

## **A Return to Africa: Russia's Renewed Interest in Kenya Between 1992 And 2013**

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### **I.Introduction**

The period from 1992 to 2013 marked a significant phase in politico-economic engagements between Kenya and Russia, characterised by Russia's strong political presence in Africa and growing economic cooperation. In the aftermath of the Cold War and amidst shifting global dynamics, both countries sought to diversify their international partnerships, with Kenya aiming to boost its economic development and Russia looking to expand its influence in Africa. To navigate bilateral relations, the two nations' foreign policy engagements were guided by four major pillars, including but not limited to: economic cooperation, peace and security diplomacy, and environmental and cultural relations. Moreover, while Kenya focused more on diaspora diplomacy, urging its diaspora community to build the nation through remittances and increased investments, Russia, on its part, concentrated on rebuilding its economy through securing financial aid from Western nations and realigning with new powers such as China, Malaysia and North Korea. In addition, Russia sought broader recognition from former Soviet powers by establishing military bases in many countries, including in Africa. To strengthen its influence, Russia also used its energy reserves as a tool for global dominance. This was also aimed at reducing America's global influence. This era, thus, witnessed a gradual intensification of trade, investment, and political dialogue, reflecting mutual interests in areas such as energy, infrastructure, education, and security globally. Each state had to position itself as an important ally of choice. Geopolitically, Russia possessed a strong hand in energy, while Kenya presented itself as an important gateway to the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Tea, coffee and flowers needed in the European markets also became important export commodities to Russia, as Kenya imported fertiliser and military equipment from Russia. Understanding the nature and impact of Kenya-Russia interactions during these years thus provides valuable insights into the broader patterns of South-South cooperation and the strategic recalibration of global alliances in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. These issues are discussed in detail in the next section.

#### **1.1 The Quiet Era: Russia and Africa Post-Cold War**

The collapse of the USSR signalled an end to intense monitoring by global powers. The USA had stamped its authority as a superpower in economics and politics, and the Soviets were increasingly focused on rebuilding their military and economic bases after years of intense economic stress. In its efforts to rebuild its economy, Russia intentionally focused on seeking Western allies rather than African ones. Western countries were financially capable of bailing Boris Yeltsin out of Russia's economic challenges and pursuing them; thus, it became the chosen path. In some cases, Russia downsized its 'insignificant' embassies in Africa, with considerable ramifications for African countries that had seen Russia as their most significant ally compared to Western ones. Russia's domestic fortunes were dwindling, and focusing much on Africa was not a strategic option. Russia thus maintained more attractive allies as it dropped and/or downgraded others, only to pick them up again during Vladimir Putin's regime. This is the case for Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia, among others.

Irina Abramova established five principles to identify the most attractive countries in Sub-Saharan Africa for Russian investment. These principles include using objective economic development indicators, recognising that investment climates differ by levels of economic development and regions, acknowledging that the regional investment climate creates a synergistic effect beyond individual countries, and emphasising that this climate must be integrated into the broader regional economy (Abramova, 2025, p. 19).

Based on the above principles, he modelled four Russian investment models. The first is the resource-oriented model, which prioritises stable access to strategic resources such as oil and minerals, focusing on access over extraction. This model requires significant capital and long-term investments and is dominant in regions such as the West, Central, and Southern Africa. The second is the market-based model, which aims to establish profitable markets for Russian products, including retail and rapidly growing sectors such as IT and mobile communications. The third model, the efficiency-based model, focuses on sub-regional economic hubs such as Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa. It aims at supporting regional expansion and local production chains.

Finally, the strategic expansion model involved coordinated economic policies by states and corporations to pursue broad economic growth, resembling China's approach in Africa (Abramova, 2025). Kenya was one such attractive ally because, in addition to being an important East African economic hub, it hosts both UN-Habitat and UNEP, two major UN bodies that the Russian Federation uses to influence its global ratings. To return to Kenya, Russia used both the strategic expansion and the efficiency-based models.

On her part, Kenya was grappling with its own domestic politics, with President Moi the more confrontational and dictatorial (compared to his predecessor, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta), amid accusations of grand corruption, political repression, disregard for the rule of law, human rights abuses, and media censorship, among others. His relationship with the West was thus waning amid aid conditionalities which eventually saw him adopt a 'Look East' policy. President Moi also openly accused foreign powers of meddling with the internal affairs of his government, a strategy that Mzee Jomo Kenyatta had steered clear of. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, President Moi's government was thus more focused on redeeming the image of his government and his own as opposed to attending to international affairs; after all, Bretton Woods institutions and America had withdrawn aid from the country unless Moi allowed for the repeal of Section 2A to allow for multiparty politics.

With the international community, regional leaders, and the opposition stifling the state's operations, focusing on whom to align with was thus less important than it had been in the 1970s and 80s; at least not with the West, which had accused Moi of dictatorship. Since 1982, President Moi had made Kenya a de facto one-party state. This was occasioned by the attempted *coup d'état organised by junior military officers allegedly aligned with Jaramogi and his son*, Odinga. The two had been darlings of Russia since the 1970s, and Moi was thus suspicious of Russian involvement in the attempted coup. In fact, Moi was majorly leaning towards the United Kingdom and rarely entertained any socialist or communist ideologies. His strong alignment with the West and the UK had been evident, especially when he led Kenya in boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

To deflate the *coup*, Moi thus put the leaders of the coup under house arrest while others sought exile abroad. Some were incarcerated, tortured and/or detained without trial. It is alleged that Russia funded some of the masterminds of the coup to flee Kenya. A former security officer alleged that those that Russia financed passed through Tanzania all the way to Norway and other friendly countries in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Diplomatically, President Moi was largely indifferent to Russia, which he considered insignificant after its defeat by the USA in the Cold War. Thus, while the two countries-maintained public level operations with embassies in Moscow and Nairobi, there was limited diplomatic engagement during 1993-1998, with only low-level trade and investment. Further, few high-level diplomatic visits were recorded, as the two countries focused inward rather than expanding their diplomatic networks. In fact, even President Moi's search for allies in Asia, including Japan, China, and Malaysia, was not necessarily meant to benefit Kenya but to annoy America and other Western nations. A former head of protocol during the Moi era stresses that according to President Moi, 'these countries were more accommodating, less abrasive and nosy. The West and Europe had rattled us. It is our time to show them what we are made of<sup>2</sup>. This, however, changed in the early 2000s as the clamour for multipartyism took shape in Kenya and as Vladimir Putin and Mwai Kibaki came to power. The two leaders adopted different modes of operation, at least diplomatically. The nature, extent, and implications of the same on politico-economic ties between Kenya and Russia are discussed in detail in the next section.

