

Rise of an Alliance: United States & Kenya

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## Introduction

Since the year 2018, the United States has heightened international relations in the East African nation of Kenya. In an official and formal capacity, the two nations have entered into a strategic partnership and have established a consistent bilateral dialogue. This means that the two nations have become formal allies that prioritize each other's economic and cultural prosperity, stability, and security of their democracies, and, therefore, positioning Kenya as the primary hub for American activity in East Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Since the inauguration of Kenyan President Ruto and the effective end of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, both nations have sought to further deepen ties to aid each other recover and persevere through the conflicts currently waging around the globe. Both the Russian-Ukraine War and the Israel-Hamas War have hindered the economic recovery of Kenya especially.<sup>2</sup> To formalize the renewed effort, in July of that year, The United States-Kenya Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership (STIP) was announced. This further defined the goals of the alliance to enhance the economic and democratic standing of Kenya by further strengthening its workforce, digital commerce, regulatory structures, and sustainable economic integration with additional regional partners.<sup>3</sup>

Why is the U.S. accelerating its international relations in East Africa, especially in Kenya? Beyond State Department mission statements, what are the factors contributing to the decision of the United States to choose Kenya as its outpost in East Africa? Kenya is receiving

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. Relations With Kenya," *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of African Affairs*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-kenya/>.

<sup>2</sup> William Mark Bellamy, "U.S. Priorities in Eastern Africa," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-priorities-eastern-africa>.

<sup>3</sup> "United States and Kenya Announce the Launch of the U.S.-Kenya Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership," *Office of the United States Trade Representative*, July 14, 2022, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2022/july/united-states-and-kenya-announce-launch-us-kenya-strategic-trade-and-investment-partnership>.

this attention because they have a growing economy with a legitimate, strong foundation, It is the most democratically sound nation in East Africa with decent stability, making them the most significant security actor for their region. Understanding this relationship is important for, not just any American or Kenyan but those radiating outward from the two. This agreement positions Kenya in a newfound special status and role in their regional politics. To demonstrate this, an analysis needs to be conducted into those factors that attracted the United States to Kenya and if those reasons are founded.

### Literature Review

Many scholars argue that Kenya's economy is the sole reason for America's interest in them. Klutse, Sági, and Kiss<sup>4</sup> argue that Kenya's national debt accumulated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns with international ramifications, as they are indebted to the IMF and the World Bank. As such, those organizations and the United States should aid the nation in debt relief. Lockwood<sup>5</sup> argues that Kenya is gaining a politically mobile, unified working class that replaced previous ethno-nationalist identities. In this way, Lockwood draws parallels between populist movements in Europe and United States, leading to increased attraction. Ng'asike, Hagmann, and Wasonga<sup>6</sup> argue that the transition from the informal to the formal marketplace, facilitated by brokers, is a key component of Kenya's international trade. This has transformed this class of informal agricultural workers into a unified voting body, represented at higher levels by the brokers who are more middle class. This unification of once fractured and marginalized peoples has led the authors to adopt the populism hypothesis, arguing

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<sup>4</sup> Senanu Klutse, Judit Sági & Gábor Dávid Kiss, (2023) "The role of COVID-19 in worsening the debt sustainability in developing economies – The case of Ghana and Kenya."

<sup>5</sup> Peter Lockwood, (2023) "'Hustler Populism, Anti-Jubilee Backlash And Economic Injustice In Kenya's 2022 Elections."

<sup>6</sup> Ong'ao Ng'asike, Tobias Hagmann & Oliver V. Wasonga, (2021) "Brokerage in the Borderlands: The Political Economy of Livestock Intermediaries in Northern Kenya."

something similar to Lockwood but from the bottom up. Mwatu<sup>7</sup> argues has made a significant impact on Kenya's economy similar to that of the COVID-19 pandemic, if not in addition. To resolve this, Mwatu argues, short of ending the war, to replace and diversify Kenya's cereals importation and that the U.S. should step up to fill this, per their established trade agreements. Riisgard, et. al.<sup>8</sup> argues that the further development of the informal working class into a unified and regulated electorate, that still retains an identity of diversity, has attracted Western suitors. Onyango and Ondiek<sup>9</sup> oppose the argument that COVID-19 has completely devastated the Kenyan economy but has created a culture of Open Innovation characterized by public and government cooperation, which should be used as a case study by the U.S., especially in the public sector. Finally, Owuor and Elliot<sup>10</sup> argue that the United States should intervene in Kenya's superhighway project as China has been financing several infrastructure projects since 2013.

