
Review Article

Between the Dragon and the Eagle: Strategic Autonomy, Sovereignty and Kenya's Diplomacy in an Era of Great-Power Competition

Emmanuel Onyinkwa Mokoro

Borangi Consultants, Kenya

ORCID:  EOM 0009-0001-4580-960X

Correspondence should be addressed to: emmanmokoro@gmail.com

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Abstract: Kenya occupies a distinctive position in contemporary global affairs, acting simultaneously as a crucial security partner for the United States, an important economic destination for Chinese capital, and a prominent defender of African agency within international institutions. This article examines how Nairobi can leverage great-power competition to its advantage without allowing external alliances to compromise domestic policy space. Drawing upon theories of strategic autonomy, African agency, neoclassical realism, and complex interdependence, we conceptualize Kenya's current diplomatic posture as an exercise in pragmatic multi-alignment rather than rigid bloc adherence. Using a qualitative documentary analysis of official policy frameworks, scholarly assessments, and authoritative reports, the study tracks Kenya's evolving relationships with both Washington and Beijing across key sectors including defence, infrastructure, technology, sovereign debt, and regional governance. The analysis indicates that Kenya's primary diplomatic objective should not center on choosing a single patron, but rather on building the internal institutional mechanisms necessary to evaluate and choose partnerships on an issue-by-issue basis. Ultimately, we propose a sovereignty-driven operational model anchored in partnership diversification, strict contract transparency, proactive parliamentary oversight, and technological independence.

Keywords: Kenya, Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, China, United States, Sovereignty.

1. Introduction

The contemporary international system is experiencing a profound shift in the global distribution of economic, technological, and strategic capabilities. The post-Cold

War assumption of an enduring Western-centric global order has run into the realities of China's sustained economic expansion, intensifying great-power friction, and an increasingly assertive push by African states demanding structural parity in international decision-making forums. This shifting environment presents a delicate balance of risks and strategic opportunities for developing countries. While major global powers aggressively compete for raw markets, infrastructure concessions, defense agreements, and technological standards, African executives face the complex task of channeling external investments into domestic developmental milestones while fiercely protecting their core policy independence.

Kenya offers a highly illustrative case study of these dynamics. Given its strategic geography, diversified economic landscape, regional diplomatic clout, expansive port and transport infrastructure, vibrant digital ecosystem, and historical security presence in the Horn of Africa, Nairobi carries a geopolitical footprint that far exceeds its material size. From a historical perspective, Kenya has maintained a deep developmental and security relationship with the United States since the independence era. Concurrently, it has dramatically expanded its economic linkages with China over the past twenty years. Beijing's presence has left a visible mark on the country's landscape through large-scale infrastructure loans, expanding trade routes, and a growing role in digital infrastructure. Critical literature on Chinese funding mechanisms demonstrates that these ties are rarely zero-sum matches of pure altruism or predatory capture; instead, they represent a highly fluid, frequently opaque form of economic statecraft whose ultimate outcomes depend significantly on the specific legal and fiscal terms that recipient states manage to secure at the negotiating table. Similarly, investigations into the digital landscape show that Chinese telecommunications giants, particularly Huawei, now occupy a foundational place in East Africa's network architecture. This reality continues to fuel intense debates regarding data sovereignty versus digital dependency, even when high-level bilateral communiqués remain politely abstract.

Conversely, the partnership with Washington has evolved far beyond conventional development aid. Kenya has solidified its position as a pillar of the United States' counterterrorism and security architecture within sub-Saharan Africa. This mutual alignment culminated in a major symbolic milestone when Washington formally designated Kenya a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), making it the first nation in sub-Saharan Africa to receive this status. President Joe Biden initially declared this strategic intent during President William Ruto's state visit to Washington, describing Nairobi as a foundational partner in global security operations. The technical designation was formalized shortly thereafter via a presidential determination. However, foreign policy analysts were immediately split on what this title would yield beyond diplomatic prestige and minor defense-trade privileges. Many questioned whether the high-profile alignment truly advanced Kenya's broader national interests or simply served Washington's immediate signaling priorities. These structural tensions became clear when the United States Senate introduced a legislative amendment requiring a comprehensive review of Kenya's MNNA status. Congressional inquiries explicitly focused on Nairobi's ongoing diplomatic and

economic ties with Beijing and Moscow, its engagement with regional non-state actors, and local human rights concerns surrounding the deployment of American-supported security assets. This sudden shift highlights a core reality of contemporary diplomacy: a strategic designation framed as an unconditional reward can rapidly transform into an instrument of legislative leverage when a recipient state's foreign policy deviates from its patron's expectations.

