

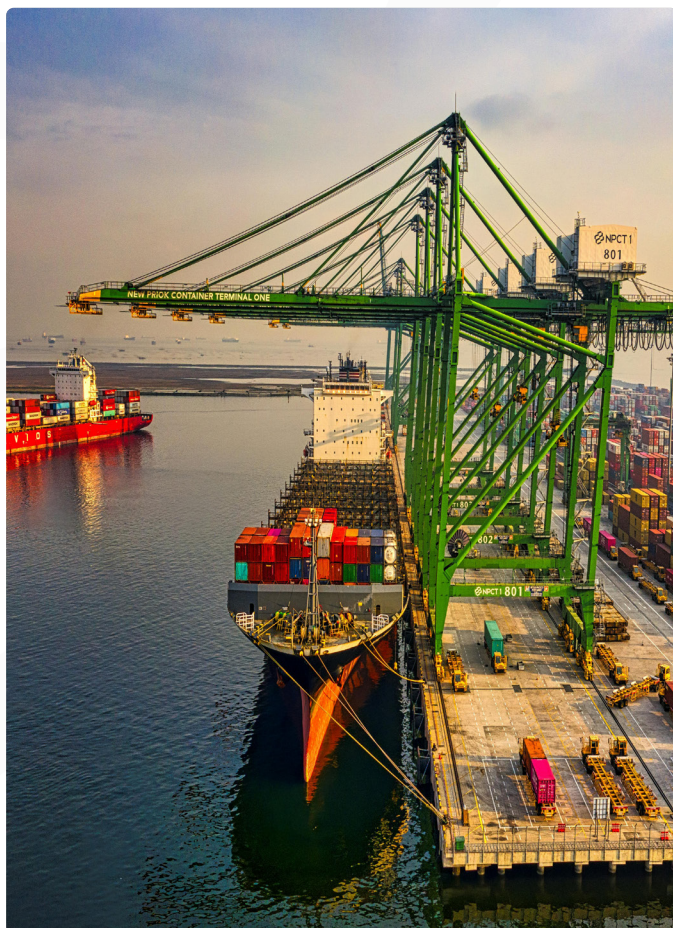
LEGAL ALERT

China and Kenya Deepen Relations Amid Global Instability: Strategic Implications for Africa and Beyond

China and Kenya entered a trade pact following a Ministerial Meeting of Coordinators for the Implementation of Follow-up Actions from the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that took place in Changsha, Hunan Province, China on 11 June 2025. In a joint declaration between the Chinese and 53 African Foreign Ministers titled 'China-Africa Changsha Declaration on Upholding Solidarity and Cooperation of the Global South', China offered duty-free access for African products entering Chinese markets.

Section VIII of the joint declaration emphasises that, "China is ready to... expand the zero-tariff treatment for 100 percent tariff lines to all 53 African countries having diplomatic relations with China, or all African countries except Eswatini, to welcome quality products from Africa to the Chinese market..."

China's intentional exclusion of Eswatini, which is Africa's sole country maintaining diplomatic ties with Taiwan, underscores Beijing's strategic messaging and the symbolic significance it places on its relationships across the continent.



Background: China-Africa Economic Ties

Amid an escalating global trade war initiated during President Trump's administration and intensifying geopolitical competition between the United States and China, Africa has experienced a notable shift in power dynamics. This shift has accelerated the formation of strategic partnerships between African nations and China.

Kenya's relationship with China exemplifies this trend. What began as a trade-focused partnership has evolved into a multifaceted engagement encompassing infrastructure, energy, and political cooperation. Kenya exports agricultural products, minerals, and manufactured goods to China, while importing machinery, electronics, textiles, and other industrial products from Chinese markets.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, China has been Africa's largest trading partner for 16 consecutive years. China's total imports and exports with African countries increased from less than RMB 100 billion (approx. USD 13.9 billion) in 2000 to RMB 2.1 trillion (approx. USD 292.7 billion) in 2024, marking an average annual growth of 14.2%, according to the General Administration of Customs (GAC). Since October 2024, Beijing has made an additional investment of over RMB 13.3 billion (approx. USD 1.8 billion), and funded projects worth RMB 150 billion (approx. USD 20.9 billion) in Africa. Additionally, the Chinese Ministry noted that in 2025 the trade volume had already risen by 12.4% with Africa to RMB 963 billion (approx. USD 133 billion).

