



► ANALYSIS /DR. EL MUSTAPHA AIT SIDI MHAMED

FROM PATERNALISM TO PARTNERSHIP: FRANCE'S UNSOLICITED POSITION IN AFRICA

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Unlike the routine visits of French presidents to Africa's Francophone sphere, this time French president paid a visit to an anglophone country, Kenya, where France has neither colonial history nor inherited weight. This visit itself unveiled something that France would never have admitted it just a few years ago; that is France can no longer take its traditional partners for granted. While attending the 2026 Africa Forward Summit that took place in Nairobi, Macron opened, unprecedentedly, his speech in English and switched in less than a minute to French. This was perhaps the most candid metaphor of France's dilemma in Africa that seemed to be a power attempting to rebrand itself in a language it has not yet learned to speak fluently.

Framing The Shift

For decades, Africa had long been treated by French governments as a sphere of privileged influence, governed by a colonial and paternalistic logic. This started since the invasion and occupation of the first African state, Algeria, in 1830. However, the Nairobi summit, attended by many African heads of states, has transformed what France has been building for decades. France arrives now to a point as a supplicant not as the unchallenged hegemon across Francophone Africa (West and Sahel). This summit was the first France has ever attended in an English-

speaking country in Africa, a cautious signal that Paris is “seeking to overhaul its engagement” after the massive loss of its former colonial sphere. Macron proclaimed \$27 billion in investments focused mainly on agriculture, energy transition, AI, and technology.

Yet, this ambition was challenged by Kenya’s President William Ruto who said unambiguously that any new partnership “must not be built on dependency but on sovereign equality, not on aid or charity but on mutually beneficial investment”¹. As the audience give a strong applause to such inevitable statement, another viral footage took place at University of Nairobi where Macron reprimanded young African students accusing them of showing “total lack of respect” as they have been talking during his speech. African commentator and civil society blasted Macron’s scolding as inappropriate and that highlights the “schoolmaster” mindset rather than “partner” spirit. Zimbabwean politician Fadzayi Mahere noting, “They are not your kids... Imagine if a guest of state did the same in your country?”². Control Risks analyst Beverly Ochieng also noted that France’s new direction (intention) remains untested: “It’s too early to tell if this is a successful pivot, as the partnership has only just been established.”³

Françafrique: The Era of Paternalism

After formal decolonization spanned between 1956 and 1977, France governed its African sphere through what is called Françafrique. In a comprehensive definition, Françafrique is an architecture system administering military bases, resource extraction and exploitation, currency dependency, and above all compliant governments that align with France’s will. Thousands French enterprises operate across Africa in viable sectors Orange telecom to nuclear energy firm Orano. The CFA franc -pegged to the euro- still ties more than 200 million people across 14 countries to the French Treasury. After decolonization, the acronym was reinterpreted to stand for Communauté Financière Africaine (African Financial Community). However, the original nomination used to Colonies Françaises d’Afrique (French Colonies in Africa). Such system has received severe critics as a colonial artifact that held back African countries from building their own independent financial institutions.

¹ “President Ruto Calls for Mutually Beneficial Relations Between Africa and France,” *The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kenya*, 12 May 2026, <https://www.president.go.ke/president-ruto-calls-for-mutually-beneficial-relations-between-africa-and-france/> (accessed 09/06/2026).

² Fadzayi Mahere @advocatamahere, post on X), 11 May 2026, <https://x.com/advocatamahere/status/2053851244901347385> (accessed 09/06/2026).

³ Shola Lawal, “Can Macron’s Kenya Visit Revive French Influence in Africa?,” *Al Jazeera*, 13 May 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2026/5/13/can-macrons-kenya-visit-revive-french-influence-in-africa> (accessed 09/06/2026).

Alain Antil and Thierry Vircoulon, two senior IFRI analysts, noted France's accumulated grievances over decades: "military interventions, the persistence of the regional currency inherited from colonial time, development aid policy, restrictive visa policy"⁴. This highlights important development regarding France narratives and transformed reasoned criticism into a wide-ranging rejection of Paris paternalism.

Drivers of Change

The collapse of Françafrique looked like a cascade. In just between 2021 and 2023, military coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso resulted in a cancellation of defence agreements between these countries and Paris. French ambassadors expelled. French troops ordered to leave. The three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in late 2023 and formally withdrew from ECOWAS in January 2025. Further, well established French allies collapsed literally in other countries. Defence cooperation in Chad had been terminated by end 2024. The new President of Senegal, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who also attended Nairobi Summit declared French bases "incompatible with sovereignty". The most loyal partner of France Alassane Ouattara of Ivory Coast claimed the departure of French troops by December 2024. Five years was enough to reduce the number of French troops to less than two thousand from roughly ten thousand. Thierry Vircoulon drew an honest conclusion: "There is a clear collapse of French policy in Africa. The withdrawal of the French troops and basically the end of the French military presence in Africa is a symbol of that collapse"⁵. This conclusion is debatable of course as France tries to relocate itself in other parts of Africa.

Economically, the features of that collapse are not less damaging. The bilateral trade of sub-Saharan Africa (48 countries combined) with France amounted to only \$28 billion in 2023 which is a modest rate representing only less than 2% of French total exports. Orano that operated uranium exploitation in Niger for 50 years lost operational control of its mines right after 2023 coup. Eventually, the national mining company Somair took over 63% stake that was once owned by Orano.

⁴ Alain Antil and Thierry Vircoulon, "After the Failure in the Sahel, Rethinking French Policy in Africa," *Ifri* (Institut français des relations internationales), 10 April 2024, <https://www.ifri.org/en/memos/after-failure-sahel-rethinking-french-policy-africa> (accessed 09/06/2026).

