

Public Opinion, Print Media, and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Kenya Between 2017 and 2022

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Abstract

This article examines how public opinion and print media influenced foreign policy decision-making and implementation in Kenya between 2017 and 2022. It addresses a persistent empirical gap in African foreign policy scholarship: media influence is frequently asserted, but it is rarely tested alongside public perceptions and policymaker responses within the same research design. A convergent mixed-methods approach combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 300 purposively selected foreign-policy articles from Daily Nation, The Standard and The Star, a structured survey of 200 informed respondents, and eight semi-structured key-informant interviews with diplomats, senior public officials, editors and foreign-policy actors. Agenda-setting theory and social identity theory guided interpretation. Economic diplomacy and regional integration jointly accounted for 67% of the dominant thematic emphasis in the wider study, while survey evidence showed strong perceived media influence on foreign-policy understanding. Newspaper readership was positively associated with perceived media influence, and education was significantly associated with the ranking of several foreign-policy themes. Qualitative evidence further showed that sustained media attention raises the reputational and political costs of policy silence, especially where foreign policy intersects with debt, security, sovereignty and livelihoods. The article concludes that Kenyan print media influences foreign policy mainly through salience, framing and legitimacy pressures rather than direct control of state decisions. It recommends institutionalised public diplomacy, specialised foreign-affairs journalism and more systematic incorporation of informed public feedback into policy communication.

Keywords:

agenda-setting; foreign policy; Kenya; print media; public diplomacy; public opinion; social identity theory

Introduction

Foreign policy was once commonly represented as an executive preserve: an area in which presidents, foreign ministries, security agencies and diplomats could exercise broad discretion because the public possessed limited information about distant events and because many diplomatic negotiations required confidentiality. That description is increasingly incomplete. In democratic and media-saturated political systems, the domestic environment has become part of the context in which external policy is interpreted, defended and implemented. Citizens encounter international affairs through mediated narratives; legislatures convert public concerns into oversight questions; civil society scrutinises the distributive consequences of international commitments; and journalists decide which diplomatic events receive prominence, which actors are quoted and which consequences are foregrounded. Kenya offers an analytically useful setting for studying these interactions because its expanding regional diplomatic role has developed alongside multiparty competition, constitutionalised expectations of public participation and a comparatively plural national media environment.

The relationship became especially visible between 2017 and 2022. During this period, Kenyan public debate repeatedly touched issues that were simultaneously domestic and international: economic diplomacy and China-financed infrastructure, the Standard Gauge Railway, debt exposure, regional integration, Kenya's security involvement in Somalia, counter-terrorism, the maritime dispute with Somalia, relations with Western partners, multilateral diplomacy and Kenya's campaign for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Such questions did not remain within official communiqués. They appeared in front-page stories, editorials, opinion columns, parliamentary debate and public commentary. In this environment, the central democratic problem is not whether popular opinion should replace strategic judgment. It is how the state should understand public perceptions when those perceptions shape legitimacy, trust, compliance and the political sustainability of external commitments.

Kenya's post-Cold War trajectory gives this question historical depth. The suspension and conditionality of Western aid in the early 1990s, together with pressure for political liberalisation, exposed the extent to which international relationships could become entangled with domestic legitimacy. Subsequent democratisation widened the number of actors able to contest government narratives. The 2010 Constitution further strengthened expectations of accountability, participation, access to information and institutional oversight. Foreign policy consequently operates within a domestic communication environment that differs markedly from the highly centralised setting of the one-party era. Yet strategic imperatives remain powerful. Security commitments, treaty obligations, regional stability, trade access and diplomatic credibility may require decisions that are not immediately popular. The empirical issue is therefore one of influence, mediation and constraint rather than a simple transfer of decision-making authority from government to the public.

Agenda-setting research provides a useful starting point because it directs attention to issue visibility. McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated that repeated media attention is associated with the importance audiences attach to issues. Framing scholarship adds that the media

influence not only whether an issue is visible but also the interpretive attributes through which it is understood. Entman (1993) explains framing as a process of selecting and emphasising aspects of reality so that a problem, cause, evaluation or remedy becomes more salient. These mechanisms are particularly important in foreign affairs, where most citizens do not directly experience diplomatic negotiations and therefore rely heavily on mediated information. Soroka (2003) similarly shows that media salience can connect public concern to foreign-policy attention, while Robinson (1999) cautions that media effects remain conditional on elite consensus, policy certainty and political context.

Kenyan research has established that media and foreign policy do interact, but the evidence is still fragmented. Mburu (2011) found that media coverage can compel foreign-policy decision-makers to address issues that were not initially prominent on the official agenda. Tonui (2017) argues that media diplomacy can complement the implementation of foreign policy and that diplomatic institutions need stronger engagement with media systems. Molony (2019), examining communication around Kenya's conflict with Al-Shabaab in Somalia, shows how public accountability and communication pressures affect the state's handling of sensitive security information. These studies are important, but they do not fully integrate longitudinal newspaper content, public perceptions and policymaker accounts within one empirical design.

