



United States–Kenyan Asymmetry in Counterterrorism Cooperation: An Assessment of the Efforts of the United States and Kenya in East Africa

Sky L Mkuti⁴¹¹ 

*Department of Political Sciences, University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa*

Jo-Ansie van Wyk⁴¹² 

*Department of Political Sciences, University of South Africa,
Pretoria South Africa*

Oluwaseun Tella⁴¹³ 

*Institute for the Future of Knowledge, University of Johannesburg,
Johannesburg, South Africa*

Abstract

On 11 September 2001, the world witnessed a drastic change in the global security landscape that influenced the dynamics of United States counterterrorism. The United States expanded its global alliances, including its financial assistance and cooperation scope, in East Africa as well. A fundamental transformation in the United States Defence Foreign Policy towards Africa was marked by a growing reliance by the United States on African partners, such as Kenya. Despite visible power disparities between the United States and Kenyan asymmetric relations, the two states set an unmatched counterterrorism partnership in East Africa – even with the growing criticism of the United States militarisation in some parts of Africa, such as in the Sahel region, which remains prone to coups despite enduring counterterrorism interventions by the United States. What is particularly interesting is how the asymmetric relations between the United States and Kenya enhanced a stable and multidimensional implementation of counterterrorism in East Africa. The dynamics of these asymmetric relations on counterterrorism demystify the perception that asymmetric relations between powerful and weak states are inherently unstable. Employing secondary data, the study on which this article reports, sought to deconstruct such rhetoric by conceptualising asymmetry whilst identifying five main conceptualisations of asymmetry theory that characterises the asymmetric relations between the United States and Kenya. Thereafter, by taking stock of the multidimensional efforts by the United States and Kenya, it is argued that triangular asymmetries are the significant force multipliers of stability and normalcy in asymmetric relations.

Keywords: Asymmetry, Terrorism, Counterterrorism, Al-Shabaab, United States, Kenya

Introduction

The dynamics of asymmetric relations between the United States of America (US) and Kenya are filled with contradictions. On the one hand, the global reputation of the United States as a powerful state and its interactions with weak states, such as Kenya, tend to be shaped by conditionalities.⁴¹⁴ This means that the power dynamics and distinctions between powerful and weak states could influence the course of the interactions. For instance, the US foreign policy on counterterrorism has been globalised since 11 September 2001 (9/11) with the US-led global mobilisation against al-Qaeda. This period not only unleashed a multitude of policy changes but also intensified national, regional, and global protection of US interests and of its allies across the world.⁴¹⁵ In East Africa, the US counterterrorism strategy in Kenya was concerning – specifically with regard to Western influence on the counterterrorism strategies of African states. For instance, critics observed how the implementation of the Kenyan Suppression of Terrorism Bill of 2003 unfolded, and concluded that this specific policy was highly influenced by the United States, and the bill was eventually enacted despite heated domestic contestation.⁴¹⁶ This further suggests that counterterrorism in Kenya has been driven by diplomatic pressures to cooperate with the political and military objectives of American post-9/11 war on terror strategies.⁴¹⁷ On the other hand, the existence of ‘a blind spot in most thinking about International Relations’⁴¹⁸ blurs the conceptualisation of asymmetric relations from an interdependence and cooperation perspective that contributes to relational management through negotiation and cooperation rather than hegemonic dominance. The main assumption the current study held was that the asymmetric nature of international relations may affect the outcome of counterterrorism initiatives, especially when the interests of asymmetric states are at stake. This means that, despite clear distinctions in the capabilities of powerful states (such as the United States) and weak states (such as Kenya), the existence of mutual security threats to their national and regional security posed by terrorists, such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, creates a balanced equilibrium and brings normalcy to asymmetric relations by agreeing to certain counterterrorism measures. Eventually, state actors are increasingly influenced by international society when responding to terror threats. For instance, as the uncertainties of globalisation increase, the conditions for vulnerabilities also rise, which further intensifies insecurities in the international arena.

To this end, the study on which this article reports, had three key objectives:

- The conceptualisation of asymmetry to advance the literature on US–Kenyan asymmetric relations. This is critical to understand distinct views about asymmetric relations in international relations;
- An empirical understanding of the dynamics of US–Kenyan asymmetry in counterterrorism by taking stock of the multidimensional security efforts in East Africa; and
- Demystifying the claims related to powerful and influential states making use of counterterrorism strategies as ‘imposed orders’⁴¹⁹ in which weak states conform to international counterterrorism orders through possible combination of enforcements.

Asymmetry and Asymmetric Relations: A Conceptual Framework

The conceptualisation of asymmetry theory offers contradictory explanations embedded in a paradox where, on the one hand, the conventional understanding assumes that states with distinct military and economic power capabilities are also ‘equal before the law and in terms of their rights and obligations’.⁴²⁰ Asymmetry is however generally perceived as a socio-political or relational structure where unequal relations are established between great and small, strong and weak as well as rich and poor. Asymmetry is thus seen as a catalyst of discord and disharmony where relations are often unjust, specifically because, in asymmetric relations, powerful states are perceived to use their global influence to impose orders on and force compliance to international norms, such as counterterrorism.⁴²¹

Counterterrorism remains a complex term to define. This has also influenced how states implement their security strategies based on what is perceived as a security threat. The lack of a universal definition of counterterrorism is thus reflected in how states have perceived terrorism, which has manifested in distinct ways for centuries; thus, influencing the course of counterterrorism strategies.⁴²² For instance, in the aftermath of 9/11, al-Qaeda operatives in East Africa began to launch a series of terror attacks on the interests of US allies in Kenya.⁴²³ The 2002 terror attacks on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Kikambala – and many others that followed – influenced the enactment of the Kenyan Suppression of Terrorism Bill of 2003 as a counterterrorism measure.

US counterterrorism efforts under the George W Bush administration relied vehemently on US allies, such as Kenya.⁴²⁴ This meant a cooperative action against acts of terror through the rectification of international conventions and the implementation protocols related to the prevention of terror. Kenya therefore implemented the Kenyan Suppression of Terrorism Bill of 2003. This bill, like the US counterterrorism approach under the Bush administration, resorted to the intense use of force and violence that compromised human rights. Consequently, US–Kenyan counterterrorism cooperation under the Bush administration was highly contested due to the use of coercive interrogation techniques. In most cases, these counterterrorism techniques came under scrutiny given the lack of scientific backing as they added physical and psychological stress to captured individuals alleged of being associated with terrorism, more especially in East Africa following the 2002 Kikambala bombings in Kenya.⁴²⁵

Counterterrorism entails national and intergovernmental measures to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to security threats nationally and internationally.⁴²⁶ These measures can be unfavourable at times but are critical for the national, regional, and international security of a state, which may be amplified by intra-state and inter-state conflict vulnerabilities.

The incidents of 9/11, for example, have not only accentuated insecurity but have also compounded conceptual confusion over the distinction between the concepts “counterterrorism” and “counterinsurgency”. This is partly because the United States focused on the former rather than on the latter due to the US perception of the complex threats that al-Qaeda posed to international peace and security.⁴²⁷ Despite existing conceptual challenges, counterterrorism differs from counterinsurgency in many respects.

Counterinsurgency presents a blended approach to defence where both civilian and military preventive efforts are implemented to contain the spread of insurgency and to address the underlying causes of the violence within a state.⁴²⁸ Counterterrorism is highly strategic, as defensive actions are targeted specifically at terrorists with transnational links; thus, requiring the use of “hard power” through heavy military use when the security interests of the state are endangered.

In some instances, the use of “hard power” and violence during counterterrorism interventions is as uncompromised as it has been since the post-9/11 war on terrorism as a strategy to defeat al-Qaeda operatives in East Africa. Counterinsurgency operations as pursued by African Union (AU) missions, such as the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), have been preferred, however, despite remaining largely military operations. Counterinsurgency employs specialised operations that aim at mobilising local forces and, to an extent, at reducing the reliance on foreign defence actors that often compound intra-state rivalry and conflicts.⁴²⁹ Essentially, the uncertain international environment compels states to pursue both soft power, which includes democratic and diplomatic engagements, as well as hard power through offensive measures in anticipation of or as reaction to a security threat.⁴³⁰

In cases where states resort to soft-power approaches to counter security threats, the likelihood for violent conflicts is minimised given that ‘attractive foreign policies’ are implemented often based on cultural, political, and economic ‘co-option’ of values that are desirable in international relations.⁴³¹ When hard power is deployed, power is not only unequal but also unstable, as unbalanced relations tend to magnify conflicts, particularly between enemies. For instance, the Russo–Ukrainian War that erupted in 2022 provides a best-case scenario of an antagonist asymmetric relationship magnified by resource-driven geopolitical conflict.⁴³² Asymmetries may often lead to a lack of mutual understanding and transparency even in a globalised environment where all aspects of humanity seem to be interdependent. This is because ‘states remain idiosyncratic in their location, identities, and historical memories’,⁴³³ and this influences asymmetry between states. An unequal character of states is clearly seen in the size of their populations, resource capabilities, and their multifarious international relations.