Kenya's infrastructure development has been shaped by its strategic role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. Key projects under the BRI include the Nairobi Expressway and the Standard Gauge Railway,

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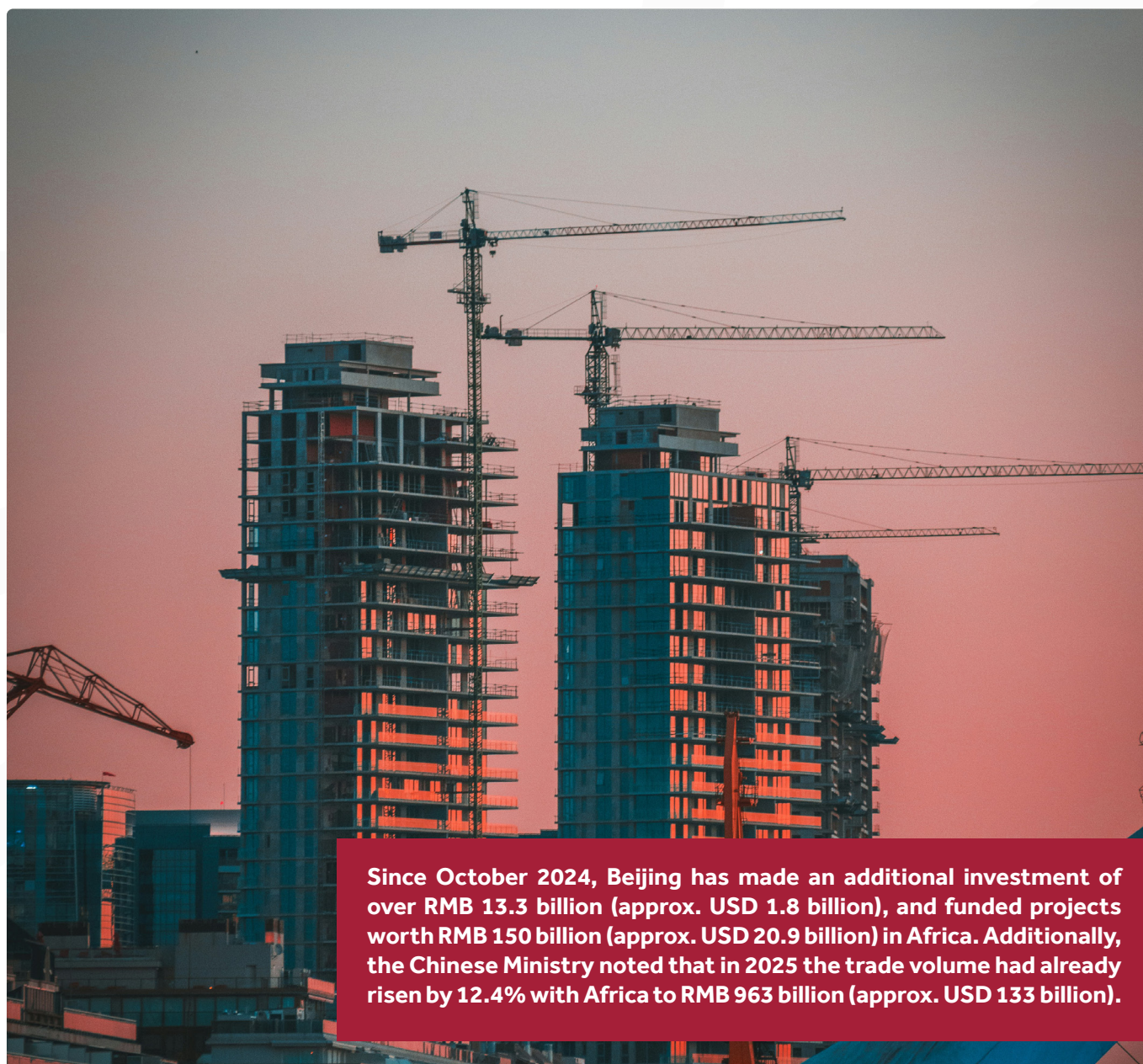
which connects Nairobi to the Port of Mombasa, enhancing trade and regional integration. The Lamu Port and the LAPSSET Corridor further extend this integration by linking Kenya with Ethiopia and South Sudan.

