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Positioning Kenya as Eastern Africa's Strategic Partner to Donald Trump's Presidency

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Executive Summary

This brief examines strategies that Kenya can adopt to strengthen Kenya-United States of America (USA) relations following the election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the USA. Under President Biden, Kenya enjoyed robust ties with the USA, marked by milestones such as President Ruto's state visit to USA, support for Kenya's leadership in the Multinational Security Support Mission (MSS) to Haiti, and Kenya's designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). However, President Trump's return to office introduces uncertainties, given his transactional policies, pragmatic approach to Africa, and "America First" agenda, which prioritizes USA interests. Since his

inauguration on January 20, 2025, President Trump has signed several executive orders that signal a major shift in USA policy. These include the declaration of a national border emergency to address illegal immigration, withdrawal of the US from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Agreement, and establishing the External Revenue Service to tax foreign countries. He has also emphasized that partnerships with the USA will be value-based, necessitating Kenya to re-strategize to safeguard and advance its strategic partnerships with his administration. This brief therefore recommends that Kenya should prioritize investments in infrastructure that align



with USA's interests in the region, leverage Kenya's strategic location in Eastern Africa to negotiate enhanced security cooperation and foster a more conducive business environment for USA investors. Furthermore, Kenya should highlight the MSS impact on reducing migration to strengthen USA's support for the initiative and in collaboration with other African nations, lobby for the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), framing it as a viable solution to the USA migrant crisis.



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Context

The 2nd inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th president of the United States carries significant policy implications for Kenya-USA relations. Both states have enjoyed strong diplomatic ties since Kenya's independence in 1963. Kenya's geopolitical and geocommercial positioning and its fast growing economy has for years placed it as a strategic USA partner in the Eastern Africa region. The USA has invested heavily across various sectors including health, where it is the country's biggest donor. In the security sector, the USA has collaborated with Kenya to safeguard its interests in Eastern Africa region, particularly against terrorism threats such as Al-Shabaab and regional conflicts. Additionally, significant USA investments have been made in technology, infrastructure, climate, and energy. Under President Biden, these partnerships deepened, evidenced by President Ruto's three-day state visit to Washington.

The return of the Trump administration has ushered in significant policy shifts, marked by a transactional approach to international relations and a strong emphasis on advancing USA interests. Key decisions, such as withdrawal from the WHO and the Paris Agreement, highlight this trajectory. Such policies as budgetary cuts to development aid and increased tariffs on imports echo the patterns observed during Trump's previous tenure (2017–2020), contributing to a weakening of Africa-USA relations. A notable development impacting Kenya-USA ties is the administration's 90-day pause in foreign development aid, pending a review of its efficiency and alignment with USA priorities. This is especially pertinent given that Kenya had recently signed aid-dependent agreements worth an estimated KES 10 billion with outgoing President Joe Biden. These agreements focusing on education, health, security, climate, and trade had been secured during President William Ruto's state visit to the USA. Additionally, in 2024, the USA had disbursed to Kenya an estimated KES 84 billion in foreign assistance. With Republicans now holding majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives, Trump administration's stringent policies are poised to gain traction.

Against this backdrop, Kenya-USA strategic collaborations require recalibration. To secure stronger ties, Kenya should proactively engage the Trump administration to sustain and strengthen this critical relationship, emphasizing its strategic value. Additionally, it is imperative for Kenya to position itself as USA's foremost strategic partner in Eastern Africa, particularly in security and trade while balancing its other international relationships. While demonstrating its pivotal role in advancing USA's interests, Kenya should also underscore its unique geographic and strategic importance, making a compelling case that enhanced USA's partnerships





with the country are essential to safeguarding America's interests in the region.

Key Issues

The following key issues remain pertinent in positioning Kenya as Eastern Africa's strategic partner to Donald Trump's presidency.



Strategic Trade and Investment

The adoption of a strategic approach by Kenya to position itself as a valuable trade and investment partner to the USA is pivotal in aligning with Trump's transactional policy framework. Trump's presidency is poised to significantly impact Kenya-USA trade partnerships, given his prioritization of USA's interests over global concerns. His administration has reinstated protectionist trade policies, championed during his first term, aimed at expanding American market access by reducing imports and increasing exports. These policies directly affect trade agreements such as AGOA and the Kenya-USA Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP), introduced by the Biden administration to replace the Free Trade Agreement that Kenya had been negotiating during Trump's first tenure. AGOA, which provides duty-free access for African goods including textiles, apparel, motor vehicle parts, and agricultural products has been particularly beneficial for Kenya. For instance, apparel exports account for 67.6% of Kenya's export

revenue to the USA, reaching \$603 million in 2022, a remarkable growth from \$55 million in 2001. However, with AGOA set to expire in 2025, there is uncertainty about its renewal under Trump's administration. To secure its extension, Kenya, in collaboration with other African nations, should lobby the USA by framing AGOA as a strategic solution to America's migration challenges. By facilitating job creation and socio-economic development across African countries, particularly for youth, AGOA eliminates some of the drivers of migration to the USA in search of economic opportunities. This approach positions AGOA not only as an economic partnership but also as a tool for addressing shared challenges.

