

MOMENTUM AFRICA OUTLOOK

From Africa First
to Africa Forward:
Execution Is Now the Test

AFRICA FORWARD SUMMIT

AFRICA - FRANCE PARTNERSHIPS
FOR INNOVATION AND GROWTH

MAY 11-12, 2026 NAIROBI, KENYA





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When colleagues and I wrote about **Africa First** during my time at Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, the argument was not complicated.

The world was changing, and Africa needed to stop behaving as if the old order would hold.

A Trump presidency, weakening multilateralism, renewed great-power competition, wars disrupting supply chains, rising protectionism, and the retreat of predictable development financing all pointed in one direction: the global system was becoming more transactional.

My concern then was that Africa was still too often entering global conversations as if goodwill, historical relationships, or moral arguments would be enough. They were not.

Africa First was never a call for isolation. It was not anti-West, anti-China, anti-Europe or anti-anyone. It was a call for agency. It was an argument that Africa needed to define its interests more clearly, negotiate with more discipline, and build the capabilities that make sovereignty real.

The Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi showed how that thinking has evolved. Africa First was the instinct. Africa Forward must now become the operating model.

The real question is whether Africa can turn a moment of diplomatic convergence into institutional muscle. That is the test now: not whether we can convene leaders, but whether we can execute priorities with

discipline after they leave the room.

Nairobi mattered because it brought nearly thirty Heads of State and Government to Kenya around a proposition that would have been much harder to land a decade ago: that Africa is not simply a theatre for global competition, a source of raw materials, a development problem to be managed, or a diplomatic afterthought. Africa is becoming one of the arenas where the next global order will be shaped.

For thirty leaders to converge in Nairobi, in East Africa, for an Africa-France Summit, tells us something important. It tells us that the geography of the relationship is changing. This was not France speaking only to its old Francophone comfort zone. It was an attempt, however imperfect, to reposition the relationship with Africa as a continent, with Kenya, and Nairobi, as a serious diplomatic platform for questions of finance, security, industrialisation, technology, agriculture, health, energy and global governance.

That shift matters for Kenya. It matters for East Africa. It matters for the continent. But we should not be naïve about it.

Critics are right to ask hard questions. France is looking for a new footing in Africa. It has lost influence in parts of the Sahel. Its security posture has been challenged. Its old assumptions about access, influence and legitimacy have been shaken. Other actors, China, Russia, Turkey, the Gulf states, India and others, have become more assertive. African publics are more sceptical. African governments have more options.

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So yes, France is recalibrating. But that is not, in itself, a problem. The real question is whether Africa is also recalibrating.

Diplomacy is not a morality play. Every country and every bloc pursues interests. France is pursuing its interests. Europe is pursuing its interests. China, the Gulf, the United States, Russia and India are doing the same. Africa's task is not to pretend otherwise. Africa's task is to understand the moment and convert it into leverage.

That is where Africa Forward becomes useful.

The point is not whether France needs a new Africa strategy. Clearly, it does. The point is whether Africa can use this moment to insist on a new bargain: one based on co-investment, value addition, technology transfer, fairer financing, institutional reform, jobs, and African ownership of the systems that will shape our future.

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priorities, it can matter.

That is why Nairobi should not be judged only by the speeches or the family photo. It should be judged by whether the political convergence produced leverage that Africa can now use.

On that front, there were important signals. Nairobi produced three forms of leverage.

First, a political signal: a renewed Africa-France partnership framed around mutual respect, co-development and shared value, not aid dependency.

Second, a capital signal: 23 billion in private investment announcements, with 14 billion from French companies and 9 billion from African businesses.

Third, a rules signal: Africa's concerns on global financial architecture, excessive imbalances, debt, guarantees, SDRs, industrialisation and peace and security were pushed into the G7 and wider multilateral conversation.

These are not insignificant outcomes. But they are also not enough. Announcements



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are not projects. Presidential attention is not state capability.

And this is where we need to be honest with ourselves.

Africa's biggest risk after Nairobi is not that the Summit lacked ambition. It is that the ambition outruns the machinery required to deliver it.

We are good at convening. We are good at communiqués. We are good at announcing frameworks, initiatives, declarations and partnerships. But too often we are weak at the boring things that actually matter: project preparation, inter-ministerial coordination, procurement, regulatory approvals, legal structuring, bankability, land issues, permits, offtake agreements, guarantees, data systems, and follow-through.

