

The United States-Africa command's geopolitical strategies: Reconfiguring Kenya-United States military diplomacy

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Recommended Reference: Oduor, O. M., Okoth, P. G., & Adar, K. G. (2026). The United States-Africa Command's geopolitical strategies: Reconfiguring Kenya-United States military diplomacy. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 3(4), 740–750.

<https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.4.59>

ABSTRACT

Across the globe, there a number of United States' combatant commands. United States African Command's (USAFRICOM) creation can be interpreted as a sign of increasing U.S focus on security in Africa. This study therefore, examines how USAFRICOM's geopolitical strategies are reconfiguring Kenya-U. S military diplomacy. Located within the broader scope of post-9/11 counterterrorism operations and shifting geopolitical disputations in Africa, the study assesses the effectiveness of geopolitical strategies of USAFRICOM in bolstering Kenya-U. S military diplomacy. Despite deepening military cooperation, existing asymmetries in decision-making, resource control and operational priorities remain unaddressed with sovereignty and long-term dependency raising critical questions about Kenya's strategic autonomy. The study was underpinned by Regional Security Complex Theory, which explicates security interdependence within proximate regions and power theory which interrogates asymmetries and hegemonic influence between Kenya and the U.S. Philosophically, the study employed pragmatism as a paradigm that emphasizes methodological flexibility and knowledge based on practical consequences. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The study targeted a total of 300 respondents drawn from combatants from Kenya-Kenya Defense Forces and base affiliated personnel in Lamu county, (250) and 50 US-rotational personnel in Nairobi County, as well as 60 key informants drawn from US embassy Defence Attaché, think tanks, international relations analysts, geo-security experts. The sample size was 125 drawn from 201 questionnaires distributed, duly filled and returned. The findings of the study reveal that military engagements and interoperability were key geopolitical strategy with 72% of the respondents affirming. Additionally, the study underscores that geo-strategic military posturing is crucial within the geopolitical rivalry between the US and Russia that puts Kenya into a partnership conundrum. Therefore, the study concludes that USAFRICOM's geopolitical strategies have significantly reconfigured Kenya-US military diplomacy. USAFRICOM has created a strategic partnership anchored on defence cooperation and geopolitical alignment. However, despite the long-term geopolitical engagement with USAFRICOM, balancing Kenya's sovereignty and strategic autonomy is crucial. This study, recommends that a more balanced strategic partnership be created to enhance Kenya's strategic autonomy as well as fortifying localized defence capacity.

Keywords: Military Diplomacy, Strategic Autonomy, USAFRICOM's Geopolitical Strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

The United States maintains several geostrategic Combatant Commands to augment its global security as well as its axiomatic foreign policy interests. In this regard, the establishment of United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) in 2007 marked a strategic inflection in the policy direction of United States engagement with Africa. As a consequence, the US integrated defence, diplomacy and security cooperation as key yardsticks to measure and advance its interests. Major powerhouses such as the United States, China, and Russia have continued to reassert their strategic calculus of external military engagement with Africa (Oluyemi, & Elhudairi, 2025). For instance, the US command combatants are pervasive and ubiquitous, China and Russia are in the race to recalibrate the global military equation with military posturing in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region respectively (Filippov, 2024; Mabera, 2016). Notably, USAFRICOM has become an important geopolitical instrument through which the United States advances its strategic interests across Africa. This happens at the backdrop of evolving regional and global security dynamics. Africa is increasingly becoming a theatre of geopolitical competition involving major powers such as the United States, Russia, China among other emerging competitors. Quintessentially, military diplomacy has become an indispensable instrument influencing contemporary foreign policies of states. In Africa, geopolitical landscape is being transformed through patterns of defence partnerships, formation of alliance as well as security governance. Security

cooperation in Africa is exponentially shaped by these rivalries, as a result, raising concerns on Africa's sovereignty and local ownership of security architecture (Daniels & Nagar, 2016).

In this light, Kenya emerges as an anchor and strategically important state in the Horn of Africa and key player among the littoral states within the Indian Ocean realm. This makes Kenya a critical security partner in Eastern Africa (Munene, 2023). Thus, Kenya-United States military diplomatic relations have expanded from traditional defence cooperation to encompass geostrategic military posturing, military engagements and interoperability, counterterrorism, maritime security strategies, military capacity building, joint military trainings as well as diplomatic intelligence and information sharing. The bilateral military cooperation is as a result of the rise of transnational security threats such as terrorism, violent extremism, cyber threats and organized crimes (Adams, 2023). Consequently, USAFRICOM's engagement has reconfigured Kenya-United States military diplomacy through bolstering defence institutions, reinforcing operational interoperability, enhancing strategic planning as well as accelerating regional security collaboration (Nyiyaana & Nwankpa, 2022). However, in spite of the deepening partnership, questions persist regarding strategic autonomy of Kenya, sovereignty, dependency as well as asymmetrical power relations within bilateral security arrangements (Nyakora, 2024).

