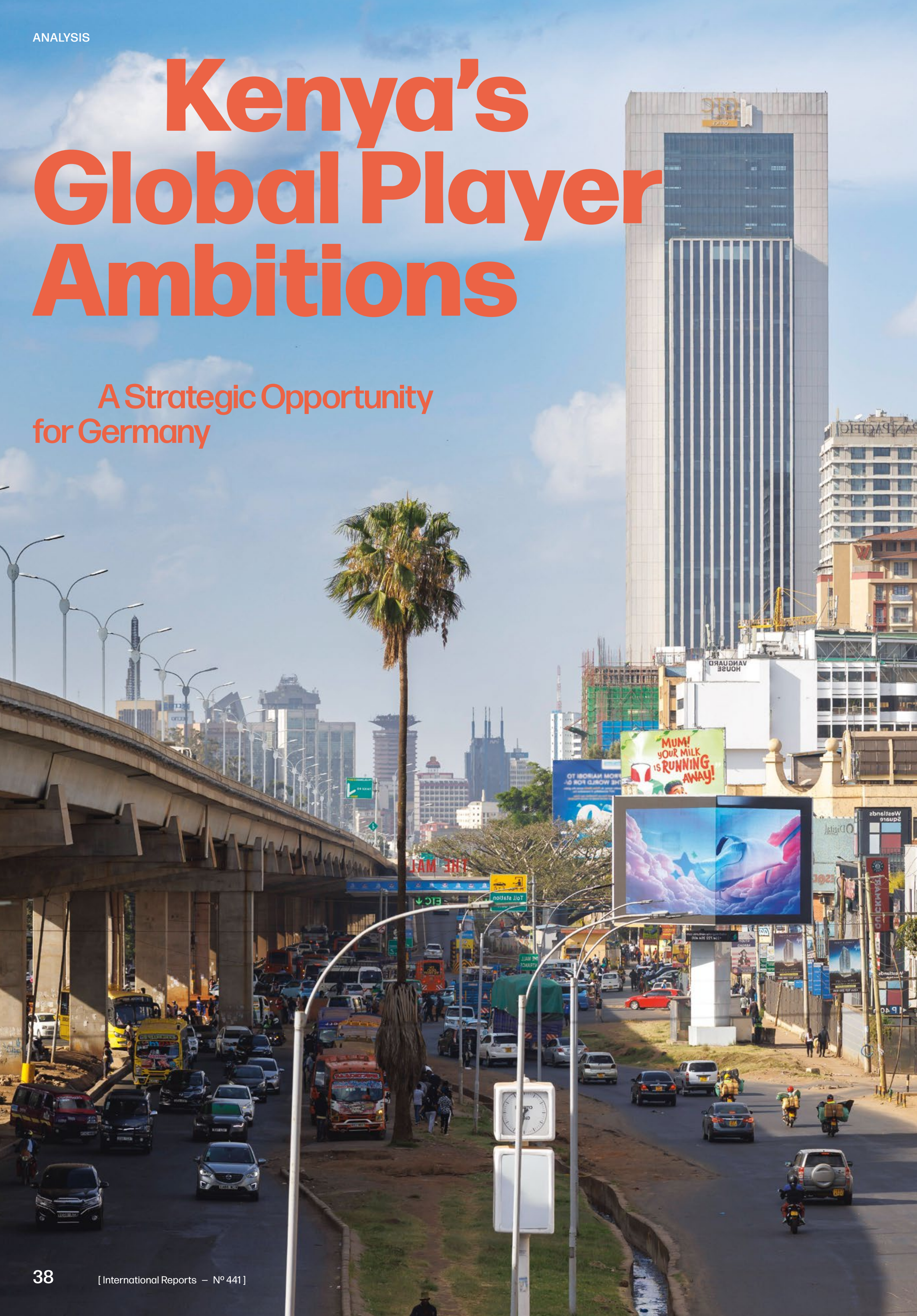
Kenya's Global Player Ambitions

A Strategic Opportunity for Germany



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IN SHORT **/ Germany and Kenya are each navigating an era of deepening geopolitical uncertainty. The old certainties of US security guarantees, stable multilateralism, and predictable development finance are dissolving faster than replacement frameworks can be agreed upon. In this context, partnering more intensely is not a luxury; rather, it is a strategic necessity.**

