

August 26, 2025

Featuring Max Meizlish, Joshua Meservey, and Benji Shulman

Moderated by Jonathan Schanzer

Introductory remarks by Elaine Dezenski

**DEZENSKI:** Welcome, and thank you for joining us for today's event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

I'm Elaine Dezenski, senior director and head of FDD's Center on Economic and Financial Power. It's Tuesday, August 26th, and today's panel will discuss how Washington is re-examining its relationship with South Africa. We're pleased to have you here for this conversation, some tuning in live, some listening to our podcast.

South Africa is emerging as a key enabler of authoritarian influence. From hosting joint military exercises with Russia and China to serving as a sanctions evasion hub and a vocal defender of Tehran, Pretoria seems to be positioning itself in direct opposition to U.S. strategic interests.

At the same time, South Africa is spearheading a campaign of legal warfare against Israel at the International Court of Justice, doing the bidding of Hamas while undermining the credibility of international legal institutions.

Earlier this month, South Africa's top military chief met with senior Iranian military officials to strengthen cooperation between the two countries. This comes just days after the African National Congress' secretary general challenged President Trump to, quote, "bring on sanctions," and only weeks following high-level delegations from South Africa to China and Russia.

What's more, one of South Africa's leading telecommunications companies, MTN, confirmed last week that it is the subject of a U.S. Department of Justice grand jury related to its dealings in Afghanistan and Iraq. The company is also being sued by families of U.S. servicemembers who were killed by Iranian proxies overseas.

All of this comes as the Financial Action Task Force, the global anti-money laundering watchdog, considers whether to remove South Africa from its grey list of jurisdictions under increased monitoring when it meets in October.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is quickly moving to isolate South Africa, and so are key members of Congress who recently moved to pass the U.S.-South Africa Bilateral Relations Review Act out of the House Foreign Affairs Committee late last month.

To discuss these complex issues and how the United States should respond to the growing threats from South Africa, we are joined by an expert lineup today.

Max Meizlish is senior research analyst for FDD's Center on Economic and Financial Power. He joined FDD from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, the primary U.S. agency responsible for administering economic sanctions. At FDD, Max's research focuses on the application of economic sanctions, tools of economic statecraft and Treasury-related policy and research. His analysis on South Africa is regularly featured in leading publications, including the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Hill*, and he has been quoted extensively in South African media.

Joshua Meservey is senior fellow at Hudson Institute, where he studies great power competition in Africa, African geopolitics, and counterterrorism. He is a returned Peace Corps volunteer who served in Zambia before working for an NGO based in Kenya. He has also worked at U.S. Army Special Operations Command, at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, and as a research fellow for Africa at the Heritage Foundation. He has testified eight times before Congress and once before the U.S.-China Economic Security Review Commission.

Rounding out our panel is Benji Shulman, the executive director of the Middle East Africa Research Institute. Benji has two decades of experience in understanding Middle East/Africa relations and regularly engages with ambassadors, civil society, religious leaders, policy experts and the media from both regions. Benji has been interviewed by and written for a range of diverse media outlets, including BBC, Fox News, *Al Jazeera*, *Times of Israel*, *The Daily Maverick* and *Deutsche Welle*.

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Moderating today's conversation is Jonathan Schanzer, the executive director at FDD. Jonathan previously worked as a terrorism finance analyst at the U.S. Department of Treasury, where he played an integral role in the designation of numerous terrorist financiers. He has held previous think tank research positions at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Middle East Forum. Jonathan's latest book, "Gaza Conflict 2021: Hamas, Israel and Eleven Days of War" challenges and corrects some of the wildly inaccurate news reported during the conflict.

Before we dive in, a few words about FDD: For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit [FDD.org](https://FDD.org), follow us on X and Instagram, and subscribe to our YouTube channel. We're everywhere.

Jonathan, the floor is yours.

**SCHANZER:** All right, thank you, Elaine, for that introduction. Let's jump right into today's conversation. Here at FDD, we certainly have been watching with concern as South Africa heads down a dangerous path, so let's set the stage first with a question for Max.

Max, in what ways are we seeing South Africa act as a rogue democracy globally?

**MEIZLISH:** Thanks, Jon. What we've seen over the last year or so, maybe a little bit longer, is South Africa quickly emerging as a key enabler of the Axis of Aggressors, key countries including China, Russia, Iran, as well as Iran's proxies in Hamas and Hezbollah. We see South Africa operating as a jurisdiction of illicit finance concern, a terror sanctions evasion hub, and also a jurisdiction by which goods are easily transshipped from South Africa across to jurisdictions of malign influence that are adversarial to the United States and hostile to Israel.