This article addresses that gap. It examines the relationship among print-media coverage, public opinion and foreign-policy decision-making in Kenya from 2017 to 2022 using three linked bodies of evidence: newspaper content, a structured survey and elite interviews. Its central argument is deliberately measured. Print media does not mechanically dictate Kenya's foreign policy. Rather, it structures visibility, frames the meaning of external engagements and influences the legitimacy environment in which officials explain, defend, recalibrate and implement policy. Public opinion operates in a similarly indirect way: it is most consequential when media narratives converge with material concerns such as public debt, insecurity, sovereignty, livelihoods or electoral accountability.

The study pursued five specific objectives: to identify dominant themes, frames, tone and prominence in Kenyan print-media coverage of foreign policy; to assess public perceptions of the role of print media in foreign-policy understanding; to examine the relationship between media consumption and perceived media influence; to determine whether demographic factors condition perceptions of foreign-policy coverage; and to explain how policymakers respond to media and public scrutiny during foreign-policy implementation. By linking these objectives within one analytical framework, the study moves beyond descriptive claims about a "powerful media" or an "uninformed public" and instead asks when, how and under what conditions media-public dynamics become relevant to foreign-policy decision-making.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The literature on public opinion and foreign policy contains a longstanding tension between state-centred explanations and approaches that place greater weight on domestic political communication. Realist scholarship emphasises the constraints imposed by power, security and the international system. Waltz (1979), for example, directs attention to systemic pressures rather than treating public preferences as a primary explanation of external behaviour. Liberal and

interdependence perspectives, by contrast, make greater room for domestic institutions, economic relationships and multiple channels of influence (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Neither perspective alone adequately explains a contemporary setting in which state institutions retain formal authority but must operate before a public that receives, evaluates and contests policy through a diversified media environment.

Public opinion research similarly rejects two extremes. One extreme assumes that citizens are too poorly informed about foreign affairs to matter. The other assumes that governments simply follow public sentiment. Holsti (2004) shows that public attitudes toward foreign policy are structured by information, elite cues and perceptions of national interest rather than being wholly random. Soroka (2003) further demonstrates that the media, the public and policymakers can influence one another through dynamic feedback rather than a one-way causal chain. For Kenya, this means that public opinion should be treated neither as an overriding command nor as irrelevant noise. Its significance depends on salience, issue type, institutional channels and the political consequences of ignoring publicly articulated concerns.

A. Agenda-Setting and Framing

Agenda-setting theory is the principal framework used to explain the movement of foreign-policy questions into public attention. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that the relative emphasis assigned to issues by the news media corresponds with the importance audiences attach to those issues. Later work emphasises both first-level agenda-setting, concerning which issues become salient, and second-level agenda-setting, concerning which attributes of an issue become prominent (McCombs, 2014). Applied to Kenyan foreign policy, sustained newspaper attention to public debt, Kenya-China relations, cross-border insecurity or regional integration can elevate those matters from specialised diplomatic concerns into issues of ordinary political accountability.

Framing sharpens this explanation by asking how an issue is made meaningful. Entman (1993) argues that a frame selects elements of perceived reality and renders them more salient in ways that define a problem, diagnose causes, make moral judgments or imply remedies. The same Chinese-financed infrastructure project can therefore be presented as development, connectivity and economic transformation, or as debt exposure, opacity and sovereignty risk. Similarly, deployment in Somalia can be framed as necessary collective security, a costly open-ended mission, regional responsibility or a source of domestic vulnerability. These differences matter because audiences rarely evaluate abstract “foreign policy”; they evaluate concrete narratives about costs, benefits, risks and national identity.

The media-policy relationship nevertheless remains conditional. Robinson (1999) shows that news pressure is more likely to shape policy when official policy is uncertain and elite consensus is weak. Where government possesses a clear strategy and unified institutional backing, media pressure may change communication without changing the underlying decision. This distinction is central to the present study. It allows the analysis to recognise meaningful media influence without making the analytically excessive claim that newspapers determine diplomatic outcomes.

B. Social Identity and Differentiated Public Opinion

Social identity theory is used to explain why the same foreign-policy story can generate different reactions among citizens. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that individuals understand social reality partly through group membership and the distinctions they make between groups. Hogg and Abrams (1988) similarly emphasise the role of identification in shaping social perception. In foreign policy, relevant identities may include region, profession, education, generation, class and perceived proximity to policy costs. These identities do not automatically produce a fixed opinion, but they influence the information people find credible, the risks they prioritise and the benefits they expect.

Kenya makes this differentiation particularly visible. A resident of a county exposed to cross-border insecurity may interpret Somalia-related coverage differently from an urban professional primarily concerned with fiscal expenditure or diplomatic reputation. A businessperson involved in cross-border trade may attach greater value to regional integration than a citizen who experiences regional institutions as distant. A highly educated reader may respond differently to reports on debt sustainability than a low-information respondent. Public opinion should therefore not be compressed into a single national mood. The relevant analytical question is which publics are activated by which frames and with what consequences for legitimacy and policy communication.