Meanwhile, Kenya's economic diplomacy with China has continued along a parallel trajectory. President Ruto's diplomatic mission to Beijing resulted in multi-million Euro commercial agreements across manufacturing, agricultural value chains, and tourism infrastructure. Notably, this engagement occurred directly on the heels of new Western trade restrictions, including fresh tariff walls erected against Kenyan exports. While Kenyan state officials framed the Beijing summit as a logical component of a calculated diversification strategy rather than a sudden shift away from Western partnerships, the precise timing underscored Nairobi's willingness to leverage alternative partnerships. Chinese state organs openly emphasized the visit as a sign of Global South solidarity at a moment when Kenya's commercial relationships with traditional Western partners faced structural headwinds.

The central premise of this study is that Kenya must not be reduced to a blank canvas or a passive battleground where Washington and Beijing wage a zero-sum influence war. Such a perspective reproduces an outdated, great-power-centric worldview that contemporary African international relations scholarship has systematically dismantled. Kenya possesses authentic diplomatic agency. Its political executives, state bureaucracies, domestic firms, and civic institutions actively make choices that dictate the terms and ultimate impact of external investments, even when interacting with asymmetric structural power. Therefore, the critical analytical inquiry must shift away from predicting which global power Nairobi will permanently align with, and focus instead on whether Kenyan institutions possess the technical and regulatory capacity to turn great-power rivalry into long-term national bargaining leverage.

To evaluate this dynamic, this article addresses four interrelated inquiries. First, how has intensifying great-power competition reshaped Kenya's domestic policy space? Second, what specific developmental opportunities and sovereignty vulnerabilities emerge from Kenya's dual engagement with China and the United States? Third, does Kenya's contemporary diplomatic posture represent genuine strategic autonomy and pragmatic multi-alignment, or is it a form of tactical bandwagoning? Fourth, what concrete institutional reforms can empower Kenya to capture the maximum benefit of global partnerships while safeguarding its core national interests? The study addresses these questions by reviewing the literature on China-Kenya and US-Kenya relations alongside the evolution of African agency concepts (Section 3). It then articulates an integrated theoretical framework combining strategic autonomy, African agency, neoclassical realism, and complex interdependence (Section 4). After outlining the qualitative documentary methodology (Section 5), the article evaluates Kenya's structural positioning in current global rivalries (Section 6), investigates five core operational dimensions of sovereignty

(Section 7), presents targeted institutional policy recommendations (Section 8), and offers concluding observations (Section 9).

2. Problem Statement

Kenya's geographical position and regional influence have placed it squarely within the intersecting orbits of competing global powers. While China's footprint is deeply embedded within transportation networks, energy projects, information technology, and direct bilateral loans, the United States has deepened its historic footprint via defense cooperation, institutional governance programs, trade initiatives, public health funding, and digital security standards. This dual dependency creates a major policy challenge: while these external partnerships provide critical resources for Kenya's national development blueprints, they simultaneously introduce structural dependencies that threaten to restrict the state's future policy options. This is an active operational risk. Kenya's long-standing public debate regarding Chinese-financed infrastructure projects, most notably the Standard Gauge Railway, demonstrates persistent domestic anxieties over debt sustainability, contractual secrecy, and unequal negotiating power. Importantly, rigorous independent research on Chinese global lending patterns shows little evidence of a pre-planned strategy of sovereign asset seizure. Consequently, the core institutional challenge for Kenya is less about avoiding predatory behavior from abroad and more about whether domestic negotiators possess the technical and legal capacity to secure favorable, equitable terms during the initial contracting phase.

The underlying policy dilemma is not the reality of international engagement itself, but rather the risk that highly asymmetric economic, technological, and military arrangements will gradually erode Kenya's domestic policy autonomy. Within this analysis, sovereignty is defined not merely as a formal legal shield against territorial intrusion, but as the practical, operational capacity of a state to independently design, negotiate, enforce, and revise its national policies free from coercive external pressure. This distinction is vital because contemporary global influence rarely relies on direct political dictate; instead, it operates through the subtler structures of credit markets, international finance, proprietary technical standards, infrastructure lock-in, and defense dependencies.

