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From Public Diplomacy to Digital Discontent: How Online Narratives Have Strained US–South Africa Diplomatic Relations

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving contours of US-South Africa diplomatic relations through the lens of digital discourse and online narratives. While traditional public diplomacy once served as a tool for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among states, the proliferation of digital platforms has introduced new dynamics of interactions among nations with varying degrees of success and failure. Drawing on content analysis and the soft power perspective, the study investigates how digital narratives, ranging from accusations of white genocide to divergent positions on global conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Palestine crisis, have strained bilateral ties between South Africa and the United States of America. The research situates these narratives within broader geopolitical realignments and domestic political sentiments, highlighting how digital misinformation, algorithmic amplification, and politicised online messaging have contributed to mistrust and policy misalignment. Ultimately, the paper argues that digital discontent is not merely a reflection of diplomatic tensions but an active force shaping them.

Keywords: US, South Africa, digital diplomacy, white genocide, online narratives

Introduction

The evolution of digital technologies has transformed lives, profoundly changed the economic and social landscape, and altered diplomacy and foreign policy. This shift in digital technologies has given rise to the era of digital diplomacy, in which they have been integrated into diplomatic practice, reshaping relationships between nations (Özdemir & Yıldız, 2024). The US has been the leading nation in the shift towards digital diplomacy through its 21st Century Statecraft initiative, which began in the early 2000s (Owen, 2016). The intricate interplay between advances in digital technology and diplomatic practice underscores the need for an adaptive approach, as traditional paradigms of diplomacy no longer suffice (Owen, 2016). In this regard, states have been trying to adapt to the changes brought by digital technologies.

Discussions of the impact of digital technologies on relations between nations have since proliferated in the literature, often focusing on their positive effects on diplomacy. A rapid response on X (formerly Twitter) serves as a vehicle for quick, concise diplomatic messaging, enabling leaders and officials to swiftly comment on breaking news and emerging crises worldwide. In this digital environment, diplomats and world leaders are increasingly expected to narrate, interpret, and influence unfolding global events as they happen. The use of social media by political leaders for diplomatic purposes has become more visible, particularly with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This demonstrates that leaders use social media to communicate with their constituents (Krebs & Jackson, 2007; Mukunda, 2012; Wedeen, 2015).

Digital diplomacy involves the use of digital technology platforms, particularly social media such as X and Facebook, by states to conduct state-to-state business (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022). Through these social media platforms, states communicate with various audiences worldwide. Traditional and digital diplomacy complement each other; however, digital diplomacy appears to be increasingly dominant in state relations. Therefore, all states worldwide have a social media section within their foreign ministries that handles digital diplomacy (Adesina, 2017). Governments such as South Africa, Israel, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and many others have social media accounts on X. Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital diplomacy has taken centre stage in nations' relations and communication. X has emerged as a crucial platform for communication and information dissemination among diplomats, heads of state, and other influential figures. X has been utilised by governments to disseminate information on consular services, embassies' responses to disasters, and foreign and domestic policies. It has become pivotal and indispensable to modern diplomatic communication for almost all nations worldwide (Di Wu & Sevin, 2022).

Donald Trump's administration is the clearest example of how social media has transformed into a diplomatic instrument. During Trump's presidency, X has become a tool for announcing policies, performing political mobilisation and even bullying other nations. As nations use social media to communicate policies and interact

with other states, discontent has become an increasingly significant challenge. Relations between South Africa and the United States of America during Donald Trump's presidency have been defined by digital discontent. Since Donald Trump's ascendancy, South African-US relations have increasingly been marked by discontent, misinformation, and antagonistic narratives on social media, resulting in strained diplomatic engagement. Led by its president and other government officials, the US has used X to amplify polarising content on foreign policy issues related to South Africa. President Trump repeatedly posted on X claims that South Africa was presiding over what he called “white genocide” through land expropriation targeting Afrikaner farmers. These posts have gained online traction, influencing public sentiment and in the process shaping US perceptions of South Africa. The white genocide narrative has been amplified by Elon Musk, a South African-born American businessperson, and other US public officials, lending further credibility to misinformation.

This article argues that digital platforms have transformed public diplomacy between the US and South Africa by enabling online narratives to shape diplomatic perceptions, public opinion and bilateral engagement beyond official state channels. I contend that social media has amplified misinformation, geopolitical contestation and competing interpretations of global events, particularly regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, the war in Gaza and South Africa's position. The article further argues that these digitally mediated narratives have weakened trust, intensified diplomatic tensions, and constrained the effectiveness of traditional public diplomacy initiatives. Rather than serving merely as communication tools, digital platforms have become contested geopolitical spaces where state actors, media organisations and ordinary citizens compete to frame bilateral relations. Consequently, understanding US-South Africa relations during the Trump administration requires moving beyond conventional diplomacy to examine how digital discourse increasingly shapes international political outcomes and diplomatic legitimacy.

This article proceeds as follows: the next section examines digital diplomacy, defines it, conducts a literature review, and provides an overview of how digital diplomacy and digital discontent have contributed to the evolution of global diplomacy. The article focuses on the challenges that have affected US-South Africa relations during Trump's administration, with particular emphasis on the Trump government's digital megaphone. This is followed by a discussion section that focuses on the empirical analysis. The author identified the themes and areas of interest, especially for US-South African digital diplomacy practitioners. The article argues that although digital diplomacy is an entrenched practice worldwide, the digital discontent that has characterised US-South Africa relations has made it a challenge in international relations. While much of the existing literature on digital diplomacy focuses on the benefits it has brought to nations' relations, this article sheds light on the issue of digital discontent that has dominated the relations between South Africa and the US during Donald Trump's presidency.

Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

Digital Age

The practice of diplomacy has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, driven by the advent of digital technologies. The digital era, marked by the emergence of the internet, social media platforms, and communication tools, has reshaped how states and nonstate actors interact on the global stage. For a long time, diplomacy was conducted through face-to-face meetings and conferences and communicated through traditional media. With the advent of digital technologies, the landscape of diplomacy has evolved, presenting opportunities and complex challenges. So obvious and immediate has been the increase in the speed at which modern diplomacy can be conducted. Traditionally, diplomatic engagements were often limited to formal dialogues and etiquette between state representatives. However, the emergence of social media platforms like X, Facebook, and others means that governments now communicate directly with the publics of foreign governments without engaging conventional media outlets or diplomatic protocols. This form of diplomacy has been characterised as ‘digital diplomacy’ or ‘twiplomacy’, referring to diplomacy conducted on digital platforms, particularly Twitter.

Digital diplomacy offers a range of opportunities for states. These opportunities include governments' ability to reach a wider audience as they articulate their foreign policy goals. Moreover, digital platforms offer an efficient and quick way to negotiate and resolve disputes. Furthermore, the ability to share information quickly and efficiently can facilitate negotiations, resolve crises more swiftly, and foster greater transparency in diplomatic practices. However, the digital age also presents several challenges for diplomacy. The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation, particularly through social media, can undermine diplomatic efforts and destabilise international relations. Cybersecurity threats, such as cyberattacks and data breaches, also pose risks to national security and the integrity of diplomatic communications.

The digital transformation has profoundly impacted the practice of diplomacy, reshaping how states, international organisations, and non-state actors engage with each other. Historically, diplomacy was conducted through formal, face-to-face negotiations and communication channels, often limited to diplomats, heads of state, and foreign ministries. Digital tools, such as social media platforms, instant messaging services, and video conferencing, have revolutionised communication by enabling instant, real-time exchanges. Diplomats and political leaders can now communicate directly with global audiences, bypassing traditional media and intermediaries. This shift towards digital diplomacy, or “twiplomacy,” has enabled governments to broadcast their foreign policy messages, engage in public diplomacy, and respond to global crises more efficiently. The increased speed and accessibility of communication have reduced barriers to diplomatic engagement, allowing countries to maintain constant, open channels with other nations and international actors.

Digital Diplomacy

The development of technology has impacted every facet of society, including the way nations relate to and interact with one another. The emergence of global telecommunications in the 1970s, coupled with the proliferation of nuclear weapons technology, has been a game-changer in international relations (Ayodele, 2021). The nature of technologies in the 1970s increased the importance of multinational corporations, leading to cross-national dependencies. One victim of digital technologies in the arena of international relations is distance, leading to a departure from the traditionally understood way of doing things in relations among nations.

Digital diplomacy is a fluid study and suffers from definitional and conceptual ambiguity. However, digital diplomacy is often associated with practices in international relations (Manor & Segev, 2015). Within the realm of international relations, some scholars view digital diplomacy as a form of soft power (Nye, 2015), while some scholars view it to gain influence in the international system through portraying one country's policies, ideas, values, beliefs and culture (Sotiriou, 2015; Pelling, 2015). However, digital technologies have sparked discontent, causing friction among nations. A growing perspective in literature characterises digital diplomacy as internet-based public diplomacy (Cull, 2011; Pamment, 2016; Sandre, 2015). Digital diplomacy is defined in the literature as the use of internet-based media by international actors to engage or communicate with foreign dignitaries with the intention of advancing policy-related goals (Mazumdar, 2024). With the advent of social media platforms, international actors have expanded their diplomatic efforts to these networks. The use of these social media platforms has been subjected to abuse, including discontent, in the international relations arena. Social media has expanded the number of consumers and those able to provide feedback on international content. Social media has acted as a force amplifier for public diplomacy. Therefore, it is essential to examine the concept of digital diplomacy, particularly as it is practised on social media platforms (X), and how it influences international relations. The tension, therefore, lies between the view of digital technologies as a means of amplifying public diplomacy as it has traditionally been understood and the discontent that has dominated digital technology platforms, especially social media.

Although digital diplomacy encompasses various aspects, this study focused on its practice on X platforms between the United States and South Africa. Social media has presented numerous opportunities for international actors to engage directly with foreign publics and receive feedback from global citizens. Diplomacy

is the vehicle that drives international relations, which provides states with the opportunity to articulate their foreign policy objectives through dialogue and negotiations with other countries (Adesina, 2017). This is a centuries-old means by which states secure their interests in the global arena without creating friction with other states. Diplomacy is the instrument through which states advance their goals, strategies and tactics in the global arena. Through diplomacy, states strive to establish peace and cultivate goodwill towards foreign governments and their citizens. This is done to ensure cooperation and mutual trust. Because researchers have held different understandings of digital diplomacy, there is no single definition that encompasses all the perspectives on this concept. Due to the lack of a clear definition of the concept, there is also no reliable conceptual framework for assessing the effectiveness of social media in public diplomacy (Bjola & Jiang, 2015). However, digital diplomacy is largely understood as a country's growing use of social media platforms to advance its foreign policy goals and manage its image (Manor & Segev, 2015). These authors noted that digital diplomacy is conducted at two levels: at the foreign ministry and at embassies around the world. It is essential to note that with Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency of the United States, a third layer has been introduced. In Donald Trump's administration, digital diplomacy is operated from his office through his X handle. What is posted on his X handle platform reflects the American position on global issues.

