05 Stakeholder Participation Mechanisms in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Lessons from Kenya's EACRF Deployment

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Abstract

This article examined the role of stakeholder participation mechanisms in foreign policy decision-making, focusing on the deployment of Kenya's contingent (KENCON) under the East African Community Regional Force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The general purpose was to investigate how diverse stakeholders influence foreign policy processes within the framework of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. It specifically sought to (i) identify the constitutional frameworks guiding foreign policy decision-making, (ii) analyse the role of key stakeholders in influencing the KENCON deployment decision, (iii) evaluate the effectiveness of public engagement platforms in facilitating stakeholder participation, and (iv) propose strategies to strengthen inclusive foreign policy decision-making. Anchored in public choice theory and constructivism, the study applied a qualitative approach using case study design. Data were collected from 188 respondents who included government officials, military personnel, policy analysts, civil society representatives and members of the public. The data collection instruments used were questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used. The study identified barriers to effective participation which included institutional capacity constraints, information asymmetries and political culture factors. The findings also indicated that despite the existence of stakeholder mechanisms in theory, in practise they are weak, symbolic and dominated by executive actors. The study proposed a comprehensive stakeholder engagement framework that incorporates multi-tiered consultation processes, enhanced information sharing mechanisms and strengthened institutional capacity for public participation. This framework would address the need for balancing security imperatives with democratic accountability while ensuring meaningful stakeholder engagement in foreign policy formulation.

Keywords: Public choice theory, constructivism, foreign policy, stakeholder participation, EACRF deployment

Introduction

The formulation of foreign policy in democratic societies requires the balancing of competing demands of security, diplomacy and domestic accountability. This process is shaped by the domestic interests of a country and the projection of internal policies, which in turn determine a state's international posturing (Adnan, 2020). In democratic societies, a critical element of the formulation entails what has been called deliberative democracy, a form of citizen participation, in ensuring that the policy process reflects the will and aspirations of the citizens (Pateman, 2012). For Kenya, the Constitution of Kenya 2010 in Article 10 established public participation as a binding national value and principle of governance across all levels of government and policy domains. These constitutional commitments were meant to redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens, positioning participation as a critical element of this relationship (Bosire, 2017).

Yet, despite this normative commitment, certain policy domains have remained elusive to meaningful participation. Chief among these is foreign policy and more specifically, the domain of military deployments. Traditionally, foreign policy making has privileged executive discretion and expert knowledge, limiting opportunities for broader stakeholder participation. In Kenya, this executive dominance has persisted even as domestic policymaking processes have gradually opened up to participatory processes (Murunga & Nasong'o, 2013).

This article interrogates that tension through a case study of the deployment of a contingent of the Kenya Defence Forces (KENCON) to the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Unlike previous deployments under the United Nations Chapter 7 mandate, such as United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUSCO) in DRC, this deployment was unique. It was the first of its kind under the East Africa Community, primarily as a peace enforcement measure alongside the Nairobi Peace Process, authorised by the EAC heads of state. Its mandate was narrower and explicitly politico–military and was seen as an African solution to an African problem, with regional ownership (East African Community, 2022). That notwithstanding, in Kenya, the decision to send KENCON was met with intense public debate on the cost of the deployment, risks in line with the mandate and national interest (Mbombo, 2023). Despite its profound political, economic and security implications, consultation on the deployment was limited to elite actors. Government officials and military leadership dominated the decision-making process while civil society and the broader public were marginal, yet the Constitution requires participation, raising questions whether Kenya's foreign policy decisions are exempt from democratic commitments.

The rationale for this article lies in exploring how Kenya negotiates the tension between security imperatives and the constitutional promise of participatory governance. Security policy often demands swift and confidential decisions, yet democratic accountability requires societal input. This article investigates the mechanisms available for participation, the barriers limiting their use and the institutional and normative factors sustaining elite dominance.

The article pursues four objectives:

1. To identify the institutional and legal frameworks guiding participation in foreign policy

2. To analyse the role of different stakeholders within the foreign policy domain

3. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing participation platforms, such as parliamentary debates, civil society forums and digital tools

4. To propose reforms for strengthening participation consistent with Kenya's constitutional commitments.

This article contributes to knowledge by extending the debate on participatory governance into the field of foreign policy, a domain that is often excluded from such analyses (Hudson, 2007; Alden & Le Pere, 2009). In practice, this will entail developing a reform-oriented framework for enhancing participation, offering lessons for Kenya and other African states grappling with the balance between security imperatives and democratic accountability.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The article is premised on two complementary perspectives: public choice theory and constructivism. Together, the theories allow for analysis of both structural barriers and the normative drivers shaping stakeholder participation in foreign policy. Public choice explains the institutional and incentive based dynamics that sustain elite dominance, while constructivism highlights the role of identity, norms and meaning in shaping how participation is understood and practiced.

