

Balancing Giants: Kenya's Foreign Policy Between the West and China in the 21st Century

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Introduction

In an era of shifting global power dynamics, the East African state of Kenya occupies a uniquely strategic position. Flanked by Indian Ocean access, regional trade routes, and a history of Western alliances, Kenya now finds itself recalibrating its foreign policy between traditional Western partners (especially the United States and European Union) and the rising influence of China. This paper argues that Kenya's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a deliberate Balancing Act: leveraging Chinese infrastructure investment and trade opportunities while trying to maintain the political, security, and normative benefits derived from its Western relationships. This balancing reflects both opportunity and risk: opportunity in terms of alternative sources of finance and strategic options, and risk in terms of dependency, sovereignty questions, and diplomatic pressure. Understanding this balance is critical not only for Kenya but also for broader debates on how middle-power states navigate great-power competition in Africa.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, a review of the existing literature on China–Africa relations and Western engagement with Africa; second, articulation of a theoretical framework combining middle-power theory and multi-alignment strategies; third, an empirical examination of Kenya's relations with China and with the West (2000–2025); fourth, analysis of how Kenya's foreign policy has balanced competing influences and the tensions that have emerged; fifth, policy implications for Kenya and for other African states; and finally, the conclusion.

Literature Review

China–Africa Relations

A large body of literature has emerged on China’s engagement in Africa, characterised by infrastructure financing, trade expansion, and discourse of “win-win cooperation.” For example, Kenya has been identified as “Kenya’s pivotal role” in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Kenya’s infrastructure partnerships with China, such as the Nairobi–Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), illustrate this engagement. Critics argue that China’s model may lead to debt-trap diplomacy (though this notion is contested) and can create dependencies.

Western Engagement in Africa

Western powers—particularly the United States and the European Union—have engaged Africa through aid, security partnerships, and governance programmes. However, some scholars argue that Western engagement has suffered from perceptions of paternalism, conditionality, and declining relative influence in the face of rising Asian powers.

Kenya’s Foreign Policy Literature

In the Kenyan context, research emphasises Kenya’s aspirations to become a regional hub and a middle power in East Africa. Kenya’s visions such as “Vision 2030” reflect its developmental ambitions, which require diversified foreign partnerships. Its history of Western alliances (in security, trade, aid) provides a backdrop to its foreign policy reorientation towards China. For instance, Kenya has become one of China’s closest African partners, reflecting a “tilt” towards Chinese infrastructure and trade.

However, there is limited work that directly frames Kenya’s foreign policy as a multi-aligned balancing strategy between the West and China. This paper fills that gap by applying an IR theoretical lens to Kenyan policy.

Theoretical Framework

Middle-Power Theory & Multi-Alignment

Middle powers are states that are not major great powers but still exert significant regional or global influence. They often pursue flexible diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and balancing strategies. In the context of great-power competition, middle powers may adopt multi-

alignment—engaging with multiple great powers simultaneously to maximise autonomy and strategic benefit.

This framework suggests that Kenya, as a regional middle power in East Africa, will navigate between China and the West by:

- Diversifying partnerships to avoid over-dependence on any single power
- Leveraging trade, investment, and security deals to enhance national development
- Managing tensions that arise from conflicting interests of larger powers
- Maintaining domestic legitimacy by demonstrating agency and sovereignty

Application to Kenya

Applying this model to Kenya means analysing how Kenya engages with China and the West in infrastructure, trade, security, and diplomacy; how it manages the inherent tensions; and what this balancing reveals about its strategic autonomy.

Empirical Examination

Kenya–China Relations

Kenya and China established diplomatic relations on 14 December 1963. In recent years, bilateral relations accelerated: high-level visits, a strategic partnership declared in 2017, and large Chinese investments. The BRI and infrastructure assistance have been central: for example, the SGR connecting Mombasa and Nairobi was financed largely by Chinese loans and constructed by Chinese firms. Trade between Kenya and China continues to grow. According to one source, bilateral trade reached approximately USD 7.9 billion in 2023. The African Report notes that China is Kenya’s largest bilateral lender and lead contractor on major roads, rails, ports, and power projects.

However, risks have surfaced: concerns about Kenya’s debt burden to China, possible loss of control over strategic assets (e.g., the Mombasa port), and critiques of local employment and tendering practices in Chinese-led projects.

Kenya–Western Partnerships

Kenya continues significant partnerships with Western powers. The U.S., for instance, engages Kenya in security cooperation, as Kenya hosts U.S. military bases and is a major recipient of U.S. aid in East Africa. At the same time, Western trade and governance links remain important for Kenya's access to markets and normative legitimacy. However, recent reporting suggests that Kenya faces pressure from the U.S. over its deepening ties with China. For example, Kenya was threatened with revocation of certain U.S. military and economic benefits due to its alignment with China.

