

CORE-PERIPHERY DYNAMICS AND GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENTS: A WORLD-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON PAKISTAN-KENYA AND INDIA- KENYA RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study analyses the structural asymmetry in Pakistan and India's bilateral relations with Kenya using World-Systems Theory (WST) and the framework of African Agency. Primarily, it investigates: How do the divergent economic trajectories of India and Pakistan shape their asymmetric relations with Kenya? And how Kenya exercises its agency to navigate South Asian asymmetric strategies to its advantage. It argues that India's dominance is rooted in its status as an ascending semi-periphery, whereas Pakistan's engagement remains constrained by limited capital accumulation and domestic economic volatility. Consequently, India provides high-value technological transfers and strategic depth, while Pakistan remains anchored in a traditional, commodity-based trade model. Rejecting the narrative of Africa as a passive periphery, this research positions Kenya as a dynamic regional hub that strategically leverages its supremacy to negotiate with competing South Asian powers. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of trade data and diplomatic records, the study covers the meaningful developments from 1978 to 2025. The findings reveal that India's influence is sustained by institutional depth, vast diaspora networks, and digital infrastructure. Conversely, while Pakistan's "Engage Africa" policy shows growth, it lacks sustained institutionalisation. The study concludes that for Pakistan to remain a viable partner, it must pivot from basic commodity exchange toward robust capacity building, diaspora engagement, and a deeper recognition of Kenya's strategic agency.

Keywords: East Africa, Kenya, Influence, Trade Ties, World Systems Theory, African Agency, India, Pakistan.

Introduction

The profound capability gap between India and Pakistan's economic structures has created an asymmetric engagement with Kenya. While India operates as a rising semi-periphery with diversified stakes in IT and pharmaceuticals, Pakistan remains in a survivalist mode, limited by domestic crises to transactional diplomacy.

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This disparity is less a matter of policy choice than a result of unequal structural capacities within the global semi-periphery. Despite traditional views of African marginality, Kenya aggressively exercises African agency, shifting from a recipient of aid to a strategic negotiator. A definitive marker of this agency is Kenya's 2024 elevation to Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status. This security alignment with the 'Core' provides Kenya the leverage to pursue trade autonomy with South Asian powers in strict congruence with its own national interests.

World System Theory

World System theory explains three layers of the global system, i.e., core, semi-periphery, and periphery. Core states are the developed ones that enjoy power and resources and dominate decision-making. Semi-peripheral states are those that are placed in a relatively better position in the global system but continue to oscillate between dependence and autonomy. Periphery states are generally resource suppliers with weaker industrial bases and institutional capacities, often dependent on both core and semi-peripheral actors.¹

Within this model, India is best understood as a rising semi-peripheral power that demonstrates core-like features in certain regional contexts, including its influence in East Africa. Pakistan, by contrast, occupies a relatively weaker semi-peripheral position, constrained by economic instability, limited institutional outreach, and a narrower strategic footprint. Kenya, traditionally located in the periphery due to its colonial legacy and economic dependency, is now showing signs of semi-peripheral transition, especially as it diversifies partnerships and strengthens regional leadership roles. Its recent elevation as a Major non-NATO Ally of the US underscores how engagement with a core actor strengthens its position in the world order and creates new bargaining leverage with semi-peripheral partners.

Kenya's Use of African Agency

In the Western literature, Africa has been presented as the inert victim of exogenous forces bound by immovable structural constraints.² African states use agency in varying degrees to negotiate, assert, and prioritise their interest in external partnerships. This variance is subject to their internal conditions, resources, and leadership control. It is pointed out by Chipaike and Knowledge African actors are capable of exercising assertive agency in their various encounters with external partners,³ depending on internal arrangements and policy choices. It endorses the view that Kenya's different policies towards India and Pakistan are not merely a result of the global power structure but its own policy preferences to negotiate, prioritise, and institutionalise partnerships towards India and Pakistan according to its national interest.

African scholars like Tim Murithi argue that African states have increasingly used regional platforms, such as the African Union (AU), to assert collective leadership and shape diplomatic outcomes on their terms.⁴ Similarly, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends that African agency involves not just political choice, but the recovery of epistemic sovereignty—the right to define and pursue development on African terms.⁵ William Brown, though not African himself, adds that African states often exercise subtle, calculated influence in their external relationships, challenging the view that global hierarchies always determine outcomes.⁶ Together, these perspectives help reposition Kenya not as a peripheral follower but as a state increasingly aware of its leverage and determined to navigate partnerships, whether with India, Pakistan, or the United States, based on what best serves its national interest.

