

Policy Brief 24 MAR 2024

## Winning Hearts and Minds Abroad or at Home? Kenya's Foreign Policy under William Ruto

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In many ways, Kenya seems to be on the winning side of an increasingly multipolar world. The country has forged partnerships with the “West” and the “East”, and President William Ruto acts as Africa’s climate champion. But his appearances on the global stage have not been universally welcomed. The paper shows how views on Kenya’s foreign policy contrast at home and abroad. While Ruto wins plaudits in the United States (US) and European capitals, public discontent with the government’s performance is high, and Ruto’s handling of foreign affairs is fuelling the criticism. What is more, African peers appreciate the Kenyan president’s emancipatory rhetoric but criticise his foreign policy stance which is seen as more oriented towards the West than towards Africa. The findings illustrate ongoing discourses on the continent about changes of the global order and non-alignment in an environment of global division. They also show that being perceived as Western-oriented does not pay off for Kenya on all fronts.<sup>1</sup>

### Africa’s International Relations: Geopolitical Shifts and New Opportunities

Multipolarity is widely seen as having a positive impact on African countries’ ability to access economic and political opportunity.<sup>2</sup> Kenya in particular has done a good job at balancing relations with the “West” and the “East”. Consecutive Kenyan governments have crafted a foreign policy profile that is open to investment from anywhere, and the country is seen as an economic hub and stable pole in a region beset by political instability. The US and the United Kingdom (UK) maintain close security partnerships with Kenya, while China has invested heavily in the country’s infrastructure. Germany, along with other European countries, is seeking strategic ties with Kenya, particularly in the field of renewable energy.

Under William Ruto, who assumed the presidency in September 2022, Kenya appears poised to take the next step to claiming a more prominent international role, particularly in

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Casper Sitemba for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Lidet Tadesse Shiferaw, “Carving Out Africa’s Role in the Emerging Global Order,” *ecdpm*, 23 October 2023, accessed 6 December 2023; Priyal Singh, “Africa Has a Rare Chance to Shape the International Order,” *ISS Africa*, 30 August 2022, accessed 6 December 2023.

the area of climate diplomacy. Observers have credited Ruto with an “atypical foreign policy strategy, which aims to distinguish Kenya from its African peers globally and add to Nairobi’s list of accomplishments as a pan-African leader”.<sup>3</sup> In September 2023, Kenya hosted the first African Climate Summit, which became an important reference for African positions on climate change. Ruto was then included in Time Magazine’s list of the 100 most influential climate leaders.

Away from the global stage, however, public dissatisfaction with the government’s policies is at an all-time high.<sup>4</sup> Ruto’s positions on global conflicts, including in Haiti, Ukraine, and Gaza, have drawn criticism in Kenya and from the wider African continent. The president is a controversial figure, described by observers as having two faces, one international and the other domestic.<sup>5</sup>

This article suggests that controversies over Ruto’s foreign policy illustrate how discourses about changes to the global order differ between different parts of the world. It asks how Ruto’s foreign policy is perceived by three key audiences, namely Kenyan citizens, Western capitals, and on the continent? It finds that decision-makers in Europe see Kenya as having a “like-minded” foreign policy and they are ready to recognise Ruto as an African thought leader. However, this positive assessment is not unanimously shared by the wider Kenyan public or by other African leaders, both of which see Ruto’s perceived willingness to accommodate the interests of external actors, particularly Western countries, as a factor that negatively affects his credibility. Against this backdrop, foreign policy messaging has become a balancing act for the Kenyan government.

The findings of this article contribute to an emerging body of literature that highlights African societies’ aspirations for autonomy and more say in international politics as well as growing scepticism about Western influence and positions in global affairs.<sup>6</sup> They show that it does not pay off to be perceived as Western-oriented when power is expected to be shifted from the “Global North” to the “Global South” within the current context of today’s changing global order.

## Kenya’s Foreign Policy under William Ruto

At first glance, Kenya’s foreign policy goals and principles have hardly changed since the country gained independence 60 years ago. It continues to strive for national security and sovereignty, economic growth, regional stability, and a positive global image. Kenya’s underlying foreign policy paradigm is similar to that of many other countries in the “Global South”, which draw on their history of non-alignment and emphasise the primacy of multilateralism, pan-Africanism, and regional cooperation.

