

France repositioning in Africa: African Eastern Rim and the Africa Forward Summit in Kenya, 11–12 May 2026

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Abstract

This paper examines the Africa Forward Summit, which was orchestrated from a strategic node of the French Government established by the MACRON-MBEMBE duo – the Innovation Foundation for Democracy (FIDEMO), based at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. As a further instance of French summit diplomacy, the Africa Forward meeting was co-hosted by President Emmanuel MACRON and President William RUTO in Kenya from 11–12 May 2026. Drawing on the framework developed in the companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026b) on the reputational attack of Afrophobia, and noting the appearance of sudden, widely circulated social-media imagery of heightened anti-immigrant action in South Africa across West and East African audiences coinciding with the MACRON-MBEMBE Nairobi Summit, the article demonstrates a discernible pattern of French strategic behaviour on the continent. The analysis further illuminates the ongoing French strategic manoeuvre to reposition itself in Africa following its Sahelian defeat and expulsion. France's deployment of non-kinetic instruments, including reputational attacks and narrative manoeuvres, is documented in two registers: in the companion paper, the reputational and developmental damage inflicted on South Africa and its continental standing was set out; at Nairobi, MACRON extended the same treatment to China and, by implication, to the BRICS formation. The argument also tracks the concurrent positioning of French surveillance, intelligence and kinetic capabilities in proximity to the vital chokepoints of Africa's Eastern Rim, of which the strategic port of Mombasa is the Kenyan instance that France is now penetrating through the €700 million CMA CGM-Kenya joint-venture signed on 10 May 2026 during the Summit period.

1. Introduction

The companion paper (ZAIMAN, 2026b) argued that France, having been expelled from much of West Africa and the Sahel between 2022 and 2025, is repositioning across Southern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean through kinetic capabilities projected from Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, La Réunion, Mayotte and the Scattered Islands, and through non-kinetic repertoires of branding, narrative warfare, media acquisition and summit-format diplomacy. It further argued that the framing of South Africa as Afrophobic in continental discourse is an exploitable instrument of non-kinetic warfare, structurally analogous to TRUMP's *white genocide* claim in its operation as a categorical falsehood deployed for political effect. The Africa Forward Summit, co-hosted by President MACRON and President RUTO at the University of Nairobi and the Kenyatta International Convention Centre on 11-12 May 2026, must be situated within that framework.

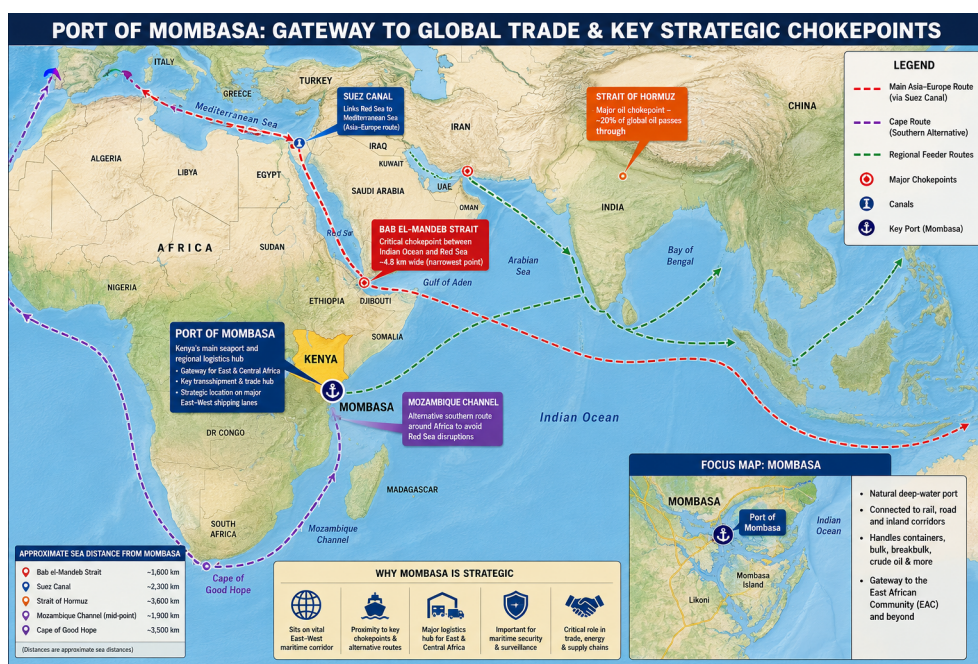


Figure 1. Port of Mombasa: gateway to global trade and key strategic chokepoints. Author's compilation; base geography from public-domain sources.

The Summit is the first France-Africa summit ever held in an Anglophone, non-former-French-colonial country (LE MONDE, 2026; The Conversation, 2026). Approximately thirty heads of state and government and more than 1,500 business leaders attended, including the Nigerian industrialist Aliko DANGOTE and arriving heads of state from Nigeria, Senegal, Gabon, Sierra Leone, Liberia and

Côte d'Ivoire (Reuters, 2026a; CNBC Africa, 2026; Citizen Digital, 2026). The conclusions of the Summit feed, by French design, into the G7 Summit which France will host at Évian on 15–17 June 2026 (French Government, 2026). The closing programme on 12 May at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre is structured to produce a Nairobi Declaration adopted by both presidents (Africa Forward Summit Secretariat, 2026). The Summit is therefore not a self-contained diplomatic event. It is a node in a continuing repositioning sequence that now reaches into the G7.