Trump's administration is also expected to escalate trade wars with countries such as China, which could impact African nations such as Kenya that maintain trade relations with both countries. A key area of USA-China competition is semiconductor technology. Both countries have heavily invested in Artificial Intelligence enabled systems that rely on advanced microchips. The USA has tightened export controls on semiconductor technology to limit China's access to advanced chips with potential military applications, escalating tensions. In response, China imposed a ban on the export of critical minerals to the USA, including gallium, germanium, and antimony. These minerals are



vital for various military applications, particularly in the production of semiconductors. Simultaneously, China has ramped up its efforts to secure raw materials especially from Africa, positioning this sector as a crucial battleground in the ongoing geocommercial rivalry. To navigate this dynamic, Kenya should strategically position itself to benefit from this competition while avoiding actions that antagonize either party. One approach is for Kenya to develop infrastructure aligned with USA interests, particularly in supporting access to key regional resources such as green minerals essential for semiconductor and AI technology production, as well as access to Eastern Africa's markets. Kenya's growing economy provides an opportunity to establish manufacturing industries focused on processing these minerals, thereby streamlining export processes and enhancing value addition. Such initiatives would foster a mutually beneficial economic partnership between Kenya and the USA, aligning their interests in global trade. Simultaneously, it is essential for Kenya to maintain a balanced approach, preserving its ties with China to ensure diversified economic partnerships and long-term stability.

Security Cooperation

Positioning Kenya as a key security partner in safeguarding USA's interests in the region is crucial in strengthening ties with the Trump administration. Trump's pragmatic policy approach will impact ongoing Kenya-USA security initiatives, as the two countries share a strategic partnership due to Kenya's geostrategic location in Eastern Africa, facing threats from conflict and terrorism. This partnership has grown under Presidents Ruto and Biden, with Kenya being designated as a MNNA following Ruto's state visit to the USA. However, Trump's focus on prioritizing domestic interests could challenge this relationship, and it remains uncertain whether Kenya will retain its



MNNA status. Despite this, it is in the USA's best interests to keep Kenya as a preferred security partner, as regional threats such as terrorism and conflict continue to jeopardize USA's interests. By emphasizing Kenya's strategic role in countering these threats, Kenya can secure continued partnerships with the USA.

Kenya should also emphasize that the MSS in Haiti is crucial in addressing the USA migrant situation, particularly concerning Haitian migration. MSS was authorized by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2699 (2023) to restore stability in Haiti and create conducive conditions for elections by curtailing gang violence which have continued to rock the nation. The USA pledged \$300 million in support, with 1,000 Kenyan police officers expected to deploy. However, only 61.7% of officers have been deployed, and financial challenges persist, with the USA contributing only \$100 million, partly due to Republican opposition. Given Trump's historical skepticism toward foreign interventions, there is a concern that USA political and logistical support for the mission may decrease. During his campaign, President Trump expressed concerns about the influx of Haitian migrants to the USA. To this end, Kenya can align the MSS mission with Trump's interests by showcasing that a peaceful





Haiti will reduce migration pressure. By supporting the mission, the USA can help create a stable environment in Haiti, offering economic opportunities that diminish the need for migration. This will serve both Haiti's and USA interests, particularly in reducing the flow of Haitian refugees.



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Conclusion

The re-entry of President Donald Trump into global politics demands Kenya to recalibrate its relations with the USA and align its interests with Trump's key policy agendas. While the robust ties Kenya enjoyed under President Biden set a strong foundation, the shift to a more transactional and bellicose approach under Trump necessitates a strategic re-orientation. Hence, placing focus on areas where Kenya can safeguard USA interests, particularly in security and trade, and positioning itself as a key partner in regional stability and economic growth is crucial to securing valuable partnerships with the USA. This will require balancing Kenya's relationships with other global powers, such as China, and demonstrating its role as a critical ally in Eastern Africa region.

Recommendations

1. The Kenyan government should;
 - a) pursue a diplomatic charm offensive and engage senior and middle level officials in the Trump presidential team;
 - b) direct its infrastructure investment focus to align with USA interests in the region such as access to critical regional resources, such as green minerals, while maintaining a balance in its relations with China;
 - c) leverage its strategic positioning in Eastern Africa to negotiate for enhanced security cooperation by highlighting its capacity to safeguard USA interests in the region;
 - d) enhance engagement with MSS mission in Haiti while projecting a posture of a reliable partner in the protection of USA interests in the Caribbean;
 - e) enhance the business environment for USA investors by eliminating non-tariff barriers;
 - f) diversify security partnerships with other global powers to prevent over-reliance on USA support; and
 - g) collaborate with the African Union to lobby for the renewal of AGOA by positioning it as a solution to USA migrant issues.