What has changed under William Ruto, however, is the stated level of ambition and messaging on the global stage. Despite campaigning on domestic issues, Ruto has devoted considerable time and resources during his first year in office to foreign policy. Having completed just under 50 trips abroad by December 2023 (see map), Ruto has far exceeded

<sup>3</sup> Sibi Nyaoga, “What Kenya’s Proposed Mission to Haiti Says About Nairobi’s Foreign Policy,” *Atlantic Council*, 21 December 2023, accessed 9 January 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Abdi L. Dahir, “Kenya’s Leader Lifts His Global Profile. At Home, the Public Fumes,” *The New York Times*, 29 November 2023, accessed 29 November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Joachim Buwembo, “Nackter Kaiser, Zwei Gesichter,” *taz*, 30 July 2023, accessed 2 August 2023.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Giovanni Carbone, Lucia Ragazzi and Paolo Magri (eds.), “Is Africa Turning Against the West?” *ISPI*, November 2023, accessed 13 February 2024; Cynthia Kamwengo, “Social Media Debates on Zambia’s Evolving Relations with the West and the East. Trends and Implications”, *Megatrends Afrika*, 6 February 2024, doi:10.18449/2024MTA-PB21.

## Kenya's President William Ruto: Trips Abroad

September 2022 – 15 December 2023

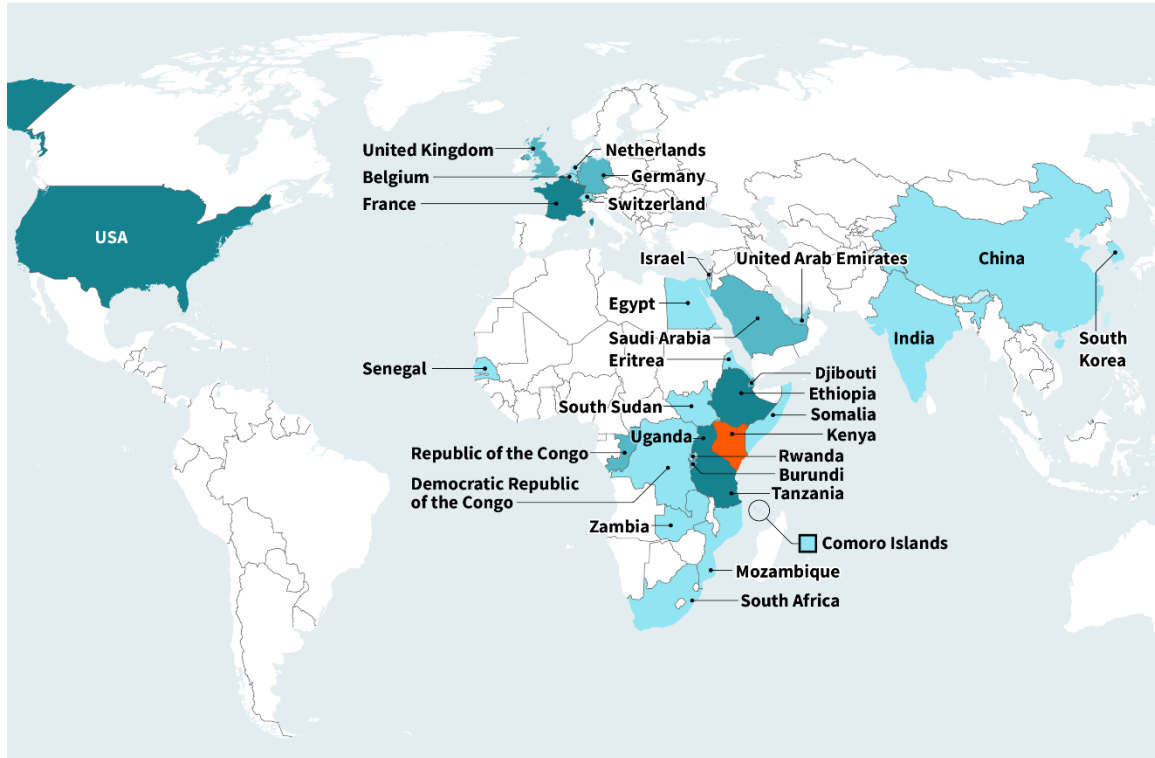
This map is for illustrative purposes only. It does not represent support for any claims asserted under international law.