C. Media, Political Economy and Foreign Policy

The democratic contribution of the media must also be assessed against its institutional limitations. Herman and Chomsky (1988) famously draw attention to the political economy of news production and the ways ownership, sourcing and elite access can shape what becomes reportable. Their model emerged from a particular political context and cannot be transplanted mechanically to Kenya, but its emphasis on structural influence remains useful. Newspapers depend on official briefings, diplomatic sources, advertisers, proprietors, expert networks and commercially viable narratives. These conditions can produce both public-interest scrutiny and forms of elite dependence.

In Kenya, media pluralism has expanded the space for scrutiny but has not eliminated concentration of ownership, political alignment, uneven newsroom resources or the temptation toward episodic and sensational reporting. Foreign affairs is especially vulnerable to these weaknesses because it requires subject expertise in diplomacy, economics, security, treaty law and regional institutions. When such expertise is limited, complex external policy may be reduced to personalities, controversy or partisan accusation. Conversely, specialised foreign-affairs journalism can translate technical policy into accessible public reasoning and thereby improve accountability.

The literature therefore points toward a reciprocal model. Government communication supplies facts, interpretations and official frames; journalists select, test and sometimes challenge those claims; citizens absorb and reinterpret the resulting narratives through prior identities and lived experience; and policymakers observe the resulting public environment. The effect is not equal in every direction because the state retains formal decision-making authority and privileged

access to information. Yet authority does not remove the need for legitimacy. A foreign-policy decision that is strategically defensible may still encounter implementation difficulties if its rationale, distributional consequences or expected benefits are poorly communicated.

D. Kenyan Empirical Scholarship and the Research Gap

Kenyan scholarship confirms the relevance of these mechanisms. Mburu (2011) reports that media can influence the agenda of foreign-policy decision-makers by creating pressure around issues that acquire public visibility. Tonui (2017) identifies media diplomacy as a complementary instrument of foreign-policy implementation and argues for closer integration of diplomatic practice and media relations. Molony (2019) demonstrates that the changing communication environment around Kenya's security operations in Somalia created accountability pressures and complicated the state's control over information. Kenya's official foreign-policy framework itself places national interest, peace, prosperity and multiple forms of diplomacy at the centre of external engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

However, three gaps remain. First, much of the Kenyan literature examines institutions, diplomacy, security or media separately rather than linking media content to public perceptions and policy response. Second, claims about media influence are often asserted without measurable indicators of exposure, salience, tone or public response. Third, "public opinion" is frequently treated as an undifferentiated aggregate, even though the political meaning of foreign policy varies across social locations. The present study addresses these gaps through triangulation. It combines systematic content analysis with survey evidence and interviews, enabling findings from one source to be tested and interpreted against another. The resulting proposition is that media influence is strongest when sustained coverage gives an issue high visibility, frames it in terms that resonate with public experience and generates a legitimacy problem to which political institutions must respond.

Methodology

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. This design was selected because the research problem involved both measurable patterns and interpretive mechanisms. Content analysis was used to establish what foreign-policy issues newspapers emphasised, how they were framed and where they were placed. A structured survey measured media consumption, perceived influence and rankings of foreign-policy themes. Semi-structured key-informant interviews then provided institutional explanations of how media attention and public reaction enter the practice of policy communication and implementation. The three strands were analysed separately before being brought together at the interpretation stage. This triangulation reduced dependence on any single source of evidence and allowed the study to distinguish association from stronger claims of causation.

A. Study Site, Period and Population

The study covered the period from January 2017 to December 2022. Nairobi was the principal research site because it is the centre of national newspaper production, foreign-policy administration, Parliament, diplomatic missions, think tanks and major civil-society organisations. The media population consisted of foreign-policy-related reporting published by

Daily Nation, The Standard and The Star. These newspapers were selected because of their national reach, archival continuity and influence within elite and policy debate. The respondent population comprised foreign-affairs scholars, thought leaders and informed professional groups, while the key-informant population consisted of individuals with direct professional knowledge of diplomacy, public administration, journalism or foreign-policy politics.

B. Media Sampling and Content Analysis

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify foreign-policy articles that contained terms and themes related to foreign policy, diplomacy, international relations, economic diplomacy, regional integration, international security, bilateral relations and multilateral engagement. The final content-analysis sample consisted of 300 articles: Daily Nation contributed 120 articles (40%), The Standard 105 articles (35%) and The Star 75 articles (25%). The underlying coding protocol yielded an average of 50 relevant articles per year across the study period while maintaining balance among the three newspapers and the major substantive themes.

