



## WHY REGIONAL LEADERS UNDER-TRADE: KENYA-INDONESIA TIES IN A SOUTH-SOUTH CONTEXT

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### Abstract

This article examines why Kenya and Indonesia continue to under-trade despite renewed diplomatic engagement that was marked by the opening of a Kenyan embassy in Jakarta in 2022. As regional economic actors that share South-South cooperation narratives, the two countries experience limited bilateral trade that stood at approximately \$295 million in 2024, with Kenya running a significant trade deficit of about \$233 million. The study employs a qualitative case study approach that draws on trade data, policy documents, secondary literature, and semi-structured interviews with a former Indonesian diplomat in Nairobi as well as students of international relations from both Kenya and Indonesia. It applies neoliberal institutionalism complemented by constructivist insights to analyse the structural and ideational constraints shaping this outcome. The findings of the study pinpoint five key hindrances: asymmetric policy priorities favouring traditional markets, weak institutional frameworks, logistical and regulatory barriers, structural trade imbalances, and enduring perception gaps. These factors collectively constrain the translation of diplomatic intent into substantive economic exchange between the two countries. The article argues, while Kenya and Indonesia rhetorically align under the Bandung Spirit and South-South cooperation, this has not materialised into meaningful economic outcomes.

**Keywords:** bilateral trade deficit; institutional gaps; Kenya-Indonesia relations; regional powers; South-South Cooperation

## Introduction

Based on recent economic data and projections for 2025-2026, Kenya and Indonesia are acting as the clear economic leaders in the East African and Southeast Asian regions, respectively. Kenya's 2026 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is projected to be approximately \$131 billion to \$140 billion, while Indonesia's is around \$1.55 trillion to \$1.67 trillion according to World Bank figures. The two countries have been described by various literature as "strategic gateways" to East Africa and Southeast Asia and have sought to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties through the South-South framework. Still, bilateral trade between the two remains relatively modest (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). Total trade in goods and services stood at approximately \$295 million in 2024, and despite heightened diplomatic presence and economic exchanges, Kenya experienced a significant trade deficit of about \$233 million (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2026).

In this study, the term "regional economic leaders" refers to countries that exert significant economic, political, and institutional influence within their respective regions. They often serve as hubs for trade, diplomacy, and regional integration. Kenya and Indonesia fall under this description as leading economies in East Africa and Southeast Asia respectively with active roles in regional blocs such as the African Union (AU), the East African Community (EAC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In principle, such positioning should facilitate stronger inter-regional economic linkages, particularly under the framework of South-South cooperation.

However, trade records highlight limited bilateral trade that is imbalanced despite this status and renewed diplomatic engagement. This paradox raises a central question about whether regional leadership alone is sufficient to drive meaningful trade relations. This contrasts with other regional leaders such as South Africa whose bilateral trade with Indonesia is a more peer-like relationship. Both countries have relatively diversified economies and trade like two industrialising middle powers according to trade data, and lead their respective regions (Southern Africa and Southeast Asia) economically. The two countries share a seat at various multilateral platforms including the G20 and BRICS. Trade between the two countries exceeds \$2.5 billion and reflects a relatively reciprocal exchange of industrial and commodity goods unlike with Kenya (OEC, 2026)

Notable development in bilateral relations happened in 2022 when Kenya opened its permanent diplomatic mission in Jakarta, covering Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines. This decision suggested Nairobi's intention to politically deepen engagement with Indonesia and its expansion of Southeast Asian presence. This is a region that comprises 11 dynamic countries with growing economies. However, this representation has yet to translate into meaningful economic outcomes (Antara, 2022).

The diplomatic landscape shifted in 2023 when then Indonesian President Joko Widodo famously known as 'Jokowi' made a first-ever visit by an Indonesian leader to Kenya. His Kenyan counterpart William Ruto upon receiving him highlighted the visit as a concrete step towards strengthening ties (Jakarta Post, 2023). Several agreements were signed during the visit and formalised partnerships in agriculture, health, trade and investments as well as technology transfer. This, according to scholars, was the Indonesian strategy of revitalising the Bandung spirit drawn from the 1955 Asia-Africa conference held in Bandung (Juned & Saripudin, 2025). As a diplomatic tradition the Indonesians invited the Kenyan president to make a reciprocal visit in order to maintain diplomatic balance and honour the Nairobi-Jakarta commitments.

This process, according to Lepgold & Shambaugh (2002) is about reciprocity in international relations, and refers to the conditional exchange of cooperation, where states reward compliant behaviour and respond to defection in kind, thereby sustaining mutually beneficial outcomes. In the context of state visits, such reciprocity is often operationalised through symbolic gestures, reciprocal agreements and matched commitments that reinforce trust and signal reliability between partners.

Keohane (1986) advances this argument when he declares that reciprocity seems to be the most effective strategy for maintaining cooperation. Despite an invitation to visit Jakarta for bilateral talks alongside the second Indonesia-Africa Forum held in 2024 in Bali, President Ruto has yet to honour it, years after President Widodo handed over power to his successor Prabowo Subianto. Instead, Ruto chose the ninth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit in Beijing in September 2024 and dispatched his energy minister Opiyo Wandayi to represent him at the Indonesia-Africa event.