Far more scholars argue that Kenya's democracy, baptized by fire, tested to be strong, and then the projection of this fortitude within and outward in the region has attracted the attention of the United States. Omulo<sup>11</sup> argues that election-related violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s has decreased the dynastic power of the executive branch, democratizing the nation, despite neoliberal economic policies pushed by the West and the subsequent repressive actions of the

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<sup>7</sup> Shadrack Mwatu, (2023) ""Impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on Grain and Fertilizer Supply: Evidence from Kenya.""

<sup>8</sup> Lone Riisgaard, et. al, (2024) "Challenging The Formality Bias: The Organization of Informal Work, Working Relations, and Collective Agency in Kenya And Tanzania."

<sup>9</sup> Gedion Onyango & Japheth Otieno Ondiek, (2022) "Open innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic policy responses in South Africa and Kenya."

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Owuor & Denielle A. Elliott, (2022) "Super-highways and Infrastructure Development in Kenya: The Political Economy of Kenya-China Road Development Projects Since 2013."

<sup>11</sup> Albert Omulo, (2023) "Towards an evaluation of the nexus between unfettered, unregulated capitalism, donor aid and debt relief inconsistencies, and the problem of post-election violence in Kenya."

Kenyan executive. This has fortified the resistant power of the electorate in Kenya. McCrone<sup>12</sup> takes Omulo's concept and applies it to a specific context of the forceful enfranchisement of the northern pastoralists. This further solidifies the unity of the electorate, which is now peaceful, attracting the attention of the United States. Touchton and Wampler<sup>13</sup> analyze the newfound institutions of the empowered electorate. They argue Kenya has either much more road ahead in establishing a healthy democracy, or that they have forged their own democratic system that best fits their circumstances. Opalo<sup>14</sup> argues that the newfound power of the electorate has also empowered the legislature to challenge the long-entrenched power of the executive branch. Both of these articles have similar recommendations of attraction for the West, either to aid the continuation of this process or now to give insurance against the potential risk of instability. To project their fortitude, an element of national identity needs to be projected as well, which is what Jarvis and Legrand<sup>15</sup> argue. Kenya has established a national identity of strength and security in resistance to terrorism in the post-9/11 world, one not dissimilar to the United States. Mwangi<sup>16</sup> explores this identity and argues that counterterrorism measures, especially online, have been effective, and are becoming repressive against marginalized peoples. This discourse has parallels with American ones, such as the Patriot Act, and these two nations could have similar paths forward in this area. In Piombo and Englebert's<sup>17</sup> article, Kenya's methods of

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<sup>12</sup> Flora McCrone, (2023) ""'I have opened the land for you': pastoralist politics and election-related violence in Kenya's arid north."

<sup>13</sup> Michael Touchton & Brian Wampler. (2023) "Participation, Development, and Accountability: A Survey Experiment on Democratic Decision-Making in Kenya."

<sup>14</sup> Ken Opalo, (2022) "Leveraging legislative power: distributive politics and Committee work in Kenya's National Assembly."

<sup>15</sup> Lee Jarvis & Tim Legrand, (2023) "National Submissions to the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee as Constructions of National Identity: Cameroon, Kenya and Nigeria."

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Mwangi & Catherine Mwangi, (2024) "Securitisation and Spaces of Terrorism in Kenya's National Police Service Counterterrorism Discourse."

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Piombo & Pierre Englebert, (2022) "The war on terror in context: domestic dimensions of Ethiopia and Kenya's policies towards Somalia."

counterterrorism against Somalis in general are compared to Ethiopia. They argue that Kenya's effective approach of non-military prosecution was economically motivated, not religiously; therefore, exacted a measured response from the government. This indication of bureaucratic stability is an attractive quality to the United States. Further secularization of the government, Saalfeld's article<sup>18</sup> argues, is prevented institutionally by the inclusion of radical Islamist grievances in secularized political platforms that align with the majority electorate's values, forcing potential jihadist radicals to participate peacefully in the electoral process. Moving away from terrorism to borderlands issues, Shanguhya<sup>19</sup> argues that the further securing of Kenya's borderland of Turkana is contributing to the overall strengthening of the state, including the marginalized peoples of the borderlands. Speaking of marginalized peoples, Kenyan Somalis, Shire<sup>20</sup> argues, are being caught between cross-border Somali guerillas and the Kenyan state. This is intentional on the part of the guerillas. Securing the border with marginalized civilian ramifications parallels issues in the United States, a concept attracting the two nations together.

### **Data Analysis**

Beginning in 2018, the United States and Kenya began to formally elevate their relationship. This coincided with the increasingly peaceful national elections of 2013 and 2017. Only after current Kenyan President William Ruto's democratically tested and upheld election in 2022 did the United States commit to an elevated level of formalized economic bilateral relations.<sup>21</sup> Due to this specific progression of Kenya proving its worth as a secure, economically stable, and democratic regional security actor, the United States accepted them as a top ally,

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<sup>18</sup> Jannis Saalfeld, (2024) "Inter-Secular Party Competition and the (Non-)Formation of Salafi-Jihadist Milieus: Evidence from Tanzania and Kenya."

<sup>19</sup> Martin Shanguhya, (2021) "Insecure borderlands, marginalization, and local perceptions of the state in Turkana, Kenya, circa 1920–2014."

<sup>20</sup> Mohammed Shire, (2023) "Provoking an Overreaction: Transborder Guerrilla Warfare in the Kenya-Somalia Borderlands."

<sup>21</sup> *U.S. Department of State: Bureau of African Affairs*, 2023.

significantly increasing international relations as a result. As explained in Omulo's<sup>22</sup> article, the election-related violence increased the power of the unified electorate, whilst weakening the dynastic power of the executive. This collectively empowered the legislature to stabilize the civilian, democratic institutions of the nation. The balanced power of the executive has also been rewarded by the United States in the conflict against the Somalian insurgency of al-Shabaab and other borderland conflicts, demonstrating its ability to be a capable security actor. Underpinning all of this is the advancement and democratization of the extremely ethnically diverse lower economic classes across the nation, who were once in violent opposition to each other. Certainly, the advancing economic conditions fed into the democratic stabilization of the nation, but, while these may be attractive to the United States, the sole and primary reason is the result of demonstrated regional security capacity.

The economic conditions underlying this democratic progression, however, cannot be ignored, as they paved the path toward stability and security. In addition to this, it is a focal point of the agreements made with the United States, such as the STIP,<sup>23</sup> and then the purpose of further visits by President Ruto to San Francisco.<sup>24</sup> The broad mobilization of the informal working classes into a unified electorate is a suitable starting point to work backward from for analyzing the challenges posed by its diversity and violent history, in doing so. The unification of this electorate is perhaps not due to a comprehensive, developed new identity shared among the informal working class, but this concept certainly stirred the electorate to support President Ruto's victory in the 2022 election.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, Ruto accomplished something that Kenya has

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<sup>22</sup> Omulo, 23-24.

<sup>23</sup> *Office of the United States Trade Representative*, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Evelyne Musambi, (2023) "In San Francisco, Kenya's president woos American tech companies despite increasing taxes at home."

<sup>25</sup> Lockwood, 206.

been struggling with since its independence from the British in the early 1960s, which is unifying and mobilizing the marginalized of not just the metropolitan areas, but the rural borderlands.

This was accomplished in the lead-up to the national elections of 2022 by the incorporation of the marginalized Maasai and Somali Kenyans under a voting body represented by their middle-class agriculture brokers.<sup>26</sup> This working-class electorate body, while not without its history of violence, has unified under, not exactly an identity, but a collective agency. These unifying tenets include the informality of their occupations, such as the market hands, the agriculture laborers, and the construction workers, and their collective demands of social security and representation. The nature of their ethnic diversity, which was previously a cause of election violence, has also become a practical unification factor.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, these conditions are pathways into the stabilization and securitization of the Kenyan democracy, and then its further ability to remain that way.