And so, in addition to these overall concerns, we also see South Africa establishing itself as essentially the chief legal officer for Hamas, taking Israel to court at the ICJ [International Court of Justice] and being involved in lawfare against Israel. Those are really the top concerns for us from us, coming from the United States.

**SCHANZER:** It's kind of a long rap sheet.

Josh, I want to ask you, how does the ANC's [African National Congress] current and past ideology inform these foreign policy choices? I mean, I – I don't know if I see continuity. Do you?

**MESERVEY:** Yeah, I – I do see some continuity, actually. I think obviously, their focus has waxed and waned over the years or skipped about. But if you go back and read their documents and their manifestoes, they're actually quite clear. The African National Congress, I'm talking about now, is quite clear about its sort of ideological presuppositions and world views, and it sees itself as part of a "global progressive revolutionary movement," I – I think I got that phrase right, but that is part of a struggle against an oppressive North, meaning countries of Global North that are wealthy and have structured a system that the African National Congress sees as unfair and oppressive. And the ANC, which is the dominant party in South Africa and has been since the end of apartheid in 1994, views itself as part of the Global South, which is the oppressed part of the global order. So they believe that, as I said, this international system is unfair; they believe it needs to be struggled against. They will refer to the United States in some of their documents as a "hyper-power." They refer to the "rapacious license of empire" of the United States, and et cetera. That type of rhetoric is not uncommon.

So, I think, you know, we've seen that manifest, as Max just laid out, in its foreign policy. It – now, again, I think it's become more prominent recently. Part of their analysis of global affairs is that the East is rising, the West is fading, so they can be more open about their ideological preferences.

But I – I think they've actually been quite consistent, really, throughout their existence, including their affinity for the Palestinian cause, their close relations with the likes of Cuba, Russia, China, et cetera. China's a little bit different actually

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cause China initially sponsored a different liberation movement in South Africa, but eventually the ANC did have a rapprochement with China, and now they're fast friends, as Max laid out.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah, I mean, I – what's so interesting to me is, I think ideologically, I think you're not wrong. I mean, we've seen indications of this for some time. It's really the boldness of all of this, really over the last year and a half, two years. I think we've seen it – like, the volume's been turned up significantly, and that – that does surprise me.

But over to you, Benji. Your turn on the hot seat. Should the US view South Africa as part of a broader authoritarian-aligned bloc, or is it just an opportunistic state that's hedging its bets and maybe trying to take advantage of some global trends?

**SHULMAN:** Yes, I think that your description, Jonathan, of it being a rogue democracy is a very apt one. There's a sense that it is a democracy, it's a very open society, people can say and do what it wants, but there is a rogue element to this.

And I think if you put it down just to opportunism, you're going to miss the real boat about what's going on, and most importantly, what potential solutions are – there are. I think that Josh's analysis of the very deep ideological roots of this is really correct. And unless you take account of that in how you're going to deal with the problem, you're going to fall short.

So, I think viewing it as opportunistic is not correct, but that doesn't mean it obviously does have still some democratic elements to it. It does have relationships with the West, with America, with Europe. And so those have to be taken into account. But if you sort of let it drift, it's going to go rogue, and that's really what the people who are interested in democracy in the world and also on the continent need to take note of.

**SCHANZER:** All right. I want to dig a little deeper here, guys. Thanks for helping to set the stage here as we dive a little deeper into this discussion.

So Max, back to you. There was some recent news about a South African military official visiting Iranian military units. This comes after the 12-day war with Israel and of course amidst reports of sanctions snapback against the Iranian regime forthcoming at the United Nations. It's all very odd and troubling, the timing of all of this.

But, I mean, maybe just unpack this for a minute here. What is the history of Iran and South Africa? What does that relationship look like over the years? How does it inform the current relationship?

**MEIZLISH:** Yeah, so the ANC, like Josh pointed out, is the historically dominant political party operating in South Africa. And in fact, it's held a majority for the entire duration from the time of apartheid until last year, I believe, when it actually lost the majority for the first time.

And so this is significant. The ANC has had historical relations with the government of Iran, the regime in Iran since the revolution, sharing historically revolutionary ties with the theocratic regime. But what we've seen over the years is growing cooperation beyond ideology, into the realm of economic cooperation, into the realm of military cooperation.

And to your point, Jon, just last week, we saw a pretty brazen instance of a – a top South African military official taking a trip over to Tehran and meeting with leaders of the Iranian military. This is all actually necessary because certain of the individuals who previously held those positions were killed by Israeli strikes.

So, in order to establish new relations with the top officials, the South African military chief made this trip. This caused a lot of – of concern. There were some remarks in which the South African military official said that his message carried political – it was a political message. This was subsequently walked back by some aspects of the South African government.