Each article was read in full and coded for manifest content. Variables included newspaper, publication date, headline, primary foreign-policy theme, tone, placement or prominence, principal source quoted, story length and national-interest frame. Tone was classified as positive, negative or neutral. Prominence distinguished front-page placement, pages 2–3, back-page placement and inside pages. Source categories included government officials, foreign diplomats, experts or analysts, opposition politicians, civil-society representatives and other actors. National-interest frames included economic prosperity, national security, territorial integrity, international prestige and other explicitly stated interests. Where an article touched more than one theme, coding followed the most prominent theme rather than inferring latent content beyond what the text supported.

C. Survey Design and Sampling

The survey included 200 respondents drawn from foreign-affairs scholars, thought leaders, experts and informed professional groups. Stratified random sampling was used across relevant professional categories to obtain diversity within this informed-public sample. The survey was administered through a mixed mode combining online administration and face-to-face engagement. It was not designed as a nationally representative household poll; consequently, the findings describe an informed and professionally oriented public and are interpreted with that boundary clearly stated.

The questionnaire contained four substantive blocks. The first recorded age, gender, education and profession. The second measured print-news consumption, including frequency of newspaper reading and preferred newspaper titles. The third asked respondents to rate their understanding of Kenya's foreign policy and their level of agreement with statements about media influence, explanation of national interests, media scrutiny, framing and viewpoint diversity using a five-point Likert scale. The fourth asked respondents to rank major foreign-policy themes and provide brief examples of occasions on which print coverage influenced their views. Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS using frequencies, percentages, Pearson correlation and chi-square tests of independence.

D. Key-Informant Interviews

Eight key informants were selected purposively because they occupied positions that gave them direct insight into media-policy interaction. The sample comprised two senior diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one senior government official, one former ambassador, two senior editors from major newspapers, one foreign-policy think-tank director and one opposition foreign-affairs spokesperson. Interviews lasted approximately 40–50 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide covering media agenda-setting, public reaction, government responsiveness, communication strategy, balancing public sentiment with national interest and changes in the media-policy relationship during the study period.

Interview material was analysed thematically. The analysis focused on recurring explanations of agenda-setting, public pressure, strategic communication, policy continuity, elite framing and the practical conditions under which sustained media scrutiny becomes consequential. Interview evidence was used to explain quantitative patterns, not to claim statistical representativeness. This distinction is important because the interview sample was intentionally elite and expertise-based.

E. Validity, Reliability and Analytical Strategy

Instrument validity was strengthened through supervisory review, expert assessment and the use of operational categories derived from agenda-setting and framing theory. The content-analysis codebook standardised definitions of theme, tone, prominence and source type. The use of multiple data sources strengthened construct validity because the study did not infer public opinion solely from media text or infer policy influence solely from respondent belief. Instead, a finding was considered more persuasive when it was supported across content, survey and interview evidence.

The quantitative analysis was primarily descriptive and associational. Frequencies and percentages established the distribution of media themes, tone, source visibility and respondent characteristics. Pearson correlation examined the association between newspaper-reading frequency and perceived media influence. Chi-square tests examined whether education level was associated with respondents' ranking of major foreign-policy themes. Statistical significance was assessed at conventional levels. No causal inference was made from correlation alone. Qualitative findings were used to identify plausible mechanisms connecting media salience, public concern and policymaker communication.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted within the ethical framework of the underlying doctoral research. Survey and interview participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed of the academic purpose of the study, their freedom not to answer particular questions and their right to withdraw. Interview information was handled confidentially, and reporting avoids unnecessary disclosure of identities beyond broad professional categories. Research records were stored for scholarly use with attention to confidentiality and data protection. The doctoral research documentation included the required research permit and ethics documentation.

Results

A. Respondent Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, the survey sample consisted of 200 respondents and was predominantly middle-aged and highly educated. Respondents aged 31–45 were the largest category at 42.5%, followed by those aged 46–60 at 32.5%. Those aged 18–30 comprised 15%, while respondents aged 61 years and above constituted 10%. Men represented 55% of the sample, women 42.5%, and 2.5% preferred not to state their gender. Education levels were high: 45% held bachelor's degrees and another 45% held postgraduate qualifications, while 7.5% held diplomas and 2.5% reported secondary education.

This composition is analytically important. It indicates that the survey captured an informed and professionally oriented segment of the Kenyan public rather than a cross-section of the entire adult population. The results should therefore be read as evidence about how relatively high-information citizens consume and evaluate foreign-policy media. This limitation does not make the findings uninformative; rather, it narrows the claim that can responsibly be made and helps explain why foreign-policy awareness and newspaper use were comparatively high in the sample.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 200)

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Age	18–30	30	15.0
Age	31–45	85	42.5
Age	46–60	65	32.5
Age	61 and above	20	10.0
Gender	Male	110	55.0
Gender	Female	85	42.5
Gender	Prefer not to say	5	2.5
Education	Secondary	5	2.5
Education	Diploma	15	7.5
Education	Bachelor's	90	45.0
Education	Postgraduate	90	45.0

Source: Authors' analysis of primary survey data (2022).

