

The Mashariki Commentary

Trump II Administration and Kenya-US Relations: Issues, Expectations and Impact



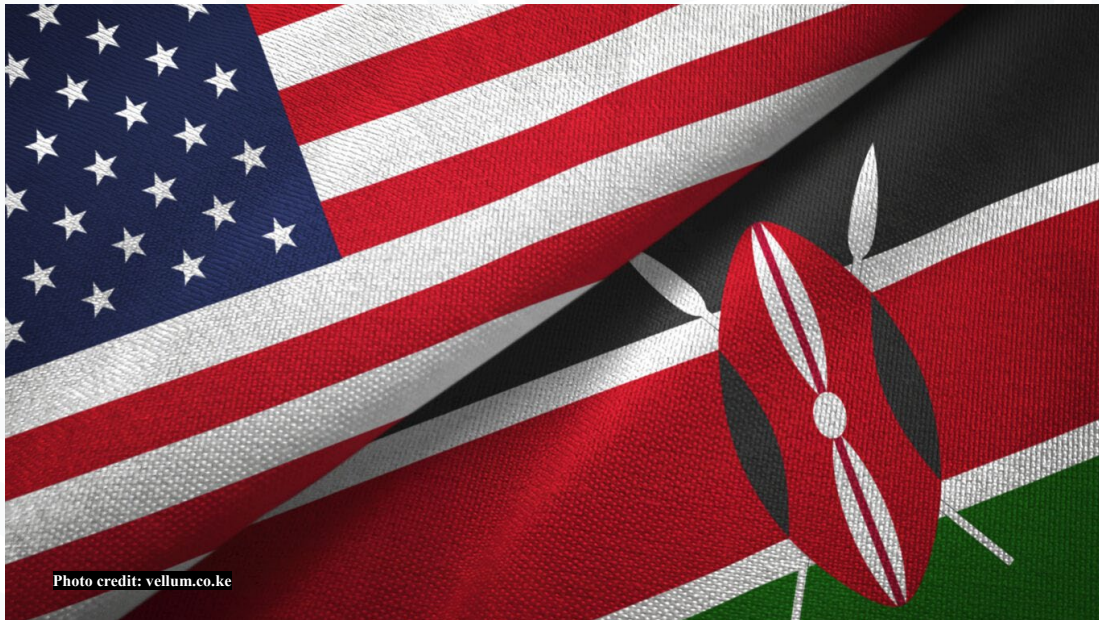
By Prof. Phillip Nyinguro, MRPC Associate Fellow

Donald Trump finally emerged the winner of the US 2024 presidential elections and will be sworn in on 20th January, 2025. As we wait for him to officially assume office, it is already clear that he is determined to implement his key campaign agenda. This can be discerned from statements he has been making and those he has proposed to nominate for various cabinet and other top positions in his administration. Many of his policy proposals that require congressional approval are most likely to pass through given that his Republican Party has gained control of both the House and Senate. The Supreme Court is also friendly to him, having packed it with loyalists during his

first term. The aim of this commentary is to examine how the Trump II administration is likely to impact on Kenya and its relations with the US in general.

It is important to discuss policy implications of Trump II for Kenya because, as is the norm, a new administration is likely to come with new priorities and style in US foreign policy. The commentary also recommends steps Kenya could take to ensure that its relations with the US continues to benefit it during Trump II administration.

Why would Kenya be concerned about the incoming administration's policies? Of what significance is the US to Kenya? Since Kenya's independence in 1963, both countries have invested in mutual strategic and diplomatic relations in key sectors. On its part, the US has always considered Kenya to be of significant geostrategic value. Kenya, being East Africa's most developed and dynamic economy is also important for US economic interests in the region. Indeed, it is the financial and business hub of the region. In recognition of its geo-political and economic value for US foreign policy objectives, Kenya has over the years leveraged its position in exchange for US assistance in various sectors. Several decades of cooperation and partnership culminated in a "Strategic Partnership" pact in 2018. This pact prioritized five pillars of engagement, namely: economic prosperity, trade and investment; defense cooperation; democracy, governance and civilian security; multilateral and regional issues; and public health cooperation. Current bilateral engagements between the two countries are anchored on these pillars.



It should be emphasized that with regard to foreign policy, while new administrations may come in with new styles and priorities, overall American foreign policy goals have always remained the same: promotion of democracy; promotion of America's business abroad; and safeguarding national security.

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These goals are, of course, defined within the framework of America's national interest. Different administrations may choose what goals to prioritize and how to pursue them.