At the same time, a purely defensive or isolationist approach to sovereignty would severely stall Kenya's domestic modernization. The country requires external capital markets, advanced technology transfers, open export destinations, specialized security collaboration, and reliable diplomatic coalitions that it cannot generate entirely on its own at the required speed. The primary policy challenge is therefore finding a way to balance international openness with national autonomy. This study conceptualizes this balance as strategic autonomy: the institutionalized capacity to actively diversify international options, preserve long-term domestic decision-making flexibility, and maintain strict domestic accountability over all external commitments, regardless of their geopolitical origin.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Kenya, China and the political economy of infrastructure

Contemporary research on China-Africa relations has moved past early descriptions that viewed Beijing's presence as either purely benevolent development assistance or nakedly neo-colonial extraction. Foundational scholarship by Deborah Brautigam indicates that Chinese development loans, corporate investments, and commercial packages are largely extensions of China's own internal modernization trajectory and a complex mix of state-backed commercial financing, rather than a monolithic geopolitical conspiracy designed to trap developing states in debt. Empirical reviews of loan instruments have failed to find a systemic pattern of intentional asset seizure following defaults. This does not imply that Chinese capital is inherently benign; rather, it indicates that the true structural risks stem from contractual non-disclosure clauses, project-level commercial viability, and stark imbalances in legal negotiating capacity during the drafting process.

Monographs focusing specifically on the Kenyan experience reinforce this nuanced view. Studies on local interactions with Chinese state entities show that Kenyan civil society, local labor forces, and public intellectuals actively exercise agency. Rather than passively absorbing top-down agreements, domestic groups frequently contest project terms, question local elite alignment, and demand structural adaptations. This serves as an important correction to macro-level analyses that treat external influence as an unstoppable force, overlooking how domestic actors actively reshape, resist, and negotiate these relationships on the ground.

The technological arena has emerged as an especially critical domain within this literature. Document-based reviews of Kenya's information and communications technology policies suggest that while Chinese infrastructure providers, most notably Huawei, have built a dominant position in local digital networks, they operate within a regulatory environment where high-level policy frameworks remain vaguely defined. This leaves substantial room for political maneuvering, creating long-term vulnerabilities regarding data control and infrastructure lock-in, even as state planners frame these tech investments as a direct path toward national digital transformation. Broader assessments of local digital politics tie these infrastructure realities directly to domestic debates over state surveillance, civil liberties, and the political economy of internet access, illustrating that technology dependencies are shaped as much by domestic regulatory enforcement as by the nationality of the underlying hardware vendor.

From an analytical perspective, major infrastructure projects are highly consequential because transport corridors, digital networks, and deep-water ports carry immense economic and geopolitical value simultaneously. Landmark projects like Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway demonstrate how external financing can alter domestic development priorities while locking in fiscal obligations that last across multiple administrations. The literature suggests that the sovereignty risks of these massive projects depend entirely on contract clarity, debt sustainability models, local content enforcement, technology transfer mandates, and the state's capacity to renegotiate terms when

macroeconomic conditions shift. This undercuts the assumption that external capital automatically results in a loss of national sovereignty; Kenyan state actors are active bargainers rather than passive targets. The vital question is whether Kenya's state organs possess the institutional and technical expertise to turn external financing into productive national assets rather than long-term fiscal liabilities.

3.2 Kenya and the United States: security, governance and strategic partnership

The bilateral relationship between Nairobi and Washington has historically rested on a combination of defense cooperation, institutional development aid, and shared diplomatic objectives, built over more than sixty years of formal ties. The security dimension has expanded significantly due to Kenya's position bordering volatile zones in the Horn of Africa and its ongoing fight against regional militant groups like al-Shabaab. This military alignment was highlighted by the historic 2024 state visit and Kenya's subsequent designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally. US officials explicitly justified this elevation by pointing to Nairobi's role as a cornerstone of counterterrorism operations in East Africa and its willingness to project security power globally, including leading the Multinational Security Support mission in Haiti.

While the MNNA title opened new pathways for specialized military procurement and defense research collaboration, domestic and international commentary remained deeply cautious about whether these symbolic accolades would translate into tangible strategic advantages for Kenya. Analysts noted that the designation served Washington's immediate geopolitical signaling needs, particularly countering Russian and Chinese influence across the Sahel and Horn of Africa, as much as it aided Kenyan defense capabilities. Subsequent events have validated this caution. Heavy reliance on an external security patron can constrain diplomatic flexibility when that patron expects broader geopolitical alignment. The legislative review of Kenya's MNNA status initiated by the US Senate, driven by concerns over Nairobi's pragmatic diplomatic engagements with China and Russia, alongside domestic policing controversies, demonstrates this tension. The designation is best understood as a flexible instrument of major-power diplomacy that can be conditioned or modified based on changing political dynamics, rather than an unshakeable guarantee of international status.

Furthermore, research indicates that Kenya's engagement with the United States extends far beyond counterterrorism. Trade initiatives like the African Growth and Opportunity Act, health sector funding, institutional governance programs, and digital safety frameworks represent vital components of the bilateral relationship. The core challenge for Kenyan foreign policy is to prevent the high-profile, easily politicized defense relationship from completely dominating the bilateral agenda at the expense of economic, technological, and commercial tracks that offer more durable developmental returns.