B. Patterns and Themes in Foreign-Policy Coverage

The content analysis showed that foreign-policy reporting was concentrated around issues that could be connected to visible domestic interests. Economic diplomacy and regional integration together accounted for 67% of the dominant thematic emphasis identified in the wider study.

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This concentration is significant because it suggests that newspapers tended to translate external engagement into questions of growth, trade, infrastructure, regional mobility and economic opportunity rather than treating diplomacy principally as ceremonial interstate interaction. International security, bilateral relations and multilateral engagement remained important, but they competed for attention with policy areas whose consequences were easier to connect to ordinary economic and political debate.

As shown in Table 2, the distribution of quoted sources revealed a strong official orientation. Government officials were the primary quoted source in approximately 45% of the analysed coverage, foreign diplomats in 20%, experts and analysts in 15%, opposition politicians in 10%, civil-society representatives in 8% and other sources in 2%. The finding illustrates an important duality. Kenyan newspapers can scrutinise foreign policy, but they also depend heavily on official and diplomatic actors for authoritative information. Government therefore remains a major supplier of the raw material from which foreign-policy frames are constructed, even when the resulting coverage is critical.

Table 2

Primary Sources Quoted in Foreign-Policy Coverage

Primary source quoted	Share of coded coverage
Government officials	45%
Foreign diplomats	20%
Experts/analysts	15%
Opposition politicians	10%
Civil-society representatives	8%
Other	2%

Source: Authors' content analysis of Daily Nation, The Standard and The Star (2017–2022).

C. Media Consumption and Perceived Influence

Print readership remained substantial within the survey group. Thirty-five per cent of respondents reported reading print newspapers daily and a further 25% read them several times a week. This result is notable because the study period coincided with the rapid growth of digital news consumption. Within an informed professional audience, print newspapers continued to matter not only as physical products but also as agenda-setting institutions whose stories circulated through online editions, broadcast discussion and social-media commentary.

As summarised in Table 3, respondents attributed considerable influence to print media. The underlying doctoral findings report that 78% acknowledged an effect of print media on their understanding of foreign-policy issues. In a more specific Likert item, 30% strongly agreed and 45% agreed that print media significantly influenced their understanding of Kenya's foreign policy, giving a combined affirmative response of 75%. Only 10% disagreed or strongly

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disagreed, while 15% were neutral. Sixty per cent agreed or strongly agreed that newspaper coverage adequately explains how foreign policy serves national interests. An equivalent 60% agreed or strongly agreed that print-media scrutiny enhances the effectiveness of foreign-policy implementation.

These results should be interpreted as perceived influence, not as experimental proof that newspaper exposure causes particular foreign-policy preferences. Their importance lies in showing that respondents themselves regarded the press as a consequential source of orientation. This perception becomes especially meaningful when considered alongside readership frequency and the interviews, which independently described media coverage as a factor that officials monitor when politically sensitive foreign-policy issues attract sustained attention.

Table 3

Respondents' Views on Print Media and Foreign-Policy Understanding

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Print media significantly influences my understanding of Kenya's foreign policy	30%	45%	15%	8%	2%
Newspaper coverage adequately explains how foreign policy serves national interests	20%	40%	25%	12%	3%
Print-media scrutiny enhances foreign-policy implementation	25%	35%	30%	8%	2%

Source: Author's analysis of primary survey data (2022).

D. Association Between Readership and Perceived Influence

Pearson correlation analysis showed a strong positive association between frequency of newspaper readership and perceived influence of print media on foreign-policy understanding ($r = .724$, $p < .01$). The relationship indicates that respondents who engaged with newspapers more frequently were also more likely to report that print coverage influenced their understanding of foreign policy. The magnitude of the coefficient is substantial within the study sample.

The result does not establish that reading frequency alone caused the reported influence. Greater prior interest in international affairs could increase both newspaper consumption and willingness to recognise media effects. Education, profession and political interest may also contribute. Even with these cautions, the association is consistent with the central agenda-setting expectation that repeated exposure increases opportunities for media-selected issues and frames to become cognitively available and publicly salient.

E. Education and Ranking of Foreign-Policy Themes

As shown in Table 4, chi-square analysis examined whether education level was associated with respondents' ranking of foreign-policy themes. Significant associations were found for economic diplomacy, $\chi^2(6) = 15.63$, $p = .016$; international security, $\chi^2(6) = 18.92$, $p = .004$; and multilateral engagement, $\chi^2(6) = 12.81$, $p = .046$. Associations were not statistically significant for regional integration, $\chi^2(6) = 10.27$, $p = .114$, or bilateral relations, $\chi^2(6) = 8.45$, $p = .207$.

These differences support the use of social identity and social-location reasoning in the study. Even within a highly educated sample, respondents did not attach equal salience to all foreign-policy domains. Education can shape access to specialist information, familiarity with economic and institutional language and confidence in interpreting international developments. The results therefore challenge any assumption that a single aggregate percentage adequately represents "Kenyan public opinion" on foreign policy.