Trip destinations, number of visits:

Sources: Compiled from the official website of the President of the Republic of Kenya, media articles, and other press releases.

1x 2x 3x or more Kenya

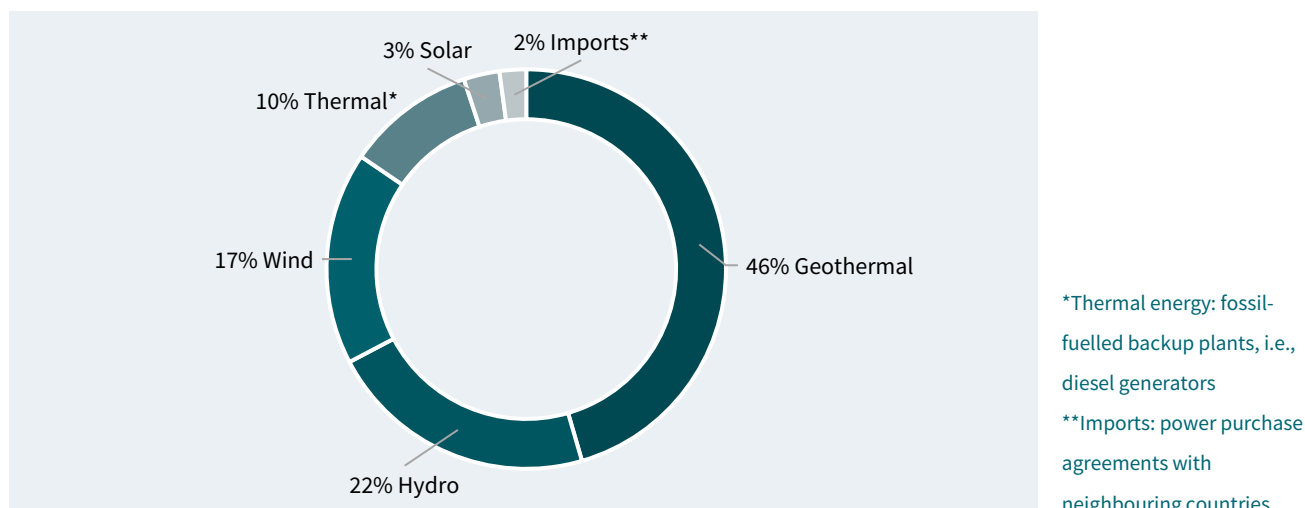
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the number of trips made by any of his predecessors in office. His stated aims are to seek foreign investment and to strengthen trade partnerships, to make Kenya a competitive, export-led economy, and to create job opportunities for Kenyans at home and abroad.

Climate diplomacy has made Ruto an internationally renowned figure. He has combined calls for greater global cooperation on climate change and redistribution of resources with demands for reform of the multilateral financial architecture, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In multilateral forums like the COP27 and 28, the Paris Summit for a New Global Financing Pact, and the Africa Climate Summit, Ruto has spoken out in favour of the Loss and Damage agenda, according to which industrialised nations should be expected to pay for the cost of environmentally harmful practices. He has also expressed support for a global carbon tax, including levies on fossil fuel trade, transport, and a financial transaction tax.

While many of his messages focus on Africa as a continent of opportunity in climate action, he also seeks to position Kenya as a country with a particularly favourable energy mix (chart below) that offers industrialised countries investment opportunities to offset emissions. Kenya is comparatively well established in the African carbon trading market and has the necessary legal framework. Indeed, the government sees carbon trading as a major growth area that can attract foreign investment and increase the government's revenue share. This positive view of international carbon trading is not unequivocally shared on the continent (see below).



**Figure 2:** Electricity Generation in Kenya by Energy Source (June - December 2022). The energy mix is dominated by green energy sources. The government has announced its intention to achieve 100% green energy by 2030. Source: Energy and Petroleum Regulatory Authority (EPRA), Biannual Energy and Petroleum Statistics Report for the Financial Year 2022/2023 (Nairobi: EPRA, Apr 25, 2023) 10, accessed Nov 29, 2023.

When it comes to global peace and security, Ruto does not shy away from divisive conflicts. Kenya was among the group of African countries that voted in favour of Ukraine in the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 and 2023 at the UN General Assembly.<sup>7</sup> He also condemned the coup in Niger in July 2023 along with political leaders from (mainly) Western capitals. After Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Ruto condemned terrorism and expressed solidarity with the State of Israel. He later expressed sympathy for the Palestinian cause when addressing Arab leaders in Riyadh.