/ As Germany reconfigures its engagement across Africa, the case for Kenya as a prioritised partner is compelling: Indeed, both countries share values in rules-based order and complementary economic interests, while Kenya has a proven track record on climate leadership and its President William Ruto has positioned his country – persuasively, albeit not without controversy – at the forefront of "Global South" advocacy.

/ The fields of greatest mutual gain are clear: green energy and climate finance, managed migration and skilled-labour mobility, private-sector investment and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and regional security anchoring in the volatile Horn of Africa.

/ In a fragmenting world order, both nations share a fundamental interest in preserving multilateralism not as a form of nostalgia for a vanishing era, but as the only credible alternative to raw-power transactionalism. Their bilateral synergies – properly channelled – can advance institutional reform at the UN, the World Bank, and beyond.

/ Recent geopolitical events across the globe have revealed that a new strategic playbook must be deployed by all players in order to manage constantly evolving international relations. Ongoing conflicts and global challenges are overburdening the management capacities of nation states and stretching the established multilateral instruments. Added to this are the uncertainty that comes with the second Trump administration, sudden cuts in development funding, increased transatlantic friction, a growing crisis of "Western" liberal democracy, a rise in authoritarianism and nationalism, and a growing tendency towards the unilateral action of big powers. This situation paints a bleak picture in which the need for rethinking international relations is apparent. As bilateral dealmaking continues to gain ground and multilateralism appears to be in crisis while nations struggle with new approaches to seeking their advantage, the old logic and tricks of the diplomatic trade have been rendered largely ineffective.

In light of these developments, Germany must orchestrate a pivot – that is, a recalculation of its relationship with Africa. The mutating geopolitical arena and rampant transactionalism – which are almost devoid of a rules-based ethos for guiding international relations – require this urgent reset – that is, a *Zeitenwende* with regard to Germany's strategic engagement with African partners.

Between skyline and savannah: Nairobi, situated at around 1,700 metres above sea level, is Kenya's economic hub and one of Africa's most important political centres. Photo: © photothek, Imago.

> *Kenya's foreign policy under President William Ruto is characterised by pragmatism, economic focus, and active regional leadership.*

The search for strategic partners in Africa: The case for Kenya

As Germany looks to reconfigure its engagement in Africa, there is an obvious need to seek strategic alliances with key regional players and countries with which new approaches can be pioneered at a faster pace. Kenya appears to be a compelling strategic choice for a number of reasons.

Kenya's current foreign policy under President William Ruto is characterised by pragmatism, economic focus, and active regional leadership. The country positions itself as a regional anchor for stability and pursues a policy of strategic balance between its traditional Western partners and others, such as China and the Gulf states.

Kenya is emerging as a key player on the regional stage. It is not only actively engaged in the volatile region of East Africa and the Horn of Africa (with regard to security policy dialogue, peacekeeping missions, mediation efforts, etc.), but also very actively involved in international forums. Perceptions across Africa may vary on this, but Ruto views himself as a leading voice of the so-called "Global South" and as an advocate for African interests, particularly regarding the shaping of the international (financial) order as well as in the areas of climate and energy.[1]

Kenya is a reliable partner on key multilateral issues. Unlike many other African states, the country – when serving as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council – clearly condemned the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and Russia's breaches of international law.[2] The Kenyan government has also – unlike most other African states – taken a stand against Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023.[3]

None of this is uncomplicated. Ruto's domestic political standing has been tested, his past has been contested, and the frustration of Kenya's young generation is real and growing such that it will matter greatly ahead of the August 2027 general election. A serious partnership must account not merely for the preferences of Kenya's current leadership, but also for the nation's institutional durability. What is significant, however, is that Kenya's principled posture on multilateral issues reflects not only presidential preference, but also a durable strand in Kenyan foreign policy thinking – one that successive governments have broadly maintained.