Balancing Behaviour

Kenya's foreign policy reveals a number of balancing behaviours:

- Infrastructure and investment deals with China, especially where Western financing was constrained or conditional.
- Maintaining security and diplomatic relationships with the West, including membership in Western-led forums and access to Western aid and military programmes.
- Moments of tension: for example, Kenya's public praise of China's role in a "new world order" triggered U.S. warning.
- Attempted hedging: Kenya negotiating to convert a Chinese dollar-denominated loan into yuan to reduce debt burdens.

These behaviours fit the multi-alignment strategy: Kenya is engaging both powers but seeking agency and flexibility.

Analysis: Tensions, Trade-offs and Strategic Implications

Economic Dependencies and Sovereignty

By aligning with China for infrastructure, Kenya has gained rapid development benefits, but the heavy reliance on Chinese capital has sparked concerns about debt sustainability and sovereignty.

Domestic Legitimacy and Foreign Policy

Kenya must manage domestic perceptions of its foreign policy. Chinese projects bring visible infrastructure gains but also local critiques about job creation, tender processes, and foreign

worker influx. Meanwhile, Western partnerships carry reputational advantages but may be seen as neo-colonial or conditional. Kenya's foreign policy must thus meet development expectations at home while navigating geopolitics.

Regional Leadership and Middle-Power Ambitions

Kenya's balancing approach advances its ambition to be a regional middle power. By engaging with China, Kenya asserts independence from Western dominance; by sustaining Western links, it retains access to global institutions and legitimacy. This dual approach amplifies Kenya's influence within the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

Policy Implications

For Kenya:

- **Debt management** is critical: Kenya must ensure Chinese borrowing does not compromise strategic assets or fiscal sovereignty.
- **Strategic clarity** in foreign policy: Kenya should articulate how it balances China and the West, avoiding ad hoc swings that might provoke partner backlash.
- **Domestic integration of foreign projects**: Ensuring local content, transparent tendering, and employment will boost legitimacy and reduce backlash.
- **Regional integration leverage**: Kenya can use its China and West links to foster infrastructure and trade cooperation with neighbours, enhancing its regional role.

For other African states: Kenya's model highlights the potential of multi-alignment, but also the risks. States must weigh economic benefits against dependency, ensure domestic gains, and maintain diplomatic autonomy.

For Western partners: The shift of African states toward China underlines the need for more flexible and respectful engagement strategies—less patronage, more equal partnership.

For China: Kenya shows that Chinese infrastructure and investment diplomacy works—but winning trust requires more transparency, local employment, and sensitivity to recipient states' sovereignty.

I. Economic Dependencies and Sovereignty

Kenya's engagement with China has been one of the most transformative yet controversial aspects of its 21st-century foreign policy. While Beijing's development financing has facilitated unprecedented infrastructure growth, it has simultaneously deepened Kenya's economic exposure and raised debates about debt dependency, sovereignty, and long-term strategic autonomy.

The political economy of China–Kenya relations reflects a dual dynamic: on one hand, China as a catalyst for development, and on the other, China as a creditor with structural leverage. This duality underscores the delicate balance Kenya faces between economic pragmatism and sovereign caution.

1. The Infrastructure Boom and the Promise of Development

Since the early 2000s, China has emerged as Kenya's largest bilateral lender and trading partner. The Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR)—Kenya's most ambitious infrastructure project since independence—was financed through a USD 5 billion loan from the Export–Import Bank of China.

The SGR and other Chinese-financed projects such as the Nairobi Expressway, Lamu Port, and segments of the LAPSSET Corridor have accelerated connectivity, reduced logistics costs, and symbolised Kenya's aspiration to become an East African trade hub (UNAV, n.d.). These projects align with Kenya's Vision 2030, a development blueprint emphasising infrastructure-led growth.

From the Kenyan government's perspective, China's financing model—characterised by speed, scale, and limited conditionality—has provided an attractive alternative to Western aid, which often comes tied to governance reforms or human-rights preconditions (Corkin, 2016). This flexibility allows Kenya to pursue its developmental agenda without direct political interference.

However, this model is loan-driven rather than grant-based, and repayment terms are often opaque. As of 2023, Kenya's debt to China stood at approximately USD 6.8 billion, representing a significant portion of its total external liabilities.

2. Debt Dependency and the Spectre of “Debt-Trap Diplomacy”

The concept of “debt-trap diplomacy” popularised by Western analysts who suggests that China intentionally extends unsustainable loans to developing countries to gain strategic leverage over critical assets (Brautigam, 2020). While many African scholars argue this notion oversimplifies complex economic relations, the Kenyan case has nonetheless been at the centre of this debate.