Ruto has also signalled Kenya's willingness to lead a UN-mandated multinational force to Haiti. This would be the first time an African country would lead such a mission outside of Africa, which illustrates Kenya's international ambitions in this area. The deployment was approved by the Kenyan parliament but was stopped by the High Court which ruled the deployment unconstitutional. Ruto has announced that he plans to proceed with the deployment regardless.

## Foreign Policy Messaging: Setting the Tone for Different Audiences

Observers have described Ruto as "a master of inscrutability".<sup>8</sup> His messaging differs depending on his audience, whether his African peers, Western donors, or the Kenyan public.

In multilateral forums, Ruto relies heavily on morally grounded arguments and, to some extent, on shaming and appeals to powerful actors and institutions to change their behaviour. To support his positions, he refers to ethical imperatives and scientific evidence, especially when it comes to climate change. This foreign policy approach is often used (with some success) by smaller states that have an interest in promoting global cooperation on climate change while lacking the political clout and coercive means to pursue their objectives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Malte Brosig, "African Countries and Voting Alignments in the UN Security Council and General Assembly," in *Is Africa turning against the West?*, ed. Giovanni Carbone, Lucia Ragazzi and Paolo Magri, 60.

<sup>8</sup> The Economist, "Grin and Bear It," *The Economist*, 16 September 2023, accessed 20 February 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Benwell, "The Canaries in the Coalmine: Small States as Climate Change Champions," *The Round Table* 100: 413 (2011), 199-211, DOI: 10.1080/00358533.2011.565632.

Sometimes, his messages contain (implicit) threats. For instance, Ruto has argued that institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF, which deny African countries resources and affordable financing opportunities should “[a]fricanise or perish”.<sup>10</sup> Overall, however, he usually tends to strike a more conciliatory tone, calling for multilateral cooperation.

Ruto does not utilise a geopolitical frame of global affairs, explicitly avoiding positioning Kenya on an East-West geopolitical spectrum. At the Pan-African Parliament, he spoke of a “geopolitical crisis” and its negative consequences for the multilateral system and Africa. Addressing the UN General Assembly, he described the UN system as being cannibalised by exclusive clubs that enjoy impunity. The details of these accusations remain vague however, as he does not name specific powerful actors as the cause of the crisis. While he initially blamed China for Kenya’s economic challenges during election campaigns, he has refrained from voicing such criticism since being elected. He also does not refer to any systemic competition between the East and the West or between democracies and autocracies. Instead, he refers to historical fault lines between the “Global North” and “Global South”; this is where he locates the main source of injustice.

Ruto is also attempting to reframe Africa’s role in global affairs. He seeks to dismantle the discursive profile of the continent as being passive and in need of external assistance, and he instead seeks to highlight its more compelling, developmentally aspirational perspective. During the opening of the Africa Climate Summit, he remarked that Africa should be looked at through an “opportunity lens” that focusses on the continent’s assets. On another occasion, speaking at the UN General Assembly, he stressed that Africa is not “ask[ing] for alms”.<sup>11</sup> Instead, he argues that African countries are ready to contribute resources to solving global problems, as exemplified by Kenya’s commitment to the Haiti mission.

Across Africa and in the “Global South”, Ruto regularly employs emancipatory rhetoric, invoking the history and shared values of the “Global South” (i.e., non-alignment) as well as his self-proclaimed pan-African identity. This can be seen, for example, in the way he justifies the proposed Haiti mission. According to Ruto, Haitians have suffered from slavery, colonialism, and neglect and Kenya can empathise with Haiti because of its own history. On other occasions, he has criticised the paternalistic behaviour of Western political leaders who treat African leaders “like schoolchildren”,<sup>12</sup> expecting them to show up when called upon, for example during “Plus One” summits.

Finally, for domestic audiences, Ruto emphasises the alignment of his foreign policy agenda with national interest. He justifies his frequent travels abroad by framing them as missions to attract investment and job opportunities. For instance, when he left for his second trip to Berlin in November 2023, he claimed that his trip sought to secure 200,000 jobs for Kenyans. He made similar assurances when he left for Saudi Arabia shortly afterwards. As for the planned mission to Haiti, the Kenyan government stressed that there will be no cost to the country, but that Kenya can expect benefits in return for its commitment.

