Nala Center
Policy Brief

Harnessing Kenya–France Relations in a Shifting Global Order

June 2026

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Executive Summary

Following the Africa Forward Summit held in Nairobi on May 11–12, 2026, Kenya stands at a crossroads between becoming a permanent market for French high-tech goods and a sovereign co-producer of its own future. While deepening security and trade ties offer a path to modernizing the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and unlocking the blue economy, the real challenge is preventing these agreements from becoming bilateral silos that alienate regional peers or deepen the national debt burden. To succeed, Kenya must move beyond its role as a convening hub and become a strategic lead. This requires a shift from operational exposure to technical internalization in maritime security, and from sovereign borrowing to equity-based partnerships that protect the domestic economy. This brief recommends enforcing mandatory local participation for industrial projects and leveraging the outcomes of the co-hosted Summit to synthesize a unified African Union (AU) position for the G7. By anchoring these French-linked investments within African-led institutional frameworks, Kenya ensures that its global visibility directly translates into regional stability and a tangible economic gain for its citizens.

Introduction

The deepening engagement between Kenya and France is unfolding amid a broader shift in global and regional dynamics. As France recalibrates its Africa strategy toward more stable and economically dynamic partners, Kenya has emerged as a strategic entry point into East Africa (Qiraat Africa, 2025). This positioning aligns with France's growing interest in blue economy development and securing trade routes in the Indian Ocean, particularly as global supply chains face increasing disruption (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2021). At the same time, Kenya's expanding role in regional diplomacy, coupled with its ambition to influence global financial reform and economic transformation, makes it an attractive partner beyond traditional development cooperation (Chatham House, 2024).

The presence of over 140 French companies and the 2025 signing of a comprehensive Defence Cooperation Agreement not only reflect commercial interests but also a broader convergence of strategic priorities (Kenya Ministry of Defence, 2025; Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs [France], 2026).

Economically, this partnership is underpinned by a convergence of commercial and structural interests. For France, Kenya offers access to the rapidly growing East African market, estimated at USD 300 billion (Institute for Security Studies, n.d.), positioning it as a strategic entry point for French firms seeking regional expansion across sectors such as infrastructure, health, and financial services. For Kenya, the relationship provides an avenue to

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diversify capital sources and shift toward more sustainable investment models. However, the current trade structure remains asymmetrical, with Kenyan exports largely concentrated in low-value agricultural produce while higher-value production and technological inputs are retained upstream. Since 2015, France has invested over EUR 1.8 billion in Kenya, evolving into Kenya's fourth-largest bilateral investor (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs [France in Kenya], 2026). Further, entry into force of the EU–Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) strengthens this framework while reinforcing the importance of stable maritime corridors and blue economy infrastructure that underpin trade flows across the Western Indian Ocean.

The Africa Forward Summit, held in Nairobi on May 11 and 12, 2026, marked a critical juncture in the evolving role of Kenya within global and diplomatic systems (Citizen Digital, 2026; KBC Digital, 2026). As the first non-Francophone nation to host the summit, Kenya signalled a broadening of both geographic focus and engagement with non-traditional partners (The Star, 2026). The summit's agenda, spanning reform of the international financial architecture, energy transition, blue economy development, and technological governance, reflected a convergence of priorities that position Africa as an active contributor to shaping global frameworks (Modern Diplomacy, 2026). Nairobi's selection as host reinforced Kenya's emerging capacity to convene multilateral dialogue at scale. This is evidenced by the planned relocation of three United Nations (UN) offices to Nairobi and the presence of major regional peace institutions such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (Development Aid, 2026). Within this setting, the summit provided a platform where regional and global priorities intersect, linking discussions within the G7 to African-led perspectives on development and governance. Its timing reflected a moment when agenda-setting influence is increasingly contested and redistributed across a wider set of actors.

Key Issues

Maritime Security and Governance

The Kenya–France security partnership marks a shift from symbolic defence cooperation toward substantive capability enhancement within the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), particularly in the maritime domain. The docking of French warships at the Port of Mombasa in March 2026, supported by the 2025 Defence Cooperation Agreement, operationalized this shift (Kenya Ministry of Defence, 2025; Talk Africa, 2025). By exposing Kenyan personnel to advanced naval coordination, real-time intelligence systems, and high-end surveillance technologies, Kenya elevates operational readiness in addressing persistent threats such as piracy, illicit trafficking, and illegal fishing within its territorial waters (The East African, 2026). However, uncertainty remains as to whether this exposure builds local capability or reinforces reliance on external expertise. As such, the partnership represents both an opportunity for defence modernization and a test of Kenya's ability to internalize and independently deploy advanced maritime security infrastructure.