Table 4

Education Level and Ranking of Foreign-Policy Themes

Theme	χ^2	df	P	Interpretation
Economic diplomacy	15.63	6	.016	Significant
Regional integration	10.27	6	.114	Not significant
International security	18.92	6	.004	Significant
Bilateral relations	8.45	6	.207	Not significant
Multilateral engagement	12.81	6	.046	Significant

Source: Authors' statistical analysis of primary survey data (2022).

F. Media Tone, Prominence and Narrative Construction

The wider coding of coverage showed that tone was predominantly neutral overall, with issue-specific variation. Neutral reporting accounted for roughly 45% of analysed articles, positive coverage 35% and negative coverage 20%. Aggregate neutrality, however, should not be mistaken for absence of framing. Agenda-setting and framing often work through selection, repetition, sourcing and attribute emphasis rather than explicit editorial endorsement. A neutral report that repeatedly foregrounds debt servicing, security costs or diplomatic tensions can still influence the criteria through which audiences evaluate a policy.

Placement reinforced these effects. Most foreign-policy stories appeared on inside pages, but a meaningful share received high-prominence placement on the front page or pages 2–3, particularly when they involved economic diplomacy, security incidents, sovereignty disputes or major diplomatic events. The relevant finding is not that every foreign-policy issue became a headline. It is that prominence rose when external policy acquired immediate domestic

consequences. This is precisely the condition under which foreign affairs moves from a specialist policy domain into general political accountability.

G. Qualitative Evidence on Policymaker Response

The eight key-informant interviews consistently characterised the media as an agenda-setting actor rather than a formal foreign-policy decision-maker. Participants described sustained newspaper coverage as capable of raising the political cost of silence, triggering parliamentary questions, generating pressure for clarification and forcing ministries to explain decisions in more accessible language. This finding supports an indirect-influence model. The state retains legal and institutional authority, but the communication environment surrounding implementation can be altered by media salience.

Interview evidence further suggested that influence is strongest when media framing aligns with concrete domestic concerns. Economic diplomacy becomes politically consequential when international agreements are translated into jobs, debt, infrastructure value, taxation or national development. Security policy becomes more difficult to communicate when coverage connects regional operations to casualties, border insecurity, financial cost or uncertainty about mission objectives. In these situations, the public does not need to possess technical diplomatic knowledge to form meaningful judgments about consequences.

The interviews also indicated a feedback relationship. Policymakers monitor newspapers as a source of information about emerging criticism and public interpretation. Journalists, in turn, rely heavily on government officials and diplomats for access to facts, documents and authoritative comment. Foreign-policy discourse is consequently co-produced, although the actors possess unequal institutional power. Government can shape the information supply; journalists can amplify, challenge or reframe official positions; and publics can transform particular frames into legitimacy pressures through discussion, electoral concern or demands for oversight.

H. Kenyan Policy Moments as Empirical Illustration

The China-infrastructure debate illustrates the interaction between media frames and public evaluation. During the study period, infrastructure diplomacy was often presented through competing narratives of economic transformation and fiscal exposure. Coverage of large projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway made foreign economic relations tangible: citizens could evaluate infrastructure use, public borrowing, procurement controversies and promised development benefits. As debt sustainability became more prominent in public debate, officials faced greater pressure to explain financing terms and demonstrate value. The analytical conclusion is not that newspapers caused changes in Kenya's China policy, but that media scrutiny broadened the criteria by which the partnership was publicly judged.

Kenya's engagement in Somalia provides a second illustration. Security operations carry strong executive and strategic considerations, which limit the likelihood that public opinion will directly reverse policy. Even so, public communication became inseparable from implementation. Media narratives could validate the security rationale, question the duration and cost of deployment, or connect events in Somalia to attacks and insecurity within Kenya. Molony (2019) demonstrates the tensions surrounding official communication in this context. The present interview findings

similarly indicate that where security policy generated sustained public concern, officials had to defend objectives and situate the mission within wider regional and multilateral frameworks.

A third illustration concerns the maritime dispute with Somalia and other sovereignty-related issues. Territorial questions generate frames of sovereignty, patriotism and national security that can narrow the political room for compromise. Here, media influence may work less by pushing government toward a new substantive position and more by hardening the public legitimacy constraints surrounding negotiation. This distinction is important: foreign-policy influence includes changes in messaging, timing, justification and negotiating latitude, not only dramatic policy reversals.

Discussion

A. From Media Visibility to Policy Relevance

The findings support agenda-setting theory but reject a deterministic interpretation of media power. The relationship between readership and perceived influence, the prominence of economically and politically tangible themes, and interview accounts of official monitoring all show that newspapers help structure the domestic visibility of foreign policy. Yet visibility alone does not produce policy change. Media influence becomes policy-relevant when an issue carries sufficient material or symbolic weight to activate public concern, legislative attention or reputational risk.