Lewis (2014) views digital diplomacy as the use of social media by diplomats with fellow diplomats and the public. Potter (2002) provides a broader definition of digital diplomacy as diplomatic practices that utilise digital and networked technologies, including the internet, mobile devices, and social media channels. Hanson (2012) defines digital diplomacy by identifying eight key goals, including knowledge management, public diplomacy, information management, consular communication and response, disaster response, internet freedom, and others. Digital diplomacy is also understood as a strategy for managing change through the use of digital tools and virtual collaborations, both online and offline (Holmes, 2015). The gathering and dissemination of information are critical for diplomatic engagements. Information can be gathered from various sources, and social media has become a valuable resource for diplomatic purposes. To provide information and policy advice to their governments, diplomats have relied on the expertise of their staff, the networks of other diplomatic missions, and news networks. Social media has become an increasingly important source of information for diplomatic missions and the conduct of foreign policy worldwide.

Misinformation and Disinformation in Digital Diplomacy

One of the most significant challenges introduced by the digital age in diplomacy is the rise of misinformation and disinformation, which can have far-reaching consequences on international relations. The speed and ease with which information spreads across digital platforms, especially social media, have created new vulnerabilities in the diplomatic landscape (Abbas & Yousaf, 2024). While digital communication offers unprecedented opportunities for engagement, it has also made it easier for false or misleading information to be disseminated globally, often with the intent to influence political decisions, sway public opinion, or destabilise governments. Misinformation refers to the spread of false or inaccurate information without malicious intent, while disinformation is the deliberate creation and distribution of false information intended to deceive the audience (Abbas & Yousaf, 2024). Both forms of information manipulation can have serious diplomatic consequences, undermining trust between states, fueling tensions, and hindering diplomatic negotiations. For example, the deliberate spread of disinformation during election periods can influence voter behaviour and political outcomes, destabilise democratic processes and affect foreign relations.

The impact of misinformation and disinformation is particularly evident in diplomatic crises, where distorted narratives can escalate conflicts or hinder peaceful resolutions. In international disputes, actors may use digital platforms to spread propaganda or distort facts to sway public opinion or gain support for their cause. This manipulation of information can increase polarisation and distrust between countries, making it more difficult to reach consensus on key issues such as trade agreements, security arrangements, or climate change negotiations (Abbas & Yousaf, 2024). To address the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation in digital diplomacy, many states and international organisations have started developing strategies to combat

this growing threat. These include improving public media literacy, using digital forensics to verify information, and implementing stricter regulations on social media platforms to curb the spread of false narratives. Furthermore, diplomatic efforts to counter disinformation often require a coordinated response, with governments and international bodies working together to counter malicious actors seeking to destabilise diplomatic processes. Ultimately, while digital platforms provide valuable tools for diplomacy, they also require a more proactive and informed approach to information management.

Theoretical framework

This study aims to understand digital diplomacy from the perspective of soft power, defined as a nation's ability to set the agenda in the world of politics through persuasion, enticing, and attracting others through the force of its beliefs, values, and ideas (Nye, 1990, p. 176). Soft power is differentiated from hard power, which is the ability to use force, coercion, and violence to act in ways contrary to one's preferences (Nye, 2011). Nye introduces a third form of power, which he calls smart power; the balance of hard and soft power (Nye, 2005). Soft power is important in international relations, as it enables nations to influence other nations without resorting to competition or the threat of violence, but rather through persuasion and attraction.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power served as the conceptual framework for this study. Soft power refers to a country's ability to influence others through non-coercive means such as culture, values, and policies. In the case of digital diplomacy, digital technology and social media have amplified the reach of soft power that nations could wield. The concept of soft power provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding the transformation of US-South Africa relations in the digital era. Public diplomacy historically served as a soft-power instrument in US-South Africa relations, aimed at cultivating goodwill and mutual understanding. However, the rise of social media has disrupted the state's monopoly over international narratives, allowing non-state actors, influencers and ordinary citizens to contest diplomatic messaging. Applying Nye's perspective reveals that soft power depends on credibility, legitimacy, and consistency between a state's values and actions. Online narratives by the US on South Africa, Iran, Russia and other countries have undermined the attractiveness of the US that constitutes the foundation of soft power. Digital platforms have amplified misinformation from state representatives and, in the process, transformed public diplomacy into an online arena of narrative competition. Consequently, Nye's framework helps to explain how digital discontent erodes American soft power in South Africa and contributes to heightened diplomatic tensions by weakening the persuasive capacity of official US public diplomacy.

Donald Trump utilised X as a tool of soft power to shape diplomatic narratives, perceptions, and public discourse across borders. Trump bypassed traditional diplomatic channels and posted directly to the public on X. His posts, which have largely been refuted by South Africa, are based on misinformation propagated by far-right media and have caused diplomatic tensions, as South Africa accused the US president of spreading falsehoods (Barman, 2024). The posts on land reform by Donald Trump and what he called 'white genocide' elevated the topics on the global stage and prompted international media and public interest in the topics (Barman, 2024). This helped to influence perceptions among South African conservatives and Afrikaner communities, who viewed Trump's views as international validation of their concerns about white farmer victimhood. This demonstrates the US's soft power through narrative framing, in which a foreign leader shapes how another country is perceived by the public. In a world increasingly interconnected by digital technology, the concept of soft power remains relevant for understanding how nations navigate the complexities of power projection. Countries use social media, online content and technology to project their soft power by shaping narratives and engaging with global audiences (Barman, 2024). In the digital age, countries can leverage digital tools to shape perceptions and narratives on a global scale. This is what the US sought to do in its relations with South Africa.