Public choice theory

Public choice theory is attributed to Buchanan and Tullock (1962). It applies economic principles to political decision-making, arguing that political actors whether government officials, interest groups, or the public make choices based on self-interest and incentives. The theory posits that public policies, including foreign policy decisions, are shaped by competing interests rather than purely national objectives (Dzenis, 2025; Mueller, 2003). Regarding stakeholder participation, this theory suggests that citizens, advocacy groups, and political leaders engage in policy deliberations based on their personal or institutional benefits, often leading to negotiations and trade-offs in decision-making. In this

article, public choice theory is relevant to stakeholder participation, as it provides insights into the extent to which citizens, civil society, and political representatives can influence foreign policy through consultations, parliamentary debates, and advocacy efforts, as mandated by the Constitution of Kenya 2010. The theory helps assess whether stakeholder participation is meaningful and impactful or if decision-making remains dominated by political elites and bureaucratic interests.

Constructivism

The theory of constructivism emphasises the role of ideas, norms and identities in shaping foreign policy beyond material interests (Wendt, 1992; Checkel, 1998). It argues that states not only act according to strategic calculations but also in ways consistent with their socially constructed identities and normative commitments. Norms define what a society or community consider as legitimate or appropriate, while identity shapes how states perceive themselves and others (Finnemore & Wendt, 2024).

For Kenya, the self-ascribed role as a regional peace broker is central to its foreign policy identity. Since the 1980s, Kenya has brokered peace and negotiated ceasefires in Sudan, Somalia and South Sudan, reinforcing its image within its peers in the region (Muriithi, 2009; Khadiagala, 2018). This identity influenced the framing of the EACRF deployment as both a strategic necessity and as a normative duty. The intervention was justified not only on security grounds but also as a consistent with Kenya's established role in promoting regional stability.

Constructivism also draws attention to domestic norms such as the national values and principles of governance enshrined in Article 10 of the 2010 Constitution, of which public participation is one of them. The persistence of elite-driven foreign policy reflects a clash between two normative orders: the norm of participatory governance and the entrenched tradition of executive dominance in foreign policy. The neglect of participatory provisions is thus evidence of the selective application of norms, where those reinforcing elite control are prioritised over those demanding democratic inclusion.

Methodology

This article a mixed methods research design that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the breadth and depth in the analysis of stakeholder participation in Kenya's foreign policy. The study focused on the deployment of KENCON to EACRF in DRC that took place in November 2022. It was chosen because the decision elicited great national interest and concern and was the first of its kind under the EAC. It thus offered an interesting case where foreign policy intersected with constitutional mandates for public participation.

◪ *Research Design*

The article adopted a convergent parallel design where quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately and integrated during interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This approach enabled triangulation, enhanced validity and provided deeper insights by comparing where the data agreed or differed.

The article focused on five categories of stakeholders:

1. Government officials within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence

2. Senior and mid-level military personnel

3. Civil society organisations (CSOs) representatives engaged in governance and security issues

4. Policy analysts and scholars

5. Members of the general public

From these groups, a total of 450 respondents were targeted, of whom 188 provided complete responses. This yielded a response rate of 41.8%. Sampling combined purposive and stratified random techniques. Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of key informants in the government, military and civil society, while stratification enabled proportional representation across stakeholder groups (Bryman, 2016). Six focus group discussion were convened with civil society and university students, while 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with senior officials and analysts.

◪ *Data Collection Methods*

Four main data collection methods were used:

1. Structured questionnaires captured quantitative data on awareness level, perceived influence and evaluation of participation mechanisms

2. Ssemi-structured interviews with policy-makers, military officials, and civil society leaders provided elite perspectives

3. FGDs allowed interactive exploration of perceptions and experiences among non-elite stakeholders

4. Document review this entailed the review of parliamentary proceedings, policy documents and media coverage contextualised participation (Bowen, 2009)

🔺 *Data Analysis*

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, presenting results as percentages and frequency distributions while qualitative data were transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analyses to identify recurrent patterns regarding awareness, influence, and barriers to participation (Fowler, 2014). Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings occurred during the discussion phase to ensure a holistic interpretation.