Therefore, the intersection between security cooperation and geopolitical competition raises pertinent questions with regards to long-term ramifications of USAFRICOM strategic positioning for Kenya's foreign policy and security. The cynosure of this research is comprehending how USAFRICOM's geopolitical strategies are influencing Kenya-United States military diplomacy. This study, therefore, examines how USAFRICOM's geopolitical strategies are reconfiguring Kenya-United States Military Diplomacy. Ultimately, the study contributes to the scholarly and policy discourse by proposing a more balanced mutually beneficial framework. This study presents the statement of the problem underpinned by existing asymmetries in decision making. It is also guided by a theoretical framework employing Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and power theory drawn from realist and neorealist perspectives to explain USAFRICOM rationale and influence in Kenya-US military diplomacy. The study is anchored in descriptive research design. Further, the study presents findings on the geo-strategic military posturing, military engagement and interoperability, capacity building on military capabilities and maritime security strategies.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

For years, Kenya-US military diplomacy has been influenced by USAFRICOM operations in Africa yet the strategic outcomes have remained insufficiently interrogated (Migue, 2014; USDS, 2021). Yet, despite deepening military cooperation, existing asymmetries in decision-making, resource control and operational priorities remain unaddressed between these two countries (Migue, 2014). As a consequence, persistent threats posed by *Al-Shabaab* continue to stymie joint military engagements and counterterrorism frameworks (Pkalya & Brendon, 2017). Besides, concerns over sovereignty and long-term dependency have raised critical questions about Kenya's strategic autonomy (Nsia-Pepa, 2014; Oduor 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by examining how USAFRICOM's geopolitical strategies are reconfiguring Kenya-United States Military Diplomacy.

1.2 Research Objective

This study assessed the effectiveness of geopolitical strategies of USAFRICOM in bolstering Kenya-U. S military diplomacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was underpinned by both Regional Security Complex theory (RSCT) and Power theory.

2.1.1 Regional Security Complex theory

RSCT as advanced by Buzan and Waever (2003), posits that international security should be interpreted from the regional lens where states often exhibit a regular and geographical pattern. RSCT underscores that actors' actions and motivations are axiomatically regional. This theory posits that an actor's security concerns are largely dependent on their immediate neighborhood. In the context of this study, RSCT was crucial in unravelling the intricacies surrounding the nature of African states' foreign policies through USAFRICOM involvement. It explained whether Kenya-US dyadic military relations are militaristic or just US interests at play. Regional security complex theory explicates the functions of regional security institutions. Therefore, security models to certain extent determine security of a state in the international environment in its spatial dimension. In this light, considerable debates arise as to whether there is a singular global security model especially where the US has tended to exert a unilateral influence

on global security matters. However, a further analysis on regions and regionalization of security interests emerges through USAFRICOM.

Thus, a conception of what constitutes a region is construed to entail structure and organization of a system. Arguably, region seems as the generalization of space and not the real socio-economic system (Walker, 2025). Therefore, in subjective terms, region is seen as existing material elements and social relations that exist between them. For purposes of this study, structure and organization as well as generalization of space is critical. Regional security institutions emerge as regional security framework to address particular threats such as proliferation of weapons, organized crimes, epidemics as well as uncontrolled migrations. Although USAFRICOM was established to address insurgencies, HIV/AIDS, oil interests as well as bolstering African militaries, it has experienced a plethora of challenges *inter alia*, rise of insurgencies and erosion of trust from African states. USAFRICOM as established was supported by military and technological potentials, character of border between states as well as political and military alliances of regional range. Aware of this phenomenon, USAFRICOM continued to pursue its African policy. Thus, the conceptualization and characterization of USAFRICOM as external-continental umpire seen through a formal structured organization deliberate in its actions. In this regard, the concept of regionality fits pretty well as a criterion for contextualizing any geographical interest. However, with regionality, USAFRICOM still faces the challenge of legitimacy. Is it the legitimate umpire to address insurgencies in Africa? The problem of geostrategic effectiveness of USAFRICOM with long-lasting objectives has failed to create an insurgency-free Africa. Further, it is preponderant to note that USAFRICOM interest has undermined a unified security framework in Africa, especially in the Horn of Africa. This study reveals that USAFRICOM further stymies the legitimacy of regional actors and lacks impartiality in its operations. The aspect of impartiality is demonstrated in the Kenyan case where USAFRICOM has threatened Kenya's autonomy.