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But notably, you know, there's a part of this story that I think has gone under-addressed, which is that joining the top military chief from South Africa was also the commander of South Africa's special forces. And so, you know, while South Africa and Iran are looking for opportunities for defined areas of cooperation, perhaps limited but strategically significant areas of cooperation in the military realm, it seems to me that that's an under-reported aspect of this story.

And we see just closer cooperation between Iran and South Africa across many domains. I think it was in 2015 or 2016, we had a memorandum of understanding signed between the two countries. This has created closer ties.

And frankly, you know, the timing of all of this is – is truly bizarre. Coming from the perspective of an analyst in DC, when you're looking at 30% tariffs hitting South Africa, a point they want to walk back from and restore some semblance of cooperation with the United States economically. And yet at the same time, the top military chief is talking about aligned interests with Iran. This is happening just days after the ANC's secretary general brazenly called out and challenged President Trump to, quote-unquote, "bring on sanctions against the ANC." And so, if I was in the position of the secretary general, I'd be cautious about challenging the president at this time.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. I would too.

Benji, to you, I mean, I – the question I think I often ask myself, is just whether ordinary South African perceive alignment with Iran as being in their interests, or China or Russia, for that matter, or is this driven by the ANC? In other words, is this a project of the political elites while the people on the ground in South Africa are sort of watching helplessly? How would you describe what's happening over there?

**SHULMAN:** So, Jonathan, if you have a look at some of the polling on this, it's very interesting. There's a – basically a sort of even split in the country, if you ask people what they think. There's a group called the Social Research Foundation who's looked into this a little bit, and it's sort of – on the one hand, there is sympathy for the West and democracies. On the other hand, there is a – you know, a strong sense about anti-imperialism, which sort of Josh has noted, which has kind of seeped into the body politics. So, there's people who are sort of more supportive of particularly Russia and China. I wouldn't say Iran features so much in the popular discourse of the country.

And there's a sort of split down the middle, which also adjusts depending on how you ask the question, which there's a class and racial aspects to how this looks. And there is party, political affiliation, which also affects it.

So there is a kind of split in the populace down the line but, really, the driver of this is happening from the ANC itself. I think that if you had some other party in power, a lot of this would just sort of quietly go away. But because the ANC keeps bringing it up, it keeps being thrust. Not just on this issue, also on the Israel stuff.

Funnily enough, the polling is slightly different on Israel. It's kind of a separate polling issue entirely. But in terms of China and Russia, there's the split between the EU and the US. And so because the ANC keeps driving it, there is some ground that they can find popular support as well.

**SCHANZER:** Very interesting. All right. I want to get into some of the illicit finance concerns that we've been tracking here at FDD. I'll just say anecdotally, when I worked at the Treasury some two decades ago, South Africa was already on our radar.

We were looking at al-Qaeda activists and Hamas activists that were on the ground that were involved in illicit financial activity. The government of South Africa didn't seem particularly interested back then, don't seem particularly interested now in combating some of this illicit financial activity either.

So, Josh, to you, to what extent is anti-Western, anti-colonial rhetoric being used as cover for corrupt or self-serving behavior by ANC elites? I mean, are we seeing a sort of hypocrisy here? How would you describe what's going on?

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**MESERVEY:** Yeah, I think that's right. I do think that some of the revolutionary posturing is convenient to the ANC. And there's several other radical groups in South Africa as well. But since the ANC is the dominant party, I'll just keep my remarks focused on them.

So, the problem – one of – the problems that the ANC has is that its management record of South Africa has been disastrous. The infrastructure is crumbling, crime is out of control, corruption is rampant. This is a beautiful country. It, at one time, had wonderful infrastructure, you know, is a lovely place to visit. But the – again, the ANC has so poorly managed it that many of the things that made South Africa so prosperous and admired are crumbling.

So, because of that, they have to double down, I would say, on the one area of legitimacy that they think they might still have, which is their role as a liberation organization, as an anti-apartheid movement. And they frequently still, 30 years later, invoke that struggle, and it's really central to their messaging, and to their sense of self, I would say. But they also then, I believe, are projecting that out abroad as well.

So, again, they framed this case against Israel at the ICJ as a moral imperative. They are obliged because they were the party of – that fought against apartheid to fight against, you know, what they would call "Israeli apartheid." And again, I do think there's a real ideological basis to that. I think in some ways, it is a sincere, you know, belief that they're holding. But I also think they believe that this is a way to remind a South African population that has suffered, frankly, under their rule that they should still retain, you know, their loyalties to ANC, and they should still vote for the ANC.