Three operational instances signal the shape of the strategy and must be read together:

1. **The MACRON-MBEMBE Innovation Foundation for Democracy (FIDEMO).** FIDEMO was founded on 7 July 2022 and publicly launched in Johannesburg in October 2022 (Engineering News, 2022; Africanews, 2022). It was the first of thirteen recommendations contained in the report Achille MBEMBE submitted to MACRON at the New Africa-France Summit at Montpellier on 8 October 2021 (Institut Montaigne, 2021). It is headquartered at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, with regional hubs across the continent and an office in Marseille, and was capitalised at €50 million over five years, the bulk of which is drawn from the French Government (allAfrica, 2022; Engineering News, 2022). MBEMBE serves as Director General (Daily Nation, 2026).

The institutional characterisation that follows from these facts is the principal point. FIDEMO is most accurately understood as the African operational node of the French Government's continental repositioning strategy, structured organisationally as a foundation hosted by a South African public university. The university affiliation provides academic and civil-society legitimacy; the substantive work is foreign-policy work conducted on a French Government budget.

This characterisation is grounded in the operational record. FIDEMO convened and organised the civil-society and policy architecture of the Africa Forward Summit: on 10 May 2026 it hosted the Social Innovation Pavilion Summit in Nairobi, bringing together more than one hundred civil society organisations from across the continent and submitting a white paper containing sixty proposals to the heads of state attending the formal Summit the following day (Daily Nation, 2026). The institution was conceived in a report commissioned by the French Presidency; it is funded

by the French Government; and its principal public activity in 2026 has been to organise the civil-society component of a French-co-hosted intergovernmental summit whose conclusions are designed to feed the French-hosted G7 at Évian on 15–17 June 2026. On the analysis advanced here, an organisation whose origin, funding, programming and operational synchronisation are all of French Government provenance is properly characterised as a French foreign-policy instrument irrespective of the academic standing of its leadership or the prestige of its host university.

2. **The Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi.** The day before the Summit opened, FIDEMO convened a Social Innovation Pavilion Summit in Nairobi on 10 May 2026, gathering more than one hundred civil society organisations and submitting a white paper of sixty proposals to the heads of state attending the main Summit (Daily Nation, 2026). The choreography is not incidental. A French-government-funded foundation, institutionally hosted on South African soil, fed policy substance into a French-co-chaired summit in Kenya whose outputs flow, by design, into the French-hosted G7 at Évian. FIDEMO and the Nairobi Summit are operationally linked.
3. **CMA CGM's €700 million Mombasa joint-venture, together with ten further Kenya-France bilateral agreements.** On 10 May 2026, in MACRON's presence at State House Nairobi, the French shipping group CMA CGM signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Government of Kenya, creating a joint-venture to develop a Mombasa container terminal capable of handling next-generation vessels (CMA CGM, 2026; Jeune Afrique, 2026; AFP, 2026). The same bilateral round produced eleven Kenya-France agreements in total, spanning transport, energy, artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, agriculture, healthcare and climate resilience, including the modernisation of the Nairobi Commuter Rail system (Capital FM, 2026; Citizen Digital, 2026).

Mombasa is the principal maritime gate to East and Central Africa, serving Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, eastern DRC and parts of Ethiopia through the Northern Corridor (Afrik, 2026). The transaction follows CMA CGM's inauguration of its regional Africa headquarters in Abidjan on 23 April 2026 and adds to its existing terminal positions in Kribi (Cameroon), Lekki (Nigeria), Pointe-Noire (Congo), Nador West Med (Morocco) and Alexandria-Sokhna (Egypt) (Afrik, 2026).

The transaction is presented in French and Kenyan official communications as investment. It is more accurately described as the addition of a further French access node in proximity to an Eastern Flank Indian Ocean Rim chokepoint. Read alongside French sovereign territory in La Réunion, Mayotte and the Scattered Islands, the basing agreements with Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates, and the existing CMA CGM terminals across the African seaboard, Mombasa completes a commercial-cum-logistical envelope in proximity to every major African maritime chokepoint. The investment frame is the cover story; the geo-strategic positioning is the substance.

The deeper strategic prize is neither the conference hall, nor the Mombasa terminal in isolation, nor FIDEMO's white papers. Five interlocking French strategic goals are served by this constellation. They may be summarised as follows:

1. The **repositioning of France as an "African" player**. The repositioning is a diplomatic sleight of hand. What is presented in Nairobi as the abandonment of *Françafrique* is, in substance, its modernisation for an era now defined by the rise of China and Asia.

Françafrique was never only a state-to-state system. It was, and remains, operationalised through French private and parastatal business networks. From the 1960s onward, the parastatal oil major Elf (later absorbed into Total), the Bolloré Group in ports and logistics, the Bouygues Group in construction, Areva in uranium, and the Lafarge Group in cement secured privileged access to key African sectors in oil, infrastructure, telecommunications and primary minerals, and reciprocated through financial support to allied African political parties and regimes (VERSCHAVE, 1998; BAYART, 2010; PIGEAUD, 2017; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018; BOUKARI-YABARA, 2025). The Elf affair of the 1990s and the formal investigations of the Bolloré Group over the 2009–2010 Conakry and Lomé port concessions are evidentiary instances of this configuration (Africa Confidential, 2018). Robert BOURGI's 2024 memoirs, written by a direct disciple of Foccart, confirm that the personal-network architecture has continued to operate into the present (BOURGI, 2024; BOUKARI-YABARA, 2025).

The vehicles have been updated; the system has not been retired. CMA CGM at Mombasa, Kribi, Lekki, Pointe-Noire, Nador West Med and Alexandria-Sokhna; Bouygues across Ivorian infrastructure; Orange across

fifty Digital Centres and as the dominant mobile operator in several Francophone markets; TotalEnergies across hydrocarbons and renewables; Canal+ (a subsidiary of the Bolloré-aligned Vivendi group, now controlling MultiChoice across Anglophone and Lusophone Africa); and the publicly funded FIDEMO at the University of the Witwatersrand together constitute the modernised operational vehicles. The presentation is investment and partnership; the structure is continuity.