<sup>10</sup> Republic of Kenya, “Maiden Address at the 36th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union,” 18 February 2023, accessed 20 February 2024, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Republic of Kenya, “National Statement Addressing The 78th Session Of The United Nations General Assembly; ‘Multilateralism On Trial’, *Republic of Kenya*, 21 September 2023, accessed 20 February 2024, 4.

<sup>12</sup> “Mo-Ibrahim Governance Conversation,” *You Tube*, 29 April 2023, accessed 7 November 2023.

## Reception among Key Audiences

While foreign policy messaging does not always explicitly target a specific audience, Ruto's messaging on the international stage currently seems to have three main audiences: Kenyans, Western capitals, and African leaders.

### Reception in Western Capitals

Seeking investment from across the globe, Ruto has devoted considerable time and resources to fostering relations with European countries and the US, where his foreign policy has been met with widespread approval. During the election campaign, members of the Western diplomatic community sporadically raised concerns about the foreign policy style that they expected from Ruto.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, he had been indicted by the International Criminal Court for his role in the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya and during the trial, Ruto had been highly critical of the insistence of Western states, particularly the UK, US, and France, on pursuing the case. As a result, some Western political actors voiced concerns over his potential unwillingness to cooperate with them.

Today, these concerns have all but vanished. Ruto is widely seen as a reliable political ally.<sup>14</sup> His first trips as president took him to Western capitals, he did not attend the Russia-Africa summit, and he first travelled to China much later, to attend the "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation". Kenya has not announced any significant deals with China for some time, though Prime Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet Secretary for Foreign and Diaspora Affairs Musalia Mudavadi visited the country in January 2024 on a "fence-mending mission" to re-affirm Kenya's commitment to the relationship after Ruto's critical comments on China during the election campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

What is more, Ruto's stance on certain global conflicts of interest to the US and European countries, including Ukraine and Gaza, have been interpreted by some observers as "a shift [...] from a non-alignment posture to a positive skew towards looking West".<sup>16</sup> In the European Parliament, Ruto has received a standing ovation; during the Africa Climate Summit, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen called Kenya a key ally in the fight against climate change; and when Ruto visited Berlin in March 2023, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the Kenyan president "a true climate champion and a role model".<sup>17</sup> US President Joe Biden also thanked Ruto over the phone for Kenya's commitment to leading the Haiti mission.

Western leaders' positive reception of Ruto is also the result of significant overlap of economic interests. Ruto is promoting Kenya as an attractive investment destination. According to Western diplomats, Ruto has found his niche with respect to the climate agenda and knows how to exploit it. His stance on global carbon trading is of interest to Western industrialised countries struggling to meet their climate goals. Overall, leaders in Western capitals seem willing to recognise Kenya as an African opinion leader with whom they would like to work, particularly when it comes to the green energy transition.

<sup>13</sup> Africa Confidential, "Careless Talk About 'Ruthless' Ruto," *Africa Confidential*, 18 April 2023, (accessed 24 November 2023).

<sup>14</sup> The Economist, "Grin and Bear It".

<sup>15</sup> Aggrey Mutambo, "Kenya Reiterates One-China Policy," *The East African*, 25 January 2024, accessed 6 February 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Omondi Okwany, "What Is at Stake for Kenyan Foreign Policy in Israel-Palestine Conflict," *The Star*, 26 October 2023, accessed 31 October 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Die Bundesregierung, "Wir wollen unsere Partnerschaft stärken," 29 March 2023, accessed 23 January 2024, [own translation].

This recognition is helped by Ruto's personal qualities and opportunistic leadership style: His generally conciliatory foreign policy messages reassure sceptics who had expected a more populist approach vis-à-vis the "West". Under Ruto, it seems as though Kenya is seeking to moderately reform the multilateral order in Africa's favour, but not to overturn it. His stronger revisionist remarks on the multilateral system and calls for Western states to pay compensation for climate-related damages, for example, rarely receive much attention. Overall, Ruto takes little risk of alienating international partners and is mindful of political constraints.