Again, ANC vote share has been cratering for a while now. They dropped way under 50% the last presidential election and some polling shows them under 40 now. So, they have a very serious political problem on their hands. And I do think that some of this, as I say, revolutionary posturing, is trying to address those political problems.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. I mean, you know, this is a sort of a typical thing that we see in the Arab world where they kind of turn on the spigot of anti-Israel invective as a means to deflect from their failings at home.

We've seen this for decades with the Arab-Israeli conflict. It's sort of interesting that the ANC is adopting this now. I mean, they sort of look like a traditional Middle East autocracy, just not in the Middle East. So, that's sort of interesting.

By the way, you know, when we mentioned this word, apartheid, which is obviously thrown around quite a bit right now in the Palestinian-Israeli context, you know, a couple of things to note. Obviously, you know, there is no division within Israel where there are, you know, based on racial design that, you know, certain people live in one place or another, or get access to one thing or another.

Israel is a much, you know, it's an integrated place. And the word "apartheid" is thrown around so erroneously, I think in this context. But there's an interesting reason why the so-called boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, the BDS movement, as it's known, which was borne to one extent or another in Durban in the early 2000s. The goal of these activists have been to try to turn Israel into apartheid South Africa. In other words, as a means to bring down the country, much in the way that apartheid South Africa was dismantled in the early 1990s.

That is spelled out in books that have been written about the so-called BDS movement. And, you know, we continue to see this confluence of, you know, Middle East activists and South Africa. It's always played an important role, this country. And so just interesting to note.

Max, I want to ask you, just getting back to this question of illicit finance. You're a former Treasury guy, what role does South Africa's financial opacity and weak enforcement play in facilitating illicit finance for terrorist groups, transnational crime, sanctions evasion, all these bad things that we're trying to discourage from countries around the world? Seems like South Africa has got a lot of it. So, what's going on there?

**MEIZLISH:** Yeah. Jon, this is a really important issue to dive deep into and, perhaps, maybe even the most concerning aspect of South Africa's emergence as an enabler of the Axis of Aggressors.

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Specifically within the realm of illicit finance, there's an aspect here that weaves the old and the new together. And so what's old is new again. We see that from the beginning of the ANC's revolutionary struggle against apartheid, which was a just struggle, there were actually a lot of trusts that were set up.

And when we look at the Financial Action Task Force and its mutual evaluation of recent years, looking at South Africa what emerges is a picture of an extraordinarily opaque financial environment where money is able to move freely throughout the country. And South Africa acts as a gateway to the continent.

So, some of these structures that actually emerged from the apartheid era have been built on now, where we have reason to think that they could be conduits for money laundering, sanctions evasion, illicit finance.

It wasn't that long ago in past elections when Viktor Vekselberg, a sanctioned Russian oligarch, had funds that were being sent through various trust structures to raise funds on behalf of the ANC. We also see Hamas having operations on the ground in South Africa, operating freely, right?

So, this is a real problem. It was several years ago that the United States designated the Al-Quds Foundation, which is an international organization operating on behalf of Hamas. And yet the South African branch has yet to be designated specifically by the United States.

And so, Ebrahim Gabriels, who's the director of the organization, runs around freely within South Africa, generating funds, presumably to benefit Hamas on behalf of the Al-Quds Foundation of South Africa. This is a major issue, and it really speaks to the pernicious threat emerging from South Africa in the realm of illicit finance.

Because we can say, well, we don't know what we don't know. But what we do know is deeply troubling, right? What comes out with respect to corruption and illicit finance, showing the huge volumes of donations being made from bad actors. And those are being publicly recorded through the registries due to transparency laws on the books.

But there's also reason to think that there's tons of bad actors pushing money into South Africa for all sorts of reasons that are contrary to U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives. And so, it seems to me that if right now, what we have an opportunity to do is to shine a light, and so I appreciate everyone gathering here today to do exactly that – shining a light on the issues plaguing South Africa.

And a lot of these issues aren't new, but what we see is that South Africa is growing more and more brazen. The ANC is diving into its historically ideological ties with these bad actors and serving as an enabler for all of their malign influence on the continent.

**SCHANZER:** All right, obviously very troubling here. I want to ask Josh, and I think Benji too, actually. I mean, we learned a little, or a lot actually, about a major problem that is plaguing South Africa that people don't talk about. And I'm not talking about Donald Trump. I mean, he's a major problem for South Africa and he's plaguing them.

But let's get, I mean, let's get down to this question of these Gupta papers that came out some time ago. They point to state capture, right? They point to this notion that an Indian crime family has taken over levers of power in the country.