Methodology

In this study, the qualitative content analysis method was used. Towards the end of his first presidency (2016-2020) and continuing into his current presidency (2025-), President Trump's social media posts and those of his government officials have become increasingly critical of South Africa. The X posts of Trump, his government officials (Elon Musk, Secretary Marco Rubio, former Secretary Mike Pompeo and others) and those of the President of South Africa (Cyril Ramaphosa), South African Minister of Foreign Affairs (Ronald Romola) and the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation were analysed. X posts from government officials of these two countries were used as the basis for selecting the data needed on the subject. Of the more than one hundred (100) posts that could be identified from representatives of the two governments and prominent individuals in these countries, twenty (20) posts were included in this study using purposive sampling methods. During data collection, the document review method was employed. Using X as a source for data collection offers valuable opportunities for researching political communication, public opinion, social movements, foreign policy and digital activism, among others. However, it raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, data ownership and potential harm to users. To avoid ethical concerns, the researcher sought to align their study with institutional ethics guidelines. To remain aligned with ethical concerns, the study focused on publicly available tweets. The study utilised publicly available posts from X because they constitute openly accessible communications intended for public dissemination. As the study analysed naturally occurring public discourse rather than private interactions, it posed minimal to no risk of infringing the participants' privacy. Moreover, there is a risk of fake X accounts that may distort findings. To deal with this issue, the researcher focused only on verified X accounts of public figures.

The study employed purposive sampling to identify online discussions directly related to US-South Africa diplomatic relations from 2018 to 2025. Posts on X were selected using keywords such as white genocide, land reform, kill the Boer, kill the farmer, white mass graves, and Gaza genocide. These terms have been widely used in interactions between South Africa and the US. Only posts that generated substantial public interaction and directly addressed diplomatic relations were included. More than 100 posts were initially identified. However, after screening, only 20 posts were considered. Duplicates and unrelated discussions were excluded. To analyse this data, the study adopted Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework, which includes familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the production of the analysis. The researcher read and reread the collected online posts to identify recurring diplomatic issues and patterns of online engagement between South African and US officials from 2018 onward. Recurring issues such as white genocide, land reform, land grabbing, disinformation, misinformation, kill the Boer, and kill the farmer were identified. These were assigned codes, which were later grouped into broader conceptual categories representing recurring online narratives. The identified themes were continually compared with the original posts to determine whether they accurately reflect the online discussions. Where necessary, similar themes were merged. Each theme was interpreted in relation to the theory of soft power. Representative quotations from online discussions were used to illustrate each theme while demonstrating how digital discourse contributed to diplomatic tensions between the US and South Africa.

Understanding the US's Digital Diplomacy

With the advent of digital technology and its pervasive nature in society, the US has adopted and integrated it into its political realm. Digital technologies have enabled nations to engage diverse audiences worldwide, and the US has sought to influence global public opinion. While the footprints of American digital diplomacy can be traced back to the United States Information Agency (USIA), it was during the presidency of Barack Obama that new digital tools were introduced (Adesina, 2017). At this time, digital diplomacy became a distinctive and defining feature of the United States administration. During this time, the US stood out as one of the earliest countries to establish a Twitter presence for diplomatic purposes. In fact, in 2007, the US sent its maiden diplomatic message via a tweet (Collins et al., 2019).

The US is the epitome of digital diplomacy, encapsulated in the initiative known as '21st Century Statecraft.' This marks a transition in policy from twentieth-century diplomacy to the contemporary era, characterised by the advent of the internet and advanced communication technologies. Hilary Clinton, who served as Secretary of State during Obama's presidency, is considered the godmother of 21st Century Statecraft-she laid the foundation for this policy. This signalled the dawn of a new era in US public diplomacy and foreign affairs. A former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, noted the leading role of the US in digital diplomacy.

And as the birthplace for so many of these technologies, including the Internet itself, we must see them used for good. To do that, we need to develop our capacity for what we call, at the State Department, 21st-century statecraft ... We want to put these tools in the hands of people who will use them to advance democracy and human rights ... That's why today I'm announcing that over the next year, we will work with partners in industry, academia, and non-governmental organizations to establish a standing effort that will harness the power of connection technologies and apply them to our diplomatic goals. By relying on mobile phones, mapping applications, and other new tools, we can empower citizens and leverage our traditional diplomacy ... In serving our diplomatic and diplomacy objectives, I assembled a talented and experienced team to lead our 21st-century statecraft efforts. This team has travelled the world helping governments and groups leverage the benefits of connection technologies (Clinton, 2010, p. 35).

Underscoring the importance of the US adapting to new diplomatic practices in the digital era, the 21st Century Statecraft policy aims to create new direct public diplomacy. The policy's implementation involved establishing new digital platforms to inform citizens and help them adapt to new information technologies (Clinton, 2010). To this end, the US State Department established the Opinion Space website jointly with the University of California. This initiative sought to develop direct global conversations on foreign affairs. Through the website, US policies became open to discussion by participants worldwide (U.S. Department of State, 2010).

With Donald Trump's arrival at the White House in 2016, there was a notable shift in the focus of US digital public diplomacy. Unlike Obama's administration, which sought to foster open, transparent, and participatory online platforms, the Trump administration shifted to the personal social media accounts of the President and other high-ranking officials. Trump's social platforms conveyed the president's viewpoints, primarily targeting countries of his choice. There was a noticeable absence of diverse perspectives in the Trump administration's efforts to gather input on foreign policy issues. During Trump's presidency, terms such as "Twitter diplomacy" or "Twiplomacy" gained popularity, reflecting the significant impact of social media on both domestic and foreign affairs.