There is, however, also a positive perspective to asymmetry theory, which does not disregard the existence of disparities in the capability of the relations of strong and weak states. Womack’s asymmetric approach presents a good understanding of how and why large and powerful states, such as the United States, are unable to reign over small and weak states, such as Kenya, regardless of their expansive military and economic capability.⁴³⁴ The explanation is simple: the current asymmetric relations between the United States and Kenya are multi-nodal. This essentially means that powerful and weak states take part in the management of asymmetric relations whereby powerful states do not necessarily compete with or exercise dominance over weak states; thus, choosing to manage any possibility of discord in order to stabilise the US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship.

In the case of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations, asymmetric theory is significant, as it sets up a framework to expand the means through which state actors implement counterterrorism strategies. This is vital because it assists states irrespective of their distinct capabilities to fight against common security threats, such as terrorism. Since 9/11, the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations have been strengthened to fight against terror threats posed by common foes, such as al-Shabaab, which has recently found a haven in East Africa.⁴³⁵ Asymmetry theory therefore provides a platform to explore and shape the dynamics of counterterrorism alliances in international relations, specifically those between powerful and weak states, such as the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations.

Increased insecurities, which often lead to competition in the power dynamics of states, create conditions for alliance formation. In asymmetric relations between states, the one with strong capabilities – deemed a powerful state – constantly worries ‘about a division of possible gains that may favor others more than itself’.⁴³⁶ Consequently, realists and neorealists insist on the anarchic structure of international relations as a factor that potentially limits cooperation and interdependence, creating an unstable cycle of interactions when it comes to securing ‘that which they depend on’⁴³⁷ – namely their national interest. Womack’s perspective on asymmetric relations presents a relatively novice perspective on international relations between unequal states, which is distinct from the classical theories of Waltz or Eckstein.⁴³⁸ Womack views international relations as interactions based on relational beads rather than independent transactions where power and control are the main features of asymmetric interactions, while Eckstein perceives that, in asymmetric relationships, one state seeks to have advantage over the other.⁴³⁹

To redress imbalance, Womack maintains that, despite visible capability disparities found in asymmetric relations, both strong and weak states can strike a stable and normal relationship because of shared mutual interests.⁴⁴⁰ In this case, national, regional, and global peace and security have become the centre of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations since 9/11, which to an extent has created conditions for cooperation between asymmetric states when responding to a common threat – terrorism.

After 9/11, the expansion of terrorism in East Africa became prominent with an increased wave of terror attacks in Kenya marked by the 2002 attack on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Kikambala.⁴⁴¹ This strengthened efforts for the establishment of a stable and normal US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship where mutual benefits are pursued by both asymmetric states as they jointly commit themselves to counterterrorism strategies. For instance, as states cooperate to reduce uncertainty through certain patterns of preventive actions that include counterterrorism capacity building, the likelihood for great-power sustainable domination is limited. In this case, capacity building includes:

- Security in aviation and border areas;
- Advisory support to security forces in the region; as well as
- ‘[T]raining and mentoring of law enforcement to conduct investigations and manage crisis response, and advancing criminal justice sector reforms.’⁴⁴²

Womack's theoretical argument on the utility asymmetric relations differs significantly from the views of realists, such as Morgenthau, and neorealists, such as Waltz, whose views on domestic hierarchy and relations in the international system are driven by an anarchic system due to the lack of an overarching legitimate authority, which limits opportunities for mutual benefits.⁴⁴³ Asymmetric relations may instead be perceived as a source of 'great power "entrapment"', as Snyder points out in his security dilemma argument.⁴⁴⁴ Snyder's conceptual and theoretical explanation of 'entrapment' suggests that, (weak) states are 'dragged into a conflict over an ally's interests that one does not share, or shares only partially'.⁴⁴⁵ Although the interests of allies exist, and these are nonetheless 'generally not identical'.⁴⁴⁶ Unlike other theoretical frameworks, such as that provided by constructivism, which also argue that the interactions of strong and weak states are often managed through domination rather than negotiations,⁴⁴⁷ Womack's interpretation of asymmetric relations, emphasises the existence of an ordered relationship. Asymmetric relations are therefore stabilised by cooperation rather than by a situation where the dependence of a weak state (e.g. Kenya) on the alliance and commitment to a powerful ally (e.g. the United States) is at a high risk of entrapment.

Apart from enforcing stability through cooperation, an ordered relationship also shapes the perception of each asymmetric state. In turn, the perceived trust and confidence of symmetric states influence interdependence and cooperation through which counterterrorism strategies are advanced bilaterally regionally, and multilaterally through international actors such as the United Nations (UN) and the AU. For example, whilst bilateral relations are essential for the formation of coalitions regionally and multilaterally, they are also critical enforcers of stable asymmetric relationships – particularly given that both powerful and weak states accept the dynamics in the asymmetric relationship framework in which national security as well as political and economic interests plays a central role. In the context of US–Kenyan asymmetry, this refers to the strategies of counterterrorism pursued through multilateral efforts, such as AMISOM. In the case of the US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship, the patterns of interdependence and cooperation serve the mutual interests of the involved parties and preserve stability by mitigating the effects of misperceptions.⁴⁴⁸

Misperceptions can generally be explained as a cluster of both "misinterpretation" and "misunderstanding" that mislead the perceived reality. Although Womack's conceptualisation of asymmetric relationships is deemed stable, misperceptions are not immune to asymmetric relations. If misperceptions occur, the two forces (i.e. powerful states and weak states) work out to constrain the 'negative complementarity'⁴⁴⁹ of misperception. This can be achieved through diplomatic measures that affirm mutual respect, such as the exchange of state visits at global, regional, and state level. These measures are essential and should be performed in ways that respect and show dignity toward local political communities. Figure 1 below illustrates how the United States and Kenya have been able to stabilise their asymmetric relations despite the existence of clear disparities in the socio-economic and political capabilities as well as regional and global influence.

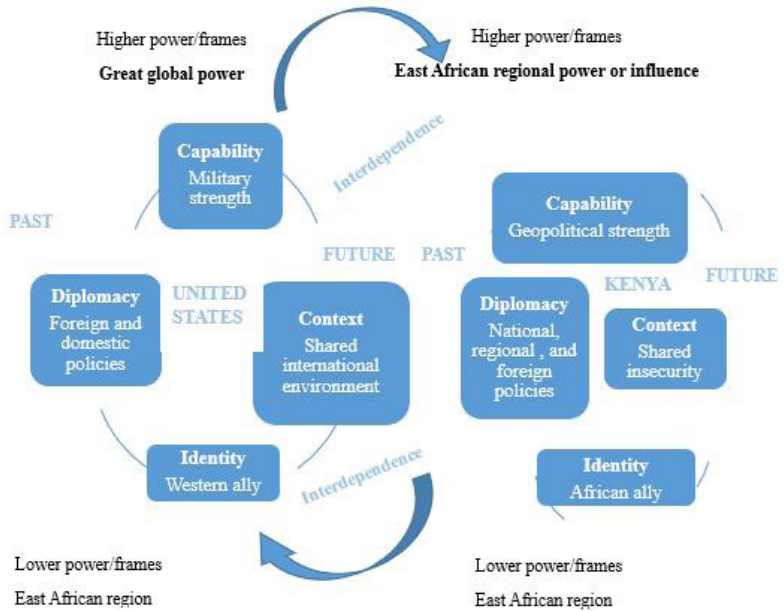


Figure 1: Pattern of a normal asymmetric relationship: United States–Kenya⁴⁵⁰

Figure 1 presents a vivid illustration of the pattern of the US–Kenyan relationship, which influences the pursuit of national security interests in Africa. US counterterrorism in Africa is theoretically guided by four elements (capability, diplomacy, identity, and context). These elements constitute the prime requirements for normalcy in any asymmetric relationship. Caution should however be taken when conceptualising “normalcy”, as a normal asymmetric relationship is not in any form one that is based on ‘mutual love or even mutual understanding, [but] rather a bilateral relationship based on the mutual conviction that the peaceful management of the relationship can be negotiated’⁴⁵¹ through recognition of the influential role of each side, whether from a strong or from a weak state.

Dynamics of United States–Kenyan Asymmetry

Womack’s interpretation of asymmetric relations emphasises normalcy through interdependence and cooperation in light of misperceptions that may destabilise asymmetric relations if mismanaged.⁴⁵² For instance, in the context of the Bush and Obama administrations, the general perception was that the US–African relations under the Bush administration created conditions for the securitisation of Africa in the sense that the US foreign policy focus was on the military engagement in dealing with the perceived threat of terrorism.⁴⁵³

Subsequently, there was a negative perception of the Bush administration, as since 9/11, the administration developed counterterrorism policies, such as the establishment of the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PRACT) in 2009. The PRACT initiative built the capacity of African military forces and enhanced cooperation of the military whilst advancing law enforcement between civilian actors across East Africa.⁴⁵⁴ To an extent, these counterterrorism efforts ensured the cooperation of African states with US military troops:

[To] develop effective military containment against terrorist attacks which pose a threat to the security of incumbent African regimes. The growing criticism ensued due to the fact that African regimes have largely advanced the economic and political security interests of foreign powers.⁴⁵⁵

For this reason, there has been a growing perception that US counterterrorism in Africa failed to promote sustainable African security interests, and instead advanced its major foreign policy priorities, which to some extent fuelled misperceptions regarding US interest in Africa.

US–African relations however evolved with diplomatic measures that have affirmed mutual respect in terms of African states, such as Kenya. For instance, the United States and Kenya exchange state visits at global, regional and state level. In recent years, Kenya has continued to support US-led initiatives to strengthen regional security – not only in East African, but also in other regions, such as in the Red Sea area and in Ukraine⁴⁵⁶ through diplomatic measures that have further enabled respect and showed dignity towards local political communities. The five-year cooperation framework on defence partnership – signed in September 2023 between the United States and Kenya – was marked by a strengthened mutual commitment to regional peace and stability. The Kenyan Minister of Defence at the time, Aden Duale, asserted that the asymmetric relationship between the United States and Kenya was ‘based on the principle of mutual trust, respect, shared values, and common defence objectives’,⁴⁵⁷ which echoed the acknowledgement by US Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, of Kenya as a continued strategic partner in East Africa.

Although distinctions can be drawn when analysing the Bush and Obama administrations, specifically with regard to the foreign policy approach taken towards East African states, it is clear that, unlike the Bush administration, the Obama administration and those that followed gained a unique reputation that advanced extensive diplomatic measures. Upon assuming office, President Obama undertook a state visit to Kenya on 24 July 2015,⁴⁵⁸ emerging as the first sitting US president to visit Kenya.⁴⁵⁹

Obama was also the first US leader to address the AU. This was yet another way to show US commitment to fighting terror in East Africa. Although Obama’s talks were primarily on trade and investment, security and counterterrorism were also on the agenda.

This unfolding of events reflected the extent to which interdependence is vital for the stability and normalcy of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations. It also shows that, to an extent, realist and neorealist perspectives on asymmetry are linked to liberal views in terms of the influence that powerful states exert on weak states. The distinction, however,

lies in the power dynamics where realists emphasise the use of military force as the main power resource, whereas liberalists – like asymmetry theory – accentuate the power of institutions, such as the UN and other actors that foster cooperation. This reduces the role of force, given that economic incentives and security concerns take centre stage instead of the relative power, which states sometimes use to coerce weak states into complying with certain goals in the international system. As these slight distinctions unfold, it is clear that, ‘in many areas, realist assumptions about the dominance of military force and security issues remain valid’.⁴⁶⁰

The ordered and stable pattern of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations as illustrated in Figure 1, does not, by any means suggest the elimination of problems or risks of entanglement but rather an enhanced possibility for the management of distinct interests, which eventually minimise the risk of conflicts between asymmetric states. Relational management facilitates normalcy in asymmetric relationships where the diplomatic leadership of states, socio-historical engagements, and the assignment of bilateral commissions routinise issues of common interest, such as counterterrorism strategies.

A clear distinction between the engagement of the Bush and Obama administrations with Africa, specifically in East Africa, can be established. On the one hand, Obama’s foreign policy emphasised youth engagement as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whereas the Bush administration was concerned with security and military matters. For instance, in the first engagement of Obama’s administration in East Africa, the focus was on the pursuit of sustainable solutions that promote entrepreneurship ‘to solve social challenges’⁴⁶¹ affecting African people. The 2015 Global Entrepreneurial Summit⁴⁶² aimed to advance better business and trade, not aid. This is how Obama envisioned Africans ridding themselves of poverty, specifically Kenyans, as this was his ancestral land, the birth country of his father.

Security interests were also part of Obama’s agenda, as the threat posed by al-Shabaab could not be ignored. Obama’s state visit happened two years after the 2013 Westgate Mall attacks and the same year in which al-Shabaab launched an attack against Garissa University on 3 April 2015, killing scores of students in their dormitories. During this specific state visit, Obama’s US foreign policy resonated with the advancement of security cooperation, which he reinforced:

I’ll be the first US president to not only visit Kenya and Ethiopia, but also to address the continent as a whole, building off the African summit that we did here which was historic and has, I think, deepened the kinds of already strong relationships that we have across the continent.⁴⁶³

This presidential statement gives an indication of the relationship between the United States and Africa, and how – despite clear asymmetry – the bilateral relations wield mutual benefits inasmuch as it is extremely beneficial for the advancement of US global security. Kenya has derived several benefits from its relations with the United States. Before 9/11, Africa received little US recognition, but the period 2001–2015 heralded a strengthened US–African partnership arising from an almost “imposed” US global counterterrorism campaign, as all US coalition partners had to participate in the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

The GWOT narrative emphasised two security aspects, namely ‘the larger the efforts that are required to counter terrorism [...] the larger the danger of abuse of authority in combating the phenomenon’.⁴⁶⁴ This was yet another factor that influenced criticism of the Bush administration. The counterterrorism approach of the Bush administration was criticised for the intense use of force and violence by the US Military, which often compromised human rights. Although the GWOT was implemented across the globe and entailed US diplomatic, financial, and other military actions to deny the establishment and/or financing of safe havens for terrorist groups, its security approach influenced the global perception of the United States.⁴⁶⁵

Since 9/11, Africa gained some prominence in US foreign policy. The post-9/11 era also informed the positive transformative nature of asymmetric relations; thus, bringing to light the significance of asymmetric bilateral relations between a powerful state and a weak state. By 2015, new counterterrorism programmes were funded by the United States. Programmes, such as the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund and the African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership, enable African partners to secure their national borders through military education and training as well as defence equipment.⁴⁶⁶ Finally, US–Kenyan bilateral relations have been solidified as a result of cooperation and interdependence that led to the attainment of mutual interests. For instance, on 9 February 2024, both the United States and Kenya reiterated the significance of their security partnership, which represents one of the diplomatic measures reflecting a continued and beneficial aspect of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations. Just as the United States underscores Kenya as one of its vital security partners in Africa, the asymmetric cooperation has enabled both states to address a wide ‘range of shared threats and advancing security in East Africa and beyond’.⁴⁶⁷

As a member of one of the volatile regions plagued by terrorism, Kenya continues to gain from the enduring US peace and security support towards regional stability. The US–Kenyan security partnership has also been instrumental in sustaining counterterrorism efforts in the fight against the expansion of al-Shabaab through multidimensional missions, such as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

To this end and through the application of asymmetry theory in terms of US–Kenyan relations, five main conceptualisations of asymmetric theory have been detected (see Table 1). These conceptualisations are relational aspects that are influenced by the transformation in the global environment, which interconnects both large and small states.

Table 1: *United States–Kenyan relations according to asymmetry theory*⁴⁶⁸

United States (Global great power = large state)	Kenya (East African sub-regional power = small state)
Normal and stable asymmetric relationship rather than dominance and competition between the large (e.g. United States) and the small (e.g. Kenya) parties.	
A pattern of mutual interests (both parties maximise counterterrorism interest in the global, regional, and national spheres).	
The great military and economic capability of large states (e.g. United States) does not enable sustained dominance of the small state (e.g. Kenya), but increases interdependence and cooperation.	
Small states (e.g. Kenya) gain much from the asymmetric relationship through East African regional influence on regional security and socio-economic stability matters. For example, Kenya contributes a large number of troops in the East Africa region due to US financial and military training assistance.	
Diplomatic measures mitigate misperceptions through mutual respect; thus, preserving stability in the asymmetric bilateral relationship.	

These concepts aid the validation of the extent to which asymmetry theory is pivotal in explaining the essentiality of interdependence–cooperation patterns of interactions to counterterrorism. This means that, in a seemingly asymmetric bilateral relationship between a powerful state and a weak state – such as seen in the US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship – stable relations are attainable despite globalisation that creates conditions for an asymmetric composition of interactions affecting how states relate in the international environment.⁴⁶⁹ The insecurity of one state thus becomes a challenge for another that can only be addressed collectively regardless of the economic, socio-political, or military capability of either one of the states. Despite asymmetry, the existence of a common threat to their national interests therefore influences the course of their relations and their commitment to counterterrorism measures that often shape the manner in which the entire international community attains peace and security.

Assessing United States–Kenyan Counterterrorism Efforts

Although contrasting views on the structure of asymmetric relations suggest one common feature – the existence of relational disparities in the capabilities of unequal states as seen in the US–Kenyan relations – this does not mean instability is a given. The existence of mutual interests normalises asymmetric relations. This however does not entail the elimination of threats but rather means that asymmetric states manage their distinct interests through routinised issues of common interest, such as counterterrorism efforts, which minimise the risk of conflicts.⁴⁷⁰ Asymmetric interactions can therefore deepen security, economic, and developmental cooperation through the identification of mutual interests that also influence the collective integration of regional and international partners. US–Kenyan asymmetric relations are therefore cemented by multinational partnerships through which states cooperate with forums, such as the Intergovernmental Authority

of Development (IGAD), the East African Community (EAC), the AU, the UN and the European Union (EU).

Subsequently, as a powerful state, the United States and its Western allies collectively support Kenya as a relatively weak East African state with the required defensive means to address the threats posed by terrorism. Fundamentally, to succeed in minimising their mutual exposure to terror threats, the United States and Kenya employ strategic patterns of interactions to counter terrorism, and address other forms of transnational threats, such as violent extremism posed by terrorist groups, such as al-Shabaab. The following patterns of asymmetry enhance normalcy in asymmetric bilateral relations through the adoption of a cooperative leadership management framework embodied in:

- Interdependence and cooperation: This pattern of asymmetry initiates conditions for collaboration between states with distinct capabilities. Since terrorism places the national interests of both powerful and weak states in a vulnerable security predicament, normalcy in their asymmetric bilateral relations is highly significant. This momentum is achieved through the ‘maintenance of an asymmetric cooperative framework’,⁴⁷¹ which refers to collaboration backed by confidence in the establishment of stable partnerships nationally and regionally. In the case of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations, the same applies as for trade and military partnerships, such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), and PRACT continues to strengthen the bilateral relations through US contributions to Kenyan investments in vital sectors. These investments include bilateral defence cooperation to bolster Kenyan military capability to support regional peace and counterterrorism efforts better, as well as reform enhancement in ‘health, agriculture, and energy sectors’.⁴⁷²
- Multi-agency partnership: This brings to light the reality that the global security crisis affecting the national and regional security interests of both asymmetric states requires a blended multi-agency approach combined with a civilian-centred approach to counter terrorism and violent extremism. By countering violent extremism collectively, it becomes a counterterrorism strategy aimed to bolster steps addressing terrorism by coordinating both state and non-state actors through synergy in ‘counter terrorism efforts and counter terrorism operations for better results’,⁴⁷³ as the existence of mutual threats shape the course of counterterrorism efforts of asymmetric states in East Africa. These coordinated efforts create conditions for stable US–Kenyan asymmetric bilateral relations through the expansion of regional and global links.⁴⁷⁴ To an extent, the multi-partnership pattern of asymmetry has influenced the US–Kenyan asymmetric bilateral relations on counterterrorism to accentuate a shift in the US military-focused approach to a much more collaborative and multi-agency counterterrorism approach with weak, yet strategic African partners, such as Kenya.

Through multi-agency collaboration, the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations enforce collective integration of national, international, and regional partnerships to stabilise and secure Kenya and East Africa. For instance, since 9/11, the US-led counterterrorism efforts not only facilitated global mobilisation against al-Qaeda through the GWOT

rhetoric that unleashed US-led unilateral invasions in Afghanistan in 2001; it also made a multitude of policy changes to protect the interests of the United States and its allies.⁴⁷⁵ An explanation for these mutual and stable relations between asymmetric states is the acknowledgement of the patterns of interdependence and cooperation, which are essentially multidimensional in nature. A multidimensional approach to counterterrorism relies on interagency collaboration, which is a distinct feature of the US unilateral approach pursued in the early 2000s. The unilateral US engagement against terrorist groups after 9/11 was nonetheless deemed necessary.⁴⁷⁶ Partly, the growing ‘anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric from a number of Islamic radicals’⁴⁷⁷ influenced the unilateral and heavy militaristic approach to counterterrorism, particularly under the Bush administration. A prominent shift was however seen in the administrations that followed by way of US commitment to building defence and military capacity, law enforcement, and cooperation with civilian and other multinational actors across East Africa.

The US foreign policy shift in its counterterrorism efforts enabled the normalisation of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations in several ways. US counterterrorism efforts focused on strengthening US–African relations by increasing trade through initiatives, such as AGOA of 2000.⁴⁷⁸ Although US–Kenyan relations have been ongoing for nearly six decades, it was only in 2012 that the US foreign policy shifted from unilateral engagement to multilateral partnership, specifically with prioritisation by the Obama administration of democratisation of African states to ensure a strengthened institutionalisation of democracy, economic growth, mechanisms for conflict prevention and peaceful resolution as well as collective responses to transnational security threats as a soft-power rather than hard-power approach to counter the growing security challenges threatening the sustainability of its interests in Africa.⁴⁷⁹

The distinctions between a hard- and a soft-power approach are in its rules of engagement. The hard-power approach was highly prominent during the Bush administration through use of coercion, as a result of which this approach was in many respects “disastrous” when engaging in counterterrorism as was the case with the US invasion in Iraq. In this case, counterterrorism interventions were preceded by violent interrogations ensuing human rights concerns.⁴⁸⁰ Subsequently, replacing the hard-power approach with a soft-power approach – which in many regards carries a “soft diplomatic” approach enforced by diplomatic and economic engagements instead of military force – has been practical specifically when dealing with the growing and complex members of al-Qaeda East Africa (AQEA) and associated terrorist fugitives from Kenya.⁴⁸¹ Despite the growing security challenges that AQEA and its affiliates, such as al-Shabaab, pose, the reliance on merely fatal military engagements could not curb terrorism threats. It consequently became critical to employ a multidimensional approach, which entailed a multitude of non-military engagements due to the limitations presented by the militaristic counterterrorism approach in countering terror threats posed by groups with insurgent inclinations.

Essentially, counterterrorism strategies should consider the transformational structure of terrorist groups in Africa, which are increasingly having links with international terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In East Africa, al-Shabaab has been employing terrorist tactics akin to counterinsurgency operations where targeted

training is given to vulnerable recruits.⁴⁸² Nonetheless, to an extent, the militaristic focus of AMISOM hampered its ability to pursue a counterinsurgency operation despite having drawn several successes in dislodging terrorist groups from areas they had previously controlled, such as Mogadishu.

In Mogadishu and other areas previously seized by terrorists, AMISOM counterterrorism operatives reclaimed those areas in offensive operations by the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and AU peace missions.⁴⁸³ The persisting resistance by al-Shabaab militants in targeting regional security forces along the border posts of Kenya and Somalia⁴⁸⁴ however compelled continuous regional cooperation and strengthened security in terms of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism measures. The transition of AMISOM to ATMIS has, therefore, created conditions for increased capacity building to redress effectively the security weaknesses, which al-Shabaab militants exploited to launch extremist violence in the East African region and beyond.

United States–Kenyan Asymmetric Counterterrorism Efforts and International Actors

Counterterrorism is one of the predictable norms to combat terrorism through which great powers, such as the United States, influence the international community to pursue collective strategies for international peace and stability. These counterterrorism strategies can be carried out through bilateral engagements and multilateral partnerships. Bilaterally, the US–Kenyan counterterrorism efforts have initially been met with a certain degree of scepticism due to a number of factors. Firstly, the conceptualisation of counterterrorism in itself renders its implementation a challenging practice by virtue of being an under-theorised and under-researched phenomenon.⁴⁸⁵ It may happen that the implementation of counterterrorism strategies by state decision-makers may occur through a reactive approach. At times, the intervention may require a prolonged strategic engagement to adapt better to the local and regional contexts in order to remain relevant and effective. It has not been an easy task to predict the outcome of some counterterrorism strategies or the public reaction to such counter strategies. For example, since 9/11, Kenya experienced its share of terror attacks. The 2002 Paradise Hotel terror incident in Kikambala compelled Kenya to strengthen its national security by enforcing counterterrorism measures.⁴⁸⁶

The enactment in Kenya of the Suppression of Terrorism Bill of 2003 during the Bush administration however raised national polemic. Critics observed the implementation process of the Suppression of Terrorism Bill (2003), and concluded that its enactment was highly influenced by the United States, given that, despite heated domestic contestation in public forums, the Bill was, nonetheless, enacted.⁴⁸⁷ The United States used diplomatic pressure to garner cooperation in terms of the political and military objectives of its post-9/11 war on terror strategies.⁴⁸⁸

This has somewhat affected the perception of the intentions of the United States in Africa, as the distinct perspectives may produce ‘structural misperceptions that can culminate in conflict’.⁴⁸⁹ This is however unlikely in asymmetric relations because, regardless of the existing power capability distinctions between the US–Kenyan relations, for example,

the risks for such occurrence are mitigated by a perceptual factor – a pattern of attention in asymmetric relations that influences and normalises bilateral relations in asymmetric relationships, specifically because of the historical context that shapes how each state perceives the other.

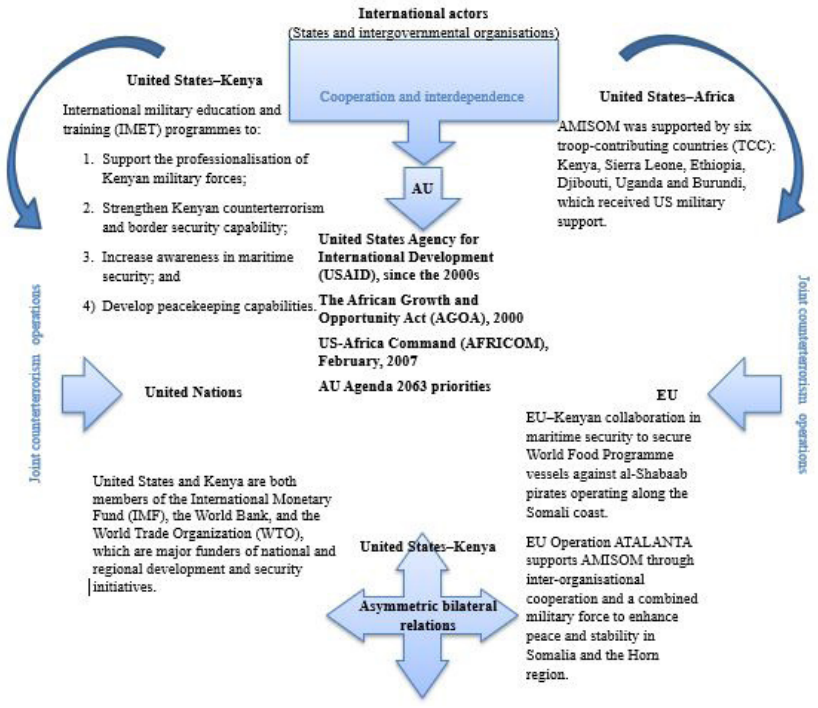
Secondly, the challenging nature of counterterrorism is amplified by the reactive approach. Arguably, counterterrorism influences the actions of both governments and the international community in such a way that they intend to take globalised defensive action. This collective action enables further advancement of common interests amongst states and also regulates bilateral asymmetric relations. Certainly, as long as security threats, such as terrorism and violent extremism, remain existential and continue to spread at an alarming rate across Africa,⁴⁹⁰ counterterrorism automatically becomes a responsive defensive strategy to counter any perceived threats associated with terrorism.

Indeed, counterterrorism strategies influence both governments and the international community in devising globalised defensive actions that advance common interests. For instance, whilst both the United States and Kenya are committed to building defence and military capacity, law enforcement, and cooperation with civilian and other multinational actors across East Africa, a multi-agency approach to counterterrorism is desirable. This would strengthen asymmetric relations between the two unequal states and the rest of the international community through collaboration with institutions, such as the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), IGAD, and ATMIS to improve the approaches in countering the morphing threats of terrorism.⁴⁹¹

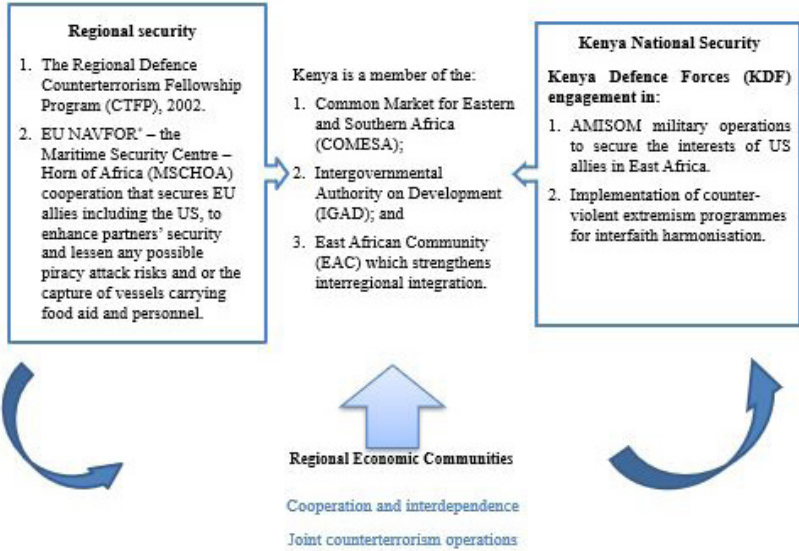
Although the significance of institutions as socially crucial tools that sustain cooperation and enhance mutual interests is embedded in the multilateral arrangements of liberal thought, asymmetry theory perceives multilateral relations as vital patterns of interaction. While liberal perceptions may be valid in maintaining that multilateral institutions ‘lock in policies’⁴⁹² by making these binding and also cementing coalitions that support progressive changes for the benefit of humanity, their position is slightly different from Womack’s asymmetric framework. On the one hand, liberalism, specifically institutional liberalism as Keohane points out, draws attention to the use of power in constructing institutions to attain a social purpose.⁴⁹³ From this point of view, one can argue that counterterrorism strategies can only wield relative gains as the use of power is a determinant according to which institutions have been created. This could potentially lead to a chaotic state of multilateral interactions. To counter this possibility – which is caused by uncertainty in international relations as realists would agree – Womack’s asymmetric theoretical argument suggests that, in light of the uncertainties that multilateralism may present to international relations, asymmetry transforms uncertainty through the management of interactions.⁴⁹⁴ The management of interactions reduces the exposure of states to certain uncertainties that may arise from misperception.⁴⁹⁵

Both the United States and Kenya accepted the asymmetric framework that embodies their relationship whilst cooperating multilaterally within the parameters of regional and global institutions that drive mutual interests, such as counterterrorism and national security goals, as in the case of the NCTC, IGAD, the UN, and the AU. Inevitably, despite

the asymmetry, the United States and Kenya will take advantage of the asymmetric relationship to maximise their interests and mutually yield benefits, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Kenya is a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.



*NAVFOR = the European Union Naval Force responsible for safeguarding maritime vessels in areas of operation⁴⁹⁶

Figure 2: Sequential architecture of United States–Kenyan counterterrorism efforts in East Africa.⁴⁹⁷

The architecture of counterterrorism strategies pursued by global and regional powers may take different forms. Figure 2 above presented the architecture of US–Kenyan counterterrorism strategies. It illustrated a sequential interlink between actors in international relations that form part of established triokas that advance regional stability.⁴⁹⁸

The sequence of asymmetric interactions in triokas demonstrates the strength of the US–Kenyan asymmetric collaborative relations with other global or regional actors, such as the AU and the EU. It therefore portrays ‘triangular cooperation’ aimed at accelerating the implementation of counterterrorism initiatives that focus on drawing mutual security benefits.⁴⁹⁹ Triokas also represent a collective commitment to multilateral security responses to achieve common interests. Apart from addressing terrorism, triokas thus enable international actors to equally address ‘concurrent and converging threats, such as the worsening climate crisis, armed conflict, poverty and inequality, and lawless cyberspace’.⁵⁰⁰

Triokas can be arranged in a unique sequence of asymmetric trilateral interactions, such as US–Kenyan–UN, US–Kenyan–AU, US–Kenyan–EU, and regionally, US–Kenyan–EAC relations, depending on the interagency composition. The utility of the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations with international actors is the creation of sustainable regional security

and stability. Essentially, each categorised international actor symbolises an interplay of US–Kenyan joint operations in a sequential interagency with key international actors that build civilian capacity and strengthen partnerships supporting Kenyan interagency and the engaging role of the country in defending its territorial integrity and regional stability. This means that, since becoming a major troop contributor to counterterrorism missions, such as AMISOM and ATMIS, the effective regional security role of Kenya cannot be attained independently.

Conversely, interagency efforts are pivotal and are extended through financial support, training, and capacity building to the existing counterterrorism institutions, such as the NCTC, which cooperates with other state actors. For example, Danish collaboration with East Africa is not least through NCTC to ‘significantly reduce the number of IED (Improvised Explosive Device) casualties and mitigate the growing threat represented by terrorists’ use of IEDs’⁵⁰¹ but also the IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism through capacity building for IGAD member states, such as Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Djibouti. These interagency cooperations are strategic in that they enhance counterterrorism efforts of asymmetric states to respond to threats emerging from easy accessibility to IEDs used by terrorist organisations, such as al-Shabaab.

Troikas Supporting the US–Kenyan Asymmetric Relations

The sequence of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations (as illustrated earlier in Figure 2 shows that the asymmetric interactions with other allies and troikas are ingrained in diplomatic, economic, and military interests through initiatives, such as AGOA, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States Africa Command (US AFRICOM) defence engagements that cement the US–Kenyan partnerships even further into stable and normalised asymmetric patterns of interactions.⁵⁰² Both the United States and Kenya have benefited from regional grant support drawn from USAID. These grants have been issued to East African member states in a collective effort to prevent and counter terror threats to US security interest. These threats have been on the rise since the twin US Embassy bombings of 1998.⁵⁰³ Similarly, US AFRICOM, which is one of seven ‘geographic combatant commands’ of the US Department of Defence, has consistently supported African military operations aimed at promoting US interests on the continent and advancing ‘regional security, stability, and prosperity’.⁵⁰⁴

From an asymmetry theory perspective, troikas bear relevance in managing asymmetric relationships that seek to respond multilaterally to imminent threats to national security. Besides establishing bilateral asymmetric relations, weak states, such as Kenya, therefore expand their membership to global forums that tackle threats posed by terrorist groups, such as Da’esh and ISIS. The willingness of Kenya, for instance, to engage in global alliances, such as the Global Coalition against Da’esh and ISIS as well as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, attests that security threats posed by terrorism affect the interests of both powerful states and weak states.⁵⁰⁵ Despite power disparities in relations of powerful states and weak states as seen in US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship, the holistic inclusion of and cooperation amongst unequal states therefore shape counterterrorism strategies by driving a multidimensional approach to national, regional, and global security.

Troikas and International Actors: A Multidimensional Approach to Counterterrorism

The major utility of troikas and international actors in asymmetric relations is their ability to normalise and stabilise international relations in the face of insecurities and power disparities amongst states. Faced with insecurity dangers posed by the ever-growing threat of terrorism, African states have recognised the significance of adopting a ‘multidimensional, holistic and integrated approach to effectively combat the terrorist threat affecting several African countries’.⁵⁰⁶ How can troikas and international actors catalyse effective responses to the problematic resurgence of terrorist groups, transnational terrorism, and acts of violent extremism in East Africa? Given the complexity of the instability woes of East African states that result from their “umbilical” linkage to war-torn states, such as Somalia, efforts for an integrated response to national and regional security threats remain a priority. For instance, as a regional player and a member of the AU, Kenya acknowledges the effects that the unstable conditions have compelled African leaders and their allies such as the United States –

[To] carry out the mandate of reducing the threat posed by al-Shabaab; support the capacity-building of the integrated Somali security and police forces; conduct a phased handover of security responsibilities to Somalia; and support peace and reconciliation efforts in that country.⁵⁰⁷

It is pivotal to fathom the general concerns of Africans around the achievement of governing objectives that advance human rights and development; the promotion of peace, security, stability; and regional economic integration supported by interactions driven by a win-win principle in spite of the distinct power capabilities.

A win-win principle can be drawn in asymmetric relations even though ‘the calculus of asymmetric negotiation is quite different from interaction premised on symmetry’.⁵⁰⁸ The concept of symmetry seems obvious and easy to define. Like other concepts in international relations, such as “terrorism” and “counterterrorism”, the interpretation of symmetry however remains a contentious issue in the study of international relations. Generally, symmetry is perceived to be more harmonious than asymmetry, as relations are found between states with equal capabilities. The perception is therefore that, since relations are driven by ‘a balanced mutual relationship, based on similar allocations of power resources’, conflicts may be limited.⁵⁰⁹

In practical terms, however, as the realists would argue, like asymmetric relations, symmetric relations involve power dynamics where coercion is likely due to competing power struggles that may occur even though negotiations and cooperation may occasionally occur. The case of the United States and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War is an example of a symmetric relationship where power competition led to global conflicts.⁵¹⁰ Despite the existence of equal power characteristics in symmetric relations, mutual trust is however not normalised nor stabilised. Consequently, any future conflicts are highly probable, as in the case of the US–Russian relations amid the Russo–Ukrainian war.

Similarly, asymmetry has two interpretations despite the existence of the power dynamics, which remain constant in international relations. The first interpretation maintains that, unlike symmetric relationships, which are between equals and considered “just”, asymmetric relations are seen as unjust because the relations are between unequal parties.⁵¹¹ The relations are, thus, between powerful states and weak where the probability of discord is likely due to a dichotomy of resources and capabilities. The second interpretation, which derives from Womack’s asymmetry theory, emphasises that, despite disparities in the capabilities of unequal states, such as the powerful United States and the weak Kenya, the likelihood of a stable and normal asymmetric interaction in an asymmetric relation is achievable. This is because mutual benefits are drawn from the realisation that the probability of power dominance by the powerful state over the weak state is less likely given the shared values and global ambitions in securing their interests in East Africa, more especially in light of the imminent shared security threats posed by the transnational nature of terrorism.

The US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship wields a mutual benefit as the idea of a win-win expectation ‘stabilizes the relationship, which is desirable for both sides’.⁵¹² For instance, by 2020, the US military spent an estimated \$778 billion⁵¹³ on defence, which capacitated the Kenyan defence force to engage in multiple global and regional security priorities. In East Africa, for example, US–Kenyan asymmetric cooperation was instrumental in addressing regional priorities, such as ‘ending the crisis in Ethiopia, fighting terrorism in Somalia, and restoring the civilian-led transition in Sudan’.⁵¹⁴

The US–Kenyan asymmetric relations indicate that the idea of discord in asymmetric relationships is not applicable in this instance. Although realists argue that asymmetric relations only present relative gains, absolute gains can be achieved when the patterns of cooperation are not only driven by ‘mutual self-interest and reciprocity’,⁵¹⁵ as Keohane emphasises in his reassessment of institutional liberalism. Although there are no visible disjoints in terms of the views of Keohane and Womack that cooperation in asymmetric relations is achievable due to mutual interests, Keohane underscores that asymmetric patterns of cooperation are strengthened by the existing sets of governing ‘principles, norms and rules governing the relations among well-defined sets of actors’⁵¹⁶ such as the UN, the AU and IGAD.

In the end, although Keohane’s assertion remains valid and is to an extent supported by asymmetry theory – despite a few visible distinctions in their explanation of asymmetric relations – this makes liberalism inadequate as compared to asymmetry theory. Womack maintains that asymmetric relations thrive through concerted efforts involving national and international actors that seek resolutions to address identified national and regional security threats as well as other forms of sustainable development concerns through diplomatic engagements and security partnerships. The existence of well-defined institutions and a set of rules alone however cannot stabilise or enforce cooperation in asymmetric relations, as relative changes may affect the relationship calculus of each party; thus, reducing the asymmetric relationship into a cost–benefit calculation. Consequently, to avoid misperception and ensure normalcy in asymmetric relationships, Womack’s asymmetry theory explains best how powerful states and weak states take

into consideration the patterns of interaction (see Figure 1), specifically US–Kenyan capability, identity, diplomacy, and the context of the relationship.⁵¹⁷ These elements are critical in asymmetric relations, as they ensure that, despite the exposed disparities in any of the identified elements, mutual interests, such as peace and security through enhanced counterterrorism strategies, are attained through collaborative efforts (see Figure 2).

The US–Kenyan collaborative counterterrorism efforts have enabled national and international actors to a great extent to enhance their advisory services, assistance, and ally support in terms of defensive operations on the African continent.⁵¹⁸ For instance, through diplomatic counterterrorism engagements, the United States has proactively engaged in de-radicalisation activities by organising dialogue with Somali communities in the United States as a counterterrorism strategy to mitigate extremist attacks on US interests domestically and abroad. In terms of security partnerships, the United States relies on intercontinental, interregional, and interstate cooperation to intensify its counterterrorism strategies in affected sub-Saharan African regions.⁵¹⁹ Given that peace and security constitute the core of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations, both the United States and Kenya cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally to achieve the envisioned national and regional security interests. To this end, international actors play a vital role in creating partnerships and synergies that advance the legislation, compliance, and implementation of counterterrorism strategies. Collaboration between Kenya and the United States and its allies has, in many regards, enhanced Kenyan military capacity, law enforcement, and cooperation with civilian actors across East Africa through regional initiatives, such as PRACT.⁵²⁰

The US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), for instance, is a strategy of PRACT that has enabled Kenya and its regional partners, namely Tanzania, Somalia, Uganda, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Mozambique to create long-term solutions to regional security threats collectively. The insecurity vulnerabilities, which are magnified by the spread of incidents of violent extremism and the expansion of transnational terrorism in some parts of these countries, have created conditions for asymmetric states and international actors to strengthen the institutions supporting both civilian and national security. For example, the implementation of the 2016 Kenyan National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism is one of the national efforts employed to confront the security challenges at national and regional level.⁵²¹

The cooperative efforts of INL, PRACT, and East African countries capacitate the host governments to play leading roles in fighting the scourge of terrorism within their territories and surrounding areas. For Kenya, a coalition with international actors maximises its strategic counterterrorism interests implemented through an enduring asymmetric bilateral relationship with the United States.

Given the tumultuous character of the East African region, comprising complex sources of instability that magnify violent conflicts emanating from the surrounding border areas, the strategies to combat the surge in terror activities have required a multidimensional approach. The increased instability risks of extreme violence spillover beyond the East African region compelled the United States and Kenya to adopt highly ‘coordinated anti-

terrorism deployments with regional economic communities, including the Multinational Joint Task Force'.⁵²²

Counterterrorism measures implemented through the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations have relied on a wide spectrum of strategies, depending on the form and manifestations of terror threats. The troikas have therefore been instrumental in promoting regional peace and security, despite growing criticism of US-led counterterrorism strategies in Africa of being rather 'reactive and heavily militaristic'⁵²³ and therefore perceived as a 'cover for US imperialism'.⁵²⁴ States are thus becoming critical of the United States, in particular to strengthen its "soft" diplomatic approach to ensure that the United States and Kenya maintain peaceful management of the asymmetric relationship.⁵²⁵ A balanced preventive approach to insecurity threats found in the shared environment enhanced by a limited reactionary counterterrorism approach, has become desirable.

US–Kenyan–UN Troika: Restoring Peace and Political Stability

The primary responsibility of the UN Security Council (UNSC) is the maintenance of international peace and security through the promotion of an international culture of peace and the prevention of terrorism in all its forms. The UNSC has led international counterterrorism operations decisively over the years by 'determining the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression'.⁵²⁶ For instance, upon the demise of Siade Barre's regime in the 1990s, Somalian instability was aggravated by the proliferation of clan militias, such as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) that gave rise in the mid-2000s to al-Shabaab, which remains a major force of instability in East Africa.⁵²⁷ Despite these long-lasting security shortcomings, the continued support drawn from the US–Kenyan–UN troika led to several positive outcomes:

- Firstly, the establishment of the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) in 2013 following the 2012 extensive political transition efforts where the US–Kenya–UN troika advanced AMISOM peacekeeping operations.⁵²⁸
- Secondly, despite having engaged militarily in Somalia through the 2011 operation Linda Nchi, which constituted the epitome of the AMISOM pursuit of al-Shabaab, great national and regional security outcomes were achieved with the involvement of the AU and the UN. The withdrawal of al-Shabaab militants from the previously captured military bases attests to the assumption that the collective engagements of asymmetric states with international actors serve as potential security enforcers in counterterrorism interventions.⁵²⁹
- Finally, in light of expanding inter-agency integration to counterterrorism, the US–Kenyan–UN troika, particularly through the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), facilitated the creation of the Nairobi Regional Counter-terrorism Centre of Excellence, which 'fosters knowledge-sharing and capacity-building at the regional level among members of the Organisation to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism'⁵³⁰ in East Africa.

Realists and liberals may agree with asymmetry theory that all states are vulnerable to the uncertain nature of the international environment, and their desire to manage uncertainty motivates international relations. It is, however, beneficial for small and weak states, such as Kenya, to engage in asymmetric troika relations to cope with and manage the evolving security threats and to advance economic development through integrative strategies because weak states are 'more exposed and have less control over the general situation'⁵³¹ which emphasises conditions for insecurity.

US–Kenyan–EU Troika: Maritime Security and Anti-piracy Efforts

Since most US–Kenyan terror threats emanate from Somalia, the international community, specifically the EU, collaborates with the United States and Kenya to secure the Somali Basin along the Indian Ocean. Through the European Union Naval Force Operation (EUNAVFOR) Operation Atalanta, the Kenyan navy obtains support to enforce its maritime security instruments whilst its seas are protected from Somali pirates whose agenda is to use the Indian Ocean corridor to 'hijack the ship and hold the crew for ransom'.⁵³² The escalation of terror threats often conducted by pirates along the Gulf of Aden affects vulnerable vessels carrying aid to East African states. For these reasons, it has become fundamental to retain an integrated and multidimensional counterterrorism strategy that collectively responds to the emerging instability crisis that is compounded by emerging collaboration between al-Shabaab and Somalian pirates.

In recent years, terrorist groups and pirates have become creative in their terrorist acts by joining forces to facilitate marine transit of illicit arms, ferry recruits, and other goods to enable the financing of their terrorist activities along the Somali seas. To counter these emerging security threats, the US–Kenyan–EU troika has to strengthen partnerships equally with the UN and AU to protect their ships from terror attacks.⁵³³ For instance, UNSC Resolution 2608 (2021) has been instrumental in repressing the activities of pirates along the Somali marine territory.

Furthermore, since the establishment of the 2012 transitional government in Somalia, the UN, the AU, and the EU have supported and enhanced coordination efforts by the UN in Somalia, by promoting an uninterrupted presence of the 'good offices of the Secretary-General and supporting political reconciliation and peacebuilding through engagement with the Federal Government of Somalia'.⁵³⁴ The US–Kenyan–EU security interests and their multinational allies have thus expanded the activities of international actors by either providing humanitarian aid or military training support to prevent violent extremism and to combat the expansion of terrorist threats within the Kenya–Somalia borders and offshore.

Consequently, as mentioned earlier, by strengthening a collective integration of national, regional, and international efforts, there is an assurance that the implementation of security measures protects the interests of the US–Kenyan national security and those of their allies against terror groups and pirates. Likewise, in defensive situations, such as counterterrorism, multi-agency cooperation enhanced by the US–Kenyan–EU troika has also increased 'the size and complexity of the target faced by the opponent'.⁵³⁵ For instance, pirate activities along the Somalian coast have frequently destabilised the vessels

carrying goods for the World Food Programme. Other vulnerable vessels supporting displaced populations in Kenya and Somalia have also been targets of piracy. The EU Naval Force (NAVFOR) in collaboration with the US–Kenyan–EU allies has however remained vital in its broader security responsibility that provides maritime security in the strategic Indian Ocean corridor.

US–Kenyan–AU Troika: Advancing Diplomatic, Economic and Military Interests

As mentioned earlier, troikas form a unique sequence of asymmetric trilateral interactions and interweaved networks of counterterrorism strategies. These strategies advance the diplomatic, economic, and military interests of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations on the continent. Furthermore, trilateral interactions with intergovernmental and regional actors ensure that the international community achieves its global goal of preventing the spread of terrorist activities through a collective effort. For instance, it was through multilateral security missions that the US–Kenyan–AU troika was able to accomplish numerous regional diplomatic, economic development, and peacekeeping successes in East Africa.

In terms of diplomatic engagements, the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations contributed to East African developmental growth marked by the implementation of policies related to regional economic growth, such as AGOA, adopted by the Clinton administration in the 1990s.⁵³⁶ These policies have been instrumental in advancing US–African economic partnerships through the introduction of tariff and non-tariff barrier reduction, trade agreement negotiations, as well as the integration of regional economic powers, such as Kenya, into the global economy. AGOA ‘grants exports from qualifying African countries duty-free access to the United States – the world’s largest consumer market. Over \$10 billion worth of African exports entered the United States duty free last year under the programme’.⁵³⁷ This is a clear indication that the US–African partnership is diversified and that the US–Kenyan–AU troika enhances support for regional economic development as well as security activities, such as bilateral and multilateral engagements advancing the war on terrorism, through strengthened interdependence and cooperation, peacekeeping operations, and civic action performance.⁵³⁸

Essentially, the existence of mutual interests in US–Kenyan asymmetric relations has thus far preserved these relations where cooperation with international actors continues to ensure stability and to mitigate the effects of misperceptions that could lead to hostilities. Furthermore, mutual respect diffuses any possibility of the display of political egos, as both powerful states and weak states focus their attention on attaining a common national and regional security.

National and regional security is at the centre of US–Kenyan–AU troika relations due to the insecurity conditions in East Africa that have prompted the international community to engage collectively in counterterrorism efforts that support the stabilisation of the Horn of Africa. Whilst there have been numerous initiatives that have contributed to the growing stabilisation of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations, the multilateral support drawn from the international community has not only normalised the troikas formed through US–Kenyan

asymmetric relations but has paved the way for enhanced collective management of threats posed by al-Shabaab. The following four-fold security achievements remain one of the remarkable security aspects of the US–Kenyan–AU troika.

Firstly, the ability of AMISOM to protect the 2006 Transitional Government in Somalia, and the subsequent establishment of the Somali Federal Government can be ascribed to the relentless capability of AMISOM to degrade terrorist cells of al-Shabaab.⁵³⁹ Secondly, the collective multilateral counterterrorism operations enabled the US–Kenyan–AU military operatives to push away most of al-Shabaab’s jihadist forces from the capital city of Mogadishu. For instance, as AMISOM advanced in its offensive operations, al-Shabaab was attacked from ‘several fronts’ as about 1 000 soldiers who were heavily backed up by 20 tanks continued to capture several al-Shabaab bases.⁵⁴⁰

Additionally, by 2022, AMISOM had been equipped successfully to counter the evolving threat amplified by terrorists’ choice of IEDs, through extensive training received from Western counterparts of the AU, such as the United States and the United Kingdom.⁵⁴¹ Increased awareness of al-Shabaab’s *modus operandi* enabled Kenya and other troop-contributing states serving under AMISOM, such as Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Uganda to mitigate al-Shabaab’s evolving ‘tactics, techniques and procedures in order to better protect’⁵⁴² themselves, and ultimately to emerge victorious. AMISOM had significant victories against al-Shabaab, as initially, prior to the transition from AMISOM to ATMIS in 2022, the bulk of troops serving under AMISOM were from Kenya and Ethiopia. Nonetheless, mutual security interests – seen through joint offensive operations against al-Shabaab militants – have led to successful military outcomes not only on land but also at sea.

For example, while AMISOM had been vital in helping the US–Kenyan–AU troika in expanding accessibility to humanitarian relief for displaced Somalis in East Africa, the political developments in Somalia remain one of the major successful regional interventions that the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations have accomplished with the continued troika partnerships with the UN and members of the EU community. The challenges associated with internally displaced people (IDPs) in Northern Kenya, for instance led to over 66 000 IDPs being hosted in Dadaab, the largest African refugee concentration camp, in East Africa.⁵⁴³

To redress the challenges magnified by the long-term effects of dispersed refugees, multinational collaboration enhanced synchronised efforts, such as financial support channelled towards the prioritisation of security and intelligence programmes for counterterrorism.⁵⁴⁴ Multinational organisations, such as the EU, continue to support the US–Kenyan–AU troika through “soft” diplomacy and financial assistance. For these reasons, the non-militaristic counterterrorism efforts of the EU – as ‘a leading supporter of Somalia’s peace process’⁵⁴⁵ – focus on effective counter-measures and terror-preventing strategies to reduce the threat of terrorist activities and violent extremism in vulnerable environments.

Finally, until its final mission, AMISOM – along with security forces of the Somali government – continued to provide fundamental security, which has been vital for the security of all international actors operating in Somalia and along its surrounding borders.⁵⁴⁶

Evidently, the prevailing military cooperation of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations with the distinct allies – such as the UN deployment to peacekeeping missions, the EU socio-economic and developmental support, as well as AU peacekeeping missions, such as AMISOM and currently ATMIS – has enabled international institutions, specifically African regional institutions, such as IGAD, to deal effectively with uncertainties resulting from terror-related threats. This has been made possible because, as Womack observes, not only do asymmetric relations accelerate cooperation between asymmetric states; they also affect the urgency and strategic actions taken by states.⁵⁴⁷

This, therefore, means that both powerful states and weak states cooperate in a bid to manage uncertainties affecting their mutual interest. Weak states are consequently in an advantageous position rather than being disadvantaged by the asymmetric relationship. This is ascribed to the fact that, despite being exposed to security threats, their cooperation with powerful states, such as the United States and its allies, the multinational institutions strengthen their ability to address terror-related threats through financial support and capacity building as well as law enforcement mechanisms nationally and regionally. Facilitation and consolidation of regional peace by Kenya by means of its defence force, particularly in Somalia, South Sudan, around the Eritrea–Ethiopia border, and in the Indian Ocean waters, attest to the developing capability of Kenya in addressing regional conflicts.⁵⁴⁸

Furthermore, while Kenya and other African states have pursued laudable counterterrorism actions through the ratification and implementation of terror-prevention instruments, such as the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism,⁵⁴⁹ after 9/11, Kenya has been exercising less control over the underlying conditions permeating the expansion of violent extremism on its surrounding borders. The defence skills Kenya acquired through continuous cooperation with the United States have enabled success in numerous peacekeeping operations in the region. The United States has equally become a relentless East African counterterror partner committed to the regional security priorities seen through its enduring financial, technical, and logistical cooperation to incapacitate terrorist groups from settling in vulnerable parts of East Africa.⁵⁵⁰

The current US–Kenyan asymmetric relations case study attests to the reality that, despite considerable US capabilities in terms of its military, economic development, and global influence, the US still focuses its attention on a small and weak state, such as Kenya, which has become a reliable US partner since 9/11, and which supports the responses to (in)security crises that often affect shared vital US–Kenyan domestic values, such as democracy and human rights.

Conclusion

There are undoubtedly conceptual complexities around the interpretation of asymmetric relationships. Nonetheless, significant lessons can be learnt from the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations, primarily the necessity to manage the asymmetric uncertainty

towards achieving mutual interests. In light of the distinct views in relation to whether asymmetric relations – such as those between the United States and Kenya – can be harmonious rather than unjust, this article argued that not only do complexities in relational perception influence the conduct of states and international actors in international relations, but they also influence the prioritisation of collective engagements to counter threats associated with terrorism effectively.

An analysis of the US–Kenyan asymmetric relations suggested that weak states benefit more from the asymmetric relationships than powerful states. The exposure to the insecurity risks that the state of uncertainty presents to both states is equally asymmetric; therefore, weak states, such as Kenya, are more affected than powerful states due to the deepened insecurity conditions that expand terror threats nationally and regionally. The powerful state however also gets positive national security returns from the same asymmetric relationship as the mutual security interests of both states are met when they collectively and multilaterally take actions to eradicate the proliferation of extremist radical networks in Africa strategically. To a certain extent, the troikas mentioned above have created conditions to enhance multinational integration, cooperation, and development, as an asymmetric relations management strategy to respond to the insecurity dimensions found in the international arena, which cannot be ignored.

The current political environment is engulfed by a plethora of uncertainties, which has rendered this environment vulnerable for both powerful states and weak states as security interests have become increasingly susceptible to terror-related threats and violent extremism. Nonetheless, the intensity with which counterterror strategies have been implemented provides insight into the dynamics of US–Kenyan asymmetric relations. The strategies of counterterrorism as pursued by asymmetric states present a clear indication that distinctions in the capability of states do not automatically translate into dominance and injustice, specifically when mutual interests, such as national, regional and global security, are at stake.

In such an instance, a normalised and stable asymmetric relationship is managed through cooperation created by conditions for collective reinforcement of national interests through bilateral and multilateral interactions. With this in mind, the US–Kenyan asymmetric relationship is characterised by cooperation that is beyond bilateral relations; thus, involving participation in multilateral organisations, such as the UN, the EU, the AU, and IGAD. These multinational institutions remain vital in reducing uncertainty through collective counterterrorism actions that have relentlessly sought to degrade the capacity and operations of pirates, al-Shabaab, and allied terrorist groups entrenched in parts of Africa.

To this end, troika interactions arguably have the potential to revitalise asymmetric relations given their multidimensional patterns of actions. It is however worth noting that, while cooperation ensures that asymmetric relations reduce uncertainty, it remains unclear whether enduring stability in East Africa can be sustained collectively through a multi-agency approach given the morphing dynamics of its insecurity.

Endnotes

- 411 Sky Mkuti is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the University of South Africa (UNISA). She received her MA in Security Studies from the University of Pretoria. Sky's research interests include terrorism, resource wars, xenophobia, cultural heritage, and African politics.
- 412 Jo-Ansie van Wyk is a Research Professor in International Relations in the Department of Political Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.
- 413 Oluwaseun Tella is Head of the Future of Diplomacy at the University of Johannesburg's Institute for the Future of Knowledge. His research interests include soft power, foreign policy, international relations, peace and conflict studies, African politics and global politics.
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