Concerns about a possible collateralisation of the Mombasa Port surfaced in 2018 when leaked audit reports hinted that Kenya’s port authority had committed assets as loan security to Chinese lenders (The Africa Report). Although both Nairobi and Beijing denied any takeover clauses, the episode intensified public fears that Kenya might lose control over sovereign infrastructure if debt obligations were not met.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that Kenya’s debt challenge is multilateral, not uniquely Chinese. A large portion of its debt is also owed to the World Bank, IMF, and Eurobond holders. As Brautigam (2020) notes, “China’s role in African debt is significant, but the notion of debt-trap diplomacy exaggerates Beijing’s control and underestimates African agency.”

What distinguishes China’s loans, however, is their scale, visibility, and political symbolism. The physical manifestation of Chinese-financed infrastructure—highways, ports, and railways—makes debt more tangible and politically charged in public discourse. This visibility amplifies nationalist anxieties about sovereignty and foreign influence, even when debt terms are commercially comparable to those of other lenders.

3. Sovereignty Concerns and Strategic Autonomy

Economic dependency inevitably intersects with questions of sovereignty and policy autonomy. Kenya’s growing indebtedness to China raises concerns about how financial obligations may translate into political deference or strategic compromises.

Kenya’s predicament exemplifies what dependency theorists describe as “asymmetric interdependence”—wherein developing nations remain formally sovereign but structurally constrained by economic ties to more powerful states (Amin, 1976). In Kenya’s case,

dependence on Chinese financing potentially limits its leverage in negotiations and may shape foreign-policy preferences subtly rather than overtly.

However, it would be reductive to frame Kenya merely as a victim of dependency. Nairobi has demonstrated strategic agency by diversifying partnerships, seeking debt renegotiations, and maintaining strong ties with Western institutions. Kenya's participation in U.S.-led security initiatives, EU trade programmes, and multilateral financial institutions underscores its pragmatic pursuit of balance. This approach aligns with its multi-alignment strategy, wherein engagement with China complements—not replaces—its Western partnerships (Lazar, 2013).

4. Domestic Politics and the Debt Discourse

Domestically, Kenya's debt relationship with China has become a politically charged issue. Opposition parties and civil-society organisations frequently criticise Chinese loans as opaque, corruption-prone, and inequitable. Public sentiment toward China has oscillated between admiration for its visible infrastructure projects and apprehension over growing dependency. A 2023 Afrobarometer survey found that while 58% of Kenyans viewed China positively as a development partner, nearly half expressed concerns over debt sustainability and foreign influence (Afrobarometer, 2023). The Kenyan government has responded to this discourse by emphasising the developmental outcomes of Chinese partnerships and framing debt as a necessary instrument of growth.

Nonetheless, the politicisation of Chinese debt underscores the domestic dimension of Kenya's foreign policy balancing. The government must not only manage external relations but also maintain public trust by ensuring transparency, accountability, and tangible economic returns.

5. Balancing Economic Pragmatism and Sovereignty

Kenya's experience demonstrates that economic pragmatism and sovereignty are not mutually exclusive, but must be constantly negotiated. While Chinese loans have expanded Kenya's infrastructure and global visibility, they have also made debt management a central determinant of foreign-policy autonomy.

Kenya's ability to balance these forces depends on several factors:

1. Diversification of financing sources to avoid single-creditor dependency.

2. Institutional transparency in debt contracting and management.
3. Leveraging regional platforms like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to reduce reliance on external markets.
4. Strengthening domestic revenue mobilisation to sustain infrastructure without perpetual borrowing.

In this sense, Kenya’s “balancing act” between economic pragmatism and sovereignty is emblematic of broader African agency in a multipolar world. It reflects not passive dependence but active navigation—an attempt to convert global competition into developmental opportunity while safeguarding autonomy.

II. Diplomatic Pressure and Strategic Autonomy

Kenya’s effort to balance between the West and China demonstrates both the promise and peril of multi-alignment diplomacy. While Nairobi seeks to harness opportunities from both sides, moments of great-power divergence expose the vulnerabilities of a middle-power state operating in an increasingly multipolar environment.

1. The Logic of Balancing in a Multipolar World

In IR theory, small and middle powers such as Kenya often engage in “soft balancing”—a strategy aimed at maintaining flexibility and hedging against overdependence on any one great power (Paul, 2004). Kenya’s foreign policy over the past two decades fits this pattern. Through deepening economic cooperation with China while retaining security and institutional partnerships with the West, Kenya has attempted to achieve a dual-track diplomacy that maximises developmental gains and preserves political agency.