Digital Discontent and Online Publics

Information and communication technology has revolutionised the way people communicate, exchange information, and engage with social, political, and economic issues. While this has been welcomed in various aspects of life, digital technologies have also facilitated the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Digital discontent has not only dominated social life but has also entered diplomacy. The US-South Africa relations since Donald Trump's first term as American President have been defined by digital discontent. The digital diplomatic strategies of the Trump administration were primarily through the president's personal social media accounts. Trump favoured concise, direct and straightforward language. In terms of the impact of digital diplomacy on the US government's interaction with the international community, the US has employed digital diplomacy to maintain the nation's global leadership for numerous decades. By adeptly employing technology as a diplomatic tool, the US has circumvented traditional media and governmental gatekeepers. One aspect that has, in recent years, defined South Africa's relations with the United States is the issue of farm murders. These farm murders have been characterised by the Donald Trump administration as a form of ethnic cleansing. Writing on X in 2018, Donald Trump said:

I have asked Secretary of State @SecPompeo to closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large-scale killing of farmers. ‘South African Government is now seizing land from white farmers.’ @TuckerCarlson @FoxNews (@donalddump, 23 August 2018).

On the same day, the South African government, through its official government handle, responded to Donald Trump's post. “South Africa totally rejects this narrow perception, which only seeks to divide our nation and reminds us of our colonial past. #landexpropriation @realDonaldTrump (@GovernmentZA, 23 August 2018)”. Donald Trump lost his re-election bid to Joe Biden in the US elections in November 2020. During the interim period, the US online onslaught against South Africa receded. However, Donald Trump was re-elected in November 2024 and was sworn in in January 2025. Upon assuming office, he resumed where he left off on South African land reform policy. Writing on X on 03 February 2025, Trump said:

South Africa is confiscating land and treating certain classes of people VERY BADLY. It is a bad situation that the Radical Left Media doesn't want to so much as mentioned. A massive Human Rights VIOLATION, at a minimum, is happening for all to see. The United States won't stand for it; we will act. Also, I will be cutting off all future funding to South Africa until a full investigation of this situation has been completed! (@realDonaldTrump, 03 February 2025).

Responding to this post, the South African president posted on his X handle. He posted on 03 February 2025:

South Africa is a constitutional democracy that is deeply rooted in the rule of law, justice and equality. The South African government has not confiscated any land. The recently adopted Expropriation Act is not a confiscation instrument, but a constitutionally mandated legal process that ensures public access to land in an equitable and just manner, as guided by the constitution. South Africa, like the United States of America and other countries, has always had expropriation laws that balance the need for public usage of land and the protection of the rights of property owners. We look forward to engaging with the Trump administration over our land reform policy and issues of bilateral interest. We are certain that, through those engagements, we will share a better and common understanding of these matters. The US remains a key strategic political and trade partner for South Africa. With the exception of PEPFAR Aid, which constitutes 17% of South Africa's HIVAids programme, there is no other funding that is received by South Africa from the United States (@CyrilRamaphosa, 03 February 2025).

The situation was made worse by the singing of the liberation song by the EFF, ‘Kill the Boer’, which literally translates to kill the Afrikaner. This is a song sung by anti-apartheid fighters during the 1980s. The song became popular again with the formation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an opposition party in South Africa. The EFF's public singing of this struggle song at rallies reignited controversy in South Africa and beyond. While the EFF and the government of South Africa defended the chant as part of South Africa's history and a symbol of resistance against the apartheid era oppression, its use in independent South Africa has been criticised as a source of racial hatred and violence against the Afrikaner farming community. This was framed by the American government as a chant that is racially inflammatory and emblematic of a deeper hostility toward white minorities in South Africa. This framing fuelled diplomatic tensions between South Africa and the U.S. The U.S. government seized this as evidence that South Africa was unwilling to address racial incitement and protect minority rights. The diplomatic tensions between the two countries over this song played out on X. Posting on X, U.S. officials referenced the song in the broader context of human rights and rule-of-law concerns, particularly the farm killings. Elon Musk posted on X on 22 March 2025:

Very few people know that there is a major political party in South Africa that is actively promoting white genocide. The video below was just yesterday. A whole arena chanting about killing white people. A month ago, the South African government passed a law legalising taking property from white people at will with no payment. Where is the outrage? Why is there no coverage by the legacy media? Starlink can't get a license to operate in South Africa simply because I'm not black. How is that right? (Elon Musk, 22 March 2025)

U.S. Secretary of State in support of this posted on X:

Kill the Boer" is a chant that incites violence. South Africa's leaders and politicians must take action to protect Afrikaners and other disfavored minorities. The United States is proud to offer those individuals who qualify for admission to our nation amid this continued horrible threat of violence (Secretary Marco Rubio (@SecRubio, 24 March 2025).

However, the South African government rejected this narrative, viewing it as discontent being weaponised by the U.S. to delegitimise South Africa's sovereignty and political discourse. South Africa emphasised that the song remains protected under the principles of freedom of expression and symbolic political speech. These differing interpretations underscored the broader diplomatic rifts. While the U.S viewed the song through the lens of racial violence and violation of minority rights, South Africa regarded the song as part of the historical memory of the anti-apartheid struggle and cultural expression. The South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, addressing the nation, dismissed the white genocide narrative as false. To emphasise the point above, South Africa's Presidential Spokesperson, Vincent Magwenya, told ABC News that there was no evidence to support the claims of genocide and alleged that the United States' foreign intelligence would reiterate that. "There is no evidence of what's being claimed here. The U.S. has a very sophisticated intelligence-gathering mechanism. I can tell you now, if your intelligence community were willing to come out and speak, they'll tell you that what is being propagated here is false" (Thom, 2025).