From a German perspective, there is more common ground with Kenya than with most other African countries. In times of geopolitical upheaval and systemic rivalries, investing in a partnership with this key, non-aligned regional player[4] therefore appears essential for Germany (and Europe).

Standing by its principles on the international stage: At the United Nations, Kenya takes a clear, international law-based stance and has established itself as a reliable partner in multilateral forums. Pictured: William Ruto, President of the Republic of Kenya at a General Debate of the 79th UN General Assembly in New York. Photo: © ZUMA Press Wire, Imago.

The recent evolution of German–Kenyan relations: *Zeitenwende* in slow motion?

The recalibration of Germany's international posture predates the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but it was the war – and the subsequent shock of Trump's return to office – that injected genuine urgency into the process. The *Zeitenwende* proclaimed by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz marked the end of many certainties from the post-Cold War era. What followed in relation to Africa was a partial and uneven reset: ambitious in rhetoric, halting in execution.

The Berlin Energy Transition Dialogue of March 2023 – at which newly elected President Ruto delivered the keynote address – was a well-calculated opening: It framed Africa's energy transition not as development charity, but as a geopolitical necessity, with Kenya at the centre of a sustainable energy solution rather than at its margins.[5] Chancellor Scholz's subsequent state visit to Nairobi leveraged Germany's symbolic distinction as the first country to recognise Kenya's independence on 12 December 1963 and elevated the relationship to strategic partnership status, with commitments to a binational commission structure comparable with those Germany maintains with Nigeria and India.

The commitments that followed were substantive. Germany co-financed the locally led FLLOCA Climate Action Programme at EUR 31 million over five years, targeting community-led adaptation across sixteen Kenyan counties.[6] Kenya joined the Climate Club[7] – the invitation-only forum anchoring Germany's approach to the global energy transition. Germany moved deliberately to support the reform of the global climate financing architecture in favour of the "Global South" following the June 2023 Paris Summit for a New Financing Pact.

On trade and investment, the discussions pointed to the scale of the opportunity: Kenya exports roughly USD 130 million to Germany against a much larger import profile approaching USD 400 million.[8] The expectation was that the respective conclusions of the EAC–EU Economic Partnership Agreement, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework, and the Compact with Africa (G20 framework for strengthening investment partnerships with African countries) would together provide a structural boost. However, that expectation has only partially materialised.

Then came political disruption: Scholz's coalition collapsed, fresh elections were held, and Chancellor Merz inherited the momentum – along with the risk of allowing it to dissipate.

> *Kenya is the undisputed economic hub of East Africa.*

The most encouraging signal came at the G7 Summit in Évian in June 2026. Referring to his engagements with President Ruto, Merz appeared "personally impressed" and encouraged the deepening of the dialogue with and cooperation between African partners, especially regarding greater investment, the diversification of trade relations, and market access – all while acknowledging that past efforts may not have been sufficient.[9]

Ruto had attended the G7 summit to present Africa's perspectives upon the invitation of the host, French President Macron. Only a few weeks earlier, France – in contrast to Germany's past hesitancy – had already made bold moves towards a robust strategic pivot by orchestrating an Africa–France summit in Africa[10] hosted by an unlikely partner: the so-called Anglophone country and revered former British colony of Kenya. This choice was not by chance and can be partly explained by Kenya's open-minded foreign policy positioning as well as by President Ruto's pragmatism.

Why Germany and Kenya make strategic sense

From a German perspective, the case for Kenya as a prioritised partner rests on several structural advantages that persist regardless of who occupies State House.