2. **Geo-strategic capability development on the African Indian Ocean Rim and the maritime chokepoints** of the Cape, the Mozambique Channel, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, which together carry the bulk of African trade and global energy flows.
3. The **marginalisation of South Africa as a continental power**, reinforced by the non-kinetic envelope of the Afrophobia narrative (MSOMI, 2026; ZAAIMAN, 2026b).
4. The **weakening and division of the BRICS formation** through the construction of an anti-China and anti-Russia front anchored rhetorically in *strategic autonomy* and aimed at drawing African states closer to Western Europe.
5. The **securing of African critical minerals to develop France and Europe** while the continent remains in a subordinate processing position consistent with the established imperial pattern (LENIN, 1917; PATNAIK and PATNAIK, 2021; CHANG, 2002).

The fourth of these goals is, on the analysis advanced here, the ultimate strategic objective. The chokepoint architecture, the FIDEMO foundation and the summit-format diplomacy are instrumental to it. France is repositioning not for the sake of the maritime gate at Mombasa, nor for the symbolic value of Anglophone hosting, but in order to draw African states out of the BRICS orbit and into a Western European convergence structured against China and Russia. The chokepoints and the FIDEMO platform are the means; the BRICS division is the end.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the Summit's origins, genealogy, funding and theme. Section 3 examines French official statements before and during the Summit. Section 4 reads MACRON's University of Nairobi and Summit speeches. Section 5 places these inside MACRON's wider 2020–2026 Africa pattern. Section 6 develops the five strategic goals in detail. Section 7 presents

African and French critique of the speeches and the manoeuvre, and documents the Chinese Government's zero-tariff position in direct quotation as the empirical counterpoint to MACRON's framing of China as *predatory*. Section 8 derives operational implications for South African statecraft, drawing on the five-task conclusion of the companion paper.

2. Origins, Genealogy, Funding and Theme

The Africa Forward Summit sits within a deliberate sequence of MACRON-era platforms (French Government, 2026):

- The Ouagadougou doctrine of November 2017, in which MACRON declared that there would be no more French policy for Africa (LE MONDE, 2026).
- The Summit on the Financing of African Economies, Paris, 2021.
- The New Africa-France Summit, Montpellier, 8 October 2021 – at which MBEMBE handed MACRON the report that proposed FIDEMO (Institut Montaigne, 2021).
- The New Global Financing Pact, Paris, 2023.
- The Africa Climate Summit, Nairobi, September 2023.
- The European Union-African Union Summit, Luanda, November 2025.
- The Africa Forward Summit, Nairobi, 11–12 May 2026, whose conclusions flow into the G7 Summit at Évian, 15–17 June 2026 (French Government, 2026; Capital FM, 2026).

Each event in the sequence represents a step in moving French engagement away from a defeated Francophone Sahel toward Anglophone and Lusophone Africa, away from aid and toward “investment-partnership”, and away from state-to-state exclusivity toward selected civil society, corporate and academic interlocutors. The Montpellier 2021 break with format – no African heads of state invited, civil society foregrounded – established the precedent. Nairobi 2026 reinstates heads of state, but on Anglophone soil and with FIDEMO's civil-society pavilion convened the day before, feeding policy substance in.

The funding architecture is consistent with the strategic ambition. On Sunday 10 May, in advance of the formal Summit opening, Reuters reported deals worth more than US\$1 billion between France and Kenya alone, including the CMA CGM Mombasa joint-venture (Reuters, 2026a). Kenya and France signed eleven bilateral agreements that same day, covering transport, energy, artificial

intelligence, digital infrastructure, agriculture, healthcare and climate resilience, of which the modernisation of the Nairobi Commuter Rail system is among the most visible (Capital FM, 2026; Citizen Digital, 2026). At the Summit itself MACRON announced an aggregate of mobilised commitments described as approximately €23 billion across the continent (Reuters, 2026b). Headline deliverables include the CMA CGM Mombasa joint-venture (€700 million); fifty Orange Digital Centres across Africa aiming to train one million young Africans by 2030 (Standard, 2026; News.az, 2026); and partnership packages in artificial intelligence, climate finance, energy systems and university exchanges (The EastAfrican, 2026a; Standard, 2026).

The official theme is partnership, innovation and growth. The two-day programme designates 11 May as *Inspire and Connect*, opening with a Business Forum and a high-level youth engagement at the University of Nairobi. The 12 May programme, convened at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre, is devoted to *development finance and global issues*, with a plenary on Peace and Security, thematic roundtables and a closing ceremony at which both presidents deliver remarks and adopt the Nairobi Declaration (French Government, 2026; Africa Forward Summit Secretariat, 2026).

3. French Official Statements Before and During the Summit

The official Elysée text frames the Summit as a *milestone in relations between France and the African continent, nearly ten years after the speech of the French President in Ouagadougou*, and as the *first summit of its kind to be hosted and co-chaired with an English-speaking country* (French Government, 2026). The text claims that partnerships built on this design will contribute to *fairer and more inclusive global governance, which rejects bloc mindsets, predation and new imperialist tendencies* (French Government, 2026).

The vocabulary of *predation and new imperialist tendencies* is directed not at France but at the powers Paris wishes to position itself against: China principally, Russia secondarily, the United States obliquely. The rhetorical move offers France, the original colonial power on much of the continent, as the partner who is not predatory, by definitional fiat. The companion paper described *Françafrique* as the post-1960 system of monetary, military and political tutelage France maintained over its former African colonies (VERSCHAVE, 1998; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018; ZAAIMAN, 2026b). The Elysée statement attempts the rhetorical erasure of that record by definitional displacement of the imperialist label onto others.