China has also expanded its involvement in Kenya's renewable energy sector, supporting investments in solar, wind, and geothermal power. These initiatives align with Kenya's broader goals for sustainable development and energy diversification.

However, the deepening of China–Kenya relationship has not been without criticism. Concerns have been raised over trade imbalances, the dominance of Chinese imports in local markets, debt sustainability,

labour practices, and environmental impacts associated with Chinese-funded projects. Critics argue that such partnerships risk undermining local industries and increasing Kenya's economic dependence, while complicating its efforts to maintain a balanced and diversified foreign policy. The growing relationship has also sparked a rebuke from Kenya's longtime ally, the United States.

Despite these concerns, Kenya's expanding engagement with China reflects a broader strategic shift toward deeper bilateral cooperation in an increasingly uncertain global environment.



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Global instability: China's Position as a Leader in South-South Cooperation

Klein and Pettis, in their book *Trade Wars are Class Wars: How Rising Inequality Distorts the Global Economy and Threatens International Peace*, argue that trade conflicts are often rooted in deeper structural inequalities – what appear to be geopolitical disputes are, in fact, reflections of domestic economic imbalances. This perspective is particularly relevant in today's context, where systemic shocks, shifting trade alliances, and intensifying power rivalries are reshaping the global order. In response, countries across the Global South are actively reassessing and redefining their strategic partnerships.

A defining feature of global instability is the escalation of the rivalry between the U.S. and China that has manifested in prolonged trade war tensions. As the two major powers seek to consolidate their influence across different regions in the world, Africa has become a theatre of soft power competition.

On the one hand, the U.S. has taken steps to recalibrate its trade posture, such as pausing reciprocal tariffs and initiating negotiations with African nations, amid uncertainty surrounding the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). In contrast, China has advanced a model of engagement centred on infrastructure investment and trade facilitation, aimed at deepening economic ties and promoting diversification across the continent.

According to data presented by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as of 2023, 52 out of 54 African countries traded more with China than the U.S. BRI and FOCAC have resulted in a boost of China-Africa trade. These platforms have also contributed to infrastructure, streamlined trade logistics, and strengthened regional value chains.



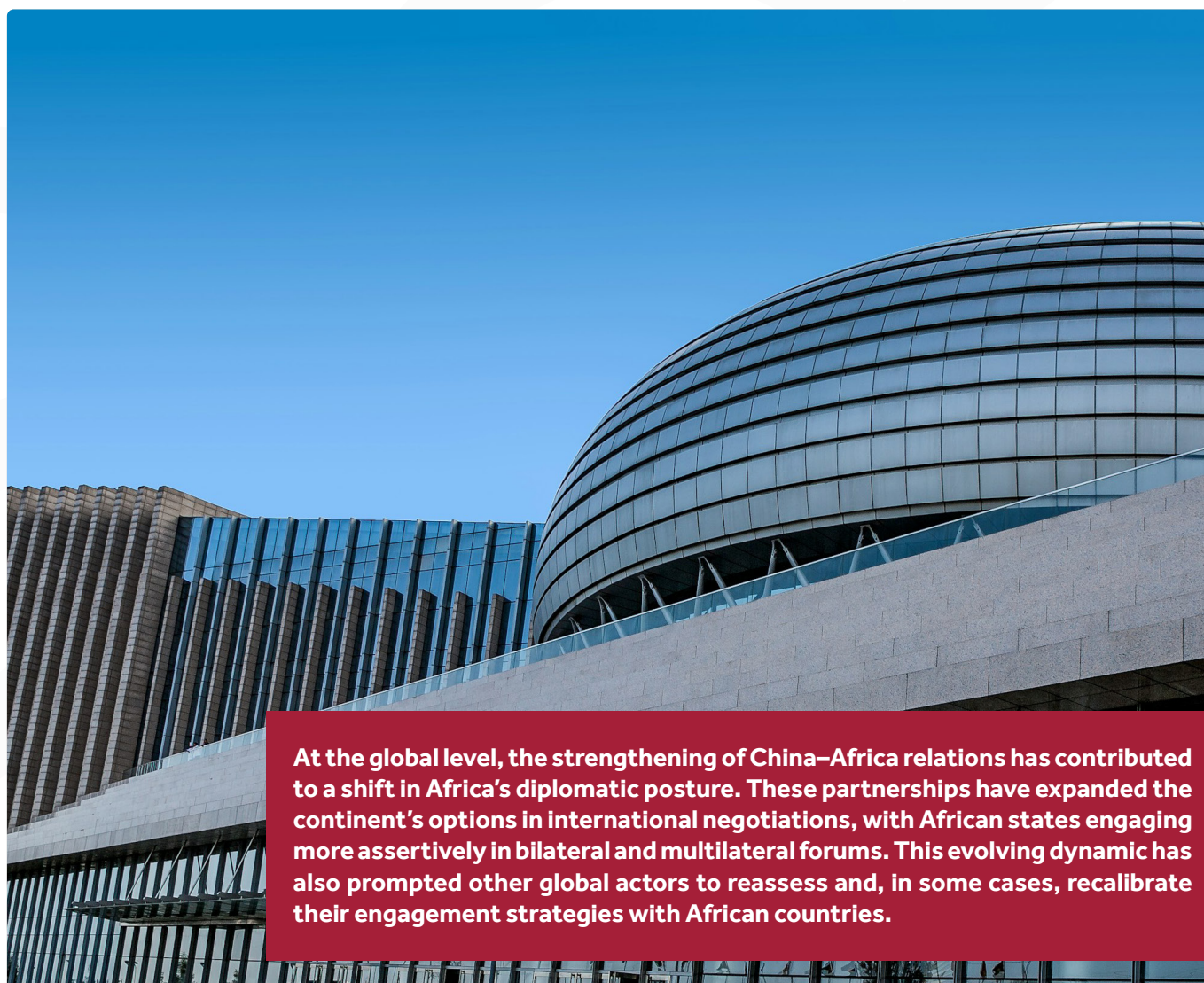
Strategic Implications for Africa and Beyond