That is the gap between Africa First as a posture and Africa Forward as an operating model. If we are serious, then sovereignty must now be understood as capability.

Across the Summit themes, the same idea kept appearing in different forms:

sovereignty now means capability. In energy, it means reliable power and local processing. In agriculture, it means treating food as industry. In health, it means manufacturing medicines, vaccines and diagnostics on the continent. In digital and AI, it means compute, data, skills and governance. In finance, it means African institutions with balance sheets strong enough to reduce dependence on external risk perceptions. And in peace and security, it means Africans remaining the main stakeholders in resolving African crises.

The point is simple: Africa Forward cannot be a slogan. It must show up in systems.

Yes, it was significant that thirty leaders came to Nairobi. But the significance of that gathering will be lost if it does not now produce a step change in how African governments execute. The credibility of Africa Forward will be decided in ministries, development banks, project preparation facilities, investment committees, procurement offices, regulators, customs authorities, energy agencies and presidential delivery units. That is where the



real work begins.

For me, execution discipline after Nairobi requires five shifts.

First, we need brutal prioritisation. Not every line in the Declaration can be treated as equal. Africa Forward needs a short list of flagship deliverables that can be tracked over the next 12 to 24 months. The 23 billion investment announcements should be broken down project by project: who is investing, where, in what sector, at what stage, what approvals are needed, what financing gaps remain, and what government action is required.

Second, every major commitment needs an owner. Not a vague institution. A named lead. A minister, CEO, development bank executive, agency head or presidential envoy who is responsible for moving that item. If nobody owns it, it will not move.

Third, the financing agenda must be treated as the spine of the whole Summit, not one theme among many. Energy, health manufacturing, agriculture, digital infrastructure, blue economy and industrialisation all depend on reducing the cost of capital and improving risk-sharing. That means strengthening African risk instruments like ATIDI, using guarantees more intelligently, developing local currency financing, pushing SDR rechanneling, and

making African financial institutions central to implementation.

Fourth, we need a delivery mechanism that is small, senior and relentless. Not another large secretariat that produces reports. A tight Africa Forward delivery platform should track the top commitments, unblock bottlenecks, convene the right actors, and report honestly on progress. It should work with the AU, AfDB, Kenya, France, African financial institutions and the private sector, but it must have one discipline: move commitments from announcement to execution.

Fifth, we need public accountability. A dashboard may sound basic, but it matters. Which investments have moved? Which are stuck? Which partner has delivered? Which African government has failed to act? Which regulatory bottlenecks remain? Which projects have reached financial close? Which commitments were quietly dropped? Without transparency, momentum will fade.

This is uncomfortable because it forces us to look at our own weaknesses.

It is easier to blame external partners, unfair finance, global rules and old power structures. And many of those critiques are valid. The international financial architecture is unfair. Africa does face a punitive risk premium. Global imbalances do hurt African



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industrialisation. The UN Security Council does not reflect today's world. The global trading system often works against late industrialisers.

But none of that removes our own responsibility. Africa cannot demand a new global order while tolerating weak execution at home. We cannot call for value addition and then fail to fix power, logistics and standards. We cannot ask for private capital and then make projects impossible to bank. We cannot speak of digital sovereignty and then underinvest in data, skills and compute. We cannot demand health sovereignty and then fail to create predictable procurement for African manufacturers. We cannot call for African-led peace and security while underfunding and under-equipping our own institutions.

Africa Forward will only be credible if it is matched by a step change in African state capability. That, for me, is the hard truth after Nairobi.

The Summit gave us momentum. But momentum is not self-executing. It decays if it is not organised.

The opportunity now is to use Nairobi as a forcing mechanism. By the time the outcomes are taken to the G7 in June, Africa should not simply be presenting concerns. It should be presenting a disciplined agenda: this is what we want changed in the global financial architecture; this is how excessive imbalances are affecting African industrialisation; this is what we need on guarantees and concessional finance; this is how African institutions can be capitalised; this is the project pipeline; this is where partners can engage; this is what African governments themselves are committing to do.

Nairobi was important because it showed that Africa can convene at scale, frame the issues, attract partners, and push its priorities into global conversations. But Nairobi will only matter if we now do the harder thing: execute.





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