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MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
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AFRICA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from Africa

May 2026

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China's Zero-Tariff Policy for Africa: Opportunity or Strategic Leverage?

On 1 May 2026, China expanded its zero-tariff treatment to 53 African countries, allowing eligible goods from nearly the entire continent to enter the Chinese market duty-free until 30 April 2028. The initiative builds on an earlier arrangement that covered 33 least-developed African countries. Eswatini remains the only African country excluded, largely because of its continued diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

The initiative provides African countries with greater access to the vast Chinese consumer market and could particularly benefit sectors such as agriculture and food processing. Countries with established export capacity may be among the immediate beneficiaries. South African wine producers, for instance, are hoping to expand their presence in the Chinese market, while producers in countries such as Ghana and Kenya could gain from increased demand for products including cocoa, coffee, tea, avocados and macadamia nuts. In this respect, tariff-free access could provide new opportunities for African exporters to diversify markets and increase foreign exchange earnings.

However, the broader impact of the policy will depend on whether African economies can overcome longstanding structural constraints. Sino-African trade continues to be characterised by a significant imbalance. Africa largely exports crude oil, minerals and other raw materials to China, while importing higher-value manufactured products. Africa's trade deficit with China reportedly reached approximately US$102 billion, highlighting the persistent asymmetry in the relationship.

Removing tariffs alone may therefore be insufficient to transform Africa's position within its trade relationship with China. Limited industrial capacity, inadequate transport infrastructure, unreliable electricity supplies and weak logistics continue to constrain the ability of many African economies to produce and export value-added goods. Without corresponding investments in manufacturing and processing capacity, improved market access could even reinforce existing commodity-dependent trade patterns. The real test will be whether African governments can use preferential access to the Chinese market as an opportunity to promote industrialisation and move higher up global value chains.

The policy also carries wider geopolitical implications. At a time of intensifying competition between China and the United States in Africa, particularly over critical minerals and strategic supply chains, Beijing is presenting itself as a proponent of trade openness and a reliable economic partner. The exclusion of Eswatini, however, also demonstrates that China's economic engagement cannot be entirely separated from its diplomatic priorities, particularly the One-China principle.

China's zero-tariff initiative therefore represents both an economic opportunity and a strategic challenge for Africa. While expanded access to the Chinese market could support exports, employment and foreign exchange earnings, its long-term developmental impact will depend on African countries' ability to expand production, diversify exports and strengthen domestic value addition. Without these changes, zero-tariff access may increase trade volumes without fundamentally addressing the structural imbalance that continues to define China–Africa economic relations.

Tshisekedi's Third-Term Ambitions and the Future of Congolese Democracy

On 6 May 2026, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) President Félix Tshisekedi opened the door to the possibility of seeking a third term in office, despite the country's constitutional limit of two presidential terms. Speaking during a nationally televised press conference, Tshisekedi stated that although he had not personally sought another term, he would be willing to continue in office if the Congolese people demanded it. Any such change, he stressed, would have to be decided through a constitutional revision approved by a referendum.

Tshisekedi, who first assumed office in 2019 and was re-elected in December 2023, is expected to complete his second and final five-year term in 2028. His remarks therefore represent his clearest intervention yet in an emerging political debate over constitutional reform and presidential term limits. The discussion has gained momentum amid calls from sections of his ruling Sacred Union coalition for changes to the Constitution that could potentially allow him to remain in power beyond 2028.

The debate is not entirely new. In late 2024, Tshisekedi had already raised the possibility of revising the Constitution, arguing that the existing charter required reform. At the time, however, he did not explicitly link constitutional revision to presidential term limits. His latest remarks have intensified opposition concerns that the reform process could eventually be used to extend his presidency.

Opposition leader Martin Fayulu has strongly rejected the possibility of a third term, accusing Tshisekedi of seeking to use the continuing conflict in eastern DRC as a justification for remaining in power. Fayulu warned that if elections are not held in 2028, Tshisekedi would have to leave office when his constitutional mandate expires. The controversy has revived memories of the political crisis under former President Joseph Kabila, whose decision to remain in office after the expiration of his mandate in 2016 led to protests and international criticism before elections were eventually held in 2018.

Tshisekedi has also warned that continuing insecurity in eastern DRC could prevent the presidential election scheduled for 2028 from being held on time. The AFC/M23 rebellion continues to control significant territory in the east, including strategically important urban centres. Tshisekedi argued that elections could not realistically be organised while parts of North and South Kivu remained outside effective government control.

