

Dynamics of Kenya-US dyadic military diplomacy: Re-imagining the strategic core of the United States-Africa Command

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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 interrogates the evolving dynamics of Kenya-United States dyadic military diplomacy. The study focuses on reimagining the strategic core of the USAFRICOM. Located within the broader gamut of post-9/11 counterterrorism operations and shifting geopolitical disputations in Africa, the study assesses how USAFRICOM has shaped Kenya's international and external security architecture. Although the collaboration has augmented in scope, including but not limited to aspects such as counterterrorism, maritime security, interoperability as well as the strategic competition, USAFRICOM's efficacy and sovereignty implications remain contested. As a consequence, this study attempted to address the tensions between operational military cooperation and the asymmetrical power structures inherent within the Kenya-US security arrangements. Particularly, the study questions whether USAFRICOM's strategic posture enhances or stymies Kenya's national interests, consequently undermining its sovereignty. The primary objective of this study was to interrogate the political dynamics underpinning Kenya-USA dyadic military diplomacy. 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 in 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, though counterterrorism cooperation and maritime security significantly drive the partnership, strategic autonomy, command efficacy and external influence have not been given utmost attention and remain thinly uncharted. Therefore, the study concludes that, USAFRICOM's current posture requires recalibration towards greater localization and institutional balance. This study, recommends that restructuring of strategic engagement is an imperative to enhance Kenyan agency, interoperability without dependency and sovereignty interference.

Keywords: Dynamics, Dyadic, Interoperability, Strategic Core, USAFRICOM

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of global power competition is indubitable. Globally 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; Munene,2023).Security cooperation in Africa is also exponentially shaped by these rivalries, raising concerns on Africa's sovereignty and local ownership of security architecture (Daniels, 2025). Consequently, the re-imagination of the USAFRICOM has elicited a critical debate on its strategic essence, operational framework as well as its fundamental logic (Nyiayaana & Nwankpa, 2022). As such, questions abound on its institutional architecture as well as its geostrategic imperative that formed part of its initial mandate. Over the years, Kenya-US military diplomacy has evolved into a critical pillar of the bilateral relations primarily to deal with the transnational security threats such as terrorism and regional instability in the Horn of Africa (HoA) (Munene, 2023). Thus, the establishment of USAFRICOM has become a significant shift in US engagement with Africa and Kenya in particular, a geostrategic partner in the East African region.

Irrefutably, Kenya is a frontline state in the war against terrorism in the East African region and has emerged as regional hub for US military operations (Nyakora, 2024). This relationship is characterized by joint training exercises, intelligence sharing as well as logistical support. However, despite its strategic significance, Kenya-US military partnership reveals asymmetrical power relations especially in resource allocation, thus, raising fundamental concerns on strategic foresight. In this regard, the US geopolitical interests in countering violent extremism have encountered a number of setbacks (Adams, 2023). This study, therefore, interrogates the evolving dynamics of this partnership by critically analyzing the political dynamics of USAFRICOM's engagement in Kenya. It further seeks to re-imagine USAFRICOM's strategic core by assessing its effectiveness and alignment with Kenya's national security. Ultimately, the study contributes to the scholarly and policy discourse by proposing a more balanced mutually beneficial framework.

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). The existing asymmetries in decision-making, resource control and operational priorities within the dyadic relationship remain critical 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-Pepira, 2014; Oduor 2019). Therefore, this study sought to fill these gaps by interrogating the evolving political dynamics of Kenya-US dyadic military diplomacy.

1.2 Research Objective

The primary objective of this study was to interrogate the political dynamics underpinning Kenya-USA dyadic 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)

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 heavily regional. 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 it is just US interests at play. However, this theory is limited. 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 (Sun 2020). RSCT is particularistic and does not ably 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. Through AFRICOM lens US's power manifest itself from a 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 relation to China and Russia.

2.2 Empirical Review

From the foregoing, Rynning (2022) found that NATO uses collective defence not only to deter competitors such as Russia but also bolster political and strategic ties among members. Pant (2021) demonstrated that India's simultaneous defence partnerships with the US and Russia reflect hedging on military diplomacy to balance major powers and safeguard its strategic autonomy. Besides, Singer and Friedman (2014) observed that China and the US compete geopolitically in the cyber domain. Branch (2020) cautioned that over-reliance on military tools sidelines diplomacy and worsens tensions rather than solving them. De Waal (2015) argued that the Horn of Africa's *realpolitik perpetuates* conflicts despite heavy military presence for long-term stability. Additionally, Nyakora (2024) found that Kenya-US relations converge on security but diverge on democracy. Antecedent literature, therefore, reveal that a number of studies largely focus on the Global North military capabilities with limited attention to political dynamics of military diplomacy in the Global South, particularly Kenya.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted descriptive research design. According to Cresswell (2014), research design is preponderant 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 guided 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' (Prestholt, 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

