

Africa And Russia to The Cold War Period: The Case for Kenya's Politico-Economic Ties

Adan Wehliye

Abstract

Kenya and Russia have historically maintained cordial and majorly pragmatic relations in many spheres of development. All along the USSR had supported decolonisation activities calling on Africa to liberate itself from the yoke of Western domination. In 1963, following Kenya's Independence Russia, therefore acknowledged and congratulated the founding President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta and vowed to support Kenya's and Africa's development projects including in the areas of education, trade and technical aid. The two countries also set up embassies in Moscow and Nairobi, formally cementing diplomatic engagements. In the years following independence, the politics of the USSR and USA, however, affected and informed how relations between states were to be navigated and operationalized. Majorly, African states shied away from taking any sides instead choosing to focus on national development and African values. Their argument was that Africa needed to look inward as opposed to meddling in the affairs of other states. Indeed, Africa's founding organisation-Organisation of African Unity(OAU) was principled on non-interference on affairs of neighbours. Kenya and other African countries thus, adopted the non-alignment principle which meant that they did not support or reject ideologies of communism or capitalism. Practically, however, many African nations Kenya included continued to rely and work more with their former colonizers and the USA. Subtly, therefore capitalism and not communism carried the day. Indeed, Kenya designed and operated under the Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965. This foundational policy document defined the governments' economic and political priorities. In addition, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta while shunning communism, continued to work with Russia in such areas as education with students receiving scholarships to study in Moscow. Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's successor also worked with both Russia and Western countries but vehemently discouraged the infiltration of communist ideas in the country. This pragmatic diplomacy worked well for Kenya as it allowed the state to stabilise following years of intense Cold war that characterised the late and early 1990s following the formal end of the war.

Key words: *diplomacy, Cold war, politico-economic engagement and decolonization*

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I. Introduction

Historical Roots of Relations between and among States Globally

Modern diplomacy, as is known today, began in earnest in 1648 with the emergence of the Westphalian Treaty, which established the notion of state sovereignty. Prior to this, states relied on intermediaries such as 'heralds, emissaries, envoys, and consuls' to deal with emerging issues and sign peace treaties. At the time, the idea of sovereignty did not exist, and permanent envoys were unknown. Conquest and subjugation, especially of less powerful states, were thus common, and intermediaries did not enjoy any immunity from receiving states. It was not until the Renaissance period that discussions about the need to establish rules governing relations between sovereign states emerged. This was given meaning by the adoption of the 1648 deliberations of the Congress of Westphalia.

The Westphalian Treaty has deep roots in the Protestant Reformation, which profoundly transformed political identities and power structures in Europe (Philpott, 2000). It ended the Thirty Years' War and established principles of religious tolerance and territorial sovereignty that reshaped power dynamics. According to Filho (2007) the treaty marked a pivotal moment in the establishment of the modern sovereign state system, though todate scholars are still grappling with the exact significance of the treaty. By and large, though, the treaty addressed profound religious divisions between Protestant and Catholic groups, establishing a framework for international relations based on territorial sovereignty (Zreik, 2021). However, recent scholarship cautions against overstating its revolutionary nature, suggesting it was more a redistribution of existing political authorities than a complete systemic transformation

Importantly, the treaty formally recognised state sovereignty, establishing a system in which states gained exclusive authority within their respective geographic boundaries (Krasner, 2001). It established international boundaries as legal territorial demarcations and asserted states' sovereign rights (Okhonmina, 2010).

The agreement marked a pivotal moment, shifting from a world organised around empires and religious authorities to a system of independent nation-states. In addition, the agreement pivoted Europe away from Christendom's supranational order toward a pluralistic system of states, empowering figures such as France's Louis XIV and Sweden's monarchs. It also operationalised and prioritised territorial integrity over ideological unity thus laying the groundwork for modern diplomacy through norms of mutual recognition and non-intervention. While not instantly creating "nation-states," it also dismantled medieval universalism, fostering balance-of-power politics. The Treaty established a comprehensive framework defining how states should relate to one another, based on key principles such as sovereignty and non-interference, territorial integrity, the secularisation of international relations, and a diplomatic framework.

The treaty established sovereign territorial states as the primary international political units, but contemporary globalisation is dramatically reshaping this model. Globalisation, supranational organisations such as the EU, and complex international dynamics have, however, complicated the original concept of absolute state sovereignty (Schmidt, 2011). And thus, while the treaty remains conceptually significant, its practical application has evolved dramatically since 1648.

While states remain dominant, non-state actors are increasingly influential (Zviadadze, 2019). Globalisation has created tensions between global capital, territorial states, and emerging international civil societies (Tehrani, 2002). Despite this scenario, states remain the dominant actors in the internal arena and they are the basis on which state diplomacy is operationalized. The Westphalian treaty has also given birth to newer treaties and systems including: the Vienna Convention, Versailles, and Yalta-Potsdam, ultimately evolving from bipolar Cold War dynamics to a unipolar system dominated by the United States.

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961.

The Conference on Diplomatic Intercourse and Immunities, held at the Neue Hofburg in Vienna, Austria, laid the foundations for modern diplomacy. It came into force on 24 April 1964. The treaty defines the framework for engagement among independent states, establishes diplomatic immunity, and outlines the privileges of states and missions. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations is a 1961 treaty that provides the legal foundation for diplomatic relations between states. It establishes common rules for embassies, diplomats, and host states, making international communication more orderly and predictable (United Nations, 1961). It codifies customary diplomatic law and establishes diplomatic immunity and mission inviolability. Its central aim is to support friendly relations among states by giving diplomats a secure legal framework to carry out their work. Together with the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, it protects consular officials' rights and foreign nationals' notification rights, and promotes state relations by establishing reciprocity principles, equality of the parties, and mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution (Hasani & Shtupi, 2017; Wojcik, 2008).

A major component of the Convention is mutual consent. States must agree before diplomatic relations are established, and the receiving state must accept the head of mission (United Nations, 1961). This respects sovereign equality and ensures that diplomacy remains a voluntary relationship between states. It prevents one state from forcing representation on another and helps maintain trust in bilateral relations.

The Convention also defines the functions of a diplomatic mission. These include representing the sending state, protecting its interests and nationals, negotiating with the receiving state, and promoting friendly relations (United Nations, 1961). These functions show that diplomacy is meant to solve problems through dialogue rather than coercion. By clearly outlining what diplomats are supposed to do, the Convention reduces misunderstandings and promotes cooperation (Wojcik, 2008).

Another key feature is the inviolability of mission premises. Embassies and diplomatic archives are protected from entry or interference by the host state, except under limited circumstances (United Nations, 1961). This protection allows diplomats to work without fear of intrusion or surveillance. It also builds confidence that confidential communications and official records will remain secure, which is essential for effective state relations.

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations establishes diplomatic immunity by generally shielding diplomatic agents from the criminal, civil, and administrative jurisdiction of the receiving state, subject to limited exceptions for private immovable property, succession matters, and certain professional or commercial activities conducted outside official functions (United Nations, 1961, art. 31). This protection is not intended for the personal benefit of individual diplomats; rather, it exists to ensure the efficient performance of diplomatic missions and to preserve the independence of diplomatic functions (United Nations, 1961). By limiting the ability of host states to subject diplomats to local legal pressure, immunity helps reduce the risk that domestic legal processes will be used as instruments of retaliation or political coercion.

The Convention also protects diplomatic personnel and families to varying degrees. Administrative and technical staff, and in some cases their family members, receive specified immunities under the treaty (United Nations, 1961). These rules help diplomatic missions function smoothly and prevent confusion over who is covered. Clear protections make it easier for states to maintain stable missions abroad (United Nations, 1961).

Another important mechanism is the *persona non grata principle* which dictates that a receiving state may declare a diplomat unacceptable and require the sending state to recall them (United Nations, 1961). This gives states a peaceful legal remedy when relations become strained. Instead of escalating conflict, the treaty offers a formal and orderly way to resolve disputes over diplomats' conduct.

The Convention also supports reciprocity. Because states expect their diplomats to be treated properly abroad, they are encouraged to treat foreign diplomats fairly at home (Hasani & Shtupi, 2017). This two-way principle strengthens mutual respect and reduces friction. It makes diplomatic relations more stable because states have an incentive to honour the same standards they apply to their own representatives.

Overall, the Vienna Convention promotes state relations by creating predictability, legal certainty, and protection for diplomatic communication. It helps states continue talking even when their political relations are difficult. By standardising rights, duties, and remedies, it reduces the likelihood that diplomatic incidents will escalate into major international disputes (United Nations, 1961).