In 2022, the Afrikaner rights group AfriForum took Julius Malema to court for singing the song 'Kill the Boer', arguing that the song constitutes hate speech and wanted to have it banned. The High Court in Johannesburg ruled the song did not constitute hate speech when sung in a political context. The Supreme Court of Appeal upheld this decision in 2024, confirming that the lyrics "Kill the Boer" cannot be interpreted as a call for violence. In March 2025, the Constitutional Court of South Africa dismissed the final appeal by the Afrikaner rights group AfriForum, effectively closing the legal challenge against the 'Kill the Boer' song.

The diplomatic tensions between South Africa and the United States reached a crescendo with President Ramaphosa's visit to the White House in May 2025. In a meeting in the Oval Office on 21 May 2025, President Trump showed President Ramaphosa a video clip taken from the internet, including a scene with white crosses alongside a rural road, which Trump claimed were burial sites of murdered white farmers in South Africa (Smith, 2025). Trump further showed an image of people lifting bags, which Trump claimed were the bodies of murdered white farmers that were being buried. The picture was sourced from American Thinker, a conservative online magazine, and included a screenshot that credited Reuters (Chau, 2025). This discontent over white genocide in South Africa gained traction online, and US officials went on to support the 'evidence' presented by Trump in the Oval Office. The official White House Twitter handle (@WhiteHouse) shared a video of the Oval Office meeting between Trump and Ramaphosa on May 21, 2025. The US State Department reposted the video on its official X handle (@StateDept). The office of the South African president issued a statement on its official X handle (@PresidencyZA) following Ramaphosa's visit to the United States. The statement indicated that the visit was meant to dispel the discontent about what was happening in South Africa.

President @CyrilRamaphosa has concluded a successful working visit to the United States of America at the invitation of President Donald Trump. The visit aimed to reset and revitalise bilateral relations between South Africa and the United States of America. The visit focused

on addressing issues that have been a source of diplomatic tensions over the recent months and reframing bilateral economic trade relations (@PresidencyZA, 22 May 2025).

Although this statement was not an outright rejection of what President Trump had presented in the Oval Office, it noted that President Ramaphosa's visit was primarily intended to address the issues that had contributed to the diplomatic fallout between their countries. Ramaphosa firmly rejected the characterisation of the land reform in South Africa as some form of victimisation of the minority whites. He argued that South Africa was undergoing a legitimate and transparent land reform process that aimed to correct the historical injustices dating back to colonialism and apartheid. He stressed that Donald Trump had been misinformed by groups that exaggerated farm attacks to construct a false narrative of systematic persecution of whites. By framing Trump's remarks as misinformation, Ramaphosa defended South Africa's land reform agenda, but he also underscored the dangers of global digital disinformation shaping diplomatic relations. He issued a long post on X explaining South Africa's land policy:

South Africa is a constitutional democracy that is deeply rooted in the rule of law, justice and equality. The South African government has not confiscated any land. The recently adopted Expropriation Act is not a confiscation instrument, but a constitutionally mandated legal process that ensures public access to land in an equitable and just manner as guided by the constitution. South Africa, like the United States of America and other countries, has always had expropriation laws that balance the need for public use of land and the protection of property owners' rights. We look forward to engaging with the Trump administration over our land reform policy and issues of bilateral interest. We are certain that, through those engagements, we will share a better and common understanding of these matters. The US remains a key strategic political and trade partner for South Africa. Except for PEPFAR Aid, which constitutes 17% of South Africa's HIV/AIDS programme, South Africa receives no other funding from the United States (@CyrilRamaphosa, Cyril Ramaphosa, 3 February 2025).

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that the digital revolution has brought significant changes to diplomacy. The narratives on X have significantly shaped the contours of diplomatic relations between South Africa and the United States by transforming how public opinion and foreign policy positions are articulated. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which usually occurs behind closed doors, X enables real-time engagement, enabling both state and non-state actors to influence the narrative. South African government officials have frequently used the X platform in the recent past to respond to the narrative by the US president and US officials that insinuated the narrative of a white genocide in South Africa. These interactions, often amplified by digital publics and media outlets, have blurred the line between public diplomacy and contested narratives expressed online.

The US-South Africa relations under the presidency of Donald Trump have been characterised by South Africa's stance on land reform and the expropriation of land. The land issue in South Africa has, for years, been a contentious legacy of the apartheid era. In 2018, the debate over land led to a motion to review Section 25 of the Constitution, which would allow expropriation of land without compensation. A bill was drafted to correct the historical injustices of dispossession under colonialism and apartheid. Interestingly, the Bill identifies circumstances where compensation may be zero. South Africa's push for expropriation of land without compensation emerged as a central pillar of its post-apartheid reform agenda. This has been framed as a corrective measure to centuries of racially skewed land dispossession. While this policy sought to correct racial land imbalances, it became a point of contention with the United States. Tensions peaked in 2018 when US President Donald Trump posted on X (formerly Twitter) his opposition to South Africa's proposed land expropriation policy. Donald Trump posted:

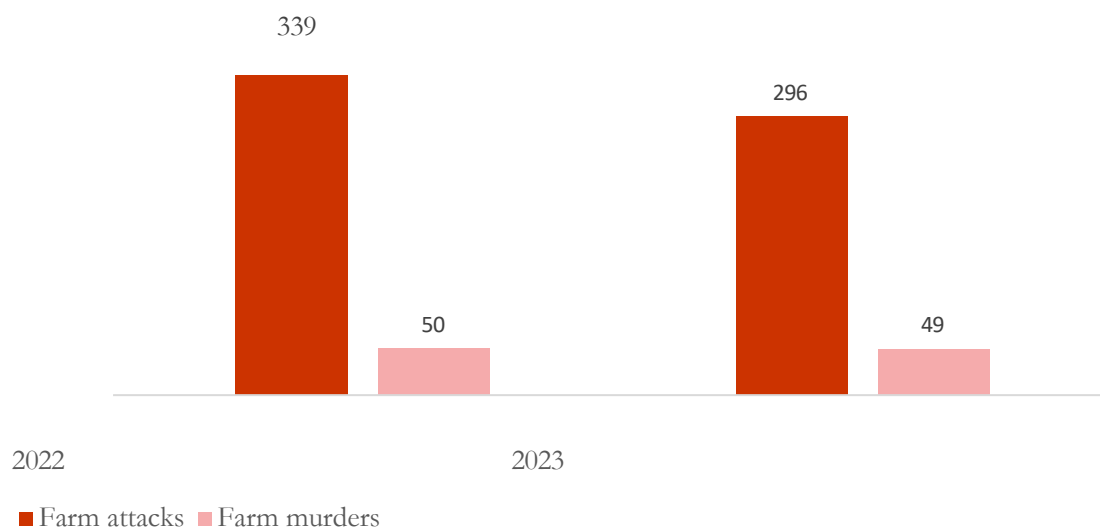
I have asked Secretary of State @SecPompeo to closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large-scale killing of farmers. 'South African Government

is now seizing land from white farmers.' @TuckerCarlson @FoxNews (@donaldtrump, 23 August 2018).

This marked the beginning of the tensions between South Africa and the United States. Beyond the rhetoric, the dispute strained broader diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries. The US's approach towards South Africa began to shift as US officials signalled scepticism about South Africa's commitment to democracy and respect for property rights. Although South Africa remained a key American trading partner during the presidency of Joe Biden, the land issue introduced an additional layer of distrust between the Trump administration and South Africa from January 2025 onwards. During Donald Trump's second presidency, the land issue resurfaced as a diplomatic sticking point between Pretoria and Washington. Washington initiated an online narrative that there was 'white genocide in South Africa', and this significantly shaped perceptions, particularly in the United States. This narrative was rooted in the claims that white South African farmers were being systematically targeted in violent attacks. Trump posted on X.

South Africa is confiscating land and treating certain classes of people VERY BADLY. It is a bad situation that the Radical Left Media doesn't want to so much as mention. A massive Human Rights VIOLATION, at a minimum, is happening for all to see. The United States won't stand for it; we will act. Also, I will be cutting off all future funding to South Africa until a full investigation of this situation has been completed! (@realDonaldTrump, 03 February 2025).

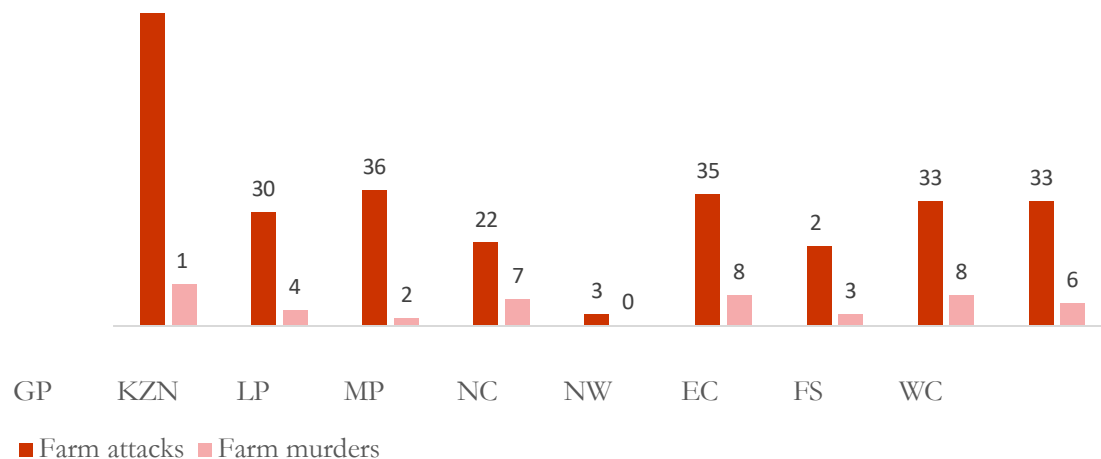
The above post from Trump insinuated that there was mistreatment of certain classes of people in South Africa. It was an indirect reference to the envisaged expropriation of land without compensation and the alleged attack on the Afrikaner farmers on the farms. Empirical studies have shown that South African farm attacks reflect broader patterns of violent crime rather than an orchestrated racial extermination campaign. A study by the Afrikaner rights group, AfriForum, in 2023 showed no evidence of a growing number of murders on farms. The study revealed that the number of attacks and murders declined from 339 in 2022 to 296 in 2023 (AfriForum, 2024). Though the decline in farm murders was not experienced as a substantial decrease in the same period, there was no evidence that a genocide was unravelling on white-owned farms. The figure below shows the farm attacks and murders in 2022/2023. There were 50 farmer murders in 2022, and the figure dropped to 49 murders in 2023.



Source: (AfriForum, 2024)

An aggregated picture of the farm attacks and murders per province across the country was produced in 2023.

In 2023, the majority of attacks (83) occurred in Gauteng. The province also recorded the highest number of murders (11). The frequency of attacks across the Limpopo, Northwest, Free State, and Western Cape provinces was the same (AfriForum, 2024). The chart below represents the frequency of attacks per province in 2023.



