



Kenya's Regional Relations: Between Principle and Practice

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A clear understanding of national, regional and continental priorities needs to drive Kenya's regional diplomacy and Kenya must define the political space it wants to occupy.
- To overcome the perception of an unwilling regional power, Kenya should infuse its new foreign policy framework with strategic thinking around tools for leveraging its hard and soft power.
- The ministries dealing with Kenya's interests in the region and beyond need to strengthen their institutional capacities, and enhance the country's diplomatic effectiveness and competitiveness by working closely with appropriate research, academic, business and other social formations.
- To enhance economic diplomacy, Kenya needs to be more aggressive in facilitating the necessary regional infrastructure to promote efficiency of production, transportation and communication.

Kisiangani Emmanuel¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya has long been cast as a reluctant regional actor. Those who view it as having a strong economy, but lacking political leverage in its region have questioned its regional influence. Critics argue that Kenya takes its cue from its neighbours and adopts regional engagement strategies that are a passive object of the geo-strategic interests of others. A radical departure from Kenya's conservative approach to regional relations was the incursion into Somalia to wage war against Al-Shabaab; the biggest military venture that Kenya had undertaken since independence. The question is: why has Kenya not consistently converted its economic strengths into political influence and acted as a pivotal state in the region? This brief examines the reasons behind Kenya's ambivalent performance in regional politics.

KENYA'S REGIONAL RELATIONS IN CONTEXT

Kenya has sought to advance its interests not by defining the regional political agenda, but by taking the regional environment as a given and then making pragmatic, but cautious, efforts to ensure its economic and security interests. Kenya maintains a number of diplomatic missions and has bilateral relations with all her neighbours, having signed bilateral trade and economic co-operation agreements with different countries.

Kenya has a long history of regional co-operation with its two East African neighbours and key trading partners, Uganda and Tanzania. The co-operation was formalised into the East African High Commission that provided for an inter-territorial co-operation in 1948. The East African Community (EAC) evolved from this agreement in 1967 aimed at strengthening ties between its members. The EAC collapsed in 1977 due to a divergence in the national interests of its members

With the re-establishment of the EAC in the 1990s and its relaunch on 7 July 2000, its expansion has widened opportunities for Kenyan businesses

and exports, which are among the most diversified in the region.² The combined EAC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa markets represents 80% of Kenya's total exports.

Studies have demonstrated the nexus between a country's domestic setting and circumstances, and its external diplomacy. For Kenya, the trajectory of its regional and international engagements has largely been affected by domestic agendas. In the immediate post-independence-era Kenya outlined the following basic norms and principles to guide its foreign relations.

- Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states, and preservation of national security
- Good neighbourliness and peaceful coexistence
- Peaceful settlement of disputes
- Non-interference in the internal affairs of other states
- Non-alignment and national self-interest
- Adherence to the Charters of the United Nations and the Organisation of African (OAU) Unity/African Union (AU).³

The above emerged from the domestic circumstances that prevailed at the time. Kenya was faced with insurrection (the Shifta War) in its north-eastern region. This insurrection was allegedly buttressed by Somalia in an attempt to create Greater Somalia. With this threat on its horizon, Kenya made the above principles pivotal to its regional relations. Concerns over territorial integrity and secessionism also made Kenya a leading supporter of the OAU's principle of the non-violation of territorial borders inherited at independence.

While, in principle, Kenya embraced the moral principles of good neighbourliness, in practice, it assumed a more pragmatic stance, including entering into a military alliance with Ethiopia to cushion itself against Somalia's threat of irredentism. Relations between Kenya and its border states remained peaceful but not without intermittent challenges: In the mid-1970s Uganda's Idi Amin advanced territorial claims on Kenya, to which the Kenyan government responded by

deploying armed troops and personnel carriers along the Kenya–Uganda border.⁴

Daniel arap Moi followed a similar, but slightly varied, approach towards the region. His regional relations were shaped by the destabilising effect of several civil wars in Kenya's neighbouring countries and their spillover effect on the region. While some regard his time in office 'as Kenya's diplomatic golden age', this is mainly attributed to his peace-brokering efforts in East Africa and the Great Lakes regions.⁵ Towards the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, he faced increasing challenges following the end of the Cold War and his diminishing strategic importance to the West. His engagement became increasingly erratic, especially towards some Western capitals keen on his departure from office.

Arap Moi's successor, Mwai Kibaki, made little impact on the resolution of conflict in the region. He was more prominent in cultivating Kenya's economic diplomacy. Kibaki espoused policies that did little to ruffle feathers regionally and internationally. This changed slightly towards the end of his second term, when he authorised Kenya's incursion into Somalia to wage war on Al-Shabaab, marking an unprecedented use of Kenya's hard power for the protection of the country's security and economic interests.

KENYA'S INTERVENTION IN SOMALIA: A SHIFT IN DIPLOMATIC APPROACH?

Kenya's intervention in Somalia marked a fundamental change from its traditional low-risk regional engagement policy. Praised by Kenyans at the time as a demonstration of the use of the country's hard power to protect its strategic interests, the incursion ran counter to the country's traditional core principles and overturned the country's policy of non-interference. However, some observers argue that Kenya was forced to act in pursuit of its national interests, since its soft power means were ineffective.⁶ Kenya, unlike its other East African neighbours, had never been confronted by actions from external parties that required military action.

President Uhuru Kenyatta emphasises a regional and Afrocentric approach in Kenya's foreign policy. In his inauguration speech he stated that Kenya's future depended not only on its national unity, but also on deepening bonds with 'brothers and sisters in East Africa and Africa as a whole'.⁷ He followed up his public pronouncements with visits to Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Nigeria and South Africa.

His pan-African focus is a consequence of the political environment surrounding his election and the legal proceedings brought against him by the International Criminal Court (ICC). During the election campaign, Uhuru used the threat of Western disapproval of his candidacy to secure support in his electoral stronghold under an emotive banner of protecting Kenya's sovereignty. After his election, he courted other African states to campaign against the ICC and its alleged 'politically motivated' agenda. This initiative has steered Kenya more strongly into the pan-African orbit.⁸ However, with the ICC case against him looking increasingly weak, he has toned down his pan-African rhetoric.

SOUTH AFRICA-KENYA RELATIONS

Kenya maintained a covert relationship with South Africa during the apartheid era. In 1990, however, South Africa's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pik Botha, visited Kenya in the first public inter-ministerial visit between the two countries.⁹ South Africa's then president, FW de Klerk, visited Kenya in June 1991 and Kenyan president arap Moi visited Cape Town in June 1992 – the first official visit to South Africa by a prominent African head of state.

While Kenya's engagement with apartheid South Africa could be seen through the prism of its post-independent foreign policy norms and guidelines on peaceful coexistence and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, others disagreed. Kenya, under Jomo Kenyatta and later arap Moi, failed to grasp the strategic importance of supporting the African National Congress in its fight against apartheid. By pursuing business ties with the apartheid state,

it also committed a major strategic blunder that dimmed its image in pan-African politics.¹⁰

Although Kenya and South Africa re-established official diplomatic relations in 1992 and upgraded these relations to full diplomatic status on 12 April 1994, it was evident that the rapport remained poor under arap Moi in Kenya. This was underlined by two incidents, one in 1997 when President Nelson Mandela landed at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi and did not meet the Kenyan delegation and another, in 1999, when President Thabo Mbeki also failed to meet the Kenyan government at the airport. The South African government reassured its counterpart that there was no sinister motive behind the non-appearance of the heads of state, but it was not lost on Kenyans that these episodes could be attributed to Kenya's historical approach towards the liberation movement in South Africa.

In economic terms, Kenya is the regional hub for trade and finance in East and Central Africa. For most of the 1990s and 2000s, there was seemingly strong distrust between the Kenyan government and South African corporates that had invested in the country, which some observes described as a 'cultural difference in business approach'.¹¹ Owing to mutual importance of the South African investment in Kenya, common forums have been established to help repair the relationship. However, Kenyan policymakers are uneasy about the size of the trade imbalance in favour of South Africa.¹²

THE FUTURE

Kenya is working on a new foreign policy framework¹³ that provides broad guidelines on Kenya's international positioning in a modern, competitive and globalised environment. Kenya's foreign policy rests on three inter-linked pillars:

- (i) environmental diplomacy;
- (ii) peace diplomacy; and
- (iii) economic diplomacy.

The document is a good starting point for establishing a more coherent strategy for Kenya's diplomatic engagement.

CONCLUSION

Kenya's regional diplomacy has been characterised by a strong sense of morality and conservatism. The regional diplomacies of Kenya's different heads of state varied more in terms of form than substance. The overriding concern has been to develop and maintain friendly relations with other regional entities, and foster co-operation with the rest of the international community. While this has ensured that the country forged beneficial regional relations, to critics it has not helped develop the country's political and military leverage in line with its economic abilities. If Kenya wants to overcome the label of 'punching below its weight', it needs to respond to ever-changing regional dynamics by adopting new approaches to strengthen bilateral relations, foster regional integration and support strategic partnerships.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Emmanuel Kisiangani is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, based in the Nairobi office.
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