For instance, Kenya's participation in Indian-led digital and agricultural initiatives, its openness to Pakistan's trade and capacity-building platforms, and its ability to extract security and financial benefits from the U.S. partnership all reflect a capacity to negotiate terms, seek alternatives, and assert priorities. African Agency accepts systemic constraints but underlines that within those restraints, African states exercise considerable autonomy and foresight. Karoline writes that Kenya's voting actions in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resemble those of Russia and China more than those of the US, the UK, and Germany.⁷ The study further affirms Kenya's effective exercise of African Agency, highlighting its role as a regional lynchpin within the East African Community (EAC), the African Union (AU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). By navigating these overlapping memberships, Kenya positions itself not as a passive recipient of South Asian diplomacy but as a strategic gateway and a 'rule-shaper' in continental governance and regional integration.

Research Methodology

The research is based on a mixed methodology. To collect qualitative data, the research has used the archival method of data collection and has examined historical bilateral agreements, policy papers, and journal articles on the relations between India and Kenya, and Pakistan and Kenya. The main sources of trade data were Trade Map.org, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, and the Pakistan Ministry of Commerce, with a special emphasis on the period of 2021-2024 to present in the tables of the comparative data. Previous numbers were also taken to establish long-run trends. Diplomatic agreements and high-level visits were included selectively, with preference being given to those that yielded concrete economic, institutional, or military benefits as opposed to some ceremonial interactions.

Comparison of Bilateral Ties: Pakistan-Kenya vs. India-Kenya Relations

India-Pakistan Diplomatic and Strategic Engagement towards Kenya

India and Kenya established diplomatic ties in 1963 and have continued to evolve since then into a high-profile partnership. Prime Minister Modi of India visited Kenya in 2016, and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta visited India in 2017; both of these visits resulted in various MOUs in various fields, including agriculture, defence, housing, etc. These visits have bolstered their bilateral framework in both substance and symbolism.⁸

Pakistan's engagement has historically been less institutionalised, with fewer follow-up mechanisms, whereas India has established more structured forums such as the JTC. The 1978 visit by President Zia-ul-Haq marked the early years of cooperation, but high-level exchanges remained sparse thereafter. More recently, Pakistan's naval outreach (2019, 2023) and the 2024 visit by the Federal Minister for Commerce represent renewed engagement under Pakistan's "Engage Africa" policy. However, mechanisms like the Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC)-last convened in 2004-remain dormant.⁹

India's structured mechanisms, such as the JTC between India and Kenya, held its 10th session virtually in October 2024.¹⁰ Pakistan, while having signed key agreements such as the MoU between the Pakistan Standards and Quality Control Authority (PSQCA) and the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) in 2007, has not yet finalised implementation.¹¹

Table 1: Visits between Pakistan-Kenya vs. Visits between India-Kenya

Dignitary/ Visit	Year	Reason/Outcome
President Zia ul Haq visited Kenya	1978	To attend the burial of President Kenyatta
Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi visited Pakistan	1983	Both countries signed the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA), which is still in force, as neither side has terminated it as per the provisions of the Agreement (Article 12.2). ¹²
Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi visited the Defence Forces Headquarters Kenya in 2019	July 24, 2019	To hold talks on enhancing military cooperation and relations between Kenya and Pakistan. ¹³

Dignitary/ Visit	Year	Reason/Outcome
Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) General Nadeem Raza visited Kenya in 2022 for four days	28 February – 3 March 2022	He met with key Defence, security, and Political leaders and discussed enhancing cooperation in the defence and military fields.
Commander of the Kenyan Navy, Major General Jimson Longiro Mutai, visited Pakistan in 2023	January 31, 2023	Discussed maritime issues and possible collaborations to increase maritime security through Regional Maritime Security Patrols. ¹⁴
Cabinet Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock of Kenya, Mithika Linturi, visited Pakistan and met Federal Minister for National Food Security and Research Tariq Bashir Cheema	February 27, 2023	To explore new avenues for joint ventures in Agri-business and livestock. Kenya expressed interest in working together to improve the Sahiwal cattle breed ¹⁵
Speaker of the National Assembly of Kenya, Mr Moses F. M. Wetang'ula, visited Pakistan ¹⁶	May 10, 2023	To attend the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.
Federal Minister for Commerce, Jam Kamal Khan, and the Kenyan High Commissioner met in Islamabad.	Dec 23, 2024	To explore new trade opportunities and regional cooperation. Discussed using Pakistan's location as a trade bridge between Central Asia and EAC. ¹⁷ Emphasised on expediting the signing of an MoU for an FTA with the EAC; currently under review by Pakistan's law division. ¹⁸

Source: Author's Compilation

Table 2: Kenya-India Diplomatic Ties

Dignitary/ Visit	Year	Reason/Outcome
Kenyan President Daneil Arap Moi visited India for 5 days.	1981	It strengthened India-Kenya bilateral relations in the fields of culture and economy. A Cultural Cooperation Agreement was signed on 24 February 1981, and a Bilateral Trade Agreement (1981) was signed under which both states granted each other Most-Favoured-Nation status.
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kenya on a 2-day state visit. He became the first Indian Leader to visit Kenya in the past 35 years.	July 10, 2016	Various MoUs were signed, including on: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defence Cooperation. 2. National Housing Policy Development and Management. 3. Avoidance of double taxation, 4. An MoU between the Bureau of Indian Standards and the Kenya Bureau of Standards. 5. A visa exemption for diplomatic passport holders. 6. Line of Credit Agreement for US\$ 15 million to IDB Capital Limited, for the development of small and medium enterprises [SMEs] 7. Line of Credit Agreement for US\$ 29.95 million for Kenya for the upgradation of Rift Valley Textiles Factory (RIVATEX)¹⁹
Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta visited India. It marked the first State visit from Kenya to India since 1981.	10-12 Jan 2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They issued a Joint Statement. 2. MoU on Cooperation in the agriculture and allied sector with a Line of Credit of US\$100 million for agricultural mechanisation.²⁰
Indian Army General Bipin Rawat visited the Kenya Defence Headquarters. ²¹	20 December 2018	To hold talks with the defence personnel.

Dignitary/ Visit	Year	Reason/Outcome
Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, Muraleedharan, visited Kenya along with his 30-member team. ²²	22-23 Nov 2023	Resulted in the launch of the India-Kenya Business Council, and India also co-chaired a Business Forum to boost trade, investment, and technology partnerships. It also deepened cultural and diaspora ties through exhibitions, community outreach, and commemorations.
President William Ruto of Kenya visited India.	4 th to 6 th Dec 2023	5 MoUs signed Covering sports, digital solutions, and culture exchange programs between Bureau of Standards of India (BIS) and Kenya (KEBS), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and Open University of Kenya (OUK), ²³ including others.

Source: Author's Compilation

Economic Integration and Trade Relations

India ranks in the sixth position in trade relations with Kenya, and its bilateral trade exceeded USD 4.2 billion in 2023.²⁴ Key Indian exports include refined petroleum, pharmaceuticals, textiles, and industrial machinery, indicators of both economic scale and sectoral diversity. Infrastructure investment has also been ambitious, as evidenced by the Adani Group's controversial 2024 bid to lease and modify Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi.²⁵

By contrast, Pakistan–Kenya trade stood at USD 787 million in 2024 and remains largely commodity-based.²⁶ Kenyan tea and Pakistani rice dominate the exchange and serve as the backbone of bilateral trade, and carry the potential to open up new avenues of opportunities. Pakistan is Kenya's largest tea importer, while Kenya remains a leading buyer of Pakistani rice. Although the Pakistan-Africa Trade Development Conference (PATDC) held in Nairobi in 2020 generated new interest, the trade structure lacks diversification and institutional follow-through.²⁷

Furthermore, Pakistan's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Kenya is negligible. Limited banking channels and the absence of bilateral preferential trade agreements continue to hinder growth.²⁸ Unlike India, Pakistan has not established a large-scale corporate or financial presence in Kenya.

Table 3: Comparative Bilateral Trade Volumes India–Kenya vs. Pakistan–Kenya (2021–2024)

Year	India–Kenya Total Trade in USD Million	Pakistan–Kenya Total Trade in USD Million	Remarks
2021	2,329.19	311.81	India's exports dominate; Pakistan's trade remains modest
2022	2,817.45	319.87	India's diversified sectors consolidate its position
2023	3,173.48	380.83	Both countries paced up the growth trends; the gap still stands significant
2024	3,351.17	787.00	Pakistan shows a sharp increase, still export-driven and less diversified
2025	-	1.3 billion	-

Source: Abstracted by the author, data taken from TradeMap.org, accessed February 2, 2025

The above-mentioned fact reveals that India's trade volume with Kenya far exceeds that of Pakistan. There are different reasons behind this reality. One is that India enjoys a wider export base in Kenya, while Pakistan's trade remains limited to only a few commodities, particularly rice and tea.

Table 4: India-Kenya and Pakistan-Kenya Economic Ties

Aspect	India-Kenya	Pakistan-Kenya
Trade Volume	\$4.2 billion (2023) – India is Kenya's 6 th largest trading partner.	\$380.83 million (2023) – Trade is significant but much lower than India's.
Major Exports to Kenya	Pharmaceuticals, machinery, refined petroleum, textiles, and automobiles.	Rice (Over 90% of Kenya's rice imports ²⁹), pharmaceuticals, and textiles. The year 2026 saw the rise in exports to Kenya and \$319.9m, marking a 32% increase from \$251.6m recorded during 2025. ³⁰

Aspect	India-Kenya	Pakistan-Kenya
Major Imports from Kenya	Tea, raw hides, gemstones, and agricultural products.	Tea (71% of Pakistan's tea imports come from Kenya, valued at over USD 434 million annually) ³¹ , coffee, and chemicals.
Investment & FDI	India invests heavily in IT, healthcare, education, and manufacturing in Kenya.	No significant investments in Kenya's infrastructure, manufacturing, or technology sectors. The relationship remains trade-centric, with Pakistan exporting rice, textiles, and pharmaceuticals while importing Kenyan tea. ³²
Economic Agreements	<p>Multiple trade agreements, free trade negotiations.</p> <p>The Bilateral Trade Agreement of 1981, under which MFN status was granted to India and Kenya on a reciprocal basis Kenya – India (JTC) was established in 1983 to follow up on the agreement.</p> <p>JTC was held in Nairobi, Kenya, on 21st -22nd July 2003.</p> <p>9 JTC sessions, with the 9th meeting having been hosted in New Delhi in 2019.³³ The 10th JTC was held virtually in 2024.</p>	<p>The Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) was signed in 1983, which provides for the formulation of the Joint Trade Committee (JTC) on trade and investment to enhance trade.³⁴</p> <p>However, JTC has never convened its meetings so far.</p> <p>JMC was established in 1992, convened 03 sessions, with the last one in 2004, inactive since then.³⁵</p> <p>MoU Between Pakistan Standards and Quality Control Authority (PSQCA) & Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) was signed in 2007, but its finalisation is still pending.</p> <p>Bilateral Agreement Between KEPHIS (Kenya) & DPP (Pakistan) on Citrus & Mango Import signed in 2016, but finalization is still pending on account of Delays in setting conditions for fruit imports.³⁶</p> <p>Joint Business Council (JBC) (FPCCI & KNCCI) was signed in 1996, but no meetings or progress have been held so far, rendering it inactive.³⁷</p>

Source: Author's Compilation

Pakistan-Kenya trade relations are often measured through the rice and tea matrix. Quite recently, it has been noticed that Pakistan is making its way to diversify its trade towards pharmaceuticals and machinery to catalyse its trade. It is noteworthy, as pointed out by Gerard McCann, that India is making private investments in Kenya, which often come in conflict with Kenya's will and inclination towards state-led and state-owned enterprises.

The Export Processing Zones (EPZ) Program is an incentivised program for export-oriented trade created to promote industrial investment within designated zones³⁸ like India and Pakistan. EPZ offers a 10-year tax exemption and duty-free imports on raw materials to not only attract investment but to keep the terms of production under its control for all buyers, either in India or Pakistan. The East African Community (EAC) is adopting a protectionist approach through a 3 or 4-band Common External Tariff (CET) towards nonmembers to promote trade within the bloc, which also asserts African agency. Pakistan faces an average of 35 per cent tariff in its export of Rice to Kenya, while Kenya faces a tariff of 11 per cent in its export of tea to Pakistan. It turns the balance in favour of Kenya.³⁹

Development Cooperation and Capacity Building

India maintains an institutionalised development partnership with Kenya. Through the Development Partnership Administration (DPA), it has extended concessional credit lines for energy and agriculture projects. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program has trained hundreds of Kenyan professionals.⁴⁰ India's commitment is further evident in its early membership in the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and its integration of Kenya into South-South cooperation efforts.⁴¹

Though on a smaller scale, Pakistan has conducted educational and diplomatic training programs. Like the Foreign Service Academy has trained 775 African Diplomats, including Kenyans. Under the Pakistan Technical Assistance Programme, it has offered scholarships and military training to Kenyan personnel.⁴² In February 2023, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Agriculture, Mithika Linturi, visited Islamabad to explore cooperation in livestock breeding and agribusiness. Talks focused on Pakistan's Sahiwal cattle breed (known for high milk yield and resilience) as a solution to Kenya's dairy sector challenges. However, bureaucratic delays have hampered the fast implementation. Pakistan has the potential to navigate its partnership beyond trade to include technology and agricultural fields. The little steps will prove impactful in building strong ties; however, if not expedited, current Pakistan-Kenya ties cannot match the pace of India-Kenya relations.

Diaspora Networks and Private Sector Influence

A key driver of the strong India-Kenya partnership lies in its diaspora network in Kenya, which dates to the British colonial period. The Indian community in Kenya has been associated with the fields of retail, finance, real estate, and healthcare.⁴³ The Indian diaspora encourages and facilitates business linkages, bridges cultural and political barriers, and promotes bilateral ties. The dawn of the 19th century witnessed the settlement of Indians, mostly from Gujarat, in East Africa, including Kenya, and they became associated with the fields of commerce, manufacturing, and professional services.

Recent literature, however, reflects that the role of the Indian diaspora in Kenya extends far beyond economic facilitation. As Aiyar writes, Indians in East Africa have historically inhabited multiple homelands, referring to India as their civilizational homeland and to Kenya as a territorial homeland. This dual belonging enables them to act as mediators across identity and politics, strengthening India's image as both cultural kin and a development partner. The Indian diaspora in Kenya has also been active in claim-making within Kenyan political discourse, using its embedded position to lobby, negotiate, and shape bilateral perceptions in ways that support India's expanding footprint.⁴⁴ Migration and communal networks have played a key role in the social mobility of South Asians in Kenya, where communities continue to be defined by religion, language, place of origin and class or jati, each with its own community centres and places of worship. Long-established South Asians have increasingly adopted an 'East African South Asian' identity, distinguishing themselves from more recent arrivals⁴⁵.

This has implications for diaspora influence: in the Indian case, it enables a structured and interlinked private sector and civic presence; in the Pakistani case, given the smaller community, such internal networks may exist but are less visible and less institutionalized. Although smaller in size compared to the Indian diaspora, the Pakistani community has contributed well to the socio-economic and religious landscape of Kenya. Pakistani migration to Kenya began under British colonial rule, when workers, soldiers, and clerks were recruited from Punjab, Baluchistan, Sindh, and other regions of present-day Pakistan to serve in railway construction, administration, and small-scale trade. Over time, Sindhi traders in particular consolidated a presence in retail, textiles, and services, embedding themselves in Kenya's urban economy.⁴⁶

Demographically, Muslims of Pakistani origin form part of the wider Indo-Pakistani Muslim population in Kenya, which is proportionally higher than in South Asia, estimated at 35–40% of the diaspora, with a strong representation of Shi'a groups such as Ismailis and Bohras⁴⁷. Many of these communities trace their roots to Sindh and other Pakistani regions, maintaining cultural and religious institutions, including mosques, community associations, and charitable networks, that connect them with wider transnational Islamic and South Asian networks.

India's private sector has been working well in Kenya and quite successfully; they developed people-to-people contacts and business links between India and Kenya, particularly in the IT and construction fields. Conversely, Pakistan lacks a comparable diaspora footprint in Kenya, limiting informal networks that often support trade and diplomacy.⁴⁸

Participation in International Organisations:

All three of these states support multilateralism and are members of numerous International Organizations, mainly the UNO, the IMF, the World Trade Organisation, and the G-77. It reflects their commitment towards governance and cooperation.

Kenya is interested in diversifying its foreign relationships with the classics of great power politics, and in the case of India and Pakistan, which represent the states of the Global South. Both Pakistan and India are participating in and supporting UN missions in Africa. Pakistan and Kenya are actively participating in several United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) together. Both nations are prominent Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs), with Pakistan historically being one of the world's top contributors and Kenya serving as a regional anchor for peace in Africa. They both are participating in UN-led peacekeeping operations in MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and UNMISS⁴⁹. Pakistan is making significant contributions to overall UN missions worldwide, with a particular focus on Africa-specific operations.

Table 5: Participation in International Organisations

Forum	Pakistan's Participation	India's Participation	Kenya's Participation
UN	✓	✓	✓
NAM	✓	✓	✓
World Bank	✓	✓	✓
Indian Ocean Rim Association IORA	No	✓	✓
Commonwealth of Nations	withdrawal and also suffered from suspensions due to different reasons. Restored its membership in 2008	✓	✓

Forum	Pakistan's Participation	India's Participation	Kenya's Participation
IMF	✓	✓	✓
G-77	✓	✓	✓
WTO	✓	✓	✓
EAC	X	X	✓
COMESA	X	Observer status	✓

Source: Author's Compilation

Pakistan, India, and Kenya, being former colonies of Britain, are members of the British Commonwealth. Under the banner of NAM, all three states observe the notions of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and South-South cooperation. Their participation in NAM has been driven by their colonial legacy. Kenya seeks to diversify its foreign engagements beyond traditional great power politics, and for both India and Pakistan, which frame themselves as leaders of the Global South. However, notable divergences were noted in the following regional groupings:

- Langan⁵⁰ has rightly observed that African officials have engaged in sovereigntist strategies to guard their cultural, political, and economic rights. It is evident from Kenya's joining of IORA and the strong coordination between India and COMESA. India and Kenya are full members of IORA to enhance trade and cooperation between the littoral states of the Indian Ocean.⁵¹ It reflects the selective participation of Kenya and the exercise of agency and sovereigntist strategy.

Military and Security Cooperation between Pakistan, Kenya, and India-Kenya

While economic cooperation dominates foreign partnerships, military and security partnerships solidify further bonding. India's engagement is rooted in a broader Indo-Pacific vision, combining naval presence, defence trade, and training exchanges. In contrast, Pakistan's ties with Kenya are growing but largely limited to defence diplomacy and goodwill missions under the "Engage Africa" banner. Kenya, situated in the Indian Ocean and facing regional maritime threats, exercises considerable agency by choosing partners who can enhance both its security posture and regional leadership. India and Kenya, to overcome the hazards of the Cold War era, transformed their diplomatic partnership by including defence and military cooperation that boosted their defence capabilities.⁵²

Table 6: Comparative Military Cooperation Matrix

Aspect	India-Kenya	Pakistan-Kenya
Strategic Military Engagement	<p>Long-standing diplomatic ties since 1963, regular high-profile visits, and joint military training.</p> <p>India's defence cooperation with Kenya falls within a broader India-Africa defence partnership aimed at countering piracy, illegal resource extraction, drug and human trafficking, and terrorism⁵³.</p> <p>India provides military training and capacity-building for African nations, including Kenya, through programs in countries like Namibia, Mauritius, and Botswana.⁵⁴</p>	<p>Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) since Nov 2023 and is still under consideration by both countries. Upon finalisation, it will strengthen military and defence cooperation and maritime security between Pakistan and Kenya.⁵⁵</p>
Defense Trade	<p>India supplies military equipment, surveillance systems, and maritime security assistance.</p>	<p>As of late 2025, the Pakistan-Kenya Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) negotiated in November 2023 remains a central pillar of their evolving partnership. While the agreement has been formally negotiated and signed, it is currently in the implementation and ratification phase.</p>
Counterterrorism Cooperation	<p>Indian naval deployments in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea have enhanced regional security, complementing Kenya's anti-piracy initiatives⁵⁶</p>	<p>Kenya benefits from Pakistani training in counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and peace enforcement strategies; however, their security ties are not backed by institutional arrangements.⁵⁷</p>

Aspect	India-Kenya	Pakistan-Kenya
Maritime Security/ cooperation	<p>Owing to the strategic location of Kenya along the Indian Ocean, India collaborates with Kenya that aligns well with its India's Indo-Pacific strategy⁵⁸. India's military presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) extends to cooperation with Mauritius and Seychelles, with potential spillover effects on Kenyan maritime security.⁵⁹</p>	<p>Pakistan's "Engage Africa" policy prioritises naval cooperation and conducts goodwill visits, joint exercises, and Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. Regular Pakistan Navy ship visits to Mombasa to strengthen ties. Bilateral naval drill in January 2020 to enhance interoperability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Medical camps in Mombasa (2020) treated 2,200+ patients for free. <p>Pakistan-Africa Trade Development Conference (2020) in Kenya explored maritime trade. Potential trade expansion via Gwadar Port as an alternative trade route⁶⁰.</p>
Peacekeeping Contributions	<p>India has deployed over 250,000 peacekeepers in 51 missions, including aviation and rapid-response units, which could serve as a model for future Kenyan partnerships in peacekeeping operations. Indian aviation contingents have played a major role in stabilising African conflicts, with their success in DR Congo serving as a potential reference for joint operations with Kenya.⁶¹</p>	<p>Pakistan is an active troop contributing country TCC to the UN peacekeeping force in Africa; however, it is not Kenya-specific. Since 1960, it has contributed over 200,000 troops in 46 UN peacekeeping missions across 28 countries, many of them in Africa.⁶²</p>

Aspect	India-Kenya	Pakistan-Kenya
Security Concerns	The India-Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) at DefExpos in 2020 and 2022 emphasized joint security concerns and long-term engagement strategies. ⁶³ IADD strengthens India-Kenya security ties through military training at the National Defence Academy (NDA) and the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC).	

Source: Author's Compilation

India's defence relationship with Kenya is part of a larger regional posture, especially in the western Indian Ocean. Its defence exports, technical training, and naval support align well with Kenya's maritime priorities. EAC is a host to \$500 million people with an economic potential of \$600 Billion. Pakistan launched a plan to create a direct sea corridor between Pakistan and EAC member states (through Karachi-Djibouti Sea Corridor).⁶⁴ This maritime trade route will give a boost to its trade with the EAC.

Kenya's Strategic Autonomy: Navigating Pakistan and India through African Agency

Kenya prioritises its national interest, conducts cost-benefit analysis, and prefers the policies and model of engagement that favour autonomy, development outcomes, and regional leadership.⁶⁵ It is evident from the policies it adopted during its history. President Arap Moi (1978–2002) practised Pan-Africanism and pragmatism through supporting decolonisation, independence movements, and non-interference in states' internal affairs. He maintained diplomatic ties even with controversial governments such as Idi Amin's Uganda to preserve regional peace.⁶⁶ Moi's Presidency in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and involvement in peacekeeping initiatives in Chad, Namibia, and South Africa positioned Kenya as a neutral but active player in continental diplomacy. His approach, often referred to as "strategic ambiguity," allowed Kenya to avoid polarizing positions and engage all sides constructively.⁶⁷

President Mwai Kibaki (2002–2013) marked a transition from a traditional approach to economic pragmatism, focused on infrastructure development, enhancement of trade, and technology development.

During his tenure, collaboration with India strengthened, particularly in fields including agriculture, IT, and defence. Kenya became active and assertive, leading and speaking up for Global South cooperation, and moving the state away from traditional Western donors.⁶⁸ Kibaki launched Vision 2030, aimed at aligning diplomatic outreach with industrial growth, digital transformation, and food security goals.⁶⁹

President Uhuru Kenyatta (2013-2022) rigorously pursued economic diplomacy in his foreign Policy, with diversification as a core pillar. During this period, Kenya sought to strengthen ties with emerging powers such as Brazil, India, Turkey, South Korea, and Pakistan to explore new trade frontiers.⁷⁰

Since 2022, under the leadership of President William Ruto, Kenya's foreign policy has shown assertive tendencies, which are enhancing its global visibility. He is blending climate diplomacy, economic pragmatism, multipolar engagement, advocating for South-South solidarity, and calling for reform of global financial structures. This enhances African agency by positioning Kenya as an active shaper of international debates rather than a passive recipient of external agendas. Yet, reliance on Western investment and financial institutions underscores the structural limits that temper Kenya's autonomy within the world-system.

Kenya's partnership with India includes targeted engagements such as the Pan-African e-Network Project (PANeP) in telemedicine and e-education, and collaboration with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) for agricultural development. These programs reflect selective engagement, not compliance, rooted in domestic needs and self-identified priorities.⁷¹ Meanwhile, Kenya has cautiously welcomed Pakistan's renewed interest under the "Engage Africa" policy, including trade diplomacy and technical training programs. However, Kenya prefers state-led long-term institutional cooperation in various fields over short-term or ad hoc bilateral policy postures.⁷²

Kenya also maintains a strong commitment to multilateral frameworks, supporting India's UNSC aspirations only within the African Union (AU) consensus, rather than issuing unilateral endorsements.⁷³ It supports African solidarity and prefers regional security frameworks such as the AU and East African Community (EAC) over joining Indo-centric or Western-led defence apparatus, reaffirming its emphasis on African-led solutions.⁷⁴

Discussion

Firstly, the arch-rivalry of India and Pakistan remains paramount in exploring their external relationships with Kenya. Both countries differed greatly in terms of size, capacities, institutional strength, and level of development.

Secondly, India has created a niche-based partnership with Kenya, which is lacking on the part of Pakistan. India has been involved in various businesses and multi-product trade, while Pakistan enjoys limited import and export of mainly tea and rice, if observed broadly. Though after the adoption of Enagae Africa Policy, changes are taking place, and the year 2024 saw a rise in trade; however, it's not a structural one.

Thirdly, India-Kenya bilateralism has shown multi-layered high-profile visits, signing of MoUs, implementation of agreements, adjustments in agreements in the light of the situation, and ground realities. Conversely, on Pakistan's side, internal bureaucratic delays and heterogeneous policies and procedures often hinder the implementation of reached agreements. JTC and JMC face delays that make progress very slow.

Fourthly, the Indian diaspora in Kenya eases the entry of business, minimises the cost of doing business, and maintains the cultural and political connection that transcends the electoral cycles and change of policies. The Pakistani diaspora is small and not so corporately networked. Further, Pakistan state does not have the rich private sector and civic networks that tend to support sustainable foreign economic contacts.

Fifthly, military and security cooperation is another example of the logic of asymmetric engagement. The Indian defence relations with Kenya are part of a wider Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific policy with defence exports, naval presence, training activities, and multilateral security discussions. The fact that Kenya has been willing to involve India in this field is one of the calculations that such collaboration will help it meet its maritime security requirements and its desire to be a regional leader. The military diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Kenya, especially the naval visits, training programs, and humanitarian aid, have been well received, though they have yet to be expanded and institutionalised. The Kenyan involvement in the security sphere of activities with Pakistan, therefore, seems provisional and not structural, as based on goodwill but limited by the smaller strategic presence of Pakistan.

Sixthly, World-Systems Theory explains why India is able to provide more extensive partnerships, whereas African Agency explains why Kenya will decide how, where, and at what levels those partnerships are utilized. The Kenyan government uses partnerships to vary its relations with external actors, to derive developmental advantages, as well as to consolidate leadership in the region without being over-dependent on an individual actor. Its persistence in depending on Western financial institutions and increasing involvement with India, as well as its reservations in the approach to Pakistan, point to a policy of calculated pluralism as opposed to alignment.

Lastly, for Pakistan, this study has more implications. Its problems in Kenya are not competitively based but strategic in nature. Pakistan is not at the level of competition to match the economic magnitude and institutional penetration of India. To stay pertinent in Africa, Pakistan needs to go beyond transactional trading to niche-based cooperation that is complementary to African development concerns. Pakistan needs uniform institutional policies and prolonged dedication instead of occasional diplomatic interactions.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that India has built a broad-based, multisectoral relationship with Kenya, rooted in economic strength, diaspora leverage, and institutional outreach, while Pakistan's engagement remains largely transactional and limited, due to its weak economic conditions and ad hoc diplomacy.

Yet, this is not just due to asymmetric capabilities. But, also due to the practice of African agency by Kenya that enables it to engage, negotiate, and decide what is good for it out of what is offered. The foreign policy of Kenya under different administrations, right from Arap Moi to William Ruto, has been consistent in making decisions that suit Kenyan interests abroad. "Kenya is the face of Africa and represents the whole of the African continent," so its role is very important not only for itself but for the whole region.⁷⁵

At its heart lies Kenya's agency-its capacity to selectively engage, recalibrate, and extract value from external partnerships. From the era of President Moi's strategic ambiguity to the economic diplomacy of the Kibaki and Ruto administrations, Kenya has shown a rational stance navigating a complex global order in pursuit of its national interest.

Policy Recommendations

- Pakistan and Kenya need to move beyond formal agreements without implementation. They need to regularise and revitalise the dormant Joint Ministerial Commission, which last convened its meeting in 2004.
- Pakistan and Kenya are enjoying good trade relations in terms of rice and tea exports. However, they should expand this partnership beyond these two commodities. Drawing inspiration from how Kenya has expanded its horticulture exports to the EU, Pakistan could encourage its SMEs to explore opportunities in agri-tech, textiles, and light manufacturing for the Kenyan market.
- The Pakistani business community should take the lead in exploring mutually beneficial sectors like agriculture, technology, and green energy in Kenya to enhance economic partnerships and to fit itself in Kenya Vision 2030.

- Pakistan should also build a strong regional partnership through Kenya. For instance, Gwadar Port could be promoted as a gateway for East African Community (EAC) trade, much like Dubai has positioned itself as a logistics hub for Africa. It will enable Kenya to use Pakistan as a corridor to reach Central Asia, while Pakistan will have access to East Africa's markets.
- By increasing the number of educational scholarships for Kenyan students and expanding professional exchanges, particularly through the Foreign Service Academy (FSA) and federal universities like Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) and International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), Pakistan can solidify its soft image in Kenya.
- Leverage the strategic interest of both Kenya and Pakistan and expand cooperation in technology transfer, investment, and knowledge exchange, particularly in health, pharmaceuticals, education, and digital infrastructure.

Prioritise long-term cooperation frameworks over one-time gestures, and seek partnerships that build institutional resilience, technical skills, and economic diversification.

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