

# The GLOCEPS

## Policy Brief

### Executive Summary

## Implications of the designation as a US Major Non-NATO Ally on Kenya's national interests: opportunities, risks and mitigations

#### The brief articulates that;

Kenya's designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) of the US portends both opportunities and risks to its national interests in areas of security, sovereignty, territorial integrity, global competitiveness, economic prosperity and sustainable development. The opportunities include a revamped security architecture for Kenya's land, air and maritime resources including equipment and technical assistance for police and defence forces; enhanced capacity to resolve and protect territorial interests and blue economy; boosted global image and trust; regional economic

leadership through strategic trade and African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA). The risks include enhanced threats of violent extremism, externally imported conflicts targeting US establishments, a decline in regional influence, increased arms race, interference in Kenya's internal affairs; negative perception of Kenya as vassal state of the US; reduced Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) from anti-US strategic development partners such as China and Russia; waning Pan-African stature of Kenya, and potential jeopardy to Kenya's candidature at the African Union commission seat.

#### It concludes that;

the MNAA status carries with it both blessings and expletives for Kenya. While it presents opportunities for Kenya to bolster its security and economy in a relatively volatile Eastern African region while leveraging US diplomacy, it may also

come with diplomatic liabilities that could jeopardize the gains already made in the pursuit and safeguarding of national security interests.

#### It recommends that;

Kenya should establish an intellectual working group to continuously monitor and recommend strategies to maximize on the opportunities accruing from the US MNNA designation while

mitigating the risks therein. This requires the best intellectual expert team to keep the US committed to promoting Kenya's national interests.



## Context

The designation of Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) of the US has implications on the national interests of the Eastern African state. The six decades-old Kenya-US relations got a significant elevation on 23 May 2024, when President Joe Biden expressed to the US Congress his intent to designate Kenya as a MNNA of the US as per the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. Once designated Kenya will be the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to join this alliance. The other three African states designated as MNNAs are all from North Africa. They include Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. The status significantly improved the capacity of Egypt and Morocco as key military and economic powerhouses for the region. Presently, only 18 countries globally are designated MNNAs. The other 15 are Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Colombia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Qatar, South Korea, and Thailand.

The US Code of Laws defines a "major Non-NATO Ally" as a country other than a member nation of NATO. Therefore, MNNA is a designation of the US and not directly that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Established in 1987 through Congress, the MNNA status is reserved for countries that have strategic partnerships with the US Armed Forces though not NATO members. Though MNNAs do not enjoy the same privileges, including mutual defense obligations accorded to NATO, the designation demonstrates high trust and symbolizes an elevated relationship with the US, which attracts security and economic privileges for the designated countries.

Notably, President Biden's message to Congress underscores the fact that the designation is "in recognition of (US) national interests in deepening bilateral defense and security cooperation with the Government of Kenya." Given that it is the US that decides who to designate as Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), such decisions may be associated with vested strategic interests. Other factors at play are the security interests of the US in the geostrategic Horn of Africa and the greater East African region. These include the US military base at Manda Bay which Washington has promised to expand and

develop. Kenya has also committed to support US and its allies in their operations against the Houthis in the Red Sea.

It is important that Kenya adjusts its defence and foreign policies to take advantage of what the US is offering without falling out with other emerging powers such as BRICS. Therefore, there is a need to assess the impact of this MNNA designation on Kenya's national interests so as to advance strategies to maximize the benefits of the status. In this regard, the brief evaluates the extent to which the pursuit of US strategic interests promotes Kenya's national interests and examines the opportunities, risks and mitigations arising therein.

## Key implications

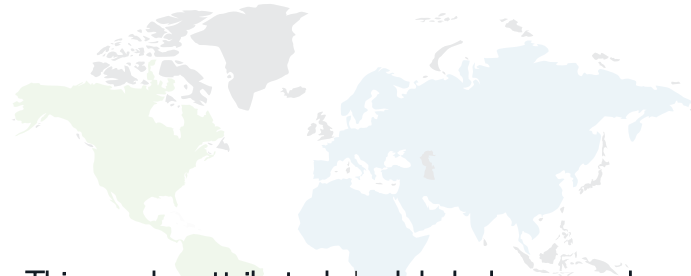
The implications of the designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) are discussed in the context of Kenya's core national interests of security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, global competitiveness and influence, and economic prosperity and sustainable development.

## Security

Kenya's security capabilities will be heightened, given the United States (US) military prowess. Key areas include strengthening efforts on counterterrorism along the coastal and north-eastern regions. Key among them is the expansion of the capacity of Manda Bay Airbase. Also, there are opportunities for the US to bolster Kenya's research and development on counterterrorism and space technology, enhance joint training thus diversifying Kenya's defence skills beyond the traditional British military doctrines and enhancing Kenya's stockpile of modern security equipment.

