

The GLOCEPS

Weekly Influential Brief

Research and Analysis in Foreign Policy Pillar

Implications of Kenya's Strategic Autonomy on its Relations with the East and West

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Executive Summary

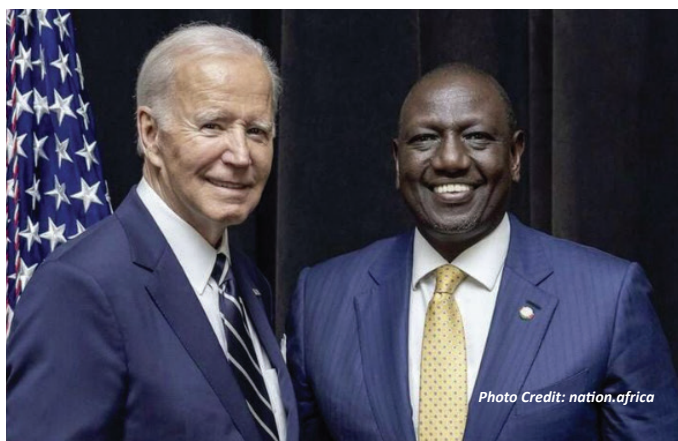
This brief states that Kenya's foreign policy strategic autonomy, marked by shifting alliances at will between the global East economic powers (China and Russia) and the West (USA and Europe), carries profound implications for its diplomatic, economic, and security interests. Amidst great power rivalry, Kenya's foreign policy has evolved from a post-colonial alignment with the West to a more diversified approach, characterised by engagement with both Western and Eastern powers. This dual engagement has yielded significant benefits, such as investment in infrastructure by China's Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI) and sustained trade with the European Union (EU) and the USA in agricultural products and labour. Nonetheless, the balancing act between the East and West, while offering immense opportunities, could destabilise strategic interests if Kenya fails to navigate the associated risks effectively. Key recommendations include a clear and consistent foreign policy framework guiding Kenya's interaction with various geopolitical actors; leveraging on collective regional approaches to enhance bargaining power, and capitalizing on local and regional development banks for financial resources.



Context

Over the years, Kenya's foreign policy has largely been characterised by a dynamic interplay of continuity and adaptation. While core principles such as regional integration, economic diplomacy, and peace-building have remained consistent across different administrations, each president has recalibrated Kenya's external relations based on emerging geopolitical realities and national priorities. For instance, Moi's regime was largely pro-West until the end of the Cold War, when Western countries, led by the USA, intensified pressure on Kenya to implement political reforms. In response, President Moi shifted his foreign policy focus towards Eastern nations, particularly China, in pursuit of aid and investment. During President Kibaki's administration, Kenya's foreign policy saw a strategic realignment that both reinforced the 'Look East' policy and renewed engagement with Western countries. Kibaki's administration leveraged increased Chinese investment and trade opportunities while it simultaneously mended relations with the West, securing support for various domestic and regional initiatives and ensuring a broader and more resilient diplomatic network. Under President Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya's relations with the Eastern bloc flourished, while ties with Western nations diminished due to the International Criminal Court (ICC) cases involving President Kenyatta and his deputy, William Ruto. Kenyatta's administration capitalised on China's



willingness to invest heavily in Kenyan infrastructure and development projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), using these opportunities to counterbalance reduced Western support and strengthen Kenya's influence in regional and continental affairs. However, after President Ruto assumed office in August 2022, a notable change emerged, with a renewed focus on relations with the West.

This shift has been characterised by enhanced cooperation with the USA, the EU, and individual European states such as the United Kingdom (UK), signaling a pro-West pivot. A notable development was the state visit in May 2024 to the USA on President Joe Biden's invitation, which culminated in Kenya being designated a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), the only one in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, President Ruto recently made a state visit to Germany in September 2024, where he signed a bilateral labour agreement with Berlin. This agreement is to facilitate the controlled and targeted migration of skilled and semi-skilled Kenyan workers into Germany, aiming to create employment opportunities for Kenyan youth. Despite the pro-West orientation under President Ruto, Kenya has not abandoned its relationship with China, particularly in terms of economic cooperation, investment, and trade. Confronted with growing domestic pressure over perceived USA interference in Kenyan affairs, Kenya has turned to China and other Eastern powers for additional funding and investments. This shift is also driven by rising living costs and debt burdens, exacerbated by unfavourable International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies, as highlighted by recent youth-led protests. In a bid to fortify China-Kenya relations and seek more assurances on incomplete Chinese infrastructural projects, such as the dualling of the Nairobi Bypass and the extension of the SGR from Naivasha





to Malaba, Kenya attended the 9th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in September 2024. This move followed a loans freeze from China since 2019, which has affected the progress of these projects. Additionally, Kenya is also strengthening relations with Russia, particularly in areas such as food security and fertilizer imports.