3.3 From alignment to multi-alignment and African agency

Recent international relations scholarship increasingly rejects frameworks that treat African states as passive objects of global competition. Studies on African agency

emphasize three analytical requirements: a clear classification of the different forms that state agency takes; an explicit recognition of how sovereign authority differentiates state actors from external entities; and a historically grounded approach that locates contemporary diplomacy within long-standing patterns of external engagement. Research across trade, aid, and multilateral forums shows that African state executives and corporate leaders routinely find room to maneuver even within highly unequal structural partnerships. The degree of leverage available varies based on the specific sector and the domestic institutional capacity of the state. Applied to Kenya, this perspective shifts the analytical focus away from structural models that overstate the power of Washington and Beijing, directing attention instead toward how local policymakers, commercial interests, and civic organizations actively shape external partnerships.

Concurrently, scholarship on middle-power strategies has highlighted the concept of multi-alignment. This foreign policy approach involves a state actively cultivating deep partnerships with several competing major powers simultaneously, refusing to join exclusive geopolitical blocs in order to preserve maximal policy freedom and address national interests on an issue-by-issue basis. Originally used to analyze India's contemporary diplomacy, where New East-West balancing and normative hedging are prominent, this framework describes states that maintain deep ties with Washington while preserving vital economic or strategic relationships with traditional rivals. Similar multi-vector strategies are visible across Central Asia and parts of Europe, where developing states use parallel ties to extract better terms from all partners. Kenya's parallel pursuit of an elevated security status with Washington and expanded commercial and infrastructure deals with Beijing, undertaken within the same calendar years, fits this global pattern. It reflects an established middle-power strategy rather than a random diplomatic improvisation.

The concept of strategic autonomy goes beyond simple partnership diversification. It investigates whether these varied relationships are guided by coherent domestic priorities and institutional oversight, or if diversification exists only in official rhetoric. A state can maintain formal ties with dozens of nations but remain structurally dependent if its core sectors, such as digital networks, sovereign debt holdings, or military procurement, are dominated by a single external actor. True strategic autonomy must be evaluated by the actual choice available to state executives at the moment of contracting, rather than by diplomatic statements or symbolic summits.

3.4 Sovereignty, dependency and the wider international-political-economy literature

Kenya's contemporary policy dilemma mirrors broader debates within international political economy regarding the shifting nature of authority in a globalized economy. Classic structural analyses, such as Susan Strange's work on the diffusion of state authority, suggest that the sovereignty vulnerabilities facing developing nations are not unique to their interactions with Washington or Beijing. Instead, they reflect a global system where structural power over finance, knowledge, technology, and security has shifted toward transnational actors, including multinational corporations, international credit rating

agencies, and proprietary tech vendors, that traditional diplomacy struggles to regulate. This implies that strengthening formal state-to-state diplomatic capacity is insufficient on its own. Kenya must simultaneously build specialized commercial and regulatory institutions capable of directly managing the corporate and financial entities that execute infrastructure, digital, and defense contracts on the ground.

3.5 Theoretical gap

Three core limitations persist in the current literature when applied to the Kenyan context. First, global rivalries are frequently framed as a rigid, binary choice between the United States and China, which minimizes Kenya's domestic agency and ignores the role of other major partners, including the European Union, Gulf states, India, and multilateral financial institutions. Second, sovereignty is often treated as an abstract normative value to be preserved, without identifying the precise domestic institutional mechanisms required to maintain autonomy, a gap that neoclassical realism is well-suited to bridge by examining how internal political structures filter external pressures. Third, existing studies often isolate economic diplomacy from defense cooperation, failing to see how these domains intersect and restrict each other. This article addresses these analytical gaps by combining strategic autonomy and African agency frameworks with the micro-level focus of neoclassical realism and complex interdependence, providing a clearer look at how domestic institutions manage multi-channel global relationships.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the theories of strategic autonomy and African agency, integrated with neoclassical realism and complex interdependence. Strategic autonomy is defined as a state's structural capacity to make independent policy choices, diversify external dependencies, and resist coercive external alignment while remaining fully engaged in international institutions. The African agency framework shifts the primary focus away from external actors, treating African state executives, local corporations, and domestic civil society networks as active decision-makers who dictate the final terms of international engagement. Neoclassical realism explains how systemic international pressures, such as shifts in the global distribution of power, are filtered through domestic institutions, internal political configurations, and elite perceptions before being translated into actual state behavior. This perspective argues that identical systemic constraints can produce highly divergent foreign policy responses depending on the organizational strength of domestic institutions. Finally, complex interdependence theory highlights the multiple channels of connection, interstate, transgovernmental, and corporate, that link contemporary societies, noting the lack of a clear hierarchy among international issues and the limits of military force in resolving disputes that are fundamentally economic and technological. This eclectic integration of paradigms avoids narrow theoretical insulation, offering a problem-focused approach to a complex empirical challenge.

