

DIPLOMACY

Ruto in Beijing: Kenya's Diplomatic Balancing Act in a Multipolar World

Between 22 and 26 April Kenya's President, William Ruto, made a state visit to China.<sup>1 2</sup> According to Chinese official channels, the plan for President Ruto's visit consisted of a welcome ceremony and banquet, followed by high level talks with President Xi, Premier Li Qiang, and Chairman Zhao Leji who would each meet with Ruto separately.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the visit, Chinese state media emphasised the “deepening relationship” between the two countries, the “warm and friendly atmosphere” between the two heads of state, and the exchange of “in-depth opinions on the new era regarding China-Kenya and China-Africa relations, as well as international regional issues of mutual concern”.<sup>4 5</sup>

On 24 April, during the 'Kenya-China Private Sector Roundtable and Business Forum', President Ruto reportedly oversaw the signing of at least 20 trade and investment agreements and Memorandums of Understanding “to promote various sectors of Kenya's economy including education, health and agriculture” with a reported value of USD 1.06 billion.<sup>6 7</sup> In its coverage, the East African local newspaper highlighted the development of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Kilifi and new agribusiness ventures in Kajiado and Baringo counties. It interpreted these as “signalling a major push for industrialisation and food security”.<sup>8</sup> Both Kenyan and Chinese outlets covered a new agreement relating to the stalled extension of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), and road projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Phases 2B and 2C of the SGR were agreed, which would extend from Naivasha to Kisumu and from Kisumu to Malaba, respectively, along with other infrastructure projects such as the dualling of the Northern Bypass and Kiambu Road.<sup>9 10 11</sup>

Both heads of state attended, and used the forum to reiterate their opposition to 'protectionist policies', and to call for 'fairness in global commerce'. Ruto reportedly thanked China “for defending the rights of developing nations” while President Xi echoed the sentiment, pledging to strengthen cooperation with Kenya and other developing countries in order to “confront global challenges and uphold multilateral systems”.<sup>12</sup> Following the meeting, China and Kenya issued a joint statement that they had upgraded ties to a 'new level', pledging to create an “all-weather” China-Africa community.<sup>13 14</sup> Subsequently, on 30 April the Chinese ambassador to Kenya, Guo Haiyun, declared Ruto's visit a “great success” and as a ‘major win’ for Africa and the Global South.<sup>15</sup>

Politically, the visit sparked debate among lawmakers and the country's potential reliance on loans and foreign investment instead of Kenya's domestic investors.<sup>16</sup> On 27 April, Majority Leader Kimani Ichun'wah, while championing the potential for the visit to attract investors, pushed back on criticism: “the President did not go to China to borrow, he went to look for investors”, and emphasised that previously opposition figures had claimed international investors were abandoning the country.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, on 29 April, Kenya's Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi told the Senate Security and Foreign Affairs Committee that a group of Kenyan lawmakers had attempted to organise a parallel visit to Taiwan during President Ruto's state visit.<sup>18</sup> Criticising the lawmakers' plan, which was ultimately aborted, as ‘unpatriotic’, Mudavadi accused the lawmakers of attempting to undermine Kenya's efforts to deepen ties with a major development partner and said if the visit had gone ahead it would have amounted to “a serious diplomatic blunder” and “could have cost the country a lot”.<sup>19 20</sup>

Adarga Analysis:

While media coverage of President Ruto's state visit has generally focused on the headline infrastructure commitments and Kenya's internal political divisions, in our view this visit reinforces our prior observations about how China is responding to the ongoing geoeconomic volatility and uncertainty following the Trump administration's tariffs, while also providing some indication about how non-aligned countries such as Kenya are reacting.

From a Chinese perspective, the state visit provided another opportunity to advance its narrative of China's stability and reliability, projecting itself as a consistent partner to the Global South at a time when U.S. policy has taken a more confrontational and protectionist turn. The U.S. does not run a trade deficit with Kenya, and within the 'Liberation Day' announcements, Kenya was comparatively lightly affected, with the 10% baseline duty imposed.<sup>21</sup> Still, this baseline level is not negligible and almost certainly enhances China's ability to position itself as the defender of open markets and multilateralism in discussions with Kenya. In doing so, it presents itself as a strategic counterweight to Washington's inward turn and offers countries like Kenya a model of partnership grounded in both economic pragmatism and political non-interference.

