



Former Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi (2nd L) answers a question from the media as US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L), US Former President George W. Bush (C) and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (R) listen during a joint presser in 05 December, 2002 inside the Cabinet Room of the White House. AFP /Getty Images

## MOI'S IMPRINTS IN KENYA'S FOREIGN POLICY

PETER KAGWANJA

*Moi transformed Kenya into one of the pivotal states and the most influential nations in Africa. However, due to one-party authoritarian states like Moi's, Kenya's position as a strategic nation declined, and relations with the West grew increasingly frosty in 1989. Tactically, this forced Kenya to adopt a Look East policy to Eastern Europe (Moscow), India and China to make up for reduced economic aid and to counter-balance the West.*

Untypically, former President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, who died on February 4, 2020, at 95, goes down the annals of history as one of the most influential figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa. From 1955, when Moi entered politics, the former

schoolteacher, legislator and son of a herdsman from the remote Kurieng'or village in Tugen Hills in Baringo County would also become one of the principle architects of Kenya's foreign policy in the turbulent Cold War era.

At the helm between August 22, 1978 to December 2002, Moi transformed Kenya into one of the pivotal states and the most influential nations in Africa. But jilted by the West after the Cold War, he strategically refocused the country's diplomatic gaze to the global East and South to tap into the potential of rising Asia (India, China and Asian Tigers), Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Moi's encounter with the world of diplomacy would start after 1945. The rise of America as the leader of the West hastened decolonization, the dismantling of European colonial empires and hewing of new independent states from the ashes of former colonies.

Following the February 3, 1960 "Wind of Change" speech by British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, Moi became one of the movers and shakers in Kenya's decolonization.

One of his assets was an enduring friendship with Britain. At the twilight of their Empire in Africa, the British colonialists embarked on glooming dependable allies from small communities as a strategy of managing the process of decolonization and local self-determination among their colonial subjects.

They earmarked young Moi as a potential ally. Moi was selected by British officials to attend a course at the Jeans School (Kenya Institute of Administration) in 1950 and a special civics course in 1953.

The British colonialists persuaded him to join politics when he was 31, becoming one of the eight Africans nominated to the colonial legislature in 1955, and imperial Britain's most enduring ally in post-colonial Kenya.

They engineered Moi's political alliance with President Jomo Kenyatta, the country's founding father. On October 26, 1959, Moi travelled to Lodwar to visit Kenyatta where he and his

Kapenguria Six colleagues were incarcerated. He took an iconic photo with them. Moi was one of the delegates in the constitutional talks held in London which drafted a new Kenyan constitution granting black people a majority in the Legislative Council and prepared for Kenya's independence from Britain in June 1960.

After independence in 1963, Moi became fiercely pro-Western in the Cold War era, with his anti-communist stance and policies winning Western recognition and support.

In December 1964, he merged his Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) with Jomo Kenyatta's Kenya African National Union (KANU), bolstering Kenyatta's rank of moderates and helping him neutralize the left-leaning wing of the ruling party.

In January 1967, Kenyatta handpicked Moi as his Vice President. Three factors tipped Moi's fortunes in shaping Kenya's diplomacy.

Kenyatta According to the recent biography, *Wealth and Prosperity* (September 2018), of Dr. Njoroge Mungai, Kenyatta's Minister, confidant and personal physician, Mzee had flight and height phobia and seldom flew outside the county. Moi represented him in almost all international forums, including the UN General Assembly, OAU Summits and dispatched him on state visits. Second, in 1969, America's right-hand man in Kenya, Tom Mboya, was assassinated. In the wake of the assassinations of Mboya's his friends, President J.F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, Mboya's influence in Washington had diminished. Moi filled the gap, becoming Washington's favorite ally in Nairobi. Third, from the late 1970s, Kenya increasingly moved further away from Britain and closer to America.

In the early 1960s, Moi was a laureate of America's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP),

designed to “offer current and emerging international leaders the opportunity to experience the richness and diversity of American” society.

In May 1969, Kenyatta dispatched Moi to White House to meet Richard Nixon, the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the US (1969- 1974) to seek US support for Kenya to contain threats of invasion from Somalia and Uganda and the growing Soviet Union influence in the region. As Vice President, Moi also met President Jimmy Carter at the White House in 1978.

Expectedly, at the death of President Kenyatta in August 1978, Moi was the unanimous choice of the Western powers to take over.

Under Moi, Kenya drew closer to the US-led West. Along with Nigeria and South Africa, it formed part of Washington’s triad of pivotal or “anchor states” in sub-Saharan Africa, defined as countries that are key to the stability of the region because of their strategic location, resources and leadership.

The United States overtook Britain as the leading source of Kenya’s economic aid and military equipment. In return, Moi offered the United States military and naval bases in Kenya. Kenya, at Washington’s bidding, actively lobbied African countries to boycott the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. In 1981, Kenya also successfully worked with the US and other Western allies to ensure that Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi did not ascend to the chair of the OAU.

Moi increasingly became the West’s blue-eyed boy. President Ronald Reagan invited him to visit the US in 1981. Reagan was particularly intrigued by Moi’s slogan, *Nyayo* (also his nickname).

“After our meeting this morning, I now fully understand the meaning of *Nyayo*, the watchword of your administration”, Reagan said, noting its implications for peace on for peace, love and unity among Kenya’s citizens, the region and the world.

“The path on which you have embarked demands courage and perseverance. I want you to know that you have our respect,” the US president added. The same year, Moi also met Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London.