Germany's colonial footprint in Kenya is minimal, which is a meaningful distinction in an era during which historical grievances routinely complicate European–African engagement. Even when Germany confronts sensitive historical matters, such as the return of Nigeria's Benin Bronzes[11] and the acknowledgement of atrocities in Namibia, its approach has been broadly perceived by its African counterparts as more honest.[12] Kenya's own relationship with its colonial history – while not without complexity – does not colour its engagement with Germany in the way that, for example, Francophone African states regard Paris.

Moreover, Kenya is the undisputed economic hub of East Africa, with Nairobi serving as Germany's primary commercial entry point to the broader continent. More than 120 German companies maintain offices in Kenya, utilising Nairobi's digital infrastructure and dynamic fintech ecosystem. The structural imbalance in the trade relationship is a challenge but not a source of embarrassment; rather, it is an investment opportunity waiting for the political will to unlock it.

At a more fundamental level, Kenyans hold similar values – both in the management of the nation's domestic polity as well as in the nation's principled posture regarding international relations – ranging from the principle of territorial integrity to self-determination. More so, some cultural attitudes – especially an ingrained spirit of entrepreneurship – enhance the likelihood and strength of partnerships.

Lastly, in a region characterised by instability and violent conflict, Kenya has remained stable and peaceful and has shown its willingness to engage constructively in peace-building efforts, thereby making it an obvious ally and entry point for security cooperation.

Other relationships between Germany and African partners appear to be much more difficult to manage due to obstacles such as conflict and instability, dire conditions of democracy and human rights, anti-Western sentiment and rhetoric, and preferences for cooperation with supposedly less "demanding" partners. Against this backdrop and despite all internal challenges, Kenya stands out as an ally on a wide range of issues.

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Key areas of strategic engagement and partnership

1. Climate and energy

Kenya is a regional leader in green energy, with renewable sources supplying over 90 per cent of the nation's electricity.[13] This makes Kenya and Germany attractive partners in their global climate diplomacy. In November 2022, the two countries agreed on a Climate and Development Partnership that aims to intensify cooperation in the areas of climate mitigation and adaptation. Strategic cooperation should continue to focus on green innovation, covering the expansion of geothermal, wind, and solar grids alongside the development of electric mobility and a local green hydrogen economy.

2. Managed migration and skilled labour

The two nations signed a Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership in late 2024 that addressed two opposing domestic challenges: Germany's aging population and its skilled labour shortage on the one hand and Kenya's high youth unemployment rate on the other hand.[14] The agreement streamlines pathways for qualified Kenyan professionals to work and study in Germany. At the same time, it also establishes structured frameworks for the identification and repatriation of undocumented migrants, with Kenya being the first sub-Saharan nation to agree to use biometric data for returns.

3. Economic and private sector growth

Kenya is not only the key economic hub in East Africa, but also Germany's primary entry point, serving as a gateway to the broader continent. Germany actively funds and supports Kenya's MSMEs, facilitating their integration into global supply chains. Other substantive opportunities lie both in expanding special economic zones in which German industrial companies can establish East African production facilities with preferential access to AfCFTA markets and in developing financial services architecture – including green bonds and blended finance instruments – in order to channel private German capital into Kenyan infrastructure at scale. Germany's 4.13 billion Kenyan shilling funding commitment in May 2026 to enhance economic ties is a welcome signal, but the structural imbalance in trade flows requires more than headline figures.[15]

4. Regional stability and geopolitical security

The Horn of Africa is a volatile region, and Germany views Kenya as both an essential democratic anchor and a stabilising force. The priority focus of engagement lies on managing regional crises in neighbouring Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia. Germany provides substantial funding in order to assist Kenya in managing and integrating its massive refugee population. Moreover, with traditional Western powers scaling back their presence in the region, Germany has dedicated funds to regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and co-hosts international peace conferences with the African Union (AU) in order to support peacekeeping operations.