However, balancing becomes inherently difficult when the strategic objectives of external actors are mutually exclusive. While China promotes an alternative model of South–South cooperation premised on non-interference and infrastructure-driven development (Brautigam, 2020), Western partners—particularly the U.S. and the European Union—continue to emphasise conditionality, governance standards, and geopolitical alignment.

This illustrates the structural dilemma of dependent interdependence: Kenya benefits from both sides yet risks alienating one when expressing alignment with the other. As Narlikar (2010)

observes, such dilemmas are endemic to “sub-systemic powers,” which operate in asymmetric relationships where autonomy is always contingent upon external tolerance.

2. Western Leverage and the Constraints on Autonomy

The United States and the European Union remain critical partners for Kenya in terms of security cooperation, trade, and diplomatic legitimacy. Kenya hosts U.S. military installations such as Camp Simba in Lamu and supports counterterrorism operations against Al-Shabaab under the *African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)* (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Western partnerships also provide Kenya with preferential trade access through frameworks like the *African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)* and the *EU–East African Community Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)*.

These partnerships grant the West substantial leverage over Nairobi’s foreign policy. The incident revealed that Western engagement remains conditioned not only on shared economic interests but also on ideological conformity with liberal-democratic values and geopolitical loyalties. This dynamic reinforces the realist assumption that asymmetry defines relationships between major and minor powers. The capacity of a small or middle power to exercise autonomy is proportional to its ability to diversify dependence. Kenya’s balancing act is thus not an abstract diplomatic manoeuvre but a material calculation—one that weighs economic rewards from China against the security and normative capital offered by the West.

However, Western pressure risks reinforcing anti-Western narratives within Kenya’s domestic discourse. Public intellectuals and media commentators increasingly frame such warnings as evidence of neo-colonial double standards—where Western actors tolerate sovereignty only when it aligns with their interests (Mutua, n.d). This discursive backlash bolsters Kenya’s justification for deepening ties with non-Western partners as an assertion of independence.

3. China’s Expanding Diplomatic Space in Kenya

China’s approach to diplomacy in Kenya deliberately contrasts with Western conditionality. Beijing presents its engagement as “respectful partnership” based on mutual benefit and non-interference in domestic affairs. This narrative resonates strongly in Nairobi, where policymakers have historically resented the prescriptive tone of Western donors.

Chinese diplomacy in Kenya operates through a combination of elite-to-elite engagement, development cooperation, and symbolic solidarity. For example, China’s active role in major infrastructure inaugurations—often attended by high-level Kenyan and Chinese officials—serves as visible markers of bilateral goodwill (UNAV, n.d.). The Confucius Institutes in Nairobi and Eldoret, the expansion of media partnerships with Chinese broadcasters, and growing educational exchanges are part of Beijing’s broader strategy to embed itself within Kenya’s cultural and informational ecosystem (Shambaugh, 2020).

However, this growing influence complicates Kenya’s diplomatic balancing. As Western powers perceive Chinese influence as strategic encroachment, Nairobi faces the risk of being cast as a “swing state” in the emerging great-power competition for Africa. Western anxiety over Chinese soft power in Kenya underscores how even cultural diplomacy can become geopolitically securitised.

4. Navigating the Pressures: Kenya’s Strategic Autonomy in Practice

Kenya’s pursuit of strategic autonomy involves careful rhetorical calibration and pragmatic diplomacy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) emphasised a doctrine of “economic diplomacy grounded in diversification”, asserting that Kenya’s engagement with China and the West is complementary rather than competitive.

In practice, Kenya demonstrates autonomy through several mechanisms:

- **Issue-specific alignment:** Nairobi supports Western initiatives on counterterrorism and governance while endorsing Chinese-led projects on infrastructure and trade.
- **Regional multilateralism:** By anchoring its foreign policy in African Union (AU) and East African Community (EAC) frameworks, Kenya reduces the perception of alignment with either bloc.
- **Symbolic neutrality:** Kenyan leaders increasingly employ language of “strategic partnership with all global actors,” signalling balance without overt allegiance.

This behaviour is consistent with what Kuik (2008) calls “hedging strategy”—a nuanced approach where states maintain relationships with competing powers to extract economic benefits while preparing for adverse shifts in alignment.

Kenya's balancing success lies not in strict neutrality but in fluid pragmatism—leveraging competition among powers to enhance its bargaining position. Yet, the structural limitations of this strategy persist. When crises arise—such as U.S. threats or potential debt renegotiations with China—Kenya's room for manoeuvre narrows. Autonomy thus exists on a spectrum, fluctuating with economic performance, debt exposure, and regional geopolitics.