For Kenya, the current trade pact seeks to improve Kenya's competitiveness in the global market through the Framework Agreement on Economic Partnership for Shared Development, which offers a platform for collaboration on sustainable development of Kenyan industries. Additionally, upon finalisation, the trade agreement aims to facilitate trade, inclusive growth, coordination of supply chain and digital economy. Kenya's partnership with China seeks to diversify Kenya's international partnerships and may influence other regional economies to follow suit.

The China-Africa Changsha Declaration on Upholding Solidarity and Cooperation of the Global South affirms China's support for the African Union's Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063. This includes commitments to address infrastructure deficits across the continent and to support the accelerated implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

At the global level, the strengthening of China-Africa relations has contributed to a shift in Africa's diplomatic posture. These partnerships have expanded the continent's options in international negotiations, with African states engaging more assertively in bilateral and multilateral forums. This evolving dynamic has also prompted other global actors to reassess and, in some cases, recalibrate their engagement strategies with African countries, particularly in areas such as trade terms, infrastructure financing, and development cooperation.

Platforms such as FOCAC have facilitated collective African participation in global discussions on issues including vaccine equity, climate finance, and sustainable development. These forums have provided African countries with additional avenues to articulate shared interests and coordinate positions on complex global challenges.



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Conclusion

China–Africa relations have evolved into strategic partnerships with significant implications for development across the continent. Amid global trade tensions and shifting geopolitical alliances, Kenya is working to diversify its trade relationships while leveraging existing Chinese investments to support infrastructure and economic growth.

Despite ongoing concerns around debt sustainability, trade imbalances, and labour practices, the China–Africa partnership is perceived regionally as a key factor in Africa’s development trajectory. For Kenya and other African nations, the challenge lies in maximising the benefits of

this cooperation while maintaining autonomy, promoting inclusive growth, and ensuring long-term sustainability. China’s engagement with Africa continues to be a focal point in assessing the nature and future of South–South cooperation in a rapidly changing global order.

Given the deepening of China–Africa ties, the United States will need to reassess its engagement strategy on the continent, prioritising consistent, long-term partnerships, competitive infrastructure financing, and equitable trade terms that reflect Africa’s growing agency in global affairs.

Should you have any questions regarding the information in this legal alert, please do not hesitate to contact, Daniel Ngumy and Luisa Cetina.



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