This choice according to Kenyan journalist K'Onyango (2024) suggested that Nairobi is yet to regard Jakarta as a development partner equivalent to Beijing. Even though a leader may opt to honour the invitation at a later date, long delays as observed,

could be interpreted by the inviting state as a sign of disdain that could potentially harm relations. Comparatively, trade between Kenya and China significantly outweighs its engagement with Indonesia, and this highlights Beijing's centrality in Nairobi's external economic relations. In 2024, bilateral trade between Kenya and China stood at approximately \$6.2 billion compared to less than \$300 million with Indonesia. Still, Kenya run a substantial deficit in both cases (OEC, 2026). This disparity helps explain the prioritisation of China as a key development partner in high-level diplomatic engagements and points to the choice of President Ruto honouring the FOCAC summit invitation over the Indonesia-Africa summit.

The relations, nevertheless, remain solid and continue to be sustained in Nairobi and Jakarta, even though this largely depends on the proactiveness of the respective missions in the two capitals. A spot check of the digital approach deployed by both diplomatic missions found a highly active and, in some cases, asymmetrical strategy to public diplomacy (Indonesian Embassy, 2026). The Indonesian brand is engaged in intensive use of social media especially Instagram to boost its cultural diplomacy compared to the relatively low-key Kenyan approach (Brawijaya et al., 2024). Public diplomacy is interpreted as a process of government communicating to foreign public aimed at providing an understanding of the country, attitudes, institutions, culture and the positions taken by the country (Daimah, 2022).

Jin (2024) posits that contemporary diplomacy has leveraged the rise of digital platforms as a soft power apparatus to influence foreign publics and advance national interests as seen in the Korean wave era where a state led soft power strategy is leveraging cultural exports to influence foreign publics and build global image. Research on the use of social media in public diplomacy has gained momentum and there are a multitude of studies exploring the intersection between digital platforms and soft power (Elitaş, 2022; Khusnu Perdani et al., 2024; Smith, 2024).

Indonesian envoy in Nairobi T.B.H. Witjaksono, who, following his accreditation by President William Ruto in September 2025, has conducted multiple high-level meetings within Kenya (Yunita & Killian, 2024). The notion of soft power was primarily articulated by Nye, Jr. (2021) who argued that soft power co-opts people rather than coerces them, and it is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants. The Kenyan team in Jakarta, by contrast, has limited online presence and

leverages X (formerly Twitter) to occasionally update. The Kenyan ambassador recently assumed post and is yet to present his credentials to President Subianto, and this appears to be the reason limiting his early substantive engagements (Kenyan Embassy, 2026).

Existing literature on Africa-Asia relations remains biased and heavily focuses on China as an actor, as well as Japan's and India's ties with the continent. The Kenyan relationship with Indonesia is still understudied (Nurhasdy et al., 2017). This article through a qualitative case study fills the gap by examining why Kenya and Indonesia as regional economic leaders in their respective regions continue to under-trade. The research contributes to the literature on South-South cooperation and asks: why do Kenya and Indonesia, as regional economic leaders, persistently under-trade despite growing diplomatic engagement?

## Literature Review

### *South-South Cooperation*

Interest in studying the Global South, especially South-South Cooperation (SSC), has surged this century among states, policymakers, and scholars. Velasquez (2024) argues they seek to harness policies from southern nations for mutual gain. Indonesia's 1955 Bandung Conference introduced this framework which would later birth the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 and spurred UN initiatives like the G77 and the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action. This plan formalised technical ties among developing states. The scholar notes the Bandung Principles rejected Cold War bilateralism, a dynamic still visible in today's global architecture (Velasquez, 2024).

The definition of SSC has evolved, and the 2009 UN High-Level Conference in Nairobi enriched the framework. It framed SSC as a shared effort of southern peoples. Rooted in solidarity and common goals, it stressed sovereignty and rejected conditionality, the core principles enshrined in the Bandung Conference (United Nations, 2009, p. 3). Kenya's 2024 foreign policy document embeds this. It promotes economic-security links with Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean via SSC. Surasky (2014) calls SSC a "reciprocal exchange of capacities" for southern development. Banik & Mawdsley (2023) sees it as resource swaps tied to postcolonial solidarity. Both views cast SSC as equal partnerships, unlike North-South models (Adjani, 2024). Currently SSC features

presidential summits and diverges from traditional donors. Funds, projects, and forums grow, like BRICS and FOCAC.

### *Economic diplomacy*

Economic diplomacy has increasingly become a central instrument through which Kenya and Indonesia promote trade and investment relations and has been deeply embedded as a critical pillar of the foreign policy of states around the world. Kenya, in its 2024 foreign policy document, indicates that economic diplomacy continues to shape the country's anchor role in the region (Kenya Foreign Policy 2024 - Abridged Version, n.d.). President William Ruto has argued that his government reviewed its foreign policy to make it more responsive to citizens' needs, emerging trends and global dynamics, with economic diplomacy remaining central to the country's international engagements.

Indonesia under its own economic diplomacy pillar initiated by the Jokowi administration and continued by his successor prioritises boosting exports and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) while still strengthening trade ties with other countries to navigate the global crisis (Yadav, 2025). This use of diplomatic institutions and processes, Bayne & Woolcock (2017) describe it as the effective way to advance a country's economic interests internationally.