Though Osifo (2022) argues that regional level for practical security relationships is crucial, the level of engagement is asymmetrical and works in favor of USAFRICOM at the expense of Kenya or other Horn of Africa states. Therefore, it is worth noting that regional security complexes are defined by patterns of amity and enmity which play in between anarchic nature of the international system and balance of power for local geographical proximity (Buzan & Waever, 2003). In this study, RSCT establishes the framework for identifying and assessing changes at regional level. Regional Security Complex Theory, further reinforces status quo, influence external success and entrench internal fragmentations. This study posits that USAFRICOM is an external actor penetrating regional security complexes, one, existing complexes and two, complexes created by USAFRICOM. In the midst of these complexes, USAFRICOM is expected to consolidate security gains and engage militarily by supporting specific states, mediate conflicts, offer aid as well as deploying military assets. However, this theory is limited. RSCT is particularistic and does not wholly encapsulate the complexity of regional clusters of African militaries, Kenya included. Due to this shortcoming, this study was buttressed by power theory.

2.1.2 Power theory

Power theory, advanced by scholars such as Morgenthau (1954), Waltz (1986), characterizes Kenya-US dyadic military diplomacy as problematic and contentious. Through USAFRICOM lens US's power manifest itself from hegemonic and domineering perspectives. It points out the asymmetries that influence Kenya-US military relations. Consequently, USAFRICOM's interaction with Kenya is regarded as part of strategy by the US to secure its position in the African continent in direct competition to China and Russia rivalries. This resonates with Morgenthau's (1954) assertion that, 'whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim'. Thus, the struggle for permanent power stems from fundamental drive for power itself. However, realists posit that, the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to prioritize their own security and survival. This is done through acquisition and demonstration of hard power. Thus, states act out of self-interest where power is seen as the end itself seeking dominance in an inherently competitive world (Morgenthau, 1954). Neorealists argue that, the struggle, is the architecture of international system that forces states to pursue power (Mearsheimer, 2001; Dunne *et al*, 2013). Neorealists refine the classical realist perspective by emphasizing structural constraints imposed by anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, power is interpreted as a means to ensure security of states. In this regard USAFRICOM seeks to maximize its capabilities to prevent potential threats. It has incorporated domestic factors such as national identity and domestic politics thereby giving a more nuanced understanding of internal and external factors that shape state behavior. Underscoring the role of power in international relations is crucial (Karim, 2023). From the foregoing, it is evident that different theoretical perspectives offer distinct interpretations of the nature and influence of USAFRICOM in geopolitical configurations. In the case of the United States, power is not a monolithic concept but varies significantly across its quest for dominance and so is USAFRICOM's influence in Kenya.

2.2 Empirical Review

From the foregoing review, Kardon (2023) demonstrates that the U. S, China, India, Australia, France and Britain compete strategically across several regions. However, the U.S is adjusting its global force posture in response to challenges emanating from the western Pacific. On African perspective, Cardoso (2016) opine that the US needs to be more constructive with African states. Though Cardoso (2016) point to the weaknesses of implementing U.S policy towards Africa, Duggan (2020) finds that China's peace and development rhetoric is stymied by its growing military presence in Africa. Russia on the other hand is reasserting its naval position and influence in the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, Munene (2023) and Adams (2023) point to Kenya's strategic importance in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, while existing studies establish an intensifying geostrategic competition among major powers in Africa and the Horn of Africa, they remain largely descriptive. Besides, little empirical evidence exists on the efficacy of geostrategic strategies of USAFRICOM in bolstering Kenya-U. S military diplomacy amid growing influence of China and Russia.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted descriptive research design. According to Cresswell (2014), research design is important in ascertaining the answers to the questions asked. He opines that a good design is as good as careful analysis. Descriptive research design as a methodical inquiry into the distribution of one or more variables in a study without trying to make inferences. This design was important to the study since it offered a systematic characterization of the area of interest and the salient characteristics of the individuals under study. Philosophically, the study employed pragmatism as a paradigm in methodological flexibility and knowledge based on practical consequences. Therefore, the study took into consideration the versatility of the design enabling the researcher to describe the facts and characteristics. This design was instrumental in understanding the nuances of the Kenyan and American military as well as the diplomatic experiences.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Nairobi and Lamu Counties, Kenya. The choice of the study areas was underpinned by the proximity of Kenya to Somalia. Nairobi was chosen because it is the political and diplomatic nucleus of Kenya. It harbors most of the important decision-makers, policy makers as well senior military officers. Lamu was chosen because it has experienced acts of terror in the previous years. It is also strategically located as it hosts one of the US military bases that counters Al-Shabaab. However, though Manda Bay is a strategic point militarily, Nairobi offered the researcher a better strategic vantage point regarding access to both human subjects and official policy material on USAFRICOM. Overall, Kenya was selected because of its strategic, geographical position in the Horn of Africa as well as Western Indian Ocean. Its longstanding defence partnership with the United States, makes it an important partner in regional counterterrorism and peace-support operations as a strategic partner in the establishment of US-led 'war on terror' (Prestholdt, 2011).