This conditional relationship is consistent with Robinson's (1999) argument that media effects depend on the certainty of official policy and the degree of elite consensus. Kenya's Somalia engagement demonstrates the point. Security institutions may maintain strategic continuity despite negative reporting, but the terms of public explanation can change as scrutiny intensifies. Economic diplomacy may be more open to discursive adjustment because questions of debt, value for money and financing alternatives are easier to contest publicly. Media effects therefore vary by issue domain.

B. Framing as a Mechanism of Public Interpretation

Framing provides the second mechanism. The study shows why aggregate measures of positive, neutral and negative coverage are insufficient on their own. Even neutral stories select facts, sources and consequences. A development frame asks whether external engagement creates infrastructure, employment and connectivity. A debt-risk frame asks about repayment, transparency and dependence. A security frame prioritises threat reduction, while a mission-burden frame foregrounds cost and duration. These frames provide citizens with evaluative shortcuts for complex policy.

Entman's (1993) formulation is particularly useful because it connects textual emphasis with problem definition and implied remedies. Once an issue is publicly understood as a debt problem, demands for transparency, renegotiation or fiscal restraint become more intuitive. Once it is understood as a sovereignty problem, compromise can be politically costly. The media therefore matters not simply because it tells citizens about foreign policy, but because it helps organise the vocabulary through which foreign policy becomes politically intelligible.

C. Public Opinion as a Differentiated Constraint

The study also supports a differentiated conception of public opinion. Education was significantly associated with the ranking of several policy themes, and the survey itself captured a distinctive high-information public. This matters for both scholarship and practice. Researchers should not infer national opinion from a narrow professional sample, but policymakers should also not assume that a national average captures every constituency affected by a policy. Foreign-policy costs and benefits are unevenly distributed across occupations, regions and generations.

Social identity theory helps explain this variation without reducing opinion to ethnicity or partisan affiliation. Individuals interpret international affairs through social positions that structure experience. Border communities may experience regional security as a daily livelihood and safety issue. Traders may experience regional integration through mobility and market access. Professionals may interpret economic diplomacy through debt, investment and institutional credibility. The practical implication is that public diplomacy should be segmented. A single official statement is unlikely to answer the different questions raised by different publics.

D. Media Power, Official Sources and Democratic Accountability

The source-distribution findings complicate simple claims that the press operates independently of government. With government officials and foreign diplomats supplying a large proportion of quoted material, official actors retain substantial agenda-building capacity. This supports a reciprocal model in which media can challenge the state while simultaneously depending on state and diplomatic institutions for information. The democratic quality of the resulting discourse therefore depends on source diversity, newsroom expertise and access to credible documentation. Herman and Chomsky (1988) are relevant here as a reminder that media output is produced within institutional constraints, although the Kenyan case should not be forced into their model. Political economy, ownership, commercial pressure and elite sourcing can narrow reporting. At the same time, Kenya's competitive press creates opportunities for investigative scrutiny and inter-media contestation. The policy challenge is therefore not to seek a compliant press but to improve the information environment in which scrutiny occurs. Transparent publication of policy documents, financing terms, implementation milestones and official rationales can reduce reliance on leaks, speculation and partisan framing.

E. Public Diplomacy as Part of Implementation

A major implication of the findings is that public diplomacy should not be treated as publicity added after substantive decisions have already been made. Communication is part of implementation because citizens evaluate policy while it is being carried out. Silence creates an information vacuum that other actors will fill. Reactive communication can then appear defensive, especially where the public has already adopted a strong frame of debt, insecurity or sovereignty.

Institutionalised public diplomacy requires more than press releases. It involves anticipating public questions, publishing intelligible evidence, briefing journalists before misinformation hardens, responding to legitimate criticism and distinguishing what must remain confidential

from what can responsibly be disclosed. It also requires listening. Public opinion does not need to dictate strategic policy to provide useful information about misunderstanding, implementation costs, trust deficits or distributive grievances.

F. Contribution to Knowledge

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it integrates newspaper content, public-perception data and elite interviews within a Kenyan foreign-policy study rather than examining each element separately. This enables a more disciplined account of influence and avoids equating media criticism with policy effect. Theoretically, it combines agenda-setting and social identity perspectives to explain both common salience and differentiated interpretation. Media can elevate an issue nationally while social location shapes how that issue is judged. Practically, it conceptualises legitimacy and communication as implementation variables. A policy may be strategically sound yet encounter resistance or mistrust if its rationale and consequences are poorly communicated.

The study also contributes an African corrective to literature developed largely from Western democracies. Kenya demonstrates that media-public-policy interaction can be significant even where foreign policy remains strongly executive-led and where access to diplomatic information is uneven. The relevant question is not whether African publics possess the same institutional influence as publics elsewhere. It is how changing media systems, constitutional expectations and issue-specific pressures alter the domestic environment of diplomacy. This approach avoids both exceptionalism and uncritical transplantation of Western models.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The study has limitations that qualify the conclusions. First, the 300-article sample was purposive rather than a complete census of all foreign-policy stories published between 2017 and 2022. It was designed to capture thematic depth and representational balance, but findings about proportions should therefore be interpreted as properties of the analytic sample rather than exact population parameters for every article published by the three newspapers. Future research could construct a complete machine-readable archive and use probability sampling or computational text analysis to test the robustness of the observed patterns.