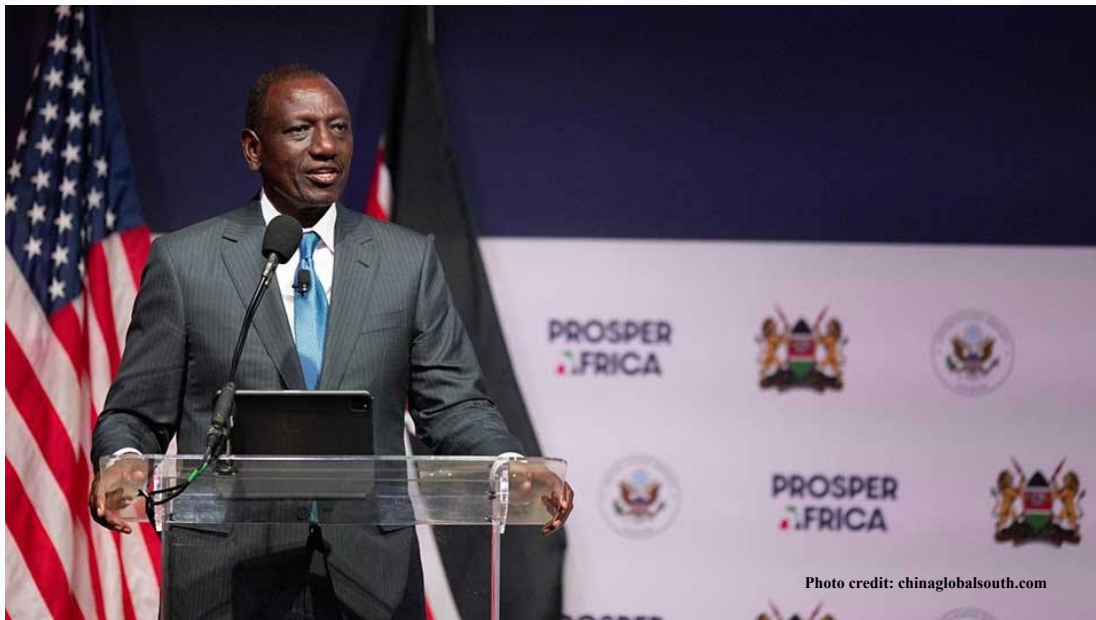
Going by Trump's campaign agenda and his apparent determination to pursue them, there are some bilateral issues that might witness policy reversals while others might not witness any significant changes, if any. One of those areas likely to be impacted by Trump II's foreign policy is trade. Trump has strongly hinted that his administration shall hike tariffs on imported goods. He seems to eschew preferential trade pacts in which goods from some countries would be granted duty free entry into the American market. It is instructive that Kenya and The US are currently negotiating a trade agreement that would extend the Africa Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA). Under AGOA, select Kenyan goods would enter the American market duty free in addition to other other provisions favorable to Kenyan businesses. Although his main targets appear to be China and its North American neighbors, Mexico and Canada, it is unlikely that his administration would prioritize trade agreements that lower or eliminate tariffs on imported goods from any other country. If he can impose tariffs on goods coming from Mexico and Canada, fellow partners in the North American Free Trade Association, what guarantees exists for preferential treatment for goods from Kenya, for instance?



Another issue that might trigger policy conflicts between the two countries is the fact that president Ruto has been one of the leaders who have been calling for the de-dollarization of the global economy. Trump has warned of dire consequences for countries that would dare abandon the dollar for another

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currency in global commerce. In fact, he has promised to levy 100% tariff on goods emanating from those countries. Although Kenya has for some time now gone slow on its anti-dollar crusade, it has just applied to join BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), an outfit that has declared an assault on the dollar, promising to unveil an alternative currency soon. With Trump's categorical warning to countries that intend to adopt a non-dollar currency, Kenya will have to tread carefully. Kenya's foreign policy establishment needs to appreciate that Kenya's is highly indebted to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, both controlled by the United States. These loans have been disbursed in US dollars!



Yet another issue area in Kenya-US relations in the Trump II era is likely to be Kenya's relations with China. Since the Kibaki administration (2002-2013), Kenya has become one of the pivotal sign posts of Chinese influence in Eastern Africa. In what was called "Look East" policy, Kibaki had turned to China for loans for infrastructural development, apart from developing firm strategic partnerships with it. Today, China is one of Kenya's biggest bilateral donors. With Trump's declaration of economic war with China, Kenya could become a pawn in the US-Chinese geo-economic rivalry in Africa. Given that both China and US are critical development partners, Kenyan leadership shall have to exercise astute economic statecraft to balance the interests of both countries in a manner that does not undermine its (Kenya's) own interests.