3.3 Target Population

The study targeted a total of 300 respondents drawn from combatants from Kenya-Kenya Defense Forces and base affiliated personnel in Lamu county, (250) and 50 US-rotational personnel in Nairobi County, as well as 60 key informants drawn from US embassy Defence *Attaché*, think tanks, international relations analysts, geo-security experts. The target population was chosen to establish diverse and integrated viewpoints on the study topic. The use of experts balanced state perspectives and analysis. The state actors such as US Mission official and trainers, USAFRICOM officials from the Kenya ministry of defence provided meaningful insights into the diplomatic and military relations between Kenya and the US

3.4 Sampling and sample size

This study adopted stratified random and purposive sampling techniques to select the respondents. These techniques were appropriate because of the nature of target population and the objective of the study. Stratified random sampling was used to put Kenyan combatants in strata to ensure proportional representation across the ranks. Purposive sampling was used to reach respondents with unique knowledge, experience and expertise on the subject matter. This category of respondents had the requisite knowledge. A total of 201 questionnaire were distributed out of a sample size of 125 was drawn.

3.5 Data Collection instruments and Procedure

The study used both semi-structured questionnaires as well as interview schedules for key Informants (KIs). The study adopted secondary approach to complement the primary findings. A combination of survey findings and qualitative interviews to provide a holistic understanding of intelligence -sharing practices was crucial. This combination enhanced evidence-based analysis by integrating institutional perspectives with respondents' experiences. Questionnaire was the principal instrument for collecting data supported by interview schedules. The researcher, with the help of the research assistants administered the questionnaires and conducted interviews. After collecting data, collation of data was carried out.

3.6 Data analysis

The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics by way of cross-tabulations, bar graphs and pie-charts. This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitative analysis allowed the researcher to methodically classify, summarize and exemplify observations using the SPSS version 24. Further, it enabled the researcher to comprehend and draw conclusions about the phenomenon under study. Qualitatively, the researcher cross-referenced the transcript of all interviews to ascertain accuracy and reliability. A qualitative analysis enabled the researcher to develop themes systematically and arrange data into significant clusters. Moreover, document analysis, a form of qualitative research was used to interpret voices and give meaning to the topic in question. Tight (2019) asserts that for documents to allow for meaningful interpretations, the researcher is obligated to code and analyze appropriately. The researcher collected documents from public records as well as physical evidence. The study used content analysis to evaluate patterns within USAFRICOM operations. Content analysis should factor in words and phrases to be analyzed.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is the foundational principle that guides all research endeavors, from the initial conceptualization of project to the completion and dissemination of the final study. This study sought informed consent of the respondents before actual data collection was done. Further, relevant authorizations were sought from Directorate of Postgraduate Studies at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. This served as formal request for research permit and authorization from the National Commission of Science and Technology (NACOSTI). Given the sensitive nature of the study, data collection was carefully structured to comply with national security protocols. Therefore, the study avoided the disclosure of classified operational details and focused on analytical and policy insights. The researcher adhered to ethical principles such as voluntary participation of respondents, seeking informed consent and upholding confidentiality of the respondents before, during and after data collection phase.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Geo-strategic Military Posturing