The resulting analytical framework conceptualizes Kenyan foreign policy as an interaction among four core variables: the external structural pressures generated by great-power competition; the domestic political and bureaucratic capacity to interpret and

manage those pressures; the level of operational diversification achieved across external partnerships; and the resulting national interest outcomes, measured by development capital secured, defense capabilities built, and policy flexibility preserved. The framework predicts that intense great-power competition creates real bargaining opportunities for Kenya when domestic regulatory institutions are strong enough to negotiate, monitor, and adjust external commitments. Conversely, the same global rivalries generate severe dependency risks when the scale of external resources outpaces domestic institutional capacity to regulate and oversee them.

Conceptually, strategic autonomy within this model is evaluated across five operational dimensions:

- **Diplomatic flexibility:** The ability to take independent positions on contested multilateral issues without automatic deference to an external patron.
- **Economic diversification:** The presence of viable, competitive alternative sources of trade, foreign investment, and development finance, rather than a nominal list of partners.
- **Technological sovereignty:** The institutional capacity to independently regulate, audit, and substitute critical digital infrastructure and telecommunications systems.
- **Security discretion:** The capability to engage in defense and counterterrorism cooperation without allowing military aid to dictate unrelated trade or economic decisions.
- **Institutional accountability:** The integration of robust parliamentary, judicial, and public oversight mechanisms over major international commitments, limiting unchecked executive discretion.

A partnership advances strategic autonomy when it expands capabilities across these five dimensions; it erodes autonomy when it locks the state into concentrated dependencies, non-disclosure clauses, or rigid alignments that cannot be modified without severe cost. This framework treats sovereignty not as a static legal status, but as a dynamic institutional variable that is continually reinforced or compromised across individual sectors and contractual negotiations.

It is crucial to clarify how these four theoretical perspectives interact analytically. Neoclassical realism provides the primary causal mechanism, showing why international structural pressures are refracted through the quality of Kenya's internal state apparatus and elite perceptions. Complex interdependence provides the descriptive structural map, outlining the varied, uncoordinated channels, commercial, technical, and military, through which these interactions flow, warning against the assumption that any single track completely dictates the others. African agency serves as a vital corrective against treating Nairobi as a passive object of external forces, insisting that domestic actors retain authorship over their policy choices. Finally, strategic autonomy provides the evaluative benchmark, measuring whether these multi-layered relationships leave Kenyan decision-makers with genuine structural alternatives when geopolitical conditions shift.

5. Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, explanatory case-study research design focused on Kenya. This approach is highly appropriate because the inquiry aims to isolate the institutional mechanisms through which global rivalries interact with domestic state structures to produce specific foreign policy outcomes, rather than estimating generalizable statistical regularities across a broader sample of nations. Explanatory case-study designs prioritize depth over breadth, allowing for detailed tracking of sequencing, institutional arrangements, and the specific terms of bilateral agreements that macro-quantitative models overlook.

The document corpus for this analysis comprises four main source categories. First, peer-reviewed academic literature on East African diplomacy, China-Africa political economy, and strategic autonomy frameworks. Second, primary Kenyan and United States government records, including formal executive determinations, state visit readouts, and ministerial briefings. Third, contemporary reporting and analysis from established international news agencies and reputable policy research institutes are used to verify recent structural developments and cross-checked across multiple independent sources to ensure factual reliability. Fourth, official US Congressional records, including legislative committee reports and statutory amendments tracking the trajectory of bilateral security assistance programs.

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic coding structured around the five operational dimensions of sovereignty defined in the analytical framework. Within each thematic category, evidence regarding the Chinese relationship was systematically contrasted with evidence from the United States relationship. This approach tests whether sovereignty opportunities and risks vary primarily by the nationality of the external partner, or if they depend more on domestic institutional capacity and contract management. Source triangulation was used to minimize reliance on any single institutional perspective, and official narratives from all sides were cross-checked against independent analytical reports.