So, I guess my question is, how do we see that playing out right now? What does that mean for the country economically, politically? And what should the United States – I mean, how should we be thinking about this? So, maybe Josh, we'll start with you, and then maybe Benji, we can ask you to weigh in as well.

**MESERVEY:** Yeah, sure. So, "Guptagate," as it was – as it came to be known, was a major corruption scandal within South Africa under the previous president, Jacob Zuma. It came to light that the Guptas were essentially offering

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ministerial posts to people within South Africa for the right price, of course, and that was how deep their influence had gone.

And out of that, Zuma was eventually removed. He even went to trial. He was briefly detained that set off riots in his base of power in KwaZulu-Natal. He eventually was released for medical reasons. He traveled to Moscow and then was there for some time, and then returned to South Africa, started the MK political party, which then became the third largest party in South Africa after the previous presidential elections. So – and there's been some investigation into this and other corruption in South Africa, which was undertaken by a South African commission called the Zondo Commission that name names about corrupt senior ANC officials.

So, I've advocated for targeted sanctions on the specific ANC officials who are behind these provocations toward the United States. And I think the Zondo Commission is a really good place to start because that was a – again, a South African effort, and it documented a lot of corruption, and it named the names of people who were involved in it.

So, the United States already has a wonderful place to start if and as it – it goes down this road.

**SCHANZER:** Benji over to you. I mean, how much are you seeing this? Is it still something that is sort of seared into the minds of South Africans? Is there a concern about this in turn? I mean, look, the fact that Zuma could come back and start a political party after everything that went down, that strikes me as corrupt and just, I mean, unbelievable in some ways.

But other than that, are you seeing signs of the lingering influence of the Gupta crime family? Are South Africans still concerned about this?

**SHULMAN:** So, I think the extent to which South Africans are concerned is the extent to which there are still some officials inside the ANC that were like strongly associated with the Guptas but sort of retained some measure of power inside the ANC and in some cases also in some of the state-owned entities that were looted. Although there has been sort of some that have been removed, although not – there haven't really been much in the way of prosecutions and more importantly convictions.

And I think that the – where this is important for the sort of debate that, that we're having here, or the discussion that we're having here is that, it's an important opportunity because those officials that are sort of stuck in from the Gupta era also tend to be the most pro-Iranian, the most pro-Hamas, whatever. And, you know, the – the admin- Trump administration is kind of focused in a lot on this question of the Afrikaners and the refugees and whatever. And that by its nature because of the historicalness of South Africa and the, you know, the fight between the Black nationalists and Afrikaans nationalists splits the country down the middle.

But I think if you were to sort of understand that there's a confluence between the corruption and the anti-Western attitude, and you were to build a sanctions regime based on that, you would get a lot more popular support because no one in South Africa, including many ANC people, are very much in favor of these corrupt officials still keeping their posts.

And so, if the administration was to focus in on the corruption issue and do sanctions that way, I think that we get much more broad support than sort of playing on identitarian questions that, kind of, tend to split the politic quite a lot.

**SCHANZER:** I think that's a fascinating observation and it does just strike me that, you know, maybe this should be the focus of the Treasury Department or the State Department here in the US and that'll be something that I suppose we can chew on here at FDD.

Max, I know you followed this issue as well. What are your thoughts?

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**MEIZLISH:** Yeah. Jon, I just want to add a couple of points here with respect to the Zondo Commission's findings and the way in which we can employ our sanctions. There was actually an article just the other day in *News24*, which is a prominent South African outlet. And it heavily featured Josh, actually, and some of his analysis.

But that article highlighted that there were – there are currently about 95 ANC members in power still to this day that were implicated in the Zondo Commission in one way or another. This is significant, and I've seen studies that suggest it could be up to about a quarter of government ministers actually implicated one way or another in the Zondo Commission as well. And so, you know, this is, you know, a years old report, significant thousands of pages. It lays out the evidence very clearly, and it provides a very good pathway for the United States to leverage its authorities and hold these officials to account.

One of whom that could be targeted is an individual like Gwede Mantashe, who's the minister of petroleum and mineral resources. This is a bad actor, right? We have him as a significant leader within the government itself as a government minister. He's held chairman positions within the ANC itself. And it was only recent – it was only a couple months ago that he actually welcomed engaging in nuclear energy cooperation with the likes of Russia and Iran. He's also gone on to say that maybe South Africa should withhold critical minerals that are really vital to the U.S. defense industrial base, and significant for our manufacturing prowess in high tech.

So the evidence is out there, and the question is just whether the United States is going to move forward with the authorities that frankly it already has.