5. The Paradox of Autonomy

Kenya's balancing act embodies what political scientist Robert Keohane (1969) termed the “paradox of autonomy”—that the pursuit of independence through multiple alignments often generates new dependencies. Each attempt to reduce reliance on one partner deepens interdependence with another.

For Kenya, Chinese loans and infrastructure have reduced Western leverage in development policy but increased financial exposure to Beijing. Conversely, reliance on Western security assistance limits Nairobi's ability to align fully with China's foreign-policy narratives. The result is not autonomy in an absolute sense, but a managed interdependence shaped by negotiation, rhetoric, and selective compliance.

Nevertheless, this dynamic does not imply weakness. Rather, it reflects the adaptive agency of African states in navigating external pressures. As Mlambo (2022) argues, African diplomacy today is characterised by “strategic manoeuvrability”—a pragmatic use of great-power competition to extract maximum benefits. Kenya's actions exemplify this trend: it uses Western and Chinese engagements as levers to advance national priorities rather than as expressions of ideological loyalty.

III. Domestic Legitimacy and Foreign Policy

Foreign policy, while conducted externally, is ultimately anchored in domestic legitimacy. For Kenya, a nation with visible socio-economic inequalities and a highly politicised development discourse, external partnerships are evaluated not merely through strategic lenses but through their tangible impact on citizens' lives. The credibility of Kenya's foreign policy—

whether toward China or the West—depends on its capacity to deliver growth, employment, and sovereignty while avoiding perceptions of exploitation or dependency.

1. The Domestic Imperative of Developmental Legitimacy

In Kenya, infrastructure development has become the central currency of political legitimacy. Governments are judged by their ability to deliver visible projects—roads, ports, railways, and power plants—that signify progress. Chinese partnerships have excelled in this regard. Projects such as the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), Nairobi Expressway, and Lamu Port have physically transformed Kenya’s urban and transport landscape.

Chinese loans and turnkey project models have enabled rapid implementation, often circumventing the procedural bottlenecks that delay Western-funded programmes (Brautigam, 2020). For the Kenyan government, this “visible development diplomacy” translates directly into political capital—a narrative of transformation that resonates with voters.

However, these same projects have sparked domestic controversies. Critics argue that the benefits of Chinese investments are unevenly distributed and that procurement processes lack transparency.

Such perceptions can erode the legitimacy of foreign partnerships. The opposition has capitalised on these grievances, portraying Chinese engagement as a form of “economic recolonisation” under a new guise (Mutua, n.d.). Civil-society groups like the *Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA-Kenya)* have demanded greater parliamentary oversight of foreign debt and public disclosure of loan agreements, reflecting a growing demand for transparency in foreign relations.

2. Western Partnerships and the Politics of Conditionality

In contrast, Kenya’s engagement with Western partners—notably the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union—carries symbolic legitimacy rooted in shared democratic ideals, long-standing aid relationships, and participation in global governance structures. Western aid programmes have contributed to Kenya’s social sectors, including education, health, and governance reforms (USAID, 2023).

However, Western partnerships also evoke historical and ideological sensitivities. Many Kenyans perceive Western engagement as conditional and paternalistic, often tied to political reforms, human-rights compliance, or anti-corruption benchmarks (Corkin, 2016). While these conditions align with good governance principles, they also generate resentment among policymakers who view them as infringements on sovereignty.

Public debates frequently contrast Western “lecturing diplomacy” with China’s “respectful cooperation.” As one Kenyan editorial put it, “The West offers advice and caution; China offers roads and bridges” (*Daily Nation*, 2023). This dichotomy—however simplistic—captures the symbolic politics of foreign policy: development visibility often trumps normative rhetoric.

The result is a dual perception: Western partnerships are associated with governance legitimacy but slow results, whereas Chinese engagements deliver rapid development but raise ethical and fiscal concerns. The Kenyan government must navigate these competing expectations to maintain both domestic and international credibility.

3. Media Narratives and Public Opinion

Kenya’s vibrant media environment and active civil society play crucial roles in shaping public perceptions of foreign policy. Media coverage of foreign relations often reflects broader domestic frustrations over inequality, unemployment, and corruption.

An Afrobarometer (2023) survey revealed that 58% of Kenyans view China’s influence as positive, citing infrastructure and trade benefits, while 48% express concern about growing indebtedness and loss of economic sovereignty. Conversely, Western countries maintain a high trust rating (65%), but respondents criticised the West for “imposing conditions” and “ignoring local priorities.” These ambivalent attitudes demonstrate that public support for foreign policy is conditional and pragmatic, not ideological.