This research design carries three clear limitations. First, documentary analysis cannot directly measure informal elite perceptions or internal bureaucratic bargaining dynamics within the Kenyan state; the conclusions focus on documented policy structures, public records, and observable institutional behavior. Second, the study faces a clear temporal constraint, meaning that assessments of ongoing defense and economic arrangements must be read as provisional rather than permanent, given the speed of contemporary diplomatic shifts. Third, there is a clear source asymmetry in the available literature: a larger volume of independent, English-language scholarly work exists on US-Kenya security cooperation than on the specific operational and commercial details of Chinese loan instruments, which are often protected by strict corporate confidentiality. This imbalance reflects the underlying transparency variations across contracts rather than a bias in the research framework. Future research would benefit from structured elite interviews with Treasury and foreign service officials, detailed analysis of parliamentary debate records, and project-level economic evaluations of specific infrastructure assets.

6. Kenya's Strategic Position in the Great-Power Contest

Kenya's geopolitical relevance to competing global powers stems from a combination of geographical position, economic diversification, regional diplomatic influence, logistical infrastructure, and defense capabilities. The country serves as an economic gateway to the wider East African market and as the primary diplomatic, financial, and humanitarian hub for the region, hosting major United Nations facilities and serving as the operational base for stabilization efforts across the Horn of Africa. This combination of attributes makes Nairobi a valuable partner for both Washington and Beijing, though each power deploys distinct diplomatic and economic instruments.

China's presence has been felt most directly through large-scale infrastructure investments, trade routes, bilateral credit facilities, and commercial networks, with major transportation projects serving as the primary visible symbols of this relationship. Concurrently, Beijing has steadily expanded its footprint within local telecommunications networks, energy grids, and the expanding digital economy. Conversely, the United States has historically focused on defense cooperation, institutional governance programs, trade access agreements, public health funding, and technical assistance, built over decades of bilateral engagement. However, the operational distinction between these two partnerships is increasingly blurred. China is steadily expanding its political and security mediation roles in East Africa, while the United States is increasingly integrating investment tools, commercial tech standards, and infrastructure finance into its competitive strategy, actively offering alternatives to Chinese digital infrastructure across the continent.

The US designation of Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally highlights the strategic weight Washington places on Nairobi. Formalized via a presidential determination following a historic state visit, the status was explicitly justified by Kenya's contributions to regional counterterrorism and its leadership in global stabilization missions, such as the deployment to Haiti. While the designation received strong bipartisan support within the US Congress, independent strategic evaluations noted that its immediate practical yield for Kenya remained uncertain compared to its symbolic value for Washington's broader competitive strategy against expanding Chinese and Russian influence in Africa. Domestic reception within Kenya was similarly divided, with critics pointing to the gap between high-level diplomatic pageantry and the country's pressing domestic economic challenges.

Crucially, this security elevation does not imply that Kenya has abandoned its diversification strategy in favor of exclusive alignment with Washington. Nairobi's ongoing high-level economic engagements with Beijing, including major commercial delegations and trade summits undertaken within months of the MNNA announcement, demonstrate that defense ties with the West and economic partnerships with the East coexist within a deliberate strategy of multi-vector diplomacy. This pattern validates the premise that Kenyan statecraft is best understood as a form of pragmatic multi-alignment rather than rigid bloc integration. This balancing act is further confirmed by the fast-moving scrutiny from the US Congress, which was triggered by Nairobi's refusal to curb its independent diplomatic engagements with alternative global powers.

7. Discussion

7.1 Sovereignty as bargaining capacity

The fundamental sovereignty test for Kenya is whether the state can enter into expansive international partnerships without sacrificing its long-term capacity to independently modify or terminate those arrangements, whether that involves restructuring a sovereign loan, declining a foreign military request, or altering a technological standards selection. Understood in this practical light, sovereignty is determined less by the nationality of the external partner and more by internal bargaining capacity: robust public procurement frameworks, transparent contract management, proactive parliamentary review, enforceable competition policies, specialized debt management units, and technically proficient legal negotiators all protect the state's autonomy, regardless of who sits across the table.

This perspective reframes the false choice between sovereignty and global integration that frequently dominates local public discourse. True strategic autonomy does not require a retreat into isolation or old forms of absolute non-alignment. Instead, calculated diversification can reinforce state sovereignty by providing alternative sources of capital, technology, and security collaboration. This expands the state's structural options and strengthens its hand in individual bilateral negotiations. Strategic dependence becomes an acute threat only when viable alternatives disappear, when a single foreign creditor, a dominant tech vendor, or a primary defense patron becomes structurally irreplaceable in the medium term.