**SCHANZER:** OK. That – that's good. That's good stuff right there. I mean, let me let me try to broaden this out even a little further. I do want to try to get a sense of where things are with the US and South Africa. We've all made mention of the sort of spat that we've watched somewhat, you know, I think it's been a little bit shocking to see how much the Trump administration has cared about South Africa. It's not a country you typically hear about, you know, sort of being thrown around about spats between the United States and I mean, it just wouldn't even be conceivable, you know, 20 years ago.

So maybe Benji, if I could start with you just to – if you could help us understand how this is being viewed in country, and then maybe we can widen out from there.

**SHULMAN:** So, look, I think that it's a complicated question, how it's sort of viewed, it depends on who you are and what you think. I think that there is actually some support for Trump's agenda. I think the people are tired of the corruption and the sort of bad actor on the international stage, and they see that this is something of a corrective.

I think there – there has been some frustration around the Afrikaner issue because it's sort of internally divisive sort of in, just here. So, it sort of plays to where you sort of start off.

But I think the overriding kind of feeling amongst all South Africans is that this is kind of brought into really perspective how important the U.S. relationship is with South Africa and how unimportant, for example, the Iranian one is in economic terms or in value terms, just as an example.

And so, it's really focused, I think general South African's minds on the idea that we don't want to have a poor relationship with America. It is actually one of our largest export trading partners, and that increased tariffs and sanctions on the general population would be a very bad thing. Although when you start to talk to people about sanctioning the ANC specifically, I think that you get a wider sort of kind of support.

But I think your average South African is, sort of broadly speaking, concerned and doesn't want to see things deteriorate with the United States.

**SCHANZER:** And yet we are seeing that deterioration, are we not Josh? It looks ugly from here and not just because the price of biltong is going to go up significantly here in the United States, which will, you know...

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**SHULMAN:** And blueberries, Jonathan.

**SCHANZER:** ...and blueberries. OK. But you know, obviously we see things looking like they're going off the rails.

So, Josh, what – what's happening here? And can it be brought back to where we were? Are there things that this government can do to fix, to mend the fences, so to speak?

**MESERVEY:** Yeah. Yeah, the relationship has – is in a very bad place. There's no sugarcoating it. I personally will be very sad if the biltong becomes unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

But more seriously, this is a huge economic problem for South Africa as Benji mentioned. And I also think this isn't good for the United States. It would be much better for the US to have a really healthy, mutually beneficial relationship with South Africa. It's an important country. However, that can't happen under the current circumstances because of the choices that the, particularly, the African National Congress and the South African government that it runs, more or less, have made over the years.

So, I think there's been – I've picked up on some confusion over the months from South African interlocutors about exactly what the United States wants and et cetera, because the messaging can be a little inconsistent, or it can sometimes focus on one issue and not another. But I think at this point, the South African government should have a very clear idea of the types of things they can do to start repairing this relationship, and I think that is what's necessary. I do not believe the U.S. government is interested in making any overtures to Pretoria. It believes that the ball is very firmly in the South African government's court, and it is up to them to take action, substantive action, some of which would be hard and difficult. But that's simply the – the position we're in.

And I would suggest some of those actions would include, you know, downgrading their support for the ICJ case against Israel. They can reallocate budget. They're spending a lot of money on this case, which is quite something, considering the economic travails that South Africa's facing. They can reassign lawyers, et cetera. They could reestablish diplomatic relations with Israel. That would be one thing. They could step back from the Russia relationship. No more joint exercises with Russia and Chi- – naval exercises with Russia and China. Given the very poor state of the South African Navy, it's hard to see these naval exercises as anything more than giving the Russians and the Chinese opportunities to gain experience in a strategic, you know, body of water...

**SCHANZER:** And putting a finger in the eye of the United States.

**MESERVEY:** Yeah, exactly, exactly. They could, you know – so the ANC and the South African government could denounce this song, "Kill the Boer", which yes, is a liberation-era struggle song. But it also very explicitly targets a minority, a racial minority within South Africa. And the ANC will say, you know, "We are not going to sing this anymore." They have said that just recently. But they still haven't condemned this thing. Just, like – just say, "It's bad and you know, we shouldn't demonize fellow citizens like this," particularly when they claim to be sort of post-racial.

They also – they can – they need to figure out a carve-out for American companies from black economic empowerment burdens, which are a very substantial barrier to American investments and trade with the country. They could do things like make farm murders a priority crime. And there's other things.

So, the point of – of me reeling off that list is that the South African government has been told these things. I know for a fact that they've been told these types of things for a while now, and there's still been no substantive action. So even as they continue sending delegations focused on trade and investment, they're avoiding the key political problems that are at the heart of – of the breakdown in this relationship. That's what needs to be addressed.