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 Political dynamics

The study assessed the political dynamics of Kenya-US military diplomacy. The study found out that out of 125 respondents, 79 (63.2%) strongly agreed that counterterrorism cooperation exemplified itself between the two countries, 61 respondents were from Kenya and 18 respondents from the US, 31 (24.8%) agreed to the inquiry, 24 respondents were from Kenya and 7 respondents from the US, 2 (1.6%) were neutral, 8 (6.4%) disagreed and 5 (4%) strongly disagreed. Besides, out of 125 respondents, 12 (9.6%) indicated that China's growing influence was driving factor in Kenya-US military diplomacy, 10 respondents were from Kenya and 2 respondents from the US, 84 (67.2%) agreed to the inquiry, 66 respondents were from Kenya and 18 respondents from the US, 4 (3.2%) from Kenya were neutral, 21 (16.8%) disagreed, 16 respondents were from Kenya and 5 respondents from the US and 4 (4%) respondents from Kenya strongly disagreed. Regarding, domestic political transitions, out of total respondents, 5 (4%) strongly agreed that domestic political transitions influenced Kenya-US military diplomacy, 4 respondents were from Kenya and 1 respondent from the US, 91 (72.8%) agreed with the inquiry, 72 respondents were from Kenya and 19 respondents from the US, 3 (2.4%) were neutral, 20 (16%) disagreed, 16 respondents were from Kenya and 4 respondents from the US and 6 (4.8%) strongly disagreed to the question, 5 respondents were from Kenya and 1 respondent from the US. In light of maritime security, out of 125 respondents, 77 (61.6%) strongly agreed that maritime security was a driving factor in Kenya-US military diplomacy, 60 respondents were from Kenya and 17 respondents from the US. Besides, 28 (22.4%)

agreed to the inquiry, 22 respondents were from Kenya and 6 respondents from the US, 3(2.4%) were neutral, 12 (9.6%) disagreed, 10 respondents were from Kenya and 2 respondents from the US and 5(4%) from strongly disagreed.

Regarding shifts in US foreign policy, the study found that, out of 125 respondents, 82(65.6%) strongly agreed that shift in US foreign policy affects Kenya-US military diplomacy, 64 respondents were from Kenya and 18 respondents from the US. Further, 19 (15.2%) agreed to the inquiry, 16 respondents were from Kenya and 3 respondents from the US, 3(2.4%) were neutral, 17(13.6%) disagreed, 14 respondents were from Kenya and 3 respondents from the US and 4(3.2%) strongly disagreed that shift in US foreign policy influences Kenya-US military diplomacy, 3 respondents were from Kenya and 1 respondent from the US. The results are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

Political dynamics of Kenya-US dyadic Military Diplomacy

Factors Assessed	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Counterterrorism Cooperation	79 (63.2%)	31(24.8%)	2(1.6%)	8(6.4%)	5(4%)
China's Growing influence	12(9.6%)	84(67.2%)	4(3.2%)	21(16.8%)	4(4%)
Domestic Political Transitions	5(4%)	91(72.8%)	3(2.4%)	20(16%)	6(4.8%)
Maritime security	77(61.6%)	28(22.4%)	3(2.4%)	12(9.6%)	5(4%)

4.1.1 Counterterrorism efforts

In light of the foregoing findings, McFate (2019), argues that counterterrorism efforts have preponderantly defined US engagements in Africa and particularly in Kenya due to its proximity to Somalia. This assertion resonated with 79(63.2%) respondents who strongly agreed that counterterrorism cooperation is central to Kenya-US dyadic military diplomacy. Mwangi (2016) further posits that, from a pragmatic sense, the strategic importance of Kenya as a counterterrorism partner places Kenya in a proximate position to support US interest in the Horn of Africa. Nyakora (2024) further highlights the role of intelligence-sharing and military assistance how important these dimensions are in fortifying Kenya's counterterrorism capabilities. Contrariwise, Branch (2020) critiques counterterrorism cooperation as a driver and lever of militarization and potential human rights violations, arguing that excessive reliance on military solutions exacerbate underlying political as well as socio-economic issues. This assertion resonates with 8(6.4%) respondents who disagreed and 5(4%) who strongly disagreed. This state of disagreement is attributed to portion of Kenyan stakeholders who remain skeptical of the benefits of counterterrorism cooperation.

