Kenya's security landscape

A case study of Kenya's domestic and foreign political security actions

Maryannita Odongo & Laurence Jost

At a Glance

› Kenya's security landscape is increasingly defined by the persistence of ethno-political violence, the ongoing threat of terrorism, and its pivotal role in regional stability.

› The post-election violence underscores the enduring salience of ethnic divisions, necessitating comprehensive electoral and socioeconomic reforms.

› Al-Shabaab's sustained terrorist threat, despite military efforts, signals the need for more robust counterterrorism frameworks, balancing security with human rights.

› Internationally, Kenya's maritime security, particularly in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, is paramount for safeguarding trade routes vital to its economy.

› As Kenya navigates its complex security landscape, its ability to address internal and external threats will be crucial in maintaining its role as a stabilizing force in East Africa.

Kenya's multiple security challenges

Kenya occupies a strategic position in East Africa, focal in regional stability, and contributes to global security efforts, including counterterrorism. Its security institutions play integral parts in human security and development. Ethnic based violence stringing from political interests coupled with post electoral uncertainty has greatly impacted Kenya's national security. This is equally evident at the present times, where anti-governmental youth led protests that began peaceful protests but turned violent. Demonstrators dubbed 'GenZ' clashed with Police from 25th June 2024, in the majority of the counties (37 out of 47) leading to loss of lives and property. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the priorly proposed Finance Bill 2024 calling on legislators not to approve a new round of punitive tax measures and other fiscal proposals being recommended by the Government in the bill. Those factors are not the only ones that cause domestical tension in Kenya. Further Al-Shabaab is an incumbent threat to Kenya's internal security coupled with the refugee burden at Dadaab Camp and the borders of Northeastern Kenya and Somalia.

Looking at the international landscape, Kenya's maritime security is crucial due to its dependence on international trade, particularly through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Recognizing the threat posed by Somali piracy, Kenya has bolstered its maritime security through international collaboration, including participation in the US-led "Prosperity Guardian" operation after Djibouti declined co-operation. This participation underscores Kenya's strategic importance and its alignment with the US in securing critical trade routes. Kenya has modernized its navy and developed a national maritime security strategy, incorporating multilateral cooperation to protect its economic interests and regional stability. Kenya's involvement in Sudan and South Sudan reflects a multifaceted strategy aimed at securing regional stability, economic interests, and political influence. Kenya has actively participated in peace processes and peacekeeping missions, including the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and UNMISS, to prevent conflict spillover and maintain stability. Economically, Kenya is invested in infrastructure and resource extraction in South Sudan, enhancing regional trade routes like the LAPSSET Corridor. Security engagements are aligned with political and economic goals, ensuring stability and safeguarding trade, thereby solidifying Kenya's leadership in East Africa.

Kenya´s domestic security landscape: Case One: Poli-ethnic Violence and Election-Related Tensions

The 2008 post-election violence played out largely on ethnic lines, and ethnicity continues to play an inordinate role in Kenyan political life. Ethnic-based violence has a long history in the country, fuelled by grievances over land, privilege, and inequality. Successive Kenyan administrations have pitted the majority Kikuyu ethnic group, favoured economically and politically by both the colonial powers and by Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta, against smaller ethnic groups, including Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, Kamba, Kisii and others. Ethnicity continues to be the principal axis on which political elites mobilize constituencies, and elections are more often won based on shrewd ethnic calculus and alliances than based on performance or national vision.

Kenya's relative stability over the years is in stark contrast with most of its neighbours. Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda have all been at various times convulsed by violent conflict far worse than anything Kenya has experienced. Political violence has played out in different manners throughout Kenya's history. In 1888 the British East Africa Company (BEAC) obtained concessionary rights to the Kenyan coast from the Sultan of Zanzibar, Waiyaki Wa Henya, a Kikuyu chief, who was abducted and killed by the British after having burned down the fort of a BEAC official. Likewise, Kenyans' opposition to the building of the Uganda Railway, prompted the British to use violent means such as assassinations. The establishment of colonial rule in Kenya was based on a tactic that involved forming partnerships with ethnic communities while stirring up conflicts between them and

other ethnic groups. This approach, known as 'divide and rule' centralized, racialized and "ethnicized" power.

Since Kenya gained its independence on December 12, 1963, cycles of organized violence around elections in various parts of the country was a characteristic of Kenyan politics. This can be traced to the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the de facto one-party system in place (which became a de jure one-party state in June 1982). However, Kenya's one-party system had a weak ideological base and a weak party machinery. This is because many apolitical bodies were politicized, including "trade unions, co-operative societies, and the army" leading Kenya to rely on the administration rather than on the party for purposes of development, execution of policy, and control. This then created a reaction from parliamentarians who publicly attacked the bureaucracy coupled with unrest and an attempted coup in August 1982 enacted by the Kenyan air force to overthrow the then President Daniel arap Moi – the successor of the Mzee Jomo Kenyatta.

The active use of force and abuse of opposition communities provided a template for the emergence of similar groups with either ethnic or political affiliations. As a result, even though gangsterism has always been key to insecurity trends in the country, the Moi era was the watershed for manifestation of its contemporary forms. As a result, those historical practices have institutionalized the use of ethnic division and violence as a tool of politics. As it stands, poli-ethnic violence is close to the trenches in Kenya. Kenyan Gen Z who makes up 75 percent of the population, according to the 2019 census, tend to have a progressive and inclusive approach towards ethnic diversity, shaped by their digital savviness, historical awareness, and desire for a united and equitable Kenya. Recently, towards the beginning of July 2024, widespread youth led anti-government protests a proposed financial bill followed, in which mobilization was primarily done online on apps such as X and TikTok. During the protests, police used water cannons, batons, and teargas to disperse protesters and arrested 335 human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and civilians. By 19 and 20 June, the protests had spread to other counties across the country, including Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, Garissa, Nyeri, Kakamega, Laikipia, and Eldoret. In response to the escalating situation, President William Ruto announced the withdrawal of the Finance Bill on June 26, 2024, dismissed all but one of the members of his cabinet and announced significant austerity in measures in several government departments to reduce government spending. This consequently led to the resignation of the Inspector General for the Kenya Police Japhet Koome, after calls from demonstrators for him to take responsibility for the shooting of peaceful protesters. According to public opinion polls in early July 2024, the youth have shown strong voting intentions ahead of the 2027 general elections, with 84% expressing a strong intention to vote in upcoming elections in 2027. This will be an improvement from the last election where 22% said they didn't vote even though they had attained voting age. The combination of these elements underscores the need for comprehensive electoral reforms, conflict resolution mechanisms, and socioeconomic policies that address the underlying grievances driving public unrest, ensuring peaceful political processes. However, challenges remain, as traditional ethnic politics still influence the broader political landscape.

Case Two: Al-Shabaab Terrorist Threat to national security

For decades East Africa served as a global Salafi-jihadist crossroad – a religious-political Sunni Islamist ideology that seeks to establish a global caliphate, characterized by the advocacy of military jihadist attacks on non-Muslim targets. Somalis who joined the Afghan mujahideen – members of several guerrilla groups operating in Afghanistan during the Afghan War (1978–92) later returned home and sprouted the ideological and organizational cores that grew into Al-Shabaab. Today, the group operates in south-central Somalia and has approximately between 7,000 and 9,000 fighters.

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Kenya-Al Shabab tensions can be traced to 16th October 2011, when the Kenyan government deployed troops to Southern Somalia under Operation Linda Nchi (Protect the Country) a joint military initiative which was launched to combat Al-Shabaab attacks along the border. On the 12th of February 2022, Kenyan troops were formally integrated into the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) after the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2036, which imposed a ban on the direct and indirect import of charcoal from Somalia. KDF's (Kenya Defence Forces) involvement in Somalia was primarily motivated by a desire to inoculate Northeastern Province of Kenya from the chaos across its borders, ease the huge refugee burden and curtail the radical influence of Al-Shabaab.

In retaliation for Kenya's involvement, Al-Shabaab carried out several attacks in Nairobi and other parts of the country: Including the horrific Westgate Mall attack on 21st September 2013, where 67 people were killed. Garissa University College attack followed on 2nd April 2015, which is notably their most gruesome acts of extreme violence, where 148 individuals including students and staff were killed. Not to mention, the high-profile terrorist attack at DusitD2 Hotel, a Thai owned establishment in an affluent region of Nairobi which occurred on 15th January 2019. The choice of DusitD2 and Westgate Mall, two exclusive facilities that often attract elite and international clientele and located in areas that host high-profile foreign businesses and embassies, was an act planned within context as perpetrating an attack in such locations would be covered by foreign media and intern, generate propaganda for Al-Shabaab.

The Kenyan Government's efforts to counter this radicalization and rise in terrorism has on the downside resulted in sweeping police powers that have been used to perpetrate human rights abuses and corruption through bribery at the border posts between Kenya and Somalia. Moreover, the Kenyan military reiterated that there was no set exit date for the" Linda Nchi" operation, but the indicator of the mission's success would be the crippling of Al-Shabaab's capacity. The main anti-terrorism legislation, the 2012 Prevention of Terrorism Act, provides only a vague definition of counterterrorism, greatly expands police powers, and allows the state to create lists of suspected terrorists and terrorist organizations without due process, what led to the legitimisation of extensive use of force and police violence in many cases. In a statement shared by Kenya's Defence Cabinet Secretary, Aden Duale on the 4th of October 2023, he confirmed that more than 4,000 Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) troops in Somalia under the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) will leave by December 2024, because of the Somali government not backing the mission anymore.

Counterterrorism measures have however been developed by The National Counter Terrorism Centre, based in Nairobi that is focused on the operational demands to prevent, detect, deter, and disrupt terrorism acts in coordinated multi-agency fashion. Their work in Northeastern Kenya is evident liaising with officials from the National Intelligence Service (NIS), Directorate of Immigration and Registration, and the Kenya Defence Forces. Cumulative strategies have been formulated by the NIS and the Kenyan Defence Forces to halt pathways to radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism by implementing activities in accordance with the National Strategy to Countering Violent Extremism and County Action Plans, training, and other operations to prevent Kenyans from becoming terrorists.

Designing and deploying a terrorism prevention framework that leverages state and civil society responses outside the military and criminal justice arenas could formidably contribute in the efforts to counter the menace of terrorism. Additionally, reviewing targets vulnerable to terrorist attack to upgrade their security and undertaking outreach and training in incident response to mitigate the damage of a terrorist attack is a concurrent solution to counter terrorism. From 8th February 2020 to 29th December 2023, as per the latest data on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Research Hub, Al-

Shabaab carried out guerrilla attacks in areas such as Lamu, Mandera and Garissa. The complex balance between internal security and offering humanitarian aid at the Dadaab Refugee camp, the third largest refugee camp in the world, presumably referred to as a "breeding ground for terrorists", is a puzzle Kenya is yet to fit. The Al Shabab is undoubtedly likely to continue posing threats to Kenya's internal security and Eastern Africa at large.

Kenya´s foreign security landscape: Case one - Kenya's maritime security interests: Kenya as part of the US lead maritime operation "Prosperity Guardian"

International maritime trade is of existential importance for Kenya. According to the African Union, 90% of all goods traded on the continent are transported by sea. Europe is one of Kenya's most important trading partners. To point out the extend of the European trading going through Africa it must be stated, that 26% of all imports and 26% of all African exports are conducted with European trading partners.[1] The Red Sea, as an access route to the Mediterranean, is of tremendous importance. The foreign trade of several East African countries is heavily dependent on the Suez Canal. Approximately 31% of Djibouti's foreign trade volume is channelled through the Suez Canal, 15% for Kenya, and 10% for Tanzania. Sudan's foreign trade is the most dependent, with about 34% of its trade volume passing through the canal.[2]From a logistical and transportation perspective, the key ports in East Africa are Mombasa, Djibouti, and Dar es Salaam, along with Maputo in southern Africa. Lamu in Kenya and Bagamoyo in Tanzania are ambitious new ports that are planned to be special economic zones, but currently lack a viable railway network. The Kenyan port of Mombasa, with 19 berths, a channel depth of up to 15 meters, and a pier draft of up to 13.5 meters, is one of the largest trading ports in East Africa. In 2023, Mombasa handled a trade volume of 1.6 million Twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) with an annual capacity of 2.65 million TEU. Mombasa serves as a central transhipment point for landlocked East African countries. Goods to and from Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan, eastern DR Congo, and Somalia are transported through Mombasa. Transit traffic increased by 11.5% to 11.41 million tons in 2023. Uganda, South Sudan, and the DR Congo were the largest transit markets in 2023, accounting for 62.3%, 52%, and 57% of total volumes, respectively.[3]

Most trade goods are transported via the Northern Corridor, which starts in Mombasa and extends over a 1,700 km transit route through Kenya to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This multimodal network of transportation infrastructure is managed by the Northern Corridor Transit and Transport Coordination Authority (NCTTC) and its six member states. Transit traffic via the Northern Corridor increased from 10.234 million tons in 2022 to 11.395 million tons in 2023, representing a growth of 1.16 million tons. This growth was supported by an increase in cargo to South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo by 639,177 tons (50.6%) and 548,091 tons (56.9%), respectively.

The relevance of the port of Mombasa, and thus Kenyan foreign trade, is undisputed. Consequently, the strategic importance of the Red Sea for Kenyan foreign trade is evident.[45]

Kenya recognized the strategic significance of the Horn of Africa region and its associated implications. Amongst those implications are participations in international navy mandates like the US led mandate "Prosperity Guardian" and increasing efforts to strengthen the Kenyan navy. Specifically, the threat posed by Somali piracy and its detrimental effects on maritime trade captured Kenya's security interest in the region, prompting initial efforts to formulate a maritime security agenda within their national maritime transport policy's which were published in June 2022.[6] Consequently, the Kenyan government started establishing and building up a coast guard to ensure the safety of commercial

vessels near its coastline during the last decade. However, the implementation of Kenya's maritime security agenda revealed several challenges. The negative impact of piracy on maritime trade and the resulting decline in Kenya's revenues highlighted the necessity for a comprehensive maritime security framework. Recognizing the potential and importance of international cooperation in ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, Kenya incorporated multilateral collaboration into its maritime security agenda, which was complemented by the enhancement of the Kenyan Navy's capabilities. With support from international partners such as the United States and Denmark, Kenya embarked on an extensive modernization program for its national navy, investing up to $500 million in this initiative.[7] International partners like the USA expect a reliable and highly qualified partner in the horn of Africa region when it comes to counter piracy operations. The aspect of multilateral cooperation evolved into an integral component of Kenya's national security strategy. The significant impact of Somali piracy on Kenyan foreign trade brought the need for a sophisticated national maritime security strategy to the forefront of Kenya's security policy. Consequently, the effects of regional tensions or military threats near Kenya's coastline have become a focal point of its security policy, driving Kenya to take sustainable actions. Part of the agenda, is the generous enhancement of the Kenyan navy, together with the increased effort in building up multilateral maritime security engagements preferably with Kenya's western allies.

At the beginning of 2024, Djibouti declined cooperation with the US-led maritime mandate Prosperity Guardian. This military mandate pursued a defensive strategy with occasional assertive measures, which dissuaded Djibouti, in solidarity with Yemen and Palestine, from engaging in collaboration. Despite the US military presence in Djibouti, the Djiboutian government also refused logistical support for the US-led mandate. To address logistical challenges of the naval operation, the US Navy eventually relied on Camp Simba, a naval base situated along the Kenyan coast. Those circumstances highlight the geostrategic importance of Kenya for the US, especially taking into consideration increased anti-western attitudes towards military collaborations and partnerships. The US-Kenyan relationship is characterized by longstanding and intensive cooperation, particularly in the military sector. Kenya agreed to let the USA coordinate the Prosperity Guardian mandate from its territory and subsequently joined the military coalition. The Kenyan President articulated overlapping security interests with the USA in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in February of this year, emphasizing the importance of military cooperation to ensure regional stability. In 2023, Kenya and the USA signed a joint defence agreement, underscoring general military collaboration and guaranteeing mutual support and solidarity. Kenya also views Yemeni attacks in the Red Sea as a threat to its own economic interests in the region, expressing a strong interest in a shared maritime security agenda to safeguard trade routes in the Red Sea. What becomes clear is that Kenya formulated strong interest in securing its influence on the maritime trading routs of the east African region. Participation in western military mandates is in that regard connected to the expectation of supply and military support from Kenya's western allies.

Case Two – Kenya's military engagements in Sudan & South Sudan: Kenya as stabilizing power within the east African community

Kenya's involvement in Sudan and South Sudan is guided by a multifaceted strategy that encompasses political, economic, and security interests. As a leading nation in East Africa, Kenya aims to ensure regional stability, which it sees as essential for both its economic development and political influence. The country's engagement in these two nations reflects its broader objectives of securing peace, fostering economic integration, and maintaining its leadership role in the region.

Kenya's foremost political interest in Sudan and South Sudan is the promotion of regional stability. A stable East African region is crucial for Kenya's security and economic prosperity. To this end, Kenya

has actively participated in peace negotiations and diplomatic missions, such as the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the 2018 South Sudanese peace agreement. Kenya's commitment to these processes is not just about fostering peace but also about preventing the spillover of conflict, which could lead to refugee flows and destabilization within its own borders.[8] Moreover, Kenya's involvement in peacekeeping missions across the continent, particularly in East Africa, highlights its role as a regional diplomat and peacemaker. Since 1979, Kenya has participated in 25 peacekeeping missions, 11 of which were in the East African region. This extensive experience underscores Kenya's leadership in regional stability efforts and its desire to maintain a peaceful neighborhood that supports its national interests.[9]

Kenya's economic interests in Sudan and South Sudan are significant and closely tied to its political strategy. The country is particularly focused on securing access to oil and gas reserves in South Sudan, where Kenyan companies are actively involved in exploration and development. Additionally, Kenya benefits from the pipeline transport routes that facilitate the flow of these resources to international markets, further integrating its economy with those of its neighbors. Infrastructure development is another critical component of Kenya's economic strategy. Kenya has invested in various infrastructure projects in both Sudan and South Sudan, including road construction, energy supply, and telecommunications.[10][11] These projects are designed to facilitate trade, improve access to resources, and enhance regional connectivity. The Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor is a prime example of Kenya's efforts to bolster regional infrastructure, which not only strengthens economic ties but also reinforces Kenya's position as a central hub for trade in East Africa.

Kenya's support for South Sudan's membership in the East African Community (EAC) further illustrates its commitment to regional economic integration. By fostering the free movement of goods, services, and capital, Kenya aims to create a more interconnected and prosperous region that benefits its economy. Bilateral trade agreements with Sudan and South Sudan are also key to expanding market access for Kenyan exporters, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of its economy on the regional stage.[12]

Kenya's security policy in Sudan and South Sudan is intricately linked to its economic and political interests. Ensuring regional stability is not only a matter of national security but also a means of safeguarding trade routes and maintaining economic stability. Conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan have the potential to generate significant refugee flows into Kenya, posing humanitarian and security challenges that the country must manage. Kenya's security engagements in these regions are therefore designed to address these challenges directly. The country has been actively involved in military operations in both Sudan and South Sudan, primarily focusing on peacekeeping and regional stability. In Sudan, Kenya participated in the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), which aimed to mitigate the conflict in Darfur. In South Sudan, Kenya contributed troops to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), supporting the implementation of the peace agreement and protecting civilians. Additionally, Kenya plays a crucial role in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Monitoring and Verification Mechanism, which oversees the implementation of peace agreements in South Sudan.

These security operations serve Kenya's broader strategic goals, which include stabilizing the region, combating radical militias, and preventing the spread of violence into Kenya. By ensuring stability, Kenya creates a more favorable environment for trade and economic development, which are vital to its national interests. Furthermore, through active engagement in regional organizations like IGAD, Kenya enhances its political influence and ensures that its leadership role in East Africa is maintained.

Kenya's strategy in Sudan and South Sudan is a well-coordinated effort that combines political, economic, and security dimensions. By promoting peace and stability, Kenya not only secures its borders and minimizes the risk of regional conflicts but also strengthens its economic ties and enhances its political influence within East Africa. This comprehensive approach ensures that Kenya remains a key player in the region, committed to fostering economic development, regional integration, and security. As long as there is a profitable economic output for Kenya connected to those engagements, that will provide access to natural resources and boost the Kenyan economy, there will be the interest in Kenya to engage in economic, political and military engagement in Sudan and South Sudan. Through its active engagement in diplomacy, infrastructure development, and security initiatives, Kenya continues to assert its role as a leading force in East Africa, aligned with its broader goals of regional and international security.

Conclusion

The cases examined highlight Kenya's multifaceted security challenges and the strategic responses shaping its future agenda. Kenya's security landscape is increasingly defined by the persistence of ethno-political violence, the ongoing threat of terrorism, and its pivotal role in regional stability. The post-election violence underscores the enduring salience of ethnic divisions, necessitating comprehensive electoral and socioeconomic reforms. Al-Shabaab's sustained terrorist threat, despite military efforts, signals the need for more robust counterterrorism frameworks, balancing security with human rights.

Internationally, Kenya's maritime security, particularly in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, is paramount for safeguarding trade routes vital to its economy. The strategic alliance with the U.S., exemplified by its participation in the Prosperity Guardian mandate, reinforces Kenya's role as a critical partner in maintaining regional stability. Furthermore, Kenya's engagements in Sudan and South Sudan underscore its commitment to regional peace, security, and economic integration. These engagements not only bolster its leadership within the East African Community but also protect its economic interests in the region and make Kenya an ideal regional partner for western powers in the east African region.

Looking forward, Kenya's security policy will likely increase its dependency on western allies or other global partners that showcase geostrategic interest in the region, emphasizing multilateral cooperation to gain from the international partnership. As Kenya navigates its complex security landscape; the question comes up whether Kenya's ability to address internal and external threats will maintain while facing new and complex challenges. Furthermore, taking a closer look at the political and economic dependencies that go hand and hand with Kenya's foreign engagements as deeply necessary. How will those dependencies influence Kenya's political agenda during the next couple of years and is Kenya's capable of sticking to the responsibilities that are coming up as a consequence of those dependencies.

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The Authors

Maryannita Odongo

Laurence Jost

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