Farm attacks and murders per province (2023) (AfriForum, 2024)

South Africa's crime statistics debunk claims that a genocide is being committed against white people. In recent years, South Africa has been ranked as the 10th most unsafe place in the world by the Global Peace Index (Management Study Guide, 2020). Crimes such as burglary at residential places, which remains the most common crime in South Africa, and motor vehicle theft are rampant (Bhorat et al., 2017; StatsSA, 2020). Contact crimes such as murders, sexual assault, attempted murder, common assault, and robbery reveal that South Africa is a hotspot of crime (Govender, 2018). Around 57 people are murdered in South Africa every day (StatsSA, 2020). These murders have nothing to do with race or tribe. In the 2016/17 year, the rate of murders was 52 a day, with 19,016 murders recorded between April 2016 and March 2017. Besides, the country has one of the highest rates of rape globally, with some 65,000 rapes and other sexual assaults reported for the year ending in March 2012, or 127.6 per 100,000 people in the country (StatsSA, 2020).

The allegation that there was a white genocide unfolding in South Africa was amplified by US President Donald Trump on X, and he repeated it in his meeting with Cyril Ramaphosa on 21 May 2025. South African Police Minister Senzo Mchunu said that between January and March 2025, five out of the six people killed on farms were black and one was white. The white victim lived on a farm, while the black people who were killed comprised two farm owners, two employees and one manager. Mchunu said that in the previous quarter, from October to December 2024, 12 murders on farms were recorded. One of the 12, a farm owner, was white. It is the first time that South Africa's crime statistics have been broken down by race, but Mchunu said he had done so because of the recent genocide claims. In February 2025, a South African judge dismissed the idea of a genocide as imagined and "not real" when ruling in an inheritance case involving a wealthy benefactor's donation to a white supremacist group.

The issue of farm murders has become among the most divisive aspects of South Africa's national security discourse. Civic groups such as AfriForum and Solidarity believe that farm murders are more pervasive than delineated by the South African Police Service (SAPS) crime data and that racial prejudice is as much a motivating factor in the perpetuation of crimes (Cunnings, 2025). However, the South African government articulates the farm murders as part of South Africa's wider violent crime phenomenon and an issue that has no ethno-political component. The crime statistics compiled by both the SAPS and independent organisations, such as AfriForum, have vindicated the South African government's position on the matter.

It cannot be ignored that South Africa's position on the war in Gaza has influenced its relations with the United States. The US and South Africa pursue divergent foreign policies in the Middle East, and this has defined their relations. South Africa and Palestine share a common experience of colonialism and segregation, and this has strengthened their bonds of solidarity for a very long time. This stance has informed South Africa's call for a free Palestine. This goes as far back as the famous Nelson Mandela statement: 'We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians'. Such a position has increasingly placed the South African government on a collision course with the Israeli government and its American ally since the escalation of the war in Gaza in October 2023. Most notably, South Africa characterised the military actions of Israel against Gaza as an act of genocide as defined by the 1951 Genocide Convention. The International Court of Justice ruled that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories was unlawful and must be discontinued, and new settlements should cease, and settlers should be evacuated. This means that all signatory states to the Genocide Convention are now obliged to arrest Netanyahu and hand him over to the ICJ should he visit their countries. But both Israel and the USA are not signatories to the Genocide Convention, and this has allowed Israel to evade provisions of the Convention.

The findings demonstrate that the deterioration of US-South Africa diplomatic relations cannot be explained only by official policy disagreements but must also be understood through the dynamics of digital misinformation and discontent. Online narratives have transformed diplomatic engagements from a state-centric process into a contested public arena where governments, political elites, media organisations and ordinary citizens compete to shape perceptions. Social media platforms have amplified competing interpretations of contentious issues such as South Africa's land policy, its non-aligned foreign policy, its position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the war in Gaza. These issues have made public diplomacy increasingly vulnerable to information, disinformation, and selective framing, contributing to mutual distrust between the two states. Rather than functioning as instruments of mutual understanding, digital platforms have frequently intensified diplomatic misunderstandings by accelerating the circulation of polarising narratives before official diplomatic responses can emerge. This illustrates that digital diplomacy has fundamentally altered the pace, visibility, and public accountability of interstate relations, requiring governments to engage more proactively with online audiences.

The study further highlighted the value of Nye's soft power perspective in understanding the changing nature of influence in the digital era. While traditional soft power relies on attraction generated by culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy, the findings suggest that digital narratives increasingly mediate the interpretation of these resources by domestic and international audiences. In the South Africa-US context, competing online narratives have weakened the effectiveness of conventional public diplomacy by reframing diplomatic actions. The digital environment enables rival state actors to challenge official narratives, thereby reducing governments' capacity to control their international image. This demonstrates that soft power has become increasingly contingent upon digital credibility, narrative consistency, and the ability to respond to misinformation. This study, therefore, extends Nye's framework by arguing that soft power in the digital age depends not only on the attractiveness of national values but also on the capacity to compete effectively within fragmented, algorithm-driven information ecosystems.

Conclusion

The diplomatic fallout between the US and South Africa, which began during the presidency of Donald Trump, who utilised social media as a diplomatic tool, demonstrates how online narratives have become powerful forces shaping diplomatic perceptions and points of contention. Social media narratives, especially on X, have not only amplified existing mistrust between the two countries but also created platforms for misinformation and disinformation. Issues that could have been dealt with amicably through traditional diplomatic channels can now, with the use of social media, quickly escalate online and compel governments to respond to narratives.

This article has shown that although digital technology has enabled instant interaction among diplomats and facilitated commentary on developing global events, it has also introduced disinformation and misinformation. This is what has characterised the relations between South Africa and the US during the presidency of Donald Trump. Donald Trump took to X to peddle unverified information that there was white genocide in South Africa. This study found that, though there had been violence targeting white farmers in South Africa, this violence has been directed at black farmers as well. A study by the pro-Afrikaner group AfriForum confirmed that there was no genocide directed against the white farmers in South Africa. So, the violence on farms is part of criminal activities that grip South African society. Police reports have confirmed that South Africa is a violent society that is directed at members of society regardless of race and ethnicity.

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