Strategic military posturing remains an important instrument of influencing geopolitical relations as well as military diplomacy. In this vein, USAFRICOM has bolstered Kenya-United States military diplomacy through military positioning that is forward in nature. This is due to Kenya's proximate location in the Horn of African and within Indian Ocean realm. This makes Kenya not only a participant state but also a critical US security partner. For instance, the establishment of Camp Simba in Manda Bay serves as a strategic point for intelligence gathering, surveillance as well as counterterrorism. Despite the enduring strategic interests between Kenya and the US, USAFRICOM has elicited debates over foreign military influence. It is against this backdrop that this study assessed whether geo-strategic military posturing as a key geopolitical strategy employed by USAFRICOM in advancing Kenyan interests. As such the study assessed strategic military basing and its implication on Kenya-US military diplomacy. The study found that, out of 125 respondents, 14 (11.2%) strongly disagreed with the inquiry whether geo-strategic military posturing was a geopolitical strategy, 36 (28.8%) disagreed, 7 (5.6%) was neutral, 51 (40.8%) agreed to the inquiry and 17 (13.6%) strongly agreed to the inquiry. The results are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1**Strategic Military Basing**

Strategic Military Basing					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	14	11.2	11.2	11.2
	Disagree	36	28.8	28.8	40.0
	Neutral	7	5.6	5.6	45.6
	Agree	51	40.8	40.8	86.4
	Strongly Agree	17	13.6	13.6	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

The antecedent findings reveal that respondents expressed divergent views on USAFRICOM's strategic military basing as a strategy for enhancing Kenya-United States military diplomacy. Cumulatively, 54.4% agreed to the inquiry whether geo-strategic military posturing was a geopolitical strategy and asserted that military posturing as augmenting counterterrorism operations, intelligence sharing as well as maritime security. Those of contrary opinion argued that strategic military posturing erodes Kenya's sovereignty, creates militarization of Kenyan territory, allows foreign military influence as well as lack of transparency of defence agreements. The foregoing findings indicate that Camp Simba is a strategic point that anchors US counterterrorism efforts. Besides, historical evidence indicates that Kenya-US military cooperation predates USAFRICOM. Findings show that USAFRICOM posturing reflects U.S geopolitical interests in East Africa. As such, respondents affirmed that Kenya's strategic location makes it an important partner within the Horn of Africa security architecture. The findings resonate with Munene (2023), who argue that Africa has become a contested trophy where major power competition involving the US, Russia and China contest to control. For instance, Russia's expansionist strategy is evidenced in Sudan where it has established its naval base, particularly in Port Sudan. Russia's presence therefore, challenges USAFRICOM'S dominance in the Horn of Africa. This presents a conundrum for Kenya especially with balancing its long-standing security partnership with the US as it engages with emerging powers.

Thus, Russia's intensifying geopolitical challenge to the United States in Africa, particularly targeting the influence of USAFRICOM, is underpinned by Moscow's pursuit of strategic leverage, economic opportunities, and military influence (Blank, 2022). By expanding its engagements across Africa, including security cooperation, arms sales, and military agreements, Russia seeks to undermine Western hegemony and position itself as a key power broker on the continent (Hedenskog, 2018). The establishment of a naval base in Port Sudan further exemplifies Moscow's ambition to secure logistical hubs and protect maritime routes critical to global trade and energy corridors (Munene, 2023). For Kenya, this escalating US–Russia rivalry influences its military diplomacy, forcing Nairobi to balance its traditional Western alliances with emerging Eastern overtures.

In view of the antecedent view, one of the KII respondents argued that:

“Russia's engagement in Africa, particularly its challenge to USAFRICOM, is not merely about military positioning but a broader strategy to dismantle Western hegemony. By leveraging historical alliances, economic partnerships, and security contracts, Moscow seeks to create an alternative power structure that appeals to African nations wary of Western interventionism. This shift forces countries like Kenya into a complex diplomatic equation, where balancing U.S. security cooperation with Russia's emerging influence becomes a strategic necessity” (KII, 2/2/2023 Nairobi, Kenya).

The foregoing assertions resonate with the thinking that Russia views Africa as a crucial geopolitical and geostrategic theater in its broader confrontation with the West (Ramani, 2021). Russia's activity in Africa has been growing albeit in measured terms (Adams *et al*, 2022). Despite its involvement in Africa, it has continued to challenge US presence in Africa. As a consequence, the US through USAFRICOM adopted a disentangle approach to contain Russia's activities in Africa. The US continues to question Russia's influence in Africa on accounts of historical presence, projects in extractive industries, diplomatic relationships as well as paramilitary and military operations. Indeed, Russia has expanded its cooperation with African states. Russia continues to engage in arms sales and transfers which have exponentially grown.