In short, the Convention is one of the most important instruments in international law because it supports peaceful interaction between states. Its key components, mutual consent, diplomatic functions, inviolability, immunity, and *persona non grata*, work together to keep diplomacy functional and respectful. That is why it remains central to modern interstate relations since it provides the legal and institutional basis for understanding how states interact through formal channels. It shows that interstate relations are not only political but also structured by rules that regulate contact, communication, and protection. Building on this foundation, the next section examines how such interactions are conceptualised and named within broader diplomatic practice, with particular attention to politico-economic engagements between and among states.

Early Exploration and Diplomatic Outreach between Russia and Africa

Exploratory expeditions, scientific research, and diplomatic curiosity from the mid-17th to early 19th centuries characterised early Russian contacts with Africa. Russian interactions began with naval expeditions around the Cape of Good Hope initiated by Peter the Great and Catherine II (Davidson, 2013). Russian naval expeditions around the Cape of Good Hope under Peter the Great and Catherine II marked the onset of direct Russian engagement with Africa in the 18th century. These ventures, though ambitious, faced setbacks, yet spurred scientific inquiry and shifted perceptions of the continent in Russian society. Peter the Great initiated plans in 1723 for a secret naval expedition via the Cape of Good Hope to Madagascar and possibly India, reflecting his drive for maritime expansion. Poor preparation doomed the effort, but Catherine II revived similar ambitions, dispatching ships under Captain Grigori Mulovski to the Cape region in the 1780s for strategic and scientific purposes. Runaway Russian sailors and criminals also reached South Africa independently, providing early firsthand accounts (Davidson, 2013).

Russian explorers conducted significant scientific research, producing valuable publications on African geography, cartography, ethnography, botany, and zoology (Ryabova, 2020). Early knowledge about Africa came through handwritten "Cosmographies" and geographical manuscripts that gradually changed Russian societal attitudes towards the continent (Davidson, 2020). Moreover, like other European powers, Russia attempted to colonise Africa.

Russia made minimal, largely unsuccessful attempts to colonise Africa in the 19th century, with only one notable, ultimately failed expedition. In 1889, a Russian contingent of about 150 Cossacks, led by Nikolai Ivanovich Ashinov, attempted to establish a colony called "New Moscow" on the northern shore of the Gulf of Tadjura, which is now within Djibouti's borders (Rollins, 1968). With tacit support from Tsar Alexander III and Orthodox leaders, framed as a religious mission to Ethiopia, the group raised the Russian flag at the Ottoman fort of Sagallo. French forces, already claiming the territory as part of Somaliland, bombarded the site in February 1889 after negotiations failed, killing several settlers and forcing evacuation (Polianichev, 2023). However, this was more of an isolated incident than a systematic colonial effort. Contrary to other European powers, Russia did not actively participate in the colonial division of Africa. Denisova (2024) notes that while Russia was a powerful political player, it closely observed but did not engage in colonial conquests. In fact, Russia's interests in Africa were primarily diplomatic, humanitarian, and strategic, rather than colonial (Nigusie Kassaye et al., 2025).

Russia's minimal 19th-century colonial attempts in Africa, particularly the failed Sagallo expedition in Djibouti, connect indirectly to modern Kenya-Russia relations through a shared historical pattern of restraint, diplomacy, and non-colonial engagement rather than direct territorial links. While Sagallo targeted the Horn of Africa geographically near but distinct from Kenya, these early ventures underscored Russia's preference for exploratory and strategic footholds over sustained colonisation, influencing its later approach to East African states like Kenya. This study examines Russia's and Kenya's engagements, focusing on politics and the economy. The next section conceptualises politico-economic ties, delineating the specific aspects of the two that the research focused on.

Cold War Politics and The Decolonisation Process in Africa

Understanding post-independence African relations with the outside world requires a deep examination of the colonial period: its dynamics, politics, and legacies, and how these profoundly shaped the continent's political boundaries, economic dependencies, and diplomatic orientations. Colonial rule in Africa was imposed primarily by European powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the Scramble for Africa, which partitioned the continent into territories dominated by Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, and others. In itself, colonialism was an exploitative affair; a process that involved domination of African people in almost all spheres, including politics, social and economic aspects. Socially, Europeans sought to subdue Africans by superimposing policies hitherto unknown to the locals. For instance, in Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, among others, the British erected artificial borders and boundaries, thereby dividing people who originally lived as one. These arbitrary borders have continually sown seeds of ethnic conflict and instability, forcing newly independent states into alignments that mirrored colonial divide-and-rule tactics, often aligning with former metropolises such as France or Britain for security and aid (Mamdani, 1996; Adebajo, 2014).

Economically, colonial extraction models entrenched raw-material exports and import substitution, making African nations vulnerable to neo-colonial influences from Western powers and, later, Cold War superpowers, as seen in France's enduring "Françafrique" networks that blurred sovereignty through military pacts and currency controls (Bischoff, 2020). Thus, without grasping these colonial imprints from governance structures to global trade imbalances, analyses of contemporary African foreign policy remain incomplete and ahistorical (Fraiture, 2021). In addition, the colonisers imposed new economic structures oriented towards resource extraction, forced labour, and political administration by foreign powers. European powers rapidly partitioned Africa between 1880 and 1914, transforming the continent through systematic territorial conquest and economic exploitation. shows that in less than 30 years, European powers conquered 10 million square miles, leaving only Ethiopia and Liberia unconquered. (2016) argue that colonial border designs were arbitrarily drawn with limited understanding of local conditions, resulting in ethnic partitioning with long-lasting consequences. On the other hand, Bagchi (2012) emphasises that imperial powers reshaped land and labour regimes to facilitate resource extraction through "export-led exploitation," which primarily benefited metropolitan countries. Taylor (2018) further notes that this process centralised power and created political monopolies, fundamentally altering African political and economic structures. The colonial system disenfranchised indigenous African political structures and peoples, laying seeds for resistance and nationalist movements that emerged in the mid-20th century (Adebajo, 2014). Politically, Africans were denied opportunities to participate in existing political activities, including agitation, protest, and the formation of political parties.

Understandably, the African response towards colonial domination was largely brutal, and the decolonisation process ended in the eventual granting of independence. By the end of World War I, European states recognised that "excessive abuse of Africans that had taken place during the preceding decades would no longer be tolerated" (Collins & Burns, 2013). The decolonisation process, however, accelerated after WWII when colonial powers found themselves "allied with the anti-imperialist powers of the United States and the Soviet Union" (ibid). One has, however, to acknowledge that the process was multifaceted, involving diplomatic strategies, political resistance, and international dynamics (Welz, 2021).

While 1960 marked a critical year with numerous states achieving independence, scholars argue that political liberation was often superficial (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). The decolonisation movement was driven by pan-African concepts such as African personality and *négritude*, which challenged colonial power structures (Fisher et al., 2023). Additionally, decolonisation was accelerated by the weakening of European powers after World Wars I and II, as African soldiers returned with demands for self-rule. International pressures from the Cold War and UN resolutions further compelled negotiated independence. The Organisation of African Unity played a crucial role by uniting 47 independent nations to promote solidarity and continue the liberation struggle (Binaisa, 1977).

Apart from the factors highlighted above, the emergence of superpower dynamics also influenced the decolonisation process, ultimately shaping relations between Western countries and post-independent African states (Goldberg, 1986). In the decolonisation process of African states, the Western powers were involved directly or indirectly. Directly, they negotiated independence transitions, such as Britain's gradual reforms in Ghana and Kenya and France's policies in Algeria, while indirectly providing aid, military support, and Cold War-era pressures through the US and the UN to counter Soviet influence and promote self-determination.

Initially, Britain and France were unconvinced by the case for independence and attempted to thwart the process. However, by the mid-1950s, they chose to "guide their colonies along an 'approved' path to independence" (Goldberg, 1986). The United States, while not a direct catalyst, was deeply involved. By 1952, US policy shifted from economic development to strategic Cold War calculations (Thomas, 2008). Zartman (1976) notes that even after independence, Western powers maintained significant influence through economic ties, cultural conditioning, and political networks. While not directly involved in the scramble for African countries, Russia was not left behind in this endeavour. Subtly, Russia eyed and engaged covertly with individuals,

organisations and heads of state but with caution. It was, however, during the Cold War that Russia emerged as an important player in African cultural and economic diplomacy.

The Cold War and the decolonisation period thus significantly altered Russia's place in Africa. The war significantly shaped the decolonisation process by transforming the continent into a strategic arena for the US and the Soviet Union. Cold War politics in the 1950s shaped African decolonisation by positioning the continent as a battleground for US-Soviet rivalry, with both superpowers pressuring European colonial powers to grant independence to secure ideological allies and prevent the spread of communism. The superpowers manipulated decolonisation for geopolitical advantage (Ade-Ibijola & Mngomezulu, 2020). For example, the Soviet Union strategically used anti-colonial propaganda to pressure Western powers, promising economic development to African nations (Maekawa, 2023). It promised African nations support in building socialist economies, offering financial aid, technical assistance, and military training to liberation movements and post-independence governments. For example, the Soviet Union backed the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) during the Algerian War of Independence against France. It provided substantial support to movements like the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. This propaganda and support not only heightened pressure on Western powers to accelerate decolonisation but also positioned the USSR as an appealing partner for African countries seeking alternatives to Western capitalist models.

Additionally, the 1958 Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Tashkent (Soviet Uzbekistan) exemplified this approach towards Africa. The conference brought together around 140-204 writers from 36-37 Asian and African countries to denounce imperialism, foster cultural exchanges through literature translations and tours, and promote solidarity among colonised and newly independent nations. Inspired by the 1955 Bandung Conference, it established the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA) with a permanent bureau, issued appeals against colonialism and racism, and served as a platform for political discourse, including speeches by figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who urged African leaders to reject Western capital. However, the strategy was not uniformly successful: many African intellectuals, including Leopold Senghor, were sceptical of Soviet propaganda and sought to maintain their intellectual autonomy. Cucciolla (2020), drawing on the above, notes that the Soviets used multiple channels, including radio, literature, films, and international conferences, to present Tashkent as a model of progressive, non-European modernity. While ambitious, their cultural diplomacy ultimately revealed the tensions in Third World solidarity during the Cold War era.

The Soviet Union actively supported African liberation movements, with Haruna & Abdul Salam (2021) noting that diplomatic ties emerged during the continent's "collective struggle for decolonisation". The 1917 Soviet Revolution inspired nationalist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela, providing ideological fuel for their anti-colonial efforts. Unlike European colonial powers, the Soviet Union did not establish territorial colonies or linguistic regions in Africa. Instead, Olivier & Suchkov emphasise that the USSR served as an "ideological role model" for African liberation, actively helping to "end colonialism and racism" through unwavering support for self-determination principles enshrined in UN resolutions. The Soviets provided comprehensive material assistance, including arms, funding, and training to movements like the MPLA in Angola and ZANU in Zimbabwe, alongside diplomatic advocacy at the United Nations to isolate colonial powers. They also established Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University in 1960, specifically to educate thousands of African students and foster a cadre of leaders and intellectuals sympathetic to socialist ideals amid decolonisation.

Vasiliev et al. (2021) point out the USSR's substantive role in accelerating African decolonisation, both diplomatically through vigorous support for the 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which condemned colonialism as a denial of human rights and materially via economic loans, technical expertise, and infrastructure projects. For instance, the Soviets provided diplomatic cover to Congo's Patrice Lumumba against Western intervention in 1960. This complex assistance not only bolstered nascent states but also pressured European powers to expedite withdrawals, positioning the USSR as a credible anti-imperial alternative during the Cold War.

While the USSR championed decolonisation as an ideological crusade, the United States, though philosophically sympathetic to anti-colonial movements, was primarily concerned with preventing communist influence (J. C. Parker, 2018). The US promoted self-determination through UN advocacy and aid to non-aligned nationalists such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah. At the same time, the Soviet Union supported anti-colonial movements, accelerating transitions in countries like Ghana (1957) but sowing seeds of post-independence proxy conflicts. Parker (2018) argues that the United States used various tools to influence decolonisation, typically channelling influence through existing colonial authorities. They utilised traditional and public diplomacy, economic and technical development aid and targeted educational programs for emerging national elites (Unger, 2011). According to Parker (2018), the main American imperative during the Cold War was to minimise political and social instability in newly independent African states and to neutralise actors, both internal and external, who could create opportunities for communist expansion on the continent. During the Cold War, the United States prioritised minimising political and social instability in newly independent African states to prevent these countries from becoming footholds for communist influence. This involved supporting moderate nationalist

leaders, providing economic and military aid, and intervening diplomatically to counter both internal and external actors seen as potential promoters of Soviet-aligned communism, reflecting a broader US strategy to contain communism worldwide.

Consequently, in the 1960s, Cold War politics extended to international forums. Kalu (2018) argues that Cold War actors created “extractive and utterly predatory political and economic institutions” by prioritising ideological competition over African development. These institutions were designed more to extract resources and maintain control than to foster sustainable growth or improve the welfare of African populations, creating long-lasting challenges for post-independence governance and economic stability. Onwaniban (2021) further confirms that while the Cold War facilitated decolonisation and provided international platforms for African states, it also “generated intense violence and crises” that destabilised the continent. The superpowers’ support for ideologically aligned factions ultimately undermined genuine independence, leaving Africa with lasting political challenges. The superpowers often backed rival political groups and armed factions based on ideological alignment rather than the interests of African peoples, thereby fuelling civil wars, coups, and prolonged violence. Suspicion, rooted in ideological divides among those who fought for independence in Africa generally and Kenya in particular, remains an enduring mark of Kenya’s politics.

Kenya and the Rest of the World at the Eve of Independence

Kenya, like the rest of the African independent states gained independence in 1963. Immediately after this, she began engaging with African and outside countries whenever it deemed important (Mazrui, 1964). This was seen as the ultimate expression of sovereignty. Establishing these direct diplomatic channels was crucial for gaining international recognition. It also enabled them to secure vital economic partnerships essential to their development while carefully navigating the geopolitical complexities of the Cold War, in which both the United States and the Soviet Union sought influence in Africa through various alignments and support for different regimes and liberation movements. This diplomatic engagement shaped the foreign policies of African states, balancing ideological pressures and practical interests in a contested international environment. This transition was captured in the phrase “from foreign rule to foreign relations,” emphasising that true independence meant having full authority to conduct foreign affairs (Mazrui, 1964, p. 499).

According to Akindele (1976), Kenya and other new states systematically built bilateral diplomatic networks, recognising the increasing complexity of international interactions. Acknowledging that the global stage was shaped by Cold War dynamics, decolonisation, and the emergence of international institutions, African countries sought to establish formal diplomatic ties to secure political recognition and economic cooperation from a variety of global actors. These networks involved establishing embassies, signing treaties and engaging in diplomatic relations, which were crucial for navigating pressures from former colonial powers and competing superpowers. African states balanced these bilateral relations with commitments to regional unity and multilateral diplomacy through the formation of regional bodies like the Organisation of African Unity(OAU). The aim was to present a collective diplomatic front while protecting individual national interests. This diplomatic network-building was essential for asserting sovereignty, facilitating development partnerships, and engaging productively in a complex international environment marked by various ideological and strategic challenges (Mohd Huda & Muchatuta, 2022).

Establishment of diplomatic relations shortly after Kenya's independence

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Kenya and various powers following its December 1963 independence reveals diverse strategic interests and evolving partnerships. For example, Britain maintained significant strategic interests, seeking to preserve economic and military influence in its former colony (Percox, 2005). At this time, the diplomatic relations were pragmatic, with Britain instrumental in forming Kenya’s initial security structures while maintaining “forward basing” (Odhiambo, 2021). However, in Nzau's (2016) work, Kenya strategically diversified its partnerships over time, gradually moving beyond traditional Western allies. This shift was influenced by factors such as Cold War dynamics, economic sanctions, and the emergence of new global powers, such as China.

One thing that was clear in post-independent Kenya was that the country’s foreign policy at independence aimed to reposition the country from a colonised territory to an active actor in global and regional affairs. At the time, Kenya’s foreign policy was anchored in three major issues: economic growth, political and territorial independence, and non-alignment, along with a commitment to African Unity under the newly formed Organisation of African Unity (OAU). After assuming the mantle, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta recognised the link between national independence and the broader goals of peace, equity, and shared heritage, which influenced his approach to diplomatic engagements and issues. Having adopted existing administrative structures from Britain, Mzee Kenyatta and the new leadership created a stronger Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and diplomatic recognition was anchored on formal engagements and agreements. Diplomatic relations were thus established legally, and embassies, missions, and consulates were opened with key states such as the United Kingdom on the very day of

independence, symbolising a transition from colonial governance to a partnership based on mutual interests. Kenya also sought to maintain constructive relations with other states in Africa, Europe, America and Asia. The focus of these early missions was mainly on protecting territorial integrity and seeking direct and indirect investments. An elder statesman, President Jomo Kenyatta focused on the need to forge unity on the continent and thus preferred soft-power diplomacy as his preferred mode of operation.

The 1980s and 1990s marked a period of transformation and a gradual shift in Kenya-Russia relations. As the geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically with the end of the Cold War, the global world order began to exhibit clear characteristics of a monopolar world with America controlling much of the global economy. The post-Cold War world order fostered U.S. dominance unprecedented in modern history, allowing it to set the terms of global governance and security architecture with limited checks from rival powers. Global superpower proxy competitions were also reduced, and Russia, along with other communist states, retreated to re-strategise. Wohlforth (1999) characterised this as the “greatest change in world power relationships since World War II,” with the US emerging as the “sole surviving superpower.” The emergence of the United States as the unrivalled global hegemon in the post-Cold War unipolar system fundamentally reshaped international relations, reducing the scope for alternative power centres, such as Russia, to project influence globally. As Wohlforth (1999) rightly notes, this shift marked the greatest reordering of world power since World War II, consolidating U.S. dominance in security and governance frameworks. This unipolarity also allowed the U.S. to acquire “inordinate influence” in military and political affairs worldwide, positioning it as the dominant global superpower with unparalleled capacities to shape international norms, policies, and security frameworks (Ahrari, 2011).

Ikenberry (2011) emphasises that the U.S. also emerged from the Cold War with “unrivalled and unprecedented material capabilities across multiple domains, including the military, technology, economy, and politics. The U.S. military’s global reach was also unmatched with advanced technology, superior nuclear capabilities, and expansive power projection capabilities supported by a network of bases worldwide, enabling rapid responses to crises and conflicts (Ikenberry, 2011). Economically, the U.S. dominated global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, guiding economic reforms and policies worldwide. Politically, it wielded significant influence over multinational organisations such as the United Nations and NATO, consolidating its leadership role. On the other hand, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union saw Russia dramatically scale back its African engagements, closing embassies, demanding debt repayments, and withdrawing ideological support, shifting toward pragmatic trade over Cold War alliances. Importantly, influence waned as Soviet-trained elites faded, replaced by Western-trained bureaucrats who focused more on primitive accumulation and exploitation of global labour. Moreover, perhaps due to financial constraints and dwindling geopolitical interest in some countries, Russia eventually closed nine embassies, including those in Lesotho, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Niger, Papua New Guinea, Suriname, and Somalia. Three consulates and various trade missions were also closed as Russia reassessed its priorities in Africa (Marten, 2019).

Scholars have also argued that limited interest in Africa was occasioned by among other factors, by miscalculations in Moscow, which saw Russia fight in Chechnya first in 1994 and again between 1999 and 2009 (Gall & de Waal, 1998). The war left an already financially constrained Moscow writhing in fiscal deficit, in addition to many deaths. Moreover, for a period, Russia experienced economic stagnation. Russia’s African arms and machinery markets had been blocked (or the demand had decreased) with the emergence of the USA and Gorbachev’s unpopular reforms.¹ At home, they were not helping. Russia thus had to apply the principle of strategic withdrawal from African nations by, among other measures, reducing support for African and Third World nations. In the 1970s, Moscow was supporting Angola and Ethiopia. Gorbachev also met with leaders from South Africa, especially during global tours to Geneva and China.

For Kenya, following decades of cautious engagement during the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era. While not strategically important, Kenya and the Russian Federation had to redefine their diplomatic and economic ties (Omollo, 2019). These symbolic engagements were informed by, among others, Russia’s internal political and economic upheavals, which limited its global diplomatic outreach. On the other hand, Kenya, under a new President, Arap Moi, focused on four main areas of diplomatic engagement: trade and economic cooperation, security and technological cooperation, educational diplomacy, and healthcare. Moreover, while Russian spy agents were still ‘present’ in the country, diplomatic relations remained formal through multilateral organisations such as the United Nations. Parliamentary diplomacy, though in its nascent stages, was also important, as discussions on bilateral engagements were held between the two parliaments in Nairobi and Moscow.

Diplomacy thus remained largely formalised, with the two heads of state engaging with each other through various meetings. For instance, in 1988, President Moi discussed with Gorbachev areas of economic cooperation, such as trade and investment between Russia and Kenya, and the need to strengthen exchanges in

¹ By 1992, Russia was experiencing super inflation occasioned by the clamping of money and deregulation of price controls

other areas, such as education and healthcare. On his part, Gorbachev and his delegation expressed interest in Kenyan coffee and tea, while Kenya sought technical aid for infrastructure development. Kenya also thanked Russia for offering scholarships to its students and reiterated its commitment to support Russian workers and businesspeople operating in Kenya. In the area of security, President Moi requested exchanges and training for its security personnel, albeit on a smaller scale. Kenya largely relied on US support in military and technological areas and was thus careful to seek assistance from the Soviets in security matters. Thus, no major military agreement was reached between these two leaders. The meeting was, however, important in three major ways.

To begin with, the meeting confirmed Kenya's commitment to the principle of non-alignment. Together with other African nations, Kenya focused more on regional unity, and supporting the USSR or America would have jeopardised its efforts to do this. By visiting Russia, Moi and other African leaders were subtly signalling to global leaders that regional unity was more important to them. Secondly, President Moi's visit to Russia also saw increased educational diplomacy, which was important for Kenya at the time. Kenya needed an expanded workforce but could not produce it due to financial challenges. By securing more scholarships for its students, Russia was helping Kenya develop a larger pool of educated workers to help build its economy. Thirdly, the meeting with Gorbachev strengthened bilateral relations between the two states. At a time when Moi was struggling with opposition figures in the country, seeking an ally in the Russian Federation perhaps signalled to Western nations pushing Kenya to adopt democracy. President Moi's regime had been accused of high-handedness and disregard for the rule of law. His authoritative regime had, throughout the 1980s, dealt with dissidence through unlawful detention, abduction, exile, extermination and torture. Some of those he had exiled, it was believed, had sought refuge in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Moi was thus, perhaps, warning opposition figures who had sought refuge in Norway and Sweden that he could smoke them out of these countries if he so wished. Reaffirming Kenya's non-aligned international posture and seeking Russia's support in addressing internal dissent were thus important for Kenya.

Secondly, the Soviets were going through a difficult economic period, and securing a market for agricultural products, among other forms of technical assistance, was thus important. At the time, Russia was seeking to diversify its markets and allies outside the socialist states, and having East Africa on its side was thus important.

In particular, Moi was a strong anti-communist crusader, viewing communism as a threat to the country's political and economic stability. He was, however, not as brutal as President Kenyatta, whose tenure coincided with the Cold War era and its politics and alignments. All the same, any citizen, organisation and/or groups considered as leftist are brutally. To begin with, security forces continued to censor university student activism, and student leaders were many times incarcerated for flimsy reasons. Secondly, opposition leaders and their strongholds were sidelined, and areas considered friendly to the state were rewarded with goodies such as roads, schools, health facilities, and employment. In addition, religious and political leaders who preached and/or criticised the Moi regime were incarcerated, exiled or detained without trial.

The West had given conditions for continued funding to the country. Importantly, the IMF and World Bank had categorically stated that for Kenya to continue enjoying aid and loans, respect for human rights, democracy, and the fight against corruption had to be affected. The West called on Moi and his KANU regime to repeal Section 2A of the Constitution to allow for multiparty democracy.

Kenya's transition from single-party to multiparty rule in the late 1980s and early 1990s was thus influenced by both external and internal pressures. Externally, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War, leading to a realignment of global geopolitical interests (Cullen, 2018). Cheeseman (2015) emphasises that this was not simply an externally imposed process, but required active domestic opposition movements. Western donor countries, which had become more influential in Kenya due to the decline of Soviet support for leftist and single-party regimes in Africa, used their financial aid as leverage to push for democratisation and political reforms in Kenya (Kiarie, 2004). This international pressure was part of a wider wave of democratisation across Africa, encouraged by the Western bloc, which now promoted multiparty democracy as a condition for political and economic assistance.

Makinda (1996) situates the disintegration of the Soviet Union within a broader global context of political change known as the "third wave of democratisation." This wave was characterised not only by the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states but also by significant democratization movements in developing countries, including those in Africa. Makinda (1996) notes that this democratization wave was driven by sustained efforts of domestic political forces within these countries, activists, opposition parties, civil society, and reformists, which were crucial in pushing for systemic political change. Equally important was the role of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which leveraged structural adjustment programs and economic aid to promote reforms that favoured multiparty democracy and good governance, thereby linking economic assistance to political liberalisation efforts (Omondi, n.d.).

Kiarie (2004) observes how the late 1980s and early 1990s, immediately following the Soviet Union's collapse, were a particularly intense period for democratic transitions in developing countries. He notes that these states faced a dual set of pressures: internally, rising demands for political pluralism and democratisation from opposition groups and civil society; externally, economic and diplomatic pressure from Western governments and international financial bodies advocating for multiparty systems as a condition for continued aid and favourable relations. These dynamics were instrumental in pushing many single-party regimes previously sustained by Cold War ideological alignments towards adopting multiparty democratic structures. The convergence of waning Soviet support and increased Western influence, coupled with domestic calls for political change, thus created a political environment ripe for transformation in Kenya (Omondi, n.d).

Mbaku (1995) elaborates on the pivotal role the collapse of the Soviet Union played in reshaping Africa's political landscape, particularly regarding the sustainability of authoritarian regimes. With the fall of the Soviet Union, African countries lost a crucial source of external financial and military support that had helped prop up dictatorial and single-party states during the Cold War. This collapse of the Soviet Union was significant because many African dictatorships had strategically aligned with either the Western or Soviet bloc to secure aid, weapons, and diplomatic backing that bolstered their grip on power. He adds that the loss of external assistance critically weakened authoritarian regimes, removing the external pillars that had insulated them from internal dissent and economic pressures. Without Soviet support, regimes faced increased economic hardship due to reduced aid and trade opportunities, as well as growing domestic opposition emboldened by global democratic trends and the changing

The above developments were not only significant for Africa, and Kenya in particular, but also mirrored broader transformations occurring within the Soviet Union itself. The internal pressures for democratisation and political reform that swept through many African states were part of a global wave that also deeply affected the Soviet Union, leading to its eventual disintegration into multiple independent nations, including Russia. Omondi (n.d) argues that just as African countries faced intense internal challenges combined with shifting external geopolitical dynamics, the Soviet Union experienced internal political liberalisation movements, economic challenges, and demands for greater autonomy from its constituent republics. These parallel processes of political transformation, Africa moving toward multiparty democracy and the Soviet Union breaking apart into successor states, were interlinked within the wider "third wave of democratisation" that reshaped the international order at the end of the 20th century and redefined geopolitics.

Diplomatically, Kenedy Fonju (2021) notes that the retreat of Soviet influence in Africa following the disintegration of the USSR has been widely attributed to significant financial constraints faced by the newly formed Russian state. The collapse severely limited Russia's ability to sustain its Cold War-era commitments, forcing a departure from the costly ideological competition that had previously defined its foreign policy. The ideological commitment of the Cold War era gave way to a transactional approach, with Kanet & Moulioukova (2022) noting that market-driven interests in exports and access to resources replaced geopolitical competition. This transformation signalled a departure from politically motivated alliances to a more transactional approach centred on economic gains and resource diplomacy. Marten (2019) further confirmed this shift, emphasising that relations became focused on economics rather than ideology. As the Soviet-era ideological commitment to socialism and state-led development waned, Russia's relations with Africa became increasingly characterised by selective partnerships and commercial interests. This pragmatic orientation reflected a broader Russian strategic recalibration, prioritising sectors such as energy, mining, and arms trade, which offered tangible returns amidst constrained budgets and a domestic agenda focused on post-Soviet reconstruction. This economic pragmatism replaced the ideological export drive that had previously framed Soviet foreign policy.

The transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation posed challenges to bilateral engagements with other nations, as Russia's focus shifted inward toward domestic reform and economic stabilisation, resulting in reduced engagement with Africa generally and with Kenya in particular (Omollo, 2019). Omollo (2019) notes that the diversification of global partnerships characterised Kenya's foreign policy during this period. The country was undergoing its own political changes, including the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1992, as well as economic challenges and regional instability. Kenya's approach to Russia was thus pragmatic, maintaining diplomatic contact while cautiously navigating economic opportunities within a framework shaped by the post-Cold War international environment (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, 1999). Thus, throughout the 1990s, Kenya continued to benefit from historic Soviet-era aid. However, this time the aid was largely channelled through educational cooperation, with several Kenyans attending Soviet and, later, Russian universities (Samrack, 2018). Additionally, Russia's development aid and cultural diplomacy continued subtly, including support for institutions such as the hospital in Kisumu, which helped sustain goodwill during this period of reduced political intensity (Samrack, 2018). Kenya and Russia thus maintained a baseline of cooperation despite the lack of robust commercial or strategic partnerships during Russia's transitional years.

In Russia, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a profound transformation as the state moved from a centralised communist superpower to an independent nation-state amid economic chaos and political uncertainty

(Huntington, 1991). Under President Boris Yeltsin, Russian leaders embarked on a radical "shock therapy" reform to dismantle the command economy, including rapid privatisation and price liberalisation, which initially caused GDP to plummet and triggered hyperinflation (Gaidar & Bouis, 2007, 2025). This economic dislocation, compounded by shortages and budget deficits, eroded public trust and fueled social instability, setting the stage for Russia's reinvention as a market-oriented federation (Round & Williams, 2010).

Politically, the Soviet Union's dissolution empowered nationalist forces and regional autonomy movements, leading Yeltsin to dissolve the USSR alongside the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus, and to establish the Russian Federation with a new constitution emphasising presidential power (Yeltsin, 1994). Gorbachev's earlier perestroika and glasnost reforms had weakened the Communist Party's monopoly, enabling multiparty elections and the emergence of opposition voices. However, this also sparked ethnic tensions and a 1993 constitutional crisis resolved by military force (Brown, 1996). Russia's path, however, differed from Western-style democracy, as oligarchs gained influence through privatisation vouchers, which largely undermined institutional stability (Prozorova, 2024).

Economically, post-Soviet Russia grappled with waves of de-modernisation, in which privatisation created vast inequality and oligarchic control, while the energy sector saw selective modernisation amid corruption and inefficiency (Edmond, 2025). By the late 1990s, the financial crisis exposed vulnerabilities and rising oil prices. Focusing on internal stability was thus more urgent for the Russians, and countries that had hitherto relied on aid from the Soviet bloc had to look elsewhere.

Recognition of Kenya by the Soviet Union(USSR) as an independent state

Even though Kenya had close ties with the West at independence, it began to re-evaluate its dependence on its traditional Western partners over time. As Nzau (2016) notes, Kenya embarked on a deliberate strategy of diversifying its diplomatic and economic partnerships. This shift was influenced by several broader global and regional factors, as mentioned earlier. Kenya, though more aligned with the West, had to navigate the pressure to be seen as a strategic pawn in a global ideological conflict. This situation limited Kenya's autonomy in international affairs and constrained its ability to pursue partnerships based purely on national interest. Kenya became close to other nations beyond the West through a combination of strategic diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical decisions aimed at increasing its autonomy, accelerating development, and responding to global power shifts. This process was gradual, driven by both external pressures and internal aspirations. While maintaining ties with Western countries, Kenya actively sought alternative alliances that offered more flexible terms of engagement, particularly from emerging powers such as China, India, and the Soviet Union. According to Iraki (2018), such moves were not a complete abandonment of the West, but a "dualism" of international engagement. This reflected Kenya's deliberate and pragmatic approach to foreign policy, which involved balancing traditional Western alliances with emerging partnerships. Rather than choosing one bloc over another, Kenya positioned itself to benefit from both, leveraging the advantages each could offer.

Cold War politics influenced the relations at independence. According to Cullen (2017a), Kenyan leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta used Cold War rhetoric to secure advantages, particularly with British partners. This is well captured in Tom Mboya's book *Freedom and After* (1963) when he writes that "It will be a difficult task keeping Africa clear of ideologies. There will be the Cold War growling its thunder around us" (p. 168). From this excerpt, it is evident that the geopolitical pressures African nations faced during the Cold War era included the challenge of remaining neutral or non-aligned in a world deeply divided between two major ideological blocs: capitalism (led by the United States and Western allies) and communism (led by the Soviet Union and its allies). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that Kenya, like any other newly independent African state, wanted to chart its own path. However, it was unlikely to avoid the influence or interference of the Cold War superpowers. It is within this realm that the analysis of Kenya-Russia relations is based.

The analysis of relations between Kenya and Russia cannot be free from the influence of Cold War politics in Kenya, for domestic politics is the basis of international politics, or, in this case, state relations. Evans (2020), looking at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy, argues that foreign policy is "primarily generated from within" and that domestic attributes profoundly reshape international interactions. Additionally, Kaarbo (2015) document a 25-year trend in international relations theory that increasingly emphasises the importance of domestic political factors such as leadership dynamics, political institutions, public opinion, and internal party politics in shaping a state's foreign policy decisions. This marks a significant shift away from earlier realist models that viewed states as unitary actors, highlighting instead how internal national contexts can heavily influence a country's behaviour on the international stage.

Kenya at independence was not a unitary actor, as there existed internal factional disputes between two prominent leaders with opposing ideological leanings. For example, Tom Mboya, the American-supported Minister for Economic Planning and Development, and Vice President Oginga Odinga, who aligned himself with the Soviet Union and other communist states (Hornsby, 2012). This rivalry reflected deeper tensions over the direction Kenya's foreign and economic policy should take; for example, Mboya favoured a capitalist, pro-

Western development model, while Odinga advocated closer ties with the Eastern bloc and promoted socialist policies. The conflict was not only personal but also ideological, exposing how Cold War dynamics played out within Kenya's domestic politics, as global superpowers sought influence through local allies. This internal division illustrated how foreign policy in newly independent African states was deeply intertwined with internal power struggles, shaped by both global pressures and differing visions of national development (Cullen, 2017a).

Drawing on the above, some scholars, such as Howell (1968), have described Kenya's foreign policy in the post-independence period as having "multiple faces," highlighting a strategic duality in its international engagement. Globally, Kenya often adopted a radical or progressive stance, aligning itself with anti-colonial and liberation movements, supporting global south solidarity, and participating in non-aligned forums that challenged Western dominance. However, at the regional level, Kenya pursued a more cautious and conservative approach, prioritising stability, non-intervention, and cooperation with neighbouring states to protect its national interests and internal cohesion. This contrast reveals a nuanced and pragmatic foreign policy, where Kenya projected a revolutionary image on the global stage to assert its independence and ideological relevance, while exercising restraint and diplomacy in regional matters to maintain peace and economic ties. The characterisation underscores Kenya's efforts to balance ideological commitments with geopolitical realities, crafting a foreign policy that served both its international identity and domestic priorities (Howell, 1968).

In the study of Kenya-Russia relations, available sources do not provide a comprehensive account of the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between Kenya and Russia at independence, making it difficult to draw a definitive conclusion about the exact nature or timing of their early bilateral engagement. However, what is clear is that Kenya-Russia relations were deeply embedded in the broader context of Cold War dynamics, with the Soviet Union seeking influence in newly independent African states (Sun, 2020).

The Soviet Union's recognition of Kenya at the time of its independence in December 1963 marked an immediate and strategic diplomatic engagement during the decolonisation period. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev formally recognised Kenya as a sovereign state shortly after independence, sending a congratulatory telegram to Kenya's first President, Jomo Kenyatta, thus:

Mr. Prime Minister, allow me to congratulate you on the auspicious occasion in the history of your country, the proclamation of the independence of Kenya, and on behalf of the government and people of the Soviet Union and on my own behalf to convey to you personally, to the government and people of Kenya, the best wishes for success in the strengthening of political and economic independence of Kenya,"(Otinga Rene, 024)

Nikita also praised Kenya for her efforts in fighting for independence, noting that Russia now recognised Kenya as a sovereign state and was ready to exchange diplomatic missions with the country. Russia thus became the second European power, after Germany, to recognise Kenya's independence and sovereignty under the Presidency of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. According to Russia's Prime Minister, independence was not only a vital step in the liberation of Africa, but he also expressed the Soviet Union's readiness to support Kenya's political and economic sovereignty and to establish formal diplomatic relations with the new state in December 1963 (Russian Embassy in Kenya, 2024). While this recognition may be seen as a mere congratulatory message, it was a clear signal to Britain and other colonising powers that Russia would henceforth be an important player in Africa's political economy.

Acknowledging Kenya's sovereign and independent position also signified a willingness to treat each other as equals as opposed to earlier ties with Britain, which saw Kenya as a weaker and less important country. Britain had indeed treated Kenyans and other of her colonies as inferior and in need of assistance, and Russia, aware of this treatment, positioned herself as an alternative equal partner in economic, social and political affairs. President Jomo Kenyatta, on his part, presented himself as a willing partner to all parties. However, in his operations, he focused more on the West, especially Britain and America, to secure financial, military, and investment support.

In particular, Britain, her former colonial master, became an important partner in trade, investment, health and education. Moreover, while the USSR presented itself as a willing ally, Mzee Kenyatta had little interest in aligning with it.

Back home, Soviet engagement with Kenya extended beyond diplomatic niceties to an active ideological and informational campaign aimed at influencing public perception within the USSR. Soviet media, particularly the newspaper Pravda, extensively covered African decolonisation, including Kenya's independence, highlighting the significance of the event to the socialist bloc's struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Soviet publications ranged from amateur observers to professional journalists and scholars, offering comprehensive insights about Kenya and its regional context. Private engagements in security and health related areas were also common.

Clearly, Russians employed both formal and informal diplomatic tactics in building their ties with Kenya. The establishment of an Embassy and related diplomatic avenues also entailed covert measures to expand its

influence in the country. This also took the form of information campaigns that largely shaped Soviet public opinion favourably towards Kenya as a symbol of anti-colonial progress and a potential partner within the framework of Cold War ideological competition (Balezin, 2023).

Beyond ideological support, the Soviet Union sought to deepen ties with Kenya through tangible developmental aid, exemplified by major infrastructure projects. In 1964, for instance, with funds from the Soviet Union, a hospital named Russia Hospital was built in Kisumu, the Nyanza region of the country. It was intended to be the largest hospital in Kenya and represented a gift from the USSR to support Kenya's post-independence development. The brainchild of then Vice President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, the hospital aimed to combat regional diseases such as malaria through modern infrastructure. Importantly, it sought to offer free healthcare to people from all walks of life in the region and beyond. The hospital was to remain a symbol of Soviet medical technology and ideological presence in Kenya (Cullen, 2017; Sun, 2020).

Jaramogi, an ardent crusader of socialism, had earlier travelled to Russia to discuss development and the possibilities of forging closer ties with the USSR. He had even received money from the Socialist countries (Odinga, 1968). While there, he sought an audience with the then-Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who pledged to support the construction of the hospital, among other projects.

The Soviet medical assistance to Kenya was substantial in scale and symbolic of the USSR's broader program of extending aid to developing countries as part of Cold War competition. The Soviet Union reportedly allocated approximately £1.2 million for the construction and equipping of the hospital, demonstrating a significant investment in Kenya's healthcare infrastructure at the time. The state-of-the-art hospital boasted sun-shading and expansive wards and was completed in 1969, within five years. The Hospital was named the New Nyanza Provincial General Hospital, though locals dubbed it "Russia" for its origins. At a five-hundred-plus (500+) bed capacity, the hospital revolutionised healthcare in the region by surpassing Nairobi's Kenyatta National Hospital in scale and equipping it with X-ray machines, labs, and operating theatres (Prince, 2020). The hospital was also expected to serve the people of Uganda and Tanzania, as well as those neighbouring Kisumu. Its opening by the President was slated for October 1969. It was also expected that economic, political and social elites would attend, and that the government would pay tribute to both Russia and Jaramogi for undertaking such a coveted infrastructure project.

However, perhaps owing to the personal and ideological stances of President Kenyatta and his Vice President, the hospital's opening did not receive as much pomp and joy as anticipated. Earlier, Tom Mboya, a prominent Luo Cabinet Minister, had allegedly been assassinated by the system on July 5, 1969. Additionally, in 1966, President Jomo Kenyatta had fallen out with Oginga Odinga for championing socialism, and the latter had hurriedly left the ruling party, KANU, to form the Kenya People's Union (KPU) (Angelo, 2019; Holmquist, 2012; Throup, 2020). Oginga Odinga's relationship with the Soviet Union was emblematic of broader Cold War competition in Kenya. The hospital he associated with became a physical representation of Soviet influence and socialist internationalism within the country. It served as a medical facility but also as a political symbol, linking Odinga's opposition faction to Moscow's support. However, this affinity with the Soviet bloc exacerbated political tensions with President Jomo Kenyatta's government, which was increasingly aligned with Western interests. The hospital project underscored the complex intersection of domestic politics and international Cold War rivalries, where Soviet aid was both a developmental asset and a source of contention within Kenya's political landscape (Prince, 2020). The falling out between Kenyatta and Odinga must thus be seen as part of a broader political realignment, in which Odinga was effectively pushed to the political periphery (Opondo, 2014), a move that favoured socialism.

With such background tension, Kenyatta's visit to Kisumu may have been a calculated move by the state to test the waters. While the official opening ceremony at the hospital proceeded without incident, the atmosphere was charged; accounts indicate that the two leaders engaged briefly before the situation deteriorated at a subsequent public rally (Ochieng', 2018). Confronted by hostile crowds chanting opposition slogans and questioning the circumstances of Mboya's death, the presidential security forces opened fire on protesters. It appears that Mzee (President Kenyatta) had fallen out with his Vice President, and his visit to Nyanza was merely to gauge the Luo people's reaction'.

The hospital's opening and the events that followed thus marked a turning point in the Kenyan government's approach to socialist ideas. Politicians and academicians who leaned towards socialism were henceforth warned, arrested, harassed and/or detained without trial. Some sought refuge in neighbouring countries while others were silenced forever. This, however, did not dampen Russian efforts to penetrate Kenya through the embassy and other channels.

In addition, the aftermath cemented the facility's entanglement in the nation's power struggles, as the government retaliated by expelling Odinga from KANU and banning the opposition Kenya People's Union (KPU). Odinga, a darling of the Russians, was eventually put under house arrest as KANU began distancing itself.

"From its socialist roots, it started aligning more closely with capitalist ideals under the guidance of Western Europe. ...The ban on KPU in 1969, founded by Oginga

Odinga and Bildad Kagia, was a calculated move by the government to stifle any political dissent that diverged from the newly adopted capitalist stance. The ban not only outlawed the KPU but also symbolised the government's determination to suppress any form of socialism (Mwangi, 2024)²

Further, the political fallout led to the deliberate stunting of the hospital's development, as no funding was provided. Prospectively, Prof. Otieno Odhiambo had thought that 'if the Kenyatta government had poured national resources into maintaining the Soviet-built facility, it risked appearing as if it was merely maintaining Odinga's legacy and in essence embracing socialism. Conversely, by allowing it to fall, the state could tacitly argue that the "Leftist" project was unsustainable without the central government's benevolence.

The hospital thus became a political symbol, or rather a political stigma that lingered in Kenyan politics. The facility itself was a concern because it was a tangible symbol of the "Leftist" path Odinga favoured. Kenyatta, a moderate capitalist, was opening a building that embodied the ideology he was trying to suppress. While the facility stood as a monument of modernity for the residents of Nyanza, for the central government, it was an architectural embodiment of the very political ideology they were actively attempting to extinguish.

One could also argue that the hospital's presence was simply a symbol of subsidising the alleged enemy. The state's concern was fundamentally about resource allocation and political legitimacy. In a patronage-based political system, development is often used as a reward for loyalty. To fully fund, staff, and equip a hospital that was essentially "gifted" by the opposition's perceived socialists was viewed by the state as subsidising the enemy. The state was not willing to take that path. It still had ties with the West and thus had to maintain a cautious balancing act, wary of becoming overly dependent on Soviet support amid Cold War tensions and regional security concerns (Prince, 2020). By subtly marginalising the hospital, Kenya meticulously managed its relations with both Western and Eastern blocs to maximise development assistance and security cooperation while avoiding entanglement in superpower conflicts. This pragmatic diplomacy allowed Kenya to maintain relative autonomy in its foreign relations despite the pressures of Cold War polarisation (Mabeya, 2020).

Further, Kenya's diplomatic policy during the Cold War reflected a nuanced approach that prioritised State-to-State recognition rather than endorsing individuals or particular governments. This means that Kenya sought formal diplomatic relations with states regardless of their ideological alignment, emphasising national sovereignty and non-alignment. Such a stance contrasted with the Soviet Union's ideological diplomacy, which tended to support socialist-oriented movements, individuals and regimes. The Kenyatta government was not to allow Russia to use individuals to 'destabilise its operations'. Nevertheless, the hospital stands as a historical reminder of Soviet efforts to project influence through development aid in Africa (Prince, 2020; Macleki, 2024).

Educational cooperation formed another pillar of Soviet assistance to Kenya during the Cold War. From the early 1960s through the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, thousands of African students, including many Kenyans, were trained at Soviet universities, such as Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow (Katsakioris, 2017). Mafany and Laila (2023) add that 'Approximately 250,000 Africans were known to have studied in the Soviet Union before the collapse of the USSR. Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki form part of this cohort. Partly, the academic programs aimed to equip African nations with qualified specialists in fields such as medicine, engineering, and agriculture, thereby demonstrating the practical benefits of Soviet education systems. Importantly, the programs emphasised technical and scientific education rather than doctrinal Marxist-Leninist indoctrination, making them attractive to African governments seeking to build local capacity and expertise for post-colonial development (Katsakioris, 2017). According to Branch (2018), between 1958 and 1969, a substantial number of Kenyan students studied in Soviet and Eastern European universities.

During this period, the Russian government, through the Embassy in Kenya, selected candidates who were vetted before travelling to Moscow for studies. By the late 1960s, however, African governments, including Kenya's, had acquired greater control over student selection for Soviet educational programs, increasing their appeal and strategic value. This autonomy allowed Kenyan authorities to select students who would likely return and contribute to national development, rather than being purely ideological emissaries. The USSR's educational aid thus became an important avenue for state capacity-building in Kenya and other African nations, illustrating a form of soft power that extended beyond immediate diplomatic ties. The Soviet educational outreach helped cultivate a generation of African professionals trained in Soviet institutions, some of whom later became influential in their home countries (Katsakioris, 2017). It appears that the state in Kenya was concerned about the real motives of the Russian scholarship.

These students, initially presumed to hold key roles in Kenya's post-independence development, were often viewed with distrust because of their education abroad—particularly in socialist countries seen as potentially aligned with communist ideologies. The Kenyan government and other African states thus portrayed socialism and its attendant forces as 'a dangerous ideology that threatened national stability and sovereignty' (Mwangi, 2024). It had to be suppressed through all means possible. As Cold War tensions intensified

2 Mwangi, Nicholas (two years ago) The forgotten Kenya Airlift by Eastern Socialist Countries

and Kenya's internal politics evolved, suspicion grew over whether these individuals supported socialist principles or foreign influences deemed contrary to national interests. Consequently, rather than occupying influential positions, many graduates were compelled to accept whatever work was available, often in lower-status roles, as their reputations and political trustworthiness were questioned within the new nation-state (Branch, 2018). A former student of Russia living in Nairobi today states that 'none of us got the job for which we were trained. The state treated us with so much suspicion that it would not allow us to join the government (Oral Interview No. 23 on 17/6/2025 in Langata Estate, Nairobi)

This suspicion is probably embedded in the ideas behind the educational assistance. The Soviet Union and US rivalry, amid Cold War politics, brought some development to Kenya through two educational assistance programs by the US and Britain (East African Airlift) and the Soviet Union (Aeroflot). The Aeroflot and Airlift educational assistance programs for Kenya during the Cold War were two competing scholarship initiatives that reflected the geopolitical contest between the Eastern Bloc and the Western hegemonic powers. The Aeroflot scholarships, supported by the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist countries, enabled Kenyan students to study in communist universities across Eastern and Central Europe from 1959 to 1970. This program aimed to advance Soviet ideological influence by educating African students in socialist principles, despite resistance from the colonial British government and Western allies (Onyango, 2016).

Oginga Odinga organised the Aeroflot scholarships. They were driven by his ideological perception that Soviet-style socialism offered a viable alternative to Western capitalism for post-independence Kenya's development and Africanisation of the public sector (Holmquist, 2012; Katsakioris, 2021; Prince, 2020). As a prominent leftist leader and rival to Tom Mboya, Odinga viewed education in the Eastern Bloc, facilitated through clandestine Aeroflot airlifts, as a means to cultivate a cadre of ideologically aligned Kenyan professionals trained in fields such as engineering, medicine, and administration, countering British colonial influences and building a socialist-oriented nation. These scholarships, arranged from 1959-1960 onward through networks in London, Cairo, and East Germany, reflected Odinga's pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist stance, enabling thousands of students to study in the USSR and allies despite government suspicions and Cold War tensions. In contrast, the Airlift program, famously championed by Kenyan nationalist Tom Mboya and supported by the United States and Britain, provided scholarships for Kenyan students to study primarily in the United States and other Western countries. This program was designed to cultivate pro-Western African elites to counter the spread of communism and maintain Western influence in the region. Beneficiaries of these scholarships returned to more rewarding jobs than students who had studied in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Both programs sought to address the shortage of educational opportunities for Africans by "Africanizing" the civil service as independence approached. However, each also served as a vehicle for its respective Cold War superpower to extend its ideological, political, and cultural hegemony through soft-power tactics, using education as a tool of influence.

The key difference lies in their political alignments and ideological underpinnings: Aeroflot was aligned with socialist Eastern Europe and the USSR, emphasising socialist education and solidarity, while the Airlift aligned with capitalist Western nations, emphasising democratic values and market economies. Both had profound impacts on Kenya's post-independence intellectual and political leadership, though returning students from the East sometimes faced suspicion and discrimination at home due to Cold War tensions.

Statistically, more than 50,000 Africans studied at Soviet universities during the Cold War, a significant percentage of whom were Kenyans, reflecting the scale and importance of educational ties between Kenya and the USSR. This cadre of trained professionals contributed to various sectors in Kenya, including health, engineering, and administration, facilitating Kenya's post-independence state-building efforts. The Soviet educational system's emphasis on technical skills over ideology resonated with Kenya's pragmatic approach to foreign aid and capacity development, a contrast to the highly politicised nature of medical aid embodied by the "Russia" hospital (Katsakioris, 2017; Prince, 2020).

In sum, Soviet medical and educational assistance to Kenya during the Cold War was substantial and influential. The Soviet-built hospital in western Kenya symbolised socialist international solidarity but became embedded in Kenya's local political struggles and Cold War factionalism. Meanwhile, Soviet educational programs offered valuable training that transcended ideological boundaries, helping build Kenya's technical human capital. Together, these aid forms exemplified Soviet soft power strategies in Africa and Kenya's pragmatic engagement in Cold War politics, balancing ideological affinities with national development priorities.

In addition, the Cold War context played a critical role in escalating factional struggles within the Kenya African National Union (KANU), Kenya's ruling party post-independence. Key political figures such as Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga utilised Cold War rhetoric to assert contrasting visions for Kenya's future: capitalist or socialist, which polarised Kenyan politics. Odinga's socialist leanings and overtures to the USSR and Communist China challenged the establishment under President Kenyatta, who pursued closer alignment with Western countries. Scholars argue that this "capitalist versus socialist debate of the 1960s" was a vital political

issue that mobilised the entire nation, shaping Kenya's political landscape and governance during this volatile period (Cullen, 2017; Sun, 2020; Muigai, 1993).

Symbolically and practically, Soviet aid projects like the Western Kenya hospital became flashpoints in this ideological struggle. The "Russia" hospital was not merely a medical facility but a site representing Soviet influence within Kenya. Kinship between Odinga and Soviet support heightened the politicisation of such development projects, which the Kenyatta government viewed with suspicion. Gradually, Kenya's official narrative distanced itself from Soviet influence, aligning more closely with Western interests while suppressing domestic socialist movements associated with Moscow, illustrating how Cold War rivalries transcended foreign policy to shape internal statecraft (Prince, 2020).

Beyond such formal engagements, Darch (2021) notes that the 1960s witnessed a period of Soviet interest in Africa. This interest would not be completed through embassies and formal missions. Nikita was a shrewd technocrat and politician. Excited with the 'disintegration of the system of colonial slavery under the impact of the national liberation movement, he had argued that this historic moment was only second to the rise of a socialist world system (Darch, 2021). He, as the Chair of the Council of Ministers, was willing to employ both covert and overt means to penetrate and counter further Western neo-capitalism. To do this in Kenya and generally in Africa;

Mid-level Soviet functionaries were stationed in Africa. (They) Interacted with, gathered and evaluated intelligence about local events, and sometimes struggled to understand their African interlocutors. (Darch, 2021)

These functionaries appear to have operated in Kenya in the 1970s as students, tourists, and even businesspeople. It is argued that while they posed as students, their real motive was to collect intelligence for Moscow and recruit local spies. It appears that Russia was set to create a socialist regime in line with the communists' idea of 'integrating an overall African strategy'. It is also argued that Nairobi was a city of choice for the KGB, which often attempted to collect economic and statistical data. According to a Saturday Nation commentary of 5th May 2018 by one John Kamau;

In the 1970s, Russia attempted to steal some statistical data from Kenya's Central Bank. In those days, the data was stored in large, voluminous books, and a CBK official had agreed to deliver one of them to a KGB spy in a Nairobi parking lot...(however) the agent had already been unmasked by the Special Branch, who decided to foil the handover without creating a diplomatic ruckus (Kamau, 5/5/2018).

Such unorthodox methods of getting information were common in Africa and elsewhere as Moscow sought to get a foothold on the continent. As discussed above, spies often posed as students, journalists and/or traders. One such was Loginov Yuri, a double-agent who worked for both the CIA and the KGB, who has also been mentioned in many documents on spying in Africa by Russia. It appears, Kamau (2018) notes, that the Russian spy Network in Kenya was under the supervision of Russia's embassy First Secretary, G. P. Bekhterev, the man who had helped Loginov obtain his alias. Actions of such spies were, however, met with brutality from local security agencies, who at times handed the spies to the Russian Embassy in Kenya. The late President Daniel Arap Moi once told parliament that, while such actions against the Kenyan state were grievous, 'we can take no action on account of the privileged position that they enjoy by virtue of their diplomatic status' (Kamau, 2018).

In the area of trade and development aid, Moscow was largely but strategically inactive in the 1960s and 1970s. Accounts of arms trading, however, abound with informants reporting that 'In the mid-1960s Russia had tried to establish a base for arms in Kenya, but her efforts did not bear fruit'. The former Professor of Kenyatta University adds that the government rejected the consignment of arms because it was associated with Oginga Odinga, whom it believed was out to destabilise the country. 'The consignment was returned, and Mzee Kenyatta warned his Ministers against engaging with the East (Oral Interview with Prof. Paul Won 8/8/2025 in Siaya).

In essence, therefore, Africa's Cold War relations with the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s were marked by intricate political manoeuvring and strategic opportunism, set against a backdrop of ideological rivalry and internal factionalism (Cullen, 2017). Against the backdrop of Britain's interest in the country, the broader Sino-Soviet competition in the Third World during this era also provided newly independent African states like Kenya with some leverage in their foreign relations. The competition between China and the Soviet Union for ideological and material influence in East Africa meant that countries could navigate between these powers to maximise national benefits, without succumbing to ideological dominance (Sun, 2020). Kenya, perceived externally as a minor power, cleverly exploited the rivalry of Britain, China and Russia to secure aid and trade benefits from both communist and capitalist powers. This strategic leverage enhanced Kenya's bargaining power and enabled it to negotiate assistance on favourable terms while maintaining its declared non-alignment status.

President Kenyatta's administration adeptly used Cold War rivalries to Kenya's advantage. Despite domestic pressures from pro-Soviet factions, Kenyatta ensured the state remained aligned with Western countries, particularly Britain, with whom Kenya had longstanding colonial ties. Although Kenya officially adhered to a

policy of non-alignment, the Cold War deeply influenced its domestic and foreign policy dynamics, particularly within the ruling KANU party.

In addition, Kenyatta's government used the threat of Soviet alignment with opposition figures as leverage in negotiations with Britain over military and economic support. For instance, during critical discussions over arms sales, Kenya's leaders openly referenced Cold War dynamics to extract better deals from Western partners, demonstrating how local actors could use global competition pragmatically to advance national interests (Cullen, 2017). For a short period in the mid-1970s, there was therefore a hiatus as Kenya aggressively pursued closer relations with Britain to the detriment of the Soviet Union and other Communist States. This was, however, to change in the mid-1980s.

II. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of diplomatic relations between Kenya and Russia from 1963 to 1992 reflects the shifting dynamics of the Cold War and Kenya's efforts to pursue an independent foreign policy. Over this period, Kenya sought to balance relations with the Soviet Union while protecting its national interests, whereas Russia, through the USSR, aimed to expand its influence in Africa through political, economic, and strategic engagement. The relationship was shaped by cooperation, cautious engagement, and periodic tension, all of which were influenced by global ideological competition and domestic priorities. This chapter has shown that bilateral relations were never static, but developed in response to changing international and regional circumstances. The period laid an important foundation for later Kenya–Russia relations in the post-Cold War era.

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