Without fair access to financial resources, the burden of climate change will continue to fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable and least able to cope, undermining development gains of the last two decades.

As we argued in a previous publication,<sup>9</sup> reforming global financial institutions is crucial for ensuring equitable access to climate finance for developing countries. The current economic order, established to support post-war Europe's economic recovery, has been criticised for imposing restrictive lending conditions that limit poorer

<sup>7</sup> Alex O Acheampong, Samuel Adams and Elliot Boateng, "Do Globalization and Renewable Energy Contribute To Carbon Emissions Mitigation in Sub-Saharan Africa?", in *Science of the Total Environment*, Vol. 677 (10 August 2019), p. 436-446, DOI 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.04.353.

<sup>8</sup> World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Climate in Africa 2023*, Geneva, September 2024, <https://library.wmo.int/idurl/4/69000>.

<sup>9</sup> Darlington Tshuma and Bongiwe Mphahlele, "South Africa's G20 Presidency", cit.

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countries' ability to access climate finance and green funds to address growing climate challenges.

The current financial architecture, which is characterised by fragmentation and a lack of transparency, limits African countries' ability to tap into resources for climate action. In light of the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, it is crucial that EU countries mobilise additional resources and support South Africa's climate leadership. Such support is vital not only for maintaining momentum in the country's shift toward sustainable energy but also for reinforcing its climate leadership role. To this end, at the 2025 Mining Indaba held in Cape Town on 2-6 February,<sup>10</sup> delegates and investors explored strategies for leveraging Africa's critical minerals to drive sustainable economic growth, industrialisation and green energy transitions. The EU-South Africa Summit slated for 13 March 2025 in Johannesburg will be another opportunity to cement ties and foster joint action in tackling the climate crisis.

As the US's withdrawal from climate agreement threatens effective global cooperation by diminishing trust and undermining multilateral frameworks, the EU-South Africa Summit is an opportunity to build a stronger partnership with the global South and to proactively engage on shared values and priorities. This is essential to solidify the G20's role as the premier platform for international cooperation

and global governance beyond South Africa's presidency, ensuring its continued relevance in addressing pressing global challenges.

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<sup>10</sup> Mining Indaba, *Investing in African Mining Indaba Conference 2025*, Cape Town, 2-6 February 2025, <https://miningindaba.com/agendas/conference-agenda>.

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