## **1.2 Re-invigorating Diplomatic Engagements: Russia and Kenya between 2000 and 2013**

Following the Soviet Union's 1991 collapse and the end of the Cold War, the 2000s marked a pivotal decade of global transformation, ushering in U.S. unipolar dominance. The two events dramatically reshaped state relations, shifting from ideological rivalries to pragmatic economic partnerships, as former adversaries such as Russia and African nations recalibrated amid China's rise. The period also saw Russia under Putin pivot from 1990s retrenchment, closing embassies and demanding African debt repayments (Antwi-Boasiako, 2022), to selective reengagement driven by oil windfalls, targeting resource markets and arms sales. Kenya, on her part, transitioned from Moi-era authoritarianism and the politics of survival to Mwai Kibaki's economic fight for the redemption of the Kenyan state. The redemption focused, among other foreign policy pillars, on economic recovery, peace and security, and re-engagement with the West, in particular with America, Britain, and Germany. Ties between Kenya and these states were severely strained during Moi's dictatorial rule.

The 2002 elections ended KANU's 39-year dominance, ushering in Mwai Kibaki's National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). Raila Odinga, a strong ally of communist nations, was a member of this coalition. NARC's win electrified Kenyans, who saw an opportunity for democratic renewal and economic growth (Anderson, 2003). Diplomatically, power-sharing agreements a

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<sup>1</sup> The security officer was interviewed in Nairobi on 30/5/2025

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with a former chief of Protocol in the Moi government, it was established that Moi considered China a better ally because it does not focus on a country's domestic politics.

And the reignition of constitutional review processes as important ingredients of a democratic state further represented Kenya as a strategic partner in the global arena. According to Anderson (2003), the general election thus represented a watershed moment as Kenya's allies abroad congratulated President Kibaki, who had decisively defeated Uhuru Kenyatta, President Moi's handpicked successor and KANU's presidential candidate. Kibaki secured 56.1% of the presidential vote against Kenyatta's 31.2%. This outcome reflected Kenyans' overwhelming desire not only for political change but also for the redemption of Kenya's image abroad. Internationally, Kenya had regained its position as a peaceful, democratic country where global investors would set up camp. Further, global allies were set and intent on returning to a country that has always been considered a darling to Europe and America due to its strategic security location.<sup>3</sup> As a gateway to the Middle East and, by comparison, to neighbouring countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia, Kenya is considered an important security partner due to its stability.

Internationally, the ability of the Kenyan state to peacefully shift from a deeply authoritarian state to a democracy further presented Kenya as a significant ally in the fight for terrorism and related international organised crimes. This, at a time of increased terror threats and increased cases of radicalisation of the youth, was especially important for America, Britain and other European nations. The peaceful transition from President Moi to Kibaki thus significantly influenced the country's international standing and foreign relations. Once more, Kenya had repositioned herself as a harbinger of peace, and global nations could trust her in their fight against terrorism. Mabera (2016) asserts that from this time till 2007, Kenya's foreign policy evolved notably, shifting from its traditional role as a "benign regional leader" focused largely on stability within East Africa to a more assertive and broad-based international actor engaged in diversified diplomatic and strategic initiatives beyond the region.

Such renewed interest reflected Kenya's ambitions to leverage its political transition and democratisation as soft power assets to enhance its global credibility and influence in international forums (Mabera, 2016; Wanyeki, 2020). Wanyeki (2020) further notes that Kenya actively sought to expand its footprint beyond regional economic communities such as the East African Community (EAC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) by pursuing more robust bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagements. This entailed strengthening ties with global powers such as the United States and China and cultivating strategic partnerships in Africa and beyond in security, trade, and development cooperation. Kenya's continued engagement in peacekeeping missions and regional conflict mediation enhanced its image as a responsible middle power committed to regional and continental stability, increasingly aligning with global governance norms (Wanyeki, 2020; Mabera, 2016).

In the early 2000s, Russia, much like Kenya, was thus still navigating the complex and often turbulent process of political and economic transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation under Putin was also rebuilding its alliance base amid economic instability, institutional reform, and political realignment challenges. Shleifer & Treisman (2003) argue that by late 2001, Russia had, however, successfully transitioned into a "typical middle-income capitalist democracy," challenging the prevalent Western narratives of chaos and failure that had dominated perceptions of its post-Soviet evolution. This assessment highlighted how, despite hyperinflation, oligarchic privatisation, and the 1998 financial crisis, Russia had achieved functional capitalist institutions and regular elections by 2000, with Yeltsin's resignation enabling constitutional continuity (McFaul, 2021).

Bernsand & Törnquist-Plewa (2019) thus note a stark generational and perceptual contrast between the turbulent 1990s, characterised by economic collapse, surges in crime, and political instability, and the 2000s under Vladimir Putin, which delivered perceived stability through recentralised state institutions, oil-fuelled economic growth, and restored national pride. Putin's consolidation of power addressed Yeltsin-era fragmentation by curbing regional separatism, reasserting federal authority, and regaining control over key assets, such as Yukos, from oligarchs, thereby fostering public approval ratings above 70% by mid-decade. This shift resonated particularly with a younger generation of Russians who experienced childhood poverty in the 1990s, viewing Putin's managed stability as a welcome respite from disorder (Edmond, 2025).

Moreover, while Voigt (2006) remained sceptical, questioning whether Russia's vertical growth was due to a genuine economic transition or merely to favourable external circumstances, such as rising oil prices, the evidence suggests a complex, multifaceted transformation with significant internal politico-economic restructuring, coupled with a search for new partners abroad. This scepticism, however, highlights specific policy choices under Putin that prioritised revenue capture over liberalisation, such as the 2003–2005 dismantling of Yukos, the largest oil company, through politically motivated tax prosecutions and asset seizures, thereby recentralising energy control under Rosneft and Gazprom and deterring foreign investment.

In addition, evidence reveals a complex transformation involving significant political and economic restructuring, blending authentic achievements with opportunistic dependencies that complicated Russia's post-

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<sup>3</sup> Kenya is often times considered an arbitrator during regional conflicts and tensions

Soviet trajectory. Russia's re-engagement with Africa, generally after 2000, thus represented a strategic shift toward restoring its great-power status and securing economic opportunities on the continent, driven by what scholars have termed the "economisation" of Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin. This renewed interest was fundamentally rooted in Russia's growing dependence on natural resource exports and a recentralized state apparatus that prioritised institutionalised, state-led economic diplomacy as a vehicle for projecting influence abroad (Makarychev & Mommen, 2013). The Putin administration thus elevated trade, energy, and balance-of-payments concerns to the centre of Russia's foreign engagement strategy (Wallander, 2012). Moscow sought to position itself as a bridge between the G8 and developing nations, using its participation in global governance structures to demonstrate developmental credibility while pursuing bilateral economic and security partnerships to restore Russian influence in regions where it had retreated following the end of the Cold War (Jordan, 2009).

To achieve this, Russia's strategy for penetrating Africa combined conventional diplomatic outreach with targeted economic tools and selective security cooperation, creating a multi-layered approach to influence-building. Central to this strategy were expanded bilateral trade links, particularly through selective engagement frameworks that identified economically dynamic African states, including Kenya and South Africa, as attractive partners for commercial expansion (Nyhodo, 2017). High-level diplomatic visits by Ministers, Members of Parliament, and other interested individuals from both the state and non-state sectors were also held to discuss common security issues. One such visit happened in 2002 after

A Russian delegation consisting of about 60 State Duma deputies paid an official visit to Kenya. During the tour, it held various meetings with various committees and personalities and subsequently invited a Kenyan parliamentary delegation to make a return visit (Kenya National Assembly, 2002).

This initial visit was conducted in September 2001 and focused on a range of areas of interest to Kenya and Russia. In particular, the visit to Kenya explored investment opportunities in security and discussed capacity-building for Kenya's security personnel in areas such as counterterrorism and related threats. In return, a select committee of Defence and Foreign Relations from Kenya visited Russia and held discussions with, among others;

Kenyan Ambassador to Russia, H.E. Dr Meshack Nyambati, the Rector of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Prof. Dmitir Bilbin, the Chairman of the Defence Committee, Hon. (Gen.) Andrey Nikolayev, the Vice-Chairman of the International Affairs Committee; Hon. Alexei Shabanov, and the Chairman of the Deputies Group on cooperation with African Parliaments, Hon. Vladimir E. Kapev (Kenya National Assembly, 2002).

Headed by the then Member of Parliament for Mwingi South, Hon. David Musila, the committee discussed, among other issues, trade, agriculture, security, investment opportunities, education, science and technology. Importantly, the committee noted that while the balance of trade between Kenya and Russia was heavily in Russia's favour, i.e., approximately 16 times, Russian fertiliser appears affordable and cost-effective compared with prices in other countries. The committee also recommended that;

The Kenya Tea Board should seek all possible ways to ensure that Kenyan tea is sold directly to the Russian market and run an intensive promotional campaign to increase sales further (Kenya National Assembly, 2002).

The delegations from Russia and Kenya were also unanimous that their two embassies needed to be revamped and properly funded to handle matters of mutual interest. Moreover, while the delegation from Kenya complained of a poor reception in Moscow from the Russian government, they nonetheless applauded the government for its commitment to supporting Kenya in education and trade. In Kenya, the Russian Embassy in Nairobi continued to operate, albeit shifting its focus from advancing socialist and communist ideologies to pragmatic, strategic trade expansion, education, and development cooperation.

This notwithstanding, Kenyan students in Russia complained of slow disbursement of funds to a number of those who had been awarded scholarships. This may be explained by the challenges Russia faced as it navigated its internal affairs, including inflation and a weak Ruble.

Further, Russia leveraged its position as a major arms exporter to deepen security ties with strategic African governments. However, such partnerships occasionally generated reputational costs, as evidenced by controversial arms sales to Sudan. Such deals, however, often undermined Moscow's attempts to present itself as a constructive development partner (Huddleston, 2013). Indeed, supporting Sudan and other ruthless regimes almost backfired on Moscow itself as it was accused of fuelling war in Africa, while hiding behind the principle of non-interference<sup>4</sup>. Further, the strategy faced inherent tensions, with Russia's selective security partnerships and arms sales sometimes contradicting its rhetoric of constructive developmental engagement. At the same time, its limited financial resources relative to those of China and Western donors constrained its ability to provide large-scale infrastructure financing or development assistance (Jordan, 2009).

Energy diplomacy centred on natural resource extraction aligns with Russia's core economic strengths and export priorities (Makarychev & Mommen, 2013). Additionally, Moscow deployed debt relief initiatives and

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4 Russia was accused of supplying weapons and protecting Al Bashirs regime during UN meetings

G8 development commitments as instruments of soft power, signalling its resurgence as a global player capable of contributing to African development while simultaneously gaining political leverage in African capitals (Jordan, 2009). Strategically, Russia also focused on sectors such as mining, infrastructure, and military-technical cooperation. Leveraging its expertise in oil, gas, and nuclear energy, Russia tactfully offered African states, including Kenya, opportunities to tap into these sectors through training and knowledge transfer from Russian firms operating in Africa, as well as technical collaborations in areas such as oil exploration (Makarychev, 2014). Thus, between 2003 and 2013, there were more than twenty (20) companies working in Africa, half of which were in the energy and mining sector. The companies increased their presence through investments and participation in privatisation processes, which, while benefiting African economies, primarily reinforced Russia's geopolitical influence and secured access to resources. Russia also used development assistance selectively, focusing on areas such as education, debt relief for countries such as Angola in return for an arms agreement and trade opportunities, and humanitarian and aid assistance, which was channelled through international bodies like the UN and the WFP. Politically, Putin's vertical power consolidation curbed the 1990s regional chaos through federal reforms and the dominance of United Russia, thereby enabling policy continuity (Edmond, 2025; Voigt, 2006).

It is amid these stark parallel transitions, Russia's post-Soviet economic stabilisation under Putin and Kenya's post-KANU democratic renewal under Kibaki, that new political and economic relations between and among allies were re-forged, characterised by pragmatic diversification rather than Cold War ideological alignments. For example, during the early 2000s, Kenya actively recalibrated its foreign policy to capitalise on Kibaki's Economic Recovery Strategy (ERS). The re-energised economic recovery programme saw the economy grow steadily from 2.9% in 2003 to 5.1% in 2004, 5.9% in 2005, and 6.3% in 2006, before reaching a peak of 7.1% in 2007, the highest rate in over two decades and the only sustained five-year growth acceleration in the country's post-independence history (World Bank, 2014). This trajectory reflected restored macroeconomic stability, with inflation dropping from 14% to single digits and foreign reserves rebuilding to cover over four months of imports by 2007. The World Bank (2014) attributes this exceptional performance to ERS-driven reforms in fiscal discipline and infrastructure investment, and to the resumption of donor aid, marking a sharp departure from Moi-era stagnation.

Kimenyi et al. (2015) add that Kibaki's government's economic policy, governance reforms, and renewed confidence from global powers markedly enhanced the country's performance, as evidenced by improvements in the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA). The CPIA evaluates 20 core aspects of governance and economic management. The average CPIA score, published annually for Kenya since 2005, rose from 3.52 in 2005 to 3.58 in 2006, reflecting strengthened fiscal discipline, public sector efficiency, and policy consistency under the Economic Recovery Strategy (Kimenyi et al., 2015: 3). Among other strategies, the ERS succeeded due to Kenya's realignment policy which focused more on selective strategic engagement (SSE) as opposed to adaptation and survival diplomacy used by the Moi regime. From 2003 onward, Kenya's diplomacy transitioned from reactive, ideologically tinged diplomacy to a proactive, economically oriented framework (Holmquist, 2003).

Between 2003 and 2013, Kenya's foreign policy was characterised by several features. To begin with, and as noted above, Kibaki pursued a strategic realignment policy with both established and new global powers, a pragmatic shift toward economic diplomacy and regional leadership. As a stable, investment-friendly hub in East Africa, Kenya consciously shifted from a more ideologically motivated and combative foreign policy to a softer, more consultative approach to diplomacy. An astute economist, Kibaki knew that establishing a vibrant, productive economy would require trust and, most importantly, an open door for diversified allies regardless of their ideological orientation. Strategically, he thus called on members of his close circle to seek new allies, adopt a soft tone towards other nations, and, above all, encourage trade and investment. In his economic recovery programme mentioned above, Kibaki in particular focused on liberalising the economy and reducing bottlenecks for local and foreign investors. Licensing and related bureaucracies were also simplified to improve investor confidence. In promoting a market-driven economy, Kibaki further provided tax incentives and assured investors of the government's protection of their businesses. In particular, Kibaki, through the Ministry of Trade, revitalised moribund institutions such as the Kenya Investment Authority (KIA) and rebranded Kenya as a regional economic hub. A former Minister of Trade and Industry asserts that Kibaki was keen to encourage both local and international trade and investment. He notes that to make the country more competitive, Kibaki also reduced trade barriers and tariffs and strengthened the Kenyan shilling. The liberalisation of the banking sector, a focus on energy investment, and, most importantly, his Vision 2030 flagship project proved important in building confidence among foreign and local investors.

Kenya's Vision 2030, launched in 2008, is deeply intertwined with strategic foreign relations, positioning diplomacy as a core enabler of achieving middle-income status through accelerated economic development and infrastructure transformation, particularly through partnerships with global powers such as Russia. This framework explicitly prioritises economic diplomacy to secure FDI, technology transfers, and concessional financing for flagship projects, balancing traditional Western allies like the UK and the USA with non-Western actors to diversify funding amid donor conditionality. Kenya's Vision 2030 exemplifies a sophisticated fusion of

domestic ambition and international pragmatism, transforming foreign relations into a strategic engine for economic leapfrogging rather than mere diplomatic formality.

To further position Kenya as an important trade and investment partner, Kenya's foreign policy also focused on promoting regionalism. Kibaki's government pursued a policy of deepened engagement within the East African Community (EAC). After years of dormancy, Kibaki together with President Museveni of Uganda and Kikwete of Tanzania worked on revitalizing the bloc through landmark achievements including fast-tracking the Customs Union (signed 2005), Common Market Protocol (signed 2009, operational 2010), and foundational negotiations for the Monetary Union Protocol (signed 2013) (East African Community, 2022; The East African, 2022; EAC Secretariat, n.d.). As East Africa's largest economy, Kenya under Kibaki's leadership played a pivotal role in driving this integration agenda, expanding the EAC to include Rwanda and Burundi in 2007, which boosted intra-regional trade from \$2 billion to over \$4 billion by decade's end and positioned the bloc as a unified market attractive to global investors (Kibaki, 2012; Business Daily Africa, 2022; Monitor, 2015).

In addition, Kenya played an instrumental role in peacebuilding, serving as a non-partisan mediator in regional conflicts such as those in Sudan and Somalia. During the Kibaki era, hardly would a month end without Nairobi hosting delegations to discuss conflicts, terrorism and related security issues. Wanyeki (2020) confirms Kenya's proactive shift, noting it pursued a "far more aggressive and multilateral diplomatic strategy" that extended beyond economics to security mediation in Sudan's 2005 Naivasha Accord and Somalia's 2004 Transitional and Federal Government (TFG) formation, stabilising investment corridors and projecting Kenya as indispensable for EAC peace. This assertiveness amplified investor confidence.

The emphasis on revitalising economic corridors, the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, and on positioning Kenya as a security hub therefore reflected Kibaki's conviction that a strong, peaceful regional bloc enhanced bargaining power on the global stage. Mabera (2016) underscores this as calculated politico-economic diplomacy, in which 7%+ GDP growth and Vision 2030 signalled policy reliability, further reinvigorating bilateral deals with countries like Russia.

Mabera (2016) adds that Kibaki's strategic actions positioned Kenya as the "economic powerhouse of East Africa and the larger Horn region" and a pivotal "hub for multilateral diplomacy," reflecting a deliberate policy of regional leadership and global positioning that enhanced its attractiveness to investors. Kaburu (2020) and Kagwanja (2022), on their part, add that the redefinition of Kenya's economic diplomacy coincided with Russia's renewed interest in Africa, as Putin's economic stabilisation and oil-driven resurgence enabled Moscow to pivot from the 1990s retrenchment toward pragmatic reengagement with the continent. The next section examines the interconnectedness between politics and Russia's trade and investment cooperation with Kenya during 2003-2013.

### **1.3 Renewed Kenya-Russia Relations: Strengthening Political and Economic Ties (2003-2013)**

As noted above, the context of renewed Kenya-Russia diplomacy post-Cold War reflects a period marked by strategic recalibration and shared interests in strengthening political and economic ties. After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Russia experienced a significant reduction in its global diplomatic footprint due to internal political and economic turmoil (Kenya-Russia relations, 2008). Kenya, on its part, pursued a pragmatic foreign policy of diversification, seeking to build relations beyond its traditional Western partners. This created an opening for Kenya to engage Russia more robustly as a partner offering alternative investment, technology, and political cooperation without ideological conditions (KIPRA, 1999).

In the mid-2000s, Russia actively sought to reassert itself in Kenya, a country with significant geopolitical influence and a gateway to accessing emerging markets (SAIIA, 2013) in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. Makarychev (2017) notes that many foreign investors at the time chose Kenya for its perceived political and social stability, making it a low-risk investment destination. During this period, Russia's renewed foreign policy emphasised "non-ideological" cooperation, focusing on minimal risks in economic diplomacy, trade, security, and cultural exchange (Kenya-Russia relations, 2008). In addition, Russia's engagement at the time focused on flexibility rather than rigid frameworks, leveraging both direct government-backed initiatives and private-sector business delegations to deepen trade and investment ties. For Russia, using an efficiency-based, low-risk investment model was thus more pragmatic and easier, especially at a time when Russia was undergoing an intense economic revival. Given its strategic geopolitical position, Gemueva (2020) notes that Kenya became an attractive testing ground for Russia's efficiency-based trade model during 2003-2013. Additionally, Hain & Jurowetzki (2015) confirm Kenya's emergence as an investment hub, particularly in the energy and technology sectors, and note that Russia was willing to venture into this emerging investment field.

For Kenya, politico-economic engagements with Russia align with its national development goals, including Vision 2030, which seeks opportunities in infrastructure development, educational scholarships, energy cooperation, and trade expansion (Nation, 2023). Diplomatic cooperation with other nations thus focused on opportunities that would help Kenya grow from a dependent nation to a middle-income country. Kibaki thus sought global partnerships with both the private and public sectors through UN-convened international forums.

Likewise, Russia used global forums to woo African nations, including Kenya, by offering them strategic incentives such as cheap agricultural machinery, arms and fertilisers.

Diplomatic protection against Western bullies and educational opportunities also featured prominently in Russia's strategy to entice Africa. For Kenya, cooperative engagements with Russia focused on three (3) major foreign policy pillars, namely: economic development, peace and security cooperation, and regional integration. On her part, Russia emphasised the following core pillars: economic renewal, global influence, a focus on sovereignty, energy and oil diplomacy, and arms exports. Additionally, the two nations sought to expand their partnerships to include China and India, pragmatic trade and investment allies with fewer conditionalities. To achieve this, the two countries used, among other strategies, the appointment of diplomats aligned with their vision, state visits, the signing of agreements, G-to-G partnerships and private collaborations.

Within this context of renewed political and economic interests from both countries, Russia and Kenya began by appointing new ambassadors to Nairobi and Moscow. President Kibaki chose Chirau Makwere (2003-2004), Sospeter Machage (2005-2010), and Paul Kurgat, whose tenure extended to the Uhuru era between 2010 and 2015, to head Kenya's Embassy in Moscow.

On his part, Vladimir Putin had Valery Yegoshkin (2005-2010) and Aleksandr Makarenko, whose term began in 2010 and ended in 2018. It was during the tenure of these four individuals that parliamentary and Ministerial diplomacy was entrenched in both countries. Dubbed shuttle diplomacy, it saw Kenya's Foreign Affairs Minister, Hon. Moses Wetangula, and Hon. Chirau Ali Mwakwere visit Moscow to sign agreements on technical and economic cooperation. After fifteen (15) years of reduced engagement between the two nations, Moses Wetangula's visits to Moscow renewed trade interests, especially in tea and horticultural products. In the tea sector, Russia emerged as one of the most important and consistent buyers, ranking fifth (5). Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the UK were the top exporters. A senior-level employee of Unilever Kenya, a major tea exporter, alleges that 'between 2006 and 2009 the Mombasa Tea Auction Hub (MTAH) was the major market from where Russian tea importers purchased their tea'. A retired manager from KTDA adds that Russia also purchased tea from KTDA because 'its tea is high-quality and bright and can be mixed with cheaper qualities from other traders'<sup>5</sup>.

Sergey Lavrov's high-level visit from Russia in 2010 cemented ties between Kenya and Russia. It was the first trip made by a Russian Foreign Minister since Kenya attained its independence, signalling an end to years of diplomatic suspicion of the 1990s (National Assembly, 2010, June 28). While in Nairobi, Lavrov held high-level discussions with President Kibaki on regional security, trade, and infrastructure investment. It was during this time that a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Russian Diplomatic Academy and the Kenya Foreign Service Institute. Through this signed agreement, an exchange program was established to serve diplomats from both countries. Importantly, Sergey visited the UN offices in Nairobi, perhaps to affirm Nairobi's status as an important international diplomatic hub.

Ambassadors working during this period for the two countries were also urged to operate under a collective diplomatic framework, which reduced trade bureaucracies and investor fatigue. A Kenyan Ambassador to Moscow, at the time, notes that between 2005 and 2013, economic and trade cooperation emphasised mutual interest rather than the dominance associated with global North-South ties. The embassies, he notes, relied on parliamentarians to advance their interests in overseas business and to reduce trade bottlenecks, and, for Kenya in particular, ambassadors insisted on fewer intermediaries in the tea and coffee trade. An employee of the MFA who worked in Moscow between 2004 and 2007 adds that discussions between the two embassies also focused on joint ventures and collaborations between Kenyan and Russian investors, especially in energy and oil exploration.

Shortly after President Uhuru Kenyatta was elected as the President of the Republic of Kenya in 2013, his first overseas visits were to Moscow and Beijing, where he advocated for closer trade relations. State visits are one of the oldest forms of diplomatic contact between leaders of states (Goldstein, 2008). Adams et al. (2024) add that state visits serve as a discursive means for building interstate relations. In addition, they are instrumental in promoting international trade. Nitsch (2007), writing on the relationship between state visits and international trade, argues that state visits are positively correlated with an 8-10% increase in bilateral exports, based on a large dataset covering France, Germany, and the US from 1948 to 2003.

As discussed above, between 2003 and 2013, Russian ministers and officials, as well as private investors, held more than 50 diplomatic and trade visits with their Kenyan counterparts. These engagements were part of Russia's broader efforts to strengthen cooperation with Africa, including expanding trade, political dialogue, and partnerships with regional organisations such as the African Union.

Moreover, while scanty literature exists on the said visits, the November 2010 visit by Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Nairobi, which was the first by a Russian Foreign Minister, stands out. Aimed at strengthening bilateral ties at a time of Russia's global repositioning, the visit buttressed Russia's commitment to strengthening Russia-Kenya ties (Kenya-Russia relations, 2008). Highly publicised,

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<sup>5</sup> KTDA is a private Kenyan Cooperative Tea Company owned by small holder farmers

high-level discussions with President Kibaki and the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prof. George Saitoti, led to the signing of various agreements in the area of cultural diplomacy, including museums and educational institutions. Parliamentary diplomacy also played an important role in strengthening ties between the two states. One such visit was made by Members of parliament from Kenya who visited Moscow between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> June 2010.

In their report to parliament, visiting MPs noted that the Russia-Africa Horizons of Cooperation Conference was titled 'Russia-Africa Horizons of Cooperation Conference' and that 'the economic and political ties (between Russia and Kenya) have weakened significantly and need to be revamped and strengthened for mutual benefit'. In addition, the report indicates that;

The overriding spirit of the Conference was captured by Russian political leaders' declaration that Russia should return to Africa and that the envisioned partnership and bilateral relations should be based on mutual respect and mutual benefit, and be free from all ideological dogmas<sup>6</sup>.

Strategically, these visits also facilitated agreements to expand trade and investment, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, energy, and tourism. It was also during this period that the idea of the Kenya-Russia Business Council, aimed at promoting business and investment, was mooted. As will be discussed later, the idea was finalised and became operational in 2019 at the Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi. Kenya also supported Russia's increased role in multilateral forums where Africa's political backing was valuable (Kenya-Russia relations, 2008; Nation, 2023). In addition to discussions around commodity sales, increased air connectivity diplomacy was considered important as it would enhance business operations.

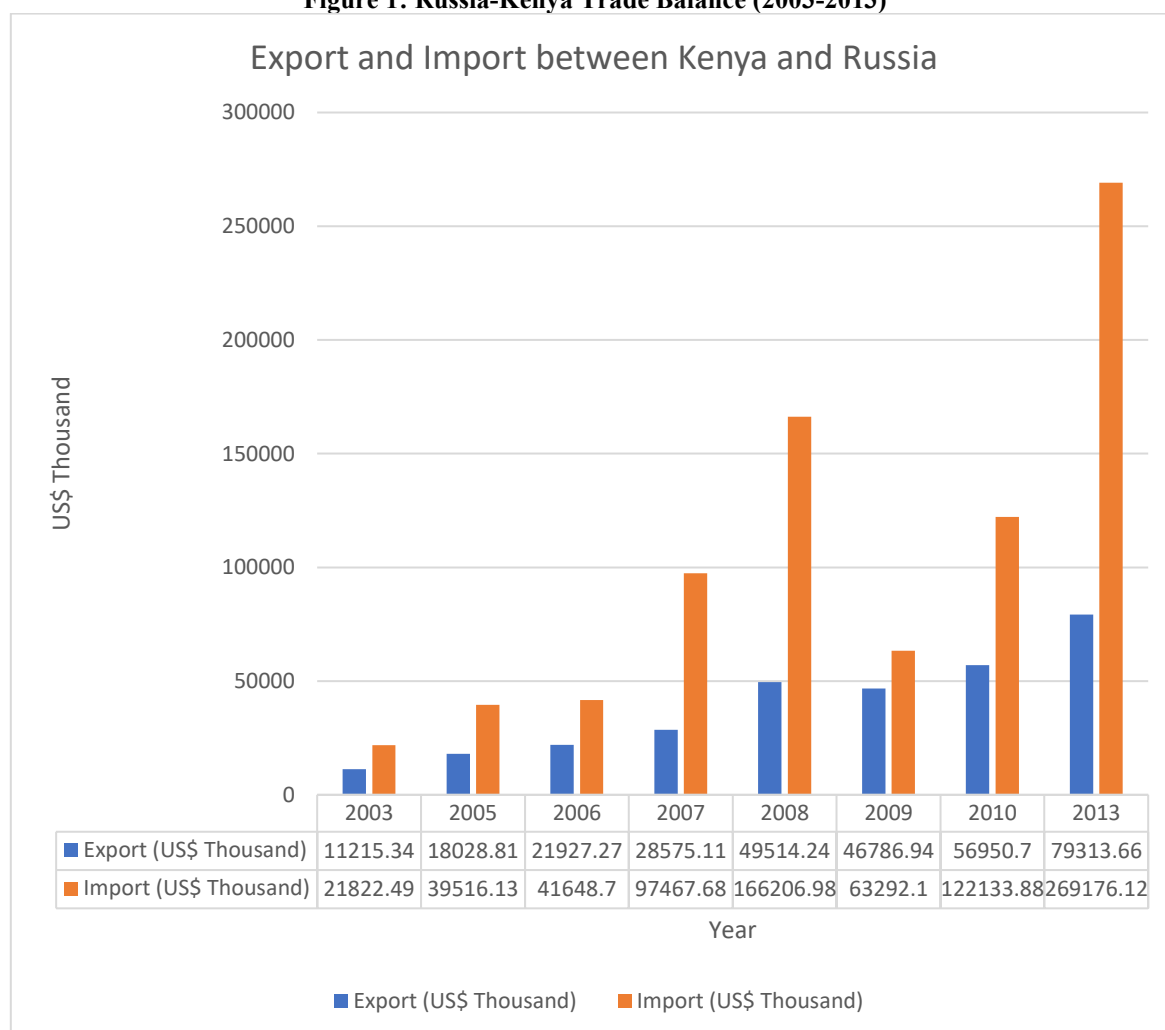
Dubbed the Aeroflot agreement, the deal, finalised after a discussion between Raila Odinga, then Prime Minister, and Vladimir Putin on the side-lines of the Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, saw the two countries sign a bilateral air travel agreement connecting Nairobi and Moscow via Dubai. The Joint Operation Agreement (JOA) was realised in 2012. Under the JOA, cargo and passenger logistics were aligned as both countries sought to expand trade operations. Another important implication of the legalised cargo and logistics cooperation was Kenya's entry into the Middle East and wider Asian air corridors, thereby boosting tourism and trade in tea, coffee, and other perishables. With a well-crafted codeshare between the two airlines, Russia was also able to broaden its trade and investment scope not only within Kenya but also across the region. Scholars and policy makers note that while Russia could not claim a leadership role in Kenya and African trade and investment cooperation deals, between 2005 and 2013, Russia strategically positioned itself as an alternative to Western powers by leveraging its historical Soviet-era connections and offering pragmatic partnership opportunities (Jordan, 2009, pp. 88-89).

The practical realisation of these, however, remained modest compared to the ambitious rhetoric of renewed Russo-African partnership. Needless to say, increased trade and investment volumes between the two countries during the 2000s demonstrate renewed interest when compared to the 1990s, with Kenya focusing on tea, coffee, and horticultural products. At the same time, Russia exported cereals, fertilisers, and steel (Kenya-Russia relations, 2008). The figure below shows the export-import balance between Kenya and Russia for the period 2003-2013.

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<sup>6</sup> National Assembly (2010, June) Report of the Kenya Parliamentary Delegation to the Russia-Africa Horizons of Cooperation Conference Parliamentary Caucases, Conferences and Meetings

**Figure 1: Russia-Kenya Trade Balance (2003-2013)**

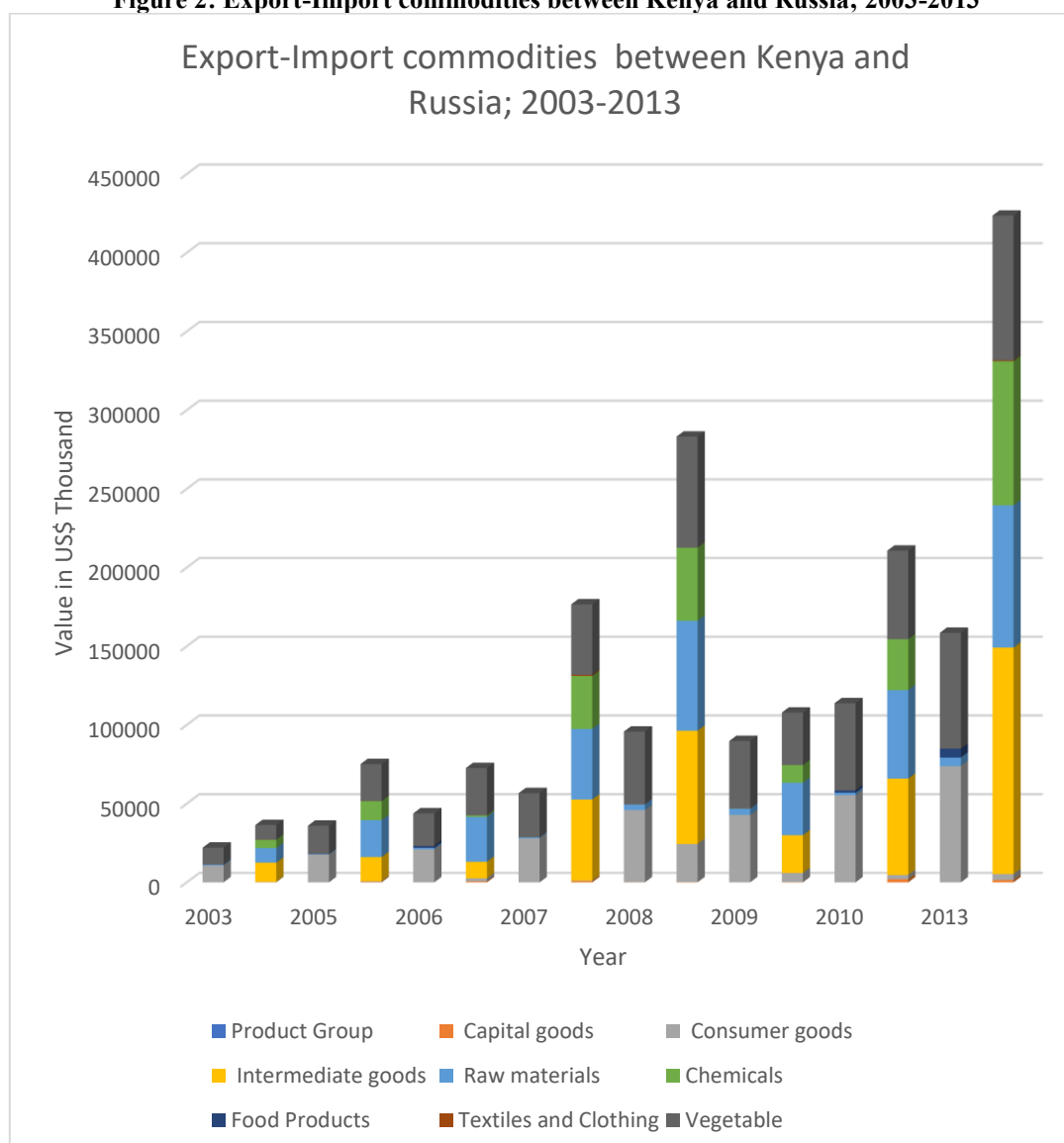


**Source:** Modified from World Integrated Trade Solutions(2025)

The figure above shows import and export volumes between Kenya and Russia for the period 2003-2013. It is noted that various products, including but not limited to consumer goods, vegetables, food products, textiles and clothing, and capital goods, were traded. The figure further demonstrates that Kenya maintained a persistent trade deficit with Russia from 2003–2013, with imports consistently exceeding exports, widening dramatically from -\$10.6 million in 2003 to -\$189.9 million in 2013. This reflects Russia's dominance in capital-intensive goods such as fertilisers, wheat, and machinery, which are essential to Kenya's Vision 2030 agro-processing and infrastructure goals. It is also noted that the period 2003–2006 witnessed steady deficit growth amid Kibaki's early stabilisation efforts. Generally, though, Kenya's exports to Russia demonstrated robust and sustained growth throughout the Kibaki era, surging from \$11.2 million in 2003 to \$79.3 million by 2013. This reflected a strategic market penetration into Russia and other European countries by the Kibaki government. Imports exploded from \$21.8 million (2003) to \$269.2 million (2013), accelerating post-2006, with a 134% jump to \$97.5 million (2007) and a 70% jump to \$166.2 million (2008).

Russian fertilisers and energy equipment partly drove this. The latter supported Kibaki's Vision 2030, which saw 7%+ GDP growth and food security amid global price spikes (World Integrated Trade Solutions, 2013). The figure below shows the most commonly traded commodities between the two countries during 2003-2013.

**Figure 2: Export-Import commodities between Kenya and Russia; 2003-2013**



**Source:** Modified from World Integrated Trade Solutions(2025)

According to the figure above, Kenya's trade with Russia for the period 2003–2013 was dominated by consumer goods exports, primarily vegetables (fresh green beans, peas, okra, Asian vegetables such as *sukuma wiki* (kales), and processed horticultural products). Trade in tea and coffee (Arabica varieties) constituted 80-95% of total exports, surging from \$10.8 million (2003) to \$73.6 million (2013, +581%). On the other hand, imports were overwhelmingly capital goods (70-90% share), including industrial machinery and electrical machinery, e.g., generators. Trade in transport equipment (e.g., aircraft parts), alongside chemicals/fertilisers such as diammonium phosphate and potassic fertilisers for tea/coffee estates, and pesticides rose from \$5.2K to \$91.6K. Intermediate goods such as iron/steel bars for infrastructure and minor food products were also traded (World Integrated Trade Solutions, 2013)

Russia's re-engagement also included scholarship programs in technical areas such as engineering, energy assistance and medicine. This enhanced bilateral relations beyond commerce, including people-to-people ties (Kenya–Russia relations, 2008). In the energy sector, Rosatom, a Russian company, held technical discussions with Kenyan companies on the possibilities of investing in the country. This laid the groundwork for future high-level nuclear cooperation agreements signed in 2015 under the Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) (Babic, 2022). The deal was effected through the governments of Russia and Kenya and Kenya's Nuclear Electricity Board (KNEB). While the plant remains in the pre-construction phase, under the agreement, Rosatom agreed with the Kenyan government to initiate the Build–Own–Operate (BOO) or Build–Own–Operate–Transfer (BOOT) finance model. This nuclear cooperation model will also involve training and capacity building for Kenyan engineers (Szulecki & Overland, 2023, Global Construction Review, 2014).

According to Babić (2022), Russia also employs soft-power diplomacy, which involves media campaigns and cultural diplomacy to shape public opinion and promote favourable narratives. For instance, amid an explosion of information, Russia launched RT (Russia Today) in 2005, and in 2013, Sputnik was launched to counter Western media houses such as CNN and BBC. Information diplomacy at the time aimed to shape perceptions of Russia and focused on discrediting, especially American and Western, foreign policy.

A media expert working in Nairobi<sup>7</sup> also explained that during the 2013 elections, Russian journalists camped in Nairobi to critique Western narratives on choices having consequences. He adds that during such periods of heightened tensions, Russian-affiliated journalists often pitch camp in Nairobi to collect information on how, when, and what Americans and Western countries offer African countries (Interview with a Kenyan Journalist working in Nairobi, 25/6/2025). This 'unorthodox' form of diplomacy is common among Russians. A security analyst alleges that since mid-1990, Russia has continually used satellite media as well as spies to collect information in and about Kenya and Africa. He observes, for instance, that prior to the 2007 election-related violence, a few Russian-trained spies were being monitored by the Kenyan government for attempting to recruit personnel to report to and for the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service). This security wing of Russia is responsible for conducting espionage abroad. They have repeatedly recruited individuals from Africa and elsewhere to provide them with information on governance, business security, and related matters from other countries. They do this covertly. It appears that, to date, Russia is still aggressively pursuing the expansion of its global presence in the post-Cold War era. A former security consultant cum university tutor adds that Russia has always used what he calls 'underground diplomacy' to access what they need from Africa, Kenya included. According to him, Russia does not perceive or play straightjacket diplomacy the way the West understands it. While this information may not be substantiated, Mafany and Laila (2023), writing on Russia in Africa, assert that Russia;

..employs mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, support for coups, and arms for resources deals, among others, within different parts of Africa. This low-cost, strong-influence strategy seeks to advance a very different world order from the rules-based, democratic political systems to which most Africans aspire, free from Western influence.

It has also been alleged that Russia uses the Internet Research Agency (IRA) to hack into African and other countries' electoral systems. This is aimed at manipulating results in favour of their preferred candidates. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Cameroon, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, between 2000 and 2022, Russia accelerated disinformation campaigns to discredit Western and French foreign policy. In Madagascar, for instance, mercenaries from the Wagner group have constantly been deployed to protect Russian political strategists and to support a preferred candidate for the presidency. This form of political manipulation, it has been noted, leaves many African countries in chaos associated with electoral violence. In the 2016 US elections, Wagner was also accused of stealing data from some American voters from a state election board (Mafany & Laila, 2023). Of course, Russia has denied such allegations while accusing countries of mismanaging their electoral and related affairs. Suffice it to say, however, the use of covert diplomacy is not unusual. Western and Asian nations often use it to gather and act on intelligence on issues of interest to them.

Since 1963, Kenya has mainly relied on the UK and the USA for arms. The trend, however, changed during the Kibaki regime when he 'looked east' for military equipment. At a time when terror threats were on the rise globally, and Kenya had suffered a huge blow after the 1998 bombing of the US embassy, over-relying on America became a bad option. Kenya thus partnered with Russia and other countries to supply her with, among other things, helicopters, vehicles, and tanks. The choice of Russia, it was argued, was cheaper as it had little, if any, hidden reasons. A member of the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs<sup>8</sup> in Kenya, however, notes that the majority of the arms and weapons from Russia between 2008 and 2012 were destined for South Sudan via the port of Mombasa. Still, this underscores Kenya's geopolitical significance as a regional hub for Western and European countries, including Russia. The table below shows an approximation of arms and military equipment traded between Kenya and Russia from 1990 to 2022. Moreover, while the figures are approximate and drawn from Trading Economics and COMTRADE, they clearly demonstrate the significant role that Kenya accords Russia in its arms and ammunition trade.

**Table 1: Kenya-Russia Arms and Military Equipment Trade (1990–2022)**

| Period / Year | Equipment Category                        | Details / Estimated Value                                                                                                                  |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1990s         | Small arms, light weapons, and ammunition | Regular but minor shipments of small arms, hunting rifles, and sporting ammunition.                                                        |
| 2000–2010     | Small arms, light weapons, and ammunition | Continued imports of Kalashnikov-pattern rifles (e.g., AK-47s) and related ammunition for the Kenya Police and Kenya Defence Forces (KDF). |

<sup>7</sup> A media expert working in Nairobi

<sup>8</sup> The member of the August House in Kenya was in the Assembly for 5 years between 2008-2012

|                  |                                                |                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>2013</b>      | Military vehicles and helicopters (General)    | Kenya allocated approximately \$20 million (KES 1.8 billion) to Russia for weaponry and military logistics during a major arms procurement drive. |
| <b>2016</b>      | Arms, ammunition, parts, and accessories       | Recorded export of Russian parts and accessories to Kenya valued at US\$13,420.                                                                   |
| <b>2017–2022</b> | Light weapons, transport parts, and ammunition | Limited heavy hardware deliveries; focus remained on procuring ammunition, spares, and small arms.                                                |

**Source:** Drawn from COMTRADE and Trading Economics (2022)

## II. Conclusion

Russia's approach to Africa from 2000 to 2013 was multifaceted, driven by geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic objectives. The strategy to regain influence thus was deliberately framed as an alternative to Western engagement models, emphasising multipolarity and freedom from the conditionalities typically attached to Western development assistance and investment. Moscow sought to differentiate itself by offering state-to-state partnerships based on mutual economic benefit and non-interference in domestic affairs, appealing to African governments wary of Western prescriptions on governance and human rights (Huddleston, 2013). This centralised, state-led nature of Putin-era foreign policy facilitated closer integration between Russian government objectives and commercial interests, creating a coordinated approach that blended diplomatic, economic, and security instruments (Makarychev & Mommen, 2013).

Kenya emerged within Russia's broad strategy as a geopolitically significant and economically attractive partner, representing the kind of dynamic regional economy that aligned with Russia's commercial and diplomatic objectives in East Africa. Kenya's strategic location, relatively diversified economy, and role as a regional hub made it an appealing partner for Russia's efforts to rebuild commercial networks and establish diplomatic footholds across the continent.

Between 2003 and 2013, President Kibaki and Vladimir Putin worked to strengthen politico-economic ties through trade and investment in tea, wheat, horticultural products, energy, and technology transfer. To do this, the two heads of state focused on high-level diplomatic and business visits where economic cooperation agreements and pacts were signed. Importantly, the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of Kenya and the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2010 operationalised training programmes, information exchange, research activities, and the exchange of expertise between the two countries. This strategy helped shape how politico-economic diplomacy played out between the two countries during the era of Kibaki and President Vladimir Putin. It was a period of renewal, at least in trade and investment cooperation.

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