Findings

Analysis of the survey, interview, focus group, and document data revealed four central themes that capture the state of stakeholder participation in Kenya's foreign policy decision making during the deployment of KENCON to the EACRF. These include the level of public awareness about the deployment; the distribution of influence among different stakeholder groups; the effectiveness of participation mechanisms such as parliamentary debates, civil society forums, media, and digital tools and the barriers that constrained meaningful participation.

🔺 *Public Awareness*

The survey data revealed limited public awareness of Kenya's EACRF deployment. Of the respondents surveyed, only 42.7% reported being aware of the deployment at the time of its announcement. As expected, awareness was highest among government officials at 78.4% and military personnel at 83.5%. It was moderate among civil society actors at 51.2% and lowest among the general public at 23.6%. These patterns indicate significant gaps in how information was disseminated. This trend was confirmed by focus group discussions where many participants stated that they first learnt of the deployment through media coverage after the decision had already been implemented. This suggests that public participation was undermined not by apathy, but by the absence of timely and accessible information (Omotola, 2010).

These findings resonate with broader literature which highlight how governments in emerging democracies often control the flow of information in security related policy domains (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Akech, 2010). In Kenya, despite constitutional obligations for transparency, foreign policy communication strategies remain limited and elite centered.

🔺 *Distribution of Stakeholder Influence*

The distribution of influence across stakeholders was found to be highly uneven. Quantitative findings revealed that 89.2% of government officials and 76.8% of military leadership exerted substantial influence over the deployment decision. In contrast, civil society organisations at 23.7% and the general public at 12.1% reported having minimal impact. Likewise, policy analysts and scholars

reported that their input was mostly limited to media commentary and policy briefs, which in their estimation were rarely incorporated into official decision-making processes.

Similarly, interviews with government officials confirmed that the decision was made within a narrow circle of executive and security chiefs. These actors defend their dominance by invoking national security imperatives by arguing that extensive consultations could compromise operational effectiveness and expose sensitive information (Rupiya, 2012). From their perspective secrecy was necessary to protect both the mission and national interests.

However, civil society actors critiqued this position, arguing that appeals to security often serve as a pretext for excluding the voice of the public. They pointed out that even within parliamentary debates, where participation is constitutionally mandated, information asymmetries and compressed timelines limited the ability of legislators to influence outcomes meaningfully (Bosire, 2017). The uneven distribution of influence is consistent with comparative findings from other global contexts, where foreign policy remains a domain of executive dominance, with legislators and publics relegated to the margins (Carment & Landry, 2015; Landberg, 2012; Tieku, 2013).

Effective participation mechanisms

The article assessed the functioning of various participation mechanisms and their effectiveness in influencing foreign policy decisions, these being parliamentary debates, civil society forums, media platforms and digital tools. Noteworthy was that, across the board, these mechanisms were found to be weak, fragmented and largely symbolic.

To begin with, parliamentary debates revealed that although the Constitution requires parliamentary approval for military deployment as per Article 240, Section 8 (a) of the Constitution of Kenya 2010, parliamentary debates on the EACRF were rushed and perfunctory. As evidenced by interviews with MPs, legislators were not provided with sufficient time or detailed briefings to scrutinise the decision. Instead, executive preferences were rubber stamped. These findings align with other studies that have documented the limited capacity of African parliamentarians to provide substantive oversight in foreign policy (Salih, 2005; Opalo, 2019; Wagner & Raunio, 2017).

Likewise, while civil society attempted to convene forums to deliberate the deployment, these efforts were fragmented, lacked institutional support and were often dismissed by policy-makers as lacking security expertise. Civil society representatives interviewed lamented that while their platforms

generated recommendations, these were not integrated into official decision-making structures. This gap reflects what Diamond (1999) refers to as the "participation influence disconnect" where participation occurs but lacks meaningful policy impact.

Meanwhile, media platforms played an important role in disseminating information and stimulating public debate. Coverage of the EACRF deployment sparked discussions on national security, costs and regional diplomacy. However, the media's role remained largely that of informing the public after the decision was already made, rather than enabling proactive engagement. This echoes studies of media-policy linkages in Africa which note that media influence is constrained by editorial pressures, limited access to policymakers and government restrictions (Mwesige, 2004; Berger, 2018).

Similarly, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, provided avenues for citizens to express opinions and critique the government's decision. Despite generating visibility, these digital debates were not formally linked to policy channels. The policymakers interviewed noted that while they were aware of online discussions, these were not considered legitimate inputs into decision-making.

Overall, participation mechanisms were reduced to gestures of transparency rather than substantive channels of influence. Their ineffectiveness was not due to lack of interest by stakeholders but rather to structural exclusion, weak institutional linkages and elite dominance.