## Reception at Home

Ruto's foreign policy has not won him domestic political support. Citizens' main concerns remain grounded in domestic politics and emphasise management of the economy, corruption, and unemployment.<sup>18</sup> During the election campaign, Ruto vowed to reduce the cost of living, which attracted the support of "hustlers" – the low-income earners working precarious jobs. However, between June 2022 and June 2023, food prices increased by 13.5% and fuel prices rose by 12.3%. This had a particularly poignant effect on low-income households. Meanwhile, the Kenyan shilling has lost almost a quarter of its value against the US dollar since early 2023, resulting in further economic hardship for large segments of the population. In this context, Ruto's frequent trips abroad with large delegations are seen by some Kenyans as publicly funded international status-seeking missions that neglect domestic issues.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, allegations of corruption and waste in the public sector are still abound, adding to citizens' frustration.

While not a core public concern, Ruto's handling of foreign affairs fuels criticism for several reasons. Ruto has constructed a narrative that his foreign policy is helping to address domestic challenges. Here, expectations have been raised, both by the government and within public discourse, about the economic benefits of a multipolar world in which Kenya is able to secure trade and investment deals from various partners while looking after its own interests. However, Kenya's day-to-day foreign policy behaviour seems to be at odds with the government's rhetoric.

On the one hand, Ruto's demands for reform of the multilateral system and his claim to 'not ask for alms' are perceived as doublespeak. At home, the government is seen as beholden to the World Bank and IMF as it closely follows their directives behind closed doors. Publicly, however, Ruto has denounced the effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions. Between June 2021 and June 2023, the IMF tripled its lending to Kenya to 2.2 billion US dollars. In exchange, the Kenyan government introduced economic reforms and new revenue collection measures that were widely perceived as increasing citizens' economic burden. Additionally, while claiming that African countries should be represented by the African Union (AU) in "Plus One" summits, which was Ruto's expressed reasoning for not attending the Russia-Africa summit, he still attended the Italy-Africa summit in February 2024.

On the other hand, Ruto is perceived as being swept away by the demands of Western countries currently promising funds. The president has been criticised for departing from the country's "quiet" diplomatic tradition and for taking a position on divisive global

<sup>18</sup> Paul Kamau and Samuel Balongo, "For the First Time in a Decade, Kenyans See Management of the Economy as Their Most Important Problem: Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 754," *Afrobarometer*, 22 December 2023, accessed 8 January 2023, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Wangu Kanuri, "Kenyans Online React to the Latest of Ruto's 'Many' Foreign Trips," *Nairobi News*, 20 November 2023, accessed 20 November 2023.

conflicts. This stands in contrast to other African governments that have remained neutral. Several events have made headlines in this context, including his initial reaction to the 7 October Hamas attack, in which he immediately expressed solidarity with Israel. The proposed mission to Haiti is also deeply unpopular, as it is widely seen as a favour to the US in exchange for economic benefits. Opposition leaders have denounced the US's interference in Kenya's internal affairs over the Haiti mission. Similar criticism has been raised in the area of climate diplomacy. The Africa Climate Summit was accompanied by civil society protests against US influence and the dominant role of McKinsey & Company, a consulting firm perceived to be driving Western agendas, and its focus on the controversial issue of global carbon trading.<sup>20</sup> Opposition politicians claimed that "Ruto is busy promoting the climate agenda for the US, UK, and the EU, which is designed to block industrialisation in Kenya".<sup>21</sup>

Surveys suggest that public discontent with Ruto's leadership is widespread, even among his supporters. A poll conducted in December 2023 suggests that Kenyans believed the government to be performing poorly when it came to reducing debt and financial dependence, fighting corruption, creating jobs, and reducing the cost of living.<sup>22</sup> According to the poll, support for Ruto's political party is also declining. While the party's popularity increased over the past two years, its support has fallen from 45% of the population in March 2023 to 31% in December 2023. At the same time, a majority of people (35%) are now not expressing support for any party, indicating a general lack of faith in the sincerity and trustworthiness of Kenya's political class.

## Reception in Africa

As a relatively small country, Kenya could benefit from "strength in numbers" by building or participating in coalitions across the African continent. After all, Ruto is a self-proclaimed pan-Africanist and many of his messages are aimed at African leaders and institutions such as the AU. Still, the extent to which these messages resonate positively or negatively (or at all) is difficult to gauge. Diplomatic etiquette prevents political leaders from speaking ill of each other in public. Nevertheless, the views of observers and political figures give some indication that Ruto's foreign policy has been received with mixed reviews throughout Africa.