7.2 Infrastructure and debt: development versus dependency

International infrastructure collaboration can yield profound developmental returns, but its long-term impact on state sovereignty is determined by project economics and governance models rather than the flag of the financing nation. The critical test is whether an infrastructure asset generates sustainable economic returns, enhances domestic technical skills, operates under transparent contractual conditions, and aligns with national development plans rather than the industrial overcapacity of the lending state. Empirical research debunking simple 'debt-trap' narratives indicates that the primary sovereignty risk in Kenya's infrastructure portfolio stems from non-disclosure terms, project-level commercial underperformance, and the inherent structural advantages that large bilateral creditors hold over localized negotiating bodies.

Consequently, Kenya must shift its public and policy assessments away from the geopolitical origins of capital and toward an intensive evaluation of institutional capability. State planners must ask: Does a project expand national productive capacity, increase fiscal health, and enhance future bargaining options, or does it primarily transfer commercial risk to local taxpayers while exporting returns to external financiers? This analytical benchmark applies equally to American, European, Chinese, or Gulf capital, none of which is immune to poor structural planning or weak commercial returns.

The Standard Gauge Railway offers a clear example of this dynamic. As a massive post-independence infrastructure development, it has delivered genuine upgrades to national freight and passenger logistics. Yet it remains the center of an intense domestic debate regarding its financial structure, the confidentiality of its original loan instruments, and the fiscal strain it creates relative to actual usage rates. This ongoing controversy persists because it centers on institutional oversight, the terms accepted by state negotiators and the capacity of public bodies to review them, rather than a static verdict on Chinese investment. The same rigorous standards must be applied to all future infrastructure developments, regardless of their source, where equivalent questions of transparency and long-term taxpayer exposure remain critical.

7.3 Security partnerships and diplomatic discretion

Defense cooperation with the United States provides Kenya with valuable resources, specialized tactical training, and operational capabilities that would be fiscally difficult to build independently, with the MNNA status formalizing these ties. However, the subsequent legislative scrutiny from the US Congress reveals how deep security dependencies can generate unstated expectations regarding a state's broader diplomatic alignment. It shows how rapidly a strategic designation can be used as a political lever when a partner pursues independent foreign policy tracks, such as continuing economic ties with strategic competitors. Kenya's primary challenge is ensuring that deep defense alignment with Washington does not compromise its capacity to make independent choices on unrelated trade, investment, and infrastructure issues, particularly with China.

This independent decision-making is vital if Kenya is to sustain its leadership role in African multilateral diplomacy and its advocacy for international financial institutional reform. Genuine strategic autonomy requires the state to preserve strict, issue-specific separation across its foreign policy tracks, ensuring that close military ties in one domain do not result in automatic concessions in economic or technological arenas.

7.4 Technology and the new sovereignty frontier

The digital ecosystem has emerged as a critical arena for modern state sovereignty. The dominant position of Chinese technology vendors within Kenya's telecommunications infrastructure has fueled extensive international debate over whether this presence creates long-term geopolitical vulnerabilities or represents a standard commercial arrangement governed by domestic regulation. Empirical reviews suggest that the true sovereignty risks depend heavily on internal regulatory enforcement. High-level policy frameworks have often remained vaguely stated, leaving a discretionary vacuum that can either protect or compromise national data sovereignty depending on how local regulators exercise their oversight authority. This technical dependence is deeply tied to domestic political debates over data privacy, state surveillance, and infrastructure governance, showing that technological autonomy is shaped primarily by internal regulatory strength.

Therefore, Kenya's strategic choices regarding telecommunications, cloud architecture, data storage, and artificial intelligence carry deep foreign policy implications

that extend far beyond simple procurement. Technological sovereignty should not involve the arbitrary exclusion of specific global vendors on ideological grounds. Instead, it must center on preserving the practical capability to diversify technical suppliers, enforce strict domestic data protection laws, independently audit critical systems, build local engineering expertise, and avoid absolute lock-in to any single foreign platform, whether Western or Eastern. Foreign policy and digital regulation must converge, as technical procurement decisions by individual ministries now carry immense strategic weight.

7.5 Regional leadership and the costs of strategic centrality

Kenya's expanding geopolitical centrality offers significant international opportunities but can simultaneously generate friction with its immediate neighbors. While an elevated security relationship with Western powers enhances Nairobi's capacity to lead regional stabilization missions, adjacent states may view this status as a structural disruption that alters regional balances and access to external resources. This is particularly sensitive as Kenya positions itself as a de facto spokesperson for the continent on international financial reform and security deployment. Furthermore, this high-profile international posture can clash with domestic political realities, where economic strains, tax debates, and governance challenges create public skepticism regarding the focus on international prestige.