On arrival in Nairobi on Sunday 10 May, MACRON took a sharper line: *I have never considered Francophone Africa as a private preserve. That's over. Since 2017, it has been finished* (LE MONDE, 2026). The claim asserts doctrinal continuity with Ouagadougou 2017. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* and *The Africa Report* timed for the Summit, MACRON conceded that colonialism had real costs but argued that *we must not exonerate from all responsibility the seven decades that followed independence*, calling on African leaders to improve governance (Arab News, 2026). The construction places primary responsibility for African underdevelopment on African governance, with French responsibility limited to a discrete colonial period now rhetorically closed.

On Monday 11 May, also in Nairobi, MACRON denied any French military deployment to the Strait of Hormuz against Iran (Africa Radio, 2026). The denial registered formally what was already a public matter of speculation. France's naval forces operate in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz region through the EUNAVFOR Aspides operation (IHEDN, 2025; ZAIMAN, 2026b). The Hormuz question, alongside the Mombasa joint-venture, frames the Summit within the geography of chokepoints, even where French officials decline to do so.

4. MACRON's University of Nairobi and Summit Speeches

MACRON's most quoted Nairobi line, delivered extemporaneously on stage with President RUTO at the University of Nairobi on 11 May, was as follows:

"A lot of solutions are made in the US or made in China. A lot of us today are consumers. So, I think we have a common fight, a common battle of investment, which is to build our strategic autonomy for Europe and Africa. If we build it together, we will be much stronger." (MACRON, in *The EastAfrican*, 2026a; Reuters, 2026a)

The construction warrants careful unpacking. The formulation *We have a common fight ... to build our strategic autonomy for Europe and Africa* is an attempt to co-opt Africa as the West European ally positioned between the United States and China. It is a feeble exercise in anti-China and, by implication, anti-BRICS diplomacy disguised as *shared strategic autonomy*. The conceptual categories deployed here – *common fight*, *common battle of investment*, *strategic autonomy for Europe and Africa* – belong to the French repertoire of non-kinetic warfare. In this instance, the repertoire is barely concealing its hostile intent.

The construction also implicitly displaces the BRICS framework, in which several major African economies (South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia) participate and within which the strategic autonomy of African states is conceived in altogether different terms. MACRON deployed the same rhetorical construction at the November 2025 G20 Summit in Johannesburg, and again during the subsequent leg of his African tour in Angola: in each setting, an audience of African leaders was invited to enter a joint European-African subject defined in negation of China and Russia, while the underlying NATO and Western strategic posture was left undisturbed.

Speaking later in French at the same event, MACRON characterised the European posture more explicitly:

“Europe defends the international order, effective multilateralism, the rule of law, free and open trade.”
(MACRON, in Euronews, 2026; Arab News, 2026)

He contrasted this position with China, which on critical minerals and rare earths *operates according to a predatory logic: it does the processing at home and creates dependencies with the rest of the world* (Euronews, 2026). The line is consequential. The companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026b) noted French investments in local assembly of trains and vehicles in Africa as a colonial pattern that secures markets and limits the scope for indigenous capability formation (PATNAIK and PATNAIK, 2021). MACRON’s critique of Chinese processing applies with equal force to French extraction. The rhetorical move offered to African audiences is that European processing-at-source for African critical minerals would not be predatory because Europe is by definition the order-defending partner. The empirical test of that claim lies in the contract terms for those minerals, not in the rhetoric of the Summit.

MACRON also acknowledged the limits of French capacity. Speaking in French, he conceded that previous European leaders had lectured African leaders on what they needed, *but 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* (Euronews, 2026). The admission is significant. France is repositioning from a position of reduced capacity, not expanded capacity. The strategy depends on positioning and partnership, not preponderance.

At the University of Nairobi, MACRON announced that France, together with private-sector partners, would support fifty Orange Digital Centres across Africa under a *Digital Africa* programme aiming to train one million young Africans by

2030 (Standard, 2026; News.az, 2026). The programme has measurable positive externalities for participating young Africans. It also creates ecosystem dependencies – on Orange platforms, on French university partnerships and on Francophone training pathways – with longer strategic effect.

The same University of Nairobi engagement produced an incidental but revealing episode. MACRON interrupted the youth forum to rebuke a noisy section of the audience for what he described as *a total lack of respect* (Capital FM, 2026). The episode is minor in isolation but consistent with the pattern of MACRON's African addresses: a register of instruction directed at African audiences, delivered in a format the new doctrine claims to have abandoned.

5. The MACRON 2020–2026 Africa Pattern

Nairobi 2026 is consistent with what MACRON has been doing across the continent since 2020. He has visited approximately twenty African countries during his presidency, averaging two trips per year – no previous French president has travelled to the continent so frequently (LE MONDE, 2026). The pattern visible in South Africa, Namibia, Mauritius and now Kenya is one of constructing anti-China and anti-Russia convergence between Africa and Western Europe, framed as joint strategic autonomy.

The companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026b) recorded MACRON's April 2025 tour of Mayotte, La Réunion and Madagascar, and his five-day African tour of November 2025 stopping in Mauritius, South Africa (for the G20), Angola and Gabon. These visits do not occur in isolation. They form an arc across the Indian Ocean Rim and the southern flank of the African continent. In each location, MACRON's public rhetoric foregrounds *equal partnership*, *strategic autonomy* and *innovation*; the contractual content addresses minerals, ports, telecommunications and military presence.

Five further features of the pattern require attention.