Kenya is likely to get more support on intelligence sharing, and funding in its war against violent extremism. Already, the US has committed \$4.9 Million in new funding to Kenya and other East African countries to improve coordination in fighting criminal networks. A further \$ 7 million for the modernization and professionalization of the NPS is also included in the package, plus \$2.2 million for the correctional services improvement. The money will be used to strengthen the Kenya





police and justice sectors. This can be attributed to the country's commitment to deploy in Haiti and hence the need for a better-prepared police contingent. Further, Kenya will be able to stock U.S. military hardware and engage in joint military training and defence research with U.S. forces. Particularly, the cooperative defense research and development projects with the United States will revive the dormant Research and Development (R&D) department in Kenya's defence forces. This will promote innovation and technological advancements and also improve Kenya's military readiness and ability to respond to regional threats.

Kenya will, for the first time, be allowed to procure depleted uranium ammunition from the US. Kenya will also be eligible for enhanced military assistance, especially in the form of loans of material supplies or equipment. This may stimulate establishment of local military manufacturing firms, hence, reducing dependence on foreign supplies. Kenya will also be considered as a priority recipient of excess US defense articles and services. The 1996 US enactment accords MNNA several of the same exemptions from the Arms Export Control Act that are enjoyed by NATO members. For instance, a MNNA is exempt from strict export license requirements for weaponry or other implements of war.

However, the recognition portends significant risks on the domestic and global fronts. The MNNA articles allow US to establish storage facilities for US-owned "war reserve stockpiles" on Kenyan territory. Even though the presence of US storage facilities might deter terrorist groups like Al Shabaab from launching attacks on Kenyan soil. This could expose Kenya to retaliatory attacks from America's adversaries in the region, for instance the Houthis in Yemen and other terrorist groups.

The designation as a MNNA of the US could draw Kenya into the ongoing new Cold War hence attracting an arms race and proxy tensions in the Eastern Africa region. Kenya will be in collision with

global players such as China, Russia, and some Middle East powers. Russia, in particular, has made significant inroads in the Sahel (especially Francophone countries), Central Africa and now war-torn Sudan. In the event of a serious escalation of conflict which could lead to proxy wars, Kenya as a MNNA will be a target. Likewise, due to the presence of Al Qaeda and ISIS in the region, the closer alliance with US forces will most likely attract retaliatory attacks, especially in Lamu county, which houses the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) at Manda bay and has been a key target of the Al Shabaab terror group.

## Sovereignty and territorial integrity

Another key national interest of Kenya is the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Given the case of unresolved maritime disputes with neighboring Somalia, the designation will enable the country to enhance capacity to resolve and protect its territorial interests. It is an opportunity for Kenya to intensify efforts to exploit the huge potential of the blue economy by enhancing maritime security. The country could confront reviving of unresolved maritime disputes with increased presence of US naval operations on Kenya's maritime.

A key risk in this space is the growing perception that Kenya is a vassal state of the US, invariably dubbed as the "voice of America in Africa". This has a net effect of isolating the country and weakening its stature as an independent sovereign state. Further, the MNNA status raises concerns on whether the US will not interfere in the country's domestic politics thereby having undue influence on Kenya's governance policies and decision-making processes. The status could give the US unfettered leeway to increase its military presence in Kenya thereby threatening Kenya's sovereignty. Furthermore, the lack of capacity to negotiate on equal terms for a win-win partnership, coupled with weak legal and institutional frameworks could lead to ceding Kenya's strategic sovereignty interests and adoption of policies skewed to serve the interests of Washington.





## Global competitiveness and influence

The new status has enhanced Kenya's image globally. The geopolitical profit of this designation is that Kenya will be joining the alliance system of the US which attracts opportunities and will therefore be seen in the Western world and by states in the US alliance system as a trusted and dependable partner. This has a ripple effect on geo-economic interests. The country will attract preferential treatment on matters of Trade, Investments, and indeed debt relief. The invitation of Kenya to the G7 summit and the Ukraine Peace Summit points to the rising diplomatic stature of the country. The MNNA status could boost Kenya's regional leadership especially in international peace operations and humanitarian response.

The MNNA status avails an opportunity for Kenya to pursue one of the two seats to the UNSC as proposed by African states in the 2005 Ezulwini Consensus backed by the Sirte Declaration, which underscores the need for at least two permanent seats and five non-permanent Security Council seats for African states. The country has the opportunity to use its new global status to champion African affairs and position itself as a formidable representative of Africa in the reformed UNSC. Lobbying the US to declare its support for Kenya in the forthcoming UN General Assembly will require little effort.