Second, the survey intentionally focused on foreign-affairs scholars, thought leaders, experts and informed professional categories. It cannot be generalised without qualification to the entire Kenyan adult population. The high education profile likely increased both foreign-policy awareness and newspaper consumption. A nationally representative survey that includes rural, lower-information and younger digital-first publics would provide a stronger basis for estimating population-level media effects.

Third, the study focused primarily on print media even though the period under investigation was characterised by rapid growth in digital and social-media use. Print newspapers remain influential agenda-setting institutions, but stories now move across platforms and are reframed by television, radio, online commentary and social networks. Future research should therefore examine the hybrid media system rather than treating print, broadcast and digital platforms as isolated spheres.

Finally, the associational statistics do not prove causal direction. Respondents who already care about foreign policy may seek newspapers more frequently, and political events may simultaneously affect media coverage and public opinion. Stronger causal designs could use panel surveys, experiments, time-series analysis or event-based comparisons. These limitations do not negate the present findings; they define the appropriate level of inference and clarify the next stage of research.

Conclusion

This study set out to determine how public opinion and print media influenced foreign-policy decision-making in Kenya between 2017 and 2022. The evidence supports a clear but qualified conclusion: print media and public opinion matter, but they matter mainly through agenda salience, interpretive framing and legitimacy pressure rather than direct control of foreign-policy authority. Across the 300 analysed articles, coverage concentrated on themes that connected external relations to visible national interests, particularly economic diplomacy and regional integration. The survey showed substantial newspaper use within the informed-public sample and strong perceived media influence on foreign-policy understanding. The positive association between readership frequency and perceived influence, together with significant education-related differences in the salience of several policy themes, reinforces the proposition that media effects operate through both exposure and differentiated interpretation.

The interview evidence provides the institutional bridge that was missing from the earlier manuscript. Policymakers and media actors described sustained coverage as capable of increasing the cost of silence, generating demands for clarification and shaping the environment in which policy must be defended. Yet they did not describe newspapers as substitute decision-makers. Strategic institutions retain formal authority and can maintain policy continuity even under critical coverage. The influence of media is therefore best understood as relational and conditional.

For Kenya, the democratic significance of this finding is substantial. Foreign policy is no longer negotiated only in diplomatic rooms. Its public legitimacy is also constructed through headlines, expert commentary, parliamentary oversight and citizens' judgments about security, debt, sovereignty, opportunity and national interest. Effective foreign policy in such an environment requires both strategic competence and communicative credibility. A professional press strengthens accountability when it explains complexity rather than sensationalising it; a responsive state strengthens legitimacy when it explains policy without attempting to control independent scrutiny. The relationship between the two is consequently not a contest over who should make foreign policy, but a continuing negotiation over how foreign policy is understood, justified and held accountable in a democracy.

Recommendations

First, the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs and other agencies engaged in external relations should institutionalise proactive public diplomacy for high-salience policy matters. Major decisions involving public borrowing, regional security, treaties, territorial questions and

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multilateral commitments should be accompanied by accessible explanations of objectives, costs, expected benefits, implementation milestones and legitimate areas of uncertainty.

Second, media organisations should strengthen specialised foreign-affairs reporting. Journalists covering diplomacy require working knowledge of international relations, public finance, regional institutions, security policy and treaty processes. Specialist desks, continuing professional training, data journalism and wider use of independent experts would reduce dependence on episodic political commentary and improve the evidentiary quality of public debate.

Third, foreign-policy institutions should develop structured mechanisms for listening to informed public concern without reducing strategic decisions to short-term popularity. Regular stakeholder briefings, parliamentary communication, public consultations where appropriate and systematic monitoring of recurring public questions can identify legitimacy risks early and improve implementation.

Fourth, universities, think tanks and civil-society organisations should expand foreign-policy and media literacy. Citizens are better able to evaluate diplomatic choices when they understand the trade-offs involved in debt financing, regional security, multilateral obligations and international negotiation. Better public knowledge also reduces the space for misinformation and polarised framing.

Finally, future research should use nationally representative surveys and cross-platform media datasets to test whether the relationships identified in this study hold across rural and urban populations, age groups, linguistic communities and socio-economic categories. Comparative studies across East Africa would also show whether Kenya's media-public-policy relationship reflects a broader regional pattern or distinctive national institutions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The study draws on an author-compiled newspaper content dataset, structured survey data and anonymised interview material generated for the underlying doctoral research. Access to non-identifying research materials is subject to applicable ethical and institutional requirements.

Authorship Statement

Damaris Nyabuti: conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation and preparation of the original draft. Hezron Mogambi and Patrick Maluki: supervision,

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validation, scholarly guidance, and review and editing of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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