1. MACRON has repeatedly chosen civil-society interlocutors over, or in addition to, heads of state – Montpellier 2021 as the prototype, FIDEMO 2022 as the institutional vehicle, the 10 May 2026 Social Innovation Pavilion in Nairobi as the most recent instance (Engineering News, 2022; Daily Nation, 2026). The selection is not neutral. It produces a class of African interlocutors whose institutional platforms are funded by the French Government and whose proposals circulate at French-co-hosted summits.

2. The civil-society channel is paralleled and reinforced by a French business channel operating in the established *Françafrique* register. From the 1960s onward *Françafrique* was operationalised not only through state-to-state arrangements but through major French corporations – Elf, later absorbed into Total, in hydrocarbons; the Bolloré Group in ports and logistics; Bouygues in construction; Areva in uranium; Lafarge in cement – which secured privileged access to African sectors and reciprocated through political support to allied African regimes (VERSCHAVE, 1998; BAYART, 2010; PIGEAUD, 2017; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018; BOUKARI-YABARA, 2025).

The system was never retired. Its personal-network architecture has continued to operate into the present, a continuity confirmed in the 2024 memoirs of Robert BOURGI, a direct disciple of Foccart (BOURGI, 2024). The vehicles have been updated for the present period. CMA CGM holds terminal positions across Mombasa, Kribi, Lekki, Pointe-Noire, Nador West Med and Alexandria-Sokhna; Bouygues dominates Ivorian infrastructure; Orange operates the Digital Centres programme and the dominant mobile networks in several Francophone markets; TotalEnergies spans hydrocarbons and renewables; and Canal+, a subsidiary of the Bolloré-aligned Vivendi group, completed its acquisition of MultiChoice in late 2025, extending French corporate reach into Anglophone and Lusophone broadcasting.

The civil-society funding through FIDEMO and the corporate positioning through these firms are two components of a wider repositioning architecture that also extends, as set out below, into French private military and security provision on the African continent and into French control of Africa's undersea cable maintenance from Cape Town.

3. A further channel of the modernised *Françafrique* system is the deployment of French private military and security companies (PMSCs) across the African continent, and with intensifying presence along the African Eastern Rim directly relevant to the geo-strategic theatre identified in this article. These firms occupy a category midway between the commercial-corporate channel and the formal state-military channel; they are private-sector in legal form, but their personnel are drawn predominantly from the French armed forces, the French Foreign Legion and the French intelligence services, and their operational footprint follows French strategic and corporate interests (Investigative Journalism for Europe, 2025; CHINA-CEE

INSTITUTE, 2025; Jamestown Foundation, 2026).

Five firms warrant explicit mention. Gallice operates anti-piracy and maritime-security services across the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea, with permits and arms-storage clearances in Mauritius, the Seychelles, Madagascar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and operates its own escort vessel Libecciu (Gallice International, 2026). GEOS, founded in Paris in 1997, provides risk-management services to French corporations operating in Mozambique and other African energy and corporate-security environments, of which the TotalEnergies-led Mozambique LNG project at Cabo Delgado, relaunched in January 2026, is the most consequential case (TotalEnergies, 2023; African Business, 2025). Agemira, owned by the French businessman Olivier BAZIN and registered in Bulgaria for regulatory arbitrage, has deployed up to one hundred and twenty contractors to the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, operating Chinese-manufactured CH-4 unmanned aerial vehicles for the FARDC from Kinshasa and Kisangani, in support of operations against the M23 (Jamestown Foundation, 2026; Africa Report, 2024; KT Press, 2025).

Amarante International, founded in 2007 by former French armed-forces executives and headquartered in Paris, employs approximately 1,250 staff across 22 subsidiaries worldwide, including a Madagascar office and continental positions in Senegal, Nigeria, Algeria, Benin, Somalia, Mali, Morocco, Chad, Uganda and Egypt; the firm holds security contracts for the European Union Delegation in the Central African Republic and provides close protection, risk analysis and training services to French and European corporates operating in hostile environments (Amarante International, 2026; Devex, 2024). Risk&Co, headquartered in Neuilly-sur-Seine, is formally classified as an *Entreprise de Services de Sécurité et de Défense* and provides advisory, training and security consulting to the French defence, energy, telecommunications and electronics sectors across more than twenty-five countries (Risk&Co, 2026).

The pattern is clear. French private military and security provision is concentrated, on the African continent, at precisely the points where French corporate, energy and maritime interests coincide with sites of insurgency, piracy or armed conflict. The Mozambique Channel and the TotalEnergies LNG facilities at Cabo Delgado; the eastern DRC mineral belt and its drone-supported counter-insurgency; the Indian Ocean anti-piracy

corridors that include the approaches to Madagascar and the Seychelles; and the broader African Eastern Rim are all sites where French PMSCs now operate. The vocabulary is private and commercial; the strategic function is consistent with the wider French repositioning manoeuvre.

4. A fifth instrument of the modernised system is French control of the maintenance of Africa's undersea fibre-optic cable infrastructure. Almost all African internet traffic, financial settlement, voice telephony and data-centre interconnection runs through submarine cables, and the maintenance of those cables in the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans is structurally outsourced to a French vessel. The Orange Marine cable-repair ship Léon Thévenin, operated by Orange Marine, a subsidiary of the French telecoms group Orange, is permanently stationed at Cape Town Harbour and operates under the 2 Oceans Cable Maintenance Agreement (2OCMA), which covers cable repairs across the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans from a base in Cape Town using Telkom SA depot facilities (Orange Marine, 2026).

The Léon Thévenin is, on the most widely reported description, *the only cable repair ship permanently stationed in Africa* (Rest of World, 2025). It has been the vessel of record for repairs to the SAT-3, WACS, EASSy, Seacom, ACE and MainOne cable systems serving the West and East African coasts, including the major outages of January 2020, March 2024 and May 2024 (ITWeb, 2020; SubTel Forum, 2024). The strategic significance is that French commercial and state interests have, by way of a long-running maintenance agreement and the absence of an African alternative, durable physical and informational access to every major African submarine telecommunications cable running through the African Indian Ocean and South Atlantic Rim. The interaction with the surveillance and intelligence-collection environment discussed in the companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026b) is not speculative; it is structural.

5. MACRON's public posture toward Francophone leaders has, on several occasions, betrayed the paternalism the new doctrine claims to have overcome. At the French Ambassadors' Conference in 2025, he accused African leaders of having *forgotten to say thank you* for French involvement in the Sahel, drawing immediate rebuke from the President of Chad and the Prime Minister of Senegal (LE MONDE, 2026). The doctrinal break is less complete than the speeches claim.

6. Five Interlocking French Strategic Goals

Read across FIDEMO, the Nairobi Summit and its eleven bilateral agreements, the Mombasa joint-venture and the wider MACRON 2020–2026 pattern, France appears to be pursuing five interlocking strategic goals. The first four are instrumental; the fifth is structural and overlaps with the fourth as its economic foundation. The weakening and division of the BRICS, and the construction of an anti-China front anchored in Africa, is the ultimate strategic objective. The remaining four goals serve it.

1. **Repositioning France as an “African” player.** The repositioning is rhetorical and operational rather than structural. The Anglophone-summit format, the public disavowal of *Françafrique* language, the elevation of civil society and youth, and the convening of the Summit’s civil-society architecture by FIDEMO – the French-Government-funded foundation, hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand and headed by MBEMBE, which organised the 10 May 2026 Social Innovation Pavilion Summit and submitted its sixty-proposal white paper to the heads of state – together recast France as a pan-African partner rather than as a former colonial metropole.

The recasting is a diplomatic sleight of hand whose principal function is the obfuscation of the French historical and contemporary record. That record includes the Atlantic slave trade and the *Code Noir* (PEABODY, 1996; TOBNER, 2007); four centuries of colonial rule; the post-1960 *Françafrique* system of monetary, military and political tutelage (VERSCHAVE, 1998; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018; BAYART, 2010); complicity in the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda (DUCLERT, 2021); a documented pattern of regime change, intervention and election interference across the continent; and documented instances of bribery, corruption and coercion of African political leaders (Africa Confidential, 2018; BOURGI, 2024; BOUKARI-YABARA, 2025).

The *Françafrique* system has not been abandoned. It has been modernised. It was always operationalised through French business networks – Elf (later absorbed into Total) in oil; the Bolloré Group in ports and logistics; the Bouygues Group in construction; Areva in uranium; Lafarge in cement – under political and intelligence cover, and it continues to be (BOUKARI-YABARA, 2025; PIGEAUD, 2017). The Nairobi configuration extends the system into the Anglophone and Lusophone continent through CMA CGM at Mombasa, Kribi, Lekki, Pointe-Noire, Nador West Med and

Alexandria-Sokhna; Bouygues across Ivorian infrastructure; Orange across fifty Digital Centres and as the dominant mobile operator in several Francophone markets; TotalEnergies across hydrocarbons and renewables; the Canal+/MultiChoice transaction completed in late 2025; and the publicly funded FIDEMO. The substance is continuity; the presentation is investment.

2. **Geo-strategic capability development on the African Indian Ocean Rim and the key chokepoints.** The Mombasa joint-venture is the visible new instance. Combined with French sovereign territory in La Réunion, Mayotte and the Scattered Islands, base agreements in Djibouti and the UAE, and existing CMA CGM terminals at Kribi, Lekki, Pointe-Noire, Nador West Med and Alexandria-Sokhna, France is constructing a commercial-cum-logistical envelope around the Cape, the Mozambique Channel, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal (CMA CGM, 2026; Afrik, 2026; ZAAIMAN, 2026b).
3. **Marginalising South Africa.** South Africa was represented at Nairobi but not as co-host. The continental narrative of Afrophobia, analysed in the companion paper, runs alongside this institutional marginalisation. A dwindling regional power, mired in deepening internal political-economic and social problems and reputationally damaged by the Afrophobia framing, is more readily bypassed in continental forums (ZAAIMAN, 2026b; MSOMI, 2026).
4. **Weakening and dividing the BRICS, and constructing an anti-China front in Africa.** This is the ultimate strategic objective. South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia are BRICS members; Nigeria, Algeria and other major African economies are BRICS partner-states. Drawing African states closer to Western Europe under the *strategic autonomy* framing, while characterising Chinese conduct as *predatory*, weakens BRICS coherence on the continent and serves the wider Western objective of containing the rise of a Eurasian-anchored pole in the international order. MACRON's Nairobi line that European and African interests are jointly opposed to those of the US and China is the rhetorical centrepiece of this construction (Euronews, 2026; Reuters, 2026a). The Section 7 critique establishes that this characterisation of China is empirically untenable.
5. **Securing African critical minerals to develop France and Europe while keeping the continent in a subordinate processing position.** MACRON's

critique of Chinese mineral processing as predatory is empirically defensible in part. The same critique applies, in different vocabulary, to French extractive arrangements over six decades (VERSCHAVE, 1998; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018). The empirical test is whether the new French-led arrangements move value-addition to source on the African continent, or whether they continue the established pattern of primary extraction for Northern processing (PATNAIK and PATNAIK, 2021; CHANG, 2002).

7. Critique in Africa and in France

The Nairobi speeches and the wider repositioning have drawn substantial critique from African and French commentators. Augustin HOLL, the Cameroonian archaeologist who led the UNESCO *General History of Africa* scientific committee, described France-Francophone Africa relations as *catastrophic*, attributing this largely to *a haughty attitude and arrogance that, moreover, are not limited to France-Africa relations* (LE MONDE, 2026). A West African minister, speaking anonymously to *Le Monde*, observed: *The problem with Macron is that he calls a lot, but he rarely listens* (LE MONDE, 2026). The Ivorian international relations scholar Arthur BANGA, himself one of MACRON's Montpellier 2021 interlocutors, acknowledged that *Emmanuel Macron really wanted to shake things up, to include the diasporas and the youth*, but that the momentum was *tempered by what is the usual pattern in international relations: the relationship between heads of state, peace and security* (LE MONDE, 2026).

An analysis published in *The Conversation* on the day the Summit opened identified the substantive risk in starker terms. Artificial intelligence, climate initiatives and weapons manufacturing are, on this reading, *yet unproven ventures with no long history of unequal exchange* between the two sides, and therefore serve as natural common ground between Africa and former colonial powers precisely because they have not yet acquired the political weight of older unequal exchanges over minerals, energy and finance (The Conversation, 2026). The implication is uncomfortable: new fields of cooperation are attractive in part because their structural inequities are not yet documented.

Marie-Yemta MOUSSANANG, of Sciences Po Paris, has warned against *a naive belief in a transformed future* (allAfrica, 2022). MBEMBE himself, in statements at the FIDEMO launch in 2022 and again at Nairobi 2026, has characterised the centre of gravity as having shifted toward Africa, warning that *the days when France held a monopoly in its former sphere of influence and made all the*

decisions are over (LE MONDE, 2026; Africanews, 2022). The argument cuts both ways: it describes a real structural shift, and it functions as a rhetorical permission slip under which the new repositioning proceeds.

Two analytical points sharpen the critique.

1. **MACRON's positioning of France against the United States.** The *strategic autonomy for Europe and Africa* formulation, together with the line about solutions *made in the US or in China*, constitutes a diplomatic sleight of hand. The empirical record on this score is unambiguous: Chinese strategic behaviour does not resemble American strategic behaviour, whereas French strategic behaviour does.

France is a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Its strategic doctrine, its intelligence-sharing arrangements with the United States, its weapons co-development programmes, its position on Ukraine, its naval deployments in the Red Sea, its alignment with Washington on Iran and on the Strait of Hormuz, and its participation in the wider Western strategic containment of Russia and China are all features of a structurally Western and NATO posture. France and the United States are not separable on the strategic questions that matter to African states; they are joint members of the same alliance, jointly engaged in the containment of the Eurasian powers.

MACRON's performance of distance from the United States in Nairobi is precisely that – a performance. It is designed to harvest anti-American sentiment in Africa, an emotion the French diplomatic service knows is widespread, while leaving the underlying NATO and Western alignment undisturbed. This is continuity with the *Françafrique* register in a different rhetorical garment: the same duplicitous diplomatic register in which France presents itself as a third way it is not (PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018; PIGEAUD, 2017; VERSHAVE, 1998; BOUKARI-YABARA, 2025).

2. **China as a different strategic actor.** The operational register through which MACRON characterises Chinese conduct as *predatory* is the same non-kinetic register through which South Africa has been recast as *Afrophobic*: a categorical reduction that travels faster than the empirical record can correct it (ZAAIMAN, 2026b; MSOMI, 2026).

The empirical record, however, does not sustain the characterisation. China is, by the formal measures of contemporary African development

cooperation, the natural developmental partner of the African continent in a way that France and the United States are not. China is Africa's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching approximately US\$348 billion in 2025 (Government of China, 2026). At the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing, President Xi Jinping announced a unilateral and unconditional zero-tariff policy. His direct words were:

“China will voluntarily and unilaterally open its market wider. We have decided to give all LDCs having diplomatic relations with China, including 33 countries in Africa, zero-tariff treatment for 100 percent tariff lines. This has made China the first major developing country and the first major economy to take such a step. It will help turn China’s big market into Africa’s big opportunity.” (Xi, 2024)

The policy took effect on 1 December 2024 for thirty-three African least-developed countries. On 28 April 2026 the Customs Tariff Commission of the State Council announced the extension of zero-tariff treatment, effective from 1 May 2026, to the remaining twenty African states with diplomatic ties to China – bringing the total to all fifty-three such states. The first consignment to enter China under the expanded policy comprised twenty-four tonnes of apples from South Africa, which cleared customs in Shenzhen in the early hours of 1 May 2026 (Government of China, 2026a). The Chinese Ministry of Commerce stated, on the same day:

“With the expanded policy taking effect on Friday, China will become the first major economy to provide unilateral, full-coverage zero-tariff treatment to all African countries with diplomatic ties, and to all least developed countries with diplomatic relations.” (Government of China, 2026a)

The Ministry further specified that the policy will lend a competitive edge to African products such as cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, coffee and avocados from Kenya, and citrus fruits and wine from South Africa, which had previously faced tariffs ranging from 8 to 30 per cent; and that the arrangement is intended to *encourage China and other trading partners to increase investment in Africa, bringing capital, technology, equipment and management expertise to process African specialty products locally* (Government of China, 2026a; China Daily, 2026). The current phase runs from 1 May 2026 to 30 April 2028, during which China intends to negotiate the long-term China-Africa Economic Partnership for Shared Development with relevant African states (Government of China, 2026b).

The structural contrast with the French offering at Nairobi is clear. What MACRON deploys against China is rhetoric. What China offers Africa is a unilateral, conditionality-free trade preference covering one hundred per cent of tariff lines, framed by the Chinese authorities as a policy intended to encourage value-addition and local processing on the African continent. France's relationship with Africa remains mediated through the CFA franc monetary system (until its 2019/2020 reform), the French military, the Agence Française de Développement, private French capital, summit-format diplomacy and a publicly-funded continental foundation. China's relationship is mediated, increasingly, through a single unilateral and conditionality-free trade preference. The empirical record, in short, does not support the characterisation of China as the *predatory* actor and Europe as the *order-defending* partner.

The point is not that China is a benign actor in Africa. Like every major power, China pursues its strategic and commercial interests. The point is that MACRON's framing of China as *predatory*, and of France and Europe as standing for *the international order, effective multilateralism, the rule of law, free and open trade*, obscures the empirical record.

That record includes France's complicity in the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, documented by the DUCLERT commission to which MACRON himself gave the mandate (DUCLERT, 2021); the long history of French economic and political imperialism in West and Central Africa (VERSCHAVE, 1998; PIGEAUD and SYLLA, 2018); the system of colonial rule that the *Françafrique* architecture succeeded (BAYART, 2010); and the founding role of France, alongside other European powers, in the Atlantic slave trade and the *Code Noir* (PEABODY, 1996; TOBNER, 2007). The French diplomatic record cannot be reset by rhetorical performance in Nairobi. France and the United States are both Western powers and both NATO members; both have a documented record of intervention against the BRICS project as a Global South initiative.

Within France, MACRON's record has drawn consistent critique for paternalism and selective condemnation. The 2025 *forgotten to say thank you* remark to the Ambassadors' Conference, the 2017 Ouagadougou comment about his Burkinabé counterpart going to fix the air conditioning, the 2020 summons-style invitation to Sahel heads of state, and the asymmetric response to the 2021 Guinea and 2023 Gabon coups compared with the Sahel coups, have all been registered in the French press and in African commentary as evidence of an incomplete doctrinal break (LE MONDE, 2026). The University of Nairobi *total lack of respect* rebuke

(Capital FM, 2026) is a minor but consistent addition to that record.

8. Operational Implications for South African Statecraft

The companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026b) set out a five-point implications list and a fourfold tasks list for South African statecraft. The Nairobi Summit, FIDEMO and the Mombasa joint-venture, read together with the eleven Kenya-France bilateral agreements signed on 10 May 2026, intensify the operational urgency of each task, and clarify what must follow:

1. **Recognition.** The Nairobi Summit, read with FIDEMO and Mombasa, makes the kind-of-war diagnosis more concrete. South Africa is engaged in a non-kinetic, grayzone contest in which an external state actor is actively reconfiguring continental forums, capital flows and infrastructure positions to bypass and marginalise it, and through which to weaken and divide the BRICS formation in which South Africa is a founding member. This is not a domestic policy problem. It is foreign policy with foreign infrastructure and foreign government funding.
2. **Comprehensive security and resolution of the colonial-apartheid economic structure.** The companion paper argued that South Africa's primary national security problem is underdevelopment and political-economic misalignment. Nairobi does not change that diagnosis. It compounds it. A country whose economic structure cannot be defended generatively will find its regional standing undercut by external partners offering investment-led models, even where those models reproduce the dependence they claim to replace.
3. **Institutional capacity in SANDF, intelligence, DIRCO and cluster departments.** The Mombasa joint-venture, the FIDEMO architecture, the eleven Kenya-France bilateral agreements and the Summit choreography are operational instances that the South African national security system should have anticipated, detected, framed publicly, and contested in continental forums. The absence of a coherent South African response to FIDEMO's 10 May Pavilion Summit feeding sixty proposals into Nairobi is the most direct illustration. Building the doctrine, the analytical capability and the diplomatic-narrative capacity to operate in this space is operationally urgent.
4. **Information infrastructure as strategic infrastructure.** The Orange Digital Centres rollout, the CMA CGM Mombasa terminal, the AI and

digital-infrastructure components of the eleven Kenya-France agreements, the Canal+/MultiChoice transaction discussed in the companion paper, and the structural French monopoly on undersea cable repair across the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans through the Cape-Town-based Léon Thévenin operated by Orange Marine, are all information-and-logistics infrastructure plays. South Africa's submarine cable landings, mobile telecommunications operators (notably MTN), satellite-broadcasting platforms, Earth-observation capability and undersea cable-maintenance arrangements must be brought inside a strategic-infrastructure regime as set out in the companion paper.

5. **African integration led by the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities, on innovative, orderly and mutually beneficial foundations.**

The Africa Forward Summit illustrates how a non-African power can move into a vacuum of continental coordination and substitute its own summit-format and civil-society architecture for genuine African integration. The institutional response sits with the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities, and not with foreign-funded foundations, foreign-co-hosted summits or foreign-led civil-society conventions.

The AU, together with SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA, the EAC and the other RECs, must lead the innovation work required to organise African integration and unity on orderly and win-win foundations that move beyond the rhetoric of continental solidarity. The substantive agenda is available: regulated movement of people, goods and capital across the African Continental Free Trade Area; critical-minerals value-addition at source; submarine-cable and digital-platform sovereignty; African research and university networks constituted as African public infrastructure; and continental peace and security architectures owned by African states rather than outsourced through foreign-hosted forums.

South Africa's task within this institutional framework is to act as one of the principal motive forces, in concert with Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Algeria and other major African economies, rather than as the lone regional power attempting to repeat post-1994 patterns of continental leadership. The Nairobi moment is, in that sense, also an opportunity. The space France is attempting to fill is a space that an AU- and REC-led integration initiative could occupy on terms set by African states.

The companion paper (ZAAIMAN, 2026b) closed with the observation that without these steps, the next iteration of the Afrophobia dossier – and the next iteration of the genocide dossier – will be more damaging than the present one. The Nairobi Summit is the operational illustration of that warning. France has moved. South Africa has not. The G7 at Évian on 15–17 June 2026 is the next deadline.

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