The non-existence of a well-defined foreign policy framework guiding Kenya's engagement with major geopolitical actors, such as China and the USA, leaves the country vulnerable to external pressure and influence. This ambiguity weakens Kenya's ability to assert its interests independently and increases its susceptibility to shifting global dynamics.

Key Issues

The key issues pertinent to Kenya's strategic autonomy in its relations with both Eastern and Western powers are highlighted below.



Strained relations amidst geopolitical competition

Kenya serves as an anchor state and gateway to the Eastern Africa region, making its geostrategic location a focal point of competition among major geopolitical actors, including the USA and China, both of whom seek to increase their influence in the region. Its perceived open door foreign policy of engaging with both the East and the West exposes it to the competing interests of these geopolitical actors. This makes it vulnerable to the influence of

great power politics.

The strategic autonomy has positioned Kenya as a key diplomatic player in the Eastern Africa region, helping to leverage benefits from both Eastern and Western partnerships. Nevertheless, this balancing act has the potential to strain diplomatic relations with both sides. For instance, the country's voting record at the United Nations (UN) has occasionally caused friction with Western allies, especially on issues related to human rights and governance. Moreover, Kenya's growing ties with China has raised concerns in the West about the influence of authoritarian regimes in Africa.

As the global rivalry between the USA and China intensifies, the growing pressure to align more closely with one side could impact critical issues such as Kenya's influence in global forums. If Kenya is seen as overly aligned with one side, it may lose credibility with the other, affecting its global and regional leadership ambitions. Having a clear foreign policy gives a state more credibility and legitimacy as it interacts with various actors. However, autonomy could hinder Kenya's ability to gain strong support from either side in multilateral negotiations, potentially limiting its capacity to influence global issues like climate change, peacekeeping, and trade negotiations.

Kenya's foreign policy inconsistency risks weakening its continental standing, particularly if it is seen as indecisive or opportunistic. This perception could undermine Kenya's bid for the seat of the Chairperson of African Union (AU), where it faces strong competition from Djibouti. Moreover, with the USA facing declining popularity in Africa, driven by its value-based foreign policy often perceived as neo-colonial interference, the country's recent alignment with the USA, including its designation as a MNNA, could undermine its diplomatic reputation on the continent. Kenya might be





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perceived as a proxy, advancing USA interests in Africa. This could alienate African leaders aligned with Russia and China, particularly in West Africa, and pose significant challenges to Kenya's AU chairmanship bid.

Weakening of economic ties

Kenya's engagement with both Eastern and Western powers has produced mixed outcomes for its economic landscape. This approach has yielded significant benefits, including trade agreements with the EU and the USA, alongside substantial investments from China. Kenya's relationship with the USA and Europe remains robust, particularly in trade and investment. However, Kenya has struggled to maintain a balanced approach to ensure diversified economic growth and leverage while mitigating the risks associated with its foreign policy autonomy.

Through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), Kenya has gained access to USA markets, contributing to the growth of its textile and apparel industries. Kenya is also keen to enhance trade relations through the ongoing USA-Kenya Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP), aimed at expanding market access and addressing non-tariff barriers. In addition, Kenya's signing of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU in December 2023 promises to deepen

bilateral trade, attract investment, and promote sustainable economic ties.

Chinese funding has also been pivotal in developing major infrastructure projects such as the SGR, roads, ports, and energy facilities. These projects have improved Kenya's transportation networks, bolstered regional trade, and fostered economic growth. Additionally, Kenya's recent accession to the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) reflects its pursuit of diverse funding sources, aiming to balance its economic ties and challenge the dominance of Western financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank.