During his first months in office, Ruto was reportedly supported by some African leaders who expected him to take a stance that was more critical of the "West" following his statements on Western interference in Kenya's internal affairs during the above referenced ICC trial.<sup>23</sup> His emancipatory rhetoric has resonated across the continent: For example, his call for Africans to be treated as equals earned him a standing ovation at the Pan-African Parliament.<sup>24</sup> Ruto's announcements in support of the de-dollarisation agenda and fairer credit terms for African countries early in his presidency bolstered the expectation that he would be "a straight talker on the international stage".<sup>25</sup> In February 2024, his African peers endorsed Ruto as the AU's champion for institutional reform.

<sup>20</sup> Winand von Petersdorff, "Klimaschutz Auf Kosten Afrikas," *faz*, 17 November 2023, accessed 21 November 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Oruta, "Ruto Claiming to Look for Jobs for Kenyans Abroad Dishonest – Aukot," *The Star*, 22 November 2023, accessed 23 November 2023.

<sup>22</sup> TIFA Research, "End of 2023: President Ruto's Government Performance. Cabinet Secretaries, Economy and Political Issues," *TIFA Research*, 13 December 2023, accessed 8 January 2024, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Malkhadir Muhumed, "Why Is William Ruto Featuring on the Geopolitical Chessboard?," *The Standard*, 25 August 2023, accessed 12 December 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Moses Nyamori, "The New Gaddafi? Ruto's Bold Statements on De-Dollarisation and a United Africa Attract Attention," *Nation*, 19 June 2023, accessed 12 December 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Gathara, "Kenya's Ruto Is Coming up Against the Limits of His Power," *Aljazeera*, 14 July 2023, accessed 11 December 2023.



However, his leadership has also attracted criticism. South African opposition leader Julius Malema, for example, publicly criticised Ruto for deviating from African interests and positions in international affairs.<sup>26</sup> In his speech on the topic, Malema took issue with Ruto's failure to challenge British King Charles with colonialism during his visit to Kenya in October and November 2023 as well as his expressed support for Israel in the Israel-Gaza conflict. The AU has adopted a more pro-Palestinian stance on the conflict. Malema's speech received considerable attention from the Kenyan public and while some claimed that it breached diplomatic etiquette, it was also met with widespread approval.<sup>27</sup>

Ruto's climate diplomacy has elicited mixed reactions throughout the continent as well. The Africa Climate Summit can be interpreted as a partial success in coalition building on the continent; and key elements of Ruto's climate agenda made it into the Summit's Nairobi Declaration, which has become a reference point for African positions on climate action. However, Ruto has been criticised for monopolising the "African" climate agenda, seeking to shape the direction of climate investment in line with Kenya's energy and resource profile and its own economic interest, all at the expense of countries that rely on fossil fuels or which prioritise the Loss and Damage agenda.<sup>28</sup> Given Ruto's dominant role in climate policy, several African heads of state reportedly decided not to attend the Africa Climate Summit. Moreover, some delegates expressed discontent in the fact that the AU, despite co-hosting the event, played only a minor role in preparing the Summit.<sup>29</sup>

A number of other foreign policy decisions made by the Kenyan government have disgruntled political actors in the region. When the Kenyan government signed a bilateral Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU, which the East African Community (EAC) had previously abandoned, observers noted that the country sought national economic advantages at the expense of regional integration efforts. Conflicts with Uganda and other neighbouring countries over import costs and Kenya-erected non-tariff barriers to regional trade are frequent.

Ruto's stated intention to maximise the benefits of carbon trading is not shared by all countries in the region either.<sup>30</sup> Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan, for example, recently warned her African counterparts about the risks of global carbon trading. While Ruto seeks to promote carbon trading, Hassan urged the EAC to adopt a more cautious position vis-à-vis foreign companies that play too influential a role in African carbon markets. These divisions highlight the different views on development rights, climate change, and global justice on the continent and place political actors who strive to play the role of African thought leaders in the crosshairs of criticism.

## Outlook: Like-Minded Partners?

The reception of Kenya's foreign policy under William Ruto varies greatly depending on the audience, showing that foreign policy messaging is a balancing act for the government. To some extent, this balancing act can be described as a "two-level game" in which a political leader must negotiate agreements with international partners while simultaneously

<sup>26</sup> Kevin Cheruiyot, "Julius Malema: President Ruto Is Doing Opposite of What He Promised," *Nation*, 09 November 2023, accessed 13 December 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Warungu, "Julius Malema: Why the South African Politician Touched a Nerve in Kenya," *BBC*, 13 November 2023, (accessed 9 January 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Africa Confidential, "Nairobi Vies for Green Capital Status," *Africa Confidential* 64, no. 18 (2023).