Social media further amplifies these narratives. On platforms like X (formerly Twitter), hashtags such as #KenyaInDebt and #ChinaInKenya trend periodically, often during loan negotiations or debt-repayment crises. Such digital discourse transforms foreign policy into a publicly contested domain, compelling leaders to justify external engagements in terms of national benefit rather than elite diplomacy (Nyabola, 2022).

Domestic legitimacy thus requires not only development outcomes but also narrative management—how the government communicates its balancing strategy to citizens who demand accountability and results.

4. Political Opposition and Partisan Contestation

Kenya's foreign policy debates often reflect domestic political rivalries. During election cycles, opposition parties frequently weaponise external partnerships to criticise the incumbent government's competence and sovereignty.

Similarly, Western engagement becomes politicised when linked to perceived interference. U.S. and EU statements on governance or human rights are often framed by nationalist politicians as attempts to influence domestic politics. This dynamic forces the government to perform a delicate balancing act—accepting Western funding and security cooperation while asserting rhetorical independence.

Foreign policy, therefore, becomes a mirror of domestic legitimacy: the government's ability to project control and competence in external relations is tied to its internal political authority. As Mlambo (2022) notes, "African foreign policy is most effective when it reinforces domestic legitimacy rather than undermines it."

5. Development Expectations and Geopolitical Navigation

Kenya's foreign policy operates at the intersection of developmental performance and geopolitical competition. The legitimacy of its balancing strategy ultimately depends on whether citizens perceive foreign partnerships—whether Western or Chinese—as improving livelihoods, creating jobs, and enhancing sovereignty.

The government's challenge is threefold:

1. **Deliver tangible benefits** from both partnerships while managing debt sustainability.
2. **Institutionalise transparency** in foreign borrowing and investment agreements.
3. **Frame foreign relations as non-partisan public goods**, not elite transactions.

Kenya's *Foreign Policy White Paper (2014)* articulates a vision of "a peaceful, prosperous, and globally competitive Kenya" driven by "diversified partnerships and mutual respect." Yet

implementation has often lagged behind rhetoric. Domestic legitimacy will depend on reconciling the promise of global partnerships with the everyday realities of Kenyan citizens.

IV. Regional Leadership and Middle-Power Ambitions

Kenya's strategic balancing between the West and China does not occur in isolation—it forms part of a broader aspiration to consolidate its position as a regional middle power in East Africa. As one of the continent's most diversified economies and a diplomatic hub, Kenya seeks to translate its economic partnerships and geopolitical leverage into regional leadership within frameworks such as the East African Community (EAC), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the African Union (AU).

This ambition reflects both material and ideational dimensions: material, in Kenya's ability to project economic and military capabilities; and ideational, in its construction of a foreign policy identity that balances sovereignty, development, and multilateralism.

1. Kenya's Regional Profile: From Frontier State to Diplomatic Pivot

Kenya's foreign policy evolution mirrors its transition from a frontline state during the Cold War to a diplomatic pivot in a multipolar Africa. With a stable political system relative to its neighbours and a dynamic service-based economy, Kenya has historically functioned as a regional anchor for trade, finance, and peace diplomacy (Brown, 2012).

The country's geographic location—bordering the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean—gives it unique access to continental and maritime trade routes. This strategic geography underpins its ambition to serve as the logistical gateway to East and Central Africa, with the Port of Mombasa and the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor symbolising its infrastructural outreach (Kimenyi & Lewis, 2016).

Within this context, partnerships with both China and the West are instrumental to Kenya's regional aspirations. Chinese financing has enabled Kenya to upgrade its transport corridors, energy networks, and digital infrastructure, thereby strengthening its regional economic connectivity (UNAV, n.d.). Meanwhile, Western engagement—through the European Union, USAID, and the UK's Commonwealth links—provides Kenya with access to global governance mechanisms, security cooperation, and diplomatic legitimacy (USAID, 2023).

By integrating both relationships into its regional agenda, Kenya transforms external balancing into an instrument of internal leadership.

2. Middle-Power Diplomacy: Theory and African Adaptation

The concept of middle power traditionally applies to states that are neither great powers nor small powers but exert disproportionate influence through diplomacy, coalition-building, and normative leadership (Chapnick, 1999). Middle powers act as “bridges, catalysts, and stabilisers” in the international system (Cooper, Higgot, & Nossal, 1993).

In the African context, middle-power diplomacy has been adapted to describe states like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, which combine regional leadership ambitions with global engagement (Prys, 2010). Kenya’s middle-power identity is particularly evident in three domains:

1. Regional mediation and peace diplomacy – Kenya has hosted and facilitated peace processes in Sudan (2005), Somalia, and Ethiopia (2022).
2. Economic integration and trade leadership – Kenya spearheads EAC initiatives such as the Customs Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) coordination mechanisms.
3. Norm entrepreneurship – Kenya promotes principles of African-led solutions, climate diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation at the UN and AU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

This diplomatic versatility exemplifies what Schoeman (2011) calls “*middle-power activism*”—leveraging soft power and moral authority to shape regional norms. Kenya’s leadership thus depends not only on material strength but also on the perception of responsibility and reliability in the region.