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Beyond military capability, the Kenya–France partnership situates maritime security within a governance framework centred on economic protection and resource control. Kenya's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and ports like Mombasa and Lamu are strategic spaces where security directly underpins economic value. Through enhanced maritime domain awareness (MDA), the Kenyan Navy acts as a regulatory force, safeguarding fisheries and trade routes from illegal fishing and smuggling (Expertise France, 2025). This coastline serves as a logistical node for Kenya's blue economy strategy, reframing defence investment as an enabler of sustainable growth. Crucially, the success of this model depends on Kenya's ability to assert consistent regulatory authority and control over resources amid rising external engagement and oceanic competition.

The deepening Kenya–France security relationship reflects an evolving dimension of strategic sovereignty shaped through targeted defence partnerships. While Kenya engages multiple global actors, this cooperation illustrates how bilateral ties can influence the structure and direction of national security frameworks. Through training, intelligence, and operational coordination, elements of French doctrine become integrated into Kenya's maritime architecture, enhancing interoperability. However, this also introduces subtle dynamics of influence, particularly in shaping threat perceptions, surveillance priorities, and regional engagement. For France, such partnerships reinforce its strategic presence in the Western Indian Ocean; for Kenya, the priority is retaining decision-making autonomy within an interconnected environment. Ultimately, this dual dynamic strengthens Kenya's capacity while necessitating careful navigation to preserve sovereignty within externally influenced defence structures.

Economic Transformation

France's economic engagement with Kenya marks a shift from traditional aid and sovereign lending models towards mutual commercial partnerships (Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry, 2024a), as evidenced by the over 140 French firms operating in the country. These companies collectively generate over 36,000 jobs while embedding French capital and technical standards within the economy (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs [France in Kenya], 2026). The real test of this arrangement is whether French-linked investment generates technical skills transfer, local supplier development, and sustainable youth employment. Simultaneously, France leverages Kenya's position as a regional financial hub to reform the international financial architecture through platforms such as the Africa Forward Summit and G7. Kenya's domestic economy—with a debt-to-GDP ratio projected at 64% in present value terms by the end of FY 2025/26 (Nzomo, 2026)—constrains its bargaining power. This pressure often prioritizes short-term capital inflows over long-term structural gains. This creates a dual dynamic: Kenya seeks industrial transformation, while France pursues market access and strategic positioning. Therefore, Kenya must actively leverage its strategic value to enhance domestic value creation rather than reinforce external dependence.

The current Kenya–France economic structure risks reinforcing dependency rather than enabling transformation. This is driven by France's advantage in capital-intensive sectors and a trade imbalance where Kenya exports primarily low-value goods in exchange for high-value industrial inputs. Such a configuration limits Kenya's ability to climb global value chains. Domestically, the distribution of benefits is uneven; while large firms capture foreign investment, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) remain weakly integrated into formal supply chains (Owoko, 2025). This imbalance risks entrenching a dual economy, where macro-level growth masks micro-level inclusion. Crucially, the scale of this challenge is highlighted by the fact that only 0.7% of licensed MSMEs have reached the medium-sized threshold necessary to scale into formal export chains (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2025). Central to addressing these trade barriers is a secure maritime domain, the 'invisible infrastructure' for 90% of Kenya's trade (State Department for Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs, 2024). By securing the EEZ and shipping lanes with French cooperation, Kenya lowers the 'insecurity tax' of high insurance and shipping costs. Without this stability, growth remains vulnerable to regional disruptions that threaten both the cost of living and small-scale coastal enterprises.

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The EU–Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which entered into force on July 1, 2024, is a critical framework for the Kenya–France relationship (Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry, 2024b). While it offers duty-free and quota-free access for Kenyan exports, it also exposes domestic industries to European competition. France's EU role further amplifies its influence over Kenya's integration into European value chains. However, market access alone does not guarantee transformation; the risk remains that Kenya continues to export low-value raw materials while French firms capture the high-value processing stages. To mitigate this, Kenya must look to industrial models like Morocco's partnership with French automotive firms. Operationally, this involved negotiating mandatory local content thresholds set by the Moroccan government at a minimum of 65% to ensure that foreign investment was legally conditioned on the integration and scaling of local supplier networks (Ilham & Haddad, 2024; Vizier Report, 2024). By adopting similar performance-linked criteria within Kenya's industrial framework, the government can transform the EPA from a simple trade deal into a catalyst for domestic industrialization.

Geopolitical Positioning and Regional Stewardship

Kenya is advancing a strategic diplomatic doctrine that positions it as a principled, multipolar actor. As articulated by Prime Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet Secretary for Foreign and Diaspora Affairs Musalia Mudavadi, this approach emphasizes a citizen-centred diplomacy that uses bilateral relations to secure broader national and continental interests (Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, 2026). Nairobi's role as a convening hub reinforces this strategy as a global headquarters for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and with the relocation of UNICEF (Children), UN Women (Gender Equality), and UNFPA (Population/Reproductive Health) by

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the end of 2026, the city is solidified as a premier diplomatic capital (Development Aid, 2026). Kenya's participation in elite global governance circles aligns with a Pan-African logic of collective agenda-setting to ensure African positions are represented at the highest levels. However, this close coordination with France in convening these platforms may be perceived as strategic alignment rather than independent facilitation. Therefore, Kenya must ensure that its convening power remains anchored in inclusive, African-led processes to sustain its credibility as a neutral broker.