1985 was particularly a good year for Kenya’s diplomacy. Moi hosted Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Queen Elizabeth II and Pope John Paul II.

In the West’s imagination, Moi’s lasting legacy is political stability. *New York Times* (February 4, 2020) eulogized his as the leader who “oversaw an island of political stability in Africa for decades”.

After 1978, Moi’s *Nyayo philosophy*, consisting of the principles of good neighborliness, non-alignment and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, pervaded Kenya’s foreign policy. In 1986, Moi brokered a short-lived peace between between General Tito Okello and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda. But as Boaz K. Mbaya rightly observes, Moi was stunned by the “rejection of the agreement” by Museveni, who captured Kampala. and gained power in 1986. However, with Uganda as Kenya’s “most strategic partner,” Moi oversaw the signing of the treaty re-establishing the East African Community (EAC), which had collapsed in 1977, which officially came to force on July 7, 2000.

To stabilize the Horn of Africa, Moi renewed the defensive alliance with Marxist-Leninist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia in 1980 and 1987. But as rebels edged towards Addis Ababa in 1991, Moi declined Haile Mariam’s call on Kenya to intervene. It was too late, and the rebels were poised to win. He, instead mediated between Meles Zenawi who took the reins of power as Prime Minister in Ethiopia and Isaias Afwerki who became the president of Eritrea.

On the African scene, Kenya joined the Common Wealth Monitoring Force in Zimbabwe (CMFZ) in 1979-80 to facilitate Zimbabwe’s smooth transition

to independence, including safe elections. Moi will be remembered as the only President to serve as OAU chair for two consecutive terms between June 24, 1981 and June 6, 1983. Kenya was the driving force in the formation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in 1996 and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) in 1994.

Globally, Kenya became a leading peace-keeping and peacebuilding nation, contributing to almost 20 UN missions all over the globe in the decade between 1988 and 1998. Kenya was twice elected to represent Africa in the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member in 1973-74 and 1997-98.

However, Kenya and the world changed in 1989. As the fall of communism, the rise of liberalism and subsequent wind of democratic change in Eastern Europe washed over Africa, one-party authoritarian states like Moi's Kenya came under pressure to open up the democratic space. With the end of the Cold War, Kenya's position as a strategic nation declined, and relations with Western allies grew increasingly frosty. Washington canceled Moi's scheduled appointments during a trip to the US to meet Reagan again in 1987 following a media exposé by *Washington Post's* Africa Correspondent, Blaine Harden, unveiling Kenya as a police state and demanded that his government come clean on the story. An appointment with UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar in New York was also canceled.

That marked the end of Moi's Cold War rendezvous with the West. In early 1987, US ambassador to Kenya, Eleanor Greer Constable (1986–89), even threatened war. Smith Hempstone, who replaced Constable in November 1989, masterminded a walk-out on Moi by Western diplomats during the 1992 Jamhuri Day celebrations, bringing rogue democracy to an unprecedented level.

Moi was once the star, but the Sun came. In the 1990s, the West hyped on a crop of Africa's "new leaders" with a progressive vision of Africa—including Meles Zenawi (Ethiopia), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), and Paul Kagame (Rwanda)—eclipsed Moi and Kenya.

This forced Bill Clinton not include Kenya in his tour of Africa- Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana, South Africa, Rwanda and Uganda—in 1997. But what infuriated Moi was Clinton's planned meeting with leaders from the sub-region at Entebbe in Uganda.

### Look East

Tactically, Kenya looked east, to Eastern Europe, India and China to make up for reduced economic aid and to counter-balance the West

In 1987, President Moi made a state visit to Romania, behind the Iron Curtain. Moi's Romania trip is widely seen as having influenced the idea to set up the dreaded police squad and torture chambers at the Nyayo House modelled on Ceausescu's Securitate. His host, Nicolae Ceausescu, nickname "the Butcher of Bucharest", paid a return state visit to Kenya in 1988.

Moi improved relations with China, which had sunk to an all-time low in the early 1970s, when the relation of the two countries was lowered to be at the chargé d'affaires level. Moi visited China three times, in September 1980, October 1988 and May 1994. Between 1980 and 2002, 16 high level Chinese leaders and officials who visited Kenya.

In 2000, Kenya attended Sino-African Cooperation Forum where the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was launched.

Ensuing the defeat of George Bush senior and Moi's decision to retire peacefully, relations with Western allies improved. In 2000, Clinton hosted Moi at Washington National Convention Centre, Washington.

In December 2002, Moi met President George W. Bush at the White House in his last official trip to the US where they discussed the deplorable security situation in the Horn of Africa.

Bush used the opportunity to personally deliver his condolences to the President for the loss of

lives that was occasioned by the August 8, 1998 bomb blast attack at the then US Embassy, Nairobi.

*Peter Kagwanja is the President and Chief Executive of Africa Policy Institute and former Government Adviser.*

---

*API Africa Research Notes Series publishes scientifically valid research outputs that cannot be considered as full research or methodology articles. Its aim is to provide a forum for sharing data, useful information and perspectives on topical issues of concern to the policy and research communities. Articles published under this series cut across disciplines, and include some short articles or opinion pieces that have already been published by the experts of the Africa Policy Institute. Some are brief publications, updates to previous work, abridged versions of research agendas or concept notes or brief reports of policy forums.*



*<https://www.africapi.org/africa-research-notes/>  
NHIF Parking Tower 5th Floor, Ragati Road  
P. O. Box 34791 - 00100, Nairobi, Kenya*