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*Introductory remarks by Elaine Dezenski*

Frankly, a trade and investment package from South Africa is going to be pretty minimal by American economic standards. It's – it's not going to move the needle on the grievances. You know, some concessions on pork and chicken and auto parts isn't going to get it done; it has to be these political issues that need to be addressed. Pretoria knows what some of the things it could do are. They just have refused so far to do them.

**SCHANZER:** Right. OK. I – we're starting to run out of time here, but I want to get each of you to weigh in on few things.

I mean, first, I mean, Benji, I want to ask you if you could just talk about the prospects for change from the ground, how you think it can be brought about. I mean, you know, we just heard about the pressure from the US, how – I mean, but we don't know exactly how are South Africans actually feeling that, and are we getting a sense that there could be a groundswell of support for change?

**SHULMAN:** So, I think that there are some – there is some potential for change here, and it sort of has to be a confluence of the outside pressure that we're seeing, plus where it's useful in the local context. So, if where, for example, we've seen some of this pressure – Josh mentioned BEE [Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment]. Elon Musk has been pushing very hard to have his Starlink product exempted from BEE, and the minister happens to be, because this is a kind of coalition government, from another party – the minister of communications. So, all of a sudden, he – that minister, who's kind of more of a more liberal bent, is now starting to see, how can we find a carve-out for Starlink so that they can do these sort of BEE deals slightly differently?

So that would be an example of where the American pressure from above and the local pressure from below is starting to shift the needles. Now, it's not a lot, and I think that there's probably a medium-term game here to be played, also in terms of where the ANC is likely to be in the next election. This is probably over a few years that we need to see and do this.

But even – there is even some cosmetic stuff that we can see. There was some kerfuffle this last week about where the Russian ships would be allowed to dock in South African ports, which is not – this is a new thing. Like, no one – this wasn't about for debate before. So there are some small things.

The other big thing that's also coming up is the potential court case against a major South African telco called MTN, and it's currently being considered in the High Court, the highest court, the constitutional court here. And if that case goes ahead, that has all sorts of implications for how the Iranian-South African relationship was formed. It has, potentially, impacts on the current president, who was the chairman of that telco at the time when some of these sort of allegedly corrupt deals that were done. So, I think that there's all sorts of things that are moving, and I think that the – need for pressure over sort of the medium-term in a sort of sustained manner is probably what can help really move the needle on this.

**SCHANZER:** Yeah. That MTN thing, we have got Toby Dershowitz here at FDD who's been doing a lot of great work on that. I know Max, you have, too, and I'll ask you to talk about that in just a second.

But Josh, over to you. I want to just hear about where Europe is in all of this. It seems like something that we should be looking at more closely. I know that Germany's an important hub and could potentially have influence on South African policy as it relates to illicit finance. Are there other European states that we should be looking to right now that can also maybe help move the needle?

**MESERVEY:** Yeah. Unfortunately, I don't think Europe's been all that helpful on South Africa. I think when you looked at a country like Spain, which has, you know, wholeheartedly joined in the South African case, for instance, on the ICJ and have made clear that they are, you know, aligning almost explicitly with some of the revisionist powers. You know, they just allowed Huawei into their sensitive networks, et cetera. So, a European country like Spain has not at all been helpful.

I also think, more broadly, the EU and some European countries still really view the ANC in an antiquated way. They think this is still the party of Nelson Mandela; this is the anti-apartheid party. And remember, it – and the ANC did fight a worthy

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cause against apartheid, and that was an evil system. And – but it has been three decades, and since then, the record has been terrible. And I, unfortunately, I don't think people's perceptions of the ANC have sufficiently adjusted to account for that.

Let's remember, we've been talking about the Iran and a little bit about both the Russia and China, you know, alignment, but this is also the ANC – or, excuse me, the South African government at the United Nations Human Rights Council, for instance, has voted against resolutions condemning – or has abstained on resolutions condemning the crimes of Bashar al-Assad, including the gassing of his own people. They have abstained on resolutions condemning the gulags of North Korea, the torture and the rape and everything else that goes on in those places.

So they are, in my estimation, a highly cynical actor that uses its moral credibility that it gained from the anti-apartheid struggle to now diplomatically support, sometimes maybe in exchange for money, to diplomatically support some of the worst regimes on the planet. They will – you know, ANC officials have praised China's treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which a UN report has described as ethnic cleansing.

So, this is how the ANC has been behaving, again, for decades. And I think the Europeans need to understand that and have a very clear-eyed view of what the ANC is today, rather than trying to, you know, step in and fill the void that they see from the US withdrawing some of its aid and engagements with South Africa, and the South Africans themselves looking to Europe as a potential rescue from the pressure that they're receiving from the United States. I think Europe is out of step on this.