3. Leveraging China and the West for Regional Ambition

Kenya’s dual engagement with China and the West enhances its regional influence in complementary ways.

From China, Kenya gains access to infrastructure-driven regional connectivity. Projects such as the SGR, Lamu Port, and cross-border roads to Uganda and South Sudan enhance Nairobi’s

role as a commercial hub linking the EAC to global supply chains. These projects also extend China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into East Africa, positioning Kenya as Beijing's logistical and diplomatic anchor in the region (UNAV, n.d.).

From the West, Kenya secures security legitimacy and multilateral influence. Its collaboration with Western partners through peacekeeping missions, counterterrorism operations, and diplomatic initiatives reinforces its standing as a responsible regional actor. The U.S. and European support for Kenya's mediation in South Sudan (2015) and its chairmanship of the IGAD revitalisation process underscore this credibility (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Thus, Kenya's regional leadership is not a zero-sum outcome of choosing one bloc over another. Instead, it is a hybrid strategy—using Western partnerships for governance and security legitimacy, and Chinese cooperation for economic and infrastructural leverage. This synthesis exemplifies what Thakur and Van Langenhove (2006) describe as “multivector diplomacy”, where middle powers diversify alignments to advance regional and global influence.

4. Regional Multilateralism and Collective Agency

Kenya's leadership within EAC and IGAD reflects its emphasis on collective regional agency as a mechanism of sovereignty protection. By embedding its policies within regional institutions, Kenya both multiplies its influence and buffers itself from external pressure.

Within the EAC, Kenya has championed economic integration and the move toward a monetary union. It remains the bloc's largest economy and a key advocate of harmonised tariffs and investment frameworks (EAC Secretariat, 2023). Within IGAD, Kenya's mediation in the Ethiopian–Tigray conflict and its support for stabilisation in Somalia showcase its commitment to peace diplomacy (Mlambo, 2022).

By situating its balancing strategy within these institutions, Kenya projects itself as a collective voice of the region, not merely a bilateral player. This approach aligns with the African Union's “Agenda 2063”, which envisions Africa as a globally respected actor through regional integration. Kenya's alignment with both Chinese and Western partners thus becomes a means of empowering regional multilateralism, not undermining it.

5. Constraints and Rivalries in Regional Leadership

Despite its ambition, Kenya's regional leadership faces constraints and contestation. Rival states such as Tanzania and Ethiopia compete for infrastructural and diplomatic primacy. Tanzania's Gwadar-aligned port strategy and Ethiopia's industrialisation drive have occasionally diluted Kenya's centrality (Kramon, 2021).

Moreover, internal challenges—ranging from corruption and inequality to public debt—limit Kenya's capacity to project consistent leadership. Critics argue that Kenya's focus on international diplomacy sometimes overshadows domestic priorities, leading to a “prestige gap” between rhetoric and resources.

Nevertheless, Kenya's agility in navigating these constraints reflects a pragmatic adaptation of middle-power behaviour. Rather than seeking dominance, Kenya aims to broker consensus and facilitate cooperation, reinforcing its role as what Alden and Schoeman (2015) call a “*regional stabiliser*” rather than a hegemon.

6. Middle Power as Strategic Identity

Ultimately, Kenya's middle-power identity serves as both a foreign policy framework and a strategic narrative. It allows Nairobi to define itself not as a subordinate of global powers but as a bridge between North and South, developed and developing worlds. By maintaining credible relations with both China and the West, Kenya situates itself as an intermediary actor capable of translating global dynamics into regional opportunities.

This positioning aligns with what Ravenhill (2017) terms the “*brokerage role*” of middle powers in global governance—states that use diplomatic versatility to mediate between contending powers while pursuing their own developmental interests.

In this sense, Kenya's balancing strategy is not simply reactive; it is performative—a projection of self-reliance, African modernity, and diplomatic agency. Its regional leadership ambitions are therefore both a manifestation of national pride and a reflection of strategic realism.

V. Complex Diplomacy of a Middle Power

Kenya's foreign policy in the 21st century epitomises the complex diplomacy of a middle power navigating a multipolar international system. Caught between traditional Western partners and the ascendant influence of China, Kenya has crafted a distinctive strategy

of pragmatic multi-alignment—a balancing act driven not by ideology but by the imperative of national development, sovereignty, and regional leadership.