Kenya's balancing act between Eastern and Western powers has led to unintended consequences, including youth-led protests and economic unrests. Perceived USA interference in Kenya's domestic affairs, coupled with IMF-backed tax reforms deemed punitive by many Kenyans, has fueled widespread discontent. These issues were central to the protests that ultimately forced the withdrawal of the contentious 2024 Finance Bill. Additionally, mounting public concern over Kenya's growing debt burden, attributed to both IMF and Chinese loans, contributed to the bill's rejection. As a result, the withdrawal of the 2024 Finance Bill and its associated tax measures



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has further strained Kenya's fiscal position, resulting in downgraded credit ratings and higher borrowing costs. The 2024 study by the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) posits that East Africa tops the list of the continent's most indebted regions, with Kenya and Tanzania among the highest sovereign loan defaulters. This precarious economic situation underscores the challenges Kenya faces in managing its foreign relations while maintaining economic stability.

The strategic autonomy also carries the risk of alienating key traditional economic partners. Over-reliance on Chinese investment could lead to a reduction in Western aid and partnerships, while favouring the West might strain relations with China, impacting crucial infrastructure projects. For example, Kenya's deepening engagement with the USA has already led to a reduction in Chinese investments and loans.

Complicating security cooperation

Kenya's involvement in regional security, particularly in combating terrorism and violent extremism, has significantly shaped its foreign policy autonomy, potentially complicating its security relations with Western nations. As a key player in the fight against Al-Shabaab (AS), a terrorist group operating in Somalia, Kenya has heavily relied on security cooperation with Western powers, notably the USA and the UK. These



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nations have provided military aid, training, and intelligence support, strengthening Kenya's counter-terrorism capabilities. However, to reduce its dependence on Western influence and pursue alternative avenues for military modernisation, Kenya has sought defence and security partnerships with nations like China and Russia. This shift risks undermining its ability to fully leverage Western security aid and support. Moreover, the country's close alignment with the West could lead to increased pressure to prioritise Western security interests, which may challenge its efforts to maintain a balanced, multi-faceted foreign policy.



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Kenya's growing alignment with the USA carries potential risks, including heightened security threats. For instance, Kenya's recent designation as a MNNA could provoke retaliation from terrorist groups like AS and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which view the USA as an enemy. This association may increase Kenya's visibility as a target for extremist groups, complicating its security landscape and potentially undermining its efforts to maintain regional stability.

The strategic autonomy could affect its role in promoting regional peace and security, particularly within organizations like Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the AU, where it must balance Western and Eastern



interests. The deepening of alliances may impede the country's neutral stance in regional diplomacy, making her increasingly vulnerable to geopolitical tensions between global powers. This shifting alignment risks complicating Kenya's ability to effectively mediate conflicts and influence regional stability while managing competing international pressures.

Conclusion

While Kenya's strategic autonomy towards the West and the East has brought significant gains in economic development, infrastructure growth, and enhanced diplomatic leverage, it has also poised significant challenges, including debt dependency, diplomatic tensions, and economic unrests. The long-term implications could result in automatic dependency on either East or West, limiting her ability to independently pursue national interests. Additionally, as global tensions between the East and West intensify, Kenya's autonomy

could backfire, leading to alienation by both sides, if it is seen as unreliable or overly opportunistic. Moving forward, Kenya will need to carefully manage these dynamics to sustain its development and maintain its strategic autonomy. The future of Kenya's foreign policy will depend on its ability to adapt to evolving global power structures and navigate the complex geopolitics of the 21st century.



Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs should:
 - a) expedite the development of the 2024 Foreign Policy doctrine to establish a coherent and consistent framework that outlines Kenya's strategic priorities and principles of engagement with Eastern, Western, and emerging powers;
 - b) lobby regional organisations such as EAC, IGAD to develop common positions and have a collective approach on issues such as trade and security when dealing with external geopolitical actors;
 - c) regularly hold press conferences to inform and engage the public, stakeholders, and foreign entities about Kenya's foreign policy activities and developments - a more proactive communication strategy is essential to enhance transparency, foster public understanding, and strengthen diplomatic relations; and
 - d) continuously conduct comprehensive evaluations of Ministry's staff, particularly at senior management levels and in diplomatic missions abroad, to ensure they are well-equipped to represent Kenya's interests globally - the effectiveness of Kenya's foreign policy implementation is closely tied to the competence of these personnel.





2. The National Treasury and Economic Planning Ministry should diversify its funding sources by deepening its engagement with local and regional development banks to avoid over-reliance on aid from Eastern and Western economic powers.



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