Meanwhile, the visit received a mixed reception in Kenya. Since taking office in September 2022, President Ruto has visited China each year, making this the third visit of his presidency.<sup>22</sup> Kenyan media extensively covered his latest visit, which was widely interpreted as aiming to strengthen trade and infrastructural development, as well as enhance bilateral relations between the two countries. In its analysis, BBC Monitoring noted a similarly optimistic tone from Kenyan Luo language radio show Ramogi FM with a contributor setting it in the broader context: “I see leaders from other countries also coming to Kenya from China, European and African countries. They come to Kenya to collaborate since countries are inter-dependent”.<sup>23</sup>

This emphasis on interdependence is illustrative of Kenya's approach. Kenya's foreign policy is guided less by ideology than by interdependence and this is reflected in its trade data. In 2023, China remained Kenya's largest trading partner, with Kenyan imports from China totalling USD 3.28 billion.<sup>24 25</sup> However, Kenyan exports to China stood at just USD 206.63 million.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Kenya's trade relationship with the U.S. is more balanced: in 2024 U.S. exports to Kenya totalled USD 782.5 million and Kenyan exports to the U.S. totalled USD 737.3 million.<sup>27</sup> Both the European Union (EU) and the UK are also key trading partners. The EU is Kenya's second largest trading partner and top export destination. Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Kenya was USD 1.8 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q4 2024, making it one of Kenya's top export destinations outside of Africa.<sup>28 29</sup>

This pattern of diversification extends beyond trade into foreign direct investment (FDI) as well. While China dominates in infrastructure projects, both the UK and EU are prominent investors in agribusiness, renewables, and manufacturing. Meanwhile, U.S. capital is concentrated in technology and finance, underscoring Nairobi's clear intent to spread risk and maximise leverage across a broad set of partners in order to sustain diversified relationships across multiple poles of influence rather than choosing one over the other.<sup>30 31 32</sup> Consequently, interpreting Kenya's outreach to China as wholesale alignment would be reductive. In this sense, we interpret Ruto's state visit to China and its associated trade and investment agreements, not as a geopolitical pivot but rather a calculated deepening of Kenya's options within the context of a rapidly evolving global order and geoeconomic environment.

Ruto's visit also served domestic as much as foreign policy purposes. At home, the trip reignited debates over the country's increasing reliance on foreign capital and infrastructure-led development. While ruling coalition leaders were able to frame the agreements as investment wins, opposition voices questioned whether new projects, especially those linked to the BRI, would deliver tangible economic returns or merely add to existing debt burdens. These divisions were further evidenced by the revelation that a group of lawmakers had attempted to coordinate a visit to Taiwan during Ruto's time in China. The aborted trip exposes fissures within Kenya's elite over core China policy questions such as adherence to the One China principle, and highlighted the absence of a unified national consensus on how best to navigate the present geopolitical balancing act. This reinforces the previous point, that rather than reflecting a wholesale tilt toward Beijing, these developments suggest a more pragmatic and contested process, one in which Kenya is neither fully aligned nor counter-aligned to China, but continually negotiating its position in a multipolar world.

China, for its part, appeared keenly aware of these nuances. Their offer of “all-weather” partnership almost certainly does not mean unconditional support, but instead hints at a more transactional, calculated, and opportunistic deepening of the relationship. Moreover, the decision to revisit financing for the Standard Gauge Railway extension and to promote new investment in agribusiness, health, and education signals a shift from rigid state-to-state infrastructure diplomacy to a more adaptive, sector-diverse approach. This flexibility is not solely a concession, but also likely part of Beijing's broader effort to build reputational capital in Africa, where the long-term success of its projects is increasingly judged not by scale but by social and economic impact.

Ultimately, the key takeaway of the visit is its reflection of Kenya's growing diplomatic agility. Rather than aligning with one major power, Nairobi is pursuing leverage through optionality, engaging with a wide range of partners while navigating a landscape that is increasingly defined by tariff wars, shifting alliances, and uncertain multilateral frameworks. While China's charm offensive and America's trade recalibrations may continue to dominate headlines, for countries like Kenya, the priority is neither China nor the U.S., but maintaining its own agency in a fragmented world order.

ABOUT

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