To manage this, Kenya must anchor its pursuit of strategic autonomy within regional institutions. By actively coordinating with the East African Community, IGAD, and the African Union, Nairobi can frame its external partnerships as regional public goods rather than unilateral advantages. A foreign policy that leverages external competition to build shared regional infrastructure, common debt-transparency rules, and unified multilateral positions builds deep diplomatic capital. This regional alignment strengthens Kenya's bargaining power with global actors, as it allows Nairobi to negotiate from a position of regional consensus rather than isolation.

7.6 Complex interdependence and the limits of a bilateral lens

Evaluating Kenya's foreign policy through a simple, isolated bilateral lens, such as US-Kenya or China-Kenya, fails to capture the structural realities of complex interdependence. Modern states are linked via multiple, intersecting channels where decisions in one domain quickly spill over into others without formal warning. Technical choices made within the digital procurement sector can create instant friction within the defense partnership with Washington, just as defense commitments can complicate economic negotiations with Beijing. The fast-moving legislative scrutiny surrounding Kenya's MNNA status demonstrates this trend. It proves that Kenyan policymakers cannot manage global relationships in isolated institutional silos. Maintaining strategic autonomy requires a highly coordinated, whole-of-government approach that actively links foreign affairs, national treasury planners, digital regulators, and security agencies into a unified strategic framework.

8. Policy Recommendations

8.1 National Autonomy Framework: Establish a formal, cross-ministerial strategic autonomy framework tasked with identifying critical national sectors, setting acceptable dependency thresholds, establishing clear diversification targets, and conducting regular reviews of major international commitments.

8.2 Partnership Audit Mechanism: Implement a standardized, non-political audit mechanism to assess all major foreign partnerships against transparent public criteria, focusing on fiscal sustainability, actual technology transfer, local job creation, procurement integrity, and data protection rules.

8.3 Specialized Negotiating Capacity: Invest heavily in building a highly specialized diplomatic and legal corps with deep expertise in international political economy, advanced tech governance, sovereign debt restructuring, and complex contract negotiation, reducing the technical information gap during major bilateral deals.

8.4 Parliamentary and Public Oversight: Statutorily require that all major international defense, infrastructure, and financial agreements be submitted to Parliament with adequate review timelines, balancing legitimate national security protections with the necessity of public accountability.

8.5 Substance-Driven Diversification: Prioritize international diversification that builds genuine commercial and technical alternatives, measuring success by the availability of competing options in times of crisis rather than the sheer number of diplomatic agreements signed.

8.6 Industrial Policy Integration: Explicitly tie all major external investments to domestic industrial strategies, embedding mandatory local content thresholds and binding technology transfer clauses directly into international contracts to build domestic industrial capabilities.

8.7 Digital Sovereignty Blueprint: Formulate an explicit national digital sovereignty strategy that establishes clear rules for critical infrastructure protection, local cloud computing, and vendor diversification, actively preventing long-term monopoly lock-in by any foreign tech power.

8.8 Regional Consensus Building: Leverage the East African Community and the African Union to build collective bargaining fronts on external debt management, digital taxation, and infrastructure standards, reducing the power imbalance between individual states and global powers.

9. Conclusion

Kenya's foreign policy has entered an era where its strategic visibility serves as both a powerful diplomatic asset and a structural vulnerability. The nation remains highly attractive to competing global powers due to its economic weight, logistical positioning, and institutional security capabilities. Yet these same attributes expose Nairobi to intense, shifting external expectations, as shown by the fast-moving political evolution of its Major

Non-NATO Ally status from a high-profile diplomatic reward to an object of legislative scrutiny within a short period.

The evidence indicates that Kenya should neither retreat from international integration nor accept rigid global bloc configurations as unavoidable. Its most effective path forward is the institutionalization of strategic autonomy: a foreign policy of active diversification governed by clear national interest criteria, robust domestic regulatory oversight, and issue-specific diplomatic flexibility. This approach prevents security ties with one nation from dictating economic positions toward another. China remains a crucial partner for infrastructure capital and commercial expansion; the United States offers foundational security collaboration, institutional links, and trade integration. Neither track should be allowed to achieve a structural monopoly that eliminates the state's capacity to choose.

Ultimately, modern sovereignty is not measured by formal declarations of non-interference. It is determined by the internal institutional capacity to navigate complex global interdependence on favorable, flexible, and reversible terms. Kenya's primary strategic goal must be to transform great-power competition into a developmental asset. Achieving this requires moving past personalized summitry and state visits, anchoring national diplomacy instead in durable, professional domestic institutions, empowered by transparent procurement, proactive legislative scrutiny, and deep regional integration. Kenya's multi-aligned posture can yield immense developmental returns, provided it is backed by the unglamorous, methodical institutional machinery required to review, adjust, and renegotiate international commitments whenever global conditions shift.

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