The domestic political debate is also becoming intertwined with the DRC's growing strategic relationship with the United States. Tshisekedi welcomed recent US sanctions against former President

Kabila, whom his government has accused of supporting forces destabilising eastern Congo. At the same time, Washington has intensified its engagement with Kinshasa as it seeks greater access to the DRC's critical minerals, including cobalt and copper, and attempts to reduce China's dominance over mineral supply chains.

This convergence of political, security and geopolitical interests could place Washington in a difficult position. Should Tshisekedi pursue constitutional changes enabling him to remain in office beyond 2028, the United States may face accusations that its strategic interest in critical minerals and regional stability is taking precedence over democratic norms. The evolving third-term debate is therefore likely to become not merely a domestic constitutional question, but also a test of how external powers balance geopolitical interests with democratic governance in one of Africa's most strategically important states.

Africa Forward Summit: France's Bid to Rebuild its Influence in Africa

On 11 May 2026, leaders and representatives from 32 African countries gathered in Nairobi for the Africa Forward Summit with French President Emmanuel Macron. The summit marked the first time that France had organised such a meeting in an English-speaking African country and came at a critical moment for Paris, which is seeking to redefine its engagement with the continent following a decline in its political and security influence in parts of Francophone Africa.

In recent years, military-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have expelled French troops and reduced security ties with Paris. Senegal has also reassessed France's military presence, reflecting a wider shift in African attitudes towards relations with former colonial powers. Against this backdrop, the Nairobi summit signalled France's attempt to expand its partnerships beyond its traditional Francophone sphere and build stronger economic and political ties with countries in East Africa and elsewhere on the continent.

The summit had a significant economic focus. Around 1,500 industry and business leaders participated in the business forum, which sought to promote investment opportunities across the continent. President Macron announced that €23 billion in investments had been mobilised through the summit. Of this amount, €14 billion was committed by French companies, while €9 billion came from African companies. One of the major announcements was a €700 million investment by French shipping group CMA CGM to modernise a terminal at the Port of Mombasa. Investments in clean energy, artificial intelligence and other sectors were also expected to form part of the broader economic partnership.

The summit's agenda extended well beyond trade and investment. Discussions covered peace and security, climate change, reform of the global financial architecture, technology, agriculture, food security, manufacturing and job creation. Innovation, research, sports, arts and culture were also highlighted, particularly in the context of Africa's youthful demographic profile. According to the input, around 70 per cent of Africa's population is aged 35 or below, making employment generation and economic opportunities for young people an important policy priority.

For Kenya, hosting the summit was an opportunity to attract greater French and European investment and to position itself as a gateway to wider African markets. Nairobi sought investment in energy, green technology and infrastructure, while also emphasising projects that could strengthen continental economic integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area. Kenya also called for greater value addition in the mining sector, arguing that African countries should move away from the traditional model of exporting raw materials without sufficient domestic processing.

The summit also reflected Africa's growing demand for reform of the international financial system. Kenya called for a more representative and equitable financial architecture that would improve African countries' access to affordable credit.

Overall, the Africa Forward Summit reflects France's effort to recalibrate its Africa policy around investment, technology, infrastructure and economic transformation. However, the credibility of this renewed approach will ultimately depend on whether the €23 billion in announced investments translate into tangible outcomes and whether France can build partnerships that respond to African demands for equality, sovereignty and greater local value creation.

African Union Taps Obasanjo for Horn of Africa Peace Efforts

On 14 May 2026, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, appointed former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo to support the African Union’s efforts towards promoting peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. The appointment reflects the continental body’s continued reliance on experienced African statesmen to facilitate dialogue and address the persistent conflicts and political tensions affecting the region.

According to the African Union, Obasanjo will engage with relevant stakeholders and parties to build confidence, sustain dialogue and support ongoing efforts towards lasting peace, stability and reconciliation. Announcing the appointment, Youssouf described the former Nigerian President as bringing “unparalleled experience, wisdom, and credibility” to the assignment. The AUC Chairperson also reaffirmed the organisation’s commitment to supporting sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa.

Obasanjo is no stranger to peace and mediation efforts on the continent. He previously served as the African Union’s High Representative for the Horn of Africa and played a significant role in efforts to resolve the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region. In 2022, he was among the senior African mediators who facilitated AU-led peace talks between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. These negotiations eventually resulted in the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities signed in Pretoria in November 2022.