A shared agenda for reimagining multilateralism

Germany and Kenya have emerged as vital bridge-builders between the "Global North" and the "Global South" (for lack of better terms). In a fragmented geopolitical landscape, both nations share a fundamental interest in preventing a return to raw power politics by preserving a rules-based international order. They can channel their bilateral synergies in order to strengthen multilateralism and reform the global order across several critical areas.

In reaffirming Kenya's strong position on Russia's attack against Ukraine as well as on Iran's recent attacks on third countries, Korir Sing'oei – Kenya's Principal Secretary for Foreign Affairs – emphasised the "pro-principle" stance of his country. Speaking at the GLOBSEC Forum in Prague in May 2026, Sing'oei explained that from an African perspective, the current ruptures are seen as a chance at re-ordering and as an opportunity to "re-imagine and re-configure the norms" in favour of more inclusive and resilient frameworks that safeguard fundamental principles of sovereignty and protect against aggression.[16]

One key aspect in this context is the UN Security Council. Its current structure reflects the global realities of 1945, not the present day. Both Germany and Kenya are vocal proponents of structural reform, albeit from slightly different traditional stances. The two countries can work together to help align European and African interests in order to push for a more representative Security Council that includes permanent African representation and broader democratic oversight.[17] From a Kenyan perspective, this is not merely an institutional adjustment, but also an indispensable step towards restoring trust, legitimacy, and confidence in the international order.

> *New partnerships will need to be forged – where possible, based on shared values, and sometimes, based on mere pragmatism.*

Secondly, Kenya and other African nations have long pointed out that global financial systems lock developing countries into high-interest debt cycles. President Ruto has been one of the most prominent global voices demanding an overhaul of the international financial architecture. He argues that the current system is fundamentally unjust and detrimental to developing nations.[18] Germany – as a major shareholder in multilateral development banks – can partner with Kenya to champion reform packages at the UN.

With traditional Western powers scaling back some physical interventions, Germany's multilateral approach relies heavily on supporting regional anchors. Kenya has historically contributed troops to UN and AU peacekeeping missions, while Germany can channel strategic funding, technical expertise, and military logistics into Kenyan-led peace initiatives under the UN umbrella. A primary example is co-managing and advocating for sustainable UN funding for regional missions. By combining German resources with Kenya's regional legitimacy and personnel, the two countries can champion a shift towards more agile, localised UN-authorised peacekeeping.

Current global challenges and geopolitical ruptures call for urgent adjustments. Countries need to build resilience, invest in strategic autonomy and diversified dependencies, and re-imagine collective security arrangements. All this will not be possible by simply remaining within traditional alliances. New partnerships

Focus on partnership: German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Kenyan President William Ruto met in June 2026 on the sidelines of the G7 summit for bilateral talks. Photo: © Bestimage, Imago.

will need to be forged – where possible, based on shared values, and sometimes, based on mere pragmatism. Strategic cooperation between Kenya and Germany will have elements of both. However, the most important common ground is the shared interest in maintaining and strengthening the rules-based international order (while also reforming it).

Coming from fundamentally different parts of the world yet each representing key players with a willingness to take up responsibility, Kenya and Germany can form an alliance that has a greater impact in terms of shaping the global agenda. This could include joint efforts to (1) shield and reaffirm international law, (2) elaborate new and resilient development funding approaches, (3) safeguard maritime security and protect global supply chains, (4) counter the weakening of multilateral institutions, (5) promote frameworks that ensure the representation of civil society, women, and youths in multilateral decision-making, and (6) advocate for diplomatic de-escalation frameworks for looming conflicts.

Defining new terms of engagement

Germany's partnership with Kenya can play a pioneering role in substantially – as well as symbolically – focusing the terms of engagement with African partners more on coherence, credibility, and strategic orientation. But what needs to be done?

1. Do not re-invent the wheel. The structures are already available to launch a robust reboot of Germany's relations with Africa, with Kenya serving as a key partner.