Besides, China has attempted to exert its influence in Africa. Under its ‘zou chu qu’ or going out policy, China has penetrated Africa in unparalleled terms (Chen, 2016). It has created the perception of no colonial subjugation and emphasized respect for African sovereignty (Manu, 2019). Whereas the West view China as a predator to exploit Africa and African resources, China's military positioning in the Horn of Africa has not only shaped regional security outcomes but also disrupted international polarity and reinforced the essence of multipolarity in the contemporary geopolitics. While China's investments in Africa is attributed to its economic persuasion, its military strategic positioning cannot be disregarded. For instance, the presence of Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PCAN) in the Gulf of Eden China's geopolitical has been viewed as a strong message for ‘zou chu qu’ policy (Henry, 2016). The

triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has augmented military cooperation in terms of arms sales and peacekeeping deployments (Kuo, 2017).

With the establishment of USAFRICOM in 2007, China shifted its military activities and security cooperation in Africa to challenge US dominance (Holslag, 2018). Though there is less attention on security dimension compared to economic aspects, Sino-Africa relations are titling the geopolitical arc in ways hitherto unchallenged. The apparent rivalry between China and US is seen through the military scramble for Djibouti (Walker, 2025). In Kenya, China has been keen to exert its foothold by funding military projects in the midst of intensified military cooperation between Kenya and the US (Anguche, 2025). Moreover, China's geopolitical vision complicates the competition between new and future cultural tapestries. China is asserting military consciousness by making inroads in Africa, in general and Kenya in particular. Moreover, China's approach in the Horn of Africa reveals adaptability as well as assertive subtlety. Therefore, the fulcrum of China's geopolitical vision lies in the concept of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A new impetus for China's activities in the Horn of Africa (Mansoor, 2024). However, China's geopolitical rivalry cast a shadow of its rise. Irrefutably, ideological differences and quest for regional foothold characterize the contours of this rivalry. In the same vein questions emerge whether China can achieve military pragmatism just as it has done with its economic aspirations and be an embodiment of contemporary geopolitics in the Horn of Africa. Militarily, China is behind the US though doggedly pursuing agreements with African states to fortify its navy by developing fleet and force posture to protect its assets (Kardon, 2023).

4.1.2 Military engagement and interoperability

In the contemporary military relations, military engagements and interoperability have become indispensable in promoting bilateral relations. Within the scope of Kenya-US military diplomacy, these exercises play a preponderant role in shaping military dynamics. In this light, the study found that, out of 125 respondents, 14(11.2%) strongly disagreed to the inquiry, 12 (9.6%) disagreed to the inquiry, 9(7.2%) was neutral, 67(53.6%) agreed to the inquiry and 23(18.4%) strongly agreed to the inquiry. Cumulatively, 71% agreed to the inquiry. The results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Military engagement and Interoperability

Joint Military Exercises					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	14	11.2	11.2	11.2
	Disagree	12	9.6	9.6	20.8
	Neutral	9	7.2	7.2	28.0
	Agree	67	53.6	53.6	81.6
	Strongly Agree	23	18.4	18.4	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

The foregoing findings demonstrate that a majority of respondents (71.6%) agreed that military engagements and interoperability significantly bolstered Kenya-US military diplomacy. They argued that military exercises enhance interoperability by creating seamless coordination as well operational compatibility between Kenya Defence Forces and the US forces. Respondents, pointed out regular exercises conducted under the auspices of Justified Accord improve counterterrorism capabilities, command and control coordination as well as operational readiness. They also asserted that military engagements facilitated logistical coordination and doctrinal alignment thus improving responses to transnational threats within the Horn of Africa. The findings reveal that military diplomacy extends beyond tactical trainings. On contrary, a minority of respondents (9.6%) argued that extensive joint military activities may reduce Kenya's strategic autonomy as well as influence national defence priorities. Respondents who were neutral (7.2%) opined that there were uncertainties with regards to long-term strategic benefits of military engagements. The findings demonstrate that for Kenya to strategically benefit then military diplomacy should create a balancing operational effectiveness for national sovereignty (Gray *et al.*, 2022).