**SCHANZER:** Well, I think you're right about needing to adjust the lens there. I think this government cannot continue to trade on its historical morality, especially as we see some of these policies evolve.

Max, I want to close things here with you. I want to ask you about what's happening here in the United States. I know there are some congressional initiatives, maybe some areas where we can dig in a bit further, like on MTN. Where do you see opportunity for the United States to influence the trajectory of this troubled ally?

**MEIZLISH:** Yeah – and, you know, Jon, let me get to the legislative front in just one second. But to your point about, you know, the historical reputation that the ANC is trading on, let's not forget that the historical reputation is also one that includes a letter from the ANC president in February 1979 saying, “long live the Iranian Revolution,” right? So, there's a history here that isn't really quite remembered the way it actually should be, and there's multiple histories that can exist at the same time, and yet we selectively choose only one aspect of that history.

Now, to the legislative issue. The U.S.-South African Bilateral Relations Review Act is currently in Congress. There's a bill in the House. It was recently passed out of the House of Representatives House Foreign Affairs Committee on a bipartisan basis. This is a big win for folks like us who are really interested in seeing accountability for the ANC officials who are corrupt and are engaging in maligned abuses of power. You know, it's unclear as to when that bill could actually be taken up in the Senate. Maybe it would be added to the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] as a must-pass piece of legislation.

But essentially what this bill would require is the president to engage in a holistic assessment of the U.S.-South Africa relationship. This is building on some reporting language from the previous NDAA, which required the U.S. Department of Defense to look at its military ties with South Africa. And also, part of this bill, which differs from the version from last year, is that it would require the president to actually compile a list of officials in South Africa who are eligible for sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act on the basis of human rights abuses and corruption.

And as we've talked about, the list is long. It's growing because the historical corruption of the Zondo Commission is still very present today. And, frankly, many of the people implicated are at even higher levels of power, including South Africa's President Ramaphosa, who, to bring this back to the issue of MTN, was the chairman of MTN when it engaged in this deal to partner and take on a 49% minority ownership stake in Iran's, I believe, second-largest telecoms company,

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Iran, which is owned and controlled by functions of the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps], right? So, the most radical terrorist elements within Iran, and this is with whom South Africa is partnered in a major telecom venture?

There's questions as to the extent to which MTN has actually been used as a vehicle to launder funds, perhaps to move military weaponry and plans that have led to South Africa having more sophisticated understanding of drone design.

So that's who – that's who the current president of South Africa is. He was involved in those dealings. And then, by the way, right, as we talk about, is South Africa just politically incompetent? Is it a question of ideology? The individual that South Africa sent to be their special envoy after their ambassador was declared persona non grata and sent home earlier this year is Mcebisi Jonas, who is the current chairman of MTN.

So, it just begs a question as to, is South Africa truly trying to repair its relationship with the United States or is it trying to say that the big bully of the West is coming after us? And, you know, here in the West, what we need to do is look at the actions that South Africa is taking and see them for what they are, right? And this is an extension of the historical actions that have been contrary to U.S. national security objectives.

For too long, South Africa has been trading on this reputation that it is a peaceful democracy, that it only seeks to promote tolerance. And what we see now is that this country really isn't non-aligned. What we see in recent years is alignment with Russia. There were allegations that the country smuggled weapons from South Africa to Russia. These are ongoing concerns as well, not just historical ones. And the reality here is that more attention is being given to South Africa. And what we can probably expect is that it's going to get tougher before it gets better for South Africa.

**SCHANZER:** Indeed. All right. Well, we've heard a lot today about Russia, China, Iran, Hamas, corruption, state capture, illicit finance, leaders that have been embroiled in significant controversy relating to illicit finance and corruption; huge problems that I think we can now point to very clearly as things that the United States should be engaged in. And, of course, we are seeing that engagement right now, in some ways positive, in some ways maybe less so, but I think this is an issue that is not going away.

So I want to wrap up here, and as we wrap up, a few thanks are in order.

First, thank you to Elaine Dezenski and the CEFP team, the Center on Economic and Financial Power, for spearheading this research initiative here at our shop. Keep your eyes open for more on these subjects, a lot more work coming out on South Africa in the coming weeks and months.

Thank you to our panelists, Max Meizlish, Josh Meservey, and Benji Shulman for a great conversation. And thanks to everyone for joining us online.

For more information on FDD and the latest analysis from CEFP on South Africa, you can visit our website, [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org); you can follow us across social media, including YouTube, X, and Instagram. We hope to see you again soon.

Thanks for tuning in.