Kenya operates within a competitive geopolitical environment shaped by China's infrastructural dominance and the United States' influence in security, trade, and finance. China remains Kenya's largest bilateral lender, while the United States anchors security cooperation and preferential trade via the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2026b; Tuko, 2025). France enters this space as a 'third way,' bringing EU-linked market access, development finance driven by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), and diplomatic weight within global governance. This creates a diversified landscape, allowing Kenya to negotiate across multiple centres of power. However, this requires careful calibration. Each partnership carries distinct expectations, standards, and political signals. Deepening ties with France, especially through high-visibility platforms, may be interpreted as a shift toward European alignment. At the same time, evolving dynamics, such as China's FOCAC-led expansion of zero-tariff access, are reshaping trade incentives (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2026a). Consequently, Kenya's strategy must remain deliberately balanced, using diversification to strengthen bargaining power while avoiding the policy drift that could undermine its standing with existing partners.

Kenya's regional stewardship determines whether external partnerships are viewed as legitimate and sustainable. Its mediation roles in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan signal a commitment to 'African-led problem-solving,' a cornerstone of the new age of diplomacy as articulated by Musalia Mudavadi (Mashariki Research and Policy Centre, 2024; Vellum, 2025). However, if bilateral cooperation is perceived as a vehicle for French 'proxy diplomacy', especially as France recalibrates its influence after setbacks in the Sahel, Kenya risks alienating its regional peers and undermining the EAC's collective security architecture (Horn Institute, 2024).

Therefore, the durability of the Kenya–France relationship depends on Kenya's ability to instrumentalize French support to strengthen regional institutions like IGAD or the AU, rather than allowing the partnership to exist as a bilateral silo that creates friction with its neighbours.

Conclusion

The Kenya–France partnership has evolved into a strategic framework linking maritime security, industrial transformation, and global diplomatic leadership. While the integration of French naval technology and capital-intensive investment offers a path to modernizing the KDF and the blue economy, it simultaneously introduces risks of technical dependency, debt expansion, and perceived diplomatic alignment.

Kenya's ability to successfully navigate this dual dynamic depends on moving beyond operational exposure toward internalization of maritime infrastructure and domestic value creation. Ultimately, the durability of this relationship rests on Kenya's capacity to capitalize on French support to reinforce its own regional stewardship and fiscal sovereignty. By anchoring bilateral cooperation within African-led institutional frameworks and enforceable industrial policies, Nairobi ensures that its global visibility translates into a sustainable, independent, and inclusive national agenda.

A critical benchmark for this success was set at the May 2026 Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi; Kenya must now convert the Summit's outcomes into binding commitments on local integration thresholds and skills transfer to ensure the partnership delivers tangible industrial gains by 2030.

Recommendations

1. The National Assembly Committee on Defence should mandate twice-yearly technical sovereignty audits to verify the KDF's independent operation and maintenance of French surveillance systems, ensuring the transition from operational exposure to genuine internalization of maritime infrastructure.
2. The Kenya Ports Authority (KPA) should integrate maritime security gains into port pricing reforms by negotiating long-term volume-based contracts with major shipping lines, trading guaranteed safety for fixed, lower freight rates that eliminate the insecurity tax on Kenyan exports.
3. The Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry should enforce a localization mandate requiring 40% local sourcing and a mandatory 10% equity stake for Kenyan MSMEs in French-led joint ventures to ensure French firms are financially incentivized to transfer technical standards to local shareholders.
4. The State Department for Foreign Affairs should establish a permanent Summit Secretariat to synthesize summit outcomes into unified African positions for the G7, positioning these engagements as a global megaphone for the AU's common agenda rather than a bilateral investment forum.
5. The State Department for Foreign Affairs should utilize its Directorate of Global Governance to launch a Bilateral Transparency Portal to publish non-classified agreement summaries and technical benchmarks to institutionalize public oversight and mitigate perceptions of elite-driven strategic alignment.

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About the Author

Getrude Maina is an analyst and emerging voice in global governance and regional integration. She holds a degree in Disaster Management and International Diplomacy and brings two years of experience in legal administration work. She applies an evidence-based approach to translating complex data into actionable policy recommendations, with a focus on governance and regional integration in Africa. She is particularly interested in strengthening institutional capacity and designing frameworks that promote sustainable and effective regional cooperation.

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