The strengthening of the Kenyan democracy internally and the increasing of its capacity to protect itself within its region and abroad is the primary motivation for the United States to increase its relations with the East African nation. By doing so, it can ensure its growing economy can continue to be a leader on the continent. The most visible sign of this American interest is the upcoming Kenyan state visit by President Ruto to the White House in May of 2024, acknowledging the new agreement to send Kenyan security forces to Haiti. President Biden articulated this in policy when White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre announced this visit and the collective of agreements “will strengthen our shared commitment to advance peace and security, expand our economic ties, and stand together in defense of democratic

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<sup>26</sup> Ng’asike, Hagmann & Wasonga, 175-177.

<sup>27</sup> Riisgard, et. al., 13.



values.”<sup>28</sup> The United States seems to especially have taken notice of the continued empowerment and separation of Kenya’s three branches of government, not dissimilar to the United States. While the executive has a history of dynastic repression of the electorate and unfair elections, it has succeeded and is succeeding in its security challenges. Two prominent examples within the nation are the al-Shabaab insurgency from in the trans-border northeastern Juba region and the securitization culture as a result of the war on terror. Since 2017, the al-Shabaab organization has been successfully contained to Somali national territory, with one isolated exception, after the successful inclusion and administrative consolidation of the people and territory of the Juba region, once restricted to a frontier state of living.<sup>29</sup> Previously, this environment enabled insurgency with the lack of systematic law enforcement. The culture of systematic security had not yet been applied to the frontier, but it had been to metropolitan Kenya. Perhaps forgotten by the wider international community, the nation experienced its own terrorist tragedy at the hands of al-Qaeda in 1998. Because of this incident, Kenya has been a primary contributor to the international War on Terror, not just abroad but at home, by adopting a national identity of security against terrorism,<sup>30</sup> not dissimilar to the United States following September 11th, 2001.

The repression and the overreactions of the executive, produced by these crises and systemic issues, have begun to be balanced out by the increasing power of the legislature and its electorate. This was accomplished beginning with the diversification of the electorate, primarily the inclusion and enfranchisement of the marginalized peoples from rural borderlands but also those who would be extremists. The continued secularization of the voters and political platforms

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<sup>28</sup> Will Weissert, (2023) “Biden plans to welcome Kenyan president to White House for state visit in May.”

<sup>29</sup> Musambayi Katumanga, (2017) “The Political Economy of Insurge-terrorism and ‘Covart’ in Kenya and Juba Borderlands,” 137.

<sup>30</sup> Jarvis & Legrand, 152.

has been crucial to securing the metropolitan areas from Islamist extremism, forcing them to participate peacefully in the political process.<sup>31</sup> The enfranchisement of the marginalized peoples, even though as a result of violence,<sup>32</sup> has also strengthened the electorate to the point that the legislature, specifically through committee, now has significant authority to challenge the long-entrenched power of the executive.<sup>33</sup> Growth in this area is still needed, and this is an additional layer of attraction for the United States. Kenya has potential,<sup>34</sup> and an idealistic administration in Washington is looking to take advantage, but in doing so has to ensure that their investment is well spent.

### **Conclusion**

Kenya is certainly a nation on the rise. It has grown to be in the top five of African economies, and this success and resolve has fueled an electoral movement that has dislodged the once despotic executive leadership. The United States, after Ethiopia plunged into a multi-actor civil war with regional consequences, is in the market for a new regional ally. Of the current options, Kenya has the best resume: a decently stable modern economy with a high-output GDP, a recent history of improving ethnic relations, and a new constitution modeled after the completely amended American constitution, decentralizing power away from the metropolitan core.<sup>35</sup> While the economic factor is important for understanding how Kenya arrived at this point and is beneficial to take advantage in the future, it does not fully answer the question of why the United States is interested in the first place. The battle-tested strength and development of the democratic nation-state of Kenya is the primary attracting factor for American interest. As

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<sup>31</sup> Saalfeld, 189-91.

<sup>32</sup> McCrone, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Opalo, 514.

<sup>34</sup> Touchton & Wampler, 1392.

<sup>35</sup> Bellamy, 2022.

mentioned previously, however, further research needs to be conducted on the impact of the current national debt of Kenya following the COVID-19 pandemic and recent international conflicts to their north on the future of this relationship.

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