However, the designation could diminish the country's diplomatic stature in the global South, including Africa. Kenya could gradually find itself isolated in the region and its Pan-African objectives disputed. This could further jeopardize its candidature for the African Union Commission seat in 2025. Acquiring the MNNA status in this period of intense renewed competition between China, Russia and the US in Africa may bring into doubt Kenya's long standing non-alignment policy on international affairs. Kenya should continue to diversify its relations by strengthening relations with other powers such as Russia and China, even if not militarily. The country's desire to enhance its

global and regional investments and trade through diversification of its foreign relations could be constrained by the MNNA designation.

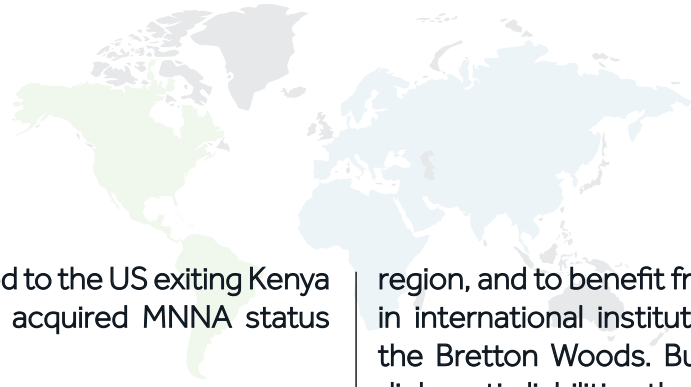
## Economic prosperity and sustainable development

The strengthened Kenya-US relations presents opportunities for mutual development in investments both public and private, and increased infrastructural development in Kenya. The status is a stamp of trust and credibility for Kenya which could increase investment confidence thus diversifying the country's foreign investment opportunities. Economic dividends may also come in the form of additional concessionary bilateral economic agreements and the reauthorization of African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA). The US may also use its immense leverage in the IMF and World Bank to have them extend cheaper loans and grants to Kenya.

The status accords Kenya the opportunity to strategically securitize economic development as a way of centering the country's trade and economic needs in the lens of US strategic needs. The Presence of US military houses and personnel in Kenya may also have an indirect positive impact on the economy of the areas where they will be located. Locals will get jobs at the US facilities as local businesses get new markets for their goods. Moreover, the tourism sector will be positively impacted with more visitors from the US. Thus, in as much as the US would seek to prioritize its security interests in the new partnership with Kenya, the latter should focus on trade rather than military cooperation.

But on the contrary, the MNNA status could strain commercial relations with US competitors at regional and global level. Kenya could face downscaling of investments by competitors and rival powers of the US. This is risky in the sense that US rivals such as China have been more practical and quick in implementing agreed projects with tangible returns as opposed to promised US investments which take inordinately longer periods to be realized. The possibility of existing





investors who are opposed to the US exiting Kenya as a result of the newly acquired MNNA status should not be ruled out.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, even though the US has been a long-time strategic partner of Kenya since independence in 1964, the designation of MNNA status carries with it both blessings and curses. It presents opportunities for Kenya to bolster its security in a relatively volatile Eastern African

region, and to benefit from US diplomatic leverage in international institutions such as the UN and the Bretton Woods. But it could also come with diplomatic liabilities that may jeopardize the gains already made in the pursuit and safeguarding of national security interests. However, with astute statecraft and well thought out diplomatic tact, the liabilities can be mitigated and turned into opportunities. The pursuit of Kenya's national interests should remain the guiding principle of the bolstered friendship for mutual benefit.

---

## Recommendations

### The government of Kenya should:

- a) Establish an intellectual committee of experts to engage the US and keep it committed to the agreements while identifying the opportunities and monitoring the risks of the MNNA designation for mitigations.
- b) Leverage its membership of AU's Committee of 10 states (AU C-10) on the UN Security Council reforms to propel itself or seek US support to be a representative of Africa on the UNSC.
- c) Securitize economic development to leverage US inclination towards financing aspects that have a security dimension.
- d) Improve its public communication to the citizens on the meaning and significance of being a US MNNA.
- e) Engage the Sub-Sahara Africa region and share the benefits of being represented among non-NATO allies through bilateral and multilateral cooperation.
- f) Pursue the safeguarding of maritime interests, including bolstering Kenya's naval power for purpose of Kenya's territorial integrity.
- g) Focus on international and regional obligations and avoid neglecting or violating them due to US influence.
- h) Leverage lessons learnt from other MNNA's of the US to pursue and safeguard national interests
- i) Adopt a balancing act and strategic ambiguity to enable it benefit from the competing global poles given its rising global image.
- j) Prioritize trade rather than military support and loans.
- k) Utilize the opportunity to advance Africa's agenda for reform of the UNSC and international financial institutions.
- l) Ensure that its decisions and voting obligations at the UN are not affected by its status as a US MNNA.
- m) Use the designation as an opportunity to promote African interests in terms of value chain of raw materials.