<sup>29</sup> Background talk with energy and climate expert, Nairobi, 12 September 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Owino, "Tanzania Urges EAC Common Stance on Foreign Carbon Trading Firms," *The East African*, 24 November 2023, accessed 11 December 2023.

seeking support from domestic constituencies.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Ruto is often described as having two faces. In an increasingly multipolar world, however, divisions go beyond “domestic” and “international” pressures to include pushes and pulls from different international audiences whose expectations are at odds with each other. Under these conditions, an opportunistic foreign policy approach is easily perceived as doublespeak.

In Western capitals – a major source of investment and trade – Kenya’s positions on selected global conflicts, including Haiti, Ukraine, and Gaza, and its cooperative stance towards the IMF are perceived as in alignment with the West. Given Kenya’s democratic credentials, its green energy profile, and its keen interest in European investment, European actors are willing to recognise Kenya’s desire to play a more prominent role on the international stage, particularly in the field of climate diplomacy.

In Africa, Ruto’s political proximity to US and European capitals, and thus Western political interests, appears to stand in the way of his ambitions to be recognised as a thought leader. African peers appreciate his emancipatory rhetoric but criticise his positioning on global conflicts, which is sometimes perceived as more oriented towards the West than towards Africa. Controversies around his foreign policy are illustrative of wider debates on the continent about autonomy and non-alignment in an increasingly divided political environment where a balanced approach to the “East” and “West” is largely preferred. These sentiments also characterise public opinion in other countries in the “Global South”.

Ultimately, the Kenyan people have the final say when it comes to Ruto and his government, and it is here where they are perceived to be underperforming. When it comes to foreign policy, Kenyans primarily want to know how the president’s trips abroad benefit the country. During these times of economic hardship, Ruto’s trips have fuelled discontent with his leadership and are widely perceived as personal status-seeking missions. While economic cooperation with Western companies and investors is generally appreciated, the public distrusts foreign policy decisions that appear to be driven by Western political interests, such as Kenya’s deployment of forces to Haiti.

By the time that the 2027 presidential campaigns get underway, it will be clear that regardless of the president’s current overtures to Western actors, it is his domestic constituency and public sentiment that will tip the scales in determining whether the Kenya government maintains or recalibrates its foreign policy orientation. Kenyans expect the government to exploit the economic benefits of a multipolar world; bloc-thinking is unpopular and the government is likely to increase efforts to dispel the impression that it is overly accommodating to Western political interests.

Against this backdrop, German and European actors seeking closer ties with Kenya should bear in mind that a government’s presumed “like-minded” foreign policy stance on selected issues does not equate to a generally pro-Western stance. Indeed, focussing on a country’s positions on few divisive conflicts in multilateral fora does not necessarily reveal much about the country’s general foreign policy orientation. Looked at over time, Kenya’s voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly is much closer to that of regional neighbours, China, and Russia than to that of the US, the UK, and Germany.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, while there is currently an overlap between Kenyan and European economic interests in green energy investment, carbon trading, and skilled labour migration, in the medium to long term, more fundamental questions about the future of the global order are

<sup>31</sup> Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen Jr., *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 133.

<sup>32</sup> Calculations by the SWP “Data and Statistics” team based on Michael A. Bailey/Anton Strezhnev/Erik Voeten, “Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data”, in: *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61 no. 2 (2017), 430-456. Dataset available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LEJUQZ>, file: AgreementScoresAll\_Jul2023.csv, accessed in July 2023.

likely to come to the fore. European actors should therefore explore the extent of common ground and opportunities for rapprochement on global issues where key interests of African societies are at stake, and where European and African positions do not necessarily coincide. Such areas include the reform of the multilateral development banks, debt restructuring, risk assessments for loans to African countries, and African demands for a global tax regime on carbon emissions.

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**IDOS** German Institute of Development and Sustainability

**IfW** Kiel Institute for the World Economy

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ISSN 2747-4119

DOI 10.18449/2024MTA-PB24



Funded by:

