

President Ruto grovels to Washington to put Kenya on the global war map

Kipchumba Ochieng
21 May 2024

Kenya's President William Ruto will be arriving in Washington for a state visit to the US Wednesday.

The Kenyan press is celebrating the visit, terming it "the first state visit by an African leader in more than 15 years", a "major milestone and investment opportunity" and a "historic moment" that is putting "Kenya on the map". Ruto is "eating big things," wrote the *Nation* newspaper, adding, "Kenya has to wear big-boy pants".

Far from this delirium, Kenya and the entire African continent are being drawn into the maelstrom of an expanding global war. The continent's geostrategic position and vast mineral resources are viewed by Washington as critical in its conflicts with Russia, Iran and China.

Ruto is the sixth head of state invited for a state visit by US President Joe Biden since he took office. The other five visits were related to Washington's war theatres across the globe. Leaders of South Korea, India, Australia and Japan were invited to discuss military alliances against China. France was accorded a state visit to discuss NATO's war on Russia in Ukraine.

It was not long ago that Washington viewed Ruto as a political thug threatening US interests in the region. Washington backed the International Criminal Court (ICC) charges against him over his involvement in Kenya's 2007-2008 post-election violence. Ruto played a crucial role in planning and organising violence that left over 1,200 dead and over 600,000 internally displaced. The case was eventually dropped as witnesses disappeared and the US lost interest in backing Ruto's prosecution after he became deputy president.

Today, Ruto is given a red carpet to establish Kenya as Washington's main military ally in the region. His visit coincides with the landing of 200 Kenyan police officers, the first batch of a thousand, in Haiti as part of a US-funded mission.

The officers, mainly from the special forces, known for their brutality in anti-terror operations, will operate from US Army-built military barracks. They are tasked with terrorizing the Haitian population and ensuring months of gang warfare does not precipitate an outflow of refugees to the US and Canada and destabilize the Caribbean region.

Countering Chinese influence

The main issue on the agenda will be countering China's influence across the African continent. According to the White House press release, "The leaders will discuss ways to bolster our cooperation in areas including people-to-people ties, trade and investment, technological innovation, climate and clean energy, health, and security. The visit will affirm our strategic partnership with Kenya and further the vision set forth at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit."

The US-Africa Leaders Summit was held in December 2022, with 49

African heads of government attending. It was a clear signal that Washington was not going to let China's influence grow unopposed in Africa. The Biden Administration's US Africa strategy states that China views Africa as "an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order, advance its own narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, undermine transparency and openness, and weaken U.S. relations with African peoples and governments."

The "rules-based international order" is the world order established by US imperialism in the aftermath of World War II, in which it sets the rules. The expansion of Chinese influence in Africa over the past 15 years directly threatens US and European imperialism's control over the lion's share of Africa's natural riches and disrupts Washington's ability to encircle China and strangle it economically. At the same time, Western corporations and banks, eager to plunder Africa's vast economic resources and its working masses, have been losing ground to China.

In this conflict African governments and political establishments have been torn between their military-political ties to Washington and the economic gains from closer ties with Beijing, whose investments have dwarfed those of the US.

Kenya is a clear example of this process. As part of its "Look East" policy, Nairobi's relations with China intensified under the presidencies of Mwai Kibaki (2002–2013) and Uhuru Kenyatta (2013–2022). China-Kenya trade grew more than thirty-fold, from \$106 million in 2000 to \$6.55 billion in 2022.

China is now Kenya's largest trading partner, with more than 16 percent of the total merchandise trade volume, followed by the European Union, India, and the United Arab Emirates. The US is relegated to fifth place.

China has emerged as the preferred source country for electronic goods, textiles, cosmetics, vehicle accessories and machinery. It is responsible for major infrastructure projects in the country including the Thika Super-highway easing transportation of raw materials and finished products between Nairobi and the country's second-most industrialised town of Thika, the Nairobi-Mombasa railway connecting Nairobi to the coast, and projects like the Kipevu Oil Terminal in Mombasa Port, Lamu Port, Liwatoni Floating Bridge and Thwake Dam.

Last October, Ruto, despite his anti-Chinese rhetoric during the presidential elections in 2022, met with President Xi Jinping as part of a three-day state visit. Ruto asked for \$1 billion in loans, adding to Kenya's \$6.3 billion debt to China, to help complete infrastructure projects. Last week, Kenya secured commitment from China's Exim Bank for the funding of the standard gauge railway from Nairobi to the Ugandan border.

For years, the Kenyan ruling class hoped it could balance between Chinese loans and infrastructure projects and Washington's political and military support. In 2020, then President Kenyatta told a conference hosted by the Atlantic Council in Washington, "We don't want to be forced to choose. We want to work with everybody, and we think there is opportunity for everybody."

Those days are over. With the politics of the entire continent on a knife's edge, Biden will demand Ruto to distance himself from China.

A glimpse of the underlying threat was seen last December when the US State Department made the unfounded claim that Beijing was planning to set up military bases in Kenya as part of its pursuit of a global military logistics network to counter the US. It stated, "China is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the People's Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Party to project and sustain military power at greater distances".

This was only weeks after US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Kenya and held a series of meetings with defence officials and Ruto.

Kenya as the anchor state of US imperialism

Ruto's visit comes at a time when Washington's influence across Africa is rapidly diminishing. South Africa, a traditional ally of the US, took its main Middle Eastern ally, Israel, to the International Court of Justice over its genocide in Gaza. Last year, the South African military participated in joint military exercises with Russia and China along South Africa's east coast.

Ethiopia, Washington's previous preferred security partner in the Horn of Africa, is increasingly orientating towards China, following decades of authoritarian rule by the US-backed Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) since 1991. In 2020, a civil war erupted between forces aligned with the new Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF.

In Niger, the new military junta booted US troops out of the country and handed over the US military bases, one of the largest US drone bases in Africa, to Russia.

In Chad, the US has withdrawn its military after the country demanded they leave last month.

As one US diplomat bemoaned in an article on International Crisis Group when asked why the Biden administration had invited the Kenyan leader to Washington: "If not Ruto, who?"

Washington is hoping to transform Kenya, which has a track record as a satrap for US and European imperialism in maintaining their strategic grip over Eastern and Central Africa, into a strategic military partner against China and Russia in the Horn of Africa.

Over the past 18 months since Ruto came to power, Washington high-ups have visited Nairobi, including CIA chief William Burns, Commander of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) General Michael Langley, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, and anti-China hawks like US Senator Chris Coons and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai.

In September, Austin signed a five-year defence deal with Nairobi providing US-led training of Kenya Defence Forces. "In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, our ability to work seamlessly together is paramount," said Kenyan Defence Minister Aden Bare Duale. "This cooperation will enable us to respond effectively to the ever-evolving security challenges in our region."

These visits took place as Ruto backed US foreign policy. Kenya signed up to US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian, the military operation against the Houthi militias in Yemen that have attempted to disrupt supplies to the Israeli military, in solidarity with the Palestinians. Ruto endorsed airstrikes on the impoverished nation, after supporting Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

The US will likely request Ruto to expand its troop presence at its Camp Simba base in Manda Bay, which serves as host for US drones and surveillance to project its control across the Indian Ocean, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, particularly over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a chokepoint critical to securing global energy.

The base has played a key role in the undeclared war on the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia, where thousands of people have died in US drone strikes, and where Kenya continues to deploy thousands of troops as the US proxy since 2011.

The US is also likely to use Kenya's army in proxy wars across Africa. It has already tested the country's soldiers in its war in Somalia, and in eastern mineral-rich DR Congo, and is now using Kenya's US-trained special forces police in Haiti.

Ruto is eager to play this role. In a country where malnutrition is rampant, defence spending grew by 38 percent between 2021 and 2024, from \$925 million to \$1.2 billion. Earlier this month, Nairobi announced it was acquiring a high-tech missile defense system from the genocidal regime of Israel using a \$1 billion loan from Tel Aviv. The sophisticated system, which could have only been offered with Washington's approval, offers protection against aircraft attacks, helicopters, cruise and ballistic missiles. Nairobi ludicrously claims growing security threats in the Gulf of Aden from Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has no aircraft, and the Houthis in Yemen, who have a single fighter jet, an ancient F-5.

Washington also hopes to use Kenya, the largest economy in the Eastern African Community economic bloc, and its growing influence in the African Union to steer African countries away from Russia and China. The US and Ruto are currently backing Kenya's main opposition leader, the millionaire Raila Odinga, nominated to lead the African Union (AU). Odinga is a longtime supporter of US and French imperialist interventions in Africa.

Ruto's war on the working class and rural masses

The intensified orientation to the US and its war aims is not merely a political choice by Ruto. It is based on fundamental objective relations between the Kenyan ruling class and imperialism.

In exchange for supporting the US, the Kenya Kwanza government of Ruto hopes to receive crumbs, in the forms of a trade deal and more US investment, which will be syphoned by the parasitical layer running the Kenyan state. The Ministry of Investment, Trade, and Industry plans to pitch over \$20.5 billion in investment opportunities, showcasing more than 30 promising projects to potential American investors. Ruto is also hoping to conclude the US-Kenya Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership this October, to boost US investment and exports to the US.

US companies such as Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger already profit out of the exploitation of cheap Kenyan labour in the Export Processing Zones across the country, which are exempted from paying taxes.

In return for Ruto's pledge to draw Kenya into wars across the continent and even around the planet, Ruto will seek Washington's backing for his Kenya Kwanza alliance government's war against the working class and rural poor. Last year, the government imposed brutal International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures that have decimated the living standards of Kenyan workers, including the introduction of a housing levy, doubling Value Added Tax on petroleum products from 8 per cent to 16 percent, tripling sales tax for small businesses from 1 percent to 3 percent, and introducing a new medical insurance tax of 2.5 percent.

Ruto's taxes have resulted in a skyrocketing cost of living, compounded by NATO's war in the Ukraine.

This year, Ruto has vowed to escalate the class war. A Finance Bill will propose a battery of new taxes including motor vehicle tax, minimum top-up tax, economic presence tax, withholding tax, and digital content tax. Ordinary bread, a staple which was among the zero-rated items, will cost more following the imposition of 16 percent VAT.

The Kenyan military and police are being prepared not only to support US-led wars abroad but also as shock troops at home.

Last year, mass anti-austerity protests were savagely drowned in blood, leaving over 70 dead, most shot by the police. Widespread discontent is re-erupting. Earlier in the year, Ruto teargassed pro-Palestinian protests in Nairobi, and a pro-Palestinian gathering at a bookshop was dispersed and activists arrested. Last week, hundreds of interim teachers protested demanding permanent jobs, threatening to strike as the unions shut down a two-month nationwide doctors' strike.

The Kenyan opposition party, Azimio la Umoja, is threatening new countrywide protests, after Odinga called them off last year fearing they were breaking free of his party's control.

All Kenya's parties, in government or opposition, support the alliance with the US, austerity and militarism. The only alternative is for workers to take matters into their own hands and fight for a socialist programme against war and to address the pressing social needs of working people.



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