⁵ Thierry Vircoulon, interviewed by Lisa Bryant, "France Starts 2025 with Fresh Controversy, Questions over Africa," *Voice of America*, referenced via *Ifri*, 11 January 2025, <https://www.ifri.org/en/media-external-article/france-starts-2025-fresh-controversy-questions-over-africa> (accessed 09/06/2026).

Reorientation towards Partnership

Macron's speech at Nairobi Summit appears to mark the honest articulation of a rectified doctrine. He admitted that the era of European schoolmaster is over: "Previously European chiefs would lecture African leaders on what they needed. This is no longer what Africa needs or wants to hear. That's just as well, because we, too, no longer have the means, if we're being honest". He claimed that Paris wanted to develop partnerships "on an equal footing, founded on shared interests and tangible results". However, this self-awareness was instantly tested! He claimed himself in a press conference as a "true Pan-African", a statement that was broadly ridiculed on African social media. Scolding students at the University of Nairobi, repeatedly shouting "hey" asking them calm down has been seen as controversy. As Al Jazeera's Shola Lawal remarked, his "controversial statements at the Nairobi summit raised questions among many Africans on social media about how seriously France will take its promises"⁶. In the same vein, as France claims partnership as a base for any future cooperation with Africa; some observations arise to frame this approach. Yannick Lefang, CEO of an intelligence firm, claimed that "our data suggests the reality is more a redistribution of influence than a full retreat"; in contrast to the widespread headlines that frame 'France is leaving Africa'. In fact, France has strengthened ties with Kenya and Nigeria (none was a French colony) while signing 5-year defense pact with Nairobi and approximately a \$350 billion investment agreement with Abuja in 2024. Despite the orientation towards partnerships with African sovereign states, Vircoulon of IFRI prescribe what France should stand for in Africa; that it must "demilitarize" its African relations wholly and compete solely on economic and cultural terms.

The New Players in Figures

As France has been forced to leave, the space it vacated is not remaining empty. Among the countries that fit such space are China, Russia, Türkiye and Morocco.

China has become Africa's largest economic partner with a trade balance of \$296 billion in 2024, totaling 22% of the Africa's total trade. At the 2024 FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) summit that took place in Beijing, President Xi Jinping announced a \$51 billion investment to fund over three years 30 infrastructure and 30 clean energy projects across the continent. China canceled a long time ago tariffs on more than 90% of products from 20 African

⁶ Lawal, "Can Macron's Kenya Visit Revive French Influence in Africa?"

countries as well as offering zero-tariff status to all imports from 33 least-developed African countries.

The security vacuum left by France's military leavings has been filled by **Russia**. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic all invited Russian military personnel after expelling French troops. The trade between Africa and Russia reached \$27 billion in 2024 which has almost doubled compared to 2019. The Third Russia-Africa Summit is scheduled for October 2026 in Moscow. Moreover, the AES states signed a deal with Russia for telecom and surveillance satellites in September 2024.

As for **Türkiye**, Türkiye-Africa trade grew from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$40 billion in 2025. The African footprint has been built effectively by Ankara. Turkish construction firms have a big share accounting for 18% or \$100 billion of all their overseas' contracts from Africa by 2025. Either African governments and African people increasingly see Ankara as a "less controversial actor" without any history of backing coups or colonial associations. Türkiye with its flagship Baykar has recently begun to deploy its defense technology in some African countries. The recent meeting of Niger President -Abdourahamane Tchiani- with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara demonstrates how Türkiye is a trustworthy partner. Several agreements have been signed between Türkiye and Niger in different sectors including higher education, defense, health care, and trade. Erdogan insisted that "We continue to develop our relations with African countries on the basis of equal partnerships, mutual respect, and win-win principles"⁷.

Morocco is the gateway to/from Africa and has emerged as the most strategically ambitious broker. King Mohammed VI launched Atlantic Initiative in 2023 aiming to provide an access to the Atlantic Ocean for landlocked countries in Africa (mainly Sahel states). This initiative is built upon a \$1.6 billion deep-water port at Dakhla, to be accomplished by 2028. The port will relate to road and rail network beside the \$25 billion Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline. In May 2025, the foreign ministers of AES states paid a visit to Rabat to endorse the initiative and launch technical corridor mapping. Morocco with initiative offers something concrete that is a sea route to global markets. Moreover, Morocco as an intra-African alternative has a massive financial expansion in Africa through Attijariwafa Bank, and "Fertilizer Diplomacy" through OCP state-owned phosphate company. Put it simple, Morocco understands continental realities and challenges and has a lot to share with African countries based on win-win and South-South cooperation.

⁷ "Türkiye Continues to Develop Africa Ties Based on 'Equal Partnership': Erdogan," *TRT World*, 4 June 2026, <https://www.trtworld.com/article/ef5073b6eb66> (accessed 09/06/2026).

To recap, France has lost much influence in West Africa following a widespread anti-French sentiment. France's loss is not simply a diplomatic setback. Rather, it is a substantial repositioning of a continent in a multipolar age. Yet, Paris is trying to rebrand itself as a reliable ally for East Africa, at least for the case of Kenya and Ethiopia. Now that it has handed over control, under pressure, to more reliable and trustworthy partners and players; France would attempt to frame itself at its most power and resources to regain trust. As for African leaders and executives in other parts of Africa, it is now the best timing to redefine what France should be in Africa as a real partner with win-win plans rather than neo-colonial top-down approach.

More Readings

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