This balancing strategy reveals both Kenya’s agency and its vulnerability. The country’s engagement with China has accelerated infrastructure development and regional integration, aligning with its Vision 2030 aspirations and its ambition to become the logistical and financial hub of East Africa. Chinese-built railways, ports, and highways stand as tangible symbols of Kenya’s modernisation and assert its independence from Western financial conditionalities. Yet, these same projects expose Kenya to debt dependence, fiscal risks, and political sensitivity, as public concern grows over the implications of Chinese credit on sovereignty and resource control.

Conversely, Kenya’s enduring partnerships with the United States, the European Union, and other Western allies continue to provide critical support in areas of trade, security, and diplomacy. The West remains an indispensable partner for Kenya’s counterterrorism operations, access to global markets, and international legitimacy. Kenya’s dilemma, therefore, lies not in choosing sides but in maintaining strategic equilibrium amid competing great-power agendas.

1. Balancing Pragmatism and Principle

Kenya’s balancing diplomacy is guided by economic pragmatism rather than ideological alignment. Successive administrations have recognised that sustainable development and regional stability require diversified partnerships. This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of contemporary global politics: that power is dispersed, interdependence is deepening, and agency lies in calibrated engagement rather than binary allegiance.

At the same time, Kenya has sought to anchor its external balancing in principled non-alignment, consistent with the historical legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement and African Pan-Africanism. The rhetoric of “mutual respect,” “sovereign equality,” and “African-led solutions” in Kenya’s foreign policy underscores its desire to participate in global affairs on its own terms, not as a proxy or client of external powers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). In this sense, Kenya’s diplomacy is as much about identity as interest—asserting its role as an independent actor within the hierarchy of global politics.

2. Domestic Legitimacy as the Anchor of Foreign Policy

Kenya's foreign policy performance is judged not only abroad but also at home. Chinese-financed infrastructure projects have given the government visible achievements to showcase, yet have sparked domestic debates about transparency, employment, and debt sustainability. Western partnerships, meanwhile, are appreciated for governance support but criticised for paternalism.

To sustain legitimacy, Kenya must continue translating foreign relations into inclusive domestic gains—through jobs, education, industrialisation, and debt accountability. As Afrobarometer (2023) surveys indicate, Kenyans evaluate foreign policy through the prism of tangible outcomes, not diplomatic rhetoric. This domestic dimension underscores a key principle of contemporary African foreign policy: international legitimacy is inseparable from national performance.

3. Regional Leadership and Middle-Power Identity

Kenya's balancing approach also reflects its ambition to function as a regional middle power—a bridge between Africa and the world, and a stabiliser within the East African region. By leveraging Chinese economic cooperation and Western diplomatic partnerships, Kenya has positioned itself as a connector state, mediating between competing global forces while advancing collective regional agendas through the East African Community (EAC) and IGAD (Prys, 2010; Mlambo, 2022).

This regional activism exemplifies what Cooper et al. (1993) call “*middle-power diplomacy*”—influence derived from coalition-building, mediation, and multilateral engagement rather than military dominance. Kenya's peace diplomacy in Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia demonstrates its capacity to combine moral authority and pragmatic leadership, enhancing its reputation as a responsible and stabilising actor in a volatile region.

4. Autonomy in a World of Asymmetry

Kenya's experience highlights the paradox of autonomy for developing states in an asymmetric world order (Keohane, 1969). Each step toward independence through diversified partnerships creates new forms of dependency—economic, technological, or strategic. Yet, within these constraints, Kenya exercises remarkable diplomatic manoeuvrability. By engaging with both

China and the West, Nairobi not only mitigates vulnerability but also converts great-power competition into a resource for national advancement.

This agency-driven diplomacy reflects a broader continental trend: African states are increasingly redefining non-alignment as strategic multi-alignment, participating actively in shaping the rules of global engagement rather than passively accepting them. Kenya's case exemplifies this transformation from object to subject in international politics.

5. Implications for Theory and Policy

The Kenyan experience contributes to evolving debates in International Relations theory on the behaviour of middle powers and the emergence of post-hegemonic multipolarity. It challenges the binary of dependency and autonomy by demonstrating how smaller states can practise "*relational sovereignty*"—a flexible, negotiated independence grounded in pragmatism, not isolation.

For policymakers, Kenya's approach offers three key lessons:

1. **Diversified diplomacy** enhances resilience in a volatile world.
2. **Transparency and accountability** are vital to sustain domestic and international legitimacy.
3. **Regional integration** multiplies voice and bargaining power, reducing reliance on external patrons.

In short, Kenya's balancing act provides a model of adaptive diplomacy for other African states navigating similar crossroads between development finance and strategic sovereignty.

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