Barriers to Participation

The article identified four major barriers that constrained effective stakeholder participation in Kenya's foreign policy decision-making on the EACRF deployment. These were institutional capacity constraints, information asymmetries, time limitations and entrenched political culture.

On institutional capacity constraints, the article established that parliamentary committees and civil society organisations lacked the technical expertise, resources and institutional infrastructure to engage substantively with complex foreign policy issues. Legislators admitted in interviews that they often relied on executive briefings, which were limited in scope and depth. Likewise, civil society organisations, while active in governance debates, they often lacked foreign policy specialists or dedicated funding to sustain systematic engagement in this field. In the article limited access to information was the most cited barrier to participation by CSOs. The perspectives of civil society groups reveal a foreign policy decision-making process heavily dominated by government and military actors, with limited influence from civil society and the general public. This aligns with

the findings by Lokimae, Bartocho and Omillo (2021) who cite structure of the public participation processes including capacity to access, assess and process information and role of the CSOs to broaden inclusion as key constructs and variables to participation.

With regard to information asymmetries, the study established that information control by the executive further undermined participation. Survey results and interviews indicated that stakeholders outside the government and the military often received incomplete or selective information. Civil society actors reported being excluded from high level briefings, while MPs noted that documentation provided during debates was often inadequate for informed deliberation, with security and confidentiality of the information being often cited as the reason. Such asymmetries are common in foreign policy contexts globally, where security justifications are used to restrict access to information (Alden & Le Pere, 2009). This dynamic is also consistent with Gichohi and Arriola's (2023) observation that executive dominance and secrecy often hinder parliamentary effectiveness in foreign policy oversight.

Time limitations also emerged as a barrier to effective stakeholder participation. The urgency of EACRF's deployment was cited by government officials as justification for expedited decision-making. While expediency is often necessary in security crises, it does not absolve the state of its constitutional obligation to consult. Focus group participants emphasised that even minimal engagement would have enhanced legitimacy and buy in. This factor was emphasised when the Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti, was delayed for a year due to legal and procedural factors, among them being stakeholder engagement (Onyango, Agwanda & Nyadera, 2024).

Finally, Kenya's political culture was also cited as a barrier to effective participation. The country's historical legacy of executive dominance in foreign policy created a political culture resistant to participatory practices. Since colonial times, foreign policy has been centralised in the governor and later in the presidency and the executive. This was justified by the view that diplomacy and security require secrecy and cohesion (Kaburu, 2020; Khadiagala, 2018; Oyugi, 1994). Despite constitutional reforms, this culture persists normalising exclusionary practices and delegitimising calls for broader participation. Interviews with senior officials suggested that some policy-makers viewed public participation to be incompatible with foreign policy, regarding it as falling within the purview of executive prerogative. According to them, public participation is a domestic governance concern rather than an international relations imperative. This cultural framing entrenches elite dominance by presenting exclusion as both normal and necessary.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that a persistent gap exists between Kenya's constitutional commitment to public participation and the realities of foreign policy practice. While mechanisms for inclusion formally exist, as was demonstrated during the public participation phase of Sessional Paper no 1of 2025 on the Foreign Policy of Kenya, they still would not qualify as effective public participation given the low number of responses that were generated. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that an intensive public stakeholder forum was carried out on 8th November 2024, and a further call for submission of memoranda from the public was posted in 2 dailies on 19th February 2024 by The National Assembly. Only six memoranda were received, majority of them from civil society organisations with interests in human rights and diaspora interests (The National Assembly, 2025). The posting in local dailies was not sufficient given the significant dynamics in how information is consumed today and the extreme low circulation of newspapers in the country (Aradi, 2025) It is evident that these mechanisms are largely symbolic gestures that leave bureaucrats and military elites as the dominant decision makers in foreign deployment such as the EACRF.

Given the above, public choice argues that elite dominance in foreign policy decision-making is not accidental but rational. The executive and the military derive prestige, influence and material benefit from international deployments. While for heads of state, such missions project leadership and reinforce Kenya's position as a regional power (Cilliers, 2015). Similarly, for the military elite, deployment provide institutional legitimacy, combat experience and access to logistical and financial resources. Thus, participation mechanisms that empower civil society or parliament would dilute these benefits and introduce pressure of accountability. It can then be argued that limited participation is a rational outcome of incentive structures that privilege elites while making inclusivity costly (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Mueller, 2003).

From a constructivist perspective, Kenya's foreign policy is shaped not only by material incentives but also by norms and identity. Since the 1980s, Kenya has cultivated the role of a regional peace broker, hosting peace talks and positioning itself as a guarantor of stability in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa (Khadiagala, 2018; Muriithi, 2009) This identity legitimises interventions such as the EACRF deployment as an expressions of Kenya's regional responsibilities; However, it can also entrench elite-led diplomacy by framing foreign policy as a domain that requires coherence, secrecy and elite expertise. Meanwhile, constitutional norms requiring public participation are sidelined, illustrating a clash between domestic democratic values and entrenched foreign policy traditions (Wendt, 1992; Checkel, 1998).

Comparative evidence underscores these dynamic. For instance, in South Africa, despite its post-apartheid emphasis on participatory governance, foreign policy remains largely elite-driven, with civil society engagement limited to ad hoc consultations (Landsberg, 2012). In Nigeria, parliamentary approval is often perfunctory in foreign deployments, reflecting similar patterns of executive dominance (Akinyemi, 2013). Globally, a mixed picture emerges: democracies like Canada have a history of stakeholder participation in foreign policy but largely dependent on the government in power (Carment & Landry, 2015). Other democracies such as the United States of America and France justify secrecy in foreign affairs. However, the case of Kenya is distinct because of constitutional mandates for participation (Hill, 2003; Hudson, 2007).

The implications of this constitutional gap are significant. First, the limited role of stakeholders undermines the democratic legitimacy of foreign policy decisions. Second, exclusion risks alienating the public, fostering the perception that foreign policy serves the elite rather than national interests. Third, insufficient participation can compromise policy coherence when decisions are made without broad input, reducing the sustainability of and public support for interventions. Finally, limited accountability mechanisms increase the risk of resource misallocation and weaken oversight of military operations and expenditures (Omotola, 2010; Opalo, 2019).

Proposed framework for stakeholder engagement

The findings highlight the persistence of elite dominance and symbolic participation in Kenya's foreign policy decision-making. To bridge the gap between constitutional ideals and foreign policy practice, this article proposes a comprehensive stakeholder engagement framework. The framework is grounded in three pillars: these are multi-tiered consultations, enhanced information sharing and strengthened institutional capacity that provides a strategy for reconciling national security imperatives with democratic accountability.

Multi-Tiered Consultations

Tier one entails consultations with Parliament. Given that the Constitution mandates them as the gatekeepers to foreign policy decisions, Parliamentary Committee on Defence, Intelligence and Foreign Affairs should be granted access to confidential briefings under conditions of non-disclosure. This would enable meaningful oversight without jeopardising security (Abdi, 2023; Opalo, 2019).

Tier two would comprise of civil society and policy experts. In other democracies, such as Canada, civil society organisations have played an important role in helping mobilise support for particular foreign policy actions with successful outcomes (Carment & Landry, 2015). Thus, structured forums could be convened

with think tanks, policy institutes and civil society organisation engaged in peace and security issues. These actors provide critical expertise and societal perspectives often missing from executive deliberations (Carment & Landry, 2015; Gyimah-Boadi, 2009).

Tier three would be composed of broad consultations that would include town hall meetings, media programs and online platforms that would be employed to engage the general public. This would also entail motivational factors to encourage and facilitate public participation such as ensuring adequate education and information about the foreign policy issue and simpler ways for the public to give their opinion (Lokimae, Bartocho & Omillo, 2021). While not all information can be shared, public deliberation on rationale, costs and implications of foreign deployment enhances legitimacy of the decision (Fung, 2015).

◢ *Enhanced information sharing*

It cannot be gainsaid that effective participation requires informed stakeholders. Article 35 of the Constitution recognises this and has made it imperative. However, current information asymmetries privilege executive actors while marginalising others. The following is proposed as a remedy:

• Regular foreign policy briefings by the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs and Ministry of Defence that would cover both ongoing and planned interventions;

• Making publicly accessible policy summaries outlining objectives, costs and expected outcomes of foreign deployment;

• Mandating post-mission accountability through tabling strategic review reports to Parliament detailing attainment of mission objectives, costs and challenges met;

• Popularising online foreign policy portals that aggregate non-sensitive documents, provides updates and listing opportunities for consultations; and

• Expand calls for participation beyond traditional media to include popular social media platforms.

◢ *Strengthened institutional capacity*

These proposed institutional reforms would enhance the ability of Parliament, civil society and academia to engage substantively in foreign policy:

• Members of parliamentary committees should receive training in international relations, security policy and regional integration. Dedicated research units could support evidence-based oversight (Africa Center for Security Studies, 2023; Salih, 2005)

but rather seek to illustrate that meaningful participation and security imperatives are not mutually exclusive. Likewise, embedding participation in institutional design can enhance the legitimacy, accountability and sustainability of foreign policy decisions.

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