A literature review reveals that this subject matter is very broad and has its own subclasses including commercial diplomacy, which is a narrower, more practical subset focused on aiding specific businesses with exports, investment, and market access according to (Bellina, 2019; Zirovcic, 2016). It is therefore realistic to apply commercial diplomacy as the unit to measure and quantify how both countries have managed to sustain and strengthen trade. According to Lee (2004) commercial diplomacy entails the promotion of inward and outward investment and of exports in trade and can be classified into three broad categories. The first perspective is on gathering and disseminating commercial information and market research for potential foreign direct investment. Secondly, establishing business and government contacts and networks in the host countries and introducing the private sector to these contacts for synergy. Finally, the promotion of goods and new products in the host market through the organisation of seminars, trade fairs, and direct lobbying (Kosters, 2013; Mubarak & Sinha, 2023).

For this reason, Indonesia has stood out in its relations with Kenya particularly on the strategic use of commercial diplomacy in advancing its national economic interests, and has managed to facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI) through the establishment of an Indomie instant noodle manufacturing facility in Kenya (Fathun, 2023; Yunus et al., 2025). The Indomie brand is widely recognised as a symbol of Indonesian innovation and consumer competitiveness and plays a significant role in enhancing Indonesia's economic and cultural visibility. Kenya has no known foreign direct investment in Indonesia. The Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry has adopted the principle of economic diplomacy to market Kenya as a key investment destination to ensure that it remains competitive and does not lose its stake in the international market.

### *The Embassy*

An embassy has been described by various literature as the diplomatic representation of a country's government in another country. Pásztor (2024) describes its work not just as representation but also as analysis of information, conducting commercial diplomatic activities, lobbying, maintaining contact with the society and host state, and facilitating international business networks as well as tourism. In other words, it is referred to as a diplomatic mission and serves as the official, permanent representative office of one country located in the capital of another and conducts government-to-government relations. It is led by an ambassador and manages diplomacy, trade, security, and protects national interests all carried under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (Malone, 2013). Berridge's "Outposts of Diplomacy: A History of the Embassy" stands apart in diplomacy literature by offering a detailed historical narrative of embassies from their ancient origins to their modern formulation (Pásztor, 2024).

It is important to note that in the categorisation of an embassy, it can either be a resident embassy based permanently in the capital of another country or a non-resident embassy accredited to a country but operating from a different nation, often to save costs or manage security (Rana, 2006). In this context, both Kenya and Indonesia maintain resident embassies in their respective capitals. Critically diplomatic missions have therefore evolved beyond the traditional roles focusing on political relations to include proactive engagement in trade promotion and investment facilitation according to Rana (2007). These missions are led by ambassadors and staffed with diplomats who are

accredited and pursue their interests in the host nation. The accreditation practice was evident when William Ruto formally accepted the credentials of Indonesia's envoy in Nairobi. He authorised him to vigorously pursue the interests of his country within Kenya's territory (State House, 2025). This is an illustration that accreditation ceremonies themselves often point towards expectations of active economic engagements between states. Thus, Kenya's move to establish an embassy in Jakarta in 2022 and Indonesia's expanding commercial relations reflect this growing task of diplomacy in trade facilitation (Antara, 2022).

### *Under-trading between friendly states*

This concept of under-trading in the global political economy is defined as a situation where the level of trade engagements between two countries is more limited than economic size, geographical distance and political relations would predict. Scholars like Mansfield & Milner (2012) argue that political relations and institutional arrangements strongly influence trade flows although having friendly diplomatic relations does not always translate into tangible outcomes particularly achieving high level of economic exchanges. The literature review shows that studies point to several structural reasons for under-trading, including the argument by Büthe & Milner (2014) that historical patterns, transport costs and institutional connections often shape trade flows. The 19th-century remark that trade follows the flag is still useful today as Kenya and Indonesia try to unlock potential and despite maintaining warm political relations, weak logistics, minimal market information and other structural issues may hinder trade between the two countries. Although Indonesia is a gateway to the Southeast Asian region, Kenya's approach historically prioritised Malaysia and Thailand due to its diplomatic presence in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Since the opening of its first embassy in the region based in Malaysia, Kenya has consistently recorded a significant trade deficit with countries of the region, and this appears to be influenced by the fact that Kenya favoured political relations at the time over economic engagement.

As a result, Kenya has gradually introduced economic and commercial diplomacy in its foreign policy document and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nairobi has been engaging its diplomats in the region and abroad on the roles of a diplomat in promotion of trade. The country's top diplomat Musalia Mudavadi has consistently urged Kenyan

envoys posted abroad to champion innovative partnerships and attract people-centred investments that generate jobs and expand opportunities for Kenyans. Importantly, just like the global economy, trade routes open a new path for engagement and when the route is unstable, trade becomes ineffective. Aviation links between the region and Kenya remain relatively low, and the country's national carrier Kenya Airways has operated five weekly flights to Bangkok since 2003. The service paused in 2020 due to COVID-19 but resumed afterward. This route bolsters connectivity between Nairobi and Bangkok and the wider region. Indonesia on the other hand runs no flights to Nairobi or Eastern Africa and this reveals not just air but trade priorities for Jakarta. Consequently, weak logistics infrastructure has hindered Kenya-Indonesia trade volumes even though relations at the political level remain strong and cordial, an evident pattern in South-South economic ties.

## **Research Method**

### *Design*

This research employs qualitative case study analysis to explore why Kenya and Indonesia, as regional powers and longstanding diplomatic relations are under-trading. As Lamont (2015) argues, qualitative design allows researchers to explore the complexity of international relations by emphasising depth of understanding over breadth of data collection.