4.1.2 China's growing influence

In retrospect, the study's findings resonate with Sun (2020) who asserts that China's expansionist agenda to stamp its military footprint in Africa, and Kenya specifically, has augmented strategic recalibrations in Kenya-US military diplomacy. Cumulatively, 76.8% agreed with this view underscoring the growing importance of China's presence as a shaping force in African military contours. Sun (2020) eviscerates that China's influence has contributed to the unprecedented shifts in the manner in which the US is operating in Africa. For instance, the increased military aid and partnership in East Africa, especially in Kenya. On the other hand, Eneka (2012) contends that while China's influence in Africa is indubitable and does not necessarily dictate Kenya-US military diplomacy since security and well as historical ties between these two countries remain deeply entrenched in their political fabric. This counterpoint aligns with the 21(16.8%) respondents who disagreed with the inquiry that China's rise is a key factor in Kenya-US military relations. Further, Migue (2014) argues that China's expansion of security engagements in Africa is part of Beijing's geostrategic aims to advance its global security posture. Adams (2023) acknowledges that Kenya's military partnerships have been dominated by the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States, it is important to interrogate whether China seeks to establish more military bases in Africa and in particular in Kenya (Vines *et al.*, 2024). China is expanding military relations with non-traditional partners like Kenya. However, this military expansionist agenda is not clear (Migue, 2014). Therefore, China's security assistance to Kenya has intermittently grown despite emphasizing on arms exports and expanded joint military trainings. The researcher contends that, albeit China has made significant inroads in Africa as well as in Kenya, the traditional diplomatic and military ties between Kenya and US still carry advantageous weight in the Horn of Africa.

4.1.3 Domestic political transitions

The study revealed that domestic political transitions significantly influenced Kenya-US military diplomacy with cumulative number 96(76.8%) agreeing to the inquiry. This finding was in tandem with Mūnene (2023) who opined those changes in Kenya's political leadership often shift in diplomatic and military priorities, consequently, affecting

bilateral agreements and cooperation frameworks. In this light, Apuuli (2016) avers those political changes in both Kenya and the US shape security collaborations and policy alignments. In support of the antecedent view, one of the key informants stated that:

“Domestic political transitions have far reached implications. The changing administrations often lead to shifts in national security policies as well as nature of bilateral agreements. Over the years, Kenya’s military and diplomatic postures have been influenced by change of regime” (KII at Ministry of Foreign affairs, Nairobi 2.2.2023).

In light of the preventient assertion, Boutellis and Zahar (2017) argue that while domestic politics play a significant role, the researcher argues that, strategic interests underpinning military diplomacy between Kenya and the US have remained relatively stable over the years. These views are supported by one of the key respondents who averred that:

“Whereas policy shifts may occur, the core military cooperation frameworks remain largely intact due to long-standing security interests between Kenya and the US. Arguably, the challenge lies in ensuring that the domestic transitions do not jeopardize these dyadic relations” (Interview with KII at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2.2.2023, Nairobi).

In view of the foregoing, 26 (20.8%) was of the opinion that Kenya-US military diplomacy lies largely on independent domestic political transitions. These respondents were skeptical that such transitions often lead to erosion of one’s sovereignty.

4.1.4 Maritime Security

Maritime security also emerged as an important political dynamic with 77(61.6%) strongly agreeing while 28 (22.4%) agreeing. In this light, Nyakora (2024) highlights the geo-strategic importance of Kenya’s coastline in securing maritime trade routes. Besides, US naval cooperation with Kenya has enhanced regional maritime security and bolstered diplomatic ties (Frost, 2026). However, Saleem (2023) argued that while maritime security is a crucial component, it is often overshadowed with other security concerns such as counterterrorism. This divergent view reflected the opinions of 12(9.6%) respondents and 5(4%) respondents who strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively.

In view of the antecedent views one of the key respondents stated that:

“Kenya is security anchor state in the Indian Ocean region. Kenya is the command’s largest exercise in East African focusing on advancing maritime security objectives by synchronizing operational efforts to foster, more secure and prosperous East Africa” (Interview with KII USAFRICOM Liason office, 26/2/2023, Nairobi).

These findings underscore that maritime security is a central pillar of Kenya-US dyadic military engagements. Further, these ties, provide both political and strategic relevance for littoral states. Fundamentally, the recognition of Kenya’s coastline as a critical geo-economic mainstay safeguards Indian Ocean trade routes. As Frost (2026) opines, despite joint patrols and rapid response capabilities, competing priorities continue unabated. Thus, an emerging debate on whether maritime security receives adequate strategic attention by the USAFRICOM (Frost, 2026).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that, despite sustained partnerships, Kenya-US dyadic military diplomacy underpinned by USAFRICOM philosophy still emphasizes on command-driven approach instead of enhancing a robust partnership model built on mutual respect. The persistence of command-driven military diplomacy model reflect asymmetries in strategic influence as well as operational capabilities of Kenya. This limits Kenya’s participation in determining the priorities of bilateral military engagements. Besides, USAFRICOM’s strategic posture requires greater sensitivity to Kenya’s domestic political realities as well as security environment. The military engagements insufficiently account for local contexts that exacerbates implementation challenges. Thus, USAFRICOM’s current posture requires recalibration since it thinly promotes context-sensitive operations and neglects the Kenya’s political realities and developmental priorities.

5.2 Recommendation

This study recommends that, there is need to bolster mutual respect and reciprocity. This will enable both partners to recognize each other’s national interests and security priorities. Therefore, Kenya should be treated as an active strategic partner rather than a recipient of external military assistance. Besides, there is need for restructuring strategic engagement in order to enhance Kenya’s agency in reducing overreliance on external logistical and intelligence support, entrench interoperability with autonomy without undermining independent command structure as well as eschewing sovereignty interference.



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.

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