In the Horn of Africa, various threats transcend traditional borders and identities. While China expands its influence through infrastructure and diplomacy to counter these threats, the dynamic challenges stymie its efforts to plan and operate effectively. The prevailing condition works in favor of the US in terms of military capability. This is due to the fact that the US has massively invested in the region and the fact that East Africa directly impact US global mobility and force projection. China's military base in Djibouti, enhances intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities influence competition with the US facing the biggest threat. Apparently, the US is failing to maintain a presence and offering compelling partnerships, this competition is defining terms of engagement both covertly and overtly (Honorato, 2026). Besides, China's geopolitical strategy in Africa is leveraging borderless tools of

influence. Therefore, while African militaries rely on Chinese training, interoperability with the US forces decline. Consequently, China's support to African militaries portrays a Western disengagement (Nantulya, 2024). In the wake of these re-adjustments Russia's transactional approach to Africa emerges (Liam *et al.*, 2026). Russia has offered a number of states security packages based on contracts. In order to counter Russia's inroads, the US uses a more direct approach to curtail Russia's presence. Albeit Russia lacks the capacity to edge the US, it retains capability in the Horn of Africa, to selectively challenge the US militarily and non-militarily especially through disinformation

4.1.3 Capacity Building on military capabilities

States engage in deliberate efforts to strengthen their forces. They do so through military development where personnel are trained, supplies for equipment are made as well as construction of facilities are done. Through partnerships, states are able to build capacities to face security challenges (Hooper, 2012). This study assessed whether capacity building on military capabilities was effective. Findings in Table 3.3 indicate that, out of 125 respondents, 5(4%) strongly disagreed, 32(24.8%) disagreed, 11(8.8%) was neutral, 57(45.6%) agreed and 21(16.8%) strongly agreed capacity building on military capabilities enhance Kenya-US military diplomacy.

Table 3

Capacity Building on military capabilities

Capacity Building on military capabilities					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	5	4.0	4.0	4.0
	Disagree	31	24.8	24.8	28.8
	Neutral	11	8.8	8.8	37.6
	Agree	57	45.6	45.6	83.2
	Strongly Agree	21	16.8	16.8	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

The foregoing findings indicate that a majority of respondents (62.4%) agreed that USAFRICOM's capacity building programs have enhanced Kenya-US military diplomacy. Respondents argued that capacity building has enhanced counterterrorism operations, operational effectiveness as well as regional stability. These findings are consistent with Zimmerman (2020) and Nyiayaana and Nwankpa (2022) who assert that USAFRICOM's support for regional security architecture cannot be overstated. They argue that USAFRICOM's contribution to improving African military capabilities are reflected through Kenya's involvement with the US, as a strategic security partner. Further, respondents affirmed that USAFRICOM's training and intelligence support have helped Kenya in combating the threat of *Al-Shabaab* and violent extremism. It was because of the frequent incursions into Kenya by *Al-Shabaab*, which forced the country to intervene militarily in Somalia in 2011 (Adar, 2020). On the contrary, a minority of the respondents expressed doubts, arguing that Kenya's overreliance on the US risked undermining its autonomy and territorial integrity. The views of minority respondents indicated that capacity-building programs are embedded within geopolitical competition with Kenya finding itself in a conundrum. These findings are in tandem with (Moeder, 2023) who argued that the United States uses defence cooperation to strengthen its strategic influence viz-a-viz its rivals, China and Russia. This study found that, while respondents acknowledged operational benefits of USAFRICOM's engagement, capacity building has not consistently led to long-term security in the Horn of Africa. These views resonate with Osifo (2022) who warns about overdependence on external forces at the expense of mutual gains.

4.1.4 Maritime Security Strategies

Maritime security strategies have become important objectives of states. The littoral states are confronted with maritime insecurities of different magnitudes. From piracy, armed robbery to trafficking. Therefore, the stability and security of world's maritime areas is crucial. It is against this backdrop that this study assesses maritime and anti-piracy efforts. Out of 125 respondents, 26(20.8%) strongly disagree with such efforts, 21(16.8%) disagreed, 11(8.8%) were neutral, 46 (36.8%) agreed to the inquiry and 21(16.8%) strongly agreed. Cumulatively, 53.6% agreed with the question whether there were maritime security and anti-piracy efforts. The results are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4*Maritime security strategies*

Maritime security strategies					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	26	20.8	20.8	20.8
	Disagree	21	16.8	16.8	37.6
	Neutral	11	8.8	8.8	46.4
	Agree	46	36.8	36.8	83.2
	Strongly Agree	21	16.8	16.8	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

The prevenient findings demonstrate that a majority of respondents (53.6%) agreed that maritime security has been enhanced thereby consolidating Kenya-US military diplomacy. Respondents believed that Kenya's strategic location acts an important gateway for safeguarding global commerce and regional stability. These findings resonate with Bueger and Edmunds (2024) who argue that, the safety of maritime routes is crucial for economic activities. Bueger and Edmunds (2024) further assert that maritime security enables intelligence sharing and coordinated operations to combat maritime terrorism as well as transnational organized crimes (Saleem, 2023). The findings also support the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy which advocates for collaborative approaches to secure Africa's maritime architecture. On the contrary, minority respondents reasoned that increased militarization of maritime zones undermine sovereignty and fuels geopolitical rivalries.

However, the contrary views reflect a dire situation in Africa. In this light, Nel and Blaine (2026) argue that, the maritime security systems in Africa remain weak. Activities along shipping routes and ports have been disrupted. Within the Indian Ocean realm, a shift from the Red Sea and Suez Canal towards Cape of Good Hope has raised questions on the maritime operations (Khan, 2023; Kuoman, 2024). Although Africa's maritime importance has been witnessed in the ability to command ports and significant corridors, its naval structures are greatly undermined by incessant insecurities (Nel & Blaine, 2026). Maritime security has been reduced to patrols and foreign naval operations. Hence, the need for Africa's strategic task to turn location into leverage through the established ports that play an integral role in production. Repercussions of insecurity on Africa's Oceans and seas impact on state sovereignty as well as national security of Africa states. Maritime security is primarily associated with piracy (Walker, 2025). However, it goes beyond the purview of piracy alone. The Gulf of Guinea for example, has experienced armed robbery in Nigeria, Togo and Ghanaian waters (Vreĳ, 2024). In Mozambique, Southern Africa's terror and piracy hotspot, has continued to witness unprecedented terrorism maneuvers despite a raft of measures to combat these nefarious activities (Walker, 2025). Quintessentially, the Horn of Africa remains a strategic maritime corridor for USAFRICOM despite terrorists exploiting weak maritime governance (Mkuti *et al.*, 2024).

The foregoing findings were supported by one of the key informants who remarked:

"The coastal counties, Lamu included, together with their coastlines cannot be viewed only as purely naval issues. The coastlines serve more than one littoral state. To protect trade routes and critical infrastructure as well as deterring terrorist infiltration into maritime corridors is inevitable. Constant surveillance and coordinated maritime security efforts is indispensable" (KII, Maritime Security Lamu ,13.3.2023).

The antecedent view resonates with Mkuti *et al.* (2024) who opine that, in Kenya, the importance of Kenyan Coastline remains significant. For instance, Lamu Port and the LAPSSET Corridor have played a preponderant role in promoting Kenya's maritime security. Despite concerted efforts by multiagency groups, terrorist attacks linked to *Al-Shabaab* continue to be encountered. Concerningly, cross-border movements between Somalia and Kenya have stymied these efforts.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that USAFRICOM's geopolitical strategies have significantly reconfigured Kenya-US military diplomacy, from conventional defence cooperation to multidimensional security partnership. This partnership encompasses interoperability, capacity building and maritime security. Undoubtedly, these strategies present conceptual complexities and nuances in the interpretation of Kenya-United States asymmetric military relations. Nonetheless, significant lessons can be learnt on the necessity to manage asymmetric uncertainty towards achieving mutual interests. Asymmetric military relations reinforce the lack of balanced prioritization of mutual interests and collective engagement. The current geopolitical environment is engulfed in plethora of uncertainty which has rendered

this environment vulnerable for both Kenya and the US with Kenya risking relinquishing its autonomy and the US failing to address incessant threats. This research demonstrates that Kenya is increasingly occupying a strategic geopolitical position. This position, though endearing Kenya to USAFRICOM, simultaneously creates security opportunities and exposes Kenya to intense competition among the United States, Russia and China. This study demonstrates that the capability of USAFRICOM does not automatically translate into dominance and success. Although USAFRICOM has fostered strategic partnership anchored in defence cooperation and geopolitical alignment, its long-term engagement continues to raise concerns regarding Kenya's sovereignty, strategic autonomy and balance of power within the Horn of Africa. The study concludes that Kenya-US military diplomacy should not solely be measured based on operational success but also by preservation of national sovereignty and locally owned security institutions.

5.2 Recommendation

This study, recommends that a more balanced strategic partnership be created to enhance Kenya strategic autonomy as well as fortifying localized defence capacity. In this regard, Kenya should institutionalize joint interoperability frameworks involving other regional partners. Besides, Kenya should expand capacity building initiatives beyond tactical military training to incorporation of strategic intelligence analysis. Considerably, Kenya should buttress its maritime domain awareness by integrating surveillance systems that enhance naval capabilities to protect the coastal corridors and critical infrastructure.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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