Another dimension of US-Kenya relations that is likely to face the test is US assistance in the public health sector including reproductive health. Trump's support base comprised those who believed in traditional family values that they perceived to be under the threat of the permissiveness of the Democratic Party. Trump's mainstream supporters are "pro-life," therefore they don't support abortion. They also don't support policies that promote LGBTQ. Trump II administration is likely to stop funding programs that promote abortion and

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LBTQ either directly or indirectly. It is instructive that just a few months into the Ruto administration, the Supreme Court ruled that the LBTQ community had a right to form associations, a ruling that fell short of recognition of the community. It was widely believed that the Biden administration had applied pressure on the Ruto administration not to discriminate against the community. Trump administration might peg assistance for Kenya's judiciary sector on anti-gay legislations.

Also at stake could be the Major Non-NATO (US) Ally (MNNA) status the Biden administration granted Kenya on 24th May, 2024 during President Ruto's state visit to the US. As an MNNA, Kenya would enjoy an array of benefits including security, economic, financial and military assistance from the US. Trump's position on NATO has been clear since his first administration (2016-2020). He insists that the alliance is a drain on US resources and that Washington should drastically cut funding. With the reduced commitment to NATO, it is doubtful that the Trump administration would commit funding to fulfill obligations in the agreement that granted Kenya the MNNA status. The administration could as well repudiate Kenya's MNNA status.



The Ruto administration has tried to distinguish itself as a champion of policies aimed at addressing the problem of climate change. It has initiated and hosted regional and international conferences and summits on climate change. US support for Kenya's climate change initiatives has been evident during Biden's administration. US is supposed to release funds to mitigate climate change together with other developed countries. Kenya would be one of the major beneficiaries of such funds. Trump, on the other hand, is not a strong believer in climate change as an urgent issue demanding attention and funding. Indeed,

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during his first term and recent campaigns, he had questioned the science behind the concept “climate change” which he claims is a hoax. Ruto administration will have to rethink the climate change-related activities it had planned to carry out with funding from the US government and other institutions where the US have a say like World Bank and the IMF.

Another issue that the Ruto administration should worry about is the sustainability of the Haiti Mission in which Kenyan policemen are participating in a peace enforcement exercise. Funding for the Kenyan contingent was to largely come from the United States. It is instructive that some members of Congress opposed the idea of the US sponsoring the Kenyan contingent. It remains to be seen whether Congress under Trump will release funds for the Kenya-led mission, let alone support the whole initiative itself. Already, government of Kenya has announced it is considering re-allocating Kenya shillings 17 billion for the Haiti mission because the US government is yet to release the funds.



But how far can Trump II administration go reversing US policy towards Kenya, or even putting on hold some of the previous commitments made to Kenya by the US? As already observed above, Kenya’s geopolitical geo-economic significance for US regional and global strategy cannot be over emphasized. The greater East African region including the Horn and Great Lakes region is a conflict zone. Some of the conflicts threaten US interests directly or indirectly. Over the years, Kenya has proved to be an important actor in conflict-resolution in the region. In Somalia, the on-going counter-terrorist efforts against the Al-Shabaab terrorist group requires Kenya’s cooperation. Kenya is currently leading mediation efforts to stabilize South Sudan. It is also actively involved in the peace process in conflict-ridden Republic of Sudan. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains volatile with civil war raging in the Eastern part.

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US and Kenya have recently developed a framework for cooperation on the ongoing Red Sea crisis caused by attacks on commercial ships plying the sea route by Yemeni based Houthi rebels. This makes Kenya an invaluable asset for the US-led coalition against the Houthi rebels. Rising cases of piracy off the Somali coast also makes continued cooperation with Kenya necessary.

The horn of Africa is also increasingly becoming a theatre of geo-strategic maneuvers by major powers, including the US. In what appears to be an arms race in the region, France, Japan, China and the US all have established military bases in Djibouti. Turkey and Russia have joined the fray by signing military assistance agreements with various countries in the Horn. Kenya's proximity to the Gulf of Aden makes it important for US strategy in the region.



In conclusion, whatever decisions the Trump II administration might take on US policy towards Kenya, it is unlikely that there will be a radical shift. Moreover, Kenya's geo-political and geo-economic significance for US regional and global strategy remain unchanged. The recent visits by senior US diplomatic and security officials just go a long way in confirming that Kenya is so valuable for the US that it has to be courted. Hence, in as much as Kenya's dependence on the US may make it vulnerable, Ruto administration should recognize its geostrategic value and make it a source of leverage in its dealings with Washington.



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