2. However, move away from the aid paradigm and outdated approaches of development cooperation and towards an interest-driven, pragmatic form of cooperation that focusses on key strategic areas of mutual benefit and that activates the private sector forces as drivers of prosperity.

3. This does not mean a U-turn; rather, enhance what works: for example, Afrika Kommt!, in which skilled African professionals who are comfortable with the German language and business culture are trained and hired in German companies, or programmes such as WIDU, in which local African entrepreneurship is curated and supported by German funds with equal contribution by diaspora relatives in Germany.

4. Expand and integrate other European nations into an enhanced Compact with Africa engagement similar to France's Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi.

5. Orchestrate and sustain multiple visits at all levels with dedicated focus areas such as trade, energy, migration, sports, and education – culminating in a Chancellor's visit, preferably in an expanded Compact with Africa context.

As East Africa's undisputed economic hub and host to high-profile international business summits, Kenya serves as a key gateway for investment across the continent. Pictured: French President Emmanuel Macron and his Kenyan counterpart, William Ruto. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

6. Mobilise strong, well-coordinated, diverse German participation in the Global Trust Summit scheduled for October 2026 in Nairobi. Hosted by President Ruto and supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, this summit will bring together experts and decision-makers in order to devise strategies against the increasing erosion of trust in governance structures and multilateral institutions.

7. Highlight a number of Africa's main challenges or interests, identify areas where they align with German/European interests and priorities, and champion these areas in the relevant international forums. This may include items such as the reform of the UN Security Council as well as the global financial architecture.

8. Establish, calibrate, and enhance mutually beneficial relationships between devolved units and the sixteen German *Bundesländer* as well as – where possible – city-to-city twinning. These economic relationships can be further enhanced by leveraging Special Economic Zones in which German companies can increase their exports to Africa as well as diversify German industry within Africa.

9. Further strengthen the complementary and strategic partnership between Bonn and Nairobi as sister UN hubs, particularly with regard to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT).

10. Promote a continuous pluralistic approach to engagement, including with the private sector and civil society, with cultural and educational institutions, and with political foundations.

Conclusion

The mutations on the world stage have given birth to a crop of leaders who are determined, resilient, and certain that their vision for a world challenged by US transactionalism is the right one – a world in which principles that are secure in a rules-based international order buttressed by robust multilateralism and evolving new alliances will be the norm. The rise of middle powers further affirms that the structure of the international relations agreed upon after the Second World War is no longer fit for this purpose. Canada's Premier Mark Carney has thrown down the gauntlet, inviting other like-minded middle powers to coalesce into a counterweight against the US and China – an effort at rebalancing in order to ensure that the system is not destabilised. Germany and Kenya are both challenged in this context: The two countries have been tasked with positioning themselves strategically in order to deal with an increasingly uncertain future of international cooperation. Partnering more intensely in order to strengthen resilience and have a stronger impact in shaping the global agenda appears to be the order of the day. The homework to be done is clear-cut, and both countries' leaderships seem prepared to move in the right direction. This should be encouraged and accompanied by a broad-based discourse involving a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and academia. The path is clear, but the terrain needs to be analysed every step of the way in order to ensure that targets are reached.

As both countries move towards intensified strategic cooperation, they must not forget to keep an eye on their respective domestic developments – and to pursue an open and honest dialogue about these developments. Democratic backsliding, political unrest, or even violence in light of the growing frustration of the young generation as Kenya moves to the next general election in August 2027 would put Kenya's credible and principled international engagement at risk. The same concern should apply for scenarios of growing xenophobia or governments at the state or even federal level that are led by right-wing populists in Germany. A constructive engagement on the global stage should also be seen as an avenue for protecting democracy at home against threats that come with economic decline, crisis management challenges, and a growing trust deficit – all of which are often accelerated by anti-democratic forces that are enhancing their global networks and extending their toolbox of interference through soft power, disinformation, and hybrid warfare. /

Article and
references
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