His involvement in African peace initiatives extends beyond the Horn of Africa. Following the outbreak of conflict in South Sudan in December 2013, Obasanjo chaired the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan. Established by the AU Peace and Security Council, the commission was tasked with investigating human rights violations and other abuses committed during the conflict and examining measures relating to accountability, reconciliation, healing and institutional reform.

The commission engaged with political leaders, civil society organisations, affected communities and other stakeholders as part of its investigation. Its work contributed to wider continental discussions on accountability and reconciliation in South Sudan, highlighting the importance of addressing impunity alongside political efforts to end armed conflict.

More recently, Obasanjo has also been involved in mediation initiatives concerning the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, further reinforcing his position as one of Africa's most prominent elder statesmen engaged in conflict resolution.

His latest appointment comes at a time when the Horn of Africa continues to face multiple and interconnected security challenges. Political instability, interstate tensions, internal armed conflicts and humanitarian crises have placed considerable pressure on existing regional peace mechanisms. Against this background, Obasanjo's experience in engaging governments and conflicting parties could strengthen the AU's diplomatic efforts.

However, his appointment also underlines the difficult task confronting the African Union. Sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa will ultimately depend not only on high-level mediation but also on the willingness of regional actors to sustain dialogue, implement agreements and address the underlying political and security grievances driving conflicts. Obasanjo's role could nevertheless provide renewed diplomatic momentum to the AU's efforts to promote an African-led approach to peace and stability in one of the continent's most strategically important regions.

India’s Defence and Maritime Engagement with Africa

India’s defence and maritime engagement with Africa continued to gain momentum in May 2026 through a series of bilateral and multilateral initiatives aimed at strengthening military cooperation, capacity building and maritime security. Developments involving Algeria, Cape Verde and several Indian Ocean partner countries reflect New Delhi’s broader effort to deepen security partnerships with African states while promoting cooperative approaches to regional stability.

On 5 May 2026, India and Algeria held the inaugural meeting of their Joint Commission on Defence Cooperation in New Delhi. The meeting, co-chaired by Joint Secretary (International Cooperation) Amitabh Prasad and Algeria’s Chief of Staff of the Naval Forces, Major General

Kaid Nour Eddine, focused on expanding cooperation in military training, exercises, medical cooperation and defence industries. The two sides also signed the Rules of Procedure for overseeing the implementation of bilateral defence cooperation, providing an institutional framework for future Joint Commission meetings.

The establishment of the Joint Commission marks an important step in India-Algeria defence relations, which have gathered pace since the signing of a Defence Memorandum of Understanding in 2024. The presence of representatives from India's three Services, Integrated Defence Staff, Department of Defence Production, Defence Research and Development Organisation, Armed Forces Medical Services and Ministry of External Affairs underlined the comprehensive nature of the engagement. The Algerian delegation's interaction with Indian defence industries also highlighted the potential for expanding cooperation beyond military exchanges towards defence manufacturing and technological collaboration.

India's maritime outreach to Africa was also visible with the arrival of INS Sudarshini at Mindelo in Cape Verde on 4 May 2026. The port call, the eighth since the ship began its Lokayan-26 voyage on 20 January, was its final African stop before crossing the Atlantic towards the Caribbean. During the visit, the Indian Navy engaged with Cape Verde's maritime authorities and Coast Guard through cross-training, professional exchanges and social interactions. Such engagements demonstrate India's growing maritime diplomacy along Africa's Atlantic coast and complement its more established presence in the Indian Ocean.

At the multilateral level, the completion of the IOS SAGAR deployment on 20 May further demonstrated India's approach to cooperative maritime security. INS Sunayna returned to Kochi after completing a multinational deployment involving 38 personnel from 16 partner countries, including Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, South Africa and Tanzania. The mission incorporated port visits, passage exercises, professional exchanges, maritime security discussions and operational training.

The deployment reflected India's transition from the SAGAR vision—Security and Growth for All in the Region to the broader MAHASAGAR framework, emphasising Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions. It also strengthened cooperation in addressing piracy, illegal fishing, narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling and other non-traditional maritime threats.

Taken together, these developments illustrate the expanding geographical and functional scope of India's security engagement with Africa. From institutionalised defence cooperation with Algeria and maritime diplomacy in Cape Verde to multinational naval collaboration with African Indian Ocean states, India is increasingly positioning defence partnerships, capacity building and maritime cooperation as important pillars of its wider engagement with the African continent.