Data were obtained from both primary and secondary resources. Primary insights were largely informed by informal, in-person discussions with Mohamad Hery Saripudin, former Indonesian Ambassador to Kenya, whose firsthand diplomatic experience provided insights into institutional and policy dynamics, as well as students of international relations from Kenya and Indonesia whose perspectives were used to explore perception gaps between the two societies. These engagements were not recorded and are therefore used to provide contextual understanding of the situation. Insights from these discussants were triangulated with secondary sources, including official documents and scholarly literature to ensure analytical consistency and reliability.

Key constraints included access to Kenyan diplomatic perspectives and multiple requests to engage Kenyan officials in Jakarta, including the ambassador, were not successful during the data collection period prior to the envoy's redeployment. As a result, the study relies more heavily on secondary material and indirect perspectives to capture

Kenya's viewpoint. Additional limitations include reliance on utilisation of secondary data, potential for bias stemming from internal reports presented by ministries, and the dynamic nature of diplomatic relations, which is fluid in nature and could outgrow available data.

Future research could explore primary sources from the two countries in order to fill the gap in the study and recommend how Kenya and Indonesia can address the challenges they face in their economic engagements (Lamont, 2015).

### *Unit of Analysis*

The unit of analysis adopted in this article is a state-level one and focuses on the bilateral relationship between Kenya and Indonesia and aims to explain the persistent under-trading. It is interrogating how state institutions, trade policies, diplomatic engagement, and structural economic factors interact to shape outcomes. This analysis centres on internal characteristics of a state, structures, and its decision-making processes to explain foreign policy actions and engagements with other states.

### *Data Collection*

In this study the researcher drew a mix of primary and secondary sources of data to capture both official and lived perspectives. Primary material includes a firsthand experience from Mohamad Hery Saripudin, former Indonesian Ambassador to Kenya who informally shared his observations during his tenure of duty, as well as official documents from both authorities. A literature study that involved gathering, reading, comprehending and analysing and interpreting data findings complement this study, and the researcher obtained data from various sources including journals, theses, dissertations, books, reports and contemporary news about Kenya-Indonesia relations. Anonymous insights from two students, one Indonesian and one Kenyan were also included and offered grounded perspectives that helped illuminate how the bilateral ties are perceived.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher applied a thematic analysis approach that involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within gathered data. It focused on diplomatic narratives, policy positions, and personal accounts. Official statements and government data were also

examined to trace policy intent and institutional goodwill while academic sources offered an analytical grounding. Experiences from the ex-ambassador and students were useful to enrich the analysis.

### *Trustworthiness*

This research ensured trustworthiness through source triangulation and combined multiple forms of evidence including official trade and foreign policy documents, scholarly literature and primary-informed insights from informal field interactions. This process allowed cross-verification of key findings and reduced reliance on a single source. The primary insights from informal in-person discussions with the former Indonesian ambassador to Kenya, Mohamad Hery Saripudin, and IR students were not treated as standalone evidence but were applied to contextualise and interpret patterns observed in documentary data. Findings of the study were compared across sources in order to improve analytical consistency and allow this research to maintain reliability by anchoring its conclusions in verifiable secondary data and clearly distinguishing between empirical evidence and interpretive insights.

### Result

Figure 1 – Bilateral Trade Trends between Kenya and Indonesia (2022-2024)

#### **Kenya-Indonesia Bilateral Trade Trends (2022-2024)**

Trade between Kenya and Indonesia has remained relatively modest, with Kenya consistently recording a significant trade deficit.

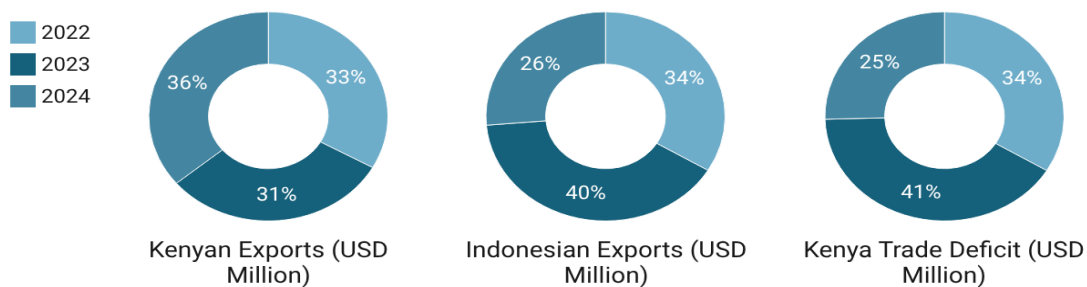


Chart: Researcher • Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) • Created with Datawrapper

Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)

As an initial overview of imbalanced bilateral trade between Kenya and Indonesia, Table 1 highlights the trade balance between the two countries in 2022, 2023, and 2024 and evidently displays that Kenya has been experiencing a significant trade deficit while the

modest trade favours Indonesia. This imbalance and deficit trend indicates a structural imbalance in both countries external trade ties.

An analysis of bilateral trade over the highlighted years reveals a consistent and significantly increasing deficit on Kenya's side. Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) show that in 2022, Kenya exported goods worth approximately \$28.5 million to Indonesia, while Indonesia's exports to Kenya reached \$337 million. The imbalance widened in 2023, with Indonesian exports increasing to \$401 million as Kenyan exports declined slightly to \$26.5 million. Although Indonesia's exports fell to \$264 million in 2024 and Kenya's exports rose modestly to \$31 million, the overall trade structure remained heavily skewed in Jakarta's favour (OEC, 2026).

Figure 2 – Bilateral Trade Trends between Kenya and Indonesia (2022-2024)

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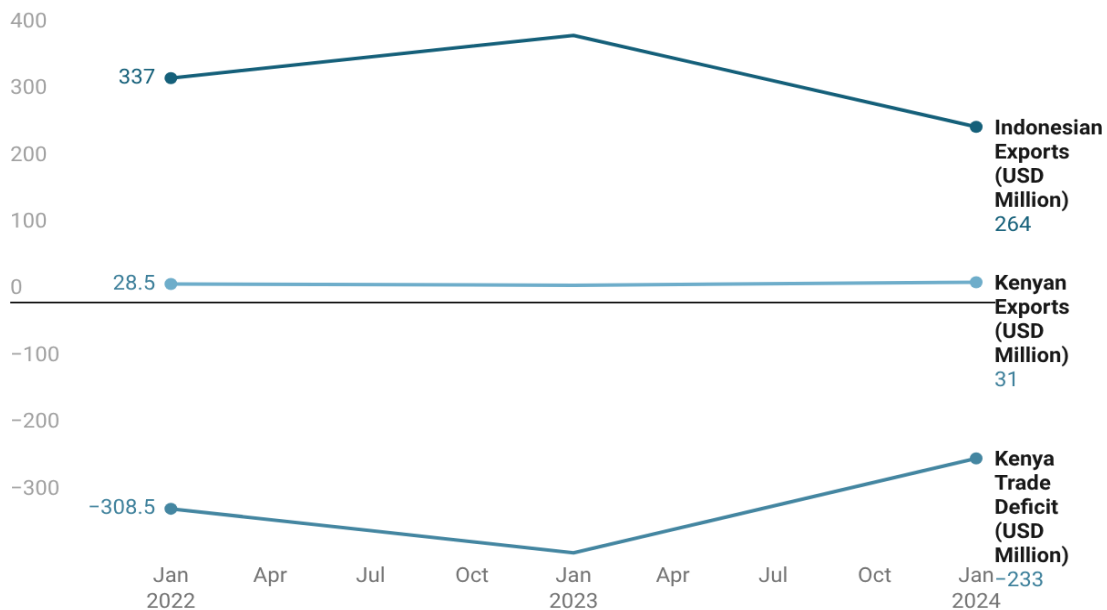


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These figures, as illustrated in figure 1 are broadly corroborated by Kenya's Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry data published in 2025, although slight discrepancies were noted. The ministry reported Kenyan exports to Indonesia at \$27.1 million in 2023, against Indonesian exports of \$319 million. Despite the statistical

variation, both datasets point to the same structural reality, a sustained bilateral trade deficit for Kenya and demonstrate a significant trade imbalance in Indonesia's favour (State Department for Trade, 2025).

**Table 1 – Kenya-Indonesia Trade Data (Exports and Imports), 2023**

<i>Source</i>	<i>Kenya Exports to Indonesia</i>	<i>Indonesia Exports to Kenya</i>
<i>OEC</i>	\$26.5 million	\$401 million
<i>Trade Ministry, Kenya</i>	\$27.1 million	\$319 million

Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Trade Ministry-Kenya

This gap reflects not only differences in trade volume, but also the imbalance in the composition and value addition of traded goods. Kenya's exports to Indonesia remain concentrated in primary commodities such as tea, coffee, cocoa, and beans, according to the Kenyan State Department for Trade. These exports are largely unprocessed and occupy lower segments of the global value chain due to limited added value addition hence limiting Kenya's capacity to capture higher-value economic returns.

In contrast, Indonesia exports to Kenya are heavily weighted toward processed, value-added products especially palm oil and paper products. This added value imbalance reinforces Kenya's position as an exporter of raw materials and an importer of finished goods, and the result, according to data is a trade relationship that remains commercially active but structurally unequal despite heightened diplomatic engagements.

The findings of this study reveal some interconnected challenges that explain the fluctuation and imbalance. Key among the challenges is: unchecked policy misalignment, institutional and logistical constraints, dynamics of respective regions, differences in trade and economic models and perceptual gaps.

### ***Policy misalignment***

Kenya and Indonesia have both championed South–South cooperation. Cooperation that aims at gravitating towards an economic growth pole with an internal locus of control responsive to emerging demands and circumstances of developing countries (Engel, 2025). However, trade priorities among countries of the global South, Kenya and Indonesia included have often diverged in practice. For instance, Indonesia's foreign policy discourse continues to invoke the legacy of the Bandung Conference of 1955 that emphasised solidarity among newly independent states of Asia and Africa.

Scholars argue that, while the Bandung spirit remains symbolically powerful, its actual economic translation has remained modicum. Juned & Saripudin (2025) posit that Indonesia's trade strategy continues to prioritise ASEAN markets leaving engagement with African and other southern economies, relatively unexplored. The country's discourse on South-South cooperation has remained strong, according to the scholars, but its conversion to tangible economic results remains low. While strong in political and diplomatic relations, Indonesia has been unable to establish strong non-traditional markets despite the huge south continental potential (Indrayana, 2024). Jakarta has established about 16 diplomatic missions in Africa, with Indonesia itself hosting 17 embassies from African countries (Tarossy, 2016). Yani (2009) notes that Indonesia's foreign policy has over time evolved from ideology to pragmatics, but implementation of trade and investment with African states like Kenya is still low due to bureaucratic bottlenecks and poor intergovernmental coordination.

Similar contradiction is reflected in Kenya's foreign policy orientation. While Kenya's new foreign policy framework 2024 highlights economic diplomacy as a key pillar, the trade architecture is heavily oriented towards western and northern markets, particularly the European Union and the United States of America. Kenya-European Union Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) serves to reinforce this position while at the same time imposing regulatory regimes that make diversification toward alternative markets difficult ("Kenya – EU: New Trade Deal," 2023).

Anyanzwa (2025) illustrates this in an article, where he argues that providing enhanced market access comes with many regimes of regulations that work against local exporters in selling to non-traditional markets. Such tensions were visibly evident in 2023 when Indonesia proposed a preferential trade agreement (PTA) during President Joko Widodo's state visit to Nairobi-Kenya. Instead of pursuing the agreement bilaterally, Kenya referred the proposal to the East African Community for consideration (Anyanzwa, 2025). Whilst that move was consistent with regional trade protocols, it did slow down momentum for deeper bilateral engagement (Hersi et al., 2025).

### *Institutional, logistical constraints*

Akbar et al. (2025) notes that infrastructural and logistical factors also play a significant part in limiting and obstructing trade between countries. To-date, there are no direct maritime or air connections between Jakarta and Nairobi. People and cargo have to travel through intermediary hubs like Dubai, and this increases transport costs and delays in time. Air connectivity faces similar challenges. Kenya's National carrier, the Kenya Airways operates flights to Bangkok but does not extend to Jakarta. Travel between the two key capitals requires several transits, and this hinders any potential trade.

As a result of these incompatibilities, data presented in this study shows that trade between Kenya and Indonesia is very limited. Kenyan exporters have reported facing difficulties in meeting Indonesia's halal certification requirements, as Indonesian companies report bureaucratic delays and opaque customs processes in Kenya. The absence of foundational agreements such as a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) also discourages long-term commercial investment. In line with the adage that "trade follows the flag", such an initiative could not only facilitate traffic but also strengthen bilateral trade and diplomatic engagements between the two countries (Pollins, 1989).

It is important to note that Kenya and Indonesia established its Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation months ahead of President Widodo's visit, and it was the inaugural meeting that aimed at expanding opportunities for mutual growth. This platform, also known as the Joint Commission for Cooperation (JCC) acts as the primary engine for driving bilateral relations and functions as the key dialogue mechanism between nations to review progress, identify new opportunities and support long-term collaboration.

It is specifically designed to iron out bottlenecks by acting as a high-level troubleshooting body that bridges the gap between political will and practical execution. Kenya and Indonesia have noted diverging national regulations, standards, and legal frameworks that often create "red tape" for trade.

Kenya's foreign minister Musalia Mudavadi while meeting the Indonesian ambassador to Kenya, Tyas Baskoro Her Witjaksono Adji in October 2025 reported that Kenya was readying itself to host the second session of the Kenya-Indonesia Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation in 2026.

### *Regional dynamics*

Regional trade frameworks and treaties, while ostensibly designed to facilitate trade, can inadvertently slow bilateral trade engagements. Indonesia often negotiates external trade agreements through the ASEAN mechanisms, and this reflects its preference for collective regional bargaining (Nguyen & Lee, 2025). Kenya also leverages the East African Community (EAC) protocols for external trade agreements. Experts see this as a bureaucratic tool when Nairobi does not see a particular potential trade agreement as a priority (Hersi et al., 2025).

For instance, in 2023 Kenya redirected its potential PTA with Indonesia toward the EAC (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). It however pursued a unilateral Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU, despite having been rejected at the regional level. Kenya is also negotiating a reciprocal trade deal with the United States of America bilaterally while delaying a Comprehensive Trade Agreement with China through bureaucratic hurdles. This pattern reveals strategic selectivity in Kenya's economic diplomacy (Maina, 2026).

For context, the East African Community operates as a customs union that allows its members to eliminate tariffs and quotas on goods traded between them while applying a common external tariff on goods imported from non-member countries. This is used as a tool for regional integration and economic development, and a member state is not allowed to unilaterally sign a preferential trade agreement or similar trade deals with a third party. Kenya has however gone ahead to sign such deals, a move that resulted in regional backlash and mistrust.

In contrast, ASEAN is not a customs union and operates under a free trade area with highly integrated customs procedures. It aims for a unified market under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and member states do not share a common external tariff like the EAC. As a consequence, ASEAN members can and frequently do sign their own bilateral trade agreements with countries of their choice and this gives Indonesia leverage over Kenya to pursue preferential trade agreements with non-traditional markets.

### *Economic structure and trade composition*

Differences in economic structures and models have also contributed to the trade imbalance. Indonesia runs a mixed economy with a strong state-directed characteristics, with scholars labelling it as a “restrained state capitalism” and is the largest economy in Southeast Asia and classified under an upper-middle-income nation. As a newly industrialised country, its economy is highly driven by domestic consumption and a massive, ongoing transformation toward industrial down-streaming especially in natural resources.

The economy is driven by manufacturing, wholesale/retail trade, construction, mining and agriculture and this has seen Indonesia export mainly manufactured goods, including textiles, electronics, footwear and palm oil. The country is reported to have had a consistent trade surplus that stood at \$3.32 billion in March and sells more goods and services to foreign markets than it purchases from them.

By contrast, while Indonesia has transitioned into a manufacturing and resource-processing powerhouse, Kenya remains a service-led economy that is significantly dependent on agricultural exports and faces a persistent trade deficit as illustrated through various data. Kenya has often been called the “Silicon Savannah” because its growth is majorly fuelled by a sophisticated services sector, particularly in mobile finance and ICT. However, its manufacturing share has actually declined over the last decade, falling to about 7% of GDP. Kenyan exports are still mainly made up of primary commodities such as tea and agricultural products and risks constraining the country’s ability to value capture within global markets and highlights the urgent necessity of expanding light manufacturing and industrial value addition (Cruz & Uris, 2022).

A 2012 analysis by Fengler on the World Bank Blogs compared the economic trajectories of Kenya and Indonesia, questioning whether Kenya could replicate Indonesia’s economic transformation. This structural difference does limit opportunities for a balanced bilateral trade. Kenya’s limited manufacturing capacity constrains its ability to export value-added products. Indonesia’s manufacturing-driven economy finds limited industrial complementarity in Kenya’s export basket (Githaiga, 2021).

### *Perceptual gaps*

Perception is an important psychological facet for humans and plays a significant role, often a reality-shaping role, in trading and economic relations between countries. It is seen as an immediate response to something and could either be positive or negative. During this study, interviews and anecdotal evidence indicate that both countries possess limited knowledge of each other's markets. Former Indonesian ambassador to Kenya Mohamad Hery Saripudin stressed that perceptions shape commercial behaviour as much as economic path. When Kenya inaugurated its embassy in Jakarta (2022), ex-Kenyan top diplomat Raychelle Omamo who had travelled for the opening reportedly remarked on the perceived distance between the two countries.

This, according to observers, reflected a broader perception of Indonesia as geographically remote despite relatively manageable travel distances. In trying to address these assumptions, ambassador Hery while in Nairobi introduced informal diplomacy through hosting Indonesian business delegations and encouraging direct engagement with Kenyan entrepreneurs. These tours, he reflected during an international relations class aimed to bridge the knowledge gap between the Indonesian private sector and the Kenyan one. He argued most of the investors he engaged were concerned about security, a perception that Africa is generally unsafe and lacks security to promote a conducive business environment (personal communication, 2025).

This is a widespread misconception often driven by international media about the continent which at times has been portrayed as a single country. Writer Faloyin (2022) in his book 'Africa is not a country', has tried to answer this question and argues that many people don't realise that Africa is one of the most culturally diverse regions on the planet (Robinson, 2023).

The ex-Indonesian diplomat initiative saw the embassy also launch exhibition dubbed the Hybrid Trade Showcase and Soko la Indonesia in 2021 that was designed to reduce informational barriers and promote confidence in the Kenyan market, and resonates with Wendt (1999) assertion that "perceptions are embedded in identity; how states see others is shaped by how they see themselves."

Constructivist views perceive perception as a process that extends beyond the mere interpretation of another's states' actions and is filtered through narratives, culture,

and national identity. Nye, Jr. (2021) frames diplomacy in his soft power writings as the act of creating and managing perceptions to influence the behaviour of others. Findings from this study suggest that mutual perceptual gaps continue to shape Kenya-Indonesia relations at the societal level. Informal engagements with students of international relations from both countries revealed limited public familiarity beyond dominant stereotypes and popular imagery. One Kenyan student studying in Indonesia noted that prior to arrival, their understanding of Indonesia was largely confined to its Muslim-majority identity and the tourist island of Bali. Similarly, several Indonesian students primarily associated Kenya with long-distance athletics, wildlife, and safari imagery, while others possessed little prior knowledge of the country beyond its African identity.

In one informal conversation, an Indonesian student jokingly asked whether people in Kenya “run alongside lions and cheetahs,” referencing the animated film *The Lion King*. Although humorous, the remark reflected the extent to which popular culture and wildlife narratives continue to shape perceptions of both Kenya and Africa more broadly. Such perceptions, while seemingly trivial, may influence broader patterns of tourism, investment interest, and people-to-people engagement (personal communication, 2025). At the same time, Kenyan athletic excellence appeared to function as a positive source of soft power visibility in Indonesia. During a field visit to Bogor, this researcher observed multiple promotional banners and posters featuring Eliud Kipchoge displayed in Nike stores across shopping malls. Kipchoge, a two-time Olympic marathon champion and former marathon world record holder, remains one of Kenya’s most globally recognizable figures. His visibility in Indonesian commercial spaces suggest that athletics constitutes one of the few prominent reference points through which Kenya is popularly recognised within Indonesian society.

This study also encountered instances of cultural familiarity that complicated assumptions of complete informational disconnect. During a visit to Batu Api, a community library in Jatinangor, the owner responded to learning that the researcher was from Kenya by playing music from a Kenyan artist originating from the researcher’s ethnic community. When asked how he had become familiar with the music, he explained that he had independently collected and archived recordings from different parts of Kenya and Africa. While anecdotal, the interaction illustrates how informal cultural exposure

and individual curiosity can shape perceptions and create unexpected forms of transnational familiarity beyond official diplomacy.

### Discussion

The results on policy misalignment reveal that Kenya and Indonesia continue to prioritise different strategic economic regions despite sustained diplomatic engagement. This supports neoliberal institutionalist arguments that cooperation between states becomes difficult to maintain if there are no mutually prioritised economic interests as well as strong institutional alignment. This demonstrates that diplomatic goodwill alone is insufficient to strengthen trade relations when state preferences remain directed toward alternative economic centres. Although both countries rhetorically reiterate South-South cooperation, their practical trade behaviour reflects strategic calculations shaped by geography, market size, and existing commercial networks (Keohane & Martin, 1995; Nye, Jr., 2021; Wendt, 1999). Kenya continues to trade heavily with Western markets, China, and Africa while Indonesia's engagement with Africa has historically concentrated on larger and commercially strategic economies such as South Africa and Nigeria. This finding suggests that diplomatic symbolism alone is insufficient to generate deeper economic integration.

The findings regarding logistical constraints are further reinforcing the neoliberal institutionalist perspectives on the importance of institutional efficiency and openness to enhance trade cooperation. Weak trade facilitation mechanisms, limited air connectivity, bottlenecks, and lack of institutional follow-up remain an impediment constraining bilateral commerce between Kenya and Indonesia. The absence of robust implementation frameworks illustrates the limits of formal diplomacy when not complemented by effective coordination. Even though embassies and non-binding bilateral agreements provide a political foundation for engagement, the results suggest that practical economic cooperation needs sustained bureaucratic coordination, trade facilitation infrastructure, and regular institutional dialogue. In this context, ties between Kenya and Indonesia demonstrate how institutional weaknesses can undermine the translation of political goodwill into tangible economic outcomes.

Regional dynamics continue to play a role in shaping bilateral trade behaviour between the two countries which are regional economic powers in East Africa and

Southeast Asia respectively. Both countries operate within broader regional mechanisms that influence their external trade priorities. Even though Indonesia's economic engagement is embedded within ASEAN, it has liberty to pursue bilateral trade frameworks with other countries without any constraints unlike Kenya, whose trade diplomacy remains strongly connected to the East African Community which is a Customs Union. This bars Nairobi from pursuing an independent trade framework with third countries. This finding extends neoliberal institutionalist thinking by showing that regional institutional commitments may at times compete with, rather than complement, interregional cooperation. This study therefore suggest that it would be extremely hard to comprehend the under-trading situation between Kenya and Indonesia at the bilateral level without interpreting the wider context of competing regional priorities and commitments.

Perhaps the most revealing finding is on trade composition which reveals a structurally unequal economic relationship characterised by imbalanced value addition. Kenya's exports remain concentrated in primary commodities such as tea, coffee, and agricultural products, while Indonesia exports largely processed and manufactured goods. This reflects broader structural differences in industrial capacity and capabilities and export diversification between the two economies. This finding supports broader international political economy arguments regarding uneven participation within global value chains. Even though the two countries are often regarded as emerging regional economies, the nature of their exports demonstrates differing levels of industrial transformation. Indonesia's stronger manufacturing base enables it to capture higher-value segments of trade, whereas Kenya's commodity-dependent export profile constrains its ability to maximise economic returns from bilateral trade. This imbalance helps explain the persistence of Kenya's trade deficit as illustrated in *figure 1* and suggests that the challenge is not simply the volume of trade, but the structure of trade itself.

The findings on perceptual gaps strongly support constructivist arguments that international relations are shaped not only by material interests, but also by socially constructed identities, narratives, and perceptions. Informal engagements demonstrated limited societal familiarity beyond selective cultural images and stereotypes. Kenya was frequently associated with wildlife and long-distance athletics, while Indonesia was commonly viewed through the lenses of Bali tourism and religion. Constructivism

suggests that these perceptions matter because they shape how societies imagine each other politically, economically and culturally. Limited mutual awareness may indirectly constrain tourism, investment, educational exchange, and broader people-to-people relations. At the same time, observations such as the visibility of Eliud Kipchoge in Indonesian commercial spaces and the preservation of Kenyan music within a community library in Jatinangor demonstrate that informal cultural encounters can also function as channels of soft power and societal recognition.

This finding may also be interpreted through a constructivist lens that emphasises the role of national identity and state self-perception in shaping foreign economic behaviour. Kenya has historically projected itself as a regional gateway to East Africa, with its trade diplomacy heavily oriented toward African regional integration, Western markets, and global financial connectivity. Indonesia, by contrast, has traditionally viewed itself as a leading Southeast Asian and Indo-pacific power whose economic priorities are strongly embedded within ASEAN and domestic industrial expansion. These differing national self-images partly shape how each state prioritises external economic partnerships and may help explain why bilateral engagement has remained secondary despite longstanding diplomatic relations.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined why Kenya and Indonesia despite decades of diplomatic relations, and shared South-South cooperation rhetoric, continue to under-trade. The results display a relationship that is constrained by policy misalignment, institutional and logistical barriers, competing regional priorities, unequal trade structures, and limited societal and cultural familiarity. While both nations maintain cordial diplomatic ties and historical links dating back to the Bandung Conference, diplomatic engagement alone has not produced deep economic integration. The study contributes to neoliberal institutionalist and constructivist arguments by demonstrating that economic cooperation between states depends not only on formal diplomacy, but also on institutional coordination and socially constructed perceptions. The conclusions suggests that symbolic political solidarity may coexist with weak economic structures where states remain oriented toward different economic spaces they view as strategic. At the societal sphere there are fragmented

mutual perceptions gaps that constrain deeper engagement despite selective forms of cultural visibility.

Future research could expand this study through interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and private sector actors from both countries in order to explore how trade and diplomatic strategies are formulated in practice. Additional comparative research examining Indonesia's engagement with other African regional powers like South Africa or Nigeria may also help contextualise the broader challenges facing interregional South-South economic cooperation.

